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“IT’S A WAR I STILL WOULD GO TO”: THE AMERICAN WAR IN VIETNAM AND NOSTALGIC RE-IMAGININGS OF WORLD WAR II

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One of my favourite quotations concerning World War II (WWII), and one that I find myself using the most often when talking about the myths of that conflict, comes from a book titled *Wartime. Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War*, written by Paul Fussell, a veteran of the Normandy landings in 1944 and later a professor of English. Writing in 1989, Fussell complained that

The damage the [war] visited upon bodies and buildings, planes and tanks and ships, is obvious. Less obvious is the damage it did to intellect, discrimination, honesty, individuality, complexity, ambiguity, and irony, not to

mention privacy and wit. For the past fifty years the Allied war has been sanitized and romanticized almost beyond recognition by the sentimental, the loony patriotic, the ignorant, and the bloodthirsty. (Fussell 1989: ix)

Fussell's book was a comprehensive deconstruction of the various myths that had accumulated around the war. He used historical facts, memoirs and other contemporary sources to, for example, point out that it was a miracle that the Allies had won at all, considering the staggering number, range, and sometimes nature of military mistakes, miscalculations and blunders on their side; or that the wastage of the war in terms of costs and destruction, but also of human life and suffering, was far beyond what is usually imagined; or that morale among American troops was in constant need of boosting, since the conditions on the frontlines were atrocious, and before the end of the war the reasons for their ordeal were rarely clear or passionately important to these soldiers. (Fussell's volume was followed in 1993 by Michael C.C. Adam's cult *The Best War Ever*, also a thesis meant to debunk the mythical, largely ahistorical images and notions associated with WWII.)

Fussell was protesting the image of WWII in popular culture and memory, an image that dominated not only representations and ways of thinking of the conflict, but coloured also the very notion of what war and warfare are and should be. In effect, that image turned out to have perhaps the most profound impact on the American war culture and the expectations towards the country's own foreign policy: it influenced tremendously not only both the initial and continued U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, but also the people's—the young soldiers among them—reception of and response to the conflict.

Indeed, the American involvement in Indochina took place in a mythological framework, which is today perhaps the most evident in the aftermath of the war, in the many books, memoirs and other texts dealing with the war, where the point of reference against which personal and national experience of Vietnam, the sense of failure, disappointment and disillusionment came to be measured—was precisely WWII. Importantly, the Vietnam generation followed the "Great Generation" of WWII immediately—which meant that the boys and men who would soon depart to Indochina to fight America's first "bad war" had been raised by fathers celebrated by the nation's culture almost uniformly as heroes and defenders of the free world. In fact, media scholar Daniel Hallin enumerated the major, exceptionally pervasive assumptions about war in general, engendered by WWII, that fostered the early nationwide support for military involvement in Vietnam, as: "war is a national endeavor," "war is an American tradition," "war is manly," "winning is what counts," and "war is rational"; he added that this brand of representing armed conflict had the effect of "purging' the war of political and moral implications" (Hallin 1986: 142-145). What Hallin meant was that the mentality borne out of the triumphalism of the

victory in WWII ultimately resulted in an enthusiasm for overseas military intervention that overreached the actual interests and capabilities of the U.S., culminating in the Vietnamese jungles; as one veteran of the earlier conflict said

World War II has warped our view of how we look at things today. We see things in terms of that war, which in a sense was a good war. But the twisted memory of it encourages the men of my generation to be willing, almost eager, to use military force anywhere in the world (qtd. in Terkel 1984: 11).

There was a number of public figures with whom this ideal warriors were associated: John Kennedy, for example, a decorated war hero; actor Audie Murphy, but, above all—John Wayne. Wayne had never been a soldier, but his film career turned him into a WWII icon: most importantly, in 1949 he appeared in the classic *Sands of Iwo Jima*, in which as a Marine sergeant he witnessed the iconic raising of the flag on Mount Suribachi, a slightly controversial event that defined the common memory of American valour and provided an everlasting image of the American experience in WWII.

In fact, it is difficult to find *any* Vietnam book, memoir, oral story, that does not mention Wayne, and often *Sands of Iwo Jima* specifically. The name and the title could be, and were, brought up when describing all stages of a soldier's Vietnam experience. For example, writing about his decision to join the Marine Corps in the early '60s, the soon-to-be Vietnam vet and author Philip Caputo recalled: "[a]lready I saw myself charging up some distant beachhead, like John Wayne in *Sands of Iwo Jima*, and then coming home a suntanned warrior with medals on my chest" (Caputo 1985: 6). Recounting his maniac, enraged fighting at Hue in *Vietnam-Perkasie*, W.D. Ehrhart listed all the things he felt he was "fighting at," and included among them "the movies of John Wayne and Audie Murphy" (qtd. in Rollins 1984: 423). In hindsight, another ex-soldier wrote that "[t]here was no doubt that they had tricked us, deceived us—they with their John Wayne charging up Mount Suribachi We had imagined a movie; we had envisioned a feast. What we got was a reality removed from all other realities; what we got was garbage pail" (qtd. in Pratt 1999: 648).

This continuous tendency to evoke John Wayne—what one Vietnam scholar called the "John Wayne Syndrome" (Herzog 2005: 17-24)—reveals just how prevalent and profoundly internalized the man's myth had been among the Vietnam generation; moreover, it underlines the scope of the demands and requisites made of the young men departing for Indochina, thus foreshadowing the scope of the future disappointment and frustration. John Wayne symbolized, to the general public but above all to the actual young veterans, the sharp contrast between the Good World War II in which their fathers had fought, and their own bad war; what is often brought up in these veterans' recollections, for example, is the sharp contrast between the alleged

WWII victory parades, where the homecoming troops were greeted by thousands and celebrated as heroes and saviours, and their own lonely returns. Then, rather than successors to John Wayne and his ilk—their own fathers, who had defeated the Nazis and kissed nurses in Time Square on victory parades—these ex-soldiers were viewed in pop culture and popular imagination through the much maligned figure of the Vietnam veteran (on the reception of Vietnam veterans, see: Anderegg 1991: 19-28; Beattie 1998; Hagopian 2001; Katzmann 2000; Lembcke 1998; MacPherson 1988; Sturken 2000; I have previously discussed some of the issues raised in this part of the chapter elsewhere; see: Musial 2013).

The infatuation with John Wayne, and his status as model American warrior, on the eve of Vietnam was sentimentalized and mythologized; but if the war in Indochina checked so many assumptions Americans could have had previously, concerning their government, military, foreign policy and fighting men, the myth of WWII as the Good War, though de-sentimentalized, continued to be cherished and cultivated in contrast to the bad war, only to be resurrected fully in the 1990s—now in *nostalgic* forms—and just in time for the assumptions listed by Hallin to be dusted off and put to good use in the War on Terror rhetoric. Indeed, it may be argued that WWII could turn into a fully nostalgic point of historical reference only *after* something like Vietnam and then the American conflicts that followed in the 1980s and '90s—covert, remote, minor, and somehow impersonal, like the technowar that was Desert Storm. In retrospect, WWII stood out from the mists of history as an epic, morally unambiguous and decidedly triumphant event of American past.

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In 1992, Stephen Ambrose published *Band of Brothers*, a bestseller which told the story of a single airborne company (“Easy” Company), from their training, through D-Day and the subsequent operations in Europe, until the end of war. Ambrose’s work was more of the traditional stock: it celebrated the heroism of the paratroopers, their patriotism and honour, their superb training and exceptional bond of brotherhood. The kind of tradition that Ambrose was perpetuating was obviously not a new thing; it was precisely the understanding of WWII which Fussell protested against. This heroic and often sentimentalized version of the conflict came eventually to be designated by some scholars and commentators as the myth of the “good war”: the name is borrowed from the title of a monumental non-fiction book by Studs Terkel, an oral history of the conflict that hit the shelves in the U.S. in 1984, and was itself in some ways a testament to the mythic image. In the introduction, having conducted over a hundred interviews with veterans and those who had experienced the war on the U.S. home front, Terkel lists all the ways in which the war had been good to America (such as the economic boom and opportunity, “liberation” of women, improvement of the employment condition for the black

population, the societal blessings of the G.I. Bill, etc.), and mentions, though more in passing, the ways in which it had been bad, or at least *not* good (the deaths of American families' sons, and the somewhat ambiguously presented gung-ho enthusiasm for military solutions in foreign policy, culminating in Vietnam). He picks several poignant quotations summarizing the U.S. experience in the conflict: "I got one eye. My feet hangs down. I got a joint mashed down in my back. I got a shoulder been broke. ... I'd go fight for my country right today. You're darn right. I'd go right now, boy" (Terkel 1984: 5-6); "World War Two was just an innocent time in America" (Terkel 1984: 13); "[reaching out to the rest of the world with help] was an act of such faith. ... World War Two? It's a war I still would go to" (Terkel 1984: 14). Terkel finally chose the following quotation from an ex-soldier to conclude the introduction:

World War Two had affected me in many ways ever since. In a short period of time, I had the most tremendous experiences of all of life: of fear, of jubilation, of misery, of hope, of comradeship, and of endless excitement. I honestly feel grateful for having been a witness to an event as monumental as anything in history and, in a very small way, a participant. (Terkel 1984: 14)

Terkel's introduction, and these quotations, encapsulate well the kind of sentimentalized view of the war, in which the positive aspects and outcomes, and the pride which the event generated, balance out the hardships, and in the long run make it "worth it." This view of the war is the sentiment that underlies and fuels the myth. Also, it is overtly nostalgic, as it speaks of "a better time" in a nation's history": of the pre-Vietnam time. Indeed, Vietnam is a dark spectre ever present in the interviews, an obvious glitch of American military history, and perhaps even an event that threw an even sharper light on the glorious endeavour that was WWII. The interviewees in Terkel's book make such comparisons often: "People here felt that we should have gone into Vietnam and finished it instead of backing off as we did. I suppose it's a feeling that carried over from World War Two when we finished Hitler" (Terkel 1984: 11); "[WWII] had been a different kind of war. 'It was not like your other wars.' ... It was not fratricidal. It was not, most of us profoundly believed, 'imperialistic.' Our enemy was, patently, obscene: the Holocaust maker. It was one war that many who would have resisted 'your other wars' supported enthusiastically. It was a 'just' war, if there is any such animal" (Terkel 1984: 13); "[on Okinawa] I heard of no fragging of unpopular officers, as in Vietnam. ... Unlike Vietnam, it wasn't just working-class kids doing the fighting" (Terkel 1984: 64); "That war was different from Vietnam. Definitely" (Terkel 1984: 93). And so it goes on and on (see also Hynes 1992: 99).

In 1998, came Tom Brokaw's bestselling *The Greatest Generation*, a book of personal stories of Americans who lived and fought during the 1940s; the titular designation—"the greatest generation"—quickly became a household term: Brokaw's thesis was that the lives of

those people had been the most special, and they, having grown up during the Depression, then proved their uniquely strong and patriotic spirit during WWII. They were, in Brokaw's view, a nation of heroes. Here, too, Vietnam loomed large as the counterpoint to the good war, and was presented almost exclusively as the conflict that produced a deep divide not only between the "greatest generation" and the generation of their children, but also among the "greatest" themselves. Mostly, the WWII veterans Brokaw portrays in his book were initially pro-war, but came to change their minds: "He supported [the Vietnam War] in the beginning, but when he saw it was poorly planned and executed, a terrible waste of young American lives, he turned against it" (Brokaw 1998: 384).

Incidentally that same year, in 1998, Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* was released, a film that not only became a smashing success and rejuvenated great interest in the war (Basinger 2003: xi-xiii), but one that also proved perhaps the man most influential in how we today imagine WWII, D-Day, and the European theatre of war, to have been; its gruesome, almost naturalistic opening half-hour on Omaha Beach has become notorious.

Stephen Ambrose was the historical consultant on the set of *Ryan*, where he met the movie's hero, Tom Hanks, who then himself got interested in the history of the American paratroopers in Europe. Hanks decided to pursue the subject further, and when Spielberg's studio, DreamWorks, contributed some serious money, the aforementioned *Band of Brothers* was created (Schatz 2008: 127-128). The TV series was if anything a better picture still, meticulously researched and produced, and arguably even more realistic, not only in its portrayal of combat but in its storylines, too. Following the scenes on the beach, the film returns to more-or-less traditional, epic mode of American combat film (Suid 2002: 634-636; Torgovnick 2005: 31-32). But the TV show never strays an inch too far from the realistic and the historically-viable, and is even more effective in endearing its audience, over ten hours of watching, to the characters, a number of which are given episode-long focus. From episode to episode, the circumstances in which the troopers find themselves deteriorate, the series thus ever more emphatically highlighting the scope of suffering and sacrifice among these soldiers; that is, of course, until the final episode in which the Germans, and then the Japanese, are defeated, and the remaining men of Easy Company indulge in an all-American game of baseball, moving in gooey slo-mo, bathed in sepia-golden light, even as the voiceover informs the viewer what became of each real-life man the camera alights on.

The show's objective of realism and its affective quality do not shy away from depicting the horror of the battlefield and the front. Terkel's interviewees spoke, too, of being wounded and maimed, of death, grief, pain, the terror of combat. But—as Janine Basinger observed concerning

the WWII Hollywood film—there are certain elements to all war stories that may be re-assembled and re-configured to create war narratives. What ultimately matters to what the narrative will end up saying, is the framing (Basinger 2003: 15). After Vietnam, notoriously the “living-room war” whose uncensored images of destruction and suffering were widely disseminated in contemporary media and which ended up disillusioning the nation as to the very nature of warfare, it would perhaps be impossible to offer viewers the super-heroic, but essentially clean portrayal of combat and the battlefield known from the post-war movies of John Wayne; the realism of *Ryan* and *Band of Brothers* is very likely a result. But crucially, in the case of these titles and generally WWII, the American casualties and the suffering of the American soldiers are located within a framework of a Manichean struggle and triumph over evil, of a nation’s being subjected to the ultimate test of endurance and heroism, and its coming out the victor: the dead or wounded soldier is not so much victimized, as his life and health are given in sacrifice for the common good of his nation; he is wounded, he grieves, he dies—but the more he does so, the greater the dimension of his war and of his nation’s conduct in it (see also: Moeller 1989: 241-244).

Following the attacks on World Trade Center in 2001, the nature of the Good War myth changed. Now that America was actually attacked—for the first time since Pearl Harbor, no less—and the War on Terror was soon to be launched, the myth and its imagery became useful in political rhetoric and military recruitment campaigns. And while the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are currently being worked through in American culture, the myth of WWII is paradoxically strengthened, for in a military culture such as the American one, with deep societal identification with the nation’s troops, war must remain central to the national imagination; and so that imagination naturally gravitates toward the one truly good war, fought by the greatest generation of Americans. It is thus a curious case of nostalgia: it is difficult to long for armed conflict, but, on the other hand, since armed conflicts “must happen,” one thinks warmly of the war where the cause was uncontentious, the fighting men—volunteers spurred by patriotic sentiment—noble and heroic, and the public at home not only enthusiastically supportive of the enterprise, but also actively engaged—through work in factories, weathering the rationing, buying bonds—in the war effort. As one commentator observed, one of the reasons

why Americans never tire of stories about World War II [is that] they make us feel virtuous. Our role in World War II was to destroy brutal regimes and liberate nations. That is what we like to think the United States does in the world. When we celebrate World War II, we celebrate ourselves: our unselfishness, our dedication to the cause of freedom, and our essential goodness. [...] We all enjoy being reminded of how righteous we are. Since that story is available to Americans, in the form of World War II, we grab it and won’t

let go. Nations, like individuals, nurture positive memories and forget or blot out those that don't show us as we imagine ourselves to be (Kinzer 2014).

Of course, something akin to nostalgia is readily used in rhetoric and propaganda; one critic, writing about this subject, wrote about "strategic mobilisation of the past rather than nostalgia" (O'Shaughnessy 2014: 43). In this context nostalgia plays two roles: it is the underlying emotional plane of a society recipient of the rhetoric, and also the emotional ground on which a certain myth rests, to which, in turn, the rhetoric or propaganda may appeal; in the case of WWII the feeling of nostalgia for what pre-Vietnam America was like feeds the myths that continue to define the image of the conflict; it is a cyclical relation.

It should also be pointed out that while personal nostalgia does usually have an actual referent in one's past—the implication is rooted in the word's etymology, after all—the object cultural nostalgia is far more vague, general, ephemeral, less clearly defined, referring to an imagined past that reflects the ills, lacks and desires of the present, and is therefore eagerly employed in such spheres of aggressive persuasion as advertising or political marketing. Nostalgia for WWII as a good war is a nostalgia for a myth. One way of dispelling it is to do away with its broader components, certain misconceptions, oversimplifications, that have seeped into popular culture and mainstream imagination, ever more successfully obscuring the "real war" among Americans, especially the younger generations; another veteran of the European theatre and author, Edward Wood, Jr. (Wood 2006; Wood 2011: 3-4; see also Adams 1993; Hynes 1992; Pauwels 2002; Weber 2008), writing in the past decade, listed these stereotypes as the pervasive notion of the Greatest Generation and:

1. The impression that the U.S. had won the war largely by itself (see also Kirsch).
2. The conviction that the war was a Manichean struggle between good and evil, that the good triumphed, and that the lesson to take home is that evil should never be appeased, but hit with all military might
3. And finally the belief that a war like the Good War is beneficial for a nation, as it bolsters national spirit and unity, boosts economy, ensures power and influence on the international area etc.

The Third Reich *did* turn out to be perhaps the closest in our history to what we consider evil, but what should be remembered is that the Allies in vast majority were not aware of the extent of Nazi crimes until 1945 and the opening of the concentration camps; as Paul Fussell wrote in another book on WWII, the Holocaust is what made the war ultimately "worth" fighting, but that what should not be at the same time forgotten is the price (the monumentality of destruction, the millions killed in combat or as "collateral damage") and the fact that the

Holocaust was *not the reason* the Americans went to war in the first place (Fussell 2005: 157-158; see also Hynes 1992: 103-104). All of this is especially important as the apparent “do not appease evil” platitude was woven into the rhetoric of George W. Bush that led the United States to the invasion of Iraq in 2003; for example, very soon after the World Trade Center attacks, the president said, in a speech to the UN: “In the Second World War, we learnt there is no isolation from evil... That evil has returned and that cause is renewed” (qtd. in Rachman 2007; see also Kirsch 2011 on examples of Barrack Obama’s use of WWII in his rhetoric justifying U.S. involvement in the civil war in Libya). To further stir up the desired national ferment, the bizarre rhetorical concept of the Axis of Evil was concocted a few months later, using the two magic formulas—Axis, as in the Axis powers of WWII, Evil, as in America’s natural enemies—and while Iraq was the intended destination of the U.S. armed forces, Iran and North Korea, known for their nuclear programmes, were co-opted to make the axis a intuitively-satisfying trio. A commentator, writing years later about the post-9/11 saturation of public language and thinking with World War II mentality, argued that “... in evoking the memory of the Second World War, Mr Bush was tapping into a wave of nostalgia for the heroism of 1939-45 that had been building up for a decade. ... Memories of the Second World War helped to form the mental map for those pushing for the invasion of Iraq” (Rachman 2007; see also Torgovnick 2005: ix-xxi).

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As of this writing, the public mood in the U.S. concerning the country’s overseas military engagement seems wane. But what the nostalgic re-imaginings of World War II—on the eve of the Vietnam War, and in the War on Terror three decades later—can teach us is that the myth of the Good War is never too far gone, and when skilfully evoked it can be manipulated and used to justify any military intervention. To continue to dispel something of the myth of American World War II might be, therefore, with a benefit for the future of the world’s peace.

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SUMMARY

„It's a War I Still Would Go To”: The American War in Vietnam and Nostalgic Re-Imaginations of World War II

In this article, I trace the process through which World War II (WWII) has become the „good war” in American culture. Drawing on a range of books and articles published on the subject—and often written by the war’s veterans—I summarize their findings considering the essentially mythical nature of the conflict’s common memory. The well-known aspects of this myth include the view that WWII was a straightforward struggle between good and evil, that the U.S. soldiers who fought it belonged to “the greatest generation,” and that it was ultimately an expression and activation of American honor, heroism, and gallantry. Further on, I argue that beginning in the 1980s, a resurgence of cultural interest in WWII becomes evident, but now tinged not only with the emerging image of “the good war,” but also with nostalgia—and that the “nostalgization” of the conflict was caused directly by, and indeed possible only because of, the U.S. experience in Vietnam. I trace the multifaceted and multiple references to WWII in Vietnam War narratives—but also to Vietnam in some nostalgic representations of WWII.

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KEYWORDS

World War II, Vietnam War, myth, nostalgia, American culture

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