

*What Were We Fighting For? Myth, Memory
and the Vietnam War in American Politics*

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Introduction:

In March 2003, as Americans prepared for the invasion of Iraq, their efforts to understand the looming confrontation were filtered through the memories of past crises. As they sought guidance from history, memories of two events seemed to dominate their thinking about Iraq. One was remote enough to have been experienced by only a small fraction of Americans, the other, more recent one, was thought to have scarred an entire generation. The first historical memory was the Munich Conference of 1938. Munich made appeasement a dirty word in American politics. For American politicians, policymakers, and opinion leaders, the lessons of Munich are unmistakable. Put simply, which is how it is most often put, the lesson was that “you cannot appease dictators.” For Cold War policymakers, most of whom had lived through World War II, the lesson of Munich became a guiding principle in moments of crisis. The lesson survives today, kept alive by a generation of leaders who have only read about World War II. During the first and second Persian Gulf Wars, 1991 and 2003, Saddam Hussein was constantly compared to Adolf Hitler. Brutal, tyrannical, cruel and sadistic, the mustached Iraqi dictator seemed well suited for the part. The lesson of Munich pointed toward a seemingly indisputable conclusion, Saddam could not be trusted. He had to be removed from power.

The second memory that dominated American thinking about Iraq in early 2003 was of Vietnam. Unlike Munich, there was no simple lesson to be drawn from the American experience in Vietnam. In 1990, 78% of Americans viewed American intervention in Vietnam as a mistake. A staggering 89% rejected the idea that America should have “gone all out to win” the war. Those figures would seem to indicate strongly that the memory of Vietnam would act as a break on future American military operations. Such was not the case.

There are, of course, multiple reasons why Americans disregarded their memories of failure in Vietnam and went to war in 2003. The most obvious was that the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 changed American thinking about

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the risks of war.¹ President Bush encouraged Americans to regard September 11th as a watershed event that created a break with the past. Moreover, the president and his advisors frequently linked Saddam to the terrorist attacks of September 11. The failure to act, warned the president, could result in a mushroom cloud appearing over an American city.

The American public's acceptance of these arguments at the time may well have been enough to make them forget Vietnam and support the war against Iraq. By itself, that conclusion does not appear to be very novel. But I would like to take the argument a step farther and suggest that what Americans remember about the Vietnam War actually facilitated the Bush administration's plan for war. Put more starkly, I would argue that memories of the Vietnam War have been used to quell dissent and build support for the Iraq war.

In order to explore this hypothesis in more detail, I will need to talk about what is usually termed collective memory. The idea of collective or public memory has received considerable attention from historians during the last twenty years.²

Most studies of memory begin with several assumptions. The first is that memory is a reconstruction of the past, not a reproduction. This means that attempts to preserve the past inevitably alter it. A second assumption is that decisions about what to preserve inevitably result in decisions, conscious or unconscious, to ignore or forget some other aspect of the past. Frequently, those decisions are culturally and politically sensitive, especially since what is remembered is crucial to a society's identity and sense of itself. Those groups that have a stake in what is remembered debate, challenge, and contest which version of the past will be remembered. And those debates reflect present day concerns.

In this way, contemporary issues contribute to a framing of the past. The extent to which the present shapes the past is a subject of debate among scholars. Some argue that there are limits to how far a group can go in transforming the past to suit the present. Others argue that in our consumer oriented society the

¹ In using force to liberate Kuwait in 1991, President George H. W. Bush famously declared that the U.S. had "kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all." That conclusion was premature. In fact, the memory of Vietnam haunted policymakers. American military leaders planned operations in the war to avoid getting the U.S. bogged down in another Vietnam like quagmire. That is why the president agreed to halt operations well before Saddam was overthrown.

² The starting point for most scholars is Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago, 1992), edited, translated, and with an introduction by Lewis Coser; and Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge, 1989). For helpful introductions to the subject see David Thelen, "Memory and American History," *The Journal of American History* 75 (March 1989), 1117-1129; Barry Schwartz, "Social Change and Collective Memory: The Democratization of George Washington," *American Sociological Review* 56 (April 1991), 221-236; and John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, 1992).

past can be transformed into a marketable commodity, such as a Hollywood movie, that can become completely detached from its original context for commercial purposes. It is not necessary to resolve this debate here. For our purposes it suffices to note that most scholars agree that in creating collective memories, societies are not bound by the same rules of evidence and logic that discipline historians.

In assessing the influence of collective memory on American thinking about the war in Iraq I will look at two overlapping types of remembering. One is what might be termed institutional memory that has been preserved and nurtured within the American armed forces, especially the U.S. Army. The other is the more commonly discussed public memory of the larger segment of the American population. The way Americans remember Vietnam has been shaped by political rhetoric, a vast memoir and historical literature, television news programs and documentaries, official memorials and monuments, and entertainment media such as Hollywood movies and television. A comprehensive study of how Americans remember the Vietnam War is beyond the scope of this presentation. Instead, my main purpose is look at the ways that certain aspects of Vietnam memories influenced public discussion in the United States before the war with Iraq.

The myth of anti-war protest as anti-soldier.

Perhaps the most pervasive “memory” of the war is that of anti-war protestors denouncing the Americans who fought the war. The most indelible image in this regard is the mental picture that people have of protestors spitting on veterans. This belief has been transmitted across generations making it a vivid secondary memory. On several occasions my college students have related family tales of veterans being harassed and spat upon by protestors. Upon closer investigation these stories became more vague and uncertain. The stories themselves were real in the sense that they conveyed honest feelings and emotions, but the incidents they related were imagined. In fact, it is doubtful that protestors even had opportunities for directly confronting veterans in the manner depicted in the popular myth.³ Moreover, no incidents of the protestors “spitting” on veterans have been documented. As it turns out, the only verifiable case occurred as a scene in a grade B movie.

Nevertheless, starting with President Richard Nixon, policymakers attacked the motives of the protestors by claiming that their hostility towards the war was really directed at the loyal men who served the country in Vietnam. In their speeches, Nixon and his advisors rhetorically “repositioned” protestors from in front of draft induction centers, where they picketed against the sending of young men to Vietnam, to the airport lobbies of the myth, where they allegedly spat on

³ Jerry Lembcke, *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York, 1998).

returning veterans and accused them of being baby killers.⁴ The effectiveness and power of this myth has been significant. It is also somewhat surprising given that very few newspaper stories at the time depicted protestors as being anti-G.I.⁵

The myth of the anti-war protestor endured beyond the war. During the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan frequently depicted veterans as having been betrayed by weak willed politicians, liberal journalists, and the privileged children of the elite who protested the war from the safety of their college campuses.⁶ The consequences of this campaign to tar the opponents of war as unpatriotic and hostile to the troops were evident immediately before the first Gulf War. As I noted, by that time most Americans regarded the Vietnam War as a mistake. Yet when they were asked if they wished they had actively protested against the war 67% answered no. We cannot know what reasons the respondents would have given for their answers, but at the minimum it seems clear that most did not view public protest as a commendable act of civic responsibility.

When the U.S. invaded Iraq in 2003, the sprouting of “Support our troops” ribbons and bumper stickers, and television commercials masquerading as public service announcements attested to the widespread belief that the proper response in wartime is to support the troops. It followed that if one were to raise questions about their mission then he or she would not be supporting the troops. The pervasive image of war protestors as unpatriotic has forced the present day anti-war movement into contortions trying to make clear their support for the troops at the same time they oppose the war. The results suggest such efforts have been unproductive at best. News stories about the efforts of protestors to avoid the supposed sins of the past, meaning Vietnam, ignore the anti-war part of their message and emphasize their support for the troops, and by implication, the war itself. The treatment that presidential candidate John Kerry received in the 2004 election further attests to the sulfurous odor that still clings to the anti-war protestors of the 1960s. Much has been made of the assault on Kerry’s war record by Republican operatives. But I am inclined to think that the most damaging part of the attack was the constant exposure given to Kerry’s participation in the anti-war movement when he returned from Vietnam. It would appear that for many Americans, Kerry’s protests were a betrayal of the comrades he left behind in Vietnam.

The association of anti-war protestors with disloyalty during the Vietnam era continues to haunt opponents of the Iraq War today. Former Democratic

⁴ “Who Supports the Troops? Vietnam, the Gulf War, and the Making of Collective Memory,” by Thomas D. Beamish; Harvey Molotch; Richard Flacks *Social Problems*, 1995.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Reagan also did much to inflate the myth that scores of Prisoners of War had been left behind in Vietnam, abandoned and neglected by soulless bureaucrats and liberal politicians. Mark Taylor, *The Vietnam War in History, Literature and Film* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama, 2003), 141–143.

Party strategist Paul Begala has noted that “the popular memory” of the anti-war movement is not about Democrats being proved right about the war in Vietnam. According to Begala, what people remember is “the indelible image of young Americans burning the American flag.”⁷

Depoliticizing Vietnam Memories.

The depiction of anti-war protestors as hostile to American soldiers was part of a deliberate political strategy to undermine opposition to the war. That strategy was successfully employed during the 1980s and 1990s to undermine opponents of American military programs. Opponents of American military adventures regularly had to fend off charges that they were betraying the young men and women who risked their lives to make the nation safe. The general sense of elation that came with America’s victory in the Cold War made it even more difficult to be seen as a critic of government policies. Under these circumstances, it is easy to see how the image of war protestors as anti-soldier would dampen the spirits of anti-war activists. But memories of Vietnam have not been simply contrived by political leaders. American popular culture has played a major role in determining how Americans have remembered Vietnam. Although the messages contained in American popular culture are by no means uniform and in most cases are not overtly political, they nevertheless contributed to a public remembering of Vietnam that facilitated American intervention in Iraq.

Students of Vietnam War movies have shown how most films of that genre present the G.I. as a victim. In earlier films he was often portrayed as a psychologically damaged criminal. The sacrifices and suffering of the soldiers, or what Vietnam did to them, and us, is the major theme of those movies. This may help to explain why 69% of Americans believe that veterans were mistreated by the public even though 87% of those same Americans claim that they have a favorable opinion of Vietnam veterans. Most commentators have concluded that the impact of film on collective memory has been profound. David Halberstam, one of the journalists who covered the early stage of the war, made this point when he observed that “Thirty years from now, people will think of the Vietnam War as [the movie] *Platoon*.”⁸

That possibility may disturb historians, but it has been even more upsetting to others who worry about depictions of veterans in film. Author and veteran Michael Lee Lanning has complained that no group has been more maligned in film than Vietnam veterans. One of Lanning’s chief complaints is the usual one that movies are often inaccurate. But Lanning’s own preference for the American government’s version of the Vietnam War is demonstrated by his awarding

⁷ “A split over war, the wimp thing, and how to win,” by Dick Polman, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, <http://www.philly.com/mid/inquirer/12434269.htm>

⁸ Quoted in Taylor, *Vietnam War*, 10.

the Hollywood propaganda film *Green Berets* three out of four stars. For our purposes, it is important to note that Lanning's preoccupation with the image of the soldier in film reflects Hollywood's emphasis on the experience of the GI in the Vietnam.⁹ In other words, the war is remembered as an intensely personal, American event. Political causation and explanations for the war rarely enter into these depictions. It is even more noteworthy that the Vietnamese are often relegated to bit parts in their own war.

As I noted earlier, historians generally agree that one of the characteristics of collective memory is that remembrances of the past can be reframed by the present. The recent memory boom that lionized the men who fought World War II as *The Greatest Generation* appears to have had that effect on the way Americans remember the Vietnam War today. An example of this interaction between representations of the past and present may be found in the impact that the movie *Saving Private Ryan*, an offshoot of the Greatest Generation phenomenon, has had on the way Americans depict war. The gripping opening scene of the movie takes the viewer on to the beaches of Normandy during the first hours of the invasion. The audience is cast into the midst of a terrifying scene of random death and havoc. The apparent authenticity of that opening sequence made such an impression on audiences that it seems to have created a template for retellings of the Vietnam War. In one example of this trend, reporters for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* opened their retrospective series on the Vietnam War by placing readers in the midst of a fierce set piece battle in the manner of *Saving Private Ryan*.¹⁰ Such battles were rare in Vietnam nevertheless, the reporters made that appear to be the central experience for the American soldier. The result, as historian Christopher DeRosa has put it is "the Private Ryanization of Vietnam."

An additional side effect of the World War II memory boom was to further validate the widespread practice of having Vietnam veterans speak to classes about their experiences. These personal histories carry great weight with audiences. A recent study of how Americans think about the past has shown that most Americans regard museum exhibits, artifacts, and personal narratives as the most authentic and truthful forms of history.¹¹ Veterans seem to share these beliefs. Supporters of a war memorial in Philadelphia have expressed concern that "For a whole generation, [Vietnam] is a war in a distant place, a long time ago. For most high school students today, the Vietnam War is as relevant as the War of 1812." In order to avoid this fate, the Philadelphia area veterans hoped to create a \$2 million endowment to fund a memorial and "to help establish a 'living

⁹ *Green Berets* is described as a movie that "will bring pride to any veteran..." Michael Lee Lanning, *Vietnam at the Movies* (New York, 1994), 236.

¹⁰ A Village, A Hill And Horror: A Tragic Battle Early In The War Stood As A Harbinger Of Things To Come For U.S. Troops, April 16, 2000, *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

¹¹ Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York, 1998), 89-114.

history link' with Philadelphia schools so that students could learn from those who were there.”

For historians, this emphasis on personal stories and memories is problematic for several reasons. One is that memory is notoriously unreliable. Indeed, the more we learn about the way humans store and recall information, the more reason we have to doubt the accuracy of our own memories. Take, for example, the memories many Vietnam veterans have of returning home “to the world” on regularly scheduled commercial flights from Vietnam. These veterans insist that their return flights took them directly from Vietnam to some civilian airport on the West Coast. Those memories have been crucial in lending credence to the pervasive belief that veterans were spat upon and ridiculed by protestors waiting for them in the airports. In reality, the planes that carried veterans home were chartered civilian airliners that landed at military installations in the U.S. When one considers that these special flights even carried the normal compliment of stewardesses, it is easy to see how veterans might be tricked by their own memories.¹²

Another reason for worrying about the emphasis on personal memories of Vietnam is that individual soldiers rarely had much information on or understanding of why the United States was there in the first place. Listening to veterans remembrances with a critical ear can teach us much about what it meant to be in Vietnam. But it is doubtful that we will learn much about the causes of the war, the strategies employed, or the Vietnamese. Without an appreciation of the motives that sent Americans to Vietnam in the first place and without knowledge of what the Vietnamese wanted, how can Americans answer one of the most fundamental questions of the war: Was it moral?

Historian Carolyn Rosenberg has suggested that one reason that these more complicated matters go begging for attention is that the historical profession itself has taken flight from the study of powerful white men who make policy and direct the country in wartime. She commends the profession for becoming more inclusive and looking at history from the bottom up but she also laments the extent to which traditional political-military subjects have been sacrificed in the process.¹³ To this, one may add the present emphasis in popular culture that gives priority to experiences that affect one directly, often with a therapeutic goal in mind. Here I have in mind the popularity of television programs such as “Oprah” and “Dr. Phil.” The pervasiveness of this trend is illustrated when we consider that even professional historians whose job it is to teach the history of the war succumb to the therapeutic approach. As one historian at a major public university explained, his Vietnam War course became a way that his students

¹² H. Bruce Franklin, *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies* (Amherst, MA, 2000).

¹³ Eisenberg, “Was Anything Learned from Vietnam?” 9 January 2006, *History News Network*, <http://hnn.us/articles/20259.html>

could begin to connect to the experiences of their fathers.¹⁴ Such an outcome may be laudable but it was achieved by substituting personalized accounts of the war for a more standard diplomatic history of the war.

Thus far I have suggested that the American public's memory of Vietnam has taken shape in such a way that made opposition to the war in Iraq unlikely and even facilitated the country's momentum towards involvement. A collective memory that casts protestors in an unfavorable light and views anti-war demonstrations as hostile to soldiers has tipped the balance in public discussions toward military involvement. Similarly, the emphasis in popular culture on seeing the war at ground level, through the soldier's eyes leaves Americans ill-equipped to ask vital questions about the war's purposes.

These collective memories of the war have been formed by various processes. Political leaders sought partisan advantage through a calculated use of Vietnam images. Hollywood created compatible images largely for commercial gain. The public's own preference for "authentic" stories over accounts filtered through historians also contributed to the particular emphasis on Vietnam as something that happened to Americans.

As far as many professional military officers were concerned, Vietnam was something that happened to them. Grievances against the presumed anti-war bias of liberal journalists form a common thread running through the memoirs of professional officers. Research has undermined arguments that biased reports in print and television journalism turned American opinion against the war. Studies of television reporting have also debunked the widely held belief that the carnage Americans supposedly viewed while watching the war in their living rooms turned them against the war.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the pervasive belief that the "media" contributed to America's loss in the Vietnam War became a staple of talk radio and political campaigns. My own classes offer anecdotal evidence of how pervasive this secondary memory has become. During the last ten years students in my various research seminars and military and diplomatic history classes have frequently volunteered their views that the "media," particularly television, undermined the American effort in Vietnam. Aware of such public skepticism, journalists and news organizations have bent over backwards to avoid similar charges in every war since, including the current one in Iraq.

For professional military officers, the easiest way to avoid the problems they encountered in Vietnam was to make sure that there would be no more wars like the Vietnam War. In the 1980s, the Army remade itself into a volunteer force designed to confront the Soviet Army on the more hospitable battlefields of

¹⁴ "Finding their Fathers. Teaching the Children of the Vietnam War," by Peter Filene *The Journal of American History* 84 (1999).

¹⁵ Scholars place far more emphasis on casualties as a determinant of opinion. John Meuller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (New York, 1973); William Hammond, "The Press in Vietnam as Agent of Defeat," *Reviews in American History* (June 1989), 318–321.

Europe. General Creighton Abrams, the new Army's chief architect went so far as to reconfigure the Army so that any full scale operation would require the calling up of National Guard units. Abrams's purpose was to make sure that no president could send troops into a major conflict without the full support of the American people.¹⁶

Perhaps the most widely held lesson which has been transmitted to the current generation of policy makers is that the U.S. lost in Vietnam because it lacked a clear and definable goal for the application of force. No one has done more to popularize this lesson than former General Colin Powell. Indeed, even though this policy stricture was first announced by Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger in the 1980s, it has become known to the public as the Powell Doctrine. In his memoirs Powell, a junior officer during the Vietnam War, blamed civilian leaders for failing to define clear American objectives in Vietnam. This is at best a dubious assertion. As historians George Herring and Russell Weigley have pointed out, the U.S. did spell out its goal in Vietnam. The goal was to defend a democratically viable South Vietnam. The United States failed not because the goal was unclear, but because it was unobtainable through any of the means the U.S. had at its disposal.¹⁷

Nevertheless, the Powell Doctrine seemed to grow in stature as its author rose in prominence in official Washington during the 1980s and 1990s. Powell's critique of the Vietnam War was intended to place limits on the use of American force. By trying to set up criteria for when the U.S. should go to war, Powell subsequently came in for considerable criticism. According to his detractors, Powell was challenging the hallowed principle of the military's subordination to civilian authority. As it turned out, Powell created only a minor obstacle to the future use of force by American leaders. In effect, by ignoring the deeper reasons for America's defeat in Vietnam, Powell's criteria made it surprisingly easy for future presidents to go to war. To satisfy Powell's requirements, and thus indicate that he had learned the lesson of Vietnam, a president simply had to assert that he possessed a clear objective for the use of American military force.

As the following exchange from one of his rare press conferences shows, President Bush recognized that the supposed restraints imposed by the Powell Doctrine could be easily overcome.

QUESTION: Mr. President, millions of Americans can recall a time when leaders from both parties set this country on a mission of regime change in Vietnam. Fifty thousand Americans died. The regime is still there in Hanoi, and it hasn't harmed or

¹⁶ Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans are Seduced by War*, 38–56.

¹⁷ Herring is cited in Russell F. Weigley, "The American Military and the Principle of Civilian Control from McLellan to Powell," *Journal of Military History* 57 (Special issue, October, 1993), 27–58; *idem*, "The Soldier, The Statesman, and the Military Historian," *JMH* 63 (October 1999).

threatened a single American in the 30 years since the war ended. What can you say tonight, sir, to the sons and the daughters of the Americans who served in Vietnam to assure them that you will not lead this country down a similar path in Iraq?

THE PRESIDENT: That's a great question. Our mission is clear in Iraq. Should we have to go in, our mission is very clear: disarmament. And in order to disarm, it would mean regime change. I'm confident we'll be able to achieve that objective, in a way that minimizes the loss of life. No doubt there's risks in any military operation; I know that. But it's very clear what we intend to do. And our mission won't change. Our mission is precisely what I just stated. We have got a plan that will achieve that mission, should we need to send forces in."¹⁸

In reading the above transcript it is easy to see that the president missed the point of the journalist's question. Whether this was intentional or not is not something we can answer here. The journalist was making that point that an earlier generation of American leaders had misjudged the danger posed by Vietnam. How, he wanted to know, could American leaders be sure they were not making the same mistake in Vietnam? It was an important, and sadly, a highly unusual question. It was intended to force the president, and those watching at home, into rethinking the certainty with which they approached war in Iraq. An additional effect might have been to force a public reexamination of some of the articles of faith about the Vietnam War.

The president did not pursue the question that was asked. Instead, he answered the question he thought that most Americans would want answered. Would Iraq be like Vietnam? That is to say, was the U.S. embarking on another open-ended struggle with no clear objective in sight? The answer to that question was no, or at least he thought so at the time. The U.S., as the president indicated in several different ways, had a clear objective in Iraq. One could complain that in the process of making that response the president missed the point of the question entirely. But then, so did nearly everyone else. There were no follow-up questions.

Conclusions:

Anti-war activists of the Vietnam era must be surprised at the extent to which the memory of the Vietnam War has been manipulated to support military intervention in the Middle East. The myth of the anti-G.I. protestors has stifled dissent and presented formidable obstacles to critics of the present war. The myth of the Liberal Media has likewise constrained the press. Both of these myths rest on collective memories so strongly held that individuals feel no reason to test them against available empirical evidence. Another widely held belief,

¹⁸ "President George Bush Discusses Iraq in National Press Conference," <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/03/20030306-8.html>

that America lost in Vietnam because it lacked clear objectives, has failed to act as a break on intervention and may also have facilitated the decision to invade Iraq. Given these circumstances, policymakers may actually find that drawing on the memories of Vietnam is beneficial to their efforts. It seems possible that reminding the public of America's failure in Vietnam has the effect of automatically reminding the public of the importance of backing "our troops" and adopting an uncritical attitude towards the government. Otherwise, dissent and a lack of will could produce another failure in which the troops sacrifice in vain.

At the same time, the personalizing of the war has all but erased the Vietnamese from their own war and removed from consideration such vital issues as the reasons for American intervention in Vietnam. Instead, debate has centered on whether the war was winnable, in other words did the U.S. have a clearly defined objective? Americans remember the Vietnam War as a mistake. But they seem as yet unwilling to ask how the U.S. got involved. In light of this reluctance to address the central questions of the war, one is tempted to ask if anybody knows what we were fighting for.