

Reprogramming Memories: The Historicization of the Vietnam War from the 1970s through the 1990s

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INTRODUCTION

It can generally be said that memories of the wars which took place during the twentieth century differ significantly depending on the viewpoint of the nations involved. There is more to this than merely the fact that in the memories of the populace of the winning country, it will be considered to have been a "good war" whereas in those of the losers the opposite is true. The main factors behind this divergence are probably suppression and forgetfulness. For example, the official Japanese stance is to ignore or deny all the atrocities it committed in Korea and China during its attempt to colonize Asia during World War II. A visit to the National Museum of Japanese History in Sakura, Chiba Prefecture, the only museum in the country to focus solely on domestic history, will reveal the amazing fact that there is not a single display that deals with material from the war. Even in the Showa-kan Gallery, a museum that was established in Tokyo jointly by the Ministry of Health and Welfare and a group of relatives of the war dead, the exhibits focus on artifacts belonging to the women and children who were left behind on the home front, depicting them as victims of an oppressive government. Not only is the history of Japan's fascist colonial expansionism entirely ignored,

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there is no mention even of the battles in which Japanese soldiers gave their lives. The institution insists that its aim is to focus on the history of the common people and their ordinary lives, but in actual fact it represents the suppression of an unsavory past, nostalgia for the small world in which the civilians lived and “an absence of all memories of killing and being killed.”¹

Starting in the nineteen-seventies, historians began to express an interest in looking at history “from the bottom up,” but due to the aforementioned constraints, this discipline continues to be subject to distortion. Concentrating on the memory of ordinary people was once thought to be a powerful device to overcome this distortion, but as can be seen from the memories of the Vietnam War that will be described here, such an approach is not always effective. Memory is an art of recollecting and, particularly in this context, the way in which the war is remembered. While it is possible for conscious effort to restore memory in a way that can open up new perspectives on history, this effort can simultaneously have the opposite effect, namely, that of erasing factual events. Yet it is this very dual nature of attempts to restore memory that gives meaning to the discussion of memory in this paper. Memory is important to historical studies today not because it provides an alternative to the conventional concept of history, but because it provides a window onto the way the past is viewed today.

This paper starts by looking at the theoretical possibilities of focusing on memories of the war, moves on to consider narratives of remembering Vietnam and the political revisionism they embody, and ends by examining the way in which America went about revising the history of the war at the end of the twentieth century. Tim O’Brien once said, “after a battle each soldier will have a different story to tell, vastly different stories.”² However, the way in which these stories resonate depends on the historical and cultural milieu of the place in which they are told, and this paper will critically examine such resonance.

I WAR AND MEMORY

“Memories help us make sense of the world we live in,” says John Gillis, “and ‘memory work’ is, like any other kind of physical or mental labor, embedded in complex class, gender and power relations that determine what is remembered (or forgotten), by whom, and for what end.”³ Accordingly, memory is simultaneously a product of politics

while also possessing a politics of its own. For instance, if we look at the history of the Vietnam War as it is recorded in the United States, in nearly every instance, it is still said to have ended in 1973, or at the very least, that this was when the “American War” ended. Looked at from the point of view of the memories and mentality of the American people, this might be said to be true, but if we are to talk of historical facts, it cannot be denied that from April 1973 to April 1975, United States military personnel, with the exception of regular ground troops, continued to participate in the fighting and to become victims of the war. Richard Nixon announced “the end of the Vietnam War” in March 1973 by the withdrawal of the regular ground troops along with his “Vietnamization” policy, but this was merely propaganda aimed at voters who were exhausted by the long-running war and its accompanying social confusion. There was no real change in America’s political presence in Indochina. In other words, it can be said that looked at from a global viewpoint, the Vietnam War did not end when the American people’s memories would have liked it to have ended. The majority of American people, however, believe that the Vietnam War ended in 1973, and are convinced that this is nothing less than a pure historical fact. This belief illustrates how memory of a historical fact can actually be the product of political expediency and, therefore, the consideration of history through the medium of memory is a critical examination of the political process.⁴

Another way to put this is that memory is an artifact that undergoes a continuous process of reconstruction, with conscious or subconscious suppression taking place under the name of forgetfulness. This line of thought corresponds with Michael Foucault’s concept of the “reprogramming of popular memory,” which he defined during an interview for a French film magazine in 1974. Foucault was discussing filmic portrayals of Nazism as an erotic and aesthetic subject and the dispute, current at the time, over claims that the political right was not in fact working to revise and authorize a sanitized version of the darker side of history concerning Nazi collaborators: “There is a battle for and around history going on at this very moment which is extremely interesting. The intention is to reprogram, to stifle what I’ve called the ‘popular memory,’ and also to propose and impose on people a framework in which to interpret the present.”⁵ Foucault defined “popular memory” as belonging to those who are at odds with the producers of official histories, “people . . . who are barred from writing, from producing their books themselves, from

drawing up their own historical accounts.”⁶ He stated that the tradition of popular memory as seen in the life of the nineteenth-century working classes had been reprogrammed by television and the mass-market press, saying, “People are shown not what they were, but what they must remember having been.”⁷ In short, memory is a malleable artifact that can be altered according to emotions, convictions or resentments, and it is these very characteristics that make it a product of politics.⁸

This can be seen in how the memory of the Vietnam War in the U.S. which has been reprogrammed in three phases. The first phase occurred in the nineteen-seventies with the Americanization of the popular image of the war. This process reflected frustration at the ambiguous way in which the war had ended and the ensuing period of forgetfulness. The second phase was the rehabilitation of the Vietnam veterans as wounded heroes in the eighties when society found a way of recollecting the war as one in which American foot soldiers were the victims. The controversy over the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. in the early eighties was mainly led by political neo-conservatives who tried to glorify the memory of the war. But at the same moment in history, oral histories of actual foot soldiers were conveying an unglorified, fragmentary view of the “working-class war.” The third phase in the late eighties and the early nineties was the justification and official validation of the war as manifest in speeches by Ronald Reagan who called the war a “noble cause” and by George Bush who said “That war cleaves us still. But, friends, that war began in earnest a quarter century ago; and surely the statute of limitations has been reached.”⁹ The success of the Persian Gulf War gave revisionists confidence to redefine the “lessons of Vietnam.” This official validation of the revised historical status of the Vietnam War gradually began to melt into the popular memory of the war; meanwhile growing numbers of Vietnamese-Americans, each with his/her own story, added many new facets to the memory of the war, and revisionists exploited these “other” voices to justify the “rightness” of the war effort to the American nation. Thus, the newly established status of the war came to have a cultural influence on the popular image of the previous American wars in the twentieth-century.

II THE AMERICANIZATION OF THE VIETNAM WAR: IN FILMS AND THE POPULAR MEMORY

According to George C. Herring, the withdrawal of regular American ground troops from Indochina resulted in a “self-conscious, collective amnesia”¹⁰ among the people of the United States. The media, whose most important task up until that time had been to bring daily reports on Vietnam, ignored the subject entirely and the columnist Joseph C. Harsch noted the following during the late seventies: “Americans have somehow blocked it out of their consciousness. They don’t talk about it. They don’t talk about its consequences.”¹¹

After the fall of Saigon in 1975, American society awoke from its amnesia and began the task of recollection. The period from 1976 to 1979 saw a rash of films on the subject of the Vietnam War—including *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Rolling Thunder* (1977), *Coming Home*, *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979)—that forced the American public to awaken from its amnesia. In particular, *The Deer Hunter* had a powerful influence on the collective memory of the Vietnam War. For example, Vietnam veteran Jan C. Scruggs was so impressed by the film when he saw it in 1979, that he was motivated to found the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF).¹²

In attempting to analyze the power of this film, John Hellmann claims it adopts the narrative structure of traditional American mythology. The depiction of the hero of the film (acted by Robert De Niro) as a young, drafted steelworker with Russian ancestry, makes him a marginal figure socially, culturally and geographically—a typically mythical American Frontier Man. This depiction was seemingly chosen so as to make the story more convincing. But, in contrast to the overwhelming acclaim received in the United States, where it won five Oscars, it was strongly criticized overseas for its racist description of the Vietnamese and Asian people, especially in the well-known Russian roulette scene.¹³ Hellmann, however, does not regard the accusation as particularly valid, because he asserts that the prisoners of the Vietnamese guerrillas in the scene include both American and South Vietnamese soldiers. Rather, he would have us take note of the narrative form of *The Deer Hunter*, that of the traditional western, just as Francis Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* relies on another traditional Hollywood genre, that of the hard-boiled detective story. “These [western and detective] formulaic genres, comprising central moral fantasies of American culture, provide collective dreams

through which the trauma of the Vietnam War may be re-experienced, assimilated and interpreted.”¹⁴

On the other hand, Naoki Sakai, while recognizing that this movie had the capacity to appeal to the American audience regardless of their diverse political leanings, pointed out that in actual fact it expressed a shrewd exclusion of Asian characters and an inventive form of denial in order to sustain the “imperialistic nationalism of the U.S.” His analysis focuses on the way in which the film contrasts the sympathetic treatment of the American soldiers with the disparaging portrayal of the Vietnamese. First Sakai focuses on the fact that the America depicted in this movie is singularly lacking in diversity. For instance, it shows the hero as living in a Pennsylvania steelworking community, thereby appearing to display the immigrant ethnic diversity of the country, but there are no Asians living in the town and therefore it results in creating the impression of the U.S. as being a homogeneous society consisting solely of Caucasians. This view is confirmed by the fact that there are no scenes of the infantry training school which would allow the audience to visualize the ethnic diversity of U.S. society or of the large cities that embody class diversity. While there is nothing strange about the fact that there may only have been a few Asians living in a small Pennsylvania town during the 1970s, the movie is not a direct reflection of reality, but rather a synecdoche of the small town. In this way, Sakai claims, the audience was able to feel a rapport for the characters in this small town as an embodiment of all Americans.¹⁵ This appeal to sympathetic emotions was a strong factor in the Americanization of the images of war.

In the same way, the Vietnamese people are depicted in this movie as being a homogenous group who are sadistic in the extreme. In particular, Sakai says that in the narrative context of the movie, the Russian roulette scene is endowed with extreme tension and the urgency of the situation which grips both participants and audience alike creates an inevitable feeling of antipathy towards Vietnam. This causes people to “transfer their opposition to the war to opposition to the enemy” and as a result, this movie played a role in intensifying antipathy to Vietnam, thereby reducing the psychological burden of guilt for America’s imperialistic intervention in Vietnamese affairs and the resultant atrocities such as the My Lai massacre.¹⁶ In this context, antipathy could be channeled into sympathy for the heroes, thus aiding in the Americanization of the images of the war.

Although Hellmann and Sakai hold opposite views concerning the

degree of racism expressed in this movie, their arguments share a common premise. That is to say, this movie did not touch at all upon how the political and military intervention of the U.S. in Indochina failed, but rather it simply showed the war in a negative light from the point of view of the drafted soldiers. By personalizing the war itself in the figures of the heroes, *The Deer Hunter* transformed the Vietnam War into an “American” war, and all subsequent Vietnam War films that were made in the U.S. can be classified as variations of this Americanized memory of the war. *First Blood* (1982), featuring a famous hero Rambo, portrayed American soldiers/veterans as victims and *Platoon* (1986), a film which has been called the most “realistic” Vietnam War film, used a series of close-ups and point-of-view shots to lead the audience into the war through the eyes of an “innocent” American boy.¹⁷ While perhaps more realistic, it still conveyed the war through American as opposed to Vietnamese eyes, and therefore also contributed in its own way to the Americanization of memories of the war. Thus this war, which *officially* finished with Nixon’s “Vietnamization policy,” has been reborn in popular culture as the American War.

III SOLDIERS AS VICTIMS: THE MEMORIAL DEBATE AND THE VETERANS’ ORAL HISTORIES

The fact that postwar recollections began with a process of Americanization was to influence the subsequent public image and memory of the war. Especially, the view of the Vietnam War as an “American” tragedy led naturally to the Vietnam veterans being looked upon as victims of this tragedy, whose families and friends had also suffered from the domestic conflict that surrounded it. It is a fact that Scruggs himself discovered this logic in *The Deer Hunter* and used it during his fund-raising campaign for the VVMF memorial to create the feeling among the general population that American society as a whole was also a victim, suffering from the trauma of a terrible tragedy. As a result he succeeded in making the construction of the memorial a national event that drew together every section of society and transcended divisions of politics, race and class. However, although the collective consciousness underwent a change from amnesia to recollecting memories of war, Scruggs did not necessarily achieve everything he wanted. Herring writes that this war was “a humiliating and deeply frustrating experience for a people accustomed to success.”¹⁸ The ongoing

construction of the veterans memorial may have been able to offer relief from the trauma, but it was unable to completely alleviate the frustration or mend the wounded pride still felt by so many Americans.

Meanwhile, neo-conservatism was on the rise. This was a major trend and in addition to involving such professional military leaders/analysts as Harry G. Summers and Bruce Palmer, it also included critics such as Norman Podhoretz and Gunter Lewy who offered revisionist interpretations of the Vietnam War. Unlike the early generation of conservatives who had insisted that US forces at the Tet Offensive had won the battle, neo-conservatives conceded the defeat but blamed the media for destroying the American war effort by covering the offensive almost “live” everyday and thus acting as the “true” enemy of the nation. In other words, they were not interested in pursuing historical facts so much as reinterpreting them, and they made a great effort to reprogram the way in which people looked at history.¹⁹

The criticism that was directed towards Maya Ying Lin’s original design for the memorial was a reflection of the confusion brought on by the neo-conservatives’ revisionist interpretation of the war and the frustration being expressed by the patriotic veterans. It began with the “black gash of shame” accusation by Tom Carhart, a VVMF member, in 1981, and culminated with the addition of the Statue of the Three Servicemen by Frederic Hart in 1984. Superficially it appeared to be the result of an internal VVMF difference of opinion over aesthetics—a controversy between Scruggs and a co-founder of the VVMF, Jack Wheeler, and Carhart and James Webb, a well-known writer and a member of the VVMF’s National Sponsoring Committee—but in actual fact, it was a dispute over political beliefs and the view of history. For instance, Lin’s original design called for the monument to display only the years and names of the casualties without any other written explanations, a proposal to which Scruggs agreed. But Webb felt this would be insufficient and demanded not only the addition of a figurative statue but also that the words “their pride in having served the cause of freedom” be included on the wall itself. In other words, Webb was not content merely to perpetuate the memory of the military servicemen and women who lost their lives, but also intended to justify the “cause” of the war and create an artifact that would justify and validate the war itself.²⁰ Webb, who was later appointed Navy Secretary under the Ronald Reagan Administration, obviously shared Reagan’s concept of the Vietnam War as a “noble cause,” and tried to revise the memory of war to that of being a glorified one in the same way as other military leaders.

Despite their work, however, it is important to note that popular memory was not to be so easily influenced by this revisionist logic. The people who viewed it with the most suspicion were what Christian Appy refers to as the soldiers of the “working-class war”²¹ or what George Lipsitz refers to as his evening school adult students “whose political affiliations and career ambitions hinged on the success of the neo-conservative agenda.” Lipsitz says, “the dominant neo-conservative narrative of the 1980s conflicted with the experiences and memories of even those Americans who desperately wanted neo-conservatism to succeed. The Vietnam War caused too much pain to be reframed as a singularly heroic moment.”²² In Lipsitz’s view, if the glorified image of the war which the revisionists portray were to conflict with the actual memories of working-class veterans such as the heroes in *The Deer Hunter*, it would suggest that the revisionist way of rewriting history would no longer resonate with their frustrated experiences. This trend generated, according to James Olson, “a sizable collection of oral histories and recollections of secondary personnel—the working- and middle-class Americans and Vietnamese who found themselves fighting a war that other men and women had made.”²³

The first group of recollections by “secondary” personnel to receive attention was the literary personal narratives which began to appear in 1973 immediately following the end of the “American” war. The best known of these was Tim O’Brien’s *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (1973), which was followed by Ron Kovic’s *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976) and Philip Caputo’s *Rumor of War* (1977), with Tobias Wolfe’s best selling, *In Pharaoh’s Army* (1994) continuing the trend. However, although this kind of text offers an invitation to the reader to explore the depths of the veteran’s personal feeling, the literary recollection has a tendency to be limited by the ability of the authors. As Lipsitz stated, many of the veterans “who desperately wanted neo-conservatism to succeed” were unable to write their memoirs as a way of healing their wounds or of expressing themselves to society. With attention being drawn to their existence by the whole of society in the early eighties, as a result of the memorial project, oral histories began to be used as a way of presenting their recollections through their own “voices.”

Oral history has been developed as a method of research in anthropology and ethnology to explore the subjective values and traditions of a society or community, but in popular readings it presents firsthand experiences and is special in that it can only be told by the people who were actually present at the scene of an event. History is the realm of

historians, but veterans and refugees are the only ones capable of conveying actual memories.

Studs Turkel was one of the first popular oral historians to achieve success in the literary market with *The Good War* (1976) and *American Dreams: Lost and Found* (1980), but in the case of the Vietnam War, it was left to a single veteran to gather together the voices of the “silent majority” and present them to the public. This was Al Santoli, an army sergeant who experienced two tours of duty in Vietnam before going on to become a journalist. He worked for the social rehabilitation of the veterans and his oral histories were the first to become best sellers. In his first book, *Everything We Had*, published in 1981, he gathered together the recollections of thirty-three veterans, including one nurse, and the technique he developed was to delete everything said by him, the interviewer, thereby producing a series of monologues. While scholars presenting oral histories are required to make clear the time, place, length of recording, and names of the participants and other information, Santoli presents the conversations of the veterans as if they are talking directly and spontaneously to the readers themselves. As a result they seem very familiar and are imbued with a sense of reliability and authority.

In the preface to this book, Santoli asks his readers to follow the experiences of the veterans emotionally. He writes that: “now as parents and as citizens we feel an obligation . . . to say what we could not or did not say in the past,” that “we were once idealistic young people confronted by the awesomeness of fighting other human beings.” He also says: “In our book we hope you will see what we saw, do what we did, feel what we felt . . . The American people have never heard in depth from the soldiers themselves the complicated psychic and physical realities of what they went through in Vietnam.”²⁴ Here, he is asking of his readers that they follow the experiences of the veterans emotionally, a demand that is common to all oral histories of Vietnam veterans. For instance in the introduction to *NAM*, which was published in the same year, Mark Baker writes that while many memoirs by generals, politicians and diplomats were published in the 1970s, “something is missing from their story, something personal and palpable . . . What happened in Vietnam? What did it look like? How did it smell? What happened to you? Vietnam veterans know firsthand the statistics, the heroism, the evil and the madness. They are the ones qualified to look inside the casket and identify the body for what it is—a dead boy killed in a war, who had a name, a personality, a story all his own.”²⁵

In fact, the personal histories of Santoli and Baker are quite opposite. Santoli was himself a Vietnam veteran and he tries to transmit the veterans' experiences from the "inside," whereas Baker spent the war years as a college student and so his recollections are anything but firsthand. Therefore, Baker has no choice but to present the work as an observer standing outside the subject he is presenting. Nevertheless, both men present their readers with the same thing: the realities of war, especially the image of the veterans as victims. They present the stories of "grunts" who suffer from horrible memories, such as that of having to kill an American soldier who had been tortured by the enemy on the battlefield, or of the rage they felt at being labeled "baby-killers" in their hometowns. Thomas Myers points out that using collective testimonies in the oral histories presents less continuous narrative and more accumulative impact than the individual personal memoirs and give the impression of being "the raw, unfiltered stuff of true history, the sort of first-person comprehensiveness that any single interpreting or re-creating imagination may only artificially emulate."²⁶ In this way, a torrent of oral histories began to flow from the victimized veterans around the mid-eighties.

Another important point concerning these memories of Vietnam is that they explored the subject through the diversity of race, gender, locality and political belief. For instance, Wallace Terry's *Bloods* (1984) deals with black veterans; Keith Walker's *A Piece of My Heart* (1985), Kathryn Marshall's *In the Combat Zone* (1987), and Dan Freedman and Jacqueline Rhoads' *Nurses in Vietnam* (1987) all concentrate on women veterans; Harry Maurer's *Strange Ground* (1987) handles civilian veterans including secretaries, diplomats, clerks, missionaries, reporters, teachers housewives, doctors and nurses; James Wilson's, *Landing Zone* (1990) looks at veterans from the Southern States; Otto J. Lehrack's *No Shining Armor* (1992) treats the Marine Corps veterans; and James W. Tollefson's *The Strength Not to Fight* (1993) focuses on the recollections of conscientious objectors. The oral history movement that was begun in order to facilitate the reinstatement of the victimized Vietnam veterans into the social fabric spread until it included even those who had refused to take part in the war.²⁷

IV DIVERGENT MEMORIES: AMERICANS AND VIETNAMESE

The developing diversity of oral histories drawn from veterans could be said to mirror the enlargement of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial

project. To “The Wall”, as the first part of the memorial was to become known after it was completed in 1982, was added the Statue of Three Servicemen in 1984. However, this addition highlighted the plight of another class of “forgotten” veteran, leading to the further addition of the Vietnam Women’s Memorial with the Statue of the Three Nurses by sculptor Glenna Goodacre which was finally completed in 1993. This diversification of memories of the war resulted not only in a light being shone on the forgotten victims of the war but also pointed to the fact that a political reprogramming of the public’s consciousness was taking place. In the words of Diane Carlson Evans, one of the directors of the Vietnam Women’s Memorial Project, which was responsible for the placing of the Statue of Three Nurses; “The Wall in itself was enough, but when they added the men it became necessary to add women to complete the memorial.”²⁸

In this way, the relationship between the Wall and the Statues can be said to represent that characteristic of our memories which changes in accordance with the times. Pierre Nora stated that, “memory always belongs to our time . . . the eternal present,” while history is a “representation of the past,”²⁹ and we could also say that in “our time” we have a tendency to only recall convenient memories. The works that Santoli has produced since the completion of the Wall reflects this fact clearly. *Everything We Had* was limited to the memoirs of American military servicemen, but *To Bear Any Burden*, published in 1985, included a larger community of veterans: soldiers, revolutionaries, foreign aid advisors, journalists, diplomats, relief workers, and refugees from North and South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Santoli writes: “I have chosen these people because . . . they share a common humanity that transcends their differences. All of them bear the scars of battle or betrayed idealism. . . They have journeyed through the dark night of memory to present their stories here. With some tears and laughter, they have looked back, with courage, so that we might learn from the trials they have endured.”³⁰

It is obvious that his intentions here are different from those in his previous book. The earlier work used the pain-filled confessions of American veterans as a form of protest against society with the object of achieving their social rehabilitation. In other words, its message was aimed at a society which treated them coldly. However, with the completion of the Wall, society’s attitude towards the veterans underwent a major change and it became necessary for Santoli to move on to the next stage—to show that the veterans were proud to have fought as soldiers

and to further restore the honor due to them. Simultaneously, he tried to illustrate how the American servicemen had been deceived by politicians who had no understanding of guerrilla warfare or Vietnamese culture. In this way, he included the recollections of those who had once been enemies, people who shared the same memories but from opposite sides, thereby seeking to create bonds between them. This book represented a kind of reunion; its role was not to transmit a particular message to the readers, but merely to show the veterans from both sides shedding tears and embracing.

In a book review in 1986, Herring suggested that literature about the Vietnam War can be divided into three distinct phases. The first phase, represented by Herr's and Caputo's books from the 1970s, reflected the "national disenchantment"; the second, which included Santoli's first work, in the early 1980s, expressed the "rage they [the veterans] had bottled up for years," and the third, which began in the mid-eighties with Santoli's new work, Bernard Edelman's *Dear America*, Tom Mangold and John Penycate's *The Tunnels of Cu Chi*, and Truong Nhu Tang's *A Vietcong Memoir*, presented "a fragmentary view of the war from the Vietcong side and offer[ed] important insights into the interaction between Americans and South Vietnamese." According to Herring, this "fragmentary view of the war" of the third phase was produced as a result of a process of revisionism that was "the national effort to justify involvement in Vietnam and to rationalize failure that ha[d] reached its most obnoxious form in *Rambo*." This is particularly true of Santoli's work, which was the "most blatantly revisionist" and tried "to reaffirm the rightness of the war as a cause and by showing how a war that could have been won was lost to help the nation learn how to use its power more wisely."³¹ In other words, the diversification and fragmentation that took place in the mid- and late eighties suggests an effort to justify and validate the war effort.

Monique T. D. Tru'o'ng made a close examination of the way in which Santoli managed the "voice/text" of the respondents, how he noted the people's titles or biological data and how he brought all the information together to create a story. Then she used this data to try and understand Santoli's subconscious intentions. Her conclusion was that all the Southeast Asians who appear in his work, even the Vietnamese-, Cambodian-, or Laotian-Americans "remain foremost Southeast Asians . . . [who] are contextualized as either a citizen of South Vietnam or a Viet Cong." Moreover, by quoting a General of the South Vietnamese Army who

said, "I understand what could have happened to Lieutenant Calley at My Lai . . . I know the tactics the VC used to harass you," Santoli tried to present the My Lai massacre as "just another case of communist 'Counterterror'-ism, with the Vietnamese people and Lieutenant Calley as the unfortunate victims."³² In this way, in the process of justification of the Vietnam War, even a murderer could become a victim.

Revisionism is not unique to the United States. At the time, finding itself politically and economically impoverished by its invasion of Cambodia and the Sino-Vietnamese War, Vietnam realized that it was necessary for it to improve diplomatic relations with the rest of the world, particularly if it hoped to win war reparations from the United States. In order to achieve this end, it began, from around 1982, to welcome scholars and journalists while also inviting veterans groups to visit the country. In addition, with the introduction of the Doi Moi policy (an "Open Door" policy that introduced the market enterprise system to the economy while retaining communist principles) the Vietnamese exhibited a willingness to "share the memory" in much the same way as Santoli. This resulted in a strengthening of the "comradeship" between the ex-members of the North Vietnamese Army and the National Liberation Front (Vietcong) and also a sharing of grief between the Vietnamese and the refugees who now lived in America or France. According to Akio Imai, this tendency became quite pronounced in films and literature during the nineties and although it still did not stretch as far as depicting reconciliation with the ex-members of the South Vietnamese Army, it "functioned to provide a powerful opening" for the new political demands to relieve the frustration of the conservative veterans who oppose the Doi Moi policy.³³ Here again, the main interest lay not so much in talking about the memories themselves as in talking about how these memories could be utilized as a political device.

The nineteen-nineties found memory of the war entering its new phase in the United States. This was due to the existence of immigrant communities that had sprung up as a result of an increase in the numbers of Vietnamese Americans who had come to the U.S. as immigrants and refugees. Their existence had become quite noticeable to the larger society and the new generation who were growing up in the U.S. lived lives that differed completely from those of their parents. Their social conditions were recorded in Le Ly Hayslip's bestseller, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (1989), which was later made into a movie by Oliver Stone. Paul James Rutledge summarized their lives in *The*

Vietnamese Experience in America (1992). For more popular reading, the refugees' life histories were portrayed in documentary mode in Thomas A. Bass's *Vietnamerica* (1996). At the same time, Steven DeBois's *Children of the Enemy* (1995) presented the oral histories of numerous "Amerasians" and their mothers. Born of American military servicemen and Southeast Asian women, these children themselves could be said to be products of the war, and DeBois, who worked at the Philippine Refugee Processing Center, looks at them carefully from both an American and a Vietnamese viewpoint, recording oral texts that display their ambiguous identities of being both "American" and "Vietnamese." This work demonstrates that oral history can be an effective tool in this type of extremely fluid socio-cultural situation.³⁴

This experiment by DeBois represented a new phase in the U.S. socio-cultural scene and shows that it was a subject that could no longer be explained through the conventional framework of diversification. However, while these new conditions provided the driving energy, what we need to pay attention to here is what was happening in the conventional social space. Because the diversification of society not always seems to have real effect on the social structure, it has no more meaning but to expand the physical and social space to contain the newcomers. This may reflect the fact that while new things sometimes become old, old things always remain old. When thinking along these lines, we are faced once more with a figure familiar in this context, that of Al Santoli. After his *To Bear Any Burden* received a lot of criticism from reviewers, he published in 1989 a new oral history entitled *The New Americans*. This book had two main characteristics. First is that the birthplaces of the twenty-three Americans who appear in the book are spread over five continents, including such countries as Poland, Italy, England, Russia, Mexico, Afghanistan, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, South Korea, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Haiti, etc., meaning that Santoli's longstanding interest in and connection with the Vietnam War becomes comparatively muted. The Vietnamese immigrants who appear in this book came from among the elite military families who had been favored by the Ngo Dinh Diem and Nhu brothers in the 1950s and did not contradict Santoli with regard to their political beliefs or the quality of their memories. The strongest impression created by this book is that of a mosaic, consisting of all these people who have come to North America from five continents for various reasons and motives. Meanwhile, the rage and mortification that are the hallmark of his previous two books have been diluted.³⁵

The other characteristic is that among these immigrants and refugees who give America such a diversified face was Santoli's own father. Having arrived from Italy in 1921 in the arms of his mother, Albert Santoli Sr. was more than merely "Americanized." He had volunteered for armed service during WWII, spent the 1950s as a mechanical engineer, then became a supervisor of the Space Program Division for the NASA Apollo project. "My family was becoming a part of the American melting pot," he recollects in an optimistic tone because as the American war front grew in Southeast Asia, he was involved in the "space front" which was expanding in a different direction. Written in the monologue style, Albert Sr.'s oral history only touches on the topic of "Vietnam" once, when his Al, Jr. married a Vietnamese woman whom he had met at a refugee camp in Thailand. The main theme that runs through his reminiscences is that of the golden days of the NASA space program from 1963 to 1969 that culminated in the first successful landing on the moon by Apollo 11.³⁶

The people who appear in this book range from an Afghan refugee to Santoli's British-born editor at Viking Press, but what they nearly all share in common is that they all were recent immigrants or refugees. The fact that there is only one person who arrived immediately after WWI and moreover, that the person is his father, indicates that he, Santoli, Jr., must have had some special intention. Looked at in this light, it would appear that the book had three objectives. The first was to reaffirm the concept of America as a "melting pot." This was a cultural myth that arose during the time of massive immigration at the end of the nineteenth-century, but it is still strong in American popular culture and is firmly believed by the descendants of the immigrants at the time. The second objective was a reconfirmation of the "American Dream," which represented an even stronger cultural myth. All the people who appear in the book enjoy American life no matter what their situation, and are all blessed with work, family and numerous friends. *The New York Times Book Review* looked favorably upon this work by introducing it under the headline "Remade in America", commenting that "the word 'education' rings magically through all their accounts."³⁷ The third objective was to reinforce the "Kennedy myth." Like so many of his contemporaries, including Philip Caputo and Oliver Stone, Santoli was so moved by John F. Kennedy's inaugural address that he volunteered for the war corps rather than the Peace Corps. It is quite apparent from the title of his previous book, *To Bear Any Burden*, that the JFK myth also serves

as a metaphor here. Albert Sr.'s recollections suggest that Santoli, Jr., is narrating an historical fantasy, where only the space frontier exists and no mention is made of the dark side of JFK's legacies, such as the Vietnam War. The Kennedy myth including the idea that JFK presented in his book, *A Nation of Immigrants* (1964), seems to have provided a role model for Santoli, Jr.'s approach to "diversity." If we define Al Santoli as a revisionist whose ideology revolves around the Kennedy myth, we are able to understand the meaning that racial diversity holds within his oral histories. That is, the official validation of the Vietnam War that sprang from political revisionism differs from the conservative nationalism of the past in that it does not try to deny diversity—it merely uses it.³⁸

AFTERMATH: THE HISTORICIZATION OF THE VIETNAM WAR

In the fall of 1990, the Commander-in-Chief of the U.S. Central Command in Saudi Arabia, Gen. Norman H. Schwarzkopf, was engrossed by a television documentary series that had been delivered from home. Simultaneously, his superior, the secretary of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Colin Powell and the Commander-in-Chief of all U.S. Forces, President George Bush, Sr., were also watching the same eleven-hour series in their offices in Washington D.C. The program that caught all their attention was *The Civil War* by Ken Burns, every installment of which enjoyed an estimated audience of approximately fourteen million Americans. What most deeply shocked viewers, including the American generals on the eve of the Gulf War, was "its deep emphasis on the casualties of this historical American tragedy."³⁹ After achieving remarkable success with this documentary, Burns expressed his longstanding fascination with looking at "history from the bottom up" in numerous interviews, repeating his sentiments in such phrases as: "I believe film is uniquely equipped to transmit that kind of power. It can be our Homeric form, and we've tried to tell this particular *Illiad*, our Civil War, in a Homeric way, not only from the aerial perspective of the gods and kings but from the level of the spear carriers as well."⁴⁰

It can be said that this incident not only contained significant points concerning American history and its memory, but simultaneously it hinted at the way the Vietnam War was remembered after 1990. Immediately after it ended, the Vietnam War was often compared to the Civil War. While one was clothed in an aura of history and the other was portrayed

as an unhonorable and undeclared war, both split the nation and both were great tragedies that brought conflict to the people. Like the reconstruction years following the Civil War, the aftermath of the Vietnam War brought with it a period of hardship.⁴¹

On the other hand, when talking about the Gulf War, people often refer to the “lessons of Vietnam.” President Bush said in his inaugural address, “The final lesson of Vietnam is that no great nation can long afford to be sundered by a memory.”⁴² Indeed, his administration was very conscious of these lessons and made every effort to insure that the Gulf War would provide a new opportunity for the United States to regain its prestige and that the resulting victory of the allied army, led by the United States, provided the Vietnam veterans the chance to reclaim their honor. The reason for this is that Powell, Schwarzkopf and the majority of the other generals and colonels who took part in the Gulf War were all Vietnam veterans. Actually, both of Powell and Schwarzkopf reinforce bitter experiences of their Vietnam tours in their autobiographies.⁴³

But what about the “spear carriers” of the Vietnam War? In order to find the answer to their dilemma, we must turn once more to the work of Santoli. He was quick to react to this change, and two years after the end of the Gulf War, in 1993, he published a book entitled *Leading the Way: How Vietnam Veterans Rebuilt the U.S. Military*. In this work he writes: “I have known the crushing feeling of being among those [soldiers in Vietnam] asked to put their lives on the line without having the support of our superiors, or the benefit of a coherent policy. The experience created a bond that unites most survivors of the Vietnam War . . . It inspired a core group of young officers and sergeants not to abandon a military community in shambles in the aftermath of Vietnam.”⁴⁴ In this discourse, the Gulf War became symbolically the Vietnam War redone.

Thus, Santoli was able to put the “aftermath of Vietnam” to rest. He was finally able to step out from under the long shadow of the war and his memories no longer had the power to intimidate him. The terrible memories he had of his personal experiences were reshaped and reprogrammed by the Gulf War. At the same time, his generation began to worry about the gradual erosion of their memories of the war. For instance, Gen. Charles Horner, who is one of the respondents in *Leading the Way*, spoke about the way in which memories of the “Nintendo War,” as the Gulf War was named after a computer TV game, would influence the future. “I sometimes worry about the generation of leaders who came into the service after the Vietnam War. Because they haven’t experi-

enced the type of adversity that bonds my generation of senior leadership.”⁴⁵

The way in which Ken Burns’s *The Civil War* expressed the reality and truth answered the call of people who feared the erosion of memories. Born in the mid-fifties, Burns came of draft age just as the withdrawal of U.S. ground troops was completed and so it could be said that he belongs to neither the Vietnam generation nor the post-Vietnam generation, but falls somewhere in between.⁴⁶ His film-making style, which utilizes abundant audio-visual graphics, combined with his interest in history may also be said to be typical of his particular age-group. He is a man who, although fascinated by the “myth and symbol” of the Brooklyn Bridge, turned his back on the Hollywood style of movie-making in which present-day actors are used to recreate an actual past. It is hardly surprising that he should be attracted to a marginal field of social history, while simultaneously reacting against conventional academism. The result was that when he set out to rescue history from the academy by saying that contemporary historical studies were “devastating . . . national memory.”⁴⁷ His reasoning merely echoed that of the revisionists when they turn their eyes towards the Vietnam War. In an interview for the *The Journal of American History*, he said: “Think of Homer, singing the epic verses of his people—verses that included not only the gods in the pantheon but the ordinary foot soldiers.” According to him, the history as “our his-story has been murdered by an academic academy,” and he wants to be “a narrative historian or narrative amateur historian—that is to say, I’m interested in telling stories, anecdotes.”⁴⁸

The cultural influence of memories of the Vietnam War can today be seen in this kind of representation as well as in its commemoration. The latter is most clearly illustrated by all the other memorials that have been erected in the Washington National Mall since the Vietnam Veterans Memorial—the strangely shaped Korean War Memorial, which resembles a combination of the Wall and the Statue and the WWII Memorial Project which is chaired by the WWII hero, Senator Bob Dole and co-chaired by the Vietnam veteran, Frederic W. Smith, president and CEO of FedEx Co.⁴⁹ These allow us a glimpse of the national psyche towards the old wars after they were affected by the memories of the Vietnam War. That is to say, it shows that reprogramming memories is a retroactive effort to recast the national memory and popular imagination to the history. But, it sometimes yield ironic results. James Russell, a critic of *The New York Times*, pointed out that the rush of constructing memorials

in the Mall has been “transforming the Nation’s capital into a kind of necropolis of special pleading.”⁵⁰ The Vietnam War, the longest war in American history, has still cast the long shadow over the nation’s history.

NOTES

¹ Kaori Chino, “Senso to Shokuminchi” (War and Colonies), Akira Kurihara, et. al., eds. *Ekkyo suru chi* Vol. 1 (Tokyo: Univ. of Tokyo Press, 2000), 121–124.

² Tim O’Brien, *Going After Cacciato* (New York: Laurel Books, 1978), 236–237.

³ John R. Gillis, Introduction to Gillis ed., *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1994), 3.

⁴ Today, internet websites provide a vast storage area for popular memory and they are now beginning to overtake films or popular novels in influence. However, most of them display the American (un)consciousness by stating that the war ended in 1973. For example, see the “Remembrance” section of *Vietnam Veterans Homepage*, an official website of the Vietnamese Memorial Association (<http://www.vietvet.org/remembrance.htm>).

⁵ Michael Foucault, “Film and Popular Memory,” Sylvere Lotringer ed., *Foucault Live (Interviews, 1966–84)*, trans. Martin Jordin (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996), 130.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ In another essay, Foucault described the memories that stood in opposition to reprogrammed memories as being “counter memory”—“a transformation of history into a totally different form of time,” that it “must record the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality,” “it must seek them in the most unpromising places, in what we tend to feel is without history—in sentiments, love, instincts.” Michael Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in his *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1977), 160, 139.

⁹ The Reagan quotation is from James William Gibson, *The Perfect of War: Techno-war in Vietnam* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986), 5; George Bush, *Inaugural Address*, 348.

¹⁰ George C. Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1979), 237.

¹¹ Joseph C. Harsh, quoted in the above.

¹² Jan C. Scruggs and Joel Swerdlow, *To Heal A Nation: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (New York: Harper, 1985, 1992), 7.

¹³ Although *The Deer Hunter* was an Oscar-winning film in the United States, it was severely criticized by the East-European judges of the Berlin Film Festival who came from socialist countries including the Soviet Union, Hungary and Cuba, for the prejudice it displayed against the Vietnamese people and this fact was received coverage even in Japan. See Gilbert Adair, *Hollywood’s Vietnam: From The Green Berets to Full Metal Jacket* (London: Heinemann, 1989), 88; Leonard Quart, “*The Deer Hunter*: The Superman in Vietnam,” Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud, eds., *From Hanoi To Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1990), 165–166.

¹⁴ John Hellmann, "Vietnam and the Hollywood Genre Film: Inversions of American Mythology in *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*," Michael Anderberg, ed., *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1991), 78–79.

¹⁵ Naoki Sakai, "Kyokan no kyodotai to hinin sareta Teikokushugiteki-Kokuminshugi" (The Community of Sympathy and the Negation of the Imperialistic Nationalism) *Gendai Shiso*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Jan., 1991), 120–123.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 124–125.

¹⁷ For the film technique of *Platoon*, see Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud, "America's Vietnam War Films: Marching toward Denial," Dittmar and Michaud, eds., *From Hanoi To Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*, 9.

¹⁸ Herring, *op. cit.*, i.

¹⁹ For the general observation over the neo-conservatism, see John Patrick Diggins, "The Changing Role of the Intellectuals in American History," *The Changing Role of the Intellectuals in the U.S.A.* (Sapporo Cool Seminar, Hokkaido Univ., 1986), 29–33. For the recent situation of the arguments about the Vietnam War by the neo-conservatives, see John Norton Moore, ed., *The Vietnam Debate: A Fresh Look At the Arguments* (New York: Univ. Press of America, 1990).

²⁰ See "Department of Defense Interview with James Webb, part 3" in the WWW homepage of Webb (<http://www.jameswebb.com> on the date of Mar. 15, 2001).

²¹ Christian Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, NC: The Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1993), 319–321.

²² George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1990), xii–xiii.

²³ James S. Olson, *The Vietnam War: Handbook of the Literature and Research* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993), 29.

²⁴ Al Santoli, *Everything We had: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Thirty-Three American Soldiers Who Fought It*, (New York: Random House, 1981), xvi.

²⁵ Mark Baker, *Nam: The Vietnam War in the Words of the Soldiers Who Fought There* (New York: Berkeley Books, 1981, 1983), xii.

²⁶ Myers, *op. cit.*, 74–76.

²⁷ Wallace Terry, *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* (New York: Random House, 1984); Keith Walker, *A Piece of My Heart: The Stories of 26 American Women Served in Vietnam* (Novato, Calif.: Presido Press, 1985); Kathryn Marshall, *In the Combat Zone: An Oral History of American Women in Vietnam, 1966–1975* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1987); Dan Freedman and Jacqueline Rhoads, *Nurses in Vietnam: The Forgotten Veterans* (Austin, Tex.: Texas Monthly Press, 1987); Harry Maurer, *Strange Ground: Americans in Vietnam, 1945–1975, An Oral History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1987); James Wilson, *Landing Zone: Southern Veterans Remember Vietnam* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1990); Otto J. Lehrack, *No Shining Arms: The Marines at War in Vietnam* (Lawrence, KS: Univ. Press of Kansas, 1992); James W. Tollefson, *The Strength Not to Fight: Conscientious Objectors of the Vietnam War - In Their Own Words* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993).

²⁸ Diane Carlson Evans, quoted in Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 1997), 68.

²⁹ Pierre Nora ed., *Les lieux de la memoire*, vol. 1 (Paris: La Republique, 1984), xix.

³⁰ Al Santoli, *To Bear Any Burden: The Vietnam War and Its Aftermath in the Words of Americans and Southeast Asians* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana Univ. Press, 1985, 1999), xxiii.

³¹ George C. Herring, "Vietnam Remembered," *Journal of American History*, Vol. 73, No.1 (June, 1986), 153, 161.

³² Monique T. D. Tru'o'ng, "Vietnamese American Literature," King-Kok Cheung, *An Interethnic Companion To Asian American Literature* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1887), 224–228.

³³ Akio Imai, "Doi Moi ka no Vietnam niokeru 'Senso no Kioku'" (Memory of the War in Vietnam Under the Doi Moi Policy), *Quadrante*, No. 2 (Mar., 2000), 62.

³⁴ Le Ly Hayslip, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: A Woman's Journey from War to Peace* (London: Pan Books, 1989); Paul James Rutledge, *The Vietnamese Experience In America* (Bloomington, ID: Indiana Univ. Press, 1992); Steven DeBois's *Children of the Enemy: Oral Histories of Vietnamese Americans and Their Mothers* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 1995); Thomas A. Bass, *Vietnamica: The War Comes Home* (NY: Soho Press, 1996).

³⁵ Al Santoli, *New Americans, An Oral History: Immigrants and Refugees in the U.S. Today* (New York: Viking, 1989).

³⁶ Albert Santoli, Sr., "The Apollo," *ibid.*, 293–304.

³⁷ Andrei Codresci, "Remade in America," *The New York Times Book Review*, Apr. 2, 1989, 32.

³⁸ For the relationship between the Vietnam war and the Kennedy myth, see John Hellmann, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1986); Idem., "Rambo's Vietnam and Kennedy's New Frontier," *Anderberg, op.cit.*, 140–152; J. Justin Gustaines, *American Rhetoric and the Vietnam War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993).

³⁹ Gabor S. Boritt, "Lincoln and Gettysburg: The Hero and the Heroic Place," Robert Brent Toplin, ed., *Ken Burns's The Civil War: Historians Respond* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996), 84.

⁴⁰ Bernard A. Weisberger, "The Great Arrogance of the Present Is to Forget the Intelligence of the Past: An Interview with Ken Burns," *American Heritage*, Vol. 41, No. 6 (Sep.-Oct., 1990), 99.

⁴¹ David W. Levy, *The Debate Over Vietnam* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1991), 51–54, 176–177.

⁴² Bush, *op. cit.*, 348.

⁴³ H. Norman Schwartzkopf and Peter Petre, *It Doesn't Take A Hero* (New York: Bantam, 1992, 1993), 248–252; Colin L. Powell and Joseph E. Persico, *My American Journey* (New York: Ballantine, 1995, 1996), 126–145. For the influences of the Vietnam War on the military leaders in the Gulf War, see James Kitfield, *Prodigal Soldiers: How the Generation of Vietnam Revolutionized the American Style of War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995).

⁴⁴ Al Santoli, *Leading the Way: How Vietnam Veterans Rebuilt the U.S. Military, An Oral History* (New York: Ballantine, 1993), xv.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 352.

⁴⁶ For the biographical data of Ken Burns and his professional career, see Weisberger, "The Great Arrogance of the Present Is to Forget the Intelligence of the Past." Gary Edgerton, "Ken Burns's American-Style, Authorship and Cultural Memory," *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Feb., 1993).

⁴⁷ David Thelen, "The Movie Maker as Historian: Conversation with Ken Burns," *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 81, No. 3 (Dec., 1994), 1032, 1035.

⁴⁸ Ken Burns, "Four O'Clock in the Morning Courage," *Ken Burns's The Civil War: Historians Respond* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996), 161.

⁴⁹ For the basic information of the WW II Memorial, see its official website (<http://www.wwiimemorial.com/> on the date of Mar.15, 2001).

⁵⁰ James S. Russell, "Art and Politics Vie In a Battle to Honor A Monumental War," *The New York Times*, Apr. 4, 1999, G1.