

REIMAGINED AND REMEMBERED:  
THE VIETNAM ERA IN THE SHADOW OF THE 1980S.

THESIS

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## INTRO

### MEMORY, MYTH, AND REMEMBRANCE

Vietnam. It is a word that creates very specific imagery in the American psyche. The word Vietnam, more often than not, brings up memories of American military involvement in a far away country. In American minds it is not so much a place as an event. From its height in 1968 to its end in 1975, the Vietnam War was the first war America lost, the first war in which “our boys” died for no reason, and to some, the war represents an episode in which the American people turned against men who fought for freedom and democracy.

With time, the burden for the loss of the war was thrown in many American minds onto the shoulders of those that protested against it. The anti-war protestors were blamed for not only the loss, but also for the mistreatment of veterans upon their return home. As time passed and America entered the 1980s, conservative politics and the media seemingly forged a bond that led some American people to believe a “truth” about the Vietnam era: those who were against the war were responsible for the American loss, the post war problems of the veterans, and, in effect, the decline of the US as a military power.

Images of the Vietnam Era are so burned into America’s collective subconscious that it is not even essential to see a still picture or video clip in order to be reminded of

the era. Certain songs have been recycled so often in films depicting the era that they themselves have become a part of the memory of Vietnam. Music, such as Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Fortunate Son" or The Rolling Stones' "Sympathy for the Devil," has the ability to conjure up images of helicopters, protest marches, soldiers walking through jungles, or even jets dropping napalm.

What is it that makes Americans remember the Vietnam Era so vividly? Why do so many people, whether they lived through the events or were born much afterward, have such strong ideas about America on the homefront, as well as the war zone, during these years? Part of the answer lies in the media and its portrayal of the Vietnam Era. When looking at movie portrayals of any era it is important to understand that, more often than not, they are not simply entertainment but a reflection of the values of the time in which they were made.

The way in which depictions of the war reflect contemporary concerns is particularly evident in the portrayals of the Vietnam era in the Reagan eighties. Although the American media did produce work on the war while it was being waged in the sixties and seventies, the nature of the portrayals changed in the aftermath of the war as Americans gained some distance from the event and as they entered into the conservative political climate of the 1980s.

John Wayne's *The Green Berets* (1968) was the only film to deal with the fighting in Vietnam during the conflict, but it did not deal with the contested nature of the war. Instead, the movie used well worn images and themes from WWII in order to show American strength of purpose and righteousness of cause. In the 1970s, prior to the end of the war, other movies appeared that focused on the homefront, always depicting the

veterans as crazy men on killing sprees. After the end of hostilities, although movies still portrayed the veterans as crazy, they began to be shown in a somewhat more flattering light. By the 1980s portrayals then took a completely different turn as movies about the war itself become more prevalent. The stories told during this decade centered upon how and why we lost the war.

Some of this change that occurred in the eighties reflects the political climate of the time and the increasing acceptance of President Ronald Reagan's depiction of the war as a "noble cause."<sup>1</sup> Other reasons for change stem from Vietnam veterans gaining distance from the war and having the opportunity to tell their story. But with this time and distance, as well as a new political climate, how might these stories have changed in order to fit certain agendas, and along the way, become an entirely new story? This work will examine the scope of the changes in discourse about the Vietnam Era during the 1980s by looking at the way the war and its participants were depicted in various media, including films, television, and magazine articles. It argues that this media helped to create a "new" vision of the war that was shaped as much by contemporaneous issues as by the events of the war itself.

Also important to the argument of a "new" memory of the era, therefore, is an examination of the political culture of the 1980s, which will be accomplished by relating the speeches of Ronald Reagan during both his presidential terms (1980-1988) and the speeches of George H.W. Bush (1988-1992) to the media portrayals of the time.

Although this work is concerned with the Vietnam Era, it is not the war itself, but memories of the homefront and the treatment of the veterans as they returned home, that

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<sup>1</sup> Reagan's "noble cause" was his belief that America intervened in Vietnam in order to protect a new, and weaker, nation (South Vietnam) that was attempting to establish itself from being overtaken by a Communist totalitarian regime (North Vietnam).

will be examined most thoroughly. I intend to show that the media, in conjunction with Ronald Reagan's speeches, had a significant impact on how America began to view the Vietnam Era, and, how this new memory significantly distorted the truth.

Integral to the argument that media and politics affect the American view of the Vietnam Era is an understanding of memory, how it works, and the different forms it can take. Andrew Hoskins, in *Televising War from Vietnam to Iraq*, points out that personal memory is continuously developed from both one's own reflections and from those of others. He explains that our memories do not reside as a "store" in our mind, as we may like to think, but instead are provoked, challenged, altered and sustained by others.<sup>2</sup> Jerry Lembcke, in *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory and the Legacy of Vietnam*, goes a step further by saying that memory is a narrative rather than a replica of an experience that can be retrieved and relived.<sup>3</sup>

When looking at collective memory, Hoskins believes that society often represents the past in a form that is acceptable to the current generation, and in doing so, reshapes events over time, thus making "forgetting" a necessary part of the fallibility and selectivity of the process of memory.<sup>4</sup> The problem, as Hoskins sees it, is that collective memory begins to assert control over personal memory to the point that the individual becomes reliant on others to sustain his own memory. According to Hoskins, there are

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Hoskins, *Televising the War From Vietnam to Iraq* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Jerry Lembcke, *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 187.

<sup>4</sup> Hoskins, *Televising the War*, 1.



three principle components of memory in modern society: people, place, and media.<sup>5</sup>

People are those who experience an event or are eyewitnesses. These people carry a literal living memory and are a primary source. With regards to a “place,” events in certain locations can cause that specific place to have a special significance. The Alamo, Gettysburg, and Little Big Horn are all examples of places that have gained significance because of an event of the past. The importance of place lies in the fact that people can go there and imagine the history of the place, almost as if they had been there when the event occurred. Finally, media affects the balance of social memory in such a way that eyewitness and living memory are becoming less important to our understanding of events.<sup>6</sup> This work will focus on two of the above components of memory - people and media.

In his work on the spat-upon veteran and the anti-war movement, Lembcke explains the difference between myth and memory. He says that myth involves the assembly of pieces of real events for the construction of stories that, taken as a whole, are not true.<sup>7</sup> He also believes that myths can be a positive for society as they can help people create a common sense of who they are. John Hellman, in *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam*, agrees, stating that myth is made up of the stories that contain a people’s image of themselves in history.<sup>8</sup> Lembcke also makes it clear, however, that the creation of myth can be used by those in power to serve their own needs.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Lembcke, *The Spitting Image*, 30.

<sup>8</sup> John Hellman, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), intro.

Memories of Vietnam include anti-war protestors spitting on veterans. This image is a stark contrast to the remembrances of World War II soldiers returning home to parades. No-one paraded the return of our Vietnam veterans. Memories of Vietnam include psychotic men in camouflage fatigues going on killing sprees or playing Russian roulette. The real question is – how many of these memories are real, and how many are simply movie images or stories that have been passed around? Or more precisely, how much of the public memory of Vietnam is based on accurate memories of the past?

It is always important to bear in mind that the media mediates. Basically, a representation of war – or any other human experience – is never the thing itself.<sup>9</sup> In fact, the capacity of electronic media to forge a visually comprehensive account poses new challenges for social memory.<sup>10</sup> The crux of the issue is simple; people are made up of what they see. Even when living through an experience like the Vietnam War, personal perception of what occurred begins to change once someone is inundated with images that attach themselves to personal memory and create, in essence, a collective memory.

Although there are many myths surrounding the Vietnam Era, including one about television news coverage being a major cause for the American loss of the war, the focus of this work will be specifically on the anti-war movement and its “historical” evolution during the 1980s. Integral to the story of how the anti-war protestors became responsible for the American loss in Vietnam is a study of the simultaneous evolution of the media portrayal of the veterans themselves. The evolution of both war protestors and of the

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and TV*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 13.

<sup>10</sup> Hoskins, *Televising the War*, 4.

veterans was forced into the American subconscious by the media, be it by books, film or television.

The conception of the “psycho” veteran owes much of its existence to the media. Television, films, and literature all had a hand in not only creating the image, but in perpetuating it. After the war, and until the early 1980s, mainstream television and film portraits of Vietnam veterans were overwhelmingly negative and stereotypical.<sup>11</sup> This portrayal was a way for the American people to shift their national guilt and shame over the war. The problem is that the blame was being shifted to young, unemployed, racial and economic minorities who were a direct witness to and a visible reminder of the corruption resultant from the Vietnam War.<sup>12</sup>

Some of the blame for the image of the psychotic veteran can be laid on television news and its contemporaneous coverage of the war. Millions of Americans were able to watch the action of the war on television. Until 1968, this coverage consisted mainly of GIs helping Vietnamese civilians or of other items that were not much different than the coverage of previous wars. As the war progressed and protests escalated, problems began to surface in the American public’s perception of the war. Then, in 1968, the Tet Offensive<sup>13</sup> and Khe Sahn<sup>14</sup> were beamed into living rooms all over the country. This was

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<sup>11</sup> Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 184.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> The Tet Offensive was a series of surprise attacks by the Vietcong and North Vietnamese forces on scores of cities, towns, and hamlets throughout South Vietnam. Attacks began on January 30, 1968, the first day of the Lunar New Year. It is considered to be a turning point in the Vietnam War not because it was a military victory for the Vietcong (it was not) but because it was a political and psychological victory for them due to the fact it contradicted the optimistic claims by the US government that the war was all but over; for more information see Gary R. Hess, *Vietnam and the United States: Origins and Legacy of the War*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998), 104).

the turning point in the coverage and depiction of both the war and the soldier in Vietnam.

Television news began to broadcast the actual carnage of the war. Then came the My Lai massacre.<sup>15</sup> My Lai was not the first war crime the press had covered. What made it different was the depth and intensity with which it was covered. Television, film, and news outlets began to run with the image of the “psychotic” vet in their coverage of Vietnam veterans. Newspapers and magazines even joined in, circulating stories of crazed veterans who were now in America refighting the battles of Vietnam.

A *New York Times* article in 1972 said fifty percent of soldiers returning from Vietnam needed professional help to readjust.<sup>16</sup> The problem with this article is that it neither defines the help needed nor how to go about adjustment. The article did, however, lead the reader to think of the Vietnam Veteran within a mental health framework. A reporter in 1973 wrote, “Vietnam Vets are the most alienated generation of trained killers

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<sup>14</sup> Khe Sahn was one of the most remote American outposts in Vietnam but by January 1968 it was getting attention from the American government. Facing a full-scale siege by the North Vietnamese, American forces had to decide whether to hold or abandon the outpost. The decision was to hold and on January 21, 1968 North Vietnamese forces launched an attack and 77 days constant ground, artillery, mortar, and rocket attacks. It was a tactical victory for the Marines but had no real strategic implication; for more information see Gary R. Hess, *Vietnam and the United States: Origins and Legacy of the War*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998), 103).

<sup>15</sup> The My Lai Massacre was the mass murder of 347-504 unarmed civilians, some women and children, in South Vietnam by American soldiers. The incident occurred in March 1968 and was made public in 1969. The publicity reduced support for the war at home. 26 US soldiers were charged but only 1 was ever convicted; for more information see Gerard J. DeGroot, *A Noble Cause? America and the Vietnam War*, (New York: Pearson Education Inc, 2000), 295.

<sup>16</sup> Lembcke, *The Spitting Image*, 103.

in American History.”<sup>17</sup> If these were the types of stories circulating in the news, then how were films depicting the veterans?

Even before the war had ended, the image of the psychotic Vietnam Veteran began to show up in film. The 1972 film, *Welcome Home, Soldier Boys*, is the tale of four Green Berets who return home from the war and begin a road trip from Texas to California. While on their trip, the veterans begin to rape and murder, which culminates in the total destruction of a town in New Mexico. Television programs were not immune to the tendency to show vets as crazed. The 1974 television season is a prime example. During this season, the Vietnam veteran was seen as a hired killer on *Columbo*, a drug-dealing sadistic murderer on *Mannix*, and as a suspected (yet innocent) murderer on *The Streets of San Francisco*. Also on *Hawaii Five-O*, “a returned hero blew up himself, his father, and a narcotics lab.”<sup>18</sup>

By 1974, the onscreen depiction of the heavily armed veteran became common, although semi-automatic and automatic weapons were not common in America at the time. The American people were left to believe that these guns and other weapons were being brought back from the war. This is a far cry from the truth as no soldiers, except MPs, were even given handguns, and all guns were part of the unit, not the personal property of the GI.<sup>19</sup> The weapons were returned, and the GIs were physically checked

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<sup>17</sup> Fred Turner, *Echoes of Combat: The Vietnam War in American Memory*, (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 51.

<sup>18</sup> John Carlos Rowe and Rick Berg, eds., *The Vietnam War and American Culture*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 121.

<sup>19</sup> Lembcke, *The Spitting Image*, 169.

before their return home. Not only did the military inspect GI property, but they were made to strip down and issued new fatigues before they were released.

The image of the psychotic veteran was so pervasive that although the movie *Taxi Driver* (1976) never overtly states that the main character Travis Bickle ever went to Vietnam, viewers certainly have no doubt as to the reason for his insanity. The crazed psychopath that threatened to bring the war home with him at any moment bore little resemblance to the vast majority of veterans. For the most part, these men had simply stepped off the plane and picked up their lives at the point they had been interrupted before going to Vietnam.<sup>20</sup> It is ironic that the depiction of the image of the psychotic veteran provided one of the few avenues that allowed the veteran to be readmitted into society without denying his past altogether.

In 1978, two years before Reagan's inauguration, there were two Vietnam films that garnered both critical and box office success, *Deer Hunter* and *Coming Home*. Although the same portrayal of veteran insanity can be seen in each movie, there is a shift, especially with regard to *Coming Home*, in the perception of "why" these men had become psychotic. *Coming Home* recast the story of the Vietnam War and made it a story about the soldier's homecoming instead of the battles he had fought. This shift moved the blame for the veteran's mental health from their experiences in the war and placed it in the hands of those thought responsible for the homecoming experiences, mainly the anti-war protestors. Thus began the process of redefining the veteran as a victim, instead of a psychopath.

When looking at the Vietnam Era and the memory that was created during the past thirty-five years, it is important to remember that since America does not have a

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<sup>20</sup> Rowe and Berg, *The Vietnam War*, 180.

strong oral tradition, the public focuses on visual imagery in order to commit the past to memory. Due to this lack of oral tradition, the past can be easily manipulated by those in power in order to create a climate amenable to their specific needs. Media is the primary source of American “remembering” as it relates to the Vietnam Era and its veterans. Since control of the media is in the hands of the few, most Americans are not able to produce the images they remember.<sup>21</sup>

In order to show how the media was able to affect the American public’s perception of the Vietnam era, I chose to use popular culture magazines such as *Rolling Stone* that had both a wide circulation and mass appeal in the 1980s. The eighties also had a multitude of movies covering the Vietnam era. According to Jeremy Devine’s *Vietnam at 24 Frames a Second*, there were almost 200 films and television shows dealing with some aspect of the war or the era between 1980 and 1991.<sup>22</sup> For my purposes, I looked at movies with a higher domestic box office return and thus, a wider audience.<sup>23</sup> My belief is that the wider audience gave more weight to the stories that were told, which helped disseminate them into the mainstream.

In its most basic form, much of what the public thinks they remember about the Vietnam Era, or about the veterans and how they were treated during and after the war, is not a function of their “remembering.” Instead, it is a compilation of all the images they have seen compressed into what they believe to be personal memory. The reality is that

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<sup>21</sup> This references media up to and including the 1980s, before widespread use of the World Wide Web and other technology made it possible for people to capture video and images more easily and disseminate them widely and outside the control of typical media outlets.

<sup>22</sup> Jeremy Devine, *Vietnam at 24 Frames a Second*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 371.

<sup>23</sup> For box office information, see appendix on page 82.

each person is walking around with their head full of collective memories, myths, and images unrelated to personal experience. Instead, the memories are based on seeing an image second-hand or hearing the retelling of a story. Unfortunately, in our image-laden American society, personal memories are no longer so personal.

It was the presidency of Ronald Reagan that helped solidify a “new” memory of the Vietnam Era for the American people. First, Reagan was a believer in the United States governments’ culpability in the loss in Vietnam. He maintained that the US government did not follow through and do what was necessary in order to win the war. Secondly, he pointed to the anti-war protestors as another reason for the American loss. Not only did they hurt the war effort, in his eyes, they also were responsible for many of the problems the soldiers faced while “in country,” upon arrival home, and into the 1980s.

In an interview with *Reason* magazine in July 1975, Reagan was asked if it was okay to send conscripted American boys halfway around the world. He responded negatively, adding that America should have stuck with Eisenhower’s logistical support instead of escalating into Kennedy’s decision to send in troops.<sup>24</sup> Reagan went further, however, explaining that once the boys “are sent in to fight and die for your country, you have a moral obligation as a nation to throw the full resources of the nation behind them” and to win as quickly as possible.<sup>25</sup> He argued that in the case of Vietnam, the US government was either unable or unwilling to win.

After losing the Republican Presidential nomination to Gerald Ford in 1975, Reagan sharpened his Vietnam dialogue while campaigning for the 1980 election. His

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<sup>24</sup> Manuel S. Klausner, “Inside Ronald Reagan: A Reason Interview,” *Reason*, July 1975.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.



desire to move America forward caused him to reframe the war from a US vs North Vietnamese perspective into a view of the war as the US vs the anti-war protestors. In Reagan's view, if the protestors had supported the troops, not only could America have won but the returning veterans could have moved on with their lives, as did veterans of other wars.

Reagan was determined to renew faith in American strength and heal the psychological wounds of the Vietnam Era. The media, especially the movies, seemed almost to follow his lead, releasing movies beginning in 1980 that shifted blame for the war and other ills of the era onto the protestors. By 1988, after two terms in office, Reagan had achieved his goal and passed the torch to George H.W. Bush, who would use similar arguments as America became involved in conflict in the Persian Gulf.

## CHAPTER I

### REAGAN'S NOBLE CRUSADE

The public memory of the Vietnam era is to this day filled with imagery of spat-upon veterans who are mentally disturbed and socially damaged due not so much to their experiences in the war as their mistreatment when returning home. This depiction has been amended from its inception in the immediate post war era. During the 1980s, under the rebirth of conservatism under Ronald Reagan, the war was recast in visual media and therefore into the public memory. This reimagining of the past took place in order to highlight the political radicalism of the Left in the 1960s, which was depicted by conservatives as a continued problem in America as late as 1980. Once the conservatives gained power, this reimagined Vietnam era was used to bolster support for their political aims both at home and abroad.

In order to understand how Ronald Reagan and the politics of the 1980s changed American perception of the Vietnam Era, it is important to explore the background of the man himself. Ronald "Dutch" Reagan was born February 6, 1911 in Tampico, Illinois to John Edward "Jack" Reagan and Nelle Wilson Reagan. The Reagans were a family of modest means, with an alcoholic father that caused them many problems. As a young man in the 1930s, Reagan listened to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's fireside

chats and looked up to Roosevelt as both a leader and communicator.<sup>26</sup>

Although his family was poor, Reagan was able to attend Eureka College, enrolling in 1928. While there, the Depression was causing economic hardship for the college, and its administrators sought to cut costs by eliminating many classes against the wishes of the students. Reagan, elected by the student body, spoke out against this, calling for an immediate student strike unless the President resigned.<sup>27</sup> This strike attracted national attention, and the students were victorious. It was through the student strike at Eureka College that Reagan got his first taste of a life in the public eye.

After graduation from Eureka College in 1932, Reagan got a job as a sportscaster, eventually ending up in Des Moines as a Cubs announcer. Then, in 1937, he joined the US Army Enlisted Reserves. Reagan was not ordered to active duty until 1942, when he became involved with the US Army Air Corps. He spent most of his enlisted time in California making training and motivational films due to his poor eyesight.<sup>28</sup> In July of 1945, Reagan was honorably discharged and joined the American Veterans Committee, a liberal veteran's organization. He was also an active member of Americans for Democratic Action throughout the 1940s, which was a political organization that was both anti-Communist and liberal.

After his discharge, Reagan stayed in California working as an actor full time, and by 1947 he was elected President of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG). While President of

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<sup>26</sup> Thomas Evans, *The Education of Ronald Reagan: The General Electric Years and the Untold Story of his Conversion to Conservatism*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 10.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

SAG, Reagan, along with other unions in California, opposed Republican “right to work” legislation.<sup>29</sup> Overall, he spent five years as SAG President, mediating union disputes. During this time he also worked secretly with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) against Communists. Reagan’s work with the FBI came about due to Reagan’s belief by the late 1940s that Hollywood was being overrun by Communists who were attempting to take over the movie business, as well as the fact that he was being threatened by the Communists.<sup>30</sup> His response to the threats, both business and personal, was to secretly provide the FBI with the names of suspected Communists.<sup>31</sup>

Politically, Reagan remained a Democrat throughout the 1950s and even into the early 1960s. He campaigned for Truman and Humphrey, and in California he even backed Helena Gahagan Douglas in her fight against Richard Nixon in his 1950 bid for a US Senate seat. In 1952, Reagan campaigned as a “Democrat for Eisenhower,” and, in 1960, a “Democrat for Nixon.” Then, in 1962, he formally became a Republican. In 1964 Reagan campaigned for Barry Goldwater and gave a speech, later dubbed “The Speech,” in which he stressed smaller government, among other things.

What caused the seemingly sudden shift from a Union President who fought Republicans to an activist who personally stumped for them? Unfortunately, this is not

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>30</sup> Reagan worked within many union organizations during his time in Hollywood. His first was as a member of the board of the Hollywood Independent Citizens Committee of Arts, Sciences, and Professions (HICCASP). While in the organization, he and others grew concerned that it was a Communist front and attempted to overtake them but failed and resigned. Later, as a member of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) a violent strike broke out and Reagan crossed picket lines. After these and other occurrences, Reagan was threatened by the Communist Party, contacted by the FBI and given a protective detail.

<sup>31</sup> James Patterson, *Restless Giant: The United States from Watergate to Bush v. Gore*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 129.

completely clear. Most point to his marriage to Nancy Davis in 1952, as well as the years he spent working for General Electric (GE) from 1954-1962. Reagan was not only host of GE's Sunday night television show, but he was also a company spokesman paid to travel to GE plants across America and speak directly to workers on behalf of the company.

As host of the Sunday evening television program, *General Electric Theatre*, one of the country's top-rated programs, Reagan made a name for himself in front of millions of Americans on a weekly basis. This corporate television work, along with the constant tours of the GE plants, brought Reagan into contact with more conservative businessmen, a complete turnaround after his years in liberal Hollywood. When he arrived at GE in 1954, Reagan was still a self-confessed Democrat and New Dealer but when he left eight years later, he was a registered Republican.<sup>32</sup>

It was a newly energized Reagan that emerged from GE to stump for Goldwater in 1964. His newfound appreciation for lower taxes, conservatism, and smaller government, as well as the fact that he was a nationally recognizable figure, made him the perfect Republican candidate for governor in 1966. Backed by conservative republicans, Reagan won the primary with 77% of the vote, and eventually beat Edmund G. "Pat" Brown, the two-term incumbent by one million votes.<sup>33</sup> In 1970 he won a second term, and then, in 1975, challenged Gerald Ford for the Republican presidential nomination. Although he lost the nomination to Ford at the Republican convention, Reagan used the next four years to campaign for the 1980 nomination.

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<sup>32</sup> Evans, *The Education of Ronald Reagan*, 4.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

Ford lost the 1976 election to Jimmy Carter. Attempting to move the country away from the memory of Vietnam Era conflicts and toward the future, on his first official day in office Carter pardoned all Vietnam draft evaders, although not deserters or those who were dishonorably discharged.<sup>34</sup> Then, in March 1977, he sent the first official US delegation to visit Vietnam since the end of the war.<sup>35</sup> Halfway through Carter's term, as presidential hopefuls began to jockey for position, the economy worsened with stagflation and the oil embargo, and, in 1979, American hostages were taken in Iran, where they remained for 444 days (until Reagan took office).

In the midst of this national chaos and hopelessness, Ronald Reagan began his quest for the Republican presidential nomination. After defeating George H.W. Bush for the nomination, Reagan took on Jimmy Carter in the 1980 presidential election. Carter was pleased with the match-up, stating "at the time, all my political team believed he was the weakest candidate the Republicans could have chosen."<sup>36</sup> Unfortunately for Carter, the economy did not improve, the hostages were not returned and Reagan began to hammer home his vision for the US as an exceptional nation that had historically been a force for good in the world. Reagan's speeches, including his 1980 speech to the Chicago VFW, made Americans feel not only a sense of relief, but also sense of regaining the greatness the country had had until the loss in Vietnam.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Jimmy Carter. Proclamation 4483: Granting Pardon for the Violation of the Selective Service Act, 21 January 1977.

<sup>35</sup> Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars 1945-1990*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), 302.

<sup>36</sup> Jimmy Carter, *Keeping the Faith: Memoirs of a President*, (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1982), 542.

<sup>37</sup> Patterson, *Restless Giant*, 146.

In August 1980, prior to the November election, *Playboy* published an article by Robert Scheer based on interviews he had done with Reagan for the *Los Angeles Times*. Scheer portrayed Reagan as “the good boy next door who will do right by the country, as he has for his family and friends.”<sup>38</sup> In the interview, he asked Reagan about the possibility of using nuclear weapons in a preemptive strike against the Russians. Reagan called up the specter of Vietnam in order to answer the question, and gave a hint of the policy and rhetoric that came into play once he was elected president:

What I am saying is that the US should never put itself in a position, as it has many times before, of guaranteeing to an enemy or potential enemy what it won't do. President Johnson, in the Vietnam War, kept over and over insisting “oh no, no, no we'll never use nuclear weapons in Vietnam.” Now, I don't think they were needed; but when somebody's out there killing your young men, you should never free the enemy of the concern for what you might do.<sup>39</sup>

In August 1980, Presidential nominee Ronald Reagan, in a Chicago speech to the Veteran's of Foreign Wars (VFW), fully articulated his thoughts on the Vietnam War. He spoke of a “Vietnam Syndrome,” reflecting his belief that the North Vietnamese won the war not on the battlefield, but on the homefront with their propaganda.<sup>40</sup> It was also at this time when Reagan's idea of a “noble cause” came into play.<sup>41</sup> With his attribution of the Vietnam War as a “noble cause” Reagan attempted to inform Americans that they had committed no wrongs but had, instead, defended a small country that needed our help to

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<sup>38</sup> Robert Scheer, “The Reagan Question,” *Playboy*, August 1980.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Speech to the Veteran's of Foreign Wars Convention,” Chicago, IL, August 18, 1980. [www.reagan.utexas.edu](http://www.reagan.utexas.edu) (Accessed January 28, 2009).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

fight off a totalitarian aggressor.<sup>42</sup> In his speech he argued that “we dishonor the memory of 50,000 young Americans who died in that cause when we give way to feelings of guilt.” Reagan also told Americans that they had treated their veterans badly, even though these veterans had fought just as hard as any person in any other war. His speech insinuated that this treatment was a main cause in the loss of the Vietnam War for America.<sup>43</sup> This idea is very important to the remembrances of the Vietnam Era that came out of the 1980s.

The 1980s produced a multitude of movies about veterans being mistreated upon their return home. There is no major film in the 1970s or 1980s specifically about the anti-war movement, and yet all movies by the early ‘80s point to it as dangerous in nature.<sup>44</sup> How had the Vietnam Veteran gone from chilling psychopath to the victim of hippies and other protestors in less than ten years? It appears this shift began in 1980, when Congress authorized the construction of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and Ronald Reagan gave his speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars about the “noble cause.” This new governmental attitude gave the American people permission to view Vietnam veterans with more sympathy and promoted the understanding that many veterans were still suffering, not only physically, but mentally as well.

It was not only in the film industry that a reawakening of interest in Vietnam was taking shape. *Rolling Stone* magazine, in March 1980, interviewed Bob Hope about his years in show business. In the article the writer, Timothy White, grilled Hope about his

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 122.



feelings on Vietnam and the shows he had done in-country during the war. He also interviewed Ron Kovic, author of *Born on the Fourth of July*, who attended a Hope show in Vietnam in 1965, as a way to show differing memories of the same event.<sup>45</sup>

White first probed Hope on how he felt, retrospectively, about the Vietnam War. Hope replied that he thought *Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now* were fiction. He was in Vietnam for nine years and, yes, it was a tragic place, but he asserted that the events portrayed in those movies were definitely “fiction.” Hope emphasized that a distortion of events had taken place in order to make the movies more exciting.<sup>46</sup> White worked to move Hope in the direction of the “actual” war as opposed to films about the war and portrayed Hope as getting angry with this line of questioning. Hope’s response sounded much like Reagan’s speech to the VFW in 1980, when he said “Listen. It was a rough enough conflict. The only sad thing is that it wasn’t an official “war.” If it had been a war, it would have been put entirely in the hands of the military and the war would have been over in three damned weeks and saved millions of lives.”<sup>47</sup>

Although Hope’s in-country tours of Vietnam were turned into television specials in order to make money, he pointed out that he did the same thing in WWII and Korea. According to Hope, the reason Vietnam became such a big deal is that it was a “political” war.<sup>48</sup> Hope contended that the troops wanted him there, and that, in fact, he received mail begging him to come. His last words on the subject, “you can’t listen to a coupla’

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<sup>45</sup> Timothy White, “The Road Not Taken,” *Rolling Stone*, 20 March, 1980.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

oddballs who think it's wrong," were used by White to introduce Kovic's experience at a Hope show in 1965.<sup>49</sup>

Ron Kovic, a paraplegic former Marine sergeant who did multiple tours in Vietnam, recalled Hope and his shows less fondly. He looked back on the shows with anger, explaining that Hope used the men by telling them how to act and where to sit, and by explaining that it was possible they would be seen by their family back home. In fact, Kovic remembered the shows as an exploitation of the troops. He recalled watching Hope's Korea shows on television as a child and liking them, but he explained that once he was a part of the show that "romance" was gone.<sup>50</sup> Interestingly, in this 1980 interview, Kovic used imagery from a 1979 movie, *Apocalypse Now*, to make his point, stating that "the *Apocalypse Now* scenes with the Playboy bunnies typified what it was really like in those troop shows – the terrible frustration and anguish."<sup>51</sup>

Kovic explained that in 1967 and 1968 (during Kovic's second in-country tour), Hope returned to Vietnam, but Kovic refused to attend his shows. He believed that at this point Hope realized that the shows were a great tool for his advancement as a personality. Kovic asserted that by that time, to the troops, Hope symbolized an American myth that had been shattered by the men's war experiences. He claimed that the troops had thus begun to boo Hope at his shows. Hope fervently denied this ever occurred.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

*Rolling Stone* was not alone in bringing up the Vietnam Era in interviews with celebrities during the 1980s. In October 1980, Eric Norden, in a *Playboy* interview with G. Gordon Liddy, asked Liddy about the threat posed by the counter-culture, the very people Reagan demonized. Liddy explained that the US was in an undeclared civil war at home against influential media portrayals and the counter-culture movement. When Norden suggested that this was an exaggeration – that the US was never on the brink of revolution – Liddy fired back that Norden seriously underestimated the threat the country faced from the students and the anti-war protestors.<sup>53</sup>

Another interview of interest occurred after the November election, in December 1980, when Lawrence Grobel interviewed George C. Scott for *Playboy*. Grobel asked if Scott believed the military should have been allowed to win in Vietnam at any cost.<sup>54</sup> Scott, much like Hope and Reagan, stated, “I’m afraid I think that’s true. It may not be a very popular opinion, but I held it at the time and I hold it now.”<sup>55</sup> Scott discussed the counter-culture, calling Vietnam the degenerate war because of the 1960s upheaval inside of the US. He argued that with the rampant drug use and the demonstrations, history will show the Vietnam Era as “the darkest, most dismal hour in this nation’s history,” not because of the war, but because that is when the country really started going downhill on the homefront.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Eric Norden, “Playboy Interview: G. Gordon Liddy,” *Playboy*, October 1980.

<sup>54</sup> Lawrence Grobel, “Playboy Interview: George C. Scott,” *Playboy*, December 1980.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

In April 1981, in a speech on the National Day of Recognition for the Veterans of the Vietnam Era, President Reagan continued his push for a reconfigured remembrance of the Vietnam Era and its veterans.<sup>57</sup> Again, he reiterated the fact that millions of vets never received their full measure of thanks for accepting America's call to arms. Reagan pointed to an undefined survey that said the American public overwhelmingly admired the Vietnam veteran. He went further by telling the American people that it was now their responsibility to reach out to these vets. "This recognition will mean much to the Vietnam veterans who never received the thanks they deserved when they originally returned home from war," he explained.<sup>58</sup>

Reagan thus not only presented the American people with a responsibility they had to accept in order for the country to begin the healing process – reaching out to the veterans to ease the suffering of both sides - but also offered a compelling reason for the vet's constant suffering and inability to fit into society. The problems that had been faced by the veterans, and to some degree that had continued, were now framed in the context of the American people having been either hostile toward the vets, or simply ungrateful.

It is at this time that movies about Vietnam vets facing an ungrateful American public became predominant. *Rambo: First Blood* (1982) is an excellent example of how the ideas of Reagan's speeches in 1980 and 1981 came to fruition in a media platform accessible to millions. In the movie, John Rambo, a Vietnam veteran, is introduced to the audience wearing combat fatigues and army boots.<sup>59</sup> He is walking alone heading into a

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<sup>57</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Proclamation for the National Day of Recognition for Veteran's of the Vietnam Era," April 23, 1981. [www.reagan.utexas.edu](http://www.reagan.utexas.edu) (accessed January 28, 2009).

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ted Kotcheff, *Rambo: First Blood*, 1982.

town in order to visit a buddy from the war. Upon arrival in the town of “Hope,” Rambo finds his friend has died of cancer from Agent Orange exposure. Although he is still minding his own business, Rambo is told by the Sheriff to leave town, which he refuses to do. Rambo is subsequently arrested and suffers flashbacks to his torture in Vietnam which leads him to fight back and escape into the woods in order to hide out.

Had this movie been released in the late 1970s, Rambo probably would have gone on a killing spree throughout the town before escaping to the woods because he would have simply been portrayed as a “psychotic” vet. Although Rambo does eventually go on a killing spree in the woods against the police sent in to capture him, in the more conservative climate of the Reagan Era, he is portrayed as a man unable to help himself because of the failure of the American government and the antagonism of the American people. This is made very clear toward the end of the movie when Rambo is finally allowed a measurable amount of dialogue. When speaking to his old commander, Colonel Sam Trautman, Rambo explains that “somebody would not let us win,” echoing Reagan’s 1980 proclamation that “we will never again ask young men to fight and possibly die in a war our government is afraid to let them win.”<sup>60</sup> Rambo delves further into Reagan’s explanation of a hostile American environment when he explains that once the vets returned to “the world” they were spat upon and called baby killers.<sup>61</sup>

*Rambo: First Blood* helped cement the main arguments Reagan spoke of in 1980 and 1981 that would intensify in media portrayals of the Vietnam Era in subsequent years: that the soldiers were not allowed to win and that the anti-war protestors shared the

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<sup>60</sup> Reagan, “VFW Speech,” August 1980.

<sup>61</sup> *Rambo: First Blood*, 1982.

responsibility for losing the war, as well as for the vets inability to heal mentally and move on. The main gist of this argument lay in the belief that anti-war protestors had aided the enemy and fought against the troops. But how well does this idea fit into the reality of the anti-war movement's aims and actions during the Vietnam Era?

America had a presence in Vietnam since the end of WWII, and by the end of 1965 there were 175,000 American troops in Vietnam. As the draftee numbers grew, so did resistance to the war. One of the first large demonstrations against the war was in New York City in October 1965, and it drew 25,000 people. In March 1966, another anti-war march took place in New York City, drawing 30,000 people. Pictured prominently in the news photographs of the parade is a photo of protestors with a sign, "Vets and Reservists for Peace." It is also in the media coverage of this parade that the first instances of spitting are recorded. It has later been shown, however, that in every circumstance it was the protestors and not the veterans who were spat upon.<sup>62</sup> This is important because it shows the reality of the spit myth as true *but* that spit was used against, not by, the anti-war protestors.

By the summer of 1966, the anti-war movement had been supporting draft resistance for over a year and began to support in-service resistance also. The winter of 1967 saw the formation of the Student Mobilization Committee, a national anti-war organization, and, by April they had access to the New York Port Authority where they began to leaflet GIs. Also during this period the Vietnam Vets Against the War (VVAW) was organized.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Lembke, *The Spitting Image*, 32.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

In 1967, the anti-war organizations began more large-scale activity, which culminated in the October march on the Pentagon that brought protestors and soldiers face to face. Photographs of this occasion clearly show no animosity between the two sides, as anti-war veterans and protestors are shown handing out leaflets and putting flowers in the soldier's guns. By the summer of 1969, news of the GI anti-war movements and a growing rebellion in the military ranks was spreading, and in November of 1969, more than 500,000 Americans protested the war in Washington DC, along with 250,000 in San Francisco.<sup>64</sup>

As dissent grew within the ranks, military personnel tried to suppress the leaflets and brochures coming into, and going out of, bases. The Nixon administration, on the other hand, was planning to split the anti-war movement by breaking the ties between the radical and liberal element, as well as with the veterans.<sup>65</sup> The administration told the American people, as Reagan did while governor of California in 1969, that "leaders of the moratorium lent comfort and aid to the enemy and that some Americans will die tonight because of the activity in our streets."<sup>66</sup> These leaders were able to change the debate from one about the war to one about the soldiers.

Nixon also intended to make the American people suspicious of the motives of the anti-war protestors by questioning their loyalty to America and linking them to the Communists. The campaign worked, as there was already tension between the radical and liberal elements of the anti-war movement, and Nixon's rhetoric began to imply that

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<sup>64</sup> Turner, *Echoes of Combat*, 38.

<sup>65</sup> Lembcke, *The Spitting Image*, 49.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

opposition to the war was tantamount to treason. The administration was also able to use the fabricated image of protestors spitting on vets as propaganda in this attack.

The biggest obstacle facing the administration was to find a way to make the anti-war movement look anti-soldier despite the large numbers of veterans participating in the war protests. Nixon had to create the image of a “good vet,” one who had fought in past wars, to contrast with that of a “bad vet,” the activist home from Vietnam. After the My Lai massacre occurred, this gave him the perfect image of a “bad vet” that he could use to discredit the veteran activists (the same vets the media had concurrently deemed “psychotic”). After My Lai, the anti-war activist veterans were portrayed as not real, or bad, veterans, and, as they watched the atrocities of My Lai unfold on television, Americans began to believe in the “bad vet” image. Unfortunately for the veterans, even as Americans watched 700 of them discard their medals in Washington DC, they were not seen as real, and consequently anything they said or did was disregarded, including their new found opposition to the war.

Further complicating this new portrayal of the anti-war movement was a Harris Poll of veterans in 1971, in which only one percent of respondents described their reception from family and friends as “not at all friendly,” and only three percent described their own age group as unfriendly. It is further indicated that the archival record does not show that GIs perceived the anti-war movement as hostile towards them.<sup>67</sup> So where does this perception come from? The biggest culprit seems to be the public, and veteran, belief that they were treated differently upon arrival home than the veterans of World War II.

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 68.



The images of ticker-tape parades and the widely accepted belief that WWII vets had an easy reentry into society were the main problems. The reality is that WWII veterans returned as individuals with only one parade per unit. Not every WWII veteran, or even the majority of them, participated in or was honored by a parade. Another problem with comparing the return of the Vietnam vets to those of WWII is the length of their tours of duty, which complicated their returns home. Most soldiers in WWII served an average of thirty-three months, sixteen of which were spent overseas. In Vietnam, soldiers had a twelve month tour and were then sent stateside singly on commercial airlines. Given the amount of attention paid to the lack of parades and celebrations of the Vietnam era subject in the early 1980s, however, it is not surprising that veterans began to feel they had been neglected.

A prime example of this anti-protestor attitude and belief that Vietnam vets were short-changed upon their return home can be seen in an article by Doug McGee for *The Nation* in January 1982. McGee wrote on the life and eventual death sentence of Vietnam veteran Wayne Felde. Felde was sentenced to death in 1978 for the killing of a Shreveport policeman. McGee discussed Felde's past and talked about his arrival in Vietnam (he enlisted) in 1968 at the age of nineteen. In addition to covering Felde, McGee also delved into the strongly held belief that, unlike WWII veterans who returned home as a company to a tumultuous welcome, the soldiers of Vietnam returned as individuals.<sup>68</sup> It was McGee's intention to show how this unceremonious return helped shape Felde's postwar life.

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<sup>68</sup> Doug McGee, "The Long War of Wayne Felde," *The Nation*, January 2-9, 1982.

Felde described the many negative “firsts” he encountered in Vietnam: the first time he did drugs, the first retaliatory raid on a village in which innocent people were killed, and his first “gook abortion” – watching another soldier slice open the abdomen of a pregnant Vietnamese woman with a machete.<sup>69</sup> Felde began to hate the war as his year in-country progressed, and upon his return home he started to have flashbacks. At this point, McGee broke off in his coverage of Felde’s life in order to explain his own belief that Vietnam veteran’s psychological problems derived from the unpopularity of the war and the hostility many of them faced upon returning home. He then continued on with Felde’s personal recollection of his return stateside in uniform. Felde described being spit at and pelted with bottles and explained that it was this treatment which made him retreat from any acknowledgement of involvement in the war, which he believed made his nightmares and problems even worse.<sup>70</sup>

By 1972 Felde began drinking heavily, doing drugs and getting into trouble with the law. Eventually he killed a man in a fight over a gun and was sent to prison, escaping in 1976. After his escape, Felde lived on the run while spiraling more and more out of control. The death of his mother sparked another bout of trouble which culminated with the death of a policeman and put Felde on Death Row in Shreveport, Louisiana.<sup>71</sup> Felde had attempted suicide many times, with the last attempt coinciding with the release of the American hostages in Iran and the upsurge of patriotism upon their arrival home. Felde’s

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

reaction was to slit his wrists and write “White Collar Heroes” in blood on the wall of his cell.<sup>72</sup>

*Rolling Stone*, in May 1981, published a similar story of a Vietnam vets reaction to the Iranian hostage crisis. Joe Klein told the story of a Vietnam vet who lost his job in early 1980. He watched as the hostages were released in January 1981 to much fanfare and began to spiral out of control. When Gary had returned home after a tour in Vietnam, his mother and wife did not understand the changes in him, but his father did. Interestingly, his father explained that he returned from WWII changed in the same manner, “I was a different person. You can’t go through something like that and not change. You get hard.”<sup>73</sup>

Gary eventually divorced his wife, got a job, and lived a semi-normal life for many years. Although he drank and did some drugs, he had a group of friends and married for a second time. His life was not easy, but Gary held on until 1980 when he lost his job and was unable to find another. This led to increased alcohol and drug use, as well as time spent reflecting on his experiences in Vietnam. Then, almost a year after Gary lost his job, the American hostages in Iran were released.

There was much celebration in the US when the hostages were released on January 20, 1981. They came home to thousands of dollars in back-pay, lifetime passes to ballparks, and parades. Gary’s reaction to this was anger: “They didn’t give me shit when I came home from Vietnam. . . look what these people are getting and they were just doing their jobs. . .they didn’t see their buddies get their heads blown off. They didn’t

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Joe Klein, “A Casualty of Peace,” *Rolling Stone*, May 28, 1981.

get shot at. I can't believe what's happening."<sup>74</sup> Gary began to spiral out of control, drinking uncontrollably, and removing himself emotionally from his family and friends. Within nine days of the American hostages return, Gary was dead after a standoff with police at his home. Interestingly, what stands out in Klein's description of Gary's life are the words of his father and his understanding of Gary's change upon his return from Vietnam. To his father, who had experienced war first hand, Gary was changed as all men are after witnessing a war, nothing more, nothing less.

These veterans' stories are, without the background of the Iranian hostage crisis, similar to many covered in the press in the mid to late 1970s. There is a key difference, however, between the stories of the two eras. In the 1970s the vets were portrayed in an unsympathetic light, as men driven crazy by war, but almost as if they were making a conscience choice to become "psychotic." In the early 1980s, especially after Reagan and Rambo, these same men were now portrayed as the victims of situations beyond their control, unable to release themselves from an "unwinnable" war because they never received the closure of parades or the support of the American people.

As late as May 1984, Reagan, at a speech for the Memorial Day Ceremonies honoring an Unknown Soldier of Vietnam, was still pushing his "noble cause." He explained that the parade taking place on Constitution Avenue was a final public welcoming of the boys' coming home.<sup>75</sup> Reagan was confident that the country was now coming together after a decade of division. Speaking of the Unknown Soldier, he stated,

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Speech at the Memorial Day Ceremonies Honoring an Unknown Serviceman of the Vietnam Conflict," Washington, DC, May 28, 1984. [www.reagan.utexas.edu](http://www.reagan.utexas.edu) (Accessed January 28, 2009).

“Today we pause to embrace him and all who served us so well in a war whose end offered no parades, no flags, and so little thanks.”<sup>76</sup> Reagan also used this speech to open a new chapter on Vietnam, as he moved toward talk of the POW/MIA issue.<sup>77</sup> He argued that even though the American people were coming together it was impossible to close the Vietnam chapter of American history until all the POW’s had been accounted for.<sup>78</sup>

The real question is why was this the first time Reagan had acknowledged the POW issue in a national forum? Five years prior, in 1979, Congress had passed a resolution for a ceremony to honor all American POWs, and, in 1982, the POW flag had flown over the White House for the first time. The parents of missing Vietnam Era servicemen had been fighting for recognition of their sons and daughters since 1970 and growing more vocal since 1975. With the end of the war and the nation’s desire to forget it ever happened, the American government was not interested in opening old wounds in an attempt to find soldiers who may or may not even be alive. Reagan’s willingness to bring the possibility of soldiers being held in captivity in Vietnam to a national audience coincides nicely with his desire to keep the escalating situation in Central America out of the media.

As early as 1981, Reagan had been fighting the spread of Communism in Central America which, by 1984, escalated into a situation that involved the Middle East. In fact, six weeks into his first term, journalist Walter Cronkite asked Reagan if there were

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> POW = Prisoner of War and MIA = Missing in Action; Instead of using POW/MIA from this point on, I will use POW to cover both terms.

<sup>78</sup> Reagan, “Memorial Day Speech,” May 1984.

parallels between US involvement in El Salvador and Vietnam.<sup>79</sup> Cronkite pointed out that the buildup of advisors and military assistance looked similar. Reagan responded by explaining that in this case, a government in our hemisphere had asked for US assistance in order to fight terrorism. He went on to point out that was not just El Salvador, but the entire Western Hemisphere he was concerned about. As per Vietnam in particular, Reagan argued that the term “military advisor” had many meanings, but in this case it simply meant training recruits, and that the US had these trainers in over thirty countries worldwide. Concluding, “I don’t see any parallel at all.” Reagan went on to explain his Cold War viewpoint of stopping the Communists at any opportunity, stating “they have told us that their goal is the Marxian philosophy of world revolution and a single, one-world Communist state and that they’re dedicated to that.”<sup>80</sup>

Three days later, at the President’s News Conference, Reagan was again asked about El Salvador and replied with a refrain that would become familiar - that the US was there at the request of the government.<sup>81</sup> When asked what military steps the US was willing to take, Reagan’s response recalled his statements on dealing with the enemy in Vietnam when he refused to comment on considerations in the line of action. He reiterated that American troops would not be sent in, as well as his point that the US must protect the Western Hemisphere from infiltration by terrorists. Reagan made it clear that he “didn’t start the El Salvador thing, I inherited it,” and that he was simply continuing to send aid as Carter has done. Unfortunately, by the time it was over, the US had spent

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<sup>79</sup> Walter Cronkite, “Ronald Reagan Interview,” *New York Times*, March 4, 1981.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Presidential News Conference,” Washington, DC, March 6, 1981. [www.reagan.utexas.edu](http://www.reagan.utexas.edu) (accessed April 10, 2009).

more than four billion dollars on economic and military aid, and 75,000 people had been killed.<sup>82</sup>

While still in El Salvador, Reagan was also aiding the Contras in Nicaragua who were fighting the Cuban-backed Sandinistas. This situation was one of the “30 other countries around the world” that he had spoken of in March 1981 and the CIA was busy training and assisting the Contras. Unfortunately for Reagan, the Democrats had taken control of Congress in the 1982 midterm elections and passed the Boland Amendment, which restricted operations in Nicaragua because, by 1984, funding became virtually impossible to obtain. This funding restriction became the main reason for Reagan’s desire to keep Central America out of the media by 1984 and into his second term.<sup>83</sup>

Although the US was also involved in Guatemala, the American led invasion of Grenada in 1983 was by far the biggest boost to Reagan’s desire to best America’s “Vietnam Syndrome.” Grenada is a Caribbean Island off the coast of Venezuela that had gained its independence from the United Kingdom in 1974. In 1979, there had been a Communist revolution followed by an internal power struggle that eventually led to the execution of the Prime Minister. The US invaded on October 25, 1983 with a total force of 10,000, which included Caribbean forces as well, though it was comprised of 7,000 US soldiers.

This military operation was the first major one conducted by the US since the Vietnam War. Along with the 7,000 US military personnel, it included helicopter gunships and naval gunfire support against less than 3,000 Grenadian and Cuban forces.

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<sup>82</sup> Kevin Sullivan and Mary Jordan, Washingtonpost.com, June 10, 2004.

<sup>83</sup> Patterson, *Restless Giant*, 208.

Although this show of force was criticized by many countries, including allies such as the UK, and condemned by the United Nations General Assembly in Resolution 38/7, it received broad support from the American people.<sup>84</sup> Reagan's invasion was designed to make America "stand tall" again, confident in their capacity to exercise force when their government deemed it necessary.<sup>85</sup>

Throughout US involvement in Central America, the media continued to follow the lead of the administration as the movies about the Vietnam Era became more concerned with the boys left behind than either the war or the homefront. Although *Uncommon Valor* (1983) was released five months prior to Reagan's "Unknown Soldier" speech, it was the first of many movies to cover the subject of soldiers left behind in Vietnam. Based on a true story, it follows the mission of a father, Colonel Jason Rhodes (ex-military), who believes his son, who has been missing for ten years, is still alive and in captivity in South East Asia.<sup>86</sup> The American government refuses to attempt to locate his son, so Rhodes assembles a group of his son's former military buddies, and the men venture into Laos in order to save him. The fact that this movie was released prior to Reagan's speech, and while the US was becoming more entangled in Central America, seems to come through in its message that the American government was unwilling to retrieve the POWs and so the burden was left to each individual family.

The singularity of the POW mission comes through in *Missing in Action* (1984). The story followed Colonel James Braddock who was still haunted by his own

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<sup>84</sup> United Nations. *Official Records of the General Assembly, Thirty-eighth Session, Plenary Meetings*, 43<sup>rd</sup> Meeting, 2 November 1983.

<sup>85</sup> Young, *The Vietnam Wars*, 314.

<sup>86</sup> Ted Kotcheff, *Uncommon Valor*, 1983.



nightmarish tour of Vietnam. Braddock is asked to join a delegation sent to Vietnam to negotiate the release of men still held in captivity.<sup>87</sup> The Communists are portrayed in a negative light, and they soon betray Braddock who is then forced to rescue the men on his own. Likewise, *Rambo: First Blood Part II* opened on Memorial Day in 1985 and follows a similar pattern as *Missing in Action*. John Rambo is asked by the military to return to the prison camp in which he was held captive during his tour in Vietnam.<sup>88</sup> The military tells Rambo they believe some of the men he was held captive with are still alive and need to be rescued. His mission, however, is not to rescue these men but to take pictures and do reconnaissance. Once Rambo finds that the men are still in captivity he decides to take matters into his own hands and save them.<sup>89</sup>

These movies, released after Reagan's "admission" that there might be men still held in captivity in Vietnam and that the government would do whatever it took to find them, are reflections not only on that theme but also on the belief that the soldiers in Vietnam were not allowed to win. In both cases the men are "not allowed to do their jobs," but both are able to transcend this fact and win the fight anyway. In fact, before Rambo will accept the assignment he asks, "Do we get to win this time?"<sup>90</sup> The movies were a way for the American people to feel they had finally won the war and could put it to rest as soon as all the boys (POWs) were able to come home.

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<sup>87</sup> Joseph Zito, *Missing in Action*, 1984.

<sup>88</sup> George P. Cosmatos, *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, 1985.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER II

### MOVING PAST THE VIETNAM SYNDROME

Even after US intervention in El Salvador and the 1983 US invasion of Grenada, Vietnam still had a hold over US foreign policy. Reagan kept up the search for the POWs while trying to prove that US military had finally moved beyond the Vietnam Syndrome that had plagued the country in the past. As the 1984 election kicked into high gear, Reagan was worried about the situation in Nicaragua coming to light. Democrats in Congress had made it next to impossible to fund the Contras to fight Communism as Reagan desired. His administration was looking for ways around the Boland Amendment and other restrictions.<sup>91</sup>

Loren Jenkins, in an October article for *Rolling Stone*, argued that Reagan was stuck in the belief that the Vietnam War was winnable and that Central America would not go the way of Vietnam.<sup>92</sup> In fact, Jenkins stated “By official decree, Vietnam is not to be invoked in any way with regard to Central America.” To do so, the Reagan administration feared, would be to cater to the dreaded “Vietnam Syndrome” which his

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<sup>91</sup> Patterson, *Restless Giant*, 208.

<sup>92</sup> Loren Jenkins, “Vietnam: The Sequel,” *Rolling Stone*, October 1984.

administration believed had crippled US diplomacy and international will for more than a decade.<sup>93</sup>

Reagan's ability to carry forty-nine states was second only to Richard Nixon in 1972 and his electoral vote count was the highest for any president. It was on this tide of optimism and almost overwhelming support that Reagan began his second term, and, in his 1985 State of the Union address, Reagan seemed to prepare the American people for what was to come when he stated, "We must not break faith with those who are risking their lives...on every continent, from Afghanistan to Nicaragua...to defy Soviet aggression and secure rights which have been ours from birth. Support for freedom fighters is self-defense."<sup>94</sup>

In 1985 Iran and Iraq were still at war after five years, and Iran desperately needed weapons in order to continue to fight the Iraqis. The Iranians approached the Reagan administration in the hopes of acquiring these weapons. Robert McFarlane, Reagan's National Security Advisor, went to Reagan and explained that the arms sales would help US relations with Iran, as well as open the door for increased influence in the Middle East. At the same time, the US and the Soviet Union were both supplying the Iraqi government with various forms of aid. The US had desired a more compelling hold on the region for many years, even going so far as to involve the CIA in the reinstatement of Reza Shah to power in 1953.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> The Vietnam Syndrome was a combination of public opinion biased against the war, a less interventionist US foreign policy, and a relative absence of American wars and interventions since 1975; for more information see DeGroot, *A Noble Cause*, 267.

<sup>94</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Address before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union," Washington, DC, February 6, 1985. [www.reagan.utexas.edu](http://www.reagan.utexas.edu) (accessed April 10, 2009).

<sup>95</sup> Patterson, *Restless Giant*, 208.

Even Jimmy Carter, who most Americans saw as a Dove with an inability to stand up to Soviet force, left his feelings on the area clear in his notes to the Reagan administration. In his notes he explained that the Persian Gulf was crucial to the security of the United States and her allies. He argued that the US would not be able to meet a direct Soviet intrusion into Iran with conventional ground forces. Going further, Carter stated that it was important to make it clear to the Soviets and the world that “such an invasion would precipitate a worldwide confrontation,” that would not be limited to the Persian Gulf area.<sup>96</sup>

At the same time that the Iranians were asking for Reagan’s help, he was having problems freeing seven American hostages in Lebanon. He was hampered by a promise he had made while campaigning in 1984 – that he would never negotiate with terrorists. In order to keep that pledge, he agreed to ship arms to Iran, which also broke the embargo, in the hopes that the Iranian government could help free the hostages.<sup>97</sup>

In 1985, with Nicaragua still on his plate and the Iranian arms deal coming to fruition, Hollywood was still following the “one man killing machine” approach to the Vietnam era. *Missing in Action II: The Beginning* was in theatres less than a year after the first *Missing in Action*. Although it was a prequel, Braddock once again is back in Vietnam, only this time recounting his original tour of duty. The movie is split in two halves, the first with Braddock in a POW camp with sadistic guards and the second encompassing the Americans’ escape and revenge upon their captors.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Carter, *Keeping the Faith*, 587.

<sup>97</sup> Patterson, *Restless Giant*, 209.

<sup>98</sup> Lance Hool, *Missing in Action II: The Beginning*, 1985.

Sylvester Stallone also reappeared as John Rambo in *Rambo: First Blood Part II* in the summer of 1985. Aside from asking if the boys would be allowed to win this time, Rambo is left in-country when he finds an American POW and attempts to escape in the military chopper. The American government had failed him yet again, because he was not supposed to find anyone alive.<sup>99</sup> Rambo is then captured and tortured by the Communists. He eventually escapes, destroys those that held him and heads out to kill the government official who left him behind. Rambo spares his life, saying “There are more Americans out there. Find them or I will.”<sup>100</sup> This is an indictment of the American government’s failure to delve far enough into the POW dilemma, seemingly using it for ‘show’ only. In the end, Rambo asserts that all he wants is for America to love its Vietnam vets as much as the vets love America.

The ten year anniversary of the Fall of Saigon also came in 1985, and it brought renewed media attention to the Vietnam Era. In fact, in April, *TIME* had two separate articles relating to Vietnam. George J. Church used his article as a reference point for lessons learned from the war itself. He argued the American people never resolved their conflicts over the war and that these divisions seemed ready to open again whenever anyone asked about the lessons that should be learned. He quoted Graham Martin, the last US Ambassador to South Vietnam:

I estimated at the end of the war that it probably would be at least two decades before any rational, objective discussion of the war and its causes and effects could be undertaken by scholars who were not so deeply, emotionally, engaged at the time that their later perceptions were colored by bias and prejudices.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, 1985.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> George J Church, “Lessons from a Lost War,” *TIME*, April 1985.

These biases and prejudices came into play in the late 1980s in films dealing both directly with the war and those that dealt with the homefront. By the late 1980s, many men who had experienced the war firsthand had written books or screenplays in the ten years since Saigon had fallen. Some of the books written by Vietnam vets, such as that of Ron Kovic, were even being turned into movies by other Vietnam vets like Oliver Stone. Later, in films like *Platoon* and *Full Metal Jacket* in 1987, this first-hand veteran experience becomes the movie, instead of simply a part of it.

Church's article delved into America's Vietnam Syndrome, asserting that, even though he believed it was fading under the impact of events like Grenada, he also believed the military action must be swift and American victory be assured.<sup>102</sup> However, Stephen Solarz, Head of the House Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs stated "It is a formula for national paralysis if, before we can ever use force, we need a Gallup poll showing that two-thirds of the American people are in favor of it."<sup>103</sup>

Church also touted television imagery as a powerful, if not the most powerful, stimulus of anti-war sentiment. To hear Church and others tell it, without television coverage of Vietnam, the students, whose friends were being sent to die, would not have mobilized against the war. This seems almost incomprehensible. The war was a fact, as were the deaths of the young men that had been drafted. Although television did have an effect on the middle-class parents at home, the students were already out and the veterans for peace had begun to act out before the anti-war movement gained full steam.

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

What television did was to show the anti-war movement in its infancy and encourage members of the middle-class to join as they began to support the war less and less. Secretary of State Dean Rusk pointed out that the war began with impressive public and Congressional support, and that it was not until 1968 that individuals at the grassroots level demanded to know when it would end. During 1968, activists at this level began to gain more traction, as television began to cover the actions on college campuses in more detail. At this time, the media also began to cover the alleged abuses and problems of the soldiers in Vietnam in a more negative light.<sup>104</sup>

Church ended with Reagan's discourse – though out of the mouths of the Vietnam vets – that Americans must never again be sent out to die in a war that “the politicians will not let them win.”<sup>105</sup> This idea had really begun to take root in Reagan's first term and now, by 1985, had become an almost universal “truth.”

Lance Morrow's article “A Bloody Rite of Passage,” looked specifically at the American experience and how the Vietnam Era created a division in society. He began with facts: Americans left Vietnam after 16 years with 58,000 dead, 300,000 wounded and \$150 billion expended.<sup>106</sup> Using the fortieth anniversary of V-E Day as a celebratory backdrop to the tenth anniversary of the fall of Saigon, he argued that the loss of the war was not as traumatic as the way the war was fought, the way it was perceived, and the way it was hated.<sup>107</sup> Morrow believed it was most important to understand how the war

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Lance Morrow, “A Bloody Rite of Passage,” *TIME*, 15 April, 1985.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

and the protests shook loose forces in American life that make it difficult to know whether to look at the era in historical or psychiatric terms. He defined the war as America vs. America.<sup>108</sup>

As he spoke directly about the veterans, Morrow went back to Reagan's vision of WWII parades that were not granted to the Vietnam vets. Morrow argued that the rites of absolution: the parades, the welcome home, and the collective embrace that gathers soldiers back into the fold of the community were not granted to the Vietnam era veterans. This indifference created a situation in which the veterans were forced to carry a burden of guilt for the horrors of war that previous generations of veterans had not faced.<sup>109</sup>

He went on to point out that the war felt much closer in 1985 than it had been in 1978. Directly after the war, the American public seemed to deny the war, and even the era, had ever taken place. This, he argued, was the main problem the vets had faced. They arrived home to no one interested in talking about the war or even acknowledging it had happened at all.

The article ended with a quote from a vet, Larry Langowski: "I went over there thinking I was doing something right and came back a bum. I came back decked with medals on my uniform, and I got spit on by a hippie girl."<sup>110</sup> Thus, in 1985, *TIME* magazine printed a veteran's recollection of being spat upon on his return home. By 1985, the image of the spat upon veteran had become so burned in the American

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.



consciousness from movies and other media that Vietnam veterans were beginning with more and more frequency to say that it happened to them personally.

Jerry Lembcke, who draws upon his own experience as a Vietnam veteran and protestor, argues that since the anti-war protestors were supportive of the veterans – veterans joined their organizations and protestors tried to stop men from being shipped out – it is impossible for them to be simultaneously hostile and mutually supportive. He makes it very clear that thirty years of research on the anti-war movement and the war itself have turned up no concrete evidence of a veteran being spat upon.<sup>111</sup> He uses the retold stories of veterans returning from Vietnam as the basis of his research and sees the stories as far too uniform to be real. The story, as it is mostly told, goes something like this: a dirty, long-haired hippy spits on a clean-cut GI at the San Francisco airport. Lembcke asks “weren’t the hippies too passive to be spitting on anyone, much less people they allegedly considered to be trained killers?”<sup>112</sup>

By 1986, both the situation with Central America and Reagan’s problems with Libya were escalating. Almost as soon as he began his first term, Reagan and Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi were at odds. In May 1981, Reagan had ordered the Libyans to close their embassy in Washington, DC.<sup>113</sup> The administration then stepped up covert operations in the Middle East and discovered the Soviets were supplying arms to the Libyans. By June, Reagan authorized the Sixth Fleet to conduct maneuvers in the Gulf of Sidra within a few months.

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<sup>111</sup> Lembcke, *The Spitting Image*, 6.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>113</sup> This was due to the FBI, in May 1981, implicating a Libyan terrorist in a murder that took place in Chicago.

Reagan was aware that Qaddafi considered the waters of the Gulf his territory and that the ordered maneuvers would, most likely, cause problems. Not surprisingly, within a few weeks of maneuvers Libyan planes fired on American F14s in the international waters of the Gulf which Qaddafi claimed as his own. Reagan had previously given permission to the American fighters that allowed them to fight back in order to show that America was no longer under the spell of the Vietnam Syndrome. He wanted to prove that the US would no longer hesitate when it had legitimate interests at stake.<sup>114</sup>

Problems escalated as the Libyans were believed to be both attempting an assassination attempt on Reagan and bringing heat seeking missiles into the country. Two months later, in October 1981, Anwar El Sadat of Egypt was killed and it was believed that the Libyans were behind it. Tensions remained high between Reagan and Qaddafi but Reagan had other concerns to deal with, both foreign and domestic. As problems in Central America arose, Reagan allowed the Libyans to fall to a lower place on his list and for the rest of his first term, he concentrated on other problems.<sup>115</sup>

By 1985, however, problems in the Middle East again came to the forefront of the Reagan administration. In December, Palestinian terrorists used automatic weapons on crowds in both the Rome and Vienna airports, killing twenty people total, including five Americans. Qaddafi called this a “noble act” and Reagan’s administration tied the Libyans to the attacks through a passport. Reagan did not react swiftly because there were almost a thousand US oil workers in the region and he was fearful that Qaddafi would take his vengeance out on these workers. Instead, Reagan chose to do nothing.

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<sup>114</sup> Edmund Morris, *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan*, (New York: Random House, 1999), 448.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 453.

Three months later, in March 1986, the Sixth Fleet went on maneuvers in the Gulf of Sidra again, awaiting a response from Qaddafi. After two days, the Libyans fired SAM missiles and sent missile-firing boats toward the American fleet. This time, Reagan's response to what he saw as an act of aggression in international waters was to sink the Libyan vessels and knockout their radar installation.

In April 1986, Reagan and his administration looked at more options for retaliation. Still worried about civilian deaths, this time on the Libyan side as all of the American oil workers had been recalled, the administration settled on Qaddafi's military headquarters in Tripoli. On April 14, 1986, Reagan launched an attack on Libya, sending jet fighters in to bomb Qaddafi's headquarters. Reagan's attack showed once and for all that America no longer suffered from the Vietnam Syndrome that had affected her for so long.<sup>116</sup>

Then, in July, after the American people's overwhelmingly positive reaction to the attack on Libya, Reagan gave a radio address to the nation concerning POWs in Southeast Asia. It was at this time that the situation in Nicaragua and the sales of arms to the Iranians was beginning to become ungainly for the administration to handle, and they were concerned the information would leak out. In his radio address, Reagan spoke about how a few years earlier there was little interest or hope in Washington about the POW issue. He explained that everything had now changed and "the media, the government, and all of America are concerned."<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 586.

<sup>117</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Radio Address to the Nation on POW's and MIA's in Southeast Asia," Washington, DC, July 19, 1986. [www.reagan.utexas.edu](http://www.reagan.utexas.edu) (accessed April 10, 2009).

Reagan thanked the families of the missing soldiers for never giving up and promised to pursue all avenues with every resource available to achieve an accounting of their relatives. He promised that progress was being made and that all of America shared the common goal of freedom or resolution for all POWs and their families.<sup>118</sup> In the end, Reagan returned to his noble cause and explained that those still missing were a part of history's heroes.

At the end of 1986 the Iran-Contra scandal finally broke. Since it was first published by Lebanese magazine *Ash-Shiraa*, Reagan was able to deny the allegations. Soon, however, the American media picked up the story, and he was unable to deny it occurred while still claiming he was not involved or even knew anything about it. An investigational probe was called, and Attorney General Edwin Meese was able to prove that only \$12 million of the \$30 million the Iranians had paid for the arms had even reached the administration. At this time, Lt. Col. Oliver North stepped forward and took responsibility for diverting the funds to the Contras without the knowledge of the National Security Advisor, or he assumed, Reagan himself.

Six months after Reagan's attack on Libya and the newly acquired American posture that came with it, America welcomed the arrival of a new type of Vietnam film - *Platoon*. *Platoon* was a Vietnam War film both written and directed by a Vietnam vet, and it brought a marked change in the direction of the genre. Not only were the films now concerned with the soldier in combat, as opposed to upon their return home, they used imagery from previous films about the Vietnam era to make their point. In *Platoon*, Stone wanted to show the viewer what it was like to be a soldier in Vietnam. This soldier-level view was far removed from the *Rambo* and *Missing in Action* one man

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

killing machine approach. The movie is about the men, or “grunts,” who actually did the fighting in the war.

The grunts depicted in the film arrive in-country in December 1967 “somewhere near the Cambodian jungle.”<sup>119</sup> Although the film is supposed to be about the war experience and apolitical, the company the men join is made up primarily of poor whites and minorities, alluding to the belief that the average soldier in Vietnam was of the lower classes in America. As time moves on, the men form cliques that gather at night after a hard day in the bush – some do drugs, others get drunk – but all do something to escape the horrors of the day.

Soon enough, the men are faced with a dilemma at a Vietnamese village. They believe the villagers have been aiding the Viet Cong, and they begin to threaten, and soon kill, innocent Vietnamese. This very graphic sequence reminds the viewer of the My Lai massacre of 1968, which, once it became public in 1969, helped turn the middle class against the war and toward the protestors. Although the men in *Platoon* do not kill everyone, they do burn the village to the ground.

The men go on fighting their daily battles and their personal demons until a Sergeant is killed, and many of the men feel another Sergeant is responsible. This death brings great discord and even more infighting to the platoon and although the men need each other to survive the daily grind in Vietnam, they are no longer a cohesive unit. In the end; the main character Chris, played by Charlie Sheen, observes that “looking back, we did not fight the enemy, we fought ourselves and the enemy was in us...the war is

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<sup>119</sup> Oliver Stone, *Platoon*, 1986.

over for me now, but it will always be there the rest of my days.”<sup>120</sup> This dialogue brought up many of the old views of the Vietnam Era, mainly that America fought not the Vietnamese as much as itself, and that this is the war we ultimately lost. Equally important in his parting words was the belief that the war was more all encompassing for the veterans of Vietnam, and somehow, though other vets were able to walk away from their wartime experiences, the Vietnam vets would never be allowed this leisure.

*Platoon* seems to have taken items from the Vietnam movies that came before it. This, in and of itself, was a change, as most Vietnam movies had used WWII symbolism and imagery to make their point. The problem, however, was that the Stone and *Platoon* helped make some of the “myths” of the war into facts. The movie not only made \$138 million and won Stone an Academy Award for Best Director, but it also brought forth a multitude of in-country films, including *Hamburger Hill* and *Full Metal Jacket*.

*Rolling Stone*, in January 1987, had a brief interview with Oliver Stone about his experience in Vietnam. Stone had visited Vietnam in 1965 as a Yale drop-out who had been hired by a church group to teach Chinese children in Cho Lon, which he did for six months.<sup>121</sup> Unlike the accepted belief that almost every person sent to Vietnam was drafted, Stone admitted that he went to the recruiter’s office on his own in 1967. Although this fits into the reality of the war – only one-third of those that served were drafted, as compared to two-thirds in World War II – it goes against the belief of many in

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Fred Schruers, “Soldiers Story,” *Rolling Stone*, January 1987.

the 1980s that the majority of American men serving in Vietnam were forcibly taken to war.<sup>122</sup>

In fact, compared to the five year (1941-1946) US involvement in WWII, both the total number of Americans serving in the military and the draft percentages for the nine year (1964-1973) Vietnam War are much lower than most people would expect. In WWII, the total number of people serving in the military was 16,112,566. Of this number, approximately 10,000,000, or over 60%, were draftees.<sup>123</sup> By comparison, during the Vietnam War, the total number serving in the military was 8,744,000, and 1,728,344, or just over 20%, were draftees.<sup>124</sup>

Stone requested for 11 Bravo, which was infantry, as his unit, and when he was accepted he felt he could start over and become “something I can be proud of, without having to fake it, see something I don’t yet see, learn something I don’t yet know.”<sup>125</sup> Over his fifteen months of service, Stone served with the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division and the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division. He was awarded both the Bronze Star and the Purple Heart for combat gallantry.<sup>126</sup> It was not until July 1976, eight years after he left Vietnam, that he began to write his version of the war. Stone said he wanted to help people understand what it was like over there: “how the everyday American, wild crazy boys from little

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<sup>122</sup> B.G. Burkett and Glenna Whitley, *Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation was Robbed of Its Heroes and Its History*, (Utah: Verity Press Publishing, 1998), 57.

<sup>123</sup> Anne Leland and Mari-Jana Oboroceanu, “American War and Military Operations Casualties: Lists and Statistics,” Congressional Research Service. <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL32492.pdf> (accessed July 15, 2010).

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Schruers, “Soldiers Story,” 1987.

<sup>126</sup> Taryn Shellhammer, “Biography of Oliver Stone,” Penn State University. [http://www.pabook.libraries.psu.edu/palitmap/bios/Stone\\_Oliver.html](http://www.pabook.libraries.psu.edu/palitmap/bios/Stone_Oliver.html) (accessed July 15, 2010).

towns in Ohio...turn into these little monster killers.”<sup>127</sup> It took Stone ten years to get “his” story told, and once he did, there was still a great deal of debate over how real his version of the Vietnam War was.

Following Reagan’s 1983 win in Grenada and his more recent stand against Libya, he no longer had a need to remind Americans of the noble cause that was Vietnam. His discourse, including his 1987 State of the Union Address, turned toward a more aggressive face-off against Soviet aggression all over the world and to the pride military men and women could now take in wearing the American uniform.

After speaking of some indefinable failures in Iran, Reagan marched quickly toward the future, “But in debating the past, we must not deny ourselves the successes of the future. Let it never be said of this generation of Americans that we became so obsessed with failure that we refused to take risks that could further the cause of peace and freedom in the world.”<sup>128</sup> With this, Reagan seemingly removed himself, his administration, and the American people from the necessity to relive the Vietnam era and into a future of America again being a military power. Continuing, Reagan promised a new American policy that embraced US intervention in the Middle East and a continued presence in Central America in order to fight Soviet expansion. He spoke of the Monroe Doctrine, FDR, Truman and JFK’s fights against Communists in the Western Hemisphere as a basis for this renewed American vigor.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Schruers, “Soldiers Story,” 1987.

<sup>128</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union,” Washington, DC, January 27, 1987. [www.reagan.utexas.edu](http://www.reagan.utexas.edu) (accessed June 17, 2009).

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.



*Rolling Stone*, in November 1987 interviewed both Jane Fonda and Tom Hayden about the Vietnam era and their time in it. Fonda was a well known actress and anti-war activist who had traveled to North Vietnam during the war to speak out against American involvement. Hayden, to whom Fonda had been married, was a founding member of the radical Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) that worked against the war and American power structure in the mid to late 1960s.

Fonda spoke of “they” while covering her time in Vietnam and was asked to explain who “they” were. Her reply was simple – there was a campaign to discredit those who were against the war, including articles that were planted in the paper against her specifically.<sup>130</sup> She went further, insisting that the American government had attempted to try her for treason for calling on the troops to desert, which she denied by explaining that she knew military law well enough to never have done such a thing. Fonda insisted that all she did on her broadcasts was to say “I am an American and this is what I am seeing.”<sup>131</sup>

Fonda argued, as many before and after her, that there was no question that the protestors definitely shortened, and perhaps even ended the war, saving innumerable lives. When she was asked why she decided to make the movie *Coming Home* in 1978, she pointed to a rally where she met Ron Kovic and heard his experiences in the VA hospitals. Fonda then explained her belief that films can have an impact due to their ability to heighten people’s awareness and get them to think a little differently.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> David Scheff, “Jane Fonda and Tom Hayden: Interview,” *Rolling Stone*, Nov 1987.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

The problem with this new awareness is whether or not it is based on truth, or a revisionist version of something that never was. As Hayden pointed out, “The Sixties have been reduced to an image, a graphic. The Sixties graphic is sound and fury signifying nothing.”<sup>133</sup> This graphic, however, is exactly what can be used to create a “memory” of an event, or era such as Vietnam, that first crowds out the truth, and then finally supplants it.

This memory creation becomes a problem as Reagan’s second term entered its final years and the Vietnam vets got a bigger voice in mainstream media, as they had in *Platoon*. While the veterans feel their voice was their own, the passage of time – fourteen years since America pulled out of Vietnam and twelve since the Fall of Saigon – had put many other’s experiences in front of them in the form of films, television, and magazine articles. Was it not possible that over these many years the veteran’s memories accumulated not only the memories of others, but also the half-truths and myths that may have been passed along?

The 1988 movie, *1969*, is a prime example of the myths and stereotypes of the Vietnam era that had arisen in the 1980s. The movie stars Robert Downey, Jr. and Kiefer Sutherland as smalltown friends Scott and Ralph. The two boys are portrayed as typical young college kids living in 1969, trying to find their way in the world while staying out of the war. After having been at college for two years, the boys return to their hometown in order to see Scott’s brother off as he leaves for Vietnam. The brother has bought into

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

the family military tradition by enlisting in the marines, as Scott, the hippie free-thinker, retorts “it’s not my war and I don’t care about it. It’s bullshit.”<sup>134</sup>

Scott and Ralph return to a campus that is now almost over run by hippies and other anti-war protestors. As Ralph gives up schoolwork, Scott reminds him it is college or war. Their mothers visit just as a peaceful protest breaks into an attack by the police. This attack leads Scott to declare “we’re in a Revolution, man.”<sup>135</sup> Soon the boys head on the road for the summer of drugs and free love. Upon their return to their hometown, they break into the Selective Service building in order to look into their draft status. Ralph is caught by the sheriff who knows Scott was also involved, but his son has recently returned from Vietnam and “will never be the same,” so Scott is allowed to go free.

Scott’s response is to run north to the Canadian border in order to evade the draft. Along the way, in his hippie van, he passes a convoy of soldiers on their way to Vietnam. At first, the soldiers throw Scott the finger, but as he passes more trucks they slowly begin to give him the peace sign. As he argues with his girlfriend about whether to keep running, Scott says “you know you’re not gonna’ get drafted and die for something nobody believes in.”<sup>136</sup>

Back at home Scott’s brother is the first local boy to die in the Vietnam War. At the funeral Scott speaks up, using WWII as a counterpoint, “It’s everybody’s war. . .my father has the medals in his closet to prove he fought in a good war and I’m proud of my

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<sup>134</sup> Ernest Thompson, *1969*, 1988.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

father. . .but I don't believe this is a good war."<sup>137</sup> As he walks to the jail to free his friend, Scott is joined by the entire town in a peaceable assembly against the war.

This movie, starring two up and coming new stars, was an obvious attempt to show the views of the Left as they pertained to the era. It was not a movie about the war, but rather, the homefront and the battles faced by the youth of the 1960s. The problem is the imagery of the hippies in contrast to the soldiers who either chose or were chosen to go to war. The police "attacked" a peaceable assembly and clubbed young people who were doing nothing but exercising their rights and the boys lived in a world in which no one had control of their lives except to flee the country. Interestingly, the movie was released just as the children born of those that lived through the Vietnam era were beginning to have to worry about things such as war and drafts.

In April 1988, with eight months until the next presidential election, William Grieder surveyed people aged 18-44 about the Vietnam War, whether they would fight, and why not.<sup>138</sup> He found that only 16% thought the US was right to fight the war in Vietnam, but that they were much more divided on what went wrong. Of the four factors they thought best explained why the US lost the war in Vietnam, 36% said the US failed to make a great enough military effort, while 20% cited the anti-war movement and overall lack of support in the US for the loss.

As the 1988 election drew near, it seemed that Reagan's eight year dialogue against the protestors and their lack of support, as well as his argument that those in charge had had not followed through and done enough to win, had finally come to

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> William Grieder, "Hell No, We Won't Go," *Rolling Stone*, April 1988.

fruition. These newly cemented beliefs about the Vietnam era would greatly help the new president, George H.W. Bush in his call for war in the Middle East.

## CHAPTER III

### SUPPORT THE TROOPS

In 1988, George H.W. Bush took over an America that was moving farther from Vietnam every day, but the nation was still not able to get past it completely. Even after eight years of conservative rule under Reagan and US military interventions in the Americas, as well as the bombing of Libya, the American public was not ready or willing to commit to a long term conflict. Bush and the Republicans needed one final military operation to put the era behind them forever. Soon, his family and political background, along with his time as VP under Reagan, coalesced with a need to defend the Middle East from Saddam Hussein. It would become America's time to show their strong hand to the world and for Bush to kick the Vietnam Syndrome that his predecessor never could.

George H.W. Bush<sup>139</sup> had a life very different than that of predecessor, Ronald Reagan. Unlike Reagan, Bush was a child of privilege, with a family lineage on his father's side that could be traced to Henry III of England.<sup>140</sup> His parents, Prescott Bush and Dorothy Walker, married in 1921, with George joining the family June 12, 1924 in

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<sup>139</sup> From this point forward, George H.W. Bush will be referred to as either Bush or George Bush.

<sup>140</sup> John Robert Greene, *The Presidency of George Bush*, (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 2000), 11.

Milton, Massachusetts. Bush grew up adept at sports and entered Andover with the intention of finishing at Yale like his father, but WWII changed his plans.

Pearl Harbor caused Bush to join the navy upon his eighteenth birthday in 1942. Unlike Reagan, Bush saw combat, becoming the youngest commissioned pilot in the navy within a year of enlistment. In September 1944, his bomber took a hit and he was forced to bail out, soon rejoining his squadron in the Philippines. Bush was officially discharged in September 18, 1945, having flown fifty-eight missions, logging 1,228 hours of flying time, making 126 carrier landings, and earning the Distinguished Flying Cross.<sup>141</sup>

Bush married Barbara Pierce on January 6, 1945 while he was on leave, and upon his return to civilian life he enrolled at Yale. He even followed his father into the Skull and Crossbones society while there, and he graduated with a B.A. in Economics in 1948. After graduation Bush refused to join the family business and set out on his own without much luck. His father, Prescott Bush, had a friend in Texas that soon offered George a job as a clerk at an oil company. Bush moved his family to Odessa Texas, moved up within the company, and, like Reagan, was part of a union – the United Steel Workers Union. After a short time, Bush began his own company, the Bush-Overby Oil Development Company, followed by Zapata Petroleum, where he served as Vice President. By the end of 1953, Bush and his partners became the first Midland independents to reach a net worth of \$1 million apiece. Soon after, he opened Commercial Bank and Trust Company and moved to Houston.

While he was in Texas, his father Prescott had been elected the US Senate which helped Bush make many valuable business and political contacts during his time in

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 15.

Houston. Bush became interested in politics at the same time that Texas was becoming a two party state, and this brought opportunities to the lifelong Republican. In fact, 1961 saw Texas elect its first Republican Senator since Reconstruction, giving Bush hope for a political future. He soon got his wish when he was elected to the Chairmanship of the Harris County Republicans in 1962.

In 1964, the same year as Reagan's Goldwater speech and conversion to Republicanism, Bush ran for the US Senate. Although he won a run-off election, he ultimately lost when Lyndon Baines Johnson became involved in the race.<sup>142</sup> During the campaign, however, there is a glimpse of Bush's feelings on Vietnam, when he called the Democrat policy "soft."<sup>143</sup> After a redistricting in 1966, Bush ran for Congress and won, gaining a seat on the Ways and Means Committee. He won again in 1968, but in 1970 tried again for a Senate seat and lost. Although he would serve Richard Nixon and other presidents after this loss, Bush would essentially be out of electoral politics for eight years.

In 1970, Bush was named Ambassador to the UN by Nixon, and came out of a difficult Senate confirmation with the job. Next, in 1972, he was asked to replace Bob Dole as the head of the Republican National Committee, which he took over in 1973, just in time to defend Nixon over Watergate. After Nixon's resignation, Gerald Ford needed a Vice President and Bush was in the running. Instead, Bush was sent to China as Ambassador. By 1975, Ford was having problems in the CIA and asked Bush to return to the states and become the director. Only a year after becoming Director of the CIA, Ford

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<sup>142</sup> President Johnson, a Texas Democrat, was concerned that both Senators from Texas would be from the Republican Party and so become personally involved in the race.

<sup>143</sup> Tom Wicker, *George Herbert Walker Bush*, (New York: The Penguin Group, 2004), 17.



lost to Jimmy Carter in the presidential election and Bush was released from service. He reentered the corporate world for the first time since 1966 with an eye on the 1980 Republican nomination.

Bush announced his official candidacy in May 1979 and, as the only moderate republican, he began the contest with a lead in the polls that helped him win Iowa against Reagan. Unfortunately, bad publicity turned the tide against Bush and he conceded one year later, in May 1980, with the hope that Reagan would ask him to run as his vice-president. After flirting with the idea of having Ford as his running mate, events turned in Bush's favor and he soon received the call from Reagan he had hoped for.<sup>144</sup>

While VP under Reagan, Bush moved from his more moderate stance to the conservative republicanism of Reagan in order to prepare for a future run at the presidency and keep Reagan's backers.<sup>145</sup> The Reagan-Bush ticket won again in 1984, and after serving Reagan faithfully for two terms, Bush announced his run for the Republican nomination in 1988 in October 1987. He eventually beat out Dole, Jack Kemp, and Pat Robertson for the nomination, only to then find himself behind Michael Dukakis, the democratic nominee, in the polls. As the campaign wore on, Bush began to pull closer in the polls, and, on November 8, 1988, Bush won forty states with 426 electoral votes versus Dukakis' ten states and 112 electoral votes.

While in his inaugural address on January 20, 1989, Bush spoke of America's desire to engage in high moral principle and a kinder, gentler nation, he also called up the specter of Vietnam and how it had affected the country:

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 64.

For Congress, too, has changed in our time. There has grown a certain divisiveness. We have seen the hard looks and heard the statements in which not each other's ideas are challenged but each other's motives. And our great parties have too often been far apart and untrusting of each other. It's been this way since Vietnam. That war cleaves us still. But, friends, that was began in earnest a quarter of a century ago and surely the statute of limitations has been reached. This is a fact: The final lesson of Vietnam is that no great nation can long afford to be sundered by a memory.<sup>146</sup>

Bush's push to move forward was not only confined to a domestic agenda. He also spoke to the world of a renewed vow that America would "stay strong to protect the peace."<sup>147</sup> It was with these words that George H.W. Bush began his term as president. He was soon forced to show America's strong hand while moving away from the Vietnam syndrome even Reagan could not quite kick.

George Bush's problems began with Manuel Noriega, the President of Panama, in May 1989. Noriega had been working with the US in some fashion since at least John F. Kennedy's administration, even as recently as the 1980s in the transfer of arms to the contras. He was involved in many things, including drug trafficking and money laundering, as well as taking official control of the Panamanian government in 1983.

In 1989 Noriega, in a show of power, called for presidential elections but he soon realized he would not be elected. He therefore nullified the results. Bush asked Noriega to respect the will of his people and let the elections stand. Instead, Noriega had his men attack the vice president of the winning party, and this attack was seen on television throughout the world. Bush reacted by sending 2,000 troops to the Canal Zone for maneuvers, and he asked for American military leaders to develop a plan to oust Noriega.

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<sup>146</sup> George H.W. Bush, "Inaugural Address," Washington, DC, January 20, 1989. [www.bushlibrary.tamu.edu](http://www.bushlibrary.tamu.edu) (accessed August 14, 2009).

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

By the end of May, there were almost 4,000 American troops in Panama awaiting orders.<sup>148</sup>

By July, Bush signed a proclamation for a National POW/MIA Day to be held in September.<sup>149</sup> This was the first time the National League of Families POW flag had been placed on permanent display at the Capitol. Bush explained to the families of the POWs that the flag “would not come down until the fullest possible accounting of your missing loved ones” was made.<sup>150</sup> He spoke of Vietnam and the loss of some of America’s finest young men and women, but, more importantly, of the division in America due to the war. He argued that the divisions were healing, and that the American people had let go of the bitterness of the past. His fear, however, was that the healing was also leading to forgetting of those that had served. Bush renewed Reagan’s pledge that “we would write no last chapters, we would close no books, we would put away no final memories until your questions about missing and possible prisoners of war have been answered.”<sup>151</sup>

It seems interesting that Bush would say that the divisions were healing and people were moving on, only to say in the same breath that the American people should not walk away from the Vietnam War until all the POWs were accounted for. For an era that saw so much contention, so much division and hatred, it seems that the healing that seemed to be occurring fifteen short years after the Fall of Saigon would be a positive

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<sup>148</sup> Greene, *George Bush*, 100-104.

<sup>149</sup> From this point on, POW/MIA will simply be referred to as POW.

<sup>150</sup> George H.W. Bush, “Remarks on Signing the National POW/MIA Recognition Day Proclamation,” Washington, DC, July 28. 1989. [www.bushlibrary.tamu.edu](http://www.bushlibrary.tamu.edu) (accessed August 14, 2009).

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

thing for the country and administration. Was the focus on the POWs just a way for Bush to keep Americans from paying attention to the growing tension in Panama and the amount of US ground forces that were slowly trickling into the area?

On November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall fell. During Reagan's second term the US had established closer ties with the Soviets through their new leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, who was made general secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in 1985. Bush and Gorbachev had met many times since 1985 and Bush believed the Russian leader to be a man of his word.<sup>152</sup>

Gorbachev was a Communist, but he understood that he needed to break with tradition in order to save the Soviet Union. The first items on his agenda were to institute *glasnost*, *perestroika*, and other difficult measures.<sup>153</sup> The war in Afghanistan was a drain on the Soviet economy and, in February 1989, Gorbachev had withdrawn Soviet forces and followed up by telling Soviet satellite countries to act "in their way."<sup>154</sup> The satellite countries soon followed this advice and began to elect non-Communist leaders. As travel restrictions were lifted for Hungary, East Germans began to flow over the border and into West Germany. Then, on November 9, the East German government lifted all travel restrictions at midnight, which German's on both sides believed meant the

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<sup>152</sup> Wicker, *George H.W. Bush*, 123.

<sup>153</sup> Glasnost was a Soviet policy that permitted open discussion of political and social issues, as well as the freeing up of news and information. Perestroika was a policy of economic and governmental reform.

<sup>154</sup> Wicker, *George H.W. Bush*, 135.

Berlin Wall would open. Crowds gathered on both sides of the wall in celebration while the East German military stood down.<sup>155</sup>

As Bush divided his time dealing with the after-effects of Tiananmen Square in China and the ramifications of the fall of the Berlin Wall in Germany, events in Panama were coming to a head. There had already been a failed US backed coup in October. Then in early December, Noriega, not only declared himself Chief of Government and “maximum leader,” but also declared war on the US.<sup>156</sup> The final straw for Bush came when two American soldiers were killed and another two were tortured in Panama City during a night on the town. On December 20, 1989, Bush used America’s strong hand to show Noriega, and the world, that the Vietnam syndrome that had so dogged America was in the past and military strength and power was once again in its grasp.<sup>157</sup>

Operation Just Cause, the largest military operation since the Vietnam War, sent 14,000 troops to join the 13,000 that had been building up in the Canal Zone since May. The US military installed Guillermo Endara as Panama’s new president just after midnight, soon followed by paratroopers hitting the ground in Panama City. Shortly after 2:00 am, Noriega’s headquarters were on fire and by 9:00 am, the operation ended, with twenty-three American dead and 394 wounded.<sup>158</sup> In early January Noriega was captured and sent to the US to stand trial.

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>158</sup> Greene, *George Bush*, 105.

Much like during the Vietnam War, many countries in the world rallied against the US for the intervention, while others condemned the sheer size of the operation.<sup>159</sup> Bush's concern, however was to show the world that once again the US was, fifteen years after the Fall of Saigon, willing to send its boys to fight for a just cause anywhere in the world. He would get the chance to prove the US was ready and willing once and for all much sooner than anyone had anticipated.

Interestingly, the release of a new movie on the Vietnam era coincided almost exactly with the military operation in Panama. *Born on the Fourth of July*, starring Tom Cruise as Vietnam War veteran Ron Kovic, was released December 22, 1989 and widened to 1,300 screens in January 1990. Kovic's book, the story of his life, had been published in 1976 and soon found itself stuck in production limbo in Hollywood until Oliver Stone, after the success of *Platoon*, was able to obtain financial backing.

The story begins with Kovic's days living an idealized 1950s life and evolves into a story of what happened to a man who enlisted in America's military to protect the "American Way." It is not a movie about the war. Instead it is about the American home front, how the country responded to returning veterans, and the effect this response had on the veterans themselves. Themes in the movie reflect, many of the "beliefs" Americans already had about the era.

Kovic, who volunteered, is in-country by 1967 and becomes involved in a firefight in which he kills one of his own. Then, in 1968, after he is shot repeatedly, he is sent to a field hospital. Kovic eventually returns to the US only to be stuck in a veteran's hospital in the Bronx that is almost as nightmarish as his time in Vietnam. While at the hospital, Kovic watches on television, as did people all across America, the riots at the

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<sup>159</sup> Wicker, *George H.W. Bush*, 144.

Democratic National Convention. He becomes angry at the hippies burning the American flag.<sup>160</sup> At this time, Kovic, even given his war experience and disability is still a “patriotic” American.

By 1969 Kovic is confined to a wheelchair and he returns home only to argue with an old friend about the war. He argues against his friend’s assertions that the US is losing and that the war is for nothing. Kovic puts on his dress uniform to attend a Fourth of July picnic, where hippies throw him the finger and others make him feel like an outsider. The events of the picnic show a Vietnam veteran, still proud of his service, being antagonized and berated for what he saw as a duty to his country.

As he tries to get his life back together Kovic visits an ex-girlfriend on a college campus that is almost overrun with anti-war activity. He attends his first anti-war protest as an observer. The next day Kovic watches as an angry black veteran throws away his medals. The end of the protest has the police tear gassing and clubbing helpless students. This image, which did occur on some campuses during the late 1960s, was not indicative of all or even the majority of collegiate anti-war protests, yet it has become a defining “truth” of the brutality of the Vietnam era thanks to movies and television.

Kovic begins to argue with his family, saying that he sacrificed himself for nothing and blaming his parents for the lies that led him to enlist. His father tells him to leave. It is now 1970, a mere three years after Kovic’s firefight in which he killed a fellow soldier, and he is in Mexico surrounded by other paralyzed vets, drugs, alcohol, and prostitutes.<sup>161</sup> Kovic is living the life of a crazed vet outcast from society as the media often portrayed them in the 1970s and 1980s. Instead of delving deeper into

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<sup>160</sup> Oliver Stone, *Born on the Fourth of July*, 1989.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

despair, he decides to take his life back by heading to the states and meeting with the family of the soldier he had killed.

At the Republican National Convention in 1972, Kovic is protesting the war while also declaring that he loves his country. He is displaying the flag of the Vietnam Vets against the War and is spit upon by convention delegates. In this instance, the spit is not from a hippie to a vet, but instead from a patriotic American that is attending the convention. Although spit is still involved, this is a change from the fabled story of a veteran returning from the war only to be spit upon in the airport by a hippie. Again, the protest ends in teargas and rioting. Once the war officially ends, Kovic is a happy, productive member of society again and speaking at the 1976 Democratic National Convention.

*Born on the Fourth of July* contains many themes that have been covered in almost every movie about the Vietnam era since 1978's *Coming Home*. Unrest on campus, protests escalating into riots where helpless people are attacked by police, vets turning to drugs and alcohol to soothe their war related problems, and even vets being spat upon. These themes had become so common that by 1990, it was impossible to separate them from the reality of the era and they had become concrete.

In the minds of Americans in 1990, fifteen years of media coverage of the era since the Fall of Saigon had turned every protest violent, every protestor into a hippie that turned against the veterans and the country, and every vet into an incomplete member of society that had been forced to turn to drugs and alcohol in order to overcome the horrors they faced, not only in the war, but also upon their return home. One new ingredient did emerge from Kovic's tale, however – his contention that being against the war was not



synonymous with being against the troops. This idea will not last long however, as the Bush administration will use American “remembrances” of the Vietnam era protests and veteran homecomings to gather support in the coming Gulf War.

In his January 1990 State of the Union Address, Bush spoke of the worldwide changes that had occurred since he had taken office only a year prior. He talked of the democracy that had been restored to Panama, the newly acquired freedom in Czechoslovakia and Poland, and the fall of the Berlin Wall.<sup>162</sup> He reiterated his stand on freedom for all and hope for America’s future. In a vein similar to that of his Inaugural Address of 1989, he talked of conflict in the world and how the “cause of peace must be served by an America strong enough and sure enough to defend our interests and ideals.”<sup>163</sup> In the end, Bush asked grandparents to speak of the struggles they waged at home and abroad and the sacrifices they freely made for freedom’s sake. This gesture was a seemingly ominous sign for what lay ahead.

Although Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) had begun to emerge as a medical diagnosis in the early 1980s, in 1990 Senator Alan Cranston, Chairman of Senate Veteran’s Affairs described what he believed to be the origins on PTSD, “Certainly unrest at home played a part. Whereas veteran’s from other wars returned to heroes welcomes and were allowed, if not encouraged, to discuss their war experiences, Vietnam Veterans received no such welcome and little encouragement and understanding.”<sup>164</sup> It was now politically incorrect to lay the blame on the veteran’s problems on themselves or

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<sup>162</sup> George H.W. Bush, “Address before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of Union,” Washington, DC, January 31, 1990. [www.bushlibrary.tamu.edu](http://www.bushlibrary.tamu.edu) (accessed August 21, 2009).

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Turner, *Echoes of Combat*, 69.

their war experiences. If, as Reagan said in 1980, the Vietnam War was just, then the veterans had done nothing wrong and so deserved respect and admiration from the American people. Also, if, as Cranston pointed out, the unrest at home psychologically damaged the veterans, then the blame for their condition lay at the feet of the American people. The concept that the American people were responsible for the victimization of the Vietnam veterans was later brought to fruition through the intertwining of the POW/MIA and Yellow Ribbon campaigns, led by the Bush administration in order to gain support for Desert Storm.

The fifteenth anniversary of the Fall of Saigon, in 1990, brought the era back into the forefront of the minds of the American people. In April, *TIME* published “Vietnam, 15 Year Later,” covering not only the era itself, but also the current situation of the American government’s inability to establish diplomatic relations with Vietnam. The author, Paul Witteman, argued that the US had still not extracted itself from Vietnam, using popular movies such as *Platoon*, the television show *China Beach*, and the soon to be Broadway show *Miss Saigon* as examples.<sup>165</sup> He pointed to the 3,600 members of the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia’s belief that US service members were still hidden away in Vietnam as proof that America was still not ready to let go of the war. In fact, a TIME/CNN poll showed that 62% of Americans and 84% of Vietnam veterans still believed there were POWs in Vietnam.<sup>166</sup> These high percentages would play into the Bush administrations favor when, in August,

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<sup>165</sup> Paul A. Witteman, “Vietnam 15 Years Later,” *TIME*, April 30, 1990.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

he had a situation on his hands that would require the full support of the American people – the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq, led by Saddam Hussein.

Bush and the US had a long history with Saddam Hussein, as the US under Reagan had supported Iraq in their ten year war against Iran and the Soviets. The US supplied Hussein with intelligence, trade credits, and arms – some supplied directly while others flowed through allied countries.<sup>167</sup> A cease-fire was signed August 1988, and although the war had ended, Iraq's problems did not. The country owed a total of \$80 billion, mostly to its neighbors Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Hussein asked both countries for debt forgiveness, which they declined, and lingering resentments grew worse.

Two years later, in August 1990, Iraq amassed thousands of troops on its border with Kuwait. The invasion came on August 2, 1990 as the Iraqi's streamed over the border into Kuwait. Fears that Saudi Arabia would be next led Bush to call world leaders in order to obtain pledges of military and monetary support for the defense of the Middle Eastern country. Bush called for US troop deployment to Saudi Arabia on August 6. The first troops left South Carolina for Saudi Arabia on August 7, 1990 to take part in Operation Desert Shield.<sup>168</sup>

The first of Bush's Presidential News Conferences on the Persian Gulf Crisis began on August 8, 1990. At this conference, there was with no mention of Vietnam. Questions did arise, however, about whether or not the US was at war and how long the US troops would be deployed in the region. Bush's reply was that the commitment was definitely not open-ended. He also made it clear that the troops were only there to defend

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<sup>167</sup> Wicker, *George H.W. Bush*, 146.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

Saudi Arabia, not for war.<sup>169</sup> Later in the conference, Bush was asked if he will rule out a preemptive strike on Iraq. Much like Reagan's criticism of LBJ's propensity to tell the North Vietnamese what the US would "not" do, Bush refused to go in to hypothetical situations.

As time passed, it became clear that Hussein would not be withdrawing his forces from Kuwait and might possibly attempt to take more territory in the region. On August 22, 1990, Bush authorized the Secretary of Defense to call up the Reserve units of the Armed Forces.<sup>170</sup> The Reserve call up included a statement that the total number of Reserves that would be called up was unknown but that they were not expected to exceed the 200,000 allowed by law. The US commitment in the Middle East was now looking more like a buildup to war and the American people were taking notice.

Speaking to representatives of Veteran Organizations in October, Bush argued that the events in the Middle East since August had shown the need for a strong America, but even more so, they showed how much the support at home meant to the men and women in the Gulf. Furthermore, he explained how Colin Powell had just returned from a visit to the region and told Bush that the support was evident in the "pride and high morale found today in the young American heroes serving overseas."<sup>171</sup> This was a marked change from the Vietnam era. Even before seeing combat, the men and women

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<sup>169</sup> George H.W. Bush, "Presidential News Conference," Washington, DC, August 8, 1990. [www.bushlibrary.tamu.edu](http://www.bushlibrary.tamu.edu) (accessed August 23, 2009).

<sup>170</sup> George H.W. Bush, "Statement by Press Secretary Fitzwater on the Mobilization of United States Reserves," Washington, DC, August 22, 1990. [www.bushlibrary.tamu.edu](http://www.bushlibrary.tamu.edu) (accessed August 23, 2009).

<sup>171</sup> George H.W. Bush, "Remarks at White House briefing for Representatives of Veterans Organizations," Washington, DC, October 11, 1990. [www.bushlibrary.tamu.edu](http://www.bushlibrary.tamu.edu) (accessed September 2, 2009).

of the US Armed Forces were being called heroes simply for serving. They were not just brave for answering the call of their country; they were heroes.

Here it was, a mere ten weeks since the American soldiers were sent to set up a defensive border between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and the entire country was said to taking be part in honoring the troops:

Tonight, as evening falls across America, there will be candles in our windows and prayers in our hearts. The Empire State Building will be awash in lights – red, white and blue – lights to honor the men and women in uniform now standing watch in the Persian Gulf. And like your presence here today...these gestures show the folks at home have not forgotten the sacrifice of our soldiers and our sailors and our airmen and our marines...many on duty tonight many miles from home.<sup>172</sup>

By November, the American people, still leery of long conflicts after Vietnam, were becoming increasingly concerned that the Persian Gulf Crisis was looking more like war and wondering how long the troops would be committed. The constant media speculation that Bush was moving closer to war as it became clear that the UN sanctions were not having the desired effect did nothing to calm the fears. It was at this time that protestors began to get louder about their opposition to a war for oil and that college campuses began to see a small anti-war movement take hold. By the end of the month the cries of “no war for oil,” and the fear of another Vietnam by draft age Americans (the children of those who had gone to Vietnam) had garnered ample media attention.<sup>173</sup> Bush was forced to counter with another news conference, the first dealing with the Gulf to use the word Vietnam.

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Greene, *George Bush*, 123.

In order to distance the Gulf from Vietnam, Bush pointed again to the reasons for the action against Iraq and the twenty-six member coalition that the administration had put together. He also made it clear that the UN Security Council fully backed the buildup by going so far as to pass twelve resolutions against Iraq.<sup>174</sup> He answered American fears of another Vietnam by assuring the population that “if” military action was needed, it would not be a protracted, drawn-out war. His reasoning was based on the difference between the countries, their leaders, the military, and again the backing of the UN. Bush made sure to add “and the motivation of our all-volunteer force is superb” in order to separate his war from the draft that so divided the nation during the Vietnam War. Again sounding much like Reagan when he spoke of the government not allowing the soldiers to win, Bush promised no murky-ending and no halfway effort.<sup>175</sup>

Although the Bush administration had been vetting the Yellow Ribbon campaign soon after troops were sent overseas, it began to gain momentum once the American people and the media started to have more questions about what was happening. The administration needed something for the American people to rally behind to support the troops. It decided to characterize the POW/MIA campaign, which was highly popular, and the Yellow Ribbon, as support for the troops.

Although the history of the ribbon can be traced to at least the 1950s, by the 1990s, the Yellow Ribbon was a familiar symbol to most Americans as it was used in 1979 to show support for the American hostages being held in Iran. What began in 1959 as a white ribbon to show support for a released convict returning to his hometown, in

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<sup>174</sup> George H.W. Bush, “Presidential News Conference,” Orlando, FL, November 30, 1990. [www.bushlibrary.tamu.edu](http://www.bushlibrary.tamu.edu) (accessed September 2, 2009).

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

*Star Wormwood*, had morphed into a yellow handkerchief in print and on television by the early 1970s.<sup>176</sup> The hit song “Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Old Oak Tree” was released in 1973 and sold three million copies in three weeks. Then, in 1975, Gail Magruder, wife of an imprisoned Watergate insider, covered her front porch with yellow ribbons to welcome her husband home.<sup>177</sup>

It was not until December 1979 that the yellow ribbon went from a symbol for the homecoming of a convict to that of the return of a loved one from wherever they might be. The *Washington Post* ran a story on Penne Laingen, the wife of an American held in Iran, who had tied a yellow ribbon around her oak tree. As a suggestion to others to do the same, she concluded “one of these days Bruce is going to untie that ribbon. It’s going to be out there til he does.”<sup>178</sup> At this time, the Family Liaison Action Group (FLAG) ran with the idea of the yellow ribbon as a symbol of American moral force during the Iranian hostage crisis and distributed 10,000 yellow ribbon pins across America.<sup>179</sup> It was this final iteration of the ribbon that the Bush administration combined with concern with the POWs and latched onto in order to push their agenda to get Americans to “support the troops.”

This was not the first time an administration had attempted to quell the protests by invoking the POWs. Nixon, in 1969, launched a publicity drive called Go Public in an attempt to rally the American public behind the belief that the North Vietnamese were

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<sup>176</sup> Gerald E. Parsons, “How the Yellow Ribbon Became a National Folk Symbol,” *Folklife Center News*, Summer, 1991.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*

mistreating POWs. Over the next few years the Nixon administration worked hard to convince the American people that the war in Vietnam was justified because they were now primarily at war to rescue troops left in the hands of the enemy.<sup>180</sup> Once the Vietnam War ended the POW/MIA movement received little attention until the early 1980s with Reagan's "noble crusade."

It was also Nixon who helped make the American people suspicious of the motives of the Vietnam era anti-war protestors and their loyalty to America. Then during the late 1970s, as illustrated in movies like *Coming Home*, Americans slowly began to transplant the blame for veteran's problems from the war to the protestors and their treatment of the vets once they returned to the states. The 1980s took this message and ran with it until, by the end of the decade, it had been seen time and time again until it had become commonplace.

In fact, 1987 had two films, *The Hanoi Hilton* and *Hamburger Hill*, that pointed specifically at the protestors as the reason for the GIs problems. *The Hanoi Hilton*, which chronicled the horrors faced by the POWs at Hao Lo Prison, used interviews with over 100 former captures and pointed directly at the anti-war protestors as the reason for their trauma and torture at the hands of the enemy.<sup>181</sup> *Hamburger Hill*, also based on a true story, has a dialogue between a Sergeant and new recruits about his reasons for serving multiple tours: long hairs threw dog shit at him and a "hairhead" had moved in with his wife and kids.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Turner, *Echoes of Combat*, 101.

<sup>181</sup> Lionel Chetwynd, *The Hanoi Hilton*, 1987.

<sup>182</sup> John Irvin, *Hamburger Hill*, 1987.



The saga of the POWs combined with the divisive nature of the Vietnam era protestors helped Bush use the POW yellow ribbon as the new symbol of support for American soldiers. This revised symbol gave Americans, who may or may not have been for the war itself, a way to show they still supported the troops in order to separate themselves from the Americans of the Vietnam era. Eventually, the campaign led to the idea that being against the war meant being against the troops and being against the troops ensured that they would suffer the same indignities of the Vietnam veterans.

The Yellow Ribbon campaign really served its purpose once Bush declared war. The Iraqis had ignored November's UN Security Council Resolution 678, which gave them until January 15, 1991 to withdraw all troops from Kuwait. Preparing for this outcome, Congress had authorized the use of force against the Iraqis on January 12. Finally, on January 16, 1991 the US launched a full scale air assault, part of Operation Desert Storm. In late February, coalition forces began to cross the border into Kuwait prepared to take down the Iraqis. With the coalition decision not to invade Iraq and oust Hussein from power, after coalition troops were within 150 miles of Baghdad, they were called back to the Kuwaiti border due to Bush's desire to not be seen as invading Iraq. Finally, on February 28, Bush declared a cease-fire and the liberation of Kuwait was complete. US troop casualties stood at 294, low for an operation that had seen troops in the Middle East for seven months.

In a radio address to the troops in the Gulf on March 3, 1991, Bush told them that soon "hometowns across America would be welcoming back the finest combat force ever

assembled.”<sup>183</sup> Furthermore, he pointed out that Americans were now more confident of their future due to the troops’ actions and that he came through with his promise that they would not be hauled into another Vietnam. To make his point Bush says, “the specter of Vietnam has been buried forever in the desert sands of the Arabian Peninsula.”<sup>184</sup>

Two days later, speaking again to the veteran’s service organizations he had met with in 1989, Bush thanked the vets for their unwavering support of the troops in the Gulf. He mentioned the Gulf POWs now on their way home and those they would not give up on. Then, fittingly, he spoke directly to the Vietnam veterans:

It is long overdue that we kicked the Vietnam Syndrome, because many veterans from that conflict came back and did not receive the proper acclaim that they deserve – that this nation was divided and we weren’t as grateful as we should be. So somehow, when these troops come home, I hope that message goes out to those that served this country in the Vietnam War that we appreciate their service as well.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> George H.W. Bush, “Radio Address to United States Armed Forces Stationed in the Persian Gulf Region,” Washington, DC, March 3, 1991. [www.bushlibrary.tamu.edu](http://www.bushlibrary.tamu.edu) (accessed September 2, 2009).

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> George H.W. Bush, “Remarks to Veterans Service Organizations,” Washington, DC, March 4, 1991. [www.bushlibrary.tamu.edu](http://www.bushlibrary.tamu.edu) (accessed September 2, 2009).

## CONCLUSION

By the end of the Vietnam Era America had lost its way both at home and abroad. The protests of the late 1960s, along with the American military loss at the hands of the North Vietnamese, sent a message to the world that America was on the decline. The veterans who returned from America's first military loss returned to a society unsure of its place in the world or how to treat the men who had served.

While this uncertainty did lead to some mistreatment of veterans, the majority of Americans greeted the veterans with ambivalence as both groups were simply attempting to return to some type of normalcy. By the end of the 1970s, as America dealt with high crime rates and an economy that was stagnating, the media began to portray the veterans as psychotic murderers bent on destroying American society. The explanation for this psychosis was usually directed at the soldier's experiences in the war. Other than the few movies containing this depiction of the veterans and the war, the era was almost completely ignored by the public.

Ronald Reagan emerged as the Republican Presidential nominee in 1979 with a call for a renewed and strengthened America, and the Vietnam Era reemerged in the American consciousness. The Conservatives used their version of the history of the era

to attack the Left by tying them to the decline of the US as both a military and economic power. In order to create a reinvigorated America, Reagan needed a scapegoat for the loss of the war and the problems of the veterans. He believed the anti-war protestors were the perfect target.

Beginning in 1980, the media and the Reagan administration operated seemingly in tandem to remake the public's perception of the Vietnam War, the anti-war protestors, and the treatment and well being of the veterans once they returned home. Films such as *Rambo. First Blood* and *Missing in Action*, helped solidify the new image of the Radical Left and the protestors being responsible for the ills of the era.

Once the American people had reason to believe the loss of the war was not the fault of the government, they began to support US military intervention around the world. Reagan built up slowly with short forays into Central America and later the bombing of Libya. The fact that these forays led to US military "wins" helped American confidence grow and the public became more comfortable with their young men being sent off to war once again.

George H.W. Bush took the presidency after Reagan and kept the Vietnam Era in the forefront of American politics while the media continued to cover the war. After eight years of work by Reagan getting the American public comfortable with military intervention, in 1989 Bush was able to invade Panama in the largest US military buildup since the Vietnam War. The US came out of this operation with a quick and decisive victory.

In 1990, the fifteen year anniversary of the Fall of Saigon, the Bush administration had continued to keep the Vietnam Era in the spotlight with the call to find

all the POWs believed to be still kept in Southeast Asia. The administration merged the campaign with a call to support the troops – unlike the 1960s leftist protestors had done. Ten years of Republican rule and the help of the media had succeeded in turning every protestor into a traitor in the minds of the American public.

This newly entrenched hatred of the anti-war protestors and what they had done to the veterans soon helped the Bush administration mobilize for war in the Middle East. Through the Yellow Ribbon campaign, the administration succeeded in convincing the public that although you might not agree with the war, you could never be against the troops or they would suffer the same indignities of the Vietnam vets. After the defeat of Saddam Hussein, America showed her renewed military supremacy along with a willingness to once again intervene with a strong hand in world affairs. Finally, sixteen years after the war, America had finally defeated the dreaded “Vietnam Syndrome.”

The legacy of the 1980s is a national collective memory that still includes mistreated veterans that were spat upon and unable to return to a normal life due to their betrayal by the American people. The media that helped spur this change still perpetuates these myths in films, television, and articles covering the era. Due to this, Americans, even when they disagree with military intervention, still refuse to speak out in large numbers or protest in the numbers seen in the late 1960s. Even now, in 2010, with the war in Afghanistan eclipsing the Vietnam War as America’s longest, the cries to bring the troops home are still muted by American fears of mistreating another generation of veterans.

## APPENDIX

### VEITNAM MOVIES DOMESTIC BOX OFFICE RECEIPTS (US DOLLARS)

<i>Rambo: First Blood Part II</i>	\$150,415,432
<i>Platoon</i>	\$137,963,328
<i>Born on the Fourth of July</i>	\$70,001,698
<i>Rambo: First Blood</i>	\$47,212,904
<i>Missing In Action</i>	\$22,812,500
<i>Hamburger Hill</i>	\$13,839,404
<i>Missing in Action II: The Beginning</i>	\$10,800,000
<i>1969</i>	\$5,979,011
<i>Uncommon Valor</i>	\$3,144,367
<i>The Hanoi Hilton</i>	\$760,000

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