

Why It Still Matters: The American War in Vietnam in the Age of Trump

By Howie Machtinger

"We don't win anymore. As a country, we don't win."

"We don't want to use our military, honestly. We don't want to use our military. But we're being scoffed at right now and we never fight to win."

"It will change. We will have so much winning if I get elected that you may get bored with winning. Believe me."

Donald Trump on the state of America

Why does it still matter to bring the truth of the American war in Vietnam to the American public more than a generation after fighting ended? Shouldn't progressives focus solely on campaigns to bring an end to Donald Trump's reign? Why be distracted by putting energy into digging up the long ago past? After all, don't Americans agree with Henry Ford that "history is bunk"?

We are all creatures of history; we all live in it. Demagogues don't drop from the sky, and the rise of the ultra right is not confined to Germany or the dustbins of history. What is the nature of Trump's appeal and how has his politics gained legitimacy and currency? What feelings of humiliation, fear, racism and sexism has he tapped into?

America's self image as an exceptional society suffered from five significant 20th century events that laid the basis for the current crisis:

1. The Great Depression of the 1930s & The Great Recession of 2008+
2. The rise of Fascism in the 1930s and 1940s
3. The challenge to Jim Crow racism
4. The rise of the women's and LGBT movements
5. The American war in Vietnam

The Great Depression of the 1930s and its 21st century kin, the Great Recession of 2008, challenged the notion that the American system would guarantee the good life for most Americans and their children. The rise of Fascism posed an authoritarian alternative to liberal capitalism; its extreme version of white supremacy and ensuing violence threatened to expose the limitations of the American trajectory and, among other things, provoked African Americans to hope for a Double V-victory over Fascism abroad and racism at home. The challenge to Jim Crow by the Black freedom movement undercut notions of freedom and equality central to the mainstream American narrative and inspired movements by others marginalized in US society. The women's and LGBT movements undermined traditional male privilege and introduced new ideas defining what it means to be male or female or human. And, pertinent to the concerns of this piece, the war in Southeast Asia raised profound questions about American power--its use and abuse--the American character, government accountability, concepts of manhood, and the purported role of the US as a defender of freedom.

Trumpism is a truly reactionary movement in that it is a well-honed authoritarian response to perceived economic crisis; a reassertion of fascist and masculinist symbols of power, a white and male supremacist counter-attack against the gains of people of color, as well as the successes of the LGBT community. Ta-Nehisi Coates adds: "historians will spend the next century analyzing how a

country with such allegedly grand democratic traditions was, so swiftly and so easily, brought to the brink of fascism. But one needn't stretch too far to conclude that an eight-year campaign of consistent and open racism aimed at the leader of the free world helped clear the way."¹

To complement all of the above, our brief is to demonstrate that how Americans responded to defeat in Vietnam importantly contributed to the rise of Trumpism. A core component of Trumpism is a desperate desire to reassert American power in an increasingly uncontrollable world in which the US no longer has a free hand. There is a powerful fear among significant portions of the US population that "they" are coming for us, that everyone must be armed for protection and that the US must do anything, from deportation to torture, to exercise the full brunt of its power to crush these dangerous enemies.

Some of these feelings have their source in US defeat in Vietnam, an early and profound signal of the loss of pre-eminence; it stoked the fear that the non-white barbarians were everywhere and ready to strike. For some Americans, this is when Americans began 'losing'. The war was a traumatic defeat for the US military and also for those Americans whose self-image has been tethered to American "exceptionalism", and who hold the core tenet that the US is a God-given "city on a hill" (in Ronald Reagan's sampling of the Sermon on the Mount and Puritan John Winthrop). These Americans felt humiliated by the damage to America's moral image as well as the sting of military defeat by what Henry Kissinger demeaned as a "fourth-rate power". The peace movement had in America (as part of a world-wide peace movement) succeeded in helping to end a terrible war which had cost the lives of million of Southeast Asians as well as 58,000 Americans, while seriously dividing the American people. But it did not succeed in helping Americans come to real terms with the defeat—to understand it as something besides loss; certainly no easy task, but, as we shall see, a crucial and necessary one.

Those on the right early on recognized the existential threat to American self-image portended by defeat in Vietnam. Attempts to resuscitate the American (imperial) mojo since the end of the war until today by both those in the mainstream and those on the fringes can be crudely classified as follows (concepts are listed separate for analytic purposes, but of course they are interconnected and build on each other):

1. The restoration of national 'pride' and the link to white supremacy: Losing the war unsettled the country and led some on the right to rationalize the loss and make efforts to restore national pride. That "gooks" had defeated the pride of the US military also called for a reassertion of white pride exemplified by a willingness to fight the dangerous 'other'. Today, for the right and others, traditional western values and power continue to be under siege and require a no-holds-barred response.
2. The "stab in the back" and anti-state patriotism: One explanation, reminiscent of the Nazi view of Germany's defeat in World War I, was that politicians at home abetted by domestic opposition had forced the US to fight with 'one hand tied behind the back'. As Rambo puts it in the postwar *First Blood* (1982): "Do we get to win this time?" This view gained widespread credence despite the incredible resources actually expended on the war. During the war, the opposition had been decried as pro-Communist, cowardly, elitist and unpatriotic. Added to this in the postwar period was the mythology that antiwar protesters had spat on returning American soldiers. The POW/MIA issue led some to believe that US politicians were deliberately colluding with the enemy. The critique of backstabbing evolved into a new *anti-state nationalism*, in which establishment politicians were scorned and government derided. These cowardly, fumbling bureaucrats needed to be replaced by

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/01/my-president-was-black/508793/>

heroic warriors and plain-speaking outsiders ready to do the deeds that the desperate situation required. Trump, in his version of an old socialist slogan, now promises to “Drain the Swamp (DTS).²

3. Rehabilitation of a warrior concept of manliness: On the far right came a call for warriors to fight a New War against not only foreign Communists but internal enemies as well, including not only unpatriotic protestors, but emasculating feminists. War movies, war games, and paintball gave full play to this machismo, often tied to violent fantasies of revenge. A cultural amalgam of the fictional Rambo and the renegade Oliver North (of Iran-contra fame) encapsulated this new hero willing to act out of the control of establishment power. Second Amendment fundamentalists carry on this tradition and pose as protectors of the population where the state power has seemingly abdicated its duty to protect America from border crossers, terrorists, and criminals as well as saboteurs of traditional values.
4. Rehabilitation of the image of the military: The military became sacrosanct and criticism of policy became equivalent to questioning the courage and service of ordinary Americans. The military and the police symbolized bastions of protection against the savage world of barbarians. The media became glutted with heroic fighters, crafty and courageous CIA agents, and tough, no-holds barred police who were unafraid to violate ‘politically correct’ rules and laws to take out the barbarians in their midst.
5. War is back and normalized. Starting with Grenada, and carrying on with Panama, the two Gulf wars, as well as Afghanistan, plus other more hidden forays around the world, the US seemed to be engaged with an eternal, and often frustrating, enemy—in recent years transmuted from Communists into (Muslim) terrorists. Threats to American security were exaggerated, excuses for war made up, and real enemies mythologized. There was to be no more coddling of outsiders perceived as threatening the American way of life.

Even as establishment politicians in 21st century America carried on an aggressive foreign policy, accompanied by increased domestic surveillance of ‘outsiders’, the image of terror-coddling Washington bureaucrats gained traction—especially after Barack Obama’s election. Accusations that Obama was a secret Muslim or that he wasn’t born in the US by the “birthers” (with Trump as a major popularizer) were not made because of their truth value--they were patently false—but to embellish Obama’s outsider status (already signified by his race), to brand him as a traitor, and to legitimize him as a target of unprecedented abuse. The slow and weak recovery from the economic crisis of 2008 in the industrial and mining heartland further fed a resentful, vengeful, anti-pc, avowedly racist and sexist, masculinist, and white supremacist narrative to restore American ‘purity’ and power. This authoritarian, populist movement abetted by new and old media entered the mainstream of political discourse culminating in a campaign to “Make America Great Again” with enough traction to take the Presidency. For Trump, the last time America was great was in his youth before the successes of the Black freedom and women’s and LGBT movements, and before the war in Vietnam.

1. The restoration of national ‘pride’ and the link to white supremacy

To justify the invasion of Cambodia in 1970, Richard Nixon lamented that the US would not act “like a pitiful, helpless giant.” He and Henry Kissinger eventually settled for what they termed a decent interval (before the Vietnamese opposition took power) to ‘preserve peace with honor’. Kissinger was obsessed with restoring the image of American power. After the fall of Saigon in 1975,

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http://www.slate.com/blogs/lexicon_valley/2016/10/26/why_do_trump_and_his_supports_keep_talking_about_draining_the_swamp.html

Kissinger told reporters, "the United States must carry out some act somewhere in the world, which shows its determination to continue to be a world power."³ In 1976, he testified to the Senate about Africa policy: "If the United States is seen to emasculate itself in the face of massive, unprecedented Soviet intervention around the world, what will be the perception of leaders around the world?"⁴ Appointed by Reagan in 1983 to head The National Bipartisan Commission on Central America, Kissinger's report asserted, "The triumph of hostile forces in what the Soviets call the 'strategic rear' of the United States would be read as a sign of US impotence."⁵

As the US-supported South Vietnam was about to collapse in April 1975, Gerald Ford initially preached amnesia: "Today America can regain the sense of pride that existed before Vietnam [note how the nation of Vietnam is here reduced to a war]. But it cannot be achieved by refighting a war that is finished as far as America is concerned."⁶

Ford's successor, Jimmy Carter detected a "crisis of confidence" in Americans after the war, but didn't "feel that we ought to apologize or castigate ourselves or to assume culpability... I don't feel that we owe a debt, nor that we should be forced to pay reparations at all."⁷ But contributions "to postwar reconstruction of the DRV of Viet-Nam and throughout Indochina" had been stated in Article 21 of the January 1973 Paris Peace Accords⁸ followed up immediately by a letter from Nixon to DRV Prime Minister Pham Van Dong⁹ (not declassified until 1977) which promised upwards of \$4 billion in postwar aid.

More disingenuous, in Carter's view "the destruction was mutual."¹⁰ Accurate estimates are hard to come by, but as many as three million or more Vietnamese were likely killed, including two million civilians, hundreds of thousands seriously injured and disabled, millions internally displaced, croplands and forests destroyed: long-term harm – physical, environmental, institutional, and psychological. The term *ecocide* was coined to try to capture the devastation of the Vietnamese landscape. From 1964 to August 15, 1973, the United States Air Force dropped in Indochina, "a total of 6,162,000 tons of bombs and other ordnance... This tonnage far exceeded that expended in World War II and in the Korean War combined."¹¹ Thus Vietnam War bombing represented roughly three times as much (by weight) as both the European and Pacific theaters of World War II bombing combined and about 13 times the total tonnage in the Korean War. From 1961 until 1971, the US military dropped more than 19 million gallons of toxic chemicals — defoliants and herbicides — on approximately 4.8 million Vietnamese in southern Viet Nam in Operation Ranch Hand. The chemicals were identified by the colors painted on their 55-gallon-drum shipping containers. The best known and most sprayed was Agent Orange, an herbicide known by the late 1960s to contain often dangerous levels of a "finger-print" (i.e. specifically identifiable) dioxin, 2,3,7,8-tetrachlorodibenzo-p-dioxin, which the World Health Organization has cited as among the

³ Greg Grandin, (2015) *Kissinger's Shadow: The Long Reach of America's Most Controversial Statesman*, Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt & Company, p. 140.

⁴ Ibid. p. 123.

⁵ Ibid., p. 192.

⁶ <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=4859>

⁷ <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=72290>

⁸ Marvin E. Gettleman, Jane Franklin, Marilyn B. Young, H. Bruce Franklin, *Vietnam and America: A Documented History* (NY: Grove Press, 1995), p. 479.

⁹ Ibid. pp. 477-8.

¹⁰ <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=72290>

¹¹ Clodfelter, Michael (1995), *Vietnam in Military Statistics: A History of the Indochina Wars, 1772-1991*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.

most dangerous persistent-organic-pollutant (POP) toxins. And of course, the Vietnamese enemy never set foot on or attacked American soil.

In any case, in an attempt to restore the US's eroding moral standing in the world as a result of the war, Carter drew a distinction between his policy and the policies of his predecessors, noting that they had pursued the "flawed and erroneous principles and tactics of our adversaries." As a result, the United States had moved away from what Carter saw as its core values. The interdependent world of the 1970s required a "new American foreign policy" grounded in cardinal principles, including the "commitment to human rights as a fundamental tenet of our foreign policy."¹² But his foreign policy failed to fulfill this high standard and it came crashing down around US support for the Shah of Iran, leading to the seizure of Americans by militant Iranians. Despite Carter's increased defense spending from 4.7% of GDP to 5.2% of GDP, and his strong support for the mujahedeen against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, but because of his fumbling attempts to address American malaise and his response to the Iran hostage crisis, Carter was tagged as soft and anti-military. Headlines screamed: "America held Hostage" even as the fifty-two captives were professional diplomats, CIA agents, and marines representing a nation, which had installed the very dictator who had been overthrown. A new nationalism abetted by Islamophobia (even as the US bankrolled jihadists including Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan) took root as the media fanned the flames. After a failed rescue of the hostages turned into 'the debacle in the desert', Carter was done for. When the hostages were finally released at the beginning of Reagan's presidency, the country was festooned with yellow ribbons. Like POWs, the hostages had been anointed heroes without having done anything heroic, except for being symbols of American victimhood, and of the hoped for rebirth of patriotic pride.

Hollywood began contributing to the frenzy after initially struggling to find its footing and a receptive audience. The Academy Award winning 1974 *Hearts and Minds* (which had initial trouble finding distribution the US) was a powerful antiwar documentary made by a journalist turned filmmaker, named Peter Davis. *The Deer Hunter* (winner of 5 Academy Awards, including for Best Picture in 1978) reversed iconic images of the war by showing North Vietnamese as sadistic killers as opposed to the sensitive, if tragic, 'bromance' of American working class soldiers. "Most famously, it appropriated a then-unforgettable Pulitzer prize-winning photo of Lt. Colonel Nguyen Ngoc Loan, South Vietnam's national police chief, executing an unarmed, bound prisoner during the Tet Offensive with a point blank pistol shot to the head. In the film, however, it was the evil enemy which made American prisoners do the same to themselves as they were forced to play Russian Roulette for the amusement of their sadistic Vietnamese captors (something that had no basis in reality)."¹³

The tone was set for almost all films about the war (including those ostensibly antiwar such as *The Deer Hunter*'s Oscar competition, the Jane Fonda vehicle, *Coming Home*)—either excluding or stereotyping the Vietnamese enemy, while almost exclusively focusing on Americans, as if the war had taken place in America. This remains the case even in explicitly antiwar movies, which have scenes in Vietnam such as *Platoon* (as extras, largely excluded), *Apocalypse Now* (stereotyped), *Full Metal Jacket* (as extras, largely excluded, except for the female sniper), and *Born on the 4th of July* (evoked, but mostly as extras). Only the Robin Williams vehicle, *Good Morning Vietnam* allows for real Vietnamese characters and an articulate voice of the enemy. Otherwise, the war in Vietnam was reduced to an American psychodrama.

¹² <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=7552>

¹³ http://www.alternet.org/story/86093/hollywood_is_becoming_the_pentagon's_mouthpiece_for_propaganda

There were more disturbing developments on the fringes of the culture. Ultra-right groups that had a history that preceded the war--stemming from the McCarthy era and going back to the Civil War--revived and expanded in the postwar period. For instance, from 1974 to 1979, membership in the Ku Klux Klan rose from an historic all-time low of 1,500 to 11,500. For these groups, non-whites (including Jews) were the same as, or agents of the same Communists who had troubled the US in Vietnam. For the Christian Identity movement, including groups such as Posse Comitatus, the loss in Vietnam seemed to forebode the Apocalypse and the job of white Christians was to bring on the Apocalypse by engaging in holy war. A less religious message was articulated in *The Turner Diaries*, a 1978 novel by William Luther Pierce (founder of the white nationalist organization, National Alliance). *The Turner Diaries* depicts a violent revolution in the United States which leads to the overthrow of the federal government, nuclear war, and, ultimately, a race war. By the year 2000, more than 500,000 copies of *The Turner Diaries* had been sold. The book became a bible for the white supremacist, nationalist movement and was found among the belongings of Timothy McVeigh (the perpetrator of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing).

These groups encapsulated two contradictory tendencies, which Leonard Zeskind has called vanguardists—who saw themselves as a militant minority with a pure message, and mainstreamers¹⁴ like David Duke and Pat Buchanan (both Trump supporters) who like Steve Bannon and Breitbart, today, are willing to somewhat sanitize the message so as to appeal to a broader public and achieve electoral success.

The movement to rehabilitate the war and restore American pride and aggressiveness really took off with the Presidency of Ronald Reagan. In a major speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) during the 1980 campaign, he asserted:

“For too long, we have lived with the "Vietnam Syndrome." Much of that syndrome has been created by the North Vietnamese aggressors who... over and over ... told us for nearly 10 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. As the years dragged on, we were told that peace would come if we would simply stop interfering and go home.

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...

There is a lesson for all of us in Vietnam. If **we are forced to fight** [emphasis added], we must have the means and the determination to prevail or we will not have what it takes to secure the peace. And while we are at it, let us tell those who fought in that war that we will never again ask young men to fight and possibly die in a war our government is afraid to let them win.¹⁵

Who exactly had forced the US to fight in Vietnam? Claiming “our government [was] afraid to let [US soldiers] win was a strange accusation against those American leaders (Democrats and Republicans alike) that had put great energy into promoting the war. But these and other accusations would have legs because they served to excuse and immunize the military and, by implication, the American people, from feeling responsible for defeat. At its peak of the war, the US had 540,000

¹⁴ <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2009/expert-leonard-zeskind-reflects-white-nationalist-movement>

¹⁵ <http://reagan.wingslikeaneagle.com/8.18.80.html>

troops (plus another 100-200,000 supporting from outside Viet Nam) in a country slightly larger than Florida. As noted above, the bombing campaign exceeded that of all previous wars; and the massive use of dangerous pesticides became notorious. What more would have been required to win is left unexplored. Were the use of nuclear weapons being suggested or perhaps a wider war that might have resulted in World War III? And what exactly would victory have meant if we preclude the total destruction of Vietnam—which some extreme hawks advocated both during and after the war. Wars are generally fought for specific political purposes. They are not all-out street fights until no one is left standing. Of course, they are politically driven. The goal in Vietnam was presumably the survival of a pro-western South Vietnamese government. But US strategy was based on a contradiction that Reagan failed to address: the more outside intervention there was, the less indigenous and legitimate the South Vietnamese government, the more it appeared to be a puppet of the American outsiders.

For all of Reagan's pro-soldier rhetoric, "his first act in office was to freeze hiring in the [Veterans] Readjustment Counseling Program. He soon moved to eliminate all Vietnam veteran outreach programs, including an employment-training program for disabled veterans." This was in line with the positions of pro-war veteran groups, such as the American Legion and the VFW.¹⁶ More Vietnam veterans committed suicide due to psychological problems after the war by 1990 than those who had died during the fighting. At least three-quarters-of a million veterans become homeless or jobless.¹⁷ What mattered to Reagan was to reinvigorate America's martial spirit and increase the defense budget, not providing actual help for veterans. Reagan's administration revived the B-1 bomber program, which had been canceled by the Carter Administration, and began production of the MX Peacekeeper missile. He approved NATO's deployment of the Pershing II missile in West Germany. He provided both legal and illegal support for the contras in their war against the Sandinista in Nicaragua, as well as for the repressive regime in El Salvador. By the end of his Presidency, he had expanded the U.S. military budget to a staggering 43% increase over the total expenditure during the height of the Vietnam War. That meant the increase of tens of thousands of troops, more weapons and equipment, not to mention a beefed-up intelligence program.

Reclaiming the war as a noble cause allowed a lifeline to those more critical of it than Reagan. Yes, too many innocents had died, but the US had meant well before it got stuck in a "quagmire" and realities took us astray. The Washington Post had already articulated this viewpoint in its editorial as Saigon fell: "if much of the actual conduct of the Vietnam policy was wrong and misguided—even tragic—it cannot be denied that some part of the purpose of that policy was right and defensible ... the hope that the people of South Vietnam would be able to decide their own form of government and social order... how good impulses can be translated into bad policy."¹⁸ Even when the US makes a mess, its honorable intentions must be applauded. The actual historical record shows little to demonstrate these good intentions: from the subversion of the 1954 Geneva Accords to the US role in numerous coups. Nor did its strategy and tactics show much concern for the lives of Vietnamese civilians.¹⁹

¹⁶ D. Michael Shafer, "The Vietnam Combat Experience: The Human Legacy," in *The Legacy: The Vietnam War in the American Imagination* (Boston: Beacon, 1992), 97, quote in Marciano 140

¹⁷ <http://thevietnamwar.info/vietnam-syndrome/>

¹⁸ (Washington Post, April 30, 1975, quoted in Marilyn Young's "Epilog" in in Marvin E. Gettleman, Jane Franklin, Marilyn B. Young, H. Bruce Franklin, *Vietnam and America: A Documented History* (NY: Grove Press, 1995). p. 516.

¹⁹ Nick Turse. (2013.) *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam*. New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt and Co.

Reagan's iconic *Morning in America* 1984 campaign ad (along with the subsequent *America is Back*) was successful in shifting the American mood. Its cheery manipulation of traditional American symbols effectively communicated the message that after a generation of social tumult, riots, scandal, and an unpopular war, Reagan had returned the United States to the tranquility of the 1950s, the Garden of Eden of American political sentimentality. He thereby became a hero for the Republican Party, who even Barack Obama has saluted as a game-changer.²⁰

Overcoming the so-called Vietnam syndrome became not just a Reaganite theme. At first Reagan's successor, George Bush (Bush I) echoed Gerald Ford's plea for historical amnesia in his inaugural: "The final lesson is that no great nation can long afford to be sundered by a memory." But the war still lurked beneath the surface, an ongoing sore point. In the flush of victory in the one-sided first Persian Gulf War (Operation Desert Storm), Bush could hardly contain himself when he more confidently exclaimed in March 1991: "It's a proud day for America. And by God, we've kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all."²¹

The Reagan era into the 1990s also featured the flowering of right-wing intellectuals. Having witnessed the influential role of intellectuals in opposing the war, right wing funders built up or started new foundations, including the American Enterprise Institute, the Manhattan Institute, the Center for Security Policy, Foreign Policy Institute, and the Project for the New American Century (now the Foreign Policy initiative). Generally speaking, all these are supportive of a Reaganite, aggressive foreign policy and a unique role for the United States. Many of the leading figures in these groups (Richard Perle, Robert Kagan, Paul Wolfowitz, Alexander Haig, Dick Cheney) became advisors to a succession of Republican Presidents. Dick Cheney, for one, has become a strong Trump supporter, and he is Mike Pence's role model for the Vice-Presidency.²²

For all of Reagan's and Bush I's bluster about having buried the Vietnam syndrome, conservative pragmatists such as Reagan's Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger²³ and General Colin Powell (chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under Bush I called for a more cautious approach to the use of American troops, including calls for a viable exit strategy, clear and limited goals, support from the American people and from the rest of the world). A doctrine of low-intensity warfare aimed to pursue American imperial aims in Central America and the Middle East with little risk to American lives. These doctrines were the military's considered response to the Vietnam debacle. The second Bush's (W) doctrine²⁴ repudiated this caution by touting an unrivaled military supremacy, legitimizing preemptive war, and arrogating to itself the right to act unilaterally. Trump's response to the foundering of W's doctrine in the Iraqi desert has been to criticize the Iraq war, but to coopt the rhetoric of military supremacy and unilateral capacity in his own name. In a nation that beset by "war and destruction abroad," "I am your voice. I alone can fix it. I will restore law and order."²⁵ Only a great and powerful political outsider is capable of making America great again.

Democrats, too, have indulged in language that celebrated the uniqueness of America, which legitimized its aggressive role in the world. Bill Clinton's Secretary of State Madeline Albright asserted her version of America's reinvigorated role: "But if we have to use force, it is because we are America; we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries

²⁰ <http://www.nytimes.com/ref/us/politics/21seelye-text.html>

²¹ <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=19351>

²² <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/mike-pence-role-model-vice-president-dick-cheney/story?id=42170897>

²³ <http://www.indepthinfo.com/articles/weinberger-doctrine.htm>

²⁴ <http://www.peace.ca/bushdoctrine.htm>

²⁵ <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/07/full-transcript-donald-trump-nomination-acceptance-speech-at-nc-225974>

into the future, and we see the danger here to all of us."²⁶ Under Obama, as well as W, Vietnam-era counter-insurgency was re-introduced with a new twist, a la General Petraeus.

In the 2016 campaign Barack Obama tried to counter Trump's message by proclaiming, "America is already great. America is already strong."²⁷ He earlier, in part to undercut Republican accusations of his un-Americanism, had asserted, "I believe in American exceptionalism with every fiber of my being."²⁸ But as the election demonstrated, the Democratic attempt to coopt a Reaganite message failed. Obama tried to promote an inclusive exceptionalism to include, say, civil rights activists and those who fought at the Stonewall for gay rights. This proved not as compelling as Trump's message that America needs to be exceptionally tough; and while his negative picture of American life was thought to contradict Reagan's morning in America rhetoric; in fact it was more in accord with Reagan's muscular unilateralism and resonated to Americans more than Obama's careful multilateralism. Note Trump's critique of American exceptionalism:

I don't like the term. I'll be honest with you. People say, "Oh he's not patriotic." Look, if I'm a Russian, or I'm a German, or I'm a person we do business with, why, you know, I don't think it's a very nice term. We're exceptional; you're not. First of all, Germany is eating our lunch. So they say, "Why are you exceptional. We're doing a lot better than you." I never liked the term. And perhaps that's because I don't have a very big ego and I don't need terms like that. Honestly. When you're doing business—I watch Obama every once in a while saying "American exceptionalism," it's [Trump makes a face]. I don't like the term. Because we're dealing—First of all, I want to take everything back from the world that we've given them. We've given them so much. On top of taking it back, I don't want to say, "We're exceptional. We're more exceptional." Because essentially we're saying we're more outstanding than you. "By the way, you've been eating our lunch for the last 20 years, but we're more exceptional than you." I don't like the term. I never liked it. When I see these politicians get up [and say], "the American exceptionalism"—we're dying. We owe 18 trillion in debt. I'd like to make us exceptional. And I'd like to talk later instead of now. Does that make any sense? Because I think you're insulting the world. And you know, Jim, if you're German, or you're from Japan, or you're from China, you don't want to have people saying that. I never liked the expression. And I see a lot of good patriots get up and talk about Amer—[sic] you can think it, but I don't think we should say it. We may have a chance to say it in the not-too-distant future. But even then, I wouldn't say it because when I take back the jobs, and when I take back all that money and we get all our stuff, I'm not going to rub it in. Let's not rub it in. Let's not rub it in. But I never liked that term.²⁹

The bottom line had moved over the years from using 'dog whistles' to stoke fears and, in Reagan's case, to then cheering up the fearful; to now openly and blatantly fomenting and exploiting their fears; 'dog whistle' code replaced by forthright attacks on racial groups and women. Being negative about America could be effective if put forward by a muscular leader, a self-proclaimed winner. What Trump shares with Reagan was not an avuncular personality, but the ability to project manly toughness to protect America—along with a perceived ability to call out others' political BS. Hillary Clinton, too, was ineffective in painting Trump as un-American because he demurred from ideas of American exceptionalism and was too negative about the state of the country. As a patriotic slogan, *Stronger Together* could not measure up to *Make America Great Again*. (It should be noted that the

²⁶ NBC's *Today Show* (February 19, 1998)

²⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jul/28/obama-hillary-clinton-convention-speech-trump>

²⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jul/28/obama-hillary-clinton-convention-speech-trump>

²⁹ (<http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/06/donald-trump-american-exceptionalism>)

2016 Republican platform does contain a ringing endorsement of American exceptionalism. Here as elsewhere Trump departed from the Republican playbook).

Moving on to our second point, we can be sure that the rehabilitation of American pride worked hand in hand with other right-inspired initiatives.

2. The “stab in the back” and anti-state patriotism

British general Sir Neill Malcolm. Malcolm asked Ludendorff why it was that he thought Germany lost [World War I]. Ludendorff replied with his list of excuses, including that the home front failed the army.

Malcolm asked him: "Do you mean, General, that you were stabbed in the back?"

Ludendorff's eyes lit up and he leapt upon the phrase like a dog on a bone. "Stabbed in the back?" he repeated. "Yes, that's it, exactly, we were stabbed in the back". And thus was born a legend which has never entirely perished.³⁰

Restoring patriotic American pride required coming up with a face-saving explanation for failure in Vietnam so as to keep intact the reputation of the military, as well as to restore a powerful self-image. The conservative movement had long cultivated a distrust of the state dating back to the pre-Civil War nullification proslavery movement and more recently reinforced by decisions of the Warren Court desegregating the schools and banning school prayer. But distrust of the state was also exacerbated by the exposure of government misinformation and lies by the antiwar movement. As the antiwar movement had largely demobilized after the war, the emboldened right was better positioned to take advantage of general distrust of the government. In his speech at the VFW, quoted in point 1, Reagan resuscitated a complaint that right-wingers had maintained throughout the war: politicians prevented the US from winning the war. Reagan blamed both the squishy soft Democrats and the Nixon/Kissinger strategy of *détente*. *Détente* signified a dangerous retreat from the holy war against the Communists and a humiliating acknowledgment of American weakness. Reagan's bellicose words, belying a cautious foreign policy in practice, seemed to pay off with the collapse of the Soviet Union just a couple of years after he left office.

In urging support for the first Gulf War, George H. W. Bush made good on Reagan's promise of unleashing the military: "with the greatest degree of protection possible for American and allied service men and women. I've told the American people before that this will not be another Vietnam, and I repeat this here tonight. Our troops will have the best possible support in the entire world, and they will not be asked to fight with one hand tied behind their back."³¹

This resentment and disparagement of establishment political leaders of both parties from the right was evident not just in Reagan's words, but more glaringly in the vituperations of the new right culture that began to flourish in the Reagan era and beyond. We have already cited the acolytes of *The Turner Diaries* and the growth of the Christian Identity movement in Point 1. These helped inspire a militia movement to police the borders and attack the 'un-American *other*', as well as institutions of the federal government. Eventually the right developed a sophisticated media strategy including talk radio, FOX News, Breitbart News and numerous sites on the web, which brought greater outreach. For many Americans, with the decline of traditional media, these became

³⁰ Wheeler-Bennett, John W. (Spring 1938). "Ludendorff: The Soldier and the Politician". *Virginia Quarterly Review*. 14 (2): 187–202.)

³¹ (<http://www.historyplace.com/speeches/bush-war.htm>)

the main sources of news and analysis. The appropriation of patriotic symbols by the Minutemen and, more successfully, the Tea Party also signaled entrée into mainstream America.

As the New Right movement targeted the establishment, it maintained its attacks on anti-establishment forces on the Left who had gained initiative in the 1960s. The antiwar movement had been vilified throughout the war. Pro-war hawks accused war opponents of being, if not Communists, tools of the Communists, cowards, and a source of troop demoralization. A new twist was added or rather expanded. Stories began to circulate that the antiwar movement not only had opposed the war, but also had spat on soldiers on their way home from the battlefields of Vietnam. Despite the proliferation of stories, in fact, no instance of antiwar activists attacking returning soldiers had been documented during the war, as Jerry Lembcke has demonstrated.³² No newspaper report or photograph of an antiwar protestor spitting on a Vietnam veteran has been shown to exist, in spite of the ubiquity of Pentax cameras and free photo processing for members of the military; nor is there any record of anyone doing so in any police reports of the Special Committee on Demonstration Observation, and there are no records of anyone ever being arrested or prosecuted for assault for doing so in the files of the Bar Association. The only documented instances, instead, showed hawks abusing anti-war veterans or soldiers. The mythology aimed to demonstrate that privileged antiwar students, often women, had expressed their class disdain for working class soldiers by spitting on them. These rumors functioned to contradict the reality of the GI coffee house movement as well as many other efforts to support dissenting GIs by the antiwar movement.

More crucially the mythology completely erased the unique and widespread opposition to the war inside the military. Col. Robert D. Heinl wrote in 1971 in the *Armed Forces Journal* that “by every conceivable indicator our army that now remains in Vietnam is in a state approaching collapse, with individual units having refused combat, murdering their officers and non-commissioned officers, drug-ridden, and dispirited when not near-mutinous.”³³ There were more than 300 antiwar underground newspapers circulated among GIs and over half-a-million reported incidents of desertion (503,926 to be exact).³⁴ Fraggings of officers (by fragmentation grenades) rose from 126 in 1969 to 333 in 1971. “An army-commissioned survey of troops on five major US military bases in 1970-71 found that 47 percent admitted to acts of dissent or disobedience.”³⁵ In early 1971 Vietnam Veterans Against the War organized the Winter Soldier Investigation of war crimes and atrocities with 116 veterans testifying in Detroit. That spring, during Operation Dewey Canyon III veterans threw away 700 medals at the Capitol Building. The resistance of antiwar active duty GIs and veterans was unprecedented. Today most Americans are unaware of this powerful movement, but are sure that spoiled antiwar protestors spat upon returning GIs. The master narrative has not permitted acknowledgment that soldiers and veterans, not just draft dodgers, were key and effective parts of the antiwar movement.

³² *The Spitting Image*; Lembcke, Jerry; New York University Press; 1998

³³ <https://msuweb.montclair.edu/~furr/Vietnam/heinl.html>

³⁴ 5An estimate of the US Department of Defense; see

http://books.google.com/books?id=_Rzy_yNMKbcC&pg=PA212&lpg=PA212&dq=desertion+503,926&source=bl&ots=hOFO9rsb1B&sig=KX4JXAvwn2xw4eGFR_nfsKtB36k&hl=en&sa=X&ei=V15sUfv5KaXYyQG9gYGABg&ved=0CDEQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=desertion%20503%2C926&f=false

⁶See <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/2343923> or <http://renew.com/general77/hdtage.htm> or <http://winoverptsd.com/wp/category/disturbing-facts-about-vietnam-veterans/or> for estimates from low to high.

³⁵ Christian G. Appy, (2015) *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity*, Viking Press, p. 212.

In the early postwar period, the narrative did allow for the image of the deranged Vietnam veteran. Hollywood embraced this theme early on with movies too numerous to list exhaustively, but include *Targets* (1968), *The Ravager* (1970), *Stanley* (1972), *To Kill a Clown* (1972), *Deathdream* (1974), *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Rolling Thunder* (1977), *The Exterminator* (1980), *Fleshburn* (1984), and *Combat Shock* (1986). While the war certainly had a deleterious effect on many soldiers, manifested in PTSD and a high number of suicides,³⁶ these movies did not result in increased treatment for veterans. They did serve to undermine any critical experience of the war expressed by veterans. That the war drove soldiers crazy somehow represented, in funhouse distortion, a way for the public to assimilate the war; or was it that our 'boys' had become infected with an Oriental virus? These unhinged veterans are not entirely distinct from the Rambo-like warriors who, as we shall see, Hollywood came to make into heroes.

The early postwar period also featured the demonization of Jane Fonda as a traitor. Though her FTA (Free of F... the Army) tour had been extremely popular among GIs and her infamous posing on a North Vietnamese tank took place quite late in the war (1972), the right had turned her into a symbol of the antiwar movement's supposedly treasonous behavior. The notion that the anti-Vietnam war movement had been anti-soldier became accepted even by the anti-war movements of the next generation.

Even before the war in Vietnam ended, Nixon had begun an unprecedented effort to make heroes of American POWs and MIAs. This was the initial effort to transform Americans from outside aggressors to victims of the war. As Jonathan Schell once noted, that getting POWs home and accounting for MIAs (traditionally accomplished at the cessation of hostilities) became the public rationale for carrying on a war which was sure to generate more of both. The POW/MIA myth initiated by Nixon (and Ross Perot) was buttressed by all Presidents who succeeded Nixon. But for those on the ultra-right, the fact that no POWs or live MIAs have ever been found since the war ended served as proof of the hypocrisy and duplicity of the federal government. The lack of evidence for the claims of the POW/MIA movement has been demonstrated over and over again by numerous Congressional and other investigations. To quote one retired Army colonel:

All U.S. POWs captured during the Vietnam War were released, either at Operation Homecoming (spring, 1973) or earlier. The only men captured and not released are 113 who died in captivity; their identities and the circumstances of their deaths are known; some of their remains have been recovered/returned.

No U. S. prisoners of war have been abandoned by the U. S. government.

No U.S. POWs remained in captivity after the conclusion of Operation Homecoming.

There is no conspiracy within the U. S. government to conceal the abandonment of prisoners of war (who were not abandoned in the first place).

No U.S. POWs from Indochina were taken to the Soviet Union, China, or any other third country.

The U.S. government has been -- since well before the end of the Vietnam War -- exerting all possible efforts to recover or account for missing men. That effort continues today and is unprecedented in the history of warfare.³⁷

Antiwar activist and scholar H. Bruce Franklin³⁸ has explicated the political purposes of this mythology as well as the facts of the matter:

³⁶ <http://www.brianwillson.com/memorandum-accelerated-mortality-rates-of-vietnam-veterans/>

³⁷ <http://www.miafacts.org/>

³⁸ See H. Bruce Franklin, *M.I.A. or Mythmaking in America*, New York: Lawrence Hill and Co., 1992. Revised and expanded paperback edition, New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1993 and

Here are statistics from his book and other sources:

US	Total Deployed in theater In theater (not all combat)	POWs	MIAs	Total Deaths
WW I:	4,734,991	4,120		116,516
WW II:	16,112,566	130,201	30,314	405,399
		124,079	(estimates vary)	
Korea:	1,789,000	7,140	8,025	36,516
Vietnam:	3,403,000	725	800	58,209
		766	1,719	(estimates vary)

What stands out here, despite the imprecision of some figures, is the relatively small number of MIAs compared to other wars (including Korea, a shorter war with fewer troops deployed and fewer killed). On the other hand, the Vietnamese government claims 300,000 Vietnamese MIAs.

The POW/MIA myth lived on in the movies and on TV. First came Chuck Norris's 1978 *Good Guys Wear Black*, which featured a cynical U.S. government writing off MIAs on a phony mission. 1983's *Uncommon Valor*, starring Gene Hackman and Norris again in 1984 with *Missing in Action* had similar approaches. The most successful movie, was, of course Sylvester Stallone's *Rambo: First Blood Part II* in 1985, which did the most to popularize the idea that American POWs had been left behind after the war and that the government had no real interest in their rescue. Rambo was a haunted Vietnam veteran commando. At one point, realizing he was betrayed by the U.S. government and under torture from the Vietnamese and their Soviet allies, Rambo is put into radio communication with the officer who ordered the mission and tells him, "Murdoch. I'm coming to get you!" Rambo and the Norris films were commercially successful in both the United States and in parts of Southeast Asia. *Rambo* was followed by Norris's 1985 prequel *Missing in Action 2: The Beginning*, as well as other films such as *P.O.W. The Escape* (1986) and *Dog Tags* (1990). The Vietnam war POW/MIA theme was also part of some television series. The long-running series *Magnum, P.I.* included multiple episodes in the 1980s whose theme was the possibility of American POWs remaining in Vietnam. The 1997 *The X-Files* episode "Unrequited" also trafficked in the myth. POW/MIAs were also part of a key story line in the series *JAG* in the late 1990s where the father of a central character had been an MIA in Vietnam.

Outside of the media, numerous efforts were made to find MIAs or rescue POWs, all to no avail. Retired Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Jack Bailey created Operation Rescue, which featured a former smuggling boat named *Akuna III*. Bailey never produced any prisoners and the boat spent years docked in Songkhla, Thailand, but the effort proved successful at bringing in money through the Virginia-based Eberle Associates direct mail marketing firm.

During the 1980s, former United States Army Special Forces member Bo Gritz undertook a series of highly publicized trips into Southeast Asia, purportedly to locate American POWs. One such mission in 1982 was to free POWs reported to be in Laos; Gritz led 15 Laotians and 3 Americans, but they were ambushed shortly after crossing the border from Vietnam to Laos and the mission failed. Gritz later ran for President on the Populist Party (United States) ticket in 1992. A vocal advocate for the re-institution of racial segregation, Gritz ran in 1992 under the slogan: "God, Guns and Gritz," and published an isolationist political manifesto entitled "The Bill of Gritz", which called

for the complete closing of the border with Mexico, abolishing the federal income tax, the dissolution of the Federal Reserve, opposition to "global government" and "The New World Order", ending all foreign aid, and abolishing the federal income tax.

Also in the 1980s, Scott Barnes, claimed he had seen an American POW in Cambodia. He caused significant dissension among POW/MIA activists, especially once he claimed that he had seen more American POWs in Laos but had been ordered by the Central Intelligence Agency to assassinate them. Barnes later became a controversial figure within Ross Perot's 1992 presidential campaign.

POWs had become heroes and the POW/MIA flag an American icon:

In 1982 it became the only flag, other than the Stars and Stripes, to fly over the White House, after it was first displayed there on POW/MIA Recognition Day. In 1989 the flag was installed in the Capitol Rotunda ...[followed by] a 1990 law to recognize the POW/MIA flag and designate the third Friday of September as National POW/MIA Recognition Day. In 1998, Section 1082 of the Defense Authorization Act—codified as Title 36, Section 902 of the U.S. Code—mandated that the POW/MIA flag be flown over the Capitol, the White House, the Korean and Vietnam Veterans Memorials, the offices of the Secretaries of State, Defense and Veterans Affairs, of the Selective Service System, and on the grounds or in the lobbies of every major military installation, every post office and all VA Medical Centers and national cemeteries on six days: POW/MIA Recognition Day, Armed Forces Day, Memorial Day, Flag Day, Fourth of July, and Veterans Day.

Since then, some states have passed laws that also mandate flying the POW/MIA flag. Oregon, for example, requires that the POW/MIA flag be flown on or near the state capitol on the same holidays as the national law. In Washington, a 2002 law requires every state agency, every state institution of higher education, and every county, city and town to display the flag on the same six holidays. Florida requires the flag at state parks year round. Arizona enacted a law requiring the POW/MIA flag to be flown over every town and city hall, Superior Court building and county office on the designated holidays. And in 2011, Idaho became the first state to require that the POW/MIA flag be flown over all state buildings, 24 hours a day, seven days a week "or until such time as all our unaccounted for and missing members of the Armed Forces return."³⁹

Most mainstream commentators predicted that Donald Trump's campaign was done for after he attacked former POW John McCain as a "loser" for having been captured. What they missed was how this appealed to his right-wing base--long suspicious of McCain, who supposedly betrayed his country in the POW camp, and who had become a vocal opponent of the use of torture--and how little it mattered to anyone else. Trump exposed the hollowness of the POW hero story for those on the right. Trumpism aims to replace the shame-imbued mythology of the POW with the hyperbolic symbology of the winner who will banish the memory of losers. They've been fired.

The flag remains a symbol for all Americans lost at war, but its origin story is intimately connected with efforts to newly demonize the Vietnamese enemy. As we have noted, the Nixon Administration created the POW/MIA issue as a rationale for the war when other rationales had been delegitimized. After the war, besides families concerned about the fate of loved ones the POW/MIA issue served not only as a retroactive justification of the war, but to demonstrate the extreme barbarity of a nation who would continue to hold and torture prisoners after the end of hostilities. And then it became a rhetorical litmus test for politicians and simultaneously a means of attacking them. The establishment was so craven that it sacrificed American lives to the barbarous

³⁹ <http://www.historynet.com/the-story-of-the-powmia-flag.htm>)

Vietnamese. The betrayal continued after the war. While Trump disparages some POWs and Muslim veterans, he elevates to new heights the accusation that American political elites have betrayed the American people, and embellishes the mythology of the outsider, savior hero—in his incarnation, less muscular, but equally plainspoken, if not always coherent.

Richard M. Hunt has argued that the ‘stab-in-the-back’ myth commanded the force of irrefutable emotional convictions for millions of Germans. Behind these myths was a sense of communal shame, not for causing the war, but for losing it. It was not the guilt of wickedness, but the shame of weakness that seized Germany, and "served as a solvent of the Weimar (the regime that preceded the Nazis) democracy and also as an ideological cement of Hitler's dictatorship"⁴⁰ Much the same can be said for those on the right in the wake of defeat in Vietnam. For the left and much of America the shame was in fighting the war, for the right, the shame in losing it. Having been brought up on the notion that America's strength in war was proof of its ethical superiority, defeat also undercut American claims of moral exceptionalism. America needed to be redeemed by a new class of warriors not tainted by association with a corrupt system.

3. Rehabilitation of a warrior concept of manliness

Defeat in Vietnam implied a humiliating emasculation for many on the right. How would real Americans respond to being ‘stabbed in the back’? *Soldier of Fortune (SOF)* magazine was founded by Special Forces veteran Robert K. Brown in the spring of 1975, just before the fall of Saigon. Its message “was explicit from the start: the independent warrior must step in to fill the dangerous void created by the American military void created by the American failure in Vietnam.”⁴¹ It featured articles about mercenaries, special ops, and counter-insurgency, as well as numerous ads for weaponry, as well as free-lance mercenaries. By the mid-1980s, it had 35,000 subscribers and newsstand sales of another 150,000.

SOF was part of a larger movement to propagate the individual warrior as the archetype of the true American. As James W. Gibson has demonstrated, *SOF* inspired magazines like *Combat Handguns*, *American Survival Guide*, and *S.W.A.T.* Military weapon sales exploded with the introduction of Colt produced semi-automatic versions of the M-16, an Israeli Defense Industries remake of the famous Uzi submachine gun, and even versions of the Soviet AK-47. In 1989, the US Bureau of ATF estimated that 2-3 million military-style rifles had been purchased since the war. Elite combat shooting schools and hundreds of new indoor pistol-shooting ranges opened. The National Survival Game invented in 1981 eventually morphed into paintball; by 1987 it was played by more than 50,000 people around the country each weekend. At one park called Sat Cong village (literally “Kill Communists”) in the Mojave Desert, players had the choice of playing fields: Vietnam, Cambodia, or Nicaragua. “The 1980s, then saw the emergence of a highly energized culture of war and warrior...The New War culture was not so much military as paramilitary...[and it] presented the warrior role as the ideal identity for all men.”⁴² A re-masculinization of men was the order of the day for the new warriors.

New War culture also represented a reaction to the growing feminist movement, as well as to the war. Viet Thanh Nguyen has noted the fear of the enemy personified in the Vietnamese woman as

⁴⁰ Hunt, Richard M. (1958) “Myths, Guilt and Shame in Pre-Nazi Germany”, *Virginia Quarterly Review*. 34, pp. 35-71.

⁴¹ James William Gibson, (1994) *Warrior Dreams: Paramilitary Culture in Post-Vietnam America* James William Gibson, Author Hill & Wang, p. 7.

⁴² *Ibid.* pp. 7-9.

“the complete and threatening object of both rapacious desire and murderous fear, the embodiment of the whole mysterious, enticing, forbidding, and dangerous country of Vietnam.” In *New War* articulations, Gibson points out, there is a complementary division between the “good, ‘pure’ sister and the bad, ‘impure’ temptress.”⁴³ The only safe woman is a supportive, virginal, white sister; the warrior must, at any cost, avoid contamination from the sexualized, enemy woman.

Until the middle 1970s, the National Rifle Association (NRA) had mainly focused on sportsmen, hunters and target shooters, and downplayed gun control issues. In 1975, it began to focus more on politics and established its lobbying arm, the Institute for Legislative Action (NRA-ILA), with Harlon Carter, and later, Neal Knox, as director. After 1977, the organization expanded its membership by focusing heavily on political issues and forming coalitions with conservative politicians. The ILA successfully lobbied Congress to pass the Firearm Owners Protection Act (FOPA) of 1986 and worked to reduce the powers of the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF). In 1991, staff lobbyist Wayne LaPierre became executive vice president and public spokesman for the NRA. The NRA’s focus on the 2nd Amendment’s right to bear arms as the ultimate protector of democracy and defense against government over-reach meshed neatly with the myth of the heroic warrior. The NRA has such enormous political clout that Congress has refused to pass serious gun control legislation, despite public support for some limits on gun purchasing. Trump’s strong pro-NRA stance⁴⁴ and his reaction to the Orlando shootings carry on the heroic warrior tradition.⁴⁵

These heroes were embodied not just in fictional heroes like Rambo and Tom Clancy’s Jack Ryan, but also in maverick warriors like Oliver North. On the staff of the National Security Council and in illegal defiance of Congress’s Boland Amendment and the ban on arms sales to Iran, North arranged and oversaw what came to be called the Iran/Contra scandal, which involved the selling of arms to Iran in exchange for the release of US hostages in Lebanon. Profits went for weapons to the US-supported contras seeking to overthrow the Sandinista-led government of Nicaragua. Despite denouncing any dealings with terrorists,⁴⁶ Reagan was forced to admit that in fact that is exactly what happened, while still disclaiming personal knowledge. North’s operation was an improvised combination of government and private action, including support from John Singlaub’s World Anti-Communist League, Tom Posey’s Civilian Military Assistance, as well as numerous free-lancers. When testifying before Congress in televised hearings, he became something of a hero. During his one-week testimony, he received 150,000 telegrams of support and his defense fund eventually raised over \$ 3 million. The country was split, but his supporters were much more fervent. An outlaw patriot could rouse intense support.

Other warriors entered public consciousness in the 1990s. At Ruby Ridge in 1992, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agents and U.S. marshals engaged in an 11-day standoff with self-proclaimed white separatist Randy Weaver.⁴⁷ In 1993, a raid by the ATF in the compound of the Branch Davidians, followed by a 51-day siege led to the deaths of 76 people. The Branch Davidians (also known as “The Branch”) is a religious group that originated in 1955 from a schism in the Seventh-day Adventist Church of the Shepherd’s Rod (Davidians), following the death of the Shepherd’s Rod

⁴³ Gibson, p. 60.

⁴⁴ <https://www.nra.org/articles/20160929/trump-the-official-nra-qa>

⁴⁵ “If some of those wonderful people had guns strapped ...right to their waist or right to their ankle and this son of a bitch comes out and starts shooting, and one of the people in that room happened to have it and goes ‘boom, boom,’ you know what, that would have been a beautiful, beautiful sight,” in <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2016/06/20/trump-clarifies-stance-on-guns-in-clubs-after-nra-pushback.html>

⁴⁶ http://articles.latimes.com/1985-06-19/news/mn-9185_1_reagan-rulesterrorists

⁴⁷ <https://www.britannica.com/event/Ruby-Ridge-incident>

founder Victor Houteff. Houteff had founded the Davidians based on his prophecy of an imminent apocalypse involving the Second Coming of Jesus Christ and the defeat of the evil armies of "Babylon".⁴⁸ The controversy around the actions of the ATF and FBI further fueled suspicions of the government by the ultra-right. More recently, the armed occupation of Oregon's Malheur National Wildlife Refuge lasted 41 days in January and February of 2016 because as one of its leaders, Ammon Bundy, put it, the promise of the rural West was fading because of federal land ownership. Patting a pocket-size copy of the Constitution peeking out of his breast pocket, he insisted that the government had to be stopped. Their defense lawyer argued "For these defendants and these people, having a firearm has nothing to do with a threat or anything else. It's as much a statement of their rural culture as a cowboy hat or a pair of jeans. I think the jury believed at the end of the day that that's why the guns were there."⁴⁹ The jury found the seven defendants not guilty of federal conspiracy charges.

The wimp vs. manly warrior factor became a key trope in American politics. Bush I had to fight off his 'wimp' image. He defeated Michael Dukakis in 1988 by successfully portraying him as an even bigger wimp. Bush's son, W., bragged about acting from his gut and played the Texas cowboy even as he was a product of the Eastern elite and managed to avoid serving in Vietnam. His swaggering image helped him avoid responsibility for not taking pre-9/11 warnings seriously; and the Democrats spared him in the name of national unity in a crisis.

Barack Obama's cool, detached image plagued him even as he pursued wars in Afghanistan and Libya, captured Osama bin Laden, re-intervened in Iraq, and greatly expanded the use of drone warfare. If Obama conceded in any way that the US had ever played a problematic role in the world, or expressed sympathy for the victims of the bombing of Hiroshima, or stated the obvious in that Guantanamo had become a "rallying cry for our enemies", then the right was quick to slam him for going on an apology tour. For them, any acknowledgment of US shortcomings is experienced as deeply humiliating in a way that destroying Iraqi society is not (for which in any case, they place blame solely on Obama's policies).

In the run up to the 2003 war against Iraq, a senior British official [an intimate of the Bush crew] dryly told *Newsweek* before the invasion, "Everyone wants to go to Baghdad. Real men want to go to Tehran." And then, presumably, to Damascus, Beirut, Khartoum, Sanaa, Pyongyang. Richard Perle, one of the most influential W advisers to the Pentagon, told an audience not long ago that, with a successful invasion of Iraq, "we could deliver a short message, a two-word message: 'You're next.'"⁵⁰

The fantasy of 'shock and awe', of remaking the Middle East, that military power would substitute for political acuity; all these represented a willful disregard—or a form of overcompensation—for the experience of Vietnam. The dangerous notion of pre-emptive war promoted by W. signaled that the US is willing to disregard international opinion and risk again the opprobrium it earned during the war in Vietnam. Real men always want to up the military ante and to hell with the consequences. Ultimately, the only meaningful power is the demonstration of violence.

The image of the heroic warrior has carried more emotional weight than any reality. So whether Trump actually opposed the Iraq war or that he referred to his time in military school as his Vietnam, or his extreme touchiness about the slightest criticism matters little. He has perfected the

⁴⁸ "Scholars tackle "cult" questions 20 years after Branch Davidian tragedy - WacoTrib.com: Religion". *WacoTrib.com*. 2013-04-13.

⁴⁹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2016/10/27/jury-acquits-leaders-of-armed-takeover-of-the-oregon-wildlife-refuge-of-federal-conspiracy-charges/?utm_term=.b1b3e151abf0

⁵⁰ <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2003/04/21/war-without-end>

outsider warrior image. Plus he shares the disdain for, and fear of, strong women typical of the post Vietnam warrior.

4. Rehabilitation of the image of the military and the militarization of the police

At the same time, placing the military into the realm of the sacred paradoxically turns it into the ultimate partisan prize. The military is the only public institution still trusted by a large majority of Americans, which is why both parties now routinely seek endorsements not only from generals but also from veterans and military families, hoping the military's consecrated aura will blind us to the tawdriness of campaign season attack ads and sound bites.⁵¹

In American popular culture, from Bill Mauldin to Sgt. Bilko to *M*A*S*H*, it had been ok to make light fun of the military. This has become more difficult since 9/11. The reverence of "Thank you for your service" has become de rigueur. After the Vietnam War and before 9/11, there was *M*A*S*H* (adapted from the 1970 movie, 1972-83), which used Korea and army medics as a safe backdrop to comment on Vietnam. The dramatic *China Beach* (1988-91) showed the perspective of a war nurse in Vietnam, and did not shy away from the problems of the war. But over time, the military in popular culture has become increasingly sacralized and criticism of American military policy has been reframed as an attack on ordinary soldiers.

The evaluation of the military according to the Gallup Poll is one way to gauge the improvement of the military's image since the end of the Vietnam War.⁵² From 1975-84, the percent of the public either "thinking a great deal of or liking the [military] a lot" ranged from the mid to high 50s. In June 2016, that figure had risen to 73% of the public; since 9/11 it sometimes rose into the 80s. The only institution even close in public approval is small business (68%). By contrast, the percent of the public approval of Congress had sunk from 42% to 9%; approval of church and religion had fallen to 41% from the mid-60s in the post-war period.

For the image of the military to be rehabilitated, first the military in Vietnam had to be normalized. In his first inaugural, Ronald Reagan initiated the process by elegiacally linking unnamed battles in Vietnam to earlier sanctified sites:

Beyond those monuments to heroism is the Potomac River, and on the far shore the sloping hills of Arlington National Cemetery with its row on row of simple white markers bearing crosses or Stars of David. They add up to only a tiny fraction of the price that has been paid for our freedom.

Each one of those markers is a monument to the kinds of hero I spoke of earlier. Their lives ended in places called Belleau Wood, The Argonne, Omaha Beach, Salerno and halfway around the world on Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Pork Chop Hill, the Chosin Reservoir, and in a hundred rice paddies and jungles of a place called Vietnam.⁵³

Barack Obama used almost the same language, this time providing an actual Vietnam battle name, in his first inaugural a quarter of a century later: "For us, they fought and died, in places like Concord and Gettysburg; Normandy and Khe Sanh."⁵⁴

⁵¹ <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-brooks-military-sacred-20160810-snap-story.html>

⁵² <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx>

⁵³ http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/reagan1.asp

⁵⁴ <http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres68.html>

The 1980s witnessed a spate of belated welcome home parades for Vietnam vets—a New York City parade featured 25,000 veteran marchers in front of a reported one million spectators-- as well the construction of hundreds of memorials around the country (including the controversial Memorial Wall in Washington DC). As Christian Appy notes, “by the 1980s, mainstream culture and politics promoted the idea that the deepest shame connected to the Vietnam War was not the war itself, but America’s failure to embrace its veterans.”⁵⁵

By the time Bush I launched the first Gulf War, even protestors felt the need to circumscribe their opposition by clarifying that they supported the troops whatever they felt about the war. Viet Thanh Nguyen has pointed out the ways in which this perspective undercuts an authentic antiwar position:

“Oppose the War, but Support the Troops: The slogan implicitly evokes the memory among many Americans that they did not support the troops during the war in Vietnam and calls on them now to support the troops fighting in current wars. In doing so the slogan also suppresses troubling questions. Perhaps one could support the troops if one only opposed the war on issues of foreign policy, or if one simply did not agree with the expenditure of American treasury on military adventurism. But if one opposed a war because it killed innocent people, then how could one support the troops who inflicted the damage? Do they not bear moral responsibility for killing? Might they not bear some political responsibility for a war they implicitly supported through their votes, their attitudes, and their actions? The question of responsibility is particularly pressing for an all-volunteer army... The slogan’s refusal to judge soldiers also implies a refusal to judge the civilians. What lies behind the slogan is not only support for the troops but the absolution of the same civilians who utter the slogan. If the hands of the troops are clean, so are the hands of these civilians. As for the American dead, they have not died for nothing after all. ...The story of supporting the troops affirms an American identity invested in the justice of American wars and the innocence of American intentions. This identity is the true “Vietnam Syndrome,” the selective memory of a country that imagines itself as a perpetual innocent.”⁵⁶

Hollywood also played a key role in refurbishing the image of the military. A turning point was *Top Gun* (1986) an updating of the notion that the military turns boys into men. In a key subplot, the hero, Maverick, learns that his father had been a heroic naval pilot during the war, not the troublemaker he had been led to believe. Navy and Air Force recruitment zoomed—sometime from recruiters in the theaters—and *Top Gun* became the highest grossing movie of the year. To obtain access to naval aircraft and personnel, the producers granted script approval to the Navy.

Hollywood has a long-standing relationship with the military. The connection was cemented with the 1927 film *Wings*. It featured over 3,000 infantrymen as extras, and included U.S. Air Force military pilots and planes. The film starred Clara Bow, the original “it” girl, as the love interest two men fight over, enlisting in an effort to become combat pilots to win her affection. It won the very first Oscar for Best Picture.

By 1989, Hollywood had upped the ante with the Defense Department's Film and Television Liaison Office led by Phil Strub, who oversaw efforts to seek United States military assistance on various movie projects, such as providing the F-22 Raptors and other vehicles used in the Transformers film trilogy. His name has appeared in the “producers wish to thank” list in more than 50 films, including *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (2009), *Lone Survivor* (2013), *Ironman*, ... *The Perfect*

⁵⁵ Appy, p. 241.

⁵⁶ Nguyen, pp.48-50

Storm (2000) and *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008), as well as the TV shows “*Bones*” (2015-17) and *24* (2001-10)”⁵⁷ On the other hand, it should be pointed out, other movies that did not fully glorify military life either refused Pentagon script approval or were turned down by the military included *Platoon* (1986), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *The Thin Red Line* (1998), *Three Kings* (1999), *Stop-Loss* (2008), *Crimson Tide* (1995), *G.I. Jane* (1997), *Windtalkers* (2002), and *In the Valley of Elah* (2007).”

The CIA also got into the act. The CIA had been under attack during and after the war. Revelation about CIA activities in Vietnam (including the notorious Phoenix program), Watergate, and evidence of domestic spying had put the CIA on the defensive. Making matters worse were critical memoirs by former CIA agents Victor Marchetti and Philip Agee.⁵⁸

In 1977, after this systematic media manipulation was publicly exposed by congressional investigations, the CIA created an Office of Public Affairs that was tasked with guiding press coverage of intelligence matters in a more transparent fashion... The flag-waving Tom Clancy franchise became a centerpiece of CIA propaganda in the 1990s, with a succession of actors (Alec Baldwin, Harrison Ford, and finally Ben Affleck) starring in films like *Patriot Games*, *Clear and Present Danger*, and *The Sum of All Fears*, which pit the daring agent Jack Ryan against an array of enemies, from terrorists to South American drug lords.⁵⁹

Long-time CIA operative Chase Brandon (Tommie Lee Jones’s cousin) was the CIA’s first entertainment liaison officer, working in the entertainment industry for over a decade from 1996 onwards. He helped change the tone of Hollywood movies from Vietnam-era takedowns like *Three Days of the Condor* (1975). Brandon more than any other individual helped set up a permanent CIA network within Hollywood and the rest of the industry. The CIA developed relationships with stars of the magnitude of Affleck, Harrison Ford, and Robert De Niro. Other CIA-influenced movies included *Enemy of the State* (1998), *Bourne Identity* (2002) *The Recruit* (2008), and most effectively *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) and *Argo* (2012). Among its many interventions on TV were *Alias* (2001-6), *24* (2001-10), *Person of Interest* (2011-now), and *Homeland* (2011-now). The CIA’s interest was not only to present a positive view of the CIA but even in movies with a jaded perspective, to over-emphasize the threats to the US and promote the CIA’s extraordinary skills and technology.

Despite the CIA’s failure to prevent 9/11 and its faulty intelligence about the 2003 Iraq war, this profusion of positive media in a fearful climate proved protective of its image. When the CIA engaged in torture under the leadership of George W. Bush, there was *24* to demonstrate its efficacy, *Zero Dark Thirty* to pretend it helped capture Osama Bin Laden, and *Argo* to provide a happy ending to the Iran hostage crisis.

Trump’s dismissal of CIA intelligence about Russian hacking is a break from CIA idolatry and resonates with his dismissal of American exceptionalism (see point 1). He has no problem tearing down establishment institutions to which he can portray himself as the antidote to their corruption, the unique vehicle to make America great. The tortured history of the CIA allows an opening to assimilate long-time criticisms of the CIA into his Right populist agenda. In a power struggle it remains to be seen whether the long-standing national security state can bring him to heel or will

⁵⁷ <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/7/29/hollywood-and-the-pentagon-relationship-of-mutual-exploitation.html>

⁵⁸ Agee, Philip (1975). *Inside the Company: CIA Diary*. Penguin and Marchetti, Victor; Marks, John D. (1974). *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence*. New York: Knopf.

⁵⁹ <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/07/operation-tinseltown-how-the-cia-manipulates-hollywood/491138/>

be transformed into his personal fiefdom. His appointments so far indicate a tilt toward the most hard-core elements of the myriad national security agencies that have proliferated since 9/11.

One supposed characteristic of a non-authoritarian democracy is the sharp distinction between the army, which fights external enemies, and the police, which maintains domestic order. This distinction, never as clear as advertised, has broken down in the last 20 years, as society and the police have become increasingly militarized.

The weaponry and advanced technology with which this country has been fighting its never-ending (and remarkably unsuccessful) conflicts abroad -- from Predator drones to the Stingray that mimics a cell phone tower and so gets nearby phones to connect to it -- began migrating home, as America's borders and police forces were militarized. The police have been supplied with weaponry and other equipment directly off the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan, while veterans from those wars have joined the growing set of SWAT teams, the domestic version of special-ops teams, that are now a must-have for police departments nationwide.

... The National Security Agency created a global surveillance apparatus so all-encompassing that it left the fantasies of the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century in the dust.⁶⁰

The 1033 Program was created during the Bill Clinton administration by the 1997 National Defense Authorization Act as part of the U.S. Government's Defense Logistics Agency Disposition Services (DLA) to transfer excess military equipment to civilian law enforcement agencies. As of 2014, 8,000 local law enforcement agencies participated in the reutilization program that has transferred \$5.1 billion in military hardware from the Department of Defense to local American law enforcement agencies since 1997. Soon after the 2014 Ferguson, Missouri police shooting of Michael Brown and the militarized response to protestors, there was some interest in Congress to reform the Pentagon's 1033 Program. Congressional action never materialized, but the Obama administration followed through, banning the transfer of at least some types of military weapons to local police.

Donald Trump, unsurprisingly, wants to undo Obama's policy. Police union members in Ohio quizzed Donald Trump about protective gear, saying President Obama has unfairly banned the practice of sales of surplus military equipment to police department. Trump says he would resume such sales, saying, "Yes, I would. I think it's ridiculous" to keep this equipment from the police.⁶¹

There has also been an ominous expansion of military-style SWAT teams. SWAT (Special Weapons And Tactics) teams are law enforcement units which use specialized or military equipment and tactics in the United States. Initially created in the 1960s to control protests or deal with violent confrontations with criminals, the number and usage of SWAT teams multiplied in the 1980s and 1990s during the so-called War on Drugs and later in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. As of 2005, SWAT teams were deployed 50,000 times every year, almost 80% of the time to serve search warrants, most often for drugs. SWAT teams are increasingly equipped with military-type hardware and trained to deploy against threats of terrorism, for crowd control, and in situations deemed beyond the capabilities of ordinary law enforcement.

⁶⁰ See

http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/176224/tomgram%3A_william_astore%2C_all_the_president%27s_generals/

⁶¹ <http://www.msnbc.com/rachel-maddow-show/trump-eager-return-military-equipment-police-departments>

What is the rationale for this hyper-militarized society?

The director of MIT's Security Studies Program, Harvey Saplosky, refers to ...what he terms "You Never Know(ism)": You Never Knowism is the guiding ethos of U.S. national security. National security planning documents are rife with it. They evoke a world of swirling uncertainty and rising complexity, a time of unprecedented change, where predictions are impossible but dangers great. They claim that the simple Soviet threat has been replaced by more various and irrational ones, which require capabilities-based planning—building military forces with no particular foe in mind.

... The dirty secret of American national security politics is that we are safe. Americans might be the most secure people in history. But we worry. We are told that our enemies may be organizing our destruction in pockets of disorder, which are growing. We are taught that the world is chaotic, awash in civil war and terrorism, which could strike us "any place, with virtually any weapon." We hear that our satellites are ripe for attack, that pirates prey on our shipping, that Iran's nuclear weapons portend disaster, and that China is a growing threat. At base, however, most arguments claiming America's insecurity rely on implausible scenarios. The futures these arguments fear are not probable but possible. It is possibility that justifies the defenses they advocate.

According to data compiled by the U.S. government's Office of Management and Budget, ...(fiscal years 1999 through 2008) of sequentially rising arms spending, measured in inflation-adjusted expenditures, is now longer than that of the Vietnam era (six years of real rising outlays) and Korea (four years). In relative terms, real Department of Defense outlays in the Vietnam era rose by 35.7 percent during 1963–68, while during 1999–2006 real outlays soared by 56 percent..⁶²

Under Obama the military budget, at first continued to rise and then fell slightly, still totaling much as the next 7 or 8 nations combined.⁶³

Trump, in typical provocateur mode, tweeted in December 2016 that the US "must greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability until such time as the world comes to its senses regarding nukes" and added that he is fine with the country taking part in an "arms race" if it puts the U.S. in a stronger position against foreign adversaries. "Let it be an arms race ... we will outmatch them at every pass and outlast them all." ⁶⁴ This seemed to mark a break with Obama's proclaimed non-proliferation strategy, but Trump's acolytes later claimed that what he was advocating was in line with Obama's calls for modernizing the nuclear arsenal. In any case, it is clear that a Trump Administration has no interest in demilitarization but will almost certainly escalate the ongoing militarization. This is clearly indicated in his cabinet appointments of what William Astore calls the elevation of tough-talking, but "losing generals"—as distinct from Washington, Grant, or Eisenhower-- like James "Mad Dog" Mattis, Michael Flynn, and John Kelly.⁶⁵ Big talk is once more the substitute for actual deeds.

⁶² <http://monthlyreview.org/2007/06/01/from-military-keynesianism-to-global-neoliberal-militarism/>

⁶³ <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2016/jan/13/barack-obama/obama-us-spends-more-military-next-8-nations-combi/>

⁶⁴ <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/12/trump-nuclear-arms-race-russia-232944>

⁶⁵ See

http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/176224/tomgram%3A_william_astore%2C_all_the_president%27s_generals/

5. War is back and normalized.

In the 15-plus years since 9/11, what was originally called the "Global War on Terror" has become a permanent war across the Greater Middle East and Africa (with collateral damage from Europe to the Philippines). In those years, staggering sums of money -- beyond what any other country or even collection of countries could imagine spending -- has poured into the U.S. military and the arms industry that undergirds it and monopolizes the global trade in weaponry.

... And the role [of the commander in chief] has expanded strikingly in these years, as the White House gained the power to make war in just about any fashion it chose without significant reference to Congress. The president now has his own air force of drone assassins to dispatch more or less anywhere on the planet to take out more or less anyone. At the same time, cocooned inside the U.S. military, an elite, secretive second military, the Special Operations forces, has been expanding its personnel, budget, and operations endlessly and its most secretive element, the Joint Special Operations Command, might even be thought of as the president's private army.⁶⁶

If the official purpose of the war in Vietnam was to stop 'the spread of Communism'—and not to establish and spread American dominance--then the expected outcome of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the onset of state capitalism in China would be not only a 'peace dividend', but also a general relaxation of global tensions along with a reduced role for the military. But In 1991, Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney publicly expressed his fear that nations such as Iraq, Iran, and North Korea, could acquire nuclear components after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. At the same time, this collapse resulted in a mood of Western triumphalism and the fantasy that the US would dominate the world without serious opposition. The end of the Soviet Union facilitated the erasure of the defeat in Vietnam. The US had beaten the Communists after all. Neo-liberal privatization and deregulation incubated under the Reagan/Thatcher regimes burst into full bloom and meshed with the neoconservative goal to remake the world in the American image. An early articulation of the post-Cold war neocon view, was the Defense Planning Guidance, a document prepared in 1992 by Under Secretary for Defense for Policy Paul Wolfowitz:

Our first objective is to prevent the re-emergence of a new rival, either on the territory of the former Soviet Union or elsewhere that poses a threat on the order of that posed formerly by the Soviet Union. This is a dominant consideration underlying the new regional defense strategy and requires that we endeavor to prevent any hostile power from dominating a region whose resources would, under consolidated control, be sufficient to generate global power.⁶⁷

The events of 9/11 reinforced the sense of fear and victimization that the right has promoted since the Vietnam War and provided a palpable enemy for the US to mobilize against. They gave full flower to the imperial fantasies of the Bush-Cheney-Rumsfeld (not to mention Wolfowitz) triumvirate. The actions of a stateless criminal conspiracy became an excuse for attacking the

⁶⁶ See

http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/176226/tomgram%3A_engelhardt%2C_it_can_happen_here_%28in_fact%2C_it_did%21%29/#more

⁶⁷ McGowan, J. (2007). "Neoconservatism". *American Liberalism: An Interpretation for Our Time*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. pp. 124–33. ISBN 0-8078-3171-9.

regimes of two nations, one of which any detached observer could tell had no relation to the crimes of 9/11. The US was to remake the Middle East initially by 'shock and awe', reviving Vietnam era dreams, and determinedly ignoring the lesson of defeat. W's announcement of an ill-defined global war (initially called a crusade) on terror in which "there is no neutral ground"⁶⁸ amplified by his assertion of the US's right to preemptive or preventive armed action (or war)⁶⁹ insured a future of perpetual war.

Where are we today? Estimates vary but there are at least 800 US military bases in over 70 countries and territories⁷⁰ around the world (no other country comes close) at costs estimated from \$80 to \$200 billion. Besides the ongoing war in Afghanistan, the US is involved in some degree in Iraq, Libya, Yemen, and Syria. Less public is the fact that:

[In 2015] US Special Operations forces have already deployed to 135 nations, according to Ken McGraw, a spokesman for Special Operations Command (SOCOM). That's roughly 70 percent of the countries on the planet. Every day, in fact, America's most elite troops are carrying out missions in 80 to 90 nations, practicing night raids or sometimes conducting them for real, engaging in sniper training or sometimes actually gunning down enemies from afar. As part of a global engagement strategy of endless hush-hush operations conducted on every continent but Antarctica, they have now eclipsed the number and range of special ops missions undertaken at the height of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁷¹

What US rulers have garnered from the Vietnam experience was not a sense of war's destructiveness or its futility, but how, in the words of Viet Thanh Nguyen to wage "forever war" more effectively. That they have been largely frustrated since the Vietnam War in this enterprise seems only to encourage them in their foolish pride. The shock of the Vietnam War to the American conscience has been displaced by a world in which peace is transient and war and the military is omnipresent.

Conclusion

In some ways Trumpism is an original right wing amalgam of competing narratives--extremely pro-business but anti-free trade; skeptical about American exceptionalism but pledging to make America great again; gaudy capitalism in touch with working class anger; a Big Business cabinet and a pledge to protect social security; America First isolationism with growing ties to authoritarian leaders around the world (from Putin to Netanyahu), presumed misgivings about some wars and disparagement of generals during the campaign, negative about NATO and suspicious of the CIA; then placing generals in roles traditionally held by civilians and fostering dreams of increasing the nuclear arsenal; the anti-politician in charge of government.

Trumpism is also in some ways the same old authoritarianism sowing fear, racism, demonization of the 'other', and hate for advantage. Trump is putting the generals in charge so the crooked, corrupt politicians will not hold them back from smashing the 'enemy'. As he put it during his campaign, "the only important thing is the unification of the people – because the other people don't mean anything".⁷² In hard times, he is advising his people to lash out at the *others* as a way to resolve

⁶⁸ "In this conflict, there is no neutral ground," USA Today, Oct. 8, 2001, p. 5.

⁶⁹ *National Security Strategy* (NSS), issued 20 September 2002

⁷⁰ <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/06/us-military-bases-around-the-world-119321>

⁷¹ <http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/176048/>

⁷² <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/sep/02/trump-erdogan-farage-the-attractions-of-populism-for-politicians-the-dangers-for-democracy>

their problems. He has coopted frustrations with the state of American society, as well as its blundering wars and pretends to allay them with the fantasy of the protective father who has mastered the art of the deal and will thereby save American jobs and bring American power to bear effectively abroad. Whether his break with the post-world War II bipartisan foreign policy consensus as well as Republican orthodoxy can be sustained in the face of opposition from the national security state and Republican cold warriors, as well as from the grassroots remains to be seen. But it is clear that something new is afoot in the world; alliances breaking down and shifting, the European Union dividing, strongmen in power --from Putin to Netanyahu to Erdogan (Turkey) to Duterte (Philippines) to Orban (Hungary) and whoever is next in France and possibly Germany— with the potential of a global authoritarian alliance.

The trajectory of Trumpism toward an American-style authoritarianism or what Umberto Eco calls *ur-fascism*⁷³ is clear. How the contradictions in his thinking play out is harder to predict, but they will matter politically if we can offer a relevant counter-narrative. Part of our job is to develop a narrative that speaks to ordinary people's vulnerability while honestly confronting America's ongoing shortcomings. We need a new sense of American-ness; one that forgoes exceptionalism. We need to elaborate an inclusive--not confined to the middle class--genuine inter-racial dialogue along with honest relationship building; a strategy and sensibility, which replace resentment and the naked pursuit of wealth and power with humanity and self-understanding.

Assuming that the case has been made that the roots of Trump's movement reside in part in a dangerous and distorted response to the war in Vietnam, why does that connection matter? We, in the Veterans For Peace Full Disclosure campaign for an Honest Commemoration of the American War in Vietnam, initially responded to the Pentagon's 50th Anniversary Commemoration of the war, which began in 2012. We have been very concerned about government attempts to whitewash and mythologize the war and US actions in Vietnam, and to thereby legitimize further unnecessary and destructive wars. The Trump Presidency has only heightened our concerns.

Our point has been that the roots of Trumpism lie in part in deep-seated feelings of resentment and victimization that will not easily be uprooted or challenged. What is America's proper place in the world? How does one help a society and a culture cope with what feels like losing? How do we combat the politics of 'resentment'? What is a useful political response to people's fears and feelings of vulnerability? What allows a people to honestly admit and deal with historical immoralities and mistakes? How can the US engage the world without seeking dominance? This speaks to many contradictions in the American experience, not just the war in Vietnam. How are the moral problems of the past to be forthrightly confronted so that we can productively move forward in the present? Our view is distinct from that expressed by President Obama's: "belief that we need to look forward as opposed to looking backwards."⁷⁴

We have seen that the unresolved past lives on; the further it is buried or rationalized, the more likely it is to resurface in disturbing and dangerous fashion. Especially when it involves profound issues of race, class, sex, and war! Our hope and aim is for an honest examination of the war that can be part of a healthy process by which Americans encounter the world and its inevitable frustrations and moral challenges. We need to work these issues through rationally, while also recognizing the deep emotional stakes involved. We have been indoctrinated to be a nation of exceptional 'winners'; are we capable of posing an emotionally satisfying and humane alternative? We do not expect progress to come easily, but it needs to come. There has been important work done in the last generation to come to terms with many of these questions. Obviously more needs

⁷³ <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1995/06/22/ur-fascism/>

⁷⁴ <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/12/us/politics/12inquire.html>

to be done in a way that's is accessible and meaningful to most Americans. Few nations have honestly confronted their historic sins; where there has been progress it has been over generations. We in the US face a unique challenge because of America's outsize role in the world. If we are controlled by our demons, then all of humanity will pay the price. The truth needs to make us free or at least wiser and more humble.