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The Vietnam War Memorial and the Gulf War

Paul L. Atwood

This article discusses the debate over the “meaning” of the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C., relating it to the revision of the “Vietnam syndrome” as it has been played out in recent U.S. armed interventions overseas. Considerable political struggle occurred during the design phase of the memorial over which values the monument should enshrine. Since its construction the memorial has continued to be a focus for controversy about the future direction of U.S. foreign policy and has functioned as a magnet for continuing historical and political attempts to sort out the “lessons” of the second Indochina war. This debate has helped shape the manner in which both the Reagan and Bush administrations have responded to foreign “crises.” The issue in the Persian Gulf was substantially the same as in Indochina, and at least for the moment, reactionary interpretations of the lessons of Vietnam are in the ascendant. Historical and cultural revisionism contributed to public willingness to employ devastating force against Grenada, Panama, and Iraq.

As we approach the tenth anniversary of the dedication of the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C., the outcome of the Gulf War may serve to underscore the debate over the “meaning” of this highly controversial symbol. It is clear that the Wall, as Vietnam veterans call it, has occupied a very special, if not central, symbolic space in the ongoing politicocultural attempt to make sense of the war in Indochina and define it for history. The Vietnam memorial has become a pivotal cultural icon during the last decade, one which has been the subject of intense scrutiny and struggle to delineate its importance in the ongoing debate over interpretation of the war.¹ Most important, America’s “Wailing Wall” has been emblematic of the argument over the future direction of American foreign policy. President George Bush’s promise that the Gulf War would not be “another Vietnam” was a conscious attempt to exploit the Gulf crisis to purge the national sense of shame and impotence that has been seen as the negative legacy of Vietnam by proponents of armed diplomacy.

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On one side of the debate are those who call into question the proclaimed role of the United States as defender of the “free world” in the aftermath of World War II. How was it possible, many ask, that the United States should virtually have destroyed Vietnam in the name of saving it? And what does the unconscionable destruction, chiefly on the territory of our ostensible ally, South Vietnam, say about the real aims of American policy? Many American citizens see the Vietnam memorial as a necessary reminder of the tragic end of imperial adventurism and a warning to future generations not to become trapped in a net of presidential lies and deceptions. The nearly 59,000 names on the Wall bear mute testimony to the costs of armed policy.²

Others see the memorial as a “black gash of shame” that seems to celebrate defeat and dishonor. During his presidency, Ronald Reagan sought to cast the Vietnam memorial as a testament to and symbol of a failed “noble cause” that became tragic primarily because a “vocal minority” sabotaged the nation’s will to win.³ In this view, the death of Americans without clear-cut victory has rendered their sacrifice all but void, leaving bile in the mouths of survivors. The “lesson” of Vietnam then, which the memorial ought to teach, is that “good intentions” are a nullity in the absence of victory.

Such logic gathered power in the face of the Reagan administration’s use of force in Lebanon, Grenada, Nicaragua, and El Salvador. Later, President Bush built upon the foundations laid by his predecessor to slam into tiny Panama, under the cover of darkness and with high tech ablazing. The fact that the United Nations condemned this violation of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Panama, as did the Organization of American States, was lost in the popular exultation following the lightning success of Operation Just Cause. The “Vietnam syndrome” was being laid to rest. The America of the 1950s was coming back. “By God! We’ve licked the Vietnam syndrome,” gushed President Bush after the hundred-hour war in the Iraqi desert.

The Wall was controversial from the start, and the initial antagonisms to its design were really deep cover for objections concerning the outcome of the war. Bothered by the collective amnesia about Vietnam that overtook the United States after the fall of Saigon in 1975, a group of Vietnam veterans headed by Jan Scruggs, Tom Carhart, and James Webb initiated a campaign to build a memorial to the war dead on the nearly sacral ground of the Washington Mall. Despite the best intentions of the memorial committee they assembled, the old bitter controversies immediately reemerged with passionate intensity. Pentagon officials sneered at the efforts of the committee, composed initially entirely of Vietnam veterans, calling them crybabies and vowing that no memorial would ever be built to “losers.” The committee then attempted to enlist bipartisan support on Capitol Hill in the persons of Senators Barry Goldwater and George McGovern, but their efforts were impeded by an avalanche of letters hostile to the latter who, in the minds of many writers, was the man most responsible for the American “defeat.” When the committee approached the heads of large multinational corporations, many of which had profited handsomely during the war, they were accused of attempting to extort blood money. In short, all the controversies that had promoted the collective amnesia threatened the construction of the memorial.⁴

The memorial committee insisted on an open, democratic design contest and approved the selection of Maya Ying Lin, a Yale architecture undergraduate and a Chinese-American. Ms. Lin, barely twenty years old, had few direct memories of the war and described herself as apolitical. Yet her vision of stark black walls emerging

from earth, which itself appears to be wounded, struck a chord in the design committee composed of distinguished architects. The emphasis of the design was on healing and invited sober reflection about the costs of the war. It functioned in the manner of an ancient Roman *memento mori*, a serious reminder that we all must die and return to the earth. The inclined angles of the walls suggested human hands opening to reach mourners in a healing embrace. Another grace of the design lay in the mirror-smooth texture of the black granite. As anyone who has ever visited the memorial knows, the effect of standing before the Wall and pondering the names, at the same time seeing the reflection of one's own face and the sky overhead and nearby trees, is a profoundly moving experience that aptly symbolizes the solemnity of death while capturing a continuing commitment to the living.

In the aftermath of Vietnam, however, ideas about art and heroism were not what they had been. The imperial renderings typical of other Washington war memorials could not address the collective emotion of the nation about Vietnam — if such a thing could be said to exist. Unlike the other monuments, which glorify heroism and hence war, Maya Ying Lin's design was a superbly contemplative abstraction that begged an utterly sane question: "Is war, any war, worth this price?"

H. Ross Perot, the millionaire Texas financier who had underwritten the cost of the design contest, ran roughshod over the democratic procedures that had resulted in approval of the Lin design and railed against the design committee, leading a conservative attack on the perceived symbolism of the design. James Webb, a secretary of the navy during the Reagan administration — and a highly acclaimed author of a successful popular novel on Vietnam — asked publicly, "Why is it black?" and "Why is it underground?" Thomas Carhart, a former West Pointer and platoon leader in Vietnam, whose own design had been rejected, said, "I just can't live with this. There have been a lot of us who have been looking for a memorial to celebrate and glorify the Vietnam veteran."

Before long, many veterans nationwide were referring to the design as a mark of shame.⁵

In September 1981, William F. Buckley's *National Review* lobbed a bombshell, calling the design "Orwellian glop," and urged the Reagan administration "to throw the switch on this project."

Okay, we lost the Vietnam War . . . Okay, the thing was mismanaged from start to finish. But the American soldiers who died in Vietnam fought for their country and deserve better than the outrage that has been approved as their memorial.⁶

In a *Washington Post* article, Tom Wolfe called the memorial a "tribute to Jane Fonda." Labeling the jurors in the design the "Mullahs of Modernism," in a blatant attempt to tarnish the patriotism of the design jury in the wake of the Iranian hostage crisis, Wolfe added:

By the late 1940's the universities were turning out students who acted as if modernism were encoded in their genes. You could put a gun at the temple of one of the new breed and you couldn't make him sculpt a realistic figure of a soldier to put up on a pedestal.⁷

Many opponents of the design objected to its color. The issue of the memorial's blackness as symbolic of shame could not fail to offend many of the nation's black veterans, who justly felt that they had borne a disproportionate share of the burden

and grief of Vietnam. One of the nation's highest ranking black officers, General George Price, was moved to say:

I remind all of you of Martin Luther King, who fought for justice for all Americans. Black is not a color of shame. I am tired of hearing it called such by you. Color meant nothing on the battlefields of Korea and Vietnam. We are all equal in combat. Color should mean nothing now.⁸

Yet clearly, the color of Asians had meant something on the battlefields. Without doubt, the race of Maya Ling Yin was a source of deep dissatisfaction to many who felt that the design of the memorial was compromised by its Asian-American authorship. Unfortunately, the official history of the memorial, *To Heal a Nation*, downplays this ugly aspect of the choice of the winning design. Though many veterans felt that such a choice was a fitting, though unintended, touch, which might help to effect reconciliation, many others conveyed contempt. Numerous veterans working to raise funds for the memorial encountered expressions of outrage that a “dink” or a “slope” had been allowed to design “our” memorial. Admiral Thomas Moore, a former chairman of the Joint Chiefs during the Vietnam War, went so far as to say “I don’t like the idea that it was not designed by an American.”⁹ Such attitudes demonstrated that the anti-Asian variant of racism, which helped to foster the war, is still endemic to American society.

Responding to the reactionary backlash, Secretary of the Interior James Watt refused his necessary signature unless the site could be redesigned to include a flag, unusual for a war memorial, as well as a heroic statue dedicated to the valor of Vietnam veterans. Since Watt’s intransigence otherwise spelled doom, a compromise had to be effected by the committee. Over the strenuous objections of Maya Ying Lin, a bronze of heroic stature, depicting three American fighting men — Caucasian, Afro-American, and Latino — was added. This marked a turning point in the ideological struggle to control the meaning of the Vietnam memorial.¹⁰

For a brief hiatus during and shortly after the Vietnam conflict, warriors went out of fashion. But with the advent of the so-called Reagan revolution, revisionist interpretations of the Vietnam experience were catapulted to the forefront of cultural productions, not least in those oriented to mass consumption. No longer the alienated, disaffected symbol of failed policies, the Vietnam veteran in films like the *Rambo* series, *Missing in Action*, *Uncommon Valor*, replayed and won the war in popular fantasy. The Clint Eastwood epic *Heartbreak Ridge*, in addition to functioning as a two-hour Marine Corps recruiting vehicle, depicted the U.S. invasion of Grenada as standard military heroics by young U.S. citizens against evil incarnate, also serving ominous notice that there would be no more Vietnams — no defeats, that is. At about the same time, a largely adolescent audience flocked to see *Hamburger Hill*, a film about a notorious battle in which the United States suffered horrible casualties, only to give up the territory a few days later. The film was a shameless attempt to elevate infantry “grunt” to Valhalla epic: any sacrifice is worth the price as long as the boys comport themselves heroically. The sales of war toys, virtually banished from toy stores throughout the 1970s, since 1982 have risen by 700 percent. During the same period the number of hours of “war cartoons” increased from 1.5 to 43 hours per week in 1989. In the latter year, the average four- to eight-year-old would see 250 half-hour episodes of these cartoons and over a thousand thirty-second commercials selling the paraphernalia accompanying this propaganda.¹¹ As one antiwar veterans organization notes, this amounts to a videonic basic training for kids.¹² The tears shed

at the Vietnam War Memorial are ceasing to be in sorrow over the tragic waste of lives, both American and Indochinese. As the revisionists have their way, the Wall will represent a symbol of determination never to “fail” again.

Many of the soldiers who served in the Gulf, particularly those in the front-line outfits, were children when the sea change in mass media depictions of Vietnam, and of militarism, was undertaken. The popular understanding of the Vietnam conflict had led to revulsion toward war in general and a virtual boycott of G.I. Joe toys (best-sellers in the early years of the Vietnam War) and similar products. At the most basic level, the public believed that the United States had been led into combat as a result of presidential duplicity and congressional ineptitude and that a tragedy had ensued for America’s stature in the world. By 1984 this view, all but banished from media outlets, was replaced by a manufactured consensus that an armed American foreign policy was the requisite nostrum to address the decline of the United States — as defined by the Reagan-Bush administration.

The essential shallowness of public understanding of the issues involved in Vietnam also ill prepared the American people to understand many important facets of the Gulf crisis. The gnawing sense of self-doubt, exacerbated by almost ceaseless media and presidential jeremiads about the need to expunge American impotence, also contributed to the psychological imperative to see the United States “standing tall” once again.

The parallels between the Vietnam conflict and the Gulf require some elaboration.

The success of the Chinese Revolution in 1949, and the defeat of the anointed client, the Kuomintang, upset American development plans for post-World War II Asia. Ironically, the very defeat of the Japanese by the United States paved the way for the Chinese communists, especially since the forces of Chiang Kai-shek were notoriously incompetent and corrupt.¹³ A full-scale assault against the Vietnamese Revolution became a necessary gambit for American policy after the Geneva Accords of 1954 all but endorsed the victory of the Vietminh. The agreements at Geneva, stipulating that Vietnam be partitioned temporarily until reunifying elections could be held under United Nations auspices in 1956, augured ill for U.S. plans. For one thing, the election of Ho Chi Minh was a foregone conclusion, which alone would have punctured the crucial element of American anticommunist ideology that communists achieved power (in the pre-Gorbachev era) only by means of the gun or by trickery. A reunited Vietnam, under a communist government mandated in an open, internationally monitored election, seemed to spell disaster for American plans. The elections were therefore aborted, and a new nation, South Vietnam, was “invented.”¹⁴

North Vietnam was never the creation of either Moscow or Beijing, but the United States set up a quisling government south of the 17th parallel since, in the absence of the Kuomintang, a new client was needed to spearhead attempts by U.S. policymakers to salvage what was left of Southeast Asia for themselves. Ngo Dinh Diem’s refusal to participate in nationwide elections, and his efforts to undo the genuine reforms of the Vietminh in the South Vietnamese countryside, led to the creation of the National Liberation Front in 1960. Diem’s attempts to conscript peasants to fight against their own compatriots had little success, so an American invasion of South Vietnam became necessary to secure the continued existence of this client regime against the ostensible beneficiaries of the “democracy” the United States had brought to southern Vietnam.

President Lyndon Johnson appealed to Congress for endorsement of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution so that he might facilitate American military intervention, having seen the United States' political and economic policies fail in Southeast Asia. As congressional hearings and *The Pentagon Papers* showed, Johnson lied to the Congress and the American people about the sequence of events in the Gulf of Tonkin in order to induce them to believe that the North Vietnamese had intentionally committed an act of unprovoked aggression against the peaceful forces of the United States. In fact, the United States had fostered a secret plan to initiate bombing of North Vietnam well prior to early August 1964; all that was needed to set it in motion was a pretext.¹⁵

There are significant parallels in the Gulf crisis. The most important is the continued dominance of the United States in the Middle East and the containment of Arab nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism, just as the primary impetus for the United States in 1954 had been to salvage preponderance in Southeast Asia and contain China. While not exactly a client of the United States, Saddam Hussein nevertheless benefited by playing a role against Iran that suited the overriding premise of American policy. When he invaded Kuwait he stepped out of his assigned role and threatened the fragile balance of forces in the Gulf region so carefully crafted in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution.

An Iraq in control of both domestic and Kuwaiti oil, with expanded outlets to the sea, would have become the de facto regional power, one which owed much of its military machine to the Soviets (though also to West Germany, France, Britain, and the United States), and one which clearly had tendencies toward an independent policy of its own. That may have included renewed war with Iran. It may also have meant brokered agreements with both Germany and Japan to deliver oil at prices substantially lower than those which the U.S.-led consortiums in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait had been charging these two rapidly emerging economic superpowers. In the wake of U.S. economic decline, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia had been depositing their immense sums of petrodollars in Japanese banks, thereby strengthening the Japanese system.¹⁶

In Southeast Asia the United States had lost its favored client, the Kuomintang, which it had hoped would contain the communists both in China itself and in neighboring Vietnam. Kuomintang troops had been employed north of the 16th parallel in 1946 in order to partition Vietnam in the aftermath of the September Revolution of 1945 and to allow British (and rearmed Japanese) troops to prepare the way for the return of the French in the south. After the abject ejection of Chiang's forces from mainland China by the communists in 1949, the long-cherished dream of the "Great China Market" seemed at an end. In response, the United States sought to reindustrialize Japan as the "workshop of Asia," and to anchor what remained of the region to the Western economic system. To function as a linchpin in the new global order envisioned at Bretton Woods, Japan would require sources of raw materials in Southeast Asia. Vietnam, therefore, became symbolically critical as the United States pinned its hopes on the French to retain Indochina in the Western orbit. After the debacle at Dien Bien Phu, the United States sought to subvert the 1954 Geneva Accords and create a new client out of whole cloth.

The role played by the United Nations is important. As an arm of the UN, the Geneva Conference stipulated that the world body accepted the territorial integrity

of Vietnam. Partition between 1954 and 1956 was intended only as a temporary measure to allow the return of peoples north and south. The elections of 1956 were to be carefully monitored by India, Canada, and Poland, and the elected government duly recognized. That would have left the United States bereft of clients in Southeast Asia at the time, a fact that explains the tenacity with which succeeding U.S. administrations toughed it out until 1973. At least by then Thailand had been groomed to replace South Vietnam. Communism in Indonesia, Burma, and Malaya had been extirpated. By then, too, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos had been so devastated that any claim to victory against the United States could only be called Pyrrhic. The near apocalyptic condition of Indochina virtually ensured that eventually these nations would come begging for normalization of relations with the United States, even allowing draconian International Monetary Fund and World Bank methods to direct their future development (as is the case in Laos).

The UN never ruled on the matter of the disputed Iraqi-Kuwaiti border, a failure that eventuated in the crisis. Long before the UN came into existence, after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, Britain had carved out putative client states of its own to guard its hegemony in the Gulf region, having assented to a French sphere of influence farther to the west, in Syria and Lebanon. The boundaries assigned to Iraq seemed arbitrary but were intended to keep the emirate of Kuwait as a trading entrepôt in Britain's control, guarding as it did the Persian Gulf. Oil was not yet the prize. In fact, Britain had been encroaching upon Ottoman territories even prior to World War I in order to thwart German intentions in the region. However, in the aftermath of the Great War, Britain decided that keeping all its mandates and clients in a weakened state was simply good policy, so the former Turkish province of Basra was not incorporated into Iraq. Some of it was, and the rest was partitioned off as the British colony of Kuwait.

There had long been an emirate of Kuwait, dating back to the late eighteenth century, but there had never been any assigned boundary to this tiny fiefdom, the size of which expanded or shrank according to the size of the herds of livestock and the territory they grazed. Numerous sheikdoms and emirates also existed on the territory of what would become various Gulf states, yet few of these — and none in Iraq — survived the dismemberment of the Turkish Empire. Kuwait served the important purposes of providing Britain with undisputed naval authority in the Gulf while weakening Iraq and Iran. When the immense reservoirs of oil in Mesopotamia, the Arabian Peninsula, and Persia were discovered and put into production, this state of affairs appeared as geopolitical prescience on the part of Britain. There was then no chance that Iraq's claim to Kuwait would ever be taken seriously.

Just as World War I caused the breakup of the Ottoman Empire, so did World War II signal the dismemberment of the British Empire. The United States played Rome to Britain's Athens, and the hegemonic position formerly occupied by the latter fell to the former. Increasingly, U.S. policy evolved to thwart the imperial hangover of France and Britain and continue the geopolitical chess game of balancing power in the Mideast. The arrangement crafted by the former European great powers seemed adequate, pitting as it did Arab against Arab, Arab against Persian, Turk, and Kurd — and after 1947, Arab against Israeli. The boundaries established by the British in the Gulf ensured virtually perpetual instability, since national frontiers encompassed amalgams of widely differing peoples and faiths. Thus, the single

overriding threat to U.S. influence, political unity among Arabs, was already effectively subverted. The attempt by Saddam Hussein to achieve union between Iraq and Kuwait, thereby giving Iraq control over the lion's share of Gulf oil, would have severely disrupted American plans for the region, given Iraq much too much leverage over the international price of oil, and potentially given Iraq too much *real* military prowess as a regional power. Potentially, too, success at this unification, under the noses of the West, would have spurred renewed Pan-Arab nationalism, the very outcome U.S. policy had always been at pains to obviate.

Put succinctly, Saddam's success at achieving integration between his nation and Kuwait would have posed a deadly threat to American development plans, just as the victory of the Chinese communists and political unification of Southern and Northern Vietnam appeared to have done to plans for Southeast Asia between 1949 and 1954.

The Persian Gulf Resolution, passed overwhelmingly by Congress in votes almost as lopsided as the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, was sold to the American public as the moral equivalent of a Red Cross mission to liberate Kuwaitis from oppressive rule. An identical pitch, with respect to the "salvation" of South Vietnam, was made in 1964 to support, first, the bombing of North Vietnam and later the injection of American combat troops into South Vietnam. Missing in 1964, at least for public consumption, was information that would have negated the charge that the North Vietnamese had perpetrated the ethical equal of Pearl Harbor, since the destroyers *Maddox* and *Turner Joy* had been assisting South Vietnamese naval forces to harass North Vietnamese ports. Missing, too, was information on the secret plan to bomb North Vietnam, which had been on the shelf for some time. Most important, the American public was fed the myth that the "independent nation" of South Vietnam was the victim of the illegal aggression of its neighbor. All but forgotten at the time was that in 1955 the United States had subverted the mechanisms of the nascent United Nations to bring peace to Indochina.

The United States also had a secret plan to inject a rapid deployment force into the Middle East.¹⁷ When investigators uncovered the plan, top Pentagon officials initially said that the operations were geared to forestall a potential Soviet move into the Gulf region. However, the Soviets had acknowledged an American sphere of influence there dating back to the "crisis" over Iran in 1946, when the Soviets were induced to withdraw from northern Iranian territories in exchange for a pledge of a share of Iranian oil. Having begun the process of dispossessing the British, the Americans were not inclined to grant Soviet concessions, so the Iranian parliament, the Majlis, repudiated the deal with the Soviets. The United States pleaded ignorance and the Soviet withdrawal stood. The USSR has never contemplated a military challenge to U.S. hegemony in the region for the same reason that it has never moved westward beyond the pale of the Iron Curtain — the virtual certainty of thermonuclear war.

The real threat came from the direction of Pan-Arabian nationalism, potentially leading to unification of Arab states, or from Islamic fundamentalists extremely hostile to satraps like the shah of Iran, or the royal houses of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and the pollution of their ancient traditions by Western influences. It was for this reason that rapid deployment became a fixture of American foreign policy, not because of any presumed Soviet threat. Yet that rationale had served as cover for the development of such military capabilities as were demonstrated in Operation

Desert Storm. That American citizens had ever believed the Soviets were willing to risk nuclear war over the Mideast, that Soviet troops, for example, were actually bent on moving from Afghanistan, after their invasion of the country in 1979, to the Gulf, is testament to the ability of the media to “invent reality” for the body politic.¹⁸

The transubstantiation of the ethos of revulsion toward war, which characterized the immediate post-Vietnam era, has been abetted by the mass media. This was characteristic. Even during the later years of the Vietnam War, when public opinion had clearly shifted against it, the press and electronic media had largely followed the Nixon administration’s line, even after the Pentagon Papers had been broken by the *New York Times*.¹⁹ The unwillingness of media outlets to challenge the Reagan-Bush interpretation of foreign affairs resulted in the Iran-contra debacle,²⁰ accompanied by a profound unwillingness on the part of any elite institutions, including Congress and the press, to plumb the depths of, and expose, what amounted to a coup over the Constitution. Despite enough information about a possible deal arranged by the Reagan campaign in 1980 with the Ayatollah Khomeini not to release Iranian-held American hostages until after the November elections, a possibility made more palpable by revelations in Congress that Reagan did, indeed, provide arms to Iran as early as 1981, the Dukakis campaign of 1988 broached not a word about the matter. Numerous American citizens exclaimed that Reagan was justified in whatever he did simply because they believed that he had restored the economy to health and made America “walk tall” again. Contragate has thus emerged as the most extensive whitewash in American history.

Therefore, it should come as no surprise that, with very few exceptions in establishment media, no serious scrutiny was given to the virtually unspoken reasons why the United States went to war with Iraq.

In 1958, when the Baathist Party of Iraq overthrew the British-installed satrap, King Faisal, the United States declared that any attempt by Iraq to annex Kuwait would result in immediate American military intervention, despite the fact that Kuwait was still a British possession. Earlier, in 1956, the United States had intervened politically to call off a combined Anglo-Franco-Israeli attack on Egypt to forestall an eruption of Pan-Arab nationalism. Efforts by the former European imperialists to recapture control — or perhaps their delusions of grandeur — threatened future American plans. As early as 1945, the United States had given warning that any threat to American access to the “greatest of all material prizes,” that is, the immense Gulf oil reservoirs, would constitute a *casus belli*.²¹

So rationales such as concern for the fate of the Kuwaiti people, or the stance for the principle of nonaggression, were disingenuous at best. No such scruples came into play when Turkey invaded Cyprus, when Indonesia invaded the former Portuguese Timor, when South Africa refused to withdraw from Namibia, when China raped Tibet. Or more salient, when Iraq invaded Iran. In the latter case there was no chance that either side could effect total victory. Rather, the attraction on the part of the United States to supply both belligerents concerned the outcome that both would be severely weakened, as well as the matter of cash generated by arms sales to Iran for use in supplying the contras. The simultaneous engagement of Saddam Hussein as a cryptoclient appeared to make it unlikely that he would step outside his assigned role to challenge the United States. It would seem, too, that Saddam miscalculated in his assessment of the situation. He knew that the UN knew of the long-standing dis-

pute between Iraq and Kuwait over borders. He knew that the world knew and, more emphatically, the Arab world knew, that Kuwaiti intransigence on the matter of raising oil prices redounded to the extreme detriment of Iraq and its effort to clear its debt after the war with Iran. Finally, all players knew of Iraqi grievances over Kuwaiti slant drilling in the disputed Rumailah oilfield. When the State Department refused categorically to condemn Iraqi aggressive moves toward Kuwait in late July 1990, Saddam reasoned that he could get away with the annexation.

Whether or not the United States led Iraq into a trap can be debated. Clearly, the Iraqi invasion presented an opportunity to mobilize the rapid deployment of U.S. forces in a grand way, which could be seen to stand against the forces of illegal aggression in the outlaw world and be taken as a generous move by a strong power to liberate a captive people from a savage bully. At the same time the “principle of nonaggression” enshrined in the charter of the UN could be upheld.

The proclaimed purpose of the UN — to make war unnecessary and virtually impossible — was subverted in Southeast Asia in 1955–1956, and the same was done in the Southwest in 1990–1991. The members of the Security Council were browbeaten, cajoled, bribed, and threatened until all but two voted for the resolution that would enable the United States to undertake the most intensive bombing campaign in history — worse over the duration even than in Vietnam — in the name of waging peace. Sanctions that would have left the civilians of Iraq with enough food, medicine, and other basics to sustain the essentials of life, while progressively eroding Iraq’s warmaking capacity (and not, incidentally, its ability to conduct the sort of terror operations launched against its own civilians), were bypassed in favor of use of the greatest army ever assembled by the only global institute ostensibly devoted to peace. War, with its attendant miseries — refugees, untreatable wounded, infant deaths due to exposure and dehydration, the almost total destruction of civilian infrastructure, and so forth — was the object of choice by a UN in thrall to an America with a chip on its shoulder and a grudge to bear.

All predictable, just as the outcome in Indochina was prophesied. Much ink has been expended about the “defeat” of the United States in Southeast Asia. But things do not look so today. Once the “rice bowl of Asia,” Vietnam cannot now feed itself. The effects of Agent Orange have resulted in a population afflicted with the highest rates of birth defects in the world. Though promised assistance to rebuild by President Nixon, Vietnam has received instead war by other means in the form of an extensive embargo that, coupled with fiscal amateurism on the part of erstwhile revolutionaries, has resulted in the near collapse of the Vietnamese economy. In neighboring Cambodia, the American bombing campaign of the late 1960s and early 1970s plowed the killing fields from which the Khmer Rouge reaped their grisly harvest.

Though Saddam Hussein has been weakened vis-à-vis his immediate neighbors, he remains a source of terror to the Shiite population of southern Iraq and the Kurds of the north. Kuwait is a monumental ecological catastrophe. Having waged war in the name of liberating Kuwait, the United States has nevertheless come down on the side of the continued rule of Saddam in Iraq — or at least of the Baathist Party by which he rules. Having repeatedly said that Saddam had victimized his own population, George Bush victimized them twice when he unleashed Desert Storm to expunge their infrastructure and reduce Iraq, in the words of the UN, to a “near apocalyptic” state. Now Saddam victimizes Iraqis thrice. All this in the name of freedom.

Freedom for whom? Not for the Saudis who want an end to feudal rule. Not for Kuwaitis who daily witness the priorities of their emir to restore his own splendor while those who bore the full burden of Iraq's occupation languish without adequate shelter and water. Not for the Shiites and Kurds of Iraq who were led to believe that their deliverance was at hand.

Saddam and his minions have been delivered freedom *carte blanche* to renew their tyranny. Hafez al Assad of Syria, a bloodstained despot and the moral equal of Saddam, has been free virtually to annex Lebanon (the part not already under the control of Israel) at the very moment U.S. citizens thought that their troops were liberating Kuwait. The bribe of \$3 billion paid to Assad as *quid pro quo* for his services to the "alliance" against Iraq is already being spent for Chinese Silkworm missiles possessing much greater accuracy than Scuds.²² Both Saudi Arabia and Israel will receive new top-of-the-line high-tech weapons. The military operation that was supposed to bring peace and stability to the Gulf and the Mideast has prepared the way for an even bloodier future round.

But the United States has secured freedom too — freedom for the major American oil companies in partnership with Aramco to further control petroleum producers in the Gulf and competitive consumers like Germany and Japan, and freedom for the Bechtel Corporation to rebuild ruined Kuwait. It has long been an article of faith that OPEC was dominated by the Gulf states, which conspired to raise prices at the expense of American and other consumers. In fact, the United States has always been a hidden member of OPEC, and the major oil companies were never sorry to see the price of oil go up. As world prices stabilized over the last five years, overseas operations became more important since Third World wages can be paid there. The major block to renewed domestic production in the United States is not that the price of oil is not high enough but that the cost of American labor is highly injurious to the rate of profit. (This is also one reason why American construction companies engaged in rebuilding Kuwait will not hire American workers for the job.) Now the United States has co-opted the Saudi royal family even more closely. The emir of Kuwait, too, owes a great debt to his benefactor. Both provincial governors will abet U.S. pricing policies and both will begin to withdraw petrodollars from Japanese banks for deposit in troubled U.S. banks and for the benefit of their investment strategies.

Once again in the driver's seat, the United States will control the price of oil available to Germany and the European Community (EC) in general. The policy of the last forty years toward Japan to control its sources of energy is buttressed, and Nippon's banking system has been simultaneously diminished. Faced with severe challenges to its post-World War II policies of global domination, the United States has moved to create a "new world order" by again seeking to reduce its rivals to mere subsidiaries. From the view at the top the prospects look good.

But matters are never that simple. Neither the EC nor Japan will simply roll over. Perhaps more important, the Soviet Union seems unlikely to become a mere client. Though clearly a profound change has occurred over the last few years in relations between the superpowers, the bombing of Baghdad, a capital virtually on Soviet borders, could not have taken place without Soviet complicity, and the future remains highly problematic.

Optimists believe that the recent coup failure against Mikhail Gorbachev represents the eventual triumph of democracy in the USSR. However, despite lack of

careful planning by the plotters, the coup represents a deeply rooted and profound animus against both Gorbachev's and Boris Yeltsin's reform program by hard-line conservatives and others who view a return to authoritarian rule as the only solution to worsening economic and political conditions. Let us remember that a majority of the Russian population remained indifferent throughout the coup attempt.

The Soviet economy is on the verge of collapse. Soviet policy of the last fifty years to keep Germany weak has come to failure, and Americans are seen as more than partially to blame by right-wing organizations like Pamyat. While NATO troop strength has abated somewhat, Western missiles are still poised at the heart of the USSR. In addition, a new massively armed American naval presence remains on the Soviet southern flank, and while President Bush insists that most of it will be withdrawn, that remains to be seen.

The collapse of the Soviet center could lead to a recapitulation of strikingly similar conditions to those which occasioned the rise of totalitarianism and paranoia in the first place. The United States will probably have little to say about a return to authoritarian rule as long as the Soviet leaders are playing footsie with Washington. However, many great Russian nationalists, especially, see Gorbachev and Yeltsin as sellouts to the West. The events of August 19, 1991, may yet prove to have been a dress rehearsal. We can be sure that future putschists will be much more aggressive and ruthless.

A sharpening of militaristic competition between the superpowers would portend worse than catastrophe, yet many Americans seem to bask in the supposed glories of desert victory.

And that returns us to our initial theme.

Returning Vietnam veterans brought more than tales of hardship in jungle warfare. Many carried messages about large-scale atrocities committed in the name of saving Vietnam. Many avowed that the high command had lost control of the troops, many of whom refused any longer to endanger themselves or to participate in the slaughter. Public confessionals such as the Citizens Committee of Inquiry in 1970 and the testimony of returning Vietnam soldiers during the Winter Soldier Investigations of 1971 served to awaken U.S. citizens to the magnitude of the war waged against civilians. The defection of groups like Vietnam Veterans Against the War signaled that the war could no longer be prosecuted, and widespread revulsion to it forced troop withdrawals from Southeast Asia. Many veterans were shattered by what they had seen and done. Still the popular image of the Vietnam veteran quickly came to focus not on the causes of his (and her) estrangement, but on the symptoms of drug abuse and violent and antisocial behavior. By refusing to deal with the etiology of posttraumatic stress disorders — that is, the war itself and the genesis of American intervention — the mass media effectively silenced the Vietnam veterans and transmogrified them into objects of fear or ridicule. Thus was the process initiated by which the lessons of Vietnam were buried.

As the living survivors of Vietnam were co-opted, so were the dead. The initiators of the Vietnam memorial project hoped for an altar of "healing and reconciliation." Most understood this to mean a domestic process whereby the political wounds in the polity would be bound up. However, as experience has since shown, healing for many veterans has come with a return to Vietnam. Reconciliation also means the capacity to see the former enemy as fully human and in need of com-

passion and renewal. These are not the values of a militaristic and imperial society. Such “feminine” virtues undermine the capacity to define armed power as the signature of the nation.

The ideological struggle at the Wall intensified as the Reagan and Bush administrations fostered the renewed use of force. Those who remonstrated that the original design cast aspersions on the honor of the nation, and on veterans, were enabled to alter the memorial. The standard-cast heroic statues added to the site injured its starkness. The Vietnam memorial was thereby invested with the message of neighboring imperial allegorical figures in alabaster and bronze: “War is the lifeblood of nations!” The somber memento mori, intended to encourage sober reflection on the war and its outcomes, was vitiated.

Though the memorial had been officially dedicated on Veterans Day 1982, another public display, Salute 2, was organized in 1984. At this second liturgy, President Reagan “officially accepted” the memorial on behalf of the nation only *after* Frederick Hart’s representational sculptures were added and blessed. Media coverage of the event stressed the theme “America’s veterans — one and all” in a deliberate attempt to integrate younger Vietnam veterans with older veterans of the “successful” wars. This transgenerational tactic would subsequently be seen in film and television representations of the Vietnam “experience” as substantially identical with World War II and Korea.²³ The Vietnam War was “decontextualized” by removing it — and the reality of the Vietnam veterans’ experiences — from specific historical circumstances.

In his “dedication” speech, President Reagan said of Vietnam veterans that there had been “a rethinking . . . Now we can say to you, and say as a nation, thank you for your courage . . . It’s time we moved on, in unity and with resolve, with the resolve to always stand for freedom, as those who fought did, and always to try to protect and preserve the peace.”²⁴

The Vietnam War had been “normalized” — made consistent with American ideology. The deaths had been made rational, the veterans made whole and finally unburdened of responsibility for “losing” the war. A consensus was manufactured which elided those lessons of Vietnam not in sync with the new look in U.S. foreign policy.

Reagan was to get one more crack at revising the meaning of Vietnam. Shortly after the 1988 elections, another media event was staged at the Wall. John Wheeler, chairman of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund and a speaker at the event, declared, “Perhaps at this late date we can all agree that we’ve learned one lesson: that young Americans must never again be sent to fight and die unless we are prepared to let them win.”²⁵

Then senator-elect Charles Robb, son-in-law of Lyndon Johnson and a former marine infantry commander in Vietnam, linked the reintegration of veterans to foreign policy.

Perhaps in no other area is the need so acute as in the area of foreign policy. We have to proceed on a bipartisan basis for a course of energetic engagement, a policy that vigorously asserts America’s ideals and defends her interests abroad, a policy that establishes our role as an inspiration to oppressed peoples everywhere . . . And it must be a policy that neither renounces nor relies exclusively on the use of force, a policy tempered but not paralyzed by the lessons of Vietnam.²⁶

Finally, in a photo opportunity used on the front pages of virtually every major daily, President and Mrs. Reagan visited the Wall as mourners. Said Reagan, "Who can doubt that the cause for which our men fought was just?"²⁷

Slightly more than one year later, Operation Just Cause was launched against Panama, resulting in heavy civilian casualties (the extent of which the Bush administration lied about), and roundly condemned by the UN as violating the territorial sovereignty of the tiny nation. From the jingoist glee surrounding that turkey shoot, it was but a small step to Baghdad and the killing fields of Iraq. ☹️

Notes

1. Trenchant analyses of this ideological struggle include Charles Griswold, "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Washington Mall: Philosophical Thoughts on Political Iconography," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1986); S. Foss, "Ambiguity as Persuasion: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial," *Communication Quarterly* 34 (1986); Harry W. Haines, "Disputing the Wreckage: Ideological Struggle at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial," *The Vietnam Generation* 1 (1989); and "What Kind of War? An Analysis of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, March 1986.
2. Obviously, the memorial does not attempt to speak to the human costs in Vietnam itself, where millions died and many more millions were permanently maimed. It should be stressed that the number of names carved on the granite is not an accurate assessment of the true costs of the Vietnam War to the United States. For example, the names of military personnel who were assigned to Southeast Asia but may have died in air crashes outside the official war zone are not included. Nor are those killed in shipboard accidents or on bases Stateside. Many of those killed in Laos or Cambodia, where it was supposed to be illegal for U.S. forces to be, are omitted. Numerous soldiers who were evacuated to hospitals in Okinawa or Hawaii, or Stateside, and subsequently expired from wounds received earlier, are not included. Of course, the nearly 100,000 suicides, as estimated by the Disabled American Veterans, are not counted among the casualties of Vietnam. Many veterans believe the Wall should be twice as large and that the reason it is not represents a cynical attempt by various administrations to keep the true American "body count" from the American people.
3. See J. Kimball, "The Stab-in-the-back Legend and the Vietnam War," *Armed Forces and Society* 14 (1988).
4. Information in this section from Jan Scruggs and Joel L. Swerdlow, *To Heal a Nation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 24–31.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Editorial, "Stop That Monument," *National Review*, September 18, 1981, 1064.
7. Tom Wolfe, "Art Disputes War: The Battle Over the Vietnam Memorial," *Washington Post*, October 13, 1982.
8. Scruggs and Swerdlow, *To Heal*, 110.
9. Quoted in Peter Nien-chu Kiang, "About Face: Recognizing Asian/Pacific American Vietnam Veterans in Asian American Studies," in *AmerAsia Journal*, Fall 1991.
10. It should be noted that the efforts by another committee, representing the nearly eight thousand women who served in Vietnam, was told by the Fine Arts Commission (which has oversight over all monuments in the Capitol district) that their proposed statue of a combat nurse as an addition to the site will "compromise the artistic integrity" of the memorial. One observer even argued that the call for inclusion of women's contributions would produce an outcry on behalf of the Army's Canine Corps! Such logic about artistic integrity was exactly the argument against the initial sculptural additions. Many male veterans make no secret of their idea that women, even those who cared for the wounded and dying, are not "real" veter-

ans of the war. This despite the fact that the majority of Vietnam combat nurses were inundated daily with far more trauma than the majority of men who served there. The question of an additional statue at the memorial is a difficult one for many former nurses. The inclusion of their statue at the site, if approved, will soften the Ramboesque features of the bronze of combat soldiers and serve to legitimate a meaning that stresses militarism and not the tragedy of war.

11. Diane E. Levin and Nancy Carlson-Paige, *The War Play Dilemma: Balancing Needs and Values in the Early Childhood Classroom* (Hagerstown, Md.: Teachers' College Press, 1983), 28.
12. The Major General Smedley D. Butler Brigade/Veterans for Peace, Boston, Massachusetts.
13. See Barbara W. Tuchman, *Stillwell and the American Experience in China, 1911–1945* (New York: Bantam, 1980), 187–188, 513–514.
14. Loren Baritz, *Backfire* (New York, Ballantine Books, 1986), chap. 3.
15. *Ibid.*, 124–131. See also "Joint Chiefs of Staff Memorandum, JCSM-46-64," January 22, 1964, *The Pentagon Papers (New York Times)* (New York: Bantam, 1971), 496–499; Assistant Secretary of Defense William P. Bundy, "Draft Memorandum for the President," March 1, 1964, in Gareth Porter, *Vietnam: A History in Documents* (New York: New American Library, 1981), 263–266.
16. Thomas Ferguson, "The Economic Incentives for War," *The Nation*, January 28, 1991.
17. For numerous citations documenting this long-standing plan, see Ralph Schoenman, *Iraq and Kuwait: A History Suppressed* (Santa Barbara: Veritas Press, 1990), 35–39.
18. Michael Parenti, *Inventing Reality* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986).
19. Dan Halin, *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 210.
20. For discussion on how the public sees the media as too conformist, see Mark Hertsgaard, *On Bended Knee* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1988), 84–85. Some critics see the press as mere "Adjuncts of Government." See Noam Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 75–103.
21. Joyce and Gabriel Kolko, *The Limits of Power* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 242.
22. Columbia Broadcasting System, "Another Saddam?" *60 Minutes*, March 10, 1991.
23. Haines, "Disputing," 148–149.
24. Ben Franklin, "President Accepts Vietnam Memorial: Crowd of Veterans and Others Hear His Call for Healing," *New York Times*, November 12, 1984, 10.
25. Haines, "Disputing," 152.
26. *Ibid.*, 151.
27. *Ibid.*