From Metaphor to Quagmire

The Domestic Legacy of the Vietnam War

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Two moments sum up the indirect and convoluted nature of my relationship to Vietnam. The first took place at Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, in the spring of 1970. As college campuses around the nation exploded in reaction to the "incursion" into Cambodia, we staged our own protest at this elite prep school. Inspired by the student activism that older siblings reported from Ivy League campuses, we challenged the establishment ourselves: we ripped off the ties that were required attire at the time. Then, on the steps of the administration building, we burned them! This experience opened my eyes to politics at the same time that it connected me to a web of friendships with other students who shared an emerging worldview. That vision consisted of much more than war-stimulated protest, but protest was the price of admission. Unlike the civil rights protesters who had earlier risked public censure, their jobs, and in some cases their lives for a cause, we risked very little in burning our ties or, later, in college, chanting "Off the pigs."

The second moment occurred fifteen years later in the library of the Johns Hopkins University. I had come to my dissertation topic—on the challenge to the authority of experts in the 1970s—in part through studying an extensive literature that cited Vietnam (and Watergate) as the reason. Like many fourth-year graduate students, I despaired of ever saying

anything new on my subject. After a bit of archival research, it occurred to me that the reasons for this challenge to authority lay deeper in the social structure and in the way that expertise had been produced and nurtured in the post–World War II state. I ended up writing a dissertation and book that argued against the prevailing literature, the sine qua non of a successful academic career. Once again, my indirect contact with a war that caused so much damage to so many individuals and the nation as a whole had redounded to my benefit.

For millions of Americans, Vietnam had direct and tragic consequences. As others lost friends to the war, I made them. It is even likely that I was spared direct contact with the horror of Vietnam because I rose from the lower middle to upper middle class on the tide of a war-induced inflationary economy that particularly favored my father's jewelry business. This is not to say that my inverse relationship to the tragedy of the war was unique. Like many others who shared my race (white) and eventual economic status, the crucial variable was the degree of direct contact with Vietnam the place. For those who were there, likely to be there, or had many friends there, tragedy was unavoidable. Those for whom Vietnam was a topic, a cause, and (as I discuss below) eventually a metaphor recognized this tragedy but were less likely to be its direct victim.

It's 1991. Walter Sobcek, a gun-toting vet whose favorite expression is "Am I wrong?" has just returned the ashes of his bowling buddy Donny to the Pacific. Like most of Walter's gestures, it doesn't quite work out as planned. The coastal winds sweep up what's left of the surfer-turned-bowler and blow his ashes right into the face of Jeff Lebowski. Walter apologizes, embracing the ash-strewn Lebowski. Lebowski has come a long way. Thirty years ago, he helped write the Port Huron Statement—the embodiment of the New Left's critique of mainstream America. He's Walter's bowling partner now, and he even has a picture in his house of Nixon bowling. Exasperated, Lebowski pushes Walter away. "What the fuck does anything have to do with Vietnam?" he pleads.

This scene is the denouement of the 1998 film *The Big Lebowski.* Besides the slapstick high jinks of Walter and Lebowski, the film offers a deft commentary on what is left of the sixties. For the most part, it's a few expressions that Lebowski lives by—"far out," "man," "fucking a"—and the name he goes by: "the Dude." It's also the tenuous community created around bowling. In other words, not much. The sixties are scattered to the winds, part of the dust of history—like Donny's ashes and the tumbleweed blowing across the scrub at the opening of the film. The one exception is Walter's obsession with the Nam. Even while delivering the homespun eulogy for his buddy Donny—who certainly never set foot in Vietnam—Walter goes into a lengthy commentary on the war. It is this digression that sets off Lebowski.

Lebowski and Walter represent two extremes that have characterized our collective memory of the sixties. Lebowski's forte is forgetting. True, he experiences the occasional acid flashback. But even the flashbacks are updated: they feature Saddam Hussein in a bowling shirt, not LBJ in a gray suit. Walter, on the other hand, conflates everything into Vietnam. Taking his own lecture about the need to "draw a line" seriously, he pulls his revolver and threatens to shoot another bowler over a disputed score.

This essay places the domestic impact of the Vietnam War in historical context. Because Vietnam was such a wrenching emotional experience, because it was so visible—"the television war"—because it affected the lives of so many Americans, because the nation felt besieged by problems in its wake, and, most significantly, because even the most optimistic Americans could find little that was positive about the experience, there has been a tendency to blame much that has gone wrong in America on the Vietnam War. The legacy of Vietnam has proven to be just as unending as the conflict itself seemed. In foreign policy and military affairs, the lingering power of the "Vietnam syndrome" is well known. The effect in domestic affairs, I contend, has been equally strong, but far less well

recognized. At home, Vietnam has come to represent the decline of authority, a new level of social and political conflict, and the fragmentation of national identity. This is not to deny the more tangible legacies of Vietnam—the cost in human lives, in dollars, in political ambitions—which are enormous and well documented. The most powerful of these domestic legacies, however, is the metaphor that Vietnam has become for turmoil and decline.

That metaphor, evoking many of the strong emotions that were unleashed by the war, has obscured more than it has enlightened. While Vietnam as metaphor has been good for Hollywood and perhaps even aided the healing process, it has been bad for history. After reviewing the legacies of Vietnam and exploring the metaphor, this essay concludes by sketching some of the structural changes in American society and politics that, in conjunction with the war, are part of a more balanced historical assessment of the turbulent times we so easily associate with Vietnam. Even in a book about the legacy of Vietnam, not everything has to be about Vietnam.

The Legacies of Vietnam

The noun most often associated with Vietnam is *tragedy. Nightmare* and *quagmire* are close seconds. Among the verbs, *mired, bogged down, drawn into, trapped,* and *traumatized* are all leading candidates. No wonder most Americans sought to forget this war even before it ended. They were momentarily successful. "Self-conscious collective amnesia," to use George Herring's phrase, gripped the country in the immediate aftermath of the war. "Today Americans can regain the sense of pride that existed before Vietnam," President Gerald Ford told an audience at Tulane shortly before the fall of Saigon in 1975. "But it cannot be achieved refighting a war that is finished." In their haste to forget the war, Americans forgot also the men and women who fought it. Sensitive to the mood of the nation that they returned to, many veterans aided this attempt to avoid

thinking about the war. "We got home and went into the airport," one vet reported. "We went into the bathroom and there was uniforms scattered all over. Guys were just leaving them there. We threw ours away, put on civilian clothes and never mentioned Vietnam again."[1]

Although America tried its hardest to forget Vietnam, it could not. By the 1980s, the amnesia had subsided. Some pundits even predicted that Vietnam would "haunt us forever. It is a war everyone wanted to forget—but can't." Most veterans were not able to leave their experience behind in airport bathrooms. The living memory that they embodied and increasingly articulated punctured the silence that at first surrounded the war. So did the scholarly debate that soon broke out about the reasons for America's military failure. Hollywood had taken the plunge by the late seventies. Eventually, even network television invaded Vietnam. "It's back! Napalm, fire fights, body bags, Hueys, rice paddies, Victor Charlie, search-and-destroy, the quagmire, the living room war," the *New York Times* reported in August 1987. A common phrase used by grunts in Vietnam best sums up the conflicted attitude of Americans about the war in the decade after the fall of Saigon: "Fuck it, it don't mean nothin'." Dismissive in its intent, the phrase paradoxically evoked an act that entails procreative and intimate joining that, for the moment, embodied everything. The offspring produced by this illicit union—its legacies—seemed to grow exponentially during the 1980s.[2]

Today, the list of those legacies is formidable. The most somber and irrevocable one is death and bodily injury. Michael Hunt estimates that 1.4 million civilians and combatants died from 1965 through 1972—the period during which American troops fought. Another 300,000 men, women, and children lost their lives in the subsequent two and a half years. More than 58,000 of those who died in Vietnam were American soldiers. Deaths among South Vietnamese forces numbered 220,000. In comparison with previous wars, the average age of the American soldiers killed was extraordinarily low: 60 percent of those who died were between seventeen and twenty-one. In Vietnam 270,000 Americans were wounded, 21,000 sustaining disabilities. The war also disabled 1.4 million Vietnamese, and it created half a million Vietnamese orphans.[3]

As with all wars, there was massive dislocation. By 1972 a population of 18 million in South Vietnam supported close to 10 million refugees. With the fall of Saigon, 1 million people fled the country, many losing their lives on the open seas. Approximately 2 million Vietnamese refugees have moved to the United States.[4]

Those Americans fortunate enough to have escaped death or injury in Vietnam still faced the disruption of their lives and, for many, the searing memory of combat. In all, more than 2 million Americans went to Vietnam. Those who served were drawn from a pool of more than 26 million men of draft age over the course of America's involvement in the war. The average age of those who served was nineteen years old. As the most visible reminder of the war, veterans were sometimes spit at or demeaned in other ways. More often, they were ignored.[5]

Despite the carnage, some have argued that the most significant legacy of Vietnam was a spiritual one. Vietnam shattered the myth of American invincibility. We lost our sense of omnipotence. Characteristically, former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara presented the problem in its most understated guise. Summing up the lessons of Vietnam, he noted that "we failed to recognize that in international affairs . . . there may be problems for which there are no immediate solutions." "At times," McNamara cautioned, "we may have to live with an imperfect, untidy world." It followed that humility should replace hubris as the touchstone of American foreign policy. Stanley Hoffman stated the problem more baldly: "At the root of this tree of evils one finds an extraordinary arrogance . . . , a self intoxicating confidence in our capacity to manipulate other societies."[6]

For many, the presumption that American foreign policy was premised on a moral foundation was undermined. Paul Boyer, sum-

ming up America's experience in Vietnam, used a theological trope: "America lost its innocence and learned the meaning of sin." Did America lose in Vietnam "its right to appeal to morals?" asked Günter Grass. Whether swayed by charges of genocide or convinced that political leaders had been "derelict" in their duty, some framed the war as a crime, not merely a blunder.[7]

Innocence and omnipotence lost shattered the perception of American exceptionalism. In the wake of the war in Vietnam and the problems it exposed at home, the United States would have its hands full simply with the mundane tasks faced by every nation-state. General Maxwell Taylor summed up the chastened attitude about American exceptionalism in 1978. Noting that Americans had felt that they could "go almost any place and do almost anything" after World War II, Taylor warned that "henceforth we're going to have trouble feeding and keeping happy our own growing population just as every other nation is. This is not a time for our government to get out on limbs which are not essential." Vietnam tested America's will to reshape the world in its own image and the claim of its citizens to be a special people. In the words of George Ball, Vietnam was a "tragic defeat for America. Not in the military terms of the battlefield, but a defeat for our political authority and moral influence abroad and for our sense of mission and cohesion at home."[8]

The one lesson in foreign policy that everybody seemed to learn from Vietnam was "No more Vietnams." To many, this meant no military intervention, period. One poll taken shortly before the fall of Saigon reported that only a third of all Americans were willing to support the defense of Berlin militarily. In fact, the only country that a majority of Americans were willing to defend militarily was Canada. Skepticism about military intervention was so pervasive that it achieved the status of a syndrome—the "Vietnam syndrome."[9]

Those who sought to retain America's prerogative to intervene militarily were at pains to distinguish future military actions from

Vietnam. They distinguished these actions by the presence of three factors: clear and achievable objectives; a willingness to use sufficient force to win quickly; and popular support for the mission. Such support might be garnered if the first two criteria were met. Crucial to retaining such support, military strategists now understood, was limited access by the press. The Reagan and Bush administrations demonstrated in circumscribed fashion that military intervention was indeed possible in the wake of Vietnam, undertaking brief and relatively minor actions in Grenada and Panama. Reagan was less successful in Lebanon and Latin America, however. The greatest breakthrough came in the Persian Gulf in 1991, when George Bush proclaimed, the day after a cease-fire was declared, "By God, we've kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all." That the president would draw such a conclusion, right or wrong, about a major military engagement almost twenty years after American troops were withdrawn from Vietnam suggests just how palpable that "syndrome" was.[10]

The Vietnam War also bequeathed a powerful set of domestic legacies. The battle between the war's supporters and those who demanded immediate withdrawal divided the nation. Many analysts claim that this debate produced the greatest fissure since the Civil War. It tore at the fabric of society, created deep and lasting divisions, and shattered political unity. In his inaugural address, fifteen years after American troops had been withdrawn from Vietnam, George Bush was still concerned about these divisions, warning Americans that "the final lesson of Vietnam is that no great nation can long afford to be sundered by a memory." Remarking on the reception that Robert McNamara received while attending a conference in Hanoi in 1995, Charles Neu noted that despite the millions of casualties inflicted by the war, "McNamara encountered less hostility in Hanoi than he did traveling around his own country."[11]

The antiwar movement served as catalyst and lightning rod for the divisions that sprang from the war. Adopting some of the tech-

niques used by the civil rights movement, antiwar protesters expanded the boundaries of pluralist participation. That the object of their concern was foreign policy dramatized the insulated nature of decision making in this traditionally elite preserve. It exposed the gulf that lay between the executive foreign policy apparatus and democratic participation, subjecting foreign policy to the vagaries of shifts in public opinion.[12] The antiwar movement also provided a plethora of examples for the emerging New Left critique of American society, adding an edge—or "relevance," in the parlance of the times—to its criticism of foreign policy and the connective tissue of the military-industrial-university complex. That school of thought, built around the work of C. Wright Mills, William Appleman Williams, and David Noble, has influenced American scholarship from the mid-sixties to this day.[13]

Those seeking to influence foreign policy were stalking a moving target as the Vietnam War propelled the executive branch of government toward the "imperial presidency." Such expansion of power occurs with most wars; in fact, Michael Sherry has suggested that what became known as the imperial presidency should really be called the "war presidency." The war that contributed the most to this expansion, of course, was the Cold War, not the one in Vietnam. But besides the body bags that streamed back from Vietnam, two additional factors underscored the emergence of an imperial presidency. The first was Lyndon Johnson's efforts to hide the war. Because Americans at home were not asked to make the kind of sacrifices that had been expected in previous wars—rationing, price and wage controls, tax increases—and because Johnson himself insisted that this was a "limited" war, the extension of the president's unilateral ability to make war seemed less warranted than in past wars. So did the secrecy that surrounded the conflict in Vietnam.[14]

The second factor that highlighted the wartime extension of power was the burgeoning opposition to the substance of executive foreign policy. As Congress responded to the increasingly mainstream opposition to the war, it sought to reassert prerogatives traditionally usurped by presidents during wartime, making the imperial presidency itself an issue, along with the administration's pursuit of an unpopular war. Sidney Milkis points to one of the most profound implications of Vietnam's contribution to the imperial presidency. For decades, Democrats had linked their party's fortunes to programmatic reform, aided and abetted by an expanding presidency. "When this supposition was seemingly violated by the Vietnam War and subsequent developments," Milkis notes, "reformers set out to protect liberal programs from unfriendly executive administration." For liberal Democrats to lead the charge against an overly assertive executive was indeed a new development in the post–New Deal era.[15]

Had the wartime presidents been credible, the imperial presidency might well have escaped relatively unscathed. Unfortunately, they were not. Lies about America's engagement in Vietnam produced a "credibility gap" by Lyndon Johnson's second term in office. Asked in 1989 what junior high school students most needed to know about the Vietnam War, Seymour Hersh responded, "The Pentagon Papers show how Presidents Kennedy and Johnson lied to the American people and to Congress about the origins of the war. I can think of no more important lesson—that we cannot trust our leaders to send us to kill and be killed."[16] Investigative reporters such as Hersh revealed that the fabrications continued, exposing Nixon's lies to his own administration about the secret bombing of Cambodia and bringing to light the massacre at My Lai.

The distrust spread far beyond the presidency itself to virtually all agencies of the government and to institutions in general. Nor was it limited to the more radical fringe of the antiwar movement that imbibed the New Left's critique of the military-industrial-university complex. As was often the case in previous wars, veterans provided an early warning sign of what was to follow in the larger population, proving to be particularly distrustful of their government. Even the Veterans Administration acknowledged that

vets reported "greater distrust of institutions" and a "bitterness, disgust and suspicion of those in positions of authority and responsibility." The problem spread far beyond the veracity of institutions and individuals in positions of power. As James Patterson summed it up, "the war undercut the standing of political elites. Nothing did more than Vietnam to subvert the grand expectations that many Americans had developed by 1965 about the capacity of government to deal with public problems. Popular doubt and cynicism about 'the system' and the Washington Establishment lingered long after the men came home." Vietnam was blamed by scholars and the public alike for undermining the basis of public authority. This jaundiced view transcended ideological divisions: whether viewing government from the left or the right, Americans no longer trusted their public officials; their very objectives were discredited.[17]

Watergate stretched the credibility gap and trust in public institutions to the breaking point. But the scandal itself was a product of the poisoned environment created by the conflict in Vietnam and the opposition to it at home. One of the Watergate conspiracy's targets, George McGovern, blames the Vietnam War for its origins. Citing the secret bombing of Cambodia in particular, he claims that Watergate "grew out of the conspiratorial atmosphere, the credibility problems, and the manipulative character of our leaders during the war"—a position sustained by most scholars.[18]

Already buffeted by criticism from the New Left and soon to be challenged by remarkably similar critiques of public authority from the right, liberal leaders struggled to settle the war that broke out within the Democratic party over Vietnam. As E. J. Dionne has noted, liberal Democrats "got the worst of all worlds: on the one hand, they were blamed for a conflict that became 'liberalism's war. . . .' On the other hand, the Democratic Party's close association with the antiwar movement tarred it in the eyes of moderate and conservative voters as the party of military weakness, flag burning, and draft dodging." The cleavage between the "Cold War" wing of the party and the "New Left" wing, epitomized by the riot

outside the Democratic convention in 1968, was brought inside the party by McGovern's nomination in 1972. Nixon's landslide victory over McGovern left the Democratic party in a shambles. Although the party's left wing has been muted by the country's swing to the right since the election of Ronald Reagan, the ideological and cultural cleavage created by Vietnam remains a significant fault line today.[19]

As the financial cost of the war was exposed, Lyndon Johnson had to choose between his commitment to domestic reform and the war. He chose the latter. Doris Kearns captured the president's tortured reasoning: "I was bound to be crucified either way I moved," Johnson told Kearns in 1970. "If I left the woman I really loved—the Great Society—in order to get involved with the bitch of a war on the other side of the world, then I would lose everything at home . . . but if I left that war and let the communists take over South Viet Nam, then I would be seen as a coward and my nation would be seen as an appeaser." The war not only drained resources from the Great Society, it played havoc with the economy. It contributed to large budget deficits, which triggered inflation and undermined the dollar in international markets. For the first time since the turn of the century, America began to run trade deficits. By the 1980s, the United States had become a net-debtor nation.[20]

Though more difficult to measure, the cultural legacy of the Vietnam War was as pervasive and persistent as the material one. The war altered some of the fundamental coordinates of American culture. As John Hellmann put it, "On the deepest level, the legacy of Vietnam is the disruption of our story, of our explanation of the past and vision of the future."[21]

This was most apparent in the form that memorials took. Organized by veterans themselves, the national memorial on the Mall in Washington, D.C., has been described as a "black gash of shame" by those used to the more traditional flag-flying and uplifting war monuments. The dark wall that simply lists the names of Americans killed in Vietnam was in fact so controversial that a life-size

statue of three GIs was added to satisfy the traditionalists. When compared to the statue commemorating Iwo Jima, however, this compromise seems only to underscore the absence of national unity and self-confidence. As Marilyn Young observed, "these soldiers are flagless and exhausted. They seem to be waiting for something, but the only thing visible in the direction in which they look are the giant slabs with the names of their dead comrades." In the past, war monuments portrayed individuals in their most public guise—personal experience was melded into heroic acts in service to the nation. With the construction of the New York Vietnam Memorial, this tradition was inverted. Here, excerpts from poems and diaries of soldiers who served in Vietnam are carved into a translucent glass wall. The personal trumped the heroic. These memorials provide a final resting place for what Tom Engelhardt calls "victory culture"—a powerful belief in the nation's ultimate triumph over savage enemies threatening the American way of life.[22]

From Legacies to Metaphor

The most enduring legacy of the Vietnam War has been its evolution from a historical event to a metaphor for some of America's most pressing domestic problems. That Vietnam replaced Munich as the operative metaphor in foreign policy after 1970 is well established. The domestic component of Vietnam as metaphor has not been as thoroughly examined. This is not to say that it has been entirely ignored. Norman Podhoretz, for example, wrote that "even before April 30, 1975 . . . Vietnam had become perhaps the most negatively charged political symbol in American history, awaiting only the literal end of the American involvement to achieve its full and final diabolization." Richard Sullivan noted, "The ease with which . . . we use the very word *Vietnam* to register a complex of meanings, devoid for the most part of any cultural or social referents to a particular country or nation or people we might identify with the Vietnamese, is an index of the degree to which the war has been mythologized as an American cultural phenomenon." The Vietnam War has become the "site of struggle over popular memory and cultural meaning."[23]

Legacies are bounded and discrete: they can be measured and studied. Why did America turn away from military engagement? What caused the resurgence of Congress? To the extent that Vietnam or attitudes about Vietnam answer these questions, these trends can be considered part of the legacy of the war. Legacies can be combined with other causal factors. In the case of congressional resurgence, for instance, there was an evolution from policy-based to constituency-based career paths for elected representatives. Because legacies are about causation, they are time-bound. For example, Vietnam had a devastating impact on the prestige of the military. But with the help of Ronald Reagan, and in response to some of the lessons learned in Vietnam, the military rebuilt its image in the 1980s. Considering the treatment of veterans is a good way to distinguish between legacy and metaphor. As we have already noted, veterans *could* serve metaphorical purposes: they symbolized both the will to forget and, later, the determination to remember. And veterans have always been used to convince the next generation of potential soldiers to fulfill their obligation to the state. But the influence of veterans on society could also be measured in more concrete ways, such as by their organized efforts to obtain benefits comparable to those provided after past wars and to achieve the recognition to which they felt entitled. Their success in these endeavors was bounded by competing political interests and such pedestrian but essential considerations as demographics. We can trace this legacy of the war—the rise and fall of veterans' influence—as a discrete historical phenomenon.[24]

Metaphors, on the other hand, have a half-life that is difficult to measure. They endure until replaced by another metaphor. They serve as a "blank screen" that absorbs unrelated concerns and tailors images of subsequent events to fit within its confines. As Jo-Anne Brown has suggested, the very vagueness and multiplicity of

a metaphor's meanings can make it a powerful social adhesive. While the meaning of a metaphor is often assumed to be self-evident, each listener in fact connects private meaning to the public symbol. Metaphors thus serve to create a powerful illusion of consensus when in fact multiple meanings exist. Before an event is "metaphorized," it is often seen as the product of a number of social phenomena. But at some point in the process, a transformation occurs. The metaphor itself becomes so powerful as to absorb competing explanations and other possible contributing causes.[25]

The domestic impact of Vietnam is a case in point. Initially, Vietnam was portrayed as the product of a confluence of American institutions and culture. Graham Greene's novel *The Quiet American* is particularly poignant in this regard, anthropomorphizing America's innocence and hubris. An ideological example is the way the war in Vietnam was treated by the New Left. The conflict, which as late as December 1964 was not particularly high on the agenda of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), was viewed as a product of "the system": a classic case of the military-industrial-university complex overreaching itself. Student radicals were more concerned about the domestic implications of that system. This was reflected in the SDS's early antiwar slogans, such as "War on Poverty—Not on People" and the famous civil rights slogan "Freedom Now," applied to Vietnam. Even when Johnson began the bombing of North Vietnam in 1965, SDS president Paul Potter did not lose his perspective. The war was merely a product of "the system." Potter told an antiwar rally, "We must name that system. We must name it, describe it, analyze it, understand it and change it. For it is only when that system is changed and brought under control that there can be any hope for stopping the forces that create a war in Vietnam today or a murder in the South tomorrow." Vietnam was becoming both a screen on which to project the New Left's political ideology and a symbol of deep structural problems in American society.[26]

But the power of the Vietnam metaphor soon substituted the

event itself for its causes: Vietnam became the cause of many of America's problems, even though some of the problems it epitomized were antecedent to the war itself. In what can be viewed as a parody of this process, Francis Ford Coppola explained how his attempt to make a film about the Vietnam War evolved into the war itself. Emerging from the Philippine jungle where he had been filming *Apocalypse Now*, the director told a press conference at the Cannes film festival, "My film is not a movie about Vietnam. It is Vietnam. It is what it was really like. It was crazy. And the way we made it was very much like the Americans were in Vietnam. We were in the jungle, there were too many of us. We had access to too much money and too much equipment and little by little, we went insane." Coppola described the arsenal employed to film *Apocalypse:* 1,200 gallons of gasoline consumed in ninety seconds, 2,000 rocket flares, and so on.[27] What had started out as an effort to portray and understand the Vietnam War became, instead, the war itself. Turned into a metaphor, Vietnam ceased to require explanation; rather, it circumscribed other possibilities, and it explained much that followed.

The power of Vietnam as a metaphor for domestic turmoil and decline derives from three interwoven elements: the decline of authority; a new level of conflict; and the fragmentation of national identity. The genealogy of these components is apparent from our review of the legacies of Vietnam. Metaphors are not fabricated out of thin air. The Vietnam metaphor bears a close resemblance to many of the consequences produced by that war. The conflict in Vietnam, the metaphor instructs, destroyed the trust that Americans had placed in their president and the authority of government institutions in general. Measured by public polling data, the level of mistrust in government nearly tripled in the decade after 1964. Vietnam (and to a lesser degree Watergate) is blamed for much of this decline. Vietnam shattered faith in experts and undermined the authority of all elites who pursued ambitious policy agendas. Since the Vietnam War, Americans have remained skeptical of their gov-

ernment, suspicious of their political leaders. They have also, the Vietnam metaphor suggests, remained divided in ways that seemingly defy resolution. During the war itself, militant actions and civil disobedience—whether dodging the draft or burning the flag—created a cultural divide that has still not narrowed. What distinguished these conflicts from previous social divisions was their seemingly intractable nature: antiwar protesters rejected pragmatic compromise and demanded that decisions be made on moral grounds, not on the basis of politics as usual. Vietnam threatened to "destroy the bonds which held us together." Like the war itself, this conflict seemed interminable. The loss in Vietnam, the fact that communism remained at bay despite the loss, and the exposure of America's exceptionalist position as myth fragmented the nation's identity, the metaphor implies. Rather than embracing the reflexive patriotism that had held the country together for much of the century, Americans increasingly wondered just what it meant to be an American. It was no longer a rhetorical question. Their story disrupted, Americans sought to pick up the pieces or craft a new one.[28]

Hollywood played a crucial role in projecting the Vietnam metaphor onto screens across the nation. Video images were particularly convincing, since that is how much of the public received its news about the war in the first place. Students of the media are quick to point out that only a small percentage of the news broadcast about Vietnam featured "bang-bang" footage. Perhaps because of this, those shots that did show actual fighting made a lasting impression. What's more, some of that footage was staged, since the enemy's attacks rarely accommodated camera people. The "television war" prepared Americans visually for the more elaborately staged scenes that they would later view in movie theaters. Vietnam on video seemed like the real thing.[29]

At first, films followed the same pattern of denial about Vietnam as the American public. There were no major releases featuring the war between John Wayne's *The Green Berets* in 1968 and *Coming Home* and *The Deer Hunter* in 1978. As one film critic put it, "A war that traumatized and divided American society was not a logical topic for popular entertainment." *The Green Berets* had been made in the grand tradition of war films that disseminate the patriotic message Washington sought to broadcast. The lesson that Hollywood drew from the movie's poor reception was that this form was not appropriate for this war. Subsequent films either referred to Vietnam metaphorically or took the politics out of the war. By the mid-eighties, Hollywood had overcome its aversion. Twelve years after Saigon fell, it was hard to book a room in Bangkok, so great was the demand by American crews shooting Vietnam films. There are now more than 400 feature films about the Vietnam War.[30]

Treating Vietnam metaphorically contributed to the impression that the war was behind everything—or at least everything bad—that was happening to America. In his essay "Hollywood and Vietnam," Michael Anderegg writes that "some would say that a Vietnam allegory underlies virtually every significant American film released from the mid-sixties to the mid-seventies, from *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) to *Ulzana's Raid* (1972) and *Taxi Driver* (1976)." By 1978 Hollywood was ready to take on the war directly. But it did so by focusing on the personal anguish of the individual soldier. There are no counterparts to the numerous World War II films that focused on the command level. Making such a film would have required engagement with the larger political picture and purpose of the war. Rather than loyalty to nation or a set of ideals associated with the nation, the emphasis of most films about the Vietnam War is on situational loyalty—to other soldiers, for instance. This depoliticization severed the major arteries of causation—whether the State Department's view or "the system" as analyzed by Paul Potter—in many of the films about Vietnam. According to Hollywood, Vietnam happened the way "shit happens."[31]

Short on how we got there, Hollywood has been extraordinarily long on how we get out of Vietnam. The need to heal and reconcile