

❖ REMEMBER VIETNAM ❖

'VIETNAM' IN THE NEW AMERICAN CENTURY

Address by H. Bruce Franklin to
Symposium of the British Academy
"Thirty Years On: The United States and
The Legacy of the Vietnam War, 1975-2005"
London • 13 -14 May 2005

SO HERE WE ARE, commemorating "the thirtieth anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War." Yes, it's now thirty years since the last U.S. military forces were evicted from Vietnam. But anybody who thinks that the Vietnam War ended for America three decades ago didn't live through the presidential election campaign of 2004, when John Kerry's campaign ship, all festooned with Vietnam war-hero flags and banners, got torpedoed by the "Swift Boat Veterans" who succeeded in convincing millions that Kerry not only aided the Vietnamese enemy but committed the ultimate sin, betrayal of our POWs.

The black-and-white POW/MIA flags still flutter all across America, as decreed by law in each and every one of the fifty states. With its image of the heroic American warrior, imprisoned and tortured by Vietnam, it remains the only flag, other than the Star-Spangled Banner, to fly, as it does annually, over the White House. On permanent display in the Rotunda of our nation's Capitol, draped in a huge banner over the New York Stock Exchange, and adorning the bumpers of hundreds of thousands of cars, SUVs, pick-ups, and big diesel rigs, the PO /MIA flag projects one of America's favorite images of itself as victim of Vietnam.

And has the war ever ended for Vietnam? Subjected to the most intense bombing and chemical warfare in human history, the land has still not recovered and new generations suffer from damage inflicted on the Vietnamese gene pool. Although the U.S. government has grudgingly recognized some of the diseases caused by Agent Orange in American veterans who were briefly exposed, it still refuses to acknowledge any of the effects of Agent Orange, not to mention Agents White, Blue, Pink, and Purple, on the Vietnamese people who have been exposed for decades.

In 2002, the United States agreed to support continuing scientific investigation of the health and environmental effects of dioxin in Vietnam. But in February 2005, Washington unilaterally revoked this agreement three days before a court hearing of a class action suit on behalf of the myriad Vietnamese suffering from the continuing epidemic of deformed babies, miscarriages, and cancers. The case was promptly thrown out by the U.S. court, and the Internet address for every document about this agreement previously posted at the web site of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences now leads to the notice, "LOST FILE."

This is a relatively minor incident in the decades of economic, political, and cultural warfare waged by Washington against Vietnam since 1975. A forthcoming book, Edwin Martini's *Invisible Enemies: The American War on Vietnam, 1975-2000*, may indeed force us to rethink our dating of the end of the war.

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The Vietnam in the title of my talk is in quotation marks. Within the dominant American culture, "Vietnam" is no longer a nation, a people, or even a war. "Vietnam" is something terrible that happened to us, something that divided, wounded, and victimized America. As the grotesque title of one widely-adopted history textbook puts it: *Vietnam: An American Ordeal*.¹

The "Vietnam" that has come to substitute for the countries, the peoples, and the history of America's war in Southeast Asia is a Byzantine construct of myths and fantasies. Three decades after the panicky U.S. exodus from Saigon, this simulacrum of Vietnam operates as a powerful, sometimes decisive, force not only in American culture, but also in American politics. It facilitated the Iraq War in 1991, led to the defeat of George H. W. Bush in 1992, but permitted his son to win the election of 2004 and thus to continue implementing the second term in the title of my talk, "the New American Century."

Perhaps not everybody here is familiar with the Project for the New American Century, though you should be. This is the plan now being implemented for U.S. total hegemony over planet Earth for at least the entire 21st century, what its authors explicitly call the "global *Pax Americana*".² Its blueprint was formulated in 1992 in the *Defense Planning Guidance* authored by Paul Wolfowitz under the direction of then Defense Secretary Dick Cheney.³

In 2000, Wolfowitz and his cohort from The Project for the New American Century published an astonishing manifesto and master game plan that envisions a world of endless imminent warfare where the land, sea, air, and heavens swarm with America's invincible

weapons. (They acknowledge that their program has "elements of science fiction".) Writing in the year 2000, they see that "the unresolved conflict with Iraq provides the immediate justification" for initiating their plan. They recognize with great regret that their vast military transformation "is likely to be a long one," unless it is fortuitously accelerated by "some catastrophic and catalyzing event—like a new Pearl Harbor".

Because the vision of the New American Century relies upon the fantasy Vietnam, we need to peel away the layer after layer of distortions, myths, and outright lies that constitute the dominant narrative of the Vietnam War, to remind ourselves that the war did not begin when the United States came to the aid of some democratic nation known as South Vietnam which was threatened by subversion and invasion from some evil Communist nation known as North Vietnam.

It's easy to understand why most Americans cannot face the reality of our war in Vietnam. Because if we did, we would have to recognize that for decade after decade we waged unrelenting and sometimes genocidal war against a people and a nation that never did anything to us except ask for our friendship and support.

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The true history of this war begins in September 1945, the month after our Vietnamese allies had seized control of their country from the defeated Japanese occupiers and established the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh, standing in front of half a million citizens in Hanoi, capital of the new nation, began to read its Declaration of Independence:

"All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. This immortal statement was made in the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America in 1776. In a broader sense, this means: All the peoples on the earth are equal from birth, all the peoples have a right to live, to be happy and free."

Suddenly two warplanes appeared overhead. The crowd looked up anxiously. When those hundreds of thousands recognized them as American P-38 fighter-bombers, they burst into a mighty cheer. To them, these planes were a token of support from the country they viewed as the world's great champion of the rights of self-determination and national independence.

Little did they know that a few weeks earlier, the U.S. government had promised France the military means to reconquer and recolonize Vietnam. Thus while the Vietnamese were cheering America and its support for the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, America was preparing to sponsor war against this friendly people and nation.

In October, the first of twelve U.S. troopships were diverted from their task of bringing GIs home from France, and instead were loaded with an army to conquer Vietnam.⁴ Although under French command and invading to restore French colonial rule, this army was financed and armed by the United States and was implementing part of Washington's global strategy. All this took place prior to the so-called Cold War, a chronological fact with immense historical significance.

For years, the American people refused to support hostilities against Vietnam. Indeed, the fall of 1945 was the beginning of the American movement against the Vietnam War. When those U.S. troopships arrived in Saigon, they were greeted and saluted on the docks by Japanese soldiers, uniformed and rearmed by British troops under the command of General Douglas Gracey. The enlisted men on the crews of these troopships then all drew up and signed

letters and petitions to Congress and the President denouncing these "imperialist policies" and the use of American ships "to subjugate the native population" of Vietnam.

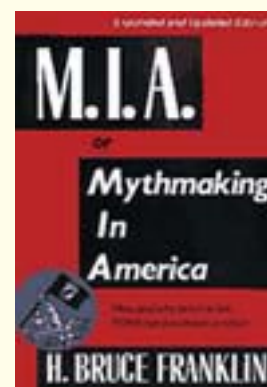
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The American movement against the war, initiated by these hundreds of sailors, kept growing in the nine years leading to French defeat in 1954. In April of that year, on the eve of the French surrender, Vice President Richard Nixon declared that the United States may "have to send troops there" because "the Vietnamese lack the ability to conduct a war or govern themselves".⁵ This trial balloon launched by the White House sparked a firestorm of protest against what some called the "Nixon War".⁶

Thousands of letters and telegrams opposing U.S. intervention deluged the White House. An American Legion division with 78,000 members demanded that "the United States should refrain from dispatching any of its Armed Forces to participate as combatants in the fighting in Indochina".⁷ There were public outcries against "colonialism" and "imperialism". Senators from both parties rose to denounce any contemplation of sending U.S. soldiers to Indochina.

For example, Senator Ed Johnson of Colorado declared on the Senate floor: "I am against sending American GIs into the mud and muck of Indochina on a bloodletting spree to perpetuate colonialism and white man's exploitation

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in Asia.”⁸ By mid-May, a Gallup poll revealed that 68% of those surveyed were against sending U.S. troops to Indochina.⁹

So the Eisenhower Administration was forced into fighting a war hidden from the American people, a covert war. The first stage was creating in June the puppet regime of Ngo Dinh Diem, creating a new proxy army, and launching terrorist and other secret operations orchestrated by Edward Lansdale. All this began before the Geneva Conference concluded, with its recognition that Vietnam was a single, independent nation and an agreement that French and DRV military forces would regroup on either side of the 17th parallel, a “military demarcation line” that “should not in any way be interpreted as constituting a political or territorial boundary”.¹⁰ It would take Vietnam 19 years to force Washington to accept these agreements.

Nine years after Geneva, the Kennedy Administration felt itself forced into another conspiracy, this one to remove Diem and replace him with generals on the Pentagon’s payroll. As U.S. Ambassador to Saigon Henry Cabot Lodge wrote in a top-secret cable in August 1963: “We are embarked on a course from which there is no respectable turning back: the overthrow of the Diem government.... there is no turning back because there is no possibility, in my view, that the war can be won under a Diem administration, still less that any member of the family can govern the country in a way to gain the support of the only people who count, i.e. the educated class in and out of government service — not to mention the American people.”¹¹

Question: Would the American people be stupid or gullible enough to believe the government’s lies?

The coup, including the assassination of Diem, took place in the first week of November. Three weeks later, President Kennedy was assassinated. Within 72 hours, newly installed President Lyndon Baines Johnson signed off on NSAM 273, the top-secret plan for a full-scale U.S. war in Vietnam. A key section of NSAM 273, entitled “Plausibility of Denial,” essentially asked for an assessment of whether the American people would be stupid or gullible enough to

believe the government’s lies when it denied the covert air, sea, and land attacks on northern Vietnam that would lead up to the open dispatch of combat forces. Meanwhile, President Johnson’s main foreign-policy campaign gambit in 1964, repeated over and over again, was his promise that “I shall never send American boys to Asia to do the job that Asian boys should do.” As soon as he was inaugurated as an elected president, after burying openly hawkish Barry Goldwater in a record landslide, Johnson sent in the Marines and began overt non-stop bombing of the north.

In that great 1974 documentary *Hearts and Minds*, Daniel Ellsberg outlines how “the American people” were “lied to month-by-month” about Vietnam by presidents Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon, and says, “It’s a tribute to the American public that their leaders perceived they had to be lied to.” But then he pauses and adds: “It’s no tribute to us that it was so easy.”

The lies did not stop when military combat ended in 1975, partly because they were necessary to legitimize that remorseless economic and political war Washington waged against Vietnam for the ensuing quarter of a century. Indeed, by 1978 a cultural juggernaut designed to reimage the war was beginning to overwhelm and replace everything we had remembered with its opposite.

The key cultural text here is *The Deer Hunter*. This lavishly financed celluloid fantasy was sanctified by five Academy Awards, capped by Best Picture— an award presented appropriately enough by John Wayne, that World War II draft dodger who received a Congressional Gold Medal for being a make-believe warrior hero.

With wicked virtuosity, *The Deer Hunter* transformed the most powerful and influential images of the war, images deeply embedded in American culture, into their precise opposites. The first scene in Vietnam shows North Vietnamese helicopters napalming a South Vietnamese village, where the surviving women and children are then slaughtered by North Vietnamese Communists. This My Lai style massacre is halted by the first American to appear in this fantasy of Vietnam, Robert De Niro as a lone heroic guerilla.

The tiger cages in which we tortured and crippled thousands of Vietnamese become tiger cages in which they try to cripple us. The bodies of Vietnamese prisoners being hurled from helicopters by American interrogators became American prisoners falling from helicopters. One of the most potent images of the real war was the photograph of Saigon secret-police chief General Loan killing an unarmed "Viet Cong suspect," his arms bound behind his back, with a revolver held to his right temple. *The Deer Hunter* artfully reverses this image, with American prisoners forced by sadistic Communist officers to play Russian roulette with a revolver held to their right temple below a portrait of Ho Chi Minh. The American POWs in *The Deer Hunter* are all working-class GIs, unlike the reality in which all but a handful of the POWs were flight officers. (And most of the enlisted POWs were in the Peace Committee, allied with their Vietnamese captors.)¹²

The Deer Hunter succeeded not only in reversing key images of the war but in helping to



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transform U.S. prisoners of war into the most potent symbols of American manhood. It was the trailblazer for the POW/MIA cult movies, beginning with *Uncommon Valor* starring Gene Hackman (1983), the first of Chuck Norris's *Missing in Action* films (1984), and of course Sylvester Stallone's *Rambo* (1985). Wounded, tortured, imprisoned, victimized by bureaucracy and a feminized culture, American manhood now fought back as super-muscle heroes. By 1988, three years after he single-handedly won the last phase of the Vietnam War by freeing the POWs, Rambo was blasting the Russian hordes on another battlefield: Afghanistan.

The year after the Motion Picture Academy canonized *The Deer Hunter*, another product of Hollywood— Ronald Reagan— brilliantly reimagined the Vietnam War as part of his campaign to capture the White House. During the 1980 election campaign, Reagan coined the "Vietnam syndrome" metaphor and, in the same speech to a Veterans of Foreign Wars conference, redefined the war as a "noble cause".¹³ By 1982, then President Reagan was articulating a version of the history of the Vietnam War, every sentence of which was demonstrably false.¹⁴ By the end of the 1980s, the matrix of illusions necessary for endless imperial warfare was in place and functioning with potency. The two great myths — the spat-upon veteran and postwar POWs — were deeply embedded in the national psyche. What was needed next was erasure of memory of the reality.

The cultural march from demonization of the Vietnamese in the late 1970s to eradication in the 1990s was vividly projected by Hollywood. Whereas the Academy Award for the Best Picture of 1978 went to *The Deer Hunter* with its meticulously reversed images of victims and victimizers, the winner of the Academy Award for the Best Picture of 1994 was *Forrest Gump*, which projects Vietnam as merely an uninhabited jungle that for inscrutable reasons shoots at nice American boys who happen to be

marching through. And our iconic hero is now a man constitutionally incapable of understanding history.

How did we get to Gumpify "Vietnam"? Throughout the decades that the United States was waging war in Vietnam, no incoming president uttered the word "Vietnam" in his inaugural address.¹⁵ Ronald Reagan, in his 1981 inaugural speech, did include "a place called Vietnam" in his list of battlefields where Americans had fought in the twentieth century. But it was not until 1989 that a newly elected president actually said anything about the Vietnam War. What he said was: forget it.

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It was George Bush the First who broke the silence with these words explicitly calling for erasure: "The final lesson of Vietnam is that no great nation can long afford to be sundered by a memory." Note that by now "Vietnam" was no longer a country or even "a place called Vietnam," as his predecessor had put it. It had become a war, an American war. Or not even a war. It was an American tragedy, an event that had divided and wounded America. Bush's speech went on to blame "Vietnam" for the "divisiveness," the "hard looks" in Congress, the challenging of "each other's motives," and the fact that "our great parties have too often been far apart and untrusting of each other.... It has been this way since Vietnam, he lamented.¹⁶

Two years later, Bush began the war against Iraq with the promise that "this will not be another Vietnam."¹⁷ Inextricably intertwined with "Vietnam", "Iraq" has also become a construct of simulations, an illusionary reality continually being spun. If the Vietnam War is the longest U.S. foreign war, the Iraq war is the second longest. After all, by now it has already been going on for fourteen years, through three American administrations.

Before U.S. and allied ground troops withdrew in 1991 from the parts of Iraq they had

invaded, the United States, with assistance from Britain and France, began to set up a form of aerial occupation and control, the so-called no-fly zones. This was an application of a strategy for imperial rule from the air developed by Britain back in the 1920s, then named "Control without Occupation". Britain tried this out first in 1922. Where? In Iraq. The first RAF report gleefully described the panic the air raids evoked among the "natives" of Baghdad, especially the terrified women and children: "Many of them jumped into a lake, making a good target for the machine guns."¹⁸

The no-fly zones in continual operation between the 1991 and 2003 invasions had two interrelated purposes, both preconditions for eventual full occupation and control: (1) detaching the oil-rich regions of the north and south from central control, thus destroying the economic and political coherence of the nation, and (2) providing pretexts for ongoing aerial bombing campaigns designed to degrade and ultimately neutralize Iraq's military defense system.

The fantasy "Vietnam" has proved crucial to launching and maintaining the war against Iraq. In 1991, the myth of the spat-upon Vietnam veteran was invoked to discredit the burgeoning antiwar movement and to create the emotional support necessary to start the war. How this was done is explored brilliantly in the 1998 book, *The Spitting Image*, the landmark study of the spat-upon veteran myth by sociologist Jerry Lembcke, himself a Vietnam veteran.

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The Bush Administration had offered many different reasons for going to war: "liberating" Kuwait; defending Saudi Arabia; freeing all those foreign hostages Iraq was holding (I bet you forgot that one); Saddam as Hitler; the threat to America's oil supplies; the 312 Kuwaiti babies dumped out of incubators by Iraqi soldiers (a fiction concocted by leading PR firm Hill & Knowlton); and so on. But the only one that succeeded in generating the required passion was "Support our troops! Don't treat them like the spat-upon Vietnam vets!" From this

flowed the ocean of yellow ribbons on cars and trucks and homes that deluged the American landscape.

The yellow ribbon campaign, with its mantra of "Support Our Troops", "dovetailed neatly," as Lembcke wrote, with that other Vietnam issue "about which the American people felt great emotion: the prisoner of war/missing in action (POW/MIA) issue."¹⁹ So finally the war was not about political issues but about people. Which people? Again in Lembcke's words: "Not Kuwaitis. Not Saudis.... The war was about the American soldiers who had been sent to fight it."

In March 1991, gloating over what seemed America's glorious defeat of Iraq, President Bush jubilantly proclaimed to a nation festooned in its jingoist yellow ribbons, "By God, we've kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all!"²⁰ Kicked? Syndrome? Had Vietnam become America's addiction? Its pathology?

The President's diagnosis proved more accurate than his prognosis. Sixteen months after claiming to have cured us of our Vietnam disease, George Bush was on national TV shouting "Shut up and sit down!" at MIA family members heckling him at the July 1992 annual convention of the National League of Families.

Inaugurated with a promise that he would heal America's Vietnam wounds, Bush tried to win reelection by reopening them, turning Bill Clinton's anti-Vietnam War activities and draft avoidance into a central campaign issue. But meanwhile Ross Perot, the original fabricator of the POW/MIA issue back in 1969, now launched his own campaign as the wartime champion of the POWs and a Rambo-like hero who would rescue not only the dozens allegedly still alive in Indochina but also the nation itself. Perot masterfully played his role of the lone outsider from Texas ready to ride into Washington to save us from its sleazy bureaucrats and politicians who had betrayed the POWs and the American people.

Unlike the Republican and Democratic candidates, Perot had no national party apparatus. What he used as a remarkably effective substitute was a ready-made national infrastructure, a network of activists motivated by near religious fervor and coordinated by grassroots

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organizations: the POW/MIA movement. A master of symbolism, Perot chose ex-POW James Stockdale as his running mate and ex-POW Orson Swindle as his campaign manager. A POW/MIA organization illegally turned the Vietnam Veterans Memorial into a perpetual campaign prop for Perot.²¹ At his rallies, Perot sat with former POWs and family members on a stage bedecked with POW flags. POW activists and their organizations led the petition campaigns that got Perot on the ballot in every state.²²

Without the Perot candidacy, Bush would undoubtedly have beaten Bill Clinton in a one-on-one race. In the televised debates, when Bush attempted to focus on Clinton's draft records, Perot argued that the Bush Administration had given Saddam Hussein permission to "take the northern part of Kuwait".²³ Perot's 20 million votes, drawn mainly from Republican voters, amounted to almost four times Clinton's margin of victory over Bush, who got almost ten million fewer votes than he had received four years earlier. If Perot was responsible for Bush's defeat, then clearly the POW/MIA issue was central to the election's outcome; for without it, Perot would surely not have been a national political figure much less a presidential candidate. In fact he would not have even made his first billion dollars, which came from contracts awarded by the Nixon Administration for selling the POW/MIA issue to the American people.

But the first President Bush was right about one thing. The invasion of Iraq accelerated the continuing militarization of American culture, thus allowing us to "kick" the "Vietnam syndrome". At the end of combat in Vietnam in 1975, a Harris poll indicated that a mere 20 percent of Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 trusted the leaders of the military. In December 2002, as the second Bush Administration was ramping up for a renewed invasion of Iraq, a Harris poll indicated that this number had more than tripled to 64 percent.²⁴

What Lembcke wrote in 1998 about events that occurred in 1991 seems even more relevant today, when the ostensible reasons for the 2003 invasion of Iraq have all been discredited. Iraq of course had no arsenal of chemical or bacteriological, much less nuclear, weapons that was threatening the United States or anybody else, and this arsenal, we now know, was an Administration concoction based on cherry-picked and flagrantly bogus intelligence. Amnesiac America recognized no similarity to the bogus intelligence used to substantiate the White Paper of 1965, which provided the justification for overt U.S. war in Vietnam.²⁵

Iraq of course had nothing to do with 9/11, but the war has been a bonanza for jihadists. Now we are supposed to believe that the war was designed to liberate the people of Iraq and bring them democracy. Well, maybe it was necessary to destroy the country in order to save it. But none of these rationalizations of the war today generate any pro-war fervor. No, those who fervently support the war today do so because they "Support Our Troops," rather than betraying them while they are fighting or spitting on them and calling them baby killers when they come home.

In 2005, the yellow-ribbon tsunami of 1991 has swept over America once again, helped by a cute technological gimmick. Now, instead of those perishable actual yellow ribbons that festooned American homes and cars as a buildup to Operation Desert Storm in 1991, we have magnetic yellow ribbons, emblazoned with the slogan "Support Our Troops", attached to millions of American cars and SUVs and vans and trucks, sometimes riding happily above the old-fashioned black-and-white POW/MIA bumper stickers.

And by 2004, "Vietnam," that construct of illusions, myths, fantasies, and lies that had replaced the realities of the Vietnam War, had become a defining test of character to determine who was fit to lead America during another construct of illusions and lies, the so-called "War on Terror". In this psychocultural hall of mirrors, George Bush, who had used family connections to avoid serving in Vietnam or even fulfilling his minimal National Guard obligations, appeared as a towering figure of bravery

and determination, while John Kerry, who had received three purple hearts for combat wounds and five medals, including the Silver Star, for bravery and heroism, was imaged as a cowardly wimp if not downright traitor who, along with Jane Fonda, had gotten Americans to spit on our troops and call them baby killers.

The onslaught against Kerry was led by John O'Neill, who had been recruited by Richard Nixon's dirty tricksters back in 1971 to discredit the combat veterans then leading the anti-war movement. The Nixon White House had been rattled by the Winter Soldier Investigation held by Vietnam Veterans Against the War, during which more than a hundred combat veterans testified about atrocities and war crimes they had witnessed or actually participated in. Some showed pictures reminiscent of recent photos from Abu Ghraib, such as an interrogator yanking on a cord tied to the testicles of a Vietnamese prisoner.

By 2004, that construct of illusions, myths, fantasies, and lies that had replaced the realities of the Vietnam War, had become a defining test of character to determine who was fit to lead America.

In April, Washington was besieged by anti-war demonstrators, eventually numbering half a million and led by thousands of Vietnam War veterans. The veterans' six-day demonstration climaxed when almost a thousand threw their medals over a hastily erected fence around the Capitol building and when their spokesman, Navy Lieutenant John Kerry, testified for two hours in nationally televised hearings of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Kerry included in his lengthy opening statement a brief summary of the veterans' testimony at the Winter Soldier Investigation.²⁶

More than three decades later, those few about the conduct of the war would be used as an explosive charge hurled with deadly effect at the Kerry campaign, thus demonstrating how thoroughly the realities of the Vietnam War have been replaced by jingoist fantasy. Never mind that the Kerry's 1971 testimony, like that of the Winter Soldier Investigation, was contemporaneous with the trial of Lt. Calley for the

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slaughter, rape, and sodomy in My Lai in 1968. Never mind that in April 2004, the *Toledo Blade* newspaper received a Pulitzer Prize for a series about systematic atrocities carried out by an elite U.S. Army unit, as part of U.S. policy, in the same province as My Lai in 1967. Never mind that back in 1967, months before My Lai, Jonathan Schell had exposed the genocide in this same province. Never mind that every one of Kerry's words about U.S. atrocities and war crimes has been proved, over and over again, to be true. No, by 2004 the hideous record of U.S. atrocities in Vietnam had been erased, and Kerry's 1971 testimony could be portrayed as a libelous if not downright treasonous attack on America and its soldiers.

Looking backward from 2005, the efforts of the Nixon gang to neutralize Kerry seem crude and primitive. "We found a vet named John O'Neill and formed a group called Vietnam Veterans for a Just Peace," Nixon Special Counsel Charles Colson boasted. "We had O'Neill meet the President, and we did everything we could to boost his group."²⁷ The White House engineered letters to newspapers demanding that they "expose" Kerry as a "fraud", and Colson arranged an Op Ed denouncing Kerry that was syndicated in 150 newspapers, with copies then mailed to "all veterans organizations and military groups in plain envelopes with no cover letter."²⁸

Thirty-three years later, and months before Kerry became the Democratic candidate in July 2004, O'Neill, with massive financial support from Bush backers and unlimited media connections launched the assault, 21st-century PR style. An April interview on CNN and a May 4 Op-Ed in the *Wall Street Journal* headlined "Unfit To Serve" set the stage for *Unfit For Command*, the book O'Neill co-authored with right-wing fanatic Jerome Corsi, and the made-for-TV film, "Stolen Honor: Wounds that Never Heal," both blaming Kerry for prolonging the war and causing the torture of American POWs.

O'Neill and his Swift Boats organization got incessant media exposure on radio, TV, newspapers, magazines and the internet, including a

free non-stop book-promotion blitz that turned *Unfit For Command* into the nation's top non-fiction best-seller for weeks during the crucial final months of the presidential race. Leading the circus was Rupert Murdoch's Fox network. Show after show on Fox featured voices such as: former Conragate conspirator and now Fox News Channel host Oliver North, who claimed that the atrocities cited by Kerry in 1971 simply "did not happen"; former Republican Speaker of the House and now regular Fox contributor Newt Gingrich, who invented a tale of secret 1970 meetings in Paris between Kerry and "Communist leaders of a country that were [sic] killing young Americans while John Kerry is sitting in Paris talking to them"; and right-wing *Washington Post* commentator and regular Fox contributor Charles Krauthammer, who claimed that Kerry "betrayed" his "comrades" by "telling the world that these soldiers left behind were committing atrocities, as Kerry has said on a daily basis."²⁹ Over and over again, the wounded and decorated warrior was explicitly branded a "traitor" responsible not only for the torture of POWs and the betrayal of his fellow soldiers, but even for the eventual defeat of the United States by the Communists.

The wounded and decorated warrior was branded a "traitor", responsible not only for the torture of POWs and the betrayal of his fellow soldiers, but even for the defeat of the U.S.A. by the Communists.

The main piece of evidence for all this was a picture of John Kerry in the War Remnants Museum of Ho Chi Minh City, a picture that John O'Neill and his cohort claimed to have discovered. *Unfit To Command* opens with a sensationalized account of this discovery by a touring Vietnam veteran:

"He realized that he had seen this face before — for the first time more than thirty years ago. It was John Kerry. The Vietnamese photo of a 1993 meeting of Kerry and Vietnamese leaders, including the General Secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party Do Muoi, was to honor John Kerry's 'heroic' contributions to the North Vietnamese victory."³⁰

Unfit For Command devotes an entire chapter to this incriminating photograph, which is actually a picture of Kerry's reception in Vietnam as head of a congressional delegation seeking information about unaccounted-for American servicemen.

Kerry and his campaign have been criticized for not responding more aggressively to these scurrilous attacks. Some have argued that he should have reaffirmed the validity of his 1971 view of the war and his later efforts to resolve postwar issues and bring about normal relations with Vietnam. In fact, as co-chair of the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs during its 17 months of investigations in 1991 and 1992, Kerry had played a major role in the gradual beginnings of trade relations during the first Bush and Clinton Administrations and the eventual establishment of diplomatic relations in 1995.

Yet Kerry and his campaign dared not take this tack. Was this a mistake? To do so would have required confronting head-on the fantasy "Vietnam". Two-thirds of the American people still believe that Vietnam secretly held many U.S. POWs after the war and therefore they are either still there or they were executed. The myth that Vietnam veterans were routinely spat upon and called baby killers is almost universal. The irrationality on this issue is suggested by

the accusation, made by a former San Diego mayor acting as guest host on the enormously popular Rush Limbaugh radio show, that John Kerry "was the one who coined the phrase 'baby killers', the phrase returning veterans from Vietnam had to hear . . . when they were spit upon in airports".³¹

John Kerry was indeed a prominent activist against the Vietnam War, which explains some of the hatred and loathing evoked by his candidacy. But that fact that a prominent activist against the Vietnam War came very close to being elected President of the United States in 2004 suggests that the war in America over the Vietnam War has another side and has not yet been decided.

Although the fantasy "Vietnam" is dominant in 21st-century American culture and politics, the antiwar movement that arose from the realities of the war still exerts a profound and powerful counterforce. Demonstrations against the Iraq war have rivaled in size those against the Vietnam War, and the anti-imperial consciousness that emerged a little over three decades ago has deepened and gained a wider constituency among the American people. Because the actual history of the Vietnam War has not yet been entirely expunged, it still threatens to obliterate the fantasy of Vietnam so essential to the Project for the New American Century.

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NOTES

1. This 1990 text written by George Donelson Moss and published by Prentice-Hall, a subsidiary of Viacom, had gone through three editions by 1998. Among the important studies that have explored how the war has been transformed into a trauma inflicted not by America on Vietnam but by Vietnam on America, see: Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1989); Fred Turner, *Echoes of Combat: The Vietnam War in American Memory* (New York: Anchor Book, 1996); Keith Beattie, *The Scar that Binds: American Culture and the Vietnam War* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).
2. *Rebuilding America's Defenses: Strategy, Forces and Resources for a New American Century. A Report of The Project for the New American Century* (New York: Project for the New American Century, September, 2000), pp. 2, 11, 13, 76.
3. "A One-Superpower World" and excerpts from the *Defense Planning Guidance for the Fiscal Years 1994-1998*. *New York Times*, 8 March 1992.
4. Much of my account of the transport of this French invasion army by U.S. troopships is based on Chapter 3 of Michael Gillen's extremely important 1991 NYU dissertation, *Roots of Opposition: The Critical Response to U.S. Indochina Policy, 1945-1954*.
5. Reprinted in *Vietnam and America: A Documented History*, revised and enlarged second edition. Marvin Gettleman, Jane Franklin, Marilyn Young and H. Bruce Franklin, eds. (New York: Grove Press, 1995), p. 52.
6. Senator Ernest Gruening and Herbert Wilton Beaser, *Vietnam Folly* (Washington, DC: National Press, 1968), pp. 100-105.
7. Gruening and Beaser, p. 105.
8. Gillen, pp. 379-383, 402. As Gillen notes, some sources incorrectly attribute this speech to Lyndon Johnson.
9. Gillen, p. 402.
10. "Final Declaration of the Geneva Conference," 21 July 1954. In *Vietnam and America*, op. cit., p. 75.
11. Cablegram from Ambassador Lodge to Secretary of State Rusk, 29 August 1963. Reprinted in *Vietnam and America*, op.cit., p. 227.
12. A revealing inside account can be found in James A. Daly, *Black Prisoner of War: A Conscientious Objector's Vietnam Memoir* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2000).
13. Turner, *Echoes of Combat*, p. 63; Arnold R. Isaacs, *Vietnam Shadows: The War, Its Ghost and Its Legacy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 49.
14. *Vietnam and America*, op.cit., p. xv.
15. Christian G. Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), p. 9.
16. George Bush, "Inaugural Address, 20 January 1989". *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush, 1989* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1990), Book I:3.
17. George Bush, "Address to the Nation Announcing Allied Military Action in the Persian Gulf, 17 January 1991". *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush, 1991* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1992), I:44.
18. Sven Lindqvist, *A History of Bombing* (New York: New Press, 2001), p. 43. C. G. Grey, *Bombers* (London: Faber & Faber, 1941), 71. See my discussion in *War Stars*, pp.88-89.
19. Lembcke, p. 20
20. "Kicking the `Vietnam Syndrome'", *Washington Post*, 4 March 1991.
21. "Veterans Raise Perot Banner," *New York Daily News*, 11 June 1992.

22. David Jackson, "MIAs' Kin Want Perot as President," *Dallas Morning News*, 19 May 1992; interview with David Jackson, 18 May 1992; telephone interview with John LeBoutillier, 12 June 1992; "It's Businessman Perot and Not War Hero Bush Who Attracts a Following Among U.S. Veterans," *Wall Street Journal*, 2 July 1992.
23. The Third 1992 Presidential Debate, 19 October 1992. Internet:
<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/debatingourdestiny/92debates>
24. "Trust in the Military Heightens among Baby Boomers' Children," *The New York Times*, 27 May 2003.
25. U.S. Department of State, *Aggression from the North: The Record of North Vietnam's Campaign to Conquer South Vietnam*. Publication 7839, Far Eastern Series 130 (Washington, DC, 1965) in *Vietnam and America*, Marvin E. Gettleman, Jane Franklin, Marilyn B. Young and H. Bruce Franklin, eds. (New York, Grove Press, 1995).
26. For the complete text of Kerry's statement, see *Vietnam and America*, pp. 456-62.
27. "The Lies of John O'Neill," *Media Matters for America*. Internet:
<http://mediamatters.org/items/printable/200408250002>
28. Tom Wells, *The War Within: America's Battle Over Vietnam* (New York: Henry Holt, 1994), p. 490.
29. Media Matters for America. Internet:
[http://mediamatters.org/items/printable/200408260004 ... /200409020010... /200409010004](http://mediamatters.org/items/printable/200408260004.../200409020010.../200409010004)
30. John E. O'Neill and Jerome Corsi, *Unfit for Command* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2004), p. 7.
31. Roger Hedgecock, the former San Diego mayor, was acting as substitute host for Limbaugh when he made this claim on August 25, 2004. His claim that Kerry coined this term in his 1971 Senate testimony is demonstrably false as well as a bit illogical, since most Vietnam veterans returned prior to 1971. See Media Matters for America: <http://mediamatters.org/items/printable/200408270003>

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