

is a major theme that runs through the films, literature, and many of the cultural artifacts produced about Vietnam in the last twenty years. Both *The Deer Hunter* and *Coming Home* are about veterans who, despite their torturous experiences and difficulty forgetting, ultimately move beyond the war. For some characters, such as Rambo in *First Blood, Part II*, only rewriting the conclusion of the war will suffice. When asked to return to Vietnam on a secret mission to obtain photographic evidence that prisoners of war are still being held, Rambo utters the famous line, "Do we get to win this time?" "It's precisely that bummer of an ending," film critic J. Hoberman observed, "that's left us with a compulsion to remake—well if not history, then at least the movie. The impossible longing for a satisfactory conclusion tempts each Vietnam film to sell itself as definitive." Before reconciliation occurs in a film, however, the horrors of Vietnam are relentlessly rehearsed and in some instances magnified.<sup>32</sup>

Accumulated images of horror conveyed through the popular media have fortified the Vietnam metaphor and underscored the connections between the loss of authority, a different order of conflict, and the fragmented national identity that all need to be repaired or reconciled in the wake of the tragedy. *Coming Home*, the story of a legless, embittered vet who is reintegrated into society because he is able to fall in love, carries the saccharine message that "love heals." Nevertheless, when *Time* reviewed the film, it characterized it as "one long howl of pain." Commenting on the popularization of Vietnam as a subject or at least backdrop for television shows, Peter Martin noted that "as much as the culture industries strive to popularize the Vietnam war, in the process they cannot avoid touching on the very issues that made the war a bitterly divisive and controversial event in the first place." The quest to reconcile, in other words, has consolidated the assault on American consensus that Vietnam has come to stand for.<sup>33</sup>

The Vietnam metaphor was not confined to the screen. Scholars

also "metaphorized" Vietnam and soon adopted it as a shorthand for the sixties. Terry Anderson, for instance, writes, "Philosophers often wonder: what determines change, what is the engine of history?" His answer for one decade, at least, is clear: "The Vietnam War became the engine of the sixties." Others have labeled the war a boundary-altering event and a symbol for domestic unrest. Few have argued with Barbara Tischler's assertion that "the Vietnam War became the most important cultural symbol in this country from the mid-1960s until the withdrawal of American forces in 1973 as dress and style increasingly represented views on the war itself, the government, and authority in general." The Vietnam metaphor cannibalized the structural critique of America offered by New Left thinkers. It came to embody, rather than explain, the nation's problems. If dramatic conflicts such as urban rioting and the demands of Black Power could be overshadowed by Vietnam, there was little chance that more subtle changes, such as the evolution of group politics or the emergence of a global economy, might be linked to the turmoil the nation now associated with Vietnam.<sup>34</sup>

The war and the movement against it seemed to devour every other concern. It took over the student movement. It strained the finances of the Great Society. Even the powerful civil rights movement became embroiled in it. The violence of Vietnam was brought home to the Democratic national convention in 1968. The war consumed the presidency and monopolized foreign policy as the quest to assure America's credibility ultimately undermined the confidence of the nation's allies. And there could be no doubt that the country had changed dramatically during the Vietnam period. By the 1970s America had lost its sense of common purpose, according to William Chafe. "A new era had dawned, lacking the confidence, optimism, and sense of national purpose that had dominated the immediate postwar period." The Vietnam metaphor had engulfed, and certainly seemed to explain, many of these changes.<sup>35</sup>

## Vietnam in Context

By the 1980s, the Vietnam metaphor itself was a quagmire. It had absorbed so many of the features associated with the sixties that, like *Apocalypse Now*, that decade was in danger of becoming the Vietnam War. The Vietnam metaphor has skewed our historical understanding of the 1960s by obscuring a number of less visible influences in that period.<sup>36</sup> Four causal factors that have little to do with Vietnam help explain the challenge to authority, the heightened political conflict, and the fragmented national identity. While this is not the place for an exhaustive review of the sixties, exploring these four themes is the way to begin extricating the explanations for the changes that took place in America from the disproportionate influence of the Vietnam metaphor. When placed alongside Vietnam and in some instances antecedent to Vietnam, they help to account for where we are today.

The civil rights revolution is by far the most visible of these four factors. It is also the one that is best integrated into the scholarship on this period. Dependent upon the courageous actions of individuals during much of the 1950s, the struggle for racial equality burst upon the public scene in the 1960s as a powerful social movement that reshaped laws and attitudes. Besides ending Jim Crow in the South, the civil rights movement led millions to embrace Black Power, contributed to the rioting that shook the very foundation of social order in many cities, evolved into a permanent lobby within the federal government for the expansion of civil rights, provided a model that led to the adoption of similar techniques by other minorities and by women, and was instrumental in the extension of rights and the means for securing those rights to millions of immigrants.

Although the civil rights movement and the leadership of articulate African American spokesmen such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X have received extensive popular and scholarly attention, some of the more subtle yet influential legacies of the quest

for civil rights have been all but neglected. Take, for instance, the revolution in immigration policy that was set in motion (quite unintentionally) by the 1965 legislation that ended the quota system designed to ensure that the majority of immigrants would come from western and northern Europe. By the 1980s, only a tenth of all immigrants to the United States were from Europe. As Peter Skerry has argued, the mechanisms through which immigrants mobilized politically were radically altered. The predominant model was now a "racialized" one. "This reflects a more general tendency in our political culture," Skerry contends, "such that we now have one dominant way of discussing and analyzing disadvantage: in terms of race. Yet this profound change in the context in which immigration policy gets made, and in which immigrants learn to define their goals and interests, has gone largely unexamined." Another legislative change, the inclusion of discrimination on the basis of sex in Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as part of the mandate of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission—an amendment supported in large part by conservative Southern Democrats, who sought to water down the authority of the EEOC—eventually contributed to a significant alteration in employment patterns for women. Arguably, the greatest gains achieved by those who sought to expand civil rights protection occurred after much of the marching had stopped, fueled by increased voting, active lobbying, and the heightened consciousness on a day-to-day basis of individuals who believed that equal rights—or at least more nearly equal rights—were in fact within their grasp.<sup>37</sup>

The struggle for equal rights undermined authority in this country at the most fundamental level. The civil rights movement waged war on the racial and gendered hierarchy that had prevailed since the nation's founding. Each victory disrupted the distribution of social and political authority and power. Those who argue that Vietnam was the most divisive event since the Civil War should at least limit their claims to the white middle class. Race has always been a profound dividing line in America.<sup>38</sup> This division was un-

derscored and reinforced in the 1960s, first by the attention that was focused on racial inequality, next by the movement to celebrate racial pride. The urban rioting that occurred primarily among African Americans in the sixties hardened the racial divide. Although equal opportunity was closely associated with America's national identity, the demand that the gap between promise and reality be closed fragmented America's sense of purpose far more than it unified the nation. The counterreaction to greater demands for racial and gender justice has further divided the nation and complicated the collective project of establishing a new national identity.

A second factor that should be added to Vietnam in our quest for a more balanced understanding of the sixties is the further extension of pluralism. The civil rights revolution, of course, established the legitimacy of racial and gendered differences—challenging the hierarchy that placed whiteness and men on top—and thus advanced the cause of social and cultural pluralism. Another variant of pluralism was transformed in the sixties: what I will call political pluralism, or simply group politics. Political pluralism had been the American political science theory of choice since the early twentieth century; with the work of David Truman, it had achieved a near-hegemonic hold on that discipline by the early 1960s. But, as critics from E. E. Schattschneider to Theodore Lowi noted, group influence was in reality available to a far smaller portion of the polity than the theory suggested. In the 1960s, the number and variety of interest groups participating in politics exploded. "Public interest" lobbies led the charge. Many of these grew out of the social movements of the sixties and imbibed the New Left's suspicion of authority.<sup>39</sup>

At the same time, the expansion of the professions, led in part by the federal government's investment in the production of experts and its pursuit of ambitious agendas, forged a symbiotic relationship between the professions and the federal government that yielded a pattern of political power that I have dubbed the "proministrative" state, for its synthesis of professional and administra-

tive capacity. The professions—now operating with technologies that required resources that the voluntary sector could not match, ranging from particle accelerators to space telescopes, and seeking to master vast data sets, whether epidemiological or sociological—required federal resources. They also needed the political and legal authority to set their ideas in motion, whether the issue was smoking or teenage pregnancy. The federal government, on the other hand, benefited from the prestige and authority wielded by the professions after World War II. It also turned to these experts as a major source of guidance in policy areas ranging from military to environmental.<sup>40</sup>

Proministrators preferred to work in insulated forums, often protected by claims of "national security" or the esoteric nature of their work. But because their programs were producer-driven, not consumer-driven (householders didn't, for example, demand that the electricity coming out of their sockets be generated by nuclear power), professionals and the agencies that housed them teamed up to "sell" their programs to the public. The necessity for going public—often with spectacular promises of benefits to follow—clashed directly with the preference for insulated consultation and debate. Expert authority, in fact, had always been highly dependent upon maintaining the illusion of consensus in public, no matter how fierce the debate behind the scenes.

Besides the need to sell the programs, a number of tendencies inherent in the dynamic of proministrative politics pushed expert debate out of insulated forums into more public arenas. The most important of these was specialization, both professional and organizational. Another was the interdisciplinary approach required to implement complex programs. A final tendency was the proliferation of experts, in large part generated by the proministrators themselves. Political actors previously excluded from esoteric debates now found it far easier to hire their own experts, since there was a surfeit of them. Those who could now participate in policy debates brought a host of new political perspectives with them. In-

terest groups that linked all three levels of America's governmental system (federal, state, and local) were often the critical agents in this process: they spread debate from the institutional arenas to broader audiences. The internal dynamic of promministrative politics was magnified by a rapidly expanding and more assertive press corps.<sup>41</sup> The cacophony of competing expert opinions eroded the special advantages held by promministrators at the outset and forced programs toward more traditional bases of support among interest groups or parties. The simultaneous erosion of the experts' public consensus across a spectrum of policy areas undermined the public's general confidence in experts, regardless of their field. It also lessened confidence in the government programs that had relied so heavily on expert agendas. This was, indeed, an explanation for the decline of authority quite different from that contained in the Vietnam metaphor.

The combination of this enlarged pluralist base and publicly contentious professional community provided a social base from which controversial issues could be pursued indefinitely. Groups that lost the battle in Congress could take the fight to administrative forums. Failure there often led to the courts. Expert forums, which had once had the first and last word about esoteric matters, were now just one voice among many. As Hugh Hecló has observed, the policymaking system was asked to do more at the same time that public officials were trusted less.<sup>42</sup>

Hecló characterizes this system as "radically pluralized" and "postmodern"—in large part because of the actors' distrust of the very institutions that they relied upon to implement their programs. Along with the "postmodern" elements in today's pluralism, its capacious range explains a great deal. "Radically pluralistic" politics is what you get when you multiply the players, diversify their interests, provide each side access to scientific authorities, and put cultural issues and questions about process on the table along with economic ones. Whatever the root causes, Hecló's description of "radically pluralistic" politics distills many of the features often

attributed to the Vietnam metaphor. The further extension of political pluralism undermined authority: "Confidence in administrative discretion, expertise, and professional independence," Hecló argues, "had to be replaced by continuous public scrutiny, hard-nosed advocacy, strict timetables, and stringent standards for prosecuting the policy cause in question." More fully realized political pluralism is also confrontational and divisive. Group leaders, required to mobilize supporters behind the "cause" and often relying on media campaigns to do so, have little leeway for compromise. Hecló is most eloquent on the implications of sixties-style group politics for the nation's identity. "The now-adult, divided, radically pluralistic Sixties generation was taking over the reins of power. More than that, they were leading an inchoate debate on what political vision of the world could have authority over the nation. In effect, the search was on for a higher public moral order in a policy culture denying there could be any such thing."<sup>43</sup>

The final two factors offered for consideration return us to the world of international affairs. The fierce debate about Vietnam—both during the war and after—masked two of the most significant developments in the last forty years: America's participation in a global economy and the attenuation of the Cold War. By 1975, America's role in the world economy had shifted. Exposure to the global economy, symbolized by the first oil crisis of 1973, soon subjected core American industries such as automobile manufacturing and steel to intense pressure from foreign competitors. Louis Galambos has written about the ways in which the Vietnam War obscured this problem and cost the United States a decade in recognizing it and beginning to respond to it. He makes it clear that the war did not cause this transition; it was happening anyway. The Vietnam War also overshadowed changes within the Soviet Union and interrupted the trend toward détente, which can be traced back to the early 1960s. The path out of the Cold War hardly ran in a straight line—in part because of the cul-de-sac of Vietnam. Nevertheless, a case can be made that America's relations with the Soviet

Union had begun to thaw long before Nixon officially declared *détente*.<sup>44</sup>

Exposure to the global economy and the thaw in the Cold War affected Americans' attitudes toward authority and national identity in similar ways, though for different reasons. The global economy raised doubts about the ability of nation-states to control crucial variables affecting their citizens' lives. One of the major legacies of World War II had been the firm establishment of federal responsibility for the nation's economic health. The recognition that Americans were competing in a global economy challenged the federal government's authority in this sphere, much as the Great Depression had raised questions about the ability of state and local governments to perform a host of services. As economist Philip Cerny notes, "This new global transformation has gravely challenged the capacity of the state to provide effective governance not only of financial markets themselves but of economic affairs generally." The emergence of *détente* in the mid-sixties undermined national authority in a different way. Americans had granted the national security state historically disproportionate amounts of discretion and power because of the perceived threat from the Soviet Union. As that threat was reduced, many began to question the need for such blanket dispensations of authority.<sup>45</sup>

When it came to national identity, the economy and bipolar relations also stimulated similar trends for different reasons. America's privileged position in the world economy had strongly reinforced the notion of American exceptionalism. As that position was challenged, so was the exceptionalist component of American's national identity. By the early 1960s, the Cold War had become a part of the nation's identity. Countless rifts and differences had been papered over in the interest of presenting a united front to the enemy. As the Cold War thawed, Americans were confronted with the challenge of defining for themselves just what it meant to be American without the framework of external threat that had played such a crucial role in that definition over the past two decades.<sup>46</sup> It is no accident that

when Ronald Reagan turned to the task of restoring the nation's confidence, he did so by reviving the perceived threat from the "evil empire."

There is a reason that the civil rights revolution, the further extension of pluralist access to experts and political power, the globalization of the economy, and the end of the Cold War are not frequently associated with the decline of authority, a different order of conflict, and the fragmentation of national identity. The changes wrought by the civil rights movement are considered one of the great triumphs of American history, symbolized by the celebration of Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday as a national holiday. Squaring real pluralist access with long-held beliefs about political pluralism must also be registered as a victory for liberal democracy, though it is a less celebrated one. Few would argue with the benefits derived from ending the Cold War, though some are still looking for the "peace dividend." And despite the heated debate over the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and concern over the stability of the ruble, both political parties seem to have embraced America's explicit entry into the global economy as the next frontier for Americans to conquer. In other words, the structural changes rooted in the 1960s that I have enumerated range from triumphant to positive. Arrayed against these, tragically trapped in its rancid metaphorical quagmire, is Vietnam. It is unambiguously negative. Because we are uncomfortable with the idea that something as good for the nation as the civil rights revolution or the end of the Cold War carries costs, we have assigned these costs to a phenomenon that clearly cost a bundle—Vietnam. The metaphor mentality ultimately leads to bumper-sticker slogans such as "No more Vietnams." A historically better informed explication of America's problems can't be reduced to "No more rights," "No more participation," "More bipolar global conflict," or "No more cheap consumer goods."

The massive challenges that we face—reestablishing authority to perform tasks essential to the public good, ensuring that disputes

are mediated and reach closure, defining a sense of national purpose—are too easily attributed to a particularly evil event or conspiracy of events. Surely they couldn't be the flip side of some of our most compelling achievements? The fact that Vietnam is "over there" (geographically) and "back then" (temporally) makes it all the more suitable to carry this burden, and it seems all the easier to "put it behind us." Separating the evil from the good is one of the functions fulfilled by the litany of metaphors that "define" the sixties—JFK's assassination, Watergate, and Vietnam.

### Conclusion

Metaphors are bad for history. They are good at evoking collective memory and contributing to a sense of shared experience, which we as a society are in great need of. They are also good at pinpointing the most pressing issues faced by a society—in this case the decline of authority, the rising level of conflict and the difficulty of reaching closure on disputes, and the fragmentation of national identity. Metaphors achieve this, however, by relying on an emotional shorthand that obscures complex causal relationships. The most significant consequence in this case is the failure to recognize the trade-offs entailed by social change. If we had a magic eraser, we would gladly efface the Vietnam War from American history. (Indeed, this was the first response to Vietnam by politicians and filmmakers alike.) Doing so would, if we subscribe to the Vietnam metaphor, also restore much that has been lost along the way: authority, unity, and national identity. If, however, these public assets were eroded not only by the legacy of Vietnam but also by the quest for civil rights, the further extension of political pluralism, the end of the Cold War, and the embracing of a global economy, many of us would not bother to remove the plastic wrap from that eraser. Acknowledging the negative consequences that were integral to positive developments makes it far more difficult to externalize obstacles that remain in our path. They can't simply be exorcised,

attributed to the conspiracy of a few evil men, or blamed on a misguided mind-set. They are interwoven into the fabric of our society and the very things that we value the most.

Several recent presidents have actively sought to deflate and replace the Vietnam metaphor. They have done so for instrumental reasons—to free up military options that had been stifled by the foreign policy implications of the Vietnam metaphor. It is time to assault the domestic component of the metaphor as well. Those of us who subscribe to the slogan "No more Vietnams," however, would be wise to ask a few questions before plunging in. How did the Vietnam metaphor grow to be so powerful? What were the political bases of those who nurtured it? What, precisely, was the relationship between popular images of Vietnam and scholarly treatments of its legacy? How was each influenced by the media? Demystifying the Vietnam metaphor and placing Vietnam in its proper historical context will allow us to achieve a richer historical understanding of our recent past. It will pave the way toward acceptance of the full panoply of consequences that accompany the benefits bestowed by a democratizing and increasingly globalized society.

The most significant of these consequences is the return of the American state to a more traditional relationship to civil society. Artificially emboldened, inflated, and insulated by the historical confluence of World War II and the Cold War, by the remarkable degree of discretion and influence enjoyed by prom administrators, and by the exceptional position that the American economy enjoyed in comparison to the rest of the world, the nation-state demanded and received a unique degree of respect and loyalty.<sup>47</sup> Nothing demonstrates the relative power of the American state better than its decision to tackle head-on the nation's most intractable problem: racial discrimination. About the time that America committed hundreds of thousands of troops to Vietnam—and partly as a result of that decision—the foundation for this political constellation began to shift. By the time the last Americans were plucked by helicopter from the

roof of the Saigon embassy, the consequences of this shift had become apparent to all. The causes were, however, after a brief period of collective amnesia, too easily conflated with Vietnam.

One final assault on Vietnam—this one directed at the domestic element in the Vietnam metaphor—will allow us to recognize the permanent changes in the nature of authority, unity, and identity that have occurred and the degree to which these changes are intertwined with some of the most valuable benefits resulting from the causal factors outlined above. This is not to minimize the importance of these priceless, if intangible, national goods. It may be, however, that they are no longer to be guaranteed by a strong central government. The partial fulfillment of the dream of pluralist participation—both social/cultural and political—has eroded the platforms that afforded policymakers the discretion to maintain stable regimes of regulation and programmatic control. This erosion has undermined the legitimacy of the central government from within. The end of the Cold War and the increasing significance of economic decisions made beyond our borders have undermined the legitimacy of the central government from without. The legacies of Vietnam have contributed to this process, first creating and then helping discredit the imperial presidency, for instance; stimulating direct participation in the political process by millions, adding to the pluralist chorus; and demonstrating that even an embarrassing loss in Vietnam did little to undermine America's national security. But it was hardly the war that started these structural changes, nor could it direct or contain them.

As we integrate these structural changes in the future, we must return to a variety of institutions that have proven more enduring in American history than a strong central government. The list could not be more familiar: family, geographic community, profession or occupational association, religious denomination, and interest groups. If we return, however, we must continue to honor the commitment to pluralist participation. It was the breach in that commitment that discredited so many of these institutions in the

early 1960s. This is not to argue that we should abandon the federal government. It remains the only institution likely to enforce the procedural equity that I am calling for. It will also take on an enhanced role as negotiator for American interests in the global marketplace. Where competing domestic interests are able to reach uneasy agreements, the federal government can contribute to the stability of such compromises, as it can enforce their provisions. It must continue to serve as a catalyst for the stimulation of expertise and knowledge. And, of course, it remains the guardian of our national security.

But, returning to its historical role, the federal government will most likely follow the dictates of civil society in initiating new policies, rather than taking the lead itself. Building support for these policies, even if it means embracing interest group politics, is a task to which those determined to reverse the growing social inequality must turn their attention. The ultimate legacy of Vietnam embraces not only the neoconservative lesson that the state exceeded its authority and its capacity, but a pluralist lesson as well: even in the field of foreign policy, the state ultimately yields to mobilized interests. This suggests that the opportunity to use the state for progressive ends still exists. In a “radically pluralized” environment, however, realizing the opportunity is no small challenge.

# **After Vietnam**

## Legacies of a Lost War



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