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# THE VIETNAM WAR: PERCEPTIONS THROUGH LITERATURE, FILM, AND TELEVISION

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THE AMERICAN WAY OF WAR IN VIETNAM WAS DISTINCTIVELY COSTLY and traumatic. After failing to prop up a series of friendly governments from 1950 to 1961, the United States began to send its own troops to prevent the collapse of the Republic of Vietnam. Over an eleven-year period, the support grew from a cadre of four hundred to a commitment of regular marine, army, air force, and navy units. From 1965 to 1972, over 3,403,100 American service personnel—among them 7,484 women—served in the Southeast Asian Theater, and over 1,000,000 at one time or another came close to combat. In America's first helicopter war, troops were assured speedy medical attention; nevertheless, American casualties were alarmingly high. Some 47,244 died as a result of hostile action and an additional 303,704 were wounded. (The Veterans Administration lists 23,014 of the wounded as 100 percent disabled.) On April 30, 1975, the Republic of Vietnam fell, when North Vietnamese regular forces entered Saigon.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Figures cited come from "The Veteran Fact Sheet," distributed free by the Vietnam Veterans Leadership Program of Houston (P. O. Box 770791, Houston, TX, 77215). The most popular overview of the diplomatic and military aspects of Vietnam is George C. Herring's *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975* (New York: Wiley, 1979), complete with an annotated bibliography. Three bibliographies survey Vietnam fiction and nonfiction. In *Vietnam War Literature* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1982), John Newman inventories the war's fiction, poetry, and drama. More oriented to nonfiction is the *Vietnam War Bibliography* (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath, 1982) by John T. Hickey and Robert Crispono. *War in Vietnam*, 2d ed. (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982) by R. D. Burns and Milton Leitenberg contains over five thousand annotated items. Michael Cotter's *Vietnam: A Guide to Reference Sources* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1977) is an exhaustive annotated list of bibliographies, periodicals, government publications, and dissertations on Vietnam topics.

Two anthologies contain papers from conferences on Vietnam: a 1983 conference held at the Woodrow Wilson Center for scholars in Washington is represented by *Vietnam as History*, ed.

For many on the homefront, Vietnam was the antithesis of the promise of American life. This disenchantment was rooted in the early 1960s, when large numbers of college students had traveled South to participate in civil rights demonstrations; many were radicalized by the experience and a few were killed. Those who remained at home in the North saw the confrontations on television and they, too, were changed.<sup>2</sup> Once articulated, the notion of civil rights seemed to have broader applications to the status of women and the needs of the Third World: oppressed people everywhere deserved to be treated with dignity and respect.<sup>3</sup> While John Kennedy was president, his political style—if not his legislative record—convinced many that the nation's established institutions could attain the goals of an idealistic generation. When a Dallas assassination created a Texas president, the power structure seemed to become more distant.<sup>4</sup> Despite his excellent record in the area of Civil Rights, Lyndon Johnson's image, and his determination to pursue war against a Third World nation, alienated many. David Levine's famous cartoon, in

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Peter Braestrup (Lanham, Md.: Univ. Press of America, 1984); a 1983 conference held at the University of Southern California is represented by *Vietnam Reconsidered*, ed. Harrison Salisbury (New York: Harper, 1984).

Official histories—many of them of high quality—are listed for all military services in a free publication entitled “A Select Bibliography of Department of Defense Publications of the Southeast Asia Conflict.” (Write to Histories Division, U. S. Army Center for Military History, Washington, D. C., 20314.) Not enough attention has been given to military materials; in fact, the only serious books to utilize them have been Guenter Lewy's *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978); and Robert Pisor's *End of the Line: The Siege of Khe Sanh* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982). The only motion picture to tap these sources has been *Television's Vietnam* (Stillwater: Oklahoma State Univ. Audiovisual Center, 1983). Other resources for study in the nation's capital are surveyed in *Scholar's Guide to Washington D. C. for Southeast Asian Studies* (Washington, D.C.: The Smithsonian Institution Press, 1983).

The nationwide resurgence of interest in Vietnam books is reported by Neil Baldwin in “Going After the War,” *Publisher's Weekly*, 11 Feb. 1983, 34–38. Fox Butterfield tells of the renewed interest on the academic front in “The New Vietnam Scholarship,” *New York Times Magazine*, 13 Feb. 1983, 26–35. In 1983, Time Books began to merchandise a multivolume series called *The Vietnam Experience*. This commercial undertaking has had both defenders and critics.

<sup>2</sup>A fascinating study of the impact on northern viewers of television reports of southern demonstrations is David Garrow, *Protest at Selma: Martin Luther King and the Voting Rights Act* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1965).

<sup>3</sup>For an overview of the women's movement that includes its growth in connection with civil rights and antiwar activism, see Sarah J. Stage, “Women,” *American Quarterly*, 35 (1983), 169–90.

<sup>4</sup>The controversy over the first version of William Manchester's *Death of a President: November 20–November 25, 1983* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967) reveals how much bitterness toward Johnson was linked to the Dallas assassination. *Publisher's Weekly* was one of many magazines to follow the struggle between author Manchester and those who wanted his account to be less vituperative toward Lyndon Johnson (“Feud Over *Death of a President* Intensifies as Manchester Attacks Kennedy Family and Staff,” 30 Jan. 1967).

which LBJ displays a stomach scar shaped like Vietnam, visually linked the widespread repulsion for LBJ's personality with his politics.<sup>5</sup>

Opposition to the war took many forms. Susan Sontag, Mary McCarthy, and Jane Fonda—just off the set of *Barbarella*—visited North Vietnam and praised a heroic people for maintaining high morale under adverse conditions. Harrison Salisbury sent back controversial dispatches from Hanoi.<sup>6</sup> Distinguished scholar Noam Chomsky spoke for many academics when he condemned his nation as “the greatest threat to peace, to national self-determination, and to international cooperation.”<sup>7</sup> Campus groups such as the Students for a Democratic Society proposed sweeping changes in the American economic and political systems. Criticism of the war gathered momentum through nation-wide teach-ins and demonstrations.<sup>8</sup> The campaign of Eugene McCarthy redirected the antiwar movement into the political mainstream. McCarthy's surprising success in the New Hampshire

<sup>5</sup>A number of studies focus on the White House decision-making process. For the early days, see Larry Berman, *Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982). A work of greater sympathy for the historic actors is Herbert Y. Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President: Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1977). Criticism of the strategy of escalation can be found in many books by retired military leaders, but the most trenchant is *Strategy for Defeat: Vietnam in Retrospect* (San Rafael, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1978) by Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp (Ret.). Admiral Sharp's distaste for civilian “war managers” in the White House supplements other negative portraits by such observers as David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972); Paul M. Kattenberg, *Vietnam: Trauma in American Foreign Policy* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1980); Norman Podhoretz, *Why We Were In Vietnam* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982); and Robert Gallucci, *Neither Peace Nor Honor: The Politics of American Military Policy in Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1975). For a stinging attack on the misuses of intellect by experts, see Noam Chomsky, *American Power and the New Mandarins* (New York: Random House, 1969).

<sup>6</sup>The Hanoi visits and reflections are recorded in Susan Sontag, *Trip to Hanoi* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967); Mary McCarthy, *Hanoi* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968); and Harrison Salisbury, *Behind the Lines: Hanoi, December 23, 1966—January 7, 1967* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967). For a critique that questions the validity of many such personal accounts, see Norman Podhoretz's conservative, revisionist *Why We Were in Vietnam* 90–96, 117–19.

<sup>7</sup>Noam Chomsky, *American Power*, 399. For an excellent examination of Chomsky as historian and moralist, see Robin Brooks, “Prophet Without Honor: Noam Chomsky as Historian,” American Studies Association Convention, Philadelphia, 5 Nov. 1983. (Brooks is a Professor of History, California State University, San Jose, CA 95114.) Although Chomsky is consistently intolerant of those who disagree with him and often more a debater than an historian, his writings are still invaluable critiques of the American intellectual establishment.

<sup>8</sup>Statements by leading antiwar leaders and scholars are included in *Moral Argument and the War in Vietnam*, ed. Paul T. Menzel (Nashville: Aurora Press, 1971). Somewhat more accessible today is the companion anthology for the PBS series. Edited by Steven Cohen, it is entitled *Vietnam: Anthology and Guide to A Television History* (New York: Knopf, 1983). Chapter 11, “Homefront, USA” (349–89), includes representative statements by leaders of the antiwar movement. A bibliography closes the chapter. A collection of original documents, to include leaflets, handouts, occasional essays, and other ephemera is G. Louis Heath, ed., *Mutiny Does Not Happen Lightly: The Literature of the American Resistance to the Vietnam War* (Metuchen, N. J.: Scarecrow Press, 1976).

primary election in 1968 signaled—or seemed to at the time—a shift of public opinion against both the war and Lyndon Johnson's leadership.<sup>9</sup>

This essay will explore how the war has been treated in a variety of narrative forms: literature, motion pictures, and television. Resources for further study will be cited in discussion footnotes and described in the concluding pages.

### THE WAR IN LITERATURE

In the foreword to his collection of Vietnam sketches, Ronald J. Glasser speculates about the difficulties posed by Vietnam as the stuff for literature: "If there is more to say it will have to be said by others, though I wonder how they will do it. There is no novel in Nam, there is not enough for a plot, nor is there really any character development. If you survive 365 days without getting killed or wounded, you simply go home and take up again where you left off."<sup>10</sup> Like filmmakers and journalists, Vietnam fiction writers have searched for the proper metaphor to give artistic structure and meaning to an unconventional war.

A number of Vietnam-related personal narratives and autobiographical fictions use the motif of a corruption of innocence, a traditional staple for American authors. The motif provides a formula in which the protagonist leaves a healthy, civilian environment to become immersed in a war that leaves him physically or psychically wounded. Because this portrait of devastation conforms to media images of the Vietnam veteran, it is both traditional and timely.<sup>11</sup> Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976) is a

<sup>9</sup>A study of the Eugene McCarthy campaign is Arthur Herzog, *McCarthy for President* (New York: Viking Press, 1969). McCarthy tells his own story in *The Year of the People* (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday, 1969). Votes for McCarthy in New Hampshire, it turns out, were cast by hawks as a gesture against a befuddled commander-in-chief rather than as peace votes—as everyone assumed at the time. For an ingenious study of this misperception of public opinion at a critical juncture in American history, see John Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (New York: Wiley, 1973); see also Mueller's contribution to the Woodrow Wilson Center Conference on Vietnam in an anthology of papers entitled *Vietnam as History* (Lanham, Md.: Univ. Press of America, 1984).

<sup>10</sup>Ronald J. Glasser, *365 Days* (New York: George Braziller, 1980), xii. There are two book-length works that survey Vietnam fiction, poetry, and drama. In *Vietnam in Prose and Film* (Jefferson, N. C.: MacFarland, 1982), James C. Wilson takes a crusader's approach. The book's shrill moralism will repel some readers; still, the survey has the virtue of brevity and is supplemented by a useful bibliography. Philip Beidler's *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1982) is a more detached overview which includes chapters on poetry and drama, genres ignored by Wilson.

<sup>11</sup>For another study of personal narratives, see Gordon O. Taylor, "American Personal Narrative of the War in Vietnam," *American Literature*, 52 (1980), 294–308. Part personal narrative, part acid trip, and part new journalism, Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977) is one of the finest books to come out of the war; in its own psychedelic way, it takes a corruption-of-innocence approach to the Vietnam experience. Taylor spends a considerable amount of time with *Dispatches*, thereby freeing this essay to consider lesser-known or more recent works.

powerful personal narrative that called attention to atrocious conditions at some Veteran Administration Hospitals. Kovic's book is also the story of innocence corrupted. Films and television shape young Kovic's attitudes toward war; after high school, the Marine Corps adds its perverting influence. When combat experiences further degenerate the spirit, Kovic reaches a dead low: he kills a friend by accident and participates in the shooting of Vietnamese children. His spinal wound comes as a blessing of sorts—through it, he learns to fight back against the official authorities—"Them."<sup>12</sup> Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* (1977) applies the same formula. While in college, Caputo is hypnotized by president John F. Kennedy's call to national service. Warped by Marine Corps officer training and traumas of combat, and set morally adrift, Caputo orders the murder of a Vietnamese civilian. At the conclusion of *A Rumor of War*, Caputo seems to have no hope for regeneration—not even through anger. As a journalist, he becomes a wandering observer of the globe's brutality.<sup>13</sup>

Innocents encounter variations of this kind of defilement in a host of other fictions and personal narratives. Robert Mason's *Chickenhawk* (1983) uses the metaphor to explore the experiences of a helicopter pilot. Like other innocents, Mason begins with a boyish love of flying and ends with a confession that he is an alcoholic and a dope smuggler: "No one is more shocked than I."<sup>14</sup> The title of W. D. Ehrhart's novel *Vietnam-Perkasie* (1978) emphasizes a contrast between the Eden of rural Pennsylvania and the Asian battlefield that transforms an all-American boy into a crazed killer. At the climax of the book, Ehrhart participates in the battle for Hue with the kind of demented fury to be found in all of the innocent narrator volumes:

I fought back passionately, in blind rage and pain, without remorse, conscience or deliberation. I fought back . . . at the Pentagon Generals and the Congress of the United States, and the *New York Times*; at the draft-card burners, and the Daughters of the American Revolution . . . at the teachers who taught me that America always had God on our side and always wore white hats and always won; at the Memorial Day parades and the daily Pledge of Allegiance . . . at the movies of John Wayne and Audie Murphy, and the solemn statements of Dean Rusk and Robert MacNamara.<sup>15</sup>

Unlike Caputo's better-known *A Rumor of War*, Ehrhart's book convinces the reader that the author is a man purging himself of a horrible experience, even if the revelations prove to be unflattering. Caputo's autobiographical narrative is

<sup>12</sup>Ron Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July* (New York: Pocket Books, 1976).

<sup>13</sup>Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York: Viking, 1983).

<sup>14</sup>Robert Mason, *Chickenhawk* (New York: Viking, 1983).

<sup>15</sup>W. D. Ehrhart, *Vietnam-Perkasie* (Jefferson, N. C.: McFarland Press, 1983).



better written, but reads more like an *apologia* than an honest confession.

The myth of American innocence and benevolence has been examined too often on the level of national policy to need extended discussion. As Louis Hartz and others have warned, the myth leads either to an irresponsible isolationism (“No More Vietnams”) or to a callous messianism (“Make the World Safe for Democracy”), both of which reflect misunderstandings of our responsibilities in a complex international environment.<sup>16</sup>

A few novels explore other metaphors and other themes to reveal the experience of Vietnam. *Chickenhawk* explores a number of themes absent from footsoldier reports by Caputo, Kovic, or Ehrhart. Mason shows that American pilots were competent professionals who took pride in their ability to thread delicate machines through enemy fire. While no one left the struggle unscarred, there *were* genuine heroes in the conflict, men who risked their lives to serve their nation, units, or co-pilots. The image of the chopper—Mason was a pilot who flew troop-carrying Huey helicopters for the 1st Air Cavalry Division—moving into danger and then flying out gives the book a rhythm that conforms to the pace of the war.<sup>17</sup>

After completing a memoir of his combat experiences, a book entitled *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (1973), Tim O’Brien decided to explore the issue of GI commitment through fiction: “I did not want to nail down sights and sounds anymore. I was more concerned with what *might* have happened.”<sup>18</sup> The result was a National Book Award winning novel for 1978, *Going After Cacciato*, in which an imaginary patrol walks to Paris from the shores of the South China Sea.<sup>19</sup> The fantasy of protagonist Paul Berlin contrasts with war “realities”: If the Vietnam war lacked clear front lines and a logical progression of battles, the patrol in search of Cacciato has a definite direction and purpose—to reach Paris; if Vietnam was an experience of disjointed

<sup>16</sup>Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955) 284–312.

<sup>17</sup>Other novels portray the heroism and professionalism of American troops in Vietnam. James Webb’s *Fields of Fire* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1978) probes the complexity of moral judgment, but along the way pays tribute to the courage and competence of many marine officers and enlisted men. *Tiger, the Lurp Dog* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1983) by Ken Miller focuses on the work of Army reconnaissance patrols which—contrary to stereotype—moved at will in Viet Cong and North Vietnamese strongholds. An upbeat, personal narrative that documents the work of an American field hospital is *Soc Trang: A Vietnamese Odyssey* (Boulder, Col.: Rocky Mt. Writers Guild, 1980) by Carl E. Bartecchi. Like most Americans, Dr. Bartecchi genuinely liked the Vietnamese he met. Short narratives that show the effectiveness of U. S. Marines are in Francis J. West, *Small Unit Action in Vietnam, Summer, 1966* (New York: Arno Press, 1968). Not to be outdone by the marines, the army has a similar volume entitled *Seven Firefights in Vietnam* (Washington, D. C.: GPO, 1970) by John Albright.

<sup>18</sup>Tim O’Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (New York: Delacorte, 1973). O’Brien’s comment is from an excellent article by Neil Baldwin about the renewed appeal of Vietnam fiction and nonfiction (“Going After the War,” *Publisher’s Weekly*, 11 Feb. 1983, 37–38).

<sup>19</sup>Tim O’Brien, *Going After Cacciato* (New York: Delacorte, 1978).

factual traumas, the novel probes for deeper meaning using another American literary staple, the romance. O'Brien's use of the fantasy of flight helps the book to transcend difficulties inherent in the corruption-of-innocence motif. Paul Berlin participated in a war he could not understand, but, because he retained hope for a better life, his basic human decency survived.

All Vietnam combat novels touch on cultural issues, but only *The 13th Valley* (1982) by John M. Del Vecchio deserves to be called a novel of ideas.<sup>20</sup> Between operations, members of the 101st Airborne participate in long rap sessions about the nature of men and nations, and the nature of war. Many readers balk at these bull sessions, in which the author exploits the rambling structure of the novel to contain amplitudes. Prior to his death near the conclusion of the book, Lieutenant Rufus Jones synthesizes conclusions in a tract entitled "An Inquiry Into Personal, Racial, and International Conflict." His text ponders the purposes of governments and parties, concluding that most are devices for duping the individual. The manuscript also considers the meaning of history and the impact of language structures on cultures and value systems (the Whorf hypothesis). Jones also explores the links between changing sexual attitudes and contemporary cultural pressures for both warfront and homefront.

### THE CELLULOID WAR

America's recent Vietnam-related films have reflected the controversy spurred by the war. Like the fiction writers, Hollywood *auteurs* have experimented with a variety of metaphors to comprehend the war, most of which have failed to satisfy critical audiences. With scholars still debating how the war could have begun and—once it became an obvious quagmire—pursued for so long, it is not surprising that artists working in a popular medium have encountered difficulties.<sup>21</sup>

Four major Vietnam fiction films have generated sufficient controversy to deserve specific attention. Every major study deplors John Wayne's *The Green Berets* (1968), a film that Renata Adler has described as "so unspeakable, so stupid, so rotten and false in every detail that it passes through being funny. . . . It is vile and insane. On top of that, it is dull."<sup>22</sup> *The Green*

<sup>20</sup>John M. Del Vecchio, *The 13th Valley* (New York: Bantam, 1982). The position paper here described is on 556-65, but should not be considered apart from the narrative.

<sup>21</sup>For a discussion of how Hollywood values affect motion picture statements on American life, see Robert Sklar, "Windows on a Made-up World," *American Film* (July 1976), 60-64. For an example of how Americanists "read" feature films as historical documents, see *Hollywood As Historian: American Film In a Cultural Context*, ed. Peter C. Rollins (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1983).

<sup>22</sup>Ray Kellogg and John Wayne, *The Green Berets* (Warner Brothers, 1968). The excoriating criticism is from an often-quoted *New York Times* review by Renata Adler ("At the Movies," 20 June 1968, 49).



*Beret's* pastiche of clichés from westerns and World War II films repelled most reviewers in 1968. Wayne's smugness bothered journalists, especially in the context of the Tet offensive and campus unrest.

Two weeks after Jimmy Carter took office, Francis Ford Coppola telegraphed a plea to the White House for assistance with his *Apocalypse Now* (1979), a film that plays like a nightmare version of *The Green Berets*. Reversing the standard Hollywood formula, Coppola's Viet Cong are cowboys, while United States commanders like Colonel Kilgore (Robert Duvall) are rapacious Indians mounted on helicopters. The narrator, Captain Willard, is an inverted John Wayne figure whose values have been destroyed by an immoral war and who accepts a mission so that he can forget the moral confusion of state-side America. Instead of hope for a constructive settlement of the conflict, *Apocalypse Now* ends with madness and violence. Little wonder the White House ignored Coppola's requests.<sup>23</sup>

*Coming Home* (1978) is a controversial homefront feature which, like *Apocalypse Now* and *The Deer Hunter* (1979), frequently loses its focus. The film contrast traditional patriots and traditional husbands with the new men and women of a liberated age; Luke Martin (John Voigt), at the conclusion of the film, has lost the use of his body but has become wise. Sally Hyde (Jane Fonda) has found a new, independent identity; seeing no place for himself in the culture of narcissism, traditional male Bob Hyde (Bruce Dern) commits suicide in the California surf. With these comments by characterization about the issues of war and peace, the roles of men and women, and the nature of patriotism, it is no surprise that the film touched off considerable debate.<sup>24</sup>

Of all Vietnam feature films, *The Deer Hunter* most ambitiously—and ambiguously—taps important American themes: civilization versus nature,

<sup>23</sup>Francis Ford Coppola, *Apocalypse Now* (United Artists, 1979). Three book-length works explore Vietnam feature films. *Vietnam in Prose and Film* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland Press, 1982) by James Wilson takes a moralistic approach. A more objective study is *Guts and Glory: Great American Movies* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1978) by Lawrence Suid. Suid is more detached and fair in his evaluations; his book stands as a model for all film researchers. Using the results of nearly three hundred interviews with producers, directors, screenwriters, and military advisers, together with the results of his study of files and correspondence, Suid yields rare insights about what brought particular war images to the screen. It is shameful that this fine book is now out of print. (For details about Coppola's plea to Jimmy Carter, see Suid's *Guts and Glory*, 313.) Gilbert Adair's *Vietnam on Film: From The Green Berets to Apocalypse Now* (New York: Proteus, 1981) combines the superficiality of a coffee table book with the tone of a late-night sign-off sermon. In the future, Lawrence Suid hopes to publish an update of his book. His new material is currently available in dissertation form: *The Film Industry and the Vietnam War*, Diss. Case Western Reserve Univ. 1980.

<sup>24</sup>Hal Ashby, *Coming Home* (United Artists, 1978).

sexual and ethnic identity, the tension between the individual and society. The film reflects a traditional American ambivalence about these issues.<sup>25</sup>

Government documentaries also had their place in attempts to give meaning to the Vietnam experience. However, Peter Davis's *Selling of the Pentagon* (1971) notwithstanding, the Vietnam War produced nothing like the government film efforts of World War II, in part because Lyndon Johnson feared that, once aroused, public opinion could not be easily restrained. The government-sponsored *Why Vietnam* (1965) is a didactic explanation of American commitments supported by interviews with Lyndon Johnson, Dean Rusk, and Robert McNamara. John Ford and others were asked to make a documentary with greater production values for the United States Information Agency. The resulting film *Vietnam! Vietnam!* was never released. (Viewing copies are available at the National Archives in Washington.) On the other side of the generation gap, campus unrest and the antiwar movement were revived in *The War at Home* (1980), a compilation of retrospective interviews and long-forgotten local television news clips concerning the campus movement at the University of Wisconsin. Despite technical problems, this film vividly evokes the campus ethos of the 1960s.

*Hearts and Minds* (1975) by Peter Davis would head anybody's list of Vietnam antiwar films. Through deft editing, Davis contrasts official statements by Lyndon Johnson, General William Westmoreland, and Walt Rostow with Vietnam "realities." The overall effect of the Academy Award winner is to dramatize the "credibility gap" of the Johnson administration. Davis did not pretend to objectivity in *Hearts and Minds*: a close study of the film reveals that—as in the case of *The Selling of the Pentagon*—the crusading filmmaker was less than fair in his treatment of officials. As early as 1975, even *Time Magazine* found the historical interpretation of the film to be simplistic, its moral rhetoric strident.<sup>26</sup>

Recent documentaries for television have brought the war back into our living rooms. A PBS series entitled *Vietnam: A Television History* was aired for thirteen weeks during the fall and winter of 1983, reigniting debate and

<sup>25</sup>Michael Cimino, *The Deer Hunter* (Universal, 1979). There is a broad spectrum of responses to *The Deer Hunter*. A number of possible interpretations are described by Peter McNerney in "Apocalypse Then: Hollywood Looks Back at Vietnam," *Film Quarterly*, 33 (1979), 30. Earnest Callenbach throws up his hands in exasperation at the confusion of the film in "Phallic Nightmare," *Film Quarterly*, 32 (1979), 18–22, concluding that Cimino's film "obfuscates and mystifies the systematic causes of the war" (22). A "New Left" approach to blue-collar themes and American imperialism in *The Deer Hunter* pervades Arnold Auster and Leonard Quart's "Hollywood in Vietnam: The Triumph of the Will," *Cineaste*, 9 (1979), 4–9.

<sup>26</sup>Stefan Kanfer, "War Town," *Time Magazine*, 17 March 1975, 4. Scholars continue to tout *Hearts and Minds*; the most recent appeared in a rave review of the 1983 PBS Vietnam series in which Martin Sherwin (Tufts University) recommended the Davis film as a perfect companion for *Vietnam: A Television History* ("A Preview: 'Vietnam: A Television History,'" *Organization of American Historians Newsletter*, Aug. 1983, 30).

discussion. Sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities and produced by WGBH-TV, Boston, the series received mixed reviews. Radical reviewers such as Peter Marin faulted the series for its cool, detached—even uncaring—tone; other radicals have criticized it for not applying the same economic and political critique to American involvement that it focuses on the French. Academic historians reviewing the series have questioned the wisdom of excessive dependence upon on-camera reports by North Vietnamese political leaders. The credentials of the program's only Vietnamese participant—translator Ngo Vinh Long—have been questioned. Finally, students of documentary filmmaking have pointed out that excessive use of propaganda films and Communist fiction features—a cardinal sin of compilation filmmaking—undercuts claims of objectivity. In any case, *A Television History* has prodded Americans to rethink the Vietnam experience.<sup>27</sup> To accompany the series, Stanley Karnow wrote *Vietnam: A History* (1983), a hefty tome that summarizes existing left-of-center scholarship. During the fall of 1984, Accuracy in Media, Inc., a Washington, D.C.-based organization, released two hour-length programs critical of the PBS series: the first program focused on specific errors of fact and interpretation; the second was a condensed version of *Television's Vietnam* (1983). (Both programs are available from the Audiovisual Center, Oklahoma State University.)

Unlike other documentaries mentioned, *Television's Vietnam* explores the difficulties of perceiving history through a camera lens. Using interviews with journalists, veterans, and television viewers, the program raises questions about the impact of visual media on policy makers and the public. The *Newsletter* of the Organization of American Historians has suggested that teachers use *Television's Vietnam* as a companion film with *Hearts and Minds*.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup>Peter Marin reviewed the series for *Mother Jones* ("Rerunning the War," Nov. 1983, 11–16); the complaint about the inconsistency of economic interpretation is from David Hunt, "Vietnam: *A Television History*—Review of the First Episodes," *Radical Historians Newsletter* (P. O. Box 221, Somerville, Mass., 02143), 1, 7. A scathing review by Douglas Pike gives some sense of how professional Indochina watchers have responded to the series, including their sensitivity to such subtle matters as the political orientation of the translator ("Audiovisual," *Indochina Chronology*, 2 [1983], 23–25). Details of cinematic interpretation are examined by one of the few practicing historian-filmmakers in Richard Raack's review of the series for the *Newsletter* of the Organization of American Historians, "Caveat Spectator: Is *Vietnam: A Television History* Yet Another Debacle?" Feb. 1984, 25–26, 28. Many observers are perplexed that the National Endowment for the Humanities could have funded such a project without more advice from academic humanists.

Two volumes are linked to the PBS series and have been very popular as tie-ins: Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking, 1983); and Steven Cohen, ed., *Vietnam: Anthology and Guide to a Television History* (New York: Knopf, 1983). The Karnow volume often adds depth and complexity to the screen version, but is still little more than a digest of existing information garnished by quotations from the PBS programs. The Cohen anthology has the virtue of availability, but has been described by Douglas Pike as passing on "ignorance in the form of an undigested mass" (*Indochina Chronology*, 2 [1983], 25).

<sup>28</sup>Robert B. Toplin, "History Through Film: The Sixties," *OAH Newsletter*, Aug. 1982, 6–7.

## THE TELEVISION WAR

As Michael Arlen has observed, Vietnam was America's first "television war."<sup>29</sup> What bothers most scholars can be put in the form of a question: "Were Americans watching television or were they watching the war?"

In 1965, after a visit to Vietnam, Walter Cronkite enthusiastically accepted Washington's approach. Lyndon Johnson's direct access to such network executives as Frank Stanton (president, CBS) and Robert Kintner (president, NBC) further assured that Washington's perceptions reached America's livingrooms. Popular culture scholars have asserted that massive doses of Cold War drama during entertainment hours reinforced the image of America as an international cop on the beat.<sup>30</sup>

Spectacular visual stories of the Tet offensive (January-March, 1968) shocked and surprised many Americans, including Walter Cronkite. "The most trusted man in America" toured Vietnam and came back to his desk in New York with a series of reports shown on the *CBS Nightly News*. In a later special about Tet, Cronkite cautioned that the war could not be won honorably. President Johnson, one of the viewers of the special, decided that there must be an immediate course change if he had lost a centrist like Cronkite. Within nineteen days of the broadcast, Lyndon Johnson went on national television to announce his withdrawal from the Democratic presidential primary.<sup>31</sup>

Vietnam reporting and its effects are the focus of Peter Braestrup's

<sup>29</sup>Michael Arlen is a reviewer for *The New Yorker* whose collected essays on television and Vietnam have been published under titles such as *Living-Room War* (New York: Viking, 1969); and *The View From Highway 1* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1976). The study of television within the context of history has gone beyond the review stage. A very recent collection of essays by American Studies specialists is John O'Connor, ed., *American History/American Television: Interpreting the Video Past* (New York: Ungar, 1983), a collection that concludes with a comprehensive bibliography by Daniel Leab. Scholars new to the field should begin here, both for the references and for the excellent model essays that use television as a primary source.

The most authoritative narrative history of television is *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975) by Erik Barnouw. More recently, David Halberstam's *The Powers That Be* (New York: Knopf, 1979) provides an inside look at CBS.

<sup>30</sup>How Cold War era entertainment conditioned viewers to accept an aggressive foreign policy is explored by J. Fred MacDonald in a forthcoming book entitled *Television and the Cold War: The Video Road to Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1985). The essence of MacDonald's thesis is in "The Cold War as Entertainment in Fifties Television," *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 7 (1978), 3-31. For an investigation of the influence of prime-time documentaries on Cold War audiences, see Peter C. Rollins, "Nightmare in Red: A Cold War View of the Communist Revolution," in O'Connor, ed., *American History/American Television*, 134-58.

<sup>31</sup>The reverberations of Tet reporting in the Johnson White House are studied in Herbert Y. Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President: Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1977).

exhaustive—indeed, exhausting—two volumes of *Big Story* (1977).<sup>32</sup> While the study focuses on the Tet offensive, the implications apply to the entire war experience. Using a case-study approach, Braestrup examines some of the major stories of Tet and compares the reportage with our current knowledge. The book attributes the misreporting to structural, technical, economic, and dramatic factors rather than to a conscious decision by reporters to get the story backwards. Braestrup's interpretation was an important influence on the documentary *Television's Vietnam*.<sup>33</sup>

### RESOURCES, NEWSLETTERS, AND ORGANIZATIONS

In addition to government sources, there are three major collections of relevance to Americanists. The Vietnam War Veteran Archives is an impressive collection containing veterans' letters, tapes, underground newspapers, and artifacts. The collection is described in the *Cornell University Libraries Southeast Asia Catalog* and its supplements. The Vietnam War Literature Collection specializes in materials published after 1955. Curator John Newman has edited a guide to sources, *Vietnam War Literature* (1982), which includes a full inventory of his archive at that time. The Institute of East Asian Studies, Indochina Studies Project contains North Vietnamese and Viet Cong captured documents that were preserved by Douglas Pike, a former State Department official. Over the years, many of the documents have been translated into English. In addition, English language documents designed as propaganda for United States troops are also available. Since the United States did not win the war, American historians are in the unusual position of not possessing access to enemy materials, thus making the Pike collection a unique source. The Project publishes a *gratis* quarterly entitled *Indochina Chronology*.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup>Braestrup's book comes in two formats. The original version, *Big Story* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1977), consists of two volumes: the first is a summary of findings, the second a miniarchive of original and secondary sources supporting the conclusions of the first volume. A paperback edition, *Big Story* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1978), prints the first volume only. Braestrup's findings about how international events reach America's livingrooms are applicable to more recent "big stories" in Lebanon and Central America.

<sup>33</sup>Peter C. Rollins and David H. Cuthbert, *Television's Vietnam: The Impact of Visual Images* (Stillwater, Oklahoma State Univ. Audiovisual Center, 1983). A position paper describing the research behind the film is Peter Rollins, "Television's Vietnam: The Visual Language of Television News," *Journal of American Culture*, 4 (1981), 114–35. This issue of *JAC* was edited by Victor Howard and contains other essays on Vietnam fiction, drama, and music.

<sup>34</sup>The Vietnam War Veteran Archives, Dept. of Manuscripts and Archives, Olin Library, Cornell Univ., Ithaca, N.Y., 14853; *Cornell University Libraries Southeast Asia Catalog* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1976); The Vietnam War Literature Collection, Colorado State Univ., CSU Libraries, Fort Collins, Co., 80523; John Newman, *Vietnam War Literature* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1982); The Institute of East Asian Studies, Indochina Studies Project, Univ. of California, Berkeley, Calif., 94720.

The academic organization most directly involved with Vietnam studies is the Association for Asian Studies, Southeast Asia Council Vietnam Studies Group, which publishes the very useful *Vietnam Studies Bulletin*. The *Bulletin* carries course descriptions, book reviews, and trends in the field of study.<sup>35</sup> Recently formed, the Vietnam Area of the Popular Culture Association has scheduled over thirty presentations at the 1984 national meeting. Interested participants for future conferences should write to the Vietnam Area Chair, Professor Peter C. Rollins, Dept. of English, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078.

A number of organizations work for the interests of veterans. The Vietnam Veterans Leadership Program has fifty centers across the country devoted to confronting the employment and image problems of Vietnam veterans. Vietnam Veterans of America lobbies for veterans' causes. The most antiestablishment group has been the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, an organization still opposing the draft and still concerned about America's interventionist proclivities. Black GI's are represented by the National Association of Black Veterans. The Disabled American Veterans, the American Legion, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars all have active programs for those who served in Vietnam.<sup>36</sup>

A host of specialized newsletters cover Vietnam topics. The *Vietnam War Newsletter* is a monthly publication that features reviews and updates. A booklist of some five hundred titles makes the Vietnam Bookstore a convenient source for the purchase of essential texts. *Deros* is devoted to poetry by veterans. From the left, the *Indochina Newsletter* stresses the antiwar movement and United States interventions. Slanting its perspective from the right, the *National Vietnam Veterans Review* covers recent developments in an ambitious, fifty-page issue each month. A host of periodicals are described in Kathryn Olney and Lee Esbenshade's "Dealing With Indochina War Issues: A Resource Guide" (1983).<sup>37</sup> Vietnam studies in the 1980s have proliferated in response to contemporary pressures. The prospect of military intervention in Central America has motivated citizens and journalists to snatch for Vietnam "lessons." Concurrently, Vietnam veterans have stepped

<sup>35</sup> *Vietnam Studies Bulletin* (Editor's address: Edwin E. Moise, Dept. of History, Clemson Univ., Clemson, S.C., 29631).

<sup>36</sup> The Vietnam Veterans Leadership Program, M-600 Action, 806 Connecticut Ave., NW, Washington, D.C., 20525; Vietnam Veterans of America, 329 8th St., NE, Washington, D.C., 20002; Vietnam Veterans Against the War, P.O. Box 25592, Chicago, Ill., 60625; National Association of Black Veterans, 4185 North Green Bay Ave., Milwaukee, Wis., 53209

<sup>37</sup> *Vietnam War Newsletter*, Vietnam Bookstore, Box 122, Collinsville, Conn., 06022; *Deros*, 6009 Edgewood Lane, Alexandria, Va., 22310; *Indochina Newsletter*, P.O. Box 19, Dorchester, Mass., 02122; *National Vietnam Veterans Review*, P.O. Box 35812, Fayetteville, N.C., 28303; Kathryn Olney and Lee Esbenshade, "Dealing with Indochina War Issues: A Resource Guide," *Southeast Asia Chronicle* (Oct. 1983), 23–26.



forward to demand a modicum of restitution for their decade-long pains as scapegoats. Whatever the political and social pressures involved, the complexity of Vietnam studies—comprising history, autobiography, fiction, poetry, and media—should invite scholars of an interdisciplinary bent. Certainly, the current perceptions through literature, film, and television need to be interpreted, related to one another—and transcended.\*

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