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Tokens for Reconciliation?

The Place and Role of Veterans in The Vietnam War Documentary Series

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Abstract

In 2017, Ken Burns and Lynn Novick released their latest documentary series, *The Vietnam War*, with a clear goal in mind: proposing a narrative that would “heal the wounds” generated by the war in the United States. This paper dwells on the role devoted to the “Viet’ vets” in this series. We argue that these veterans played a crucial role in this reconciliatory undertaking since they served as main conveyors of a critical vision of the war, close to what some scholars have called the “orthodox school”. In this regard, the emphasis put on them is indicative of a much broader mutation: the sacralisation of these “Viet’ vets” in official narratives and their progressive rehabilitation in U.S. popular culture.

Keywords

The Vietnam War documentary series – Vietnam War memory – Viet’ vets – veterans in U.S. society

Introduction¹

More than forty years after its conclusion, the Vietnam War remains a controversial issue in the United States. Even though the conflict has lost its immediacy, the debates that it triggered remain vivid. In this context, various

1 The author would like to thank Thomas Laloux and Valérie Rosoux for their precious feedbacks on the first draft of this paper.

reconciliation projects gradually took place in the United States. One of the latest initiatives, a 17-and-a-quarter-hour TV series entitled *The Vietnam War* (henceforth *tvw*), was launched in September 2017 by two well-known documentary filmmakers: Ken Burns and Lynn Novick. From the beginning of their undertaking, the two directors assigned a clear purpose to this series: “healing” America’s wounds by tackling a conflict that, according to Novick, “created such enormous tension and rancor and ill will and [...] angst [...] in our society that we are still dealing with [today]”.²

One of the main features of this series is its focus. Both directors refused to interview professional/academic historians to convey “their” vision of the war.³ Instead, the origins, the rationale and the major events of this conflict are told not only through a voice-over, but also through the testimonies of nearly eighty first-hand witnesses. Among them, U.S. veterans from the four different military branches (Air Force, Navy, Army or Marines) play a central role: out of the 51 U.S. interviewees, 30 of them served in Vietnam, for one or several tours.⁴ Such a focus on the so-called “Viet’ vets” is far from insignificant. Veterans were at the centre of a series of controversies that arose during and after the conflict. For several decades, the way they were treated, the alleged hostility of anti-war protesters towards them, and the fact that several of them came to endorse the anti-war rationale crystallised some of the tensions between pro- and anti-war partisans.⁵

In this perspective, this paper dwells on the role devoted to these “Viet’ vets” in the narrative promoted by Burns and Novick. In this research, narratives must be understood as discourses “with a clear sequential order that connect events in a meaningful way”,⁶ and “provide lessons for the future and suggestions on which policies it is reasonable and realistic to adopt and support”.⁷ Narratives allow those who subscribe to them to make sense of the world that surrounds them and act accordingly. Our argument is that, in a context of growing distrust towards U.S. political institutions and of the veneration of veterans, Burns and Novick interviewed the “Viet’ vets” in order to convey a critical vision of the war with significant political implications. Indeed, *tvw*

2 Wilkens, “Filmmaker Ken Burns”, (2017).

3 Gawthorphe, “Ken Burns”, (2019).

4 The exact numbers are available on the PBS website: <http://www.pbs.org/kenburns/the-vietnam-war/about/about-the-participants/>. Accessed 4 September 2020.

5 Lembcke, *The Spitting Image*, (2010).

6 Hinchman and Hinchman, *Memory, Identity, Community*, (1997), p. xvi.

7 Hagström and Gustafsson, “Narrative Power”, (2019), p. 390.

does not only question the rightness of the war: it also challenges a certain vision of U.S. exceptionalism.

In this regard, examining the narrative conveyed by *tvw* will contribute to a better understanding of the interplay between popular culture and International Relations (IR). Indeed, popular culture artefacts play a crucial role in the dissemination of narratives with significant implications in IR. Various authors from the field of critical geopolitics have shown how popular culture artefacts can, for instance, contribute to the perpetuation of certain practices, including “foreign policy discourse and thus [...] State action”.⁸ Conversely, these same popular culture artefacts can spread counter-narratives and, hence, fuel protest speeches against the official narrative.⁹

In order to make sense of the depictions of the “Viet vets” in *tvw* and, more generally, of the historical narrative they contribute to promote, this paper will partly rely on the abundant memory studies literature. This field of research provides a relevant “tool box” when it comes to the analysis of contemporary depictions of past events. In particular, several researchers have examined the role of “memory entrepreneurs” in the evolution of narratives surrounding certain past events.¹⁰ These persons can be defined as individuals that seek “social recognition and political legitimacy of *one* (their own) interpretation or narrative of the past”.¹¹ Given Burns and Novick’s background and initial objective (i.e. domestic reconciliation), we argue that they clearly acted as memory entrepreneurs, which is why their work must be carefully scrutinised. We will also show that this documentary series marks a significant evolution of the depiction of the “Viet’ vets” in popular culture and, therefore, of the debates that continue to surround the war in which they fought.

Formally, the paper is structured as follows. We first examine the historiographic and societal debates that continue to surround this conflict. We define two broad schools of thoughts: the “orthodox” and the “revisionist”. This categorisation will allow us to show that the narrative Burns and Novick promoted is closer to the “orthodox” school, which is highly critical of the U.S. intervention in Vietnam. The critical stance of the *tvw* unleashed a series of controversies that will also briefly be examined. In a second section, we show how the “Viet’ vets” played a crucial role in the promotion of Burns and Novick’s

8 Weldes, “Going Cultural”, (1999), p. 118.

9 For an example of how movies can produce this kind of counter-narratives, see O’Meara *et al.*, *Movies, Myths*, (2016), pp. 107–132.

10 See for instance Jelin, *State Repression*, (2003); Perchoc “European memory”, (2018).

11 Jelin, *State Repression*, *op. cit.*, pp. 33–34.

narrative. We argue that this is partly because of the critical scope of *TVW* narrative that both directors chose to resort to the veterans to convey their vision of the war. In the next section, we show how these “Viet’ vets” became one of the symbols of the various controversies surrounding the war and how those controversies evolved after the conflict. Finally, we show how *TVW* marks a new turn in a trend which, in popular culture, had begun since the beginning of the 1980’s: the progressive rehabilitation of these Vietnam War veterans.

In Medio Virtus? Analysing TVW’s Narrative

Over the years, the fate of the “Viet’ vets” has come to epitomise broader discussions about the conflict itself, its underlying motivations and its “winability”.¹² In this section, these debates will be reduced to two main “schools of thought”. This will allow us to broadly characterise the kind of narrative Burns and Novick sought to promote via their documentary. The reader should however be aware that this classification remains a simplification and that considerable nuances exist within these two variants. Broadly speaking, the questions that underpin today’s debates about the war are the same as those which arose during it.¹³ One issue that still preoccupies many authors relates to responsibility: who should ultimately be blamed for this defeat? Attempting to answer this question leads to a myriad of others, almost all controversial.

The first school, the “orthodox”, assumes that U.S. officials, regardless of their partisan affiliation, were misguided by the “domino theory”, which stated that the loss of a country to communism would lead to the loss of a whole region. Since he contributed to dramatically increase the U.S. military presence in Vietnam, President Lyndon Johnson is often described as one of the main “culprits”. However, orthodox scholars such as Jeffrey Kimball¹⁴ also denounce Nixon and Kissinger who, in their view, pointlessly prolonged the conflict in order to ensure the President’s re-election in 1972. More fundamentally, the “orthodox” researchers argue that the United States government incorrectly assessed the nature of the conflict: the revolution led by Ho Chi Minh was not a communist crusade but a national liberation struggle. As a result, these

¹² See for instance Dumbrell, *Clinton’s Foreign Policy*, (2009).

¹³ Guttman, “Protest Against the War”, (1969), pp. 56–63.

¹⁴ For an “orthodox” analysis of Nixon’s actions in Vietnam, see for instance Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, (1998).

scholars claim that “even if the U.S. strategy and tactics were poor, [...] the war was never really ‘winnable’”.¹⁵ The stakes the U.S. forces were fighting for were less immediate and tangible than those of their adversaries. This is a typical configuration in asymmetrical conflicts which often leads to the victory of the “weak” against the “strong”.¹⁶

This vision of the war is not limited to academia: it is also widely shared within the American general public. A series of polls commissioned by CBS in 2018 provide an overview of the influence this narrative. Figure 1 shows that a majority of American citizens still considers that the United States “should have stayed out” of Vietnam. The decrease in this figure can essentially be explained by the growing number of respondents (mainly Americans aged under 50) who do not have an opinion about the war rather than by the

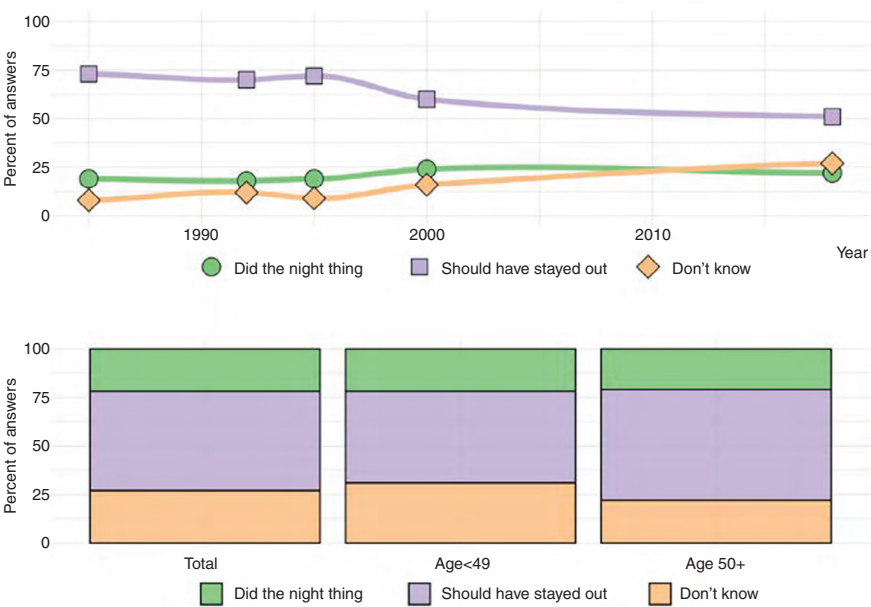


FIGURE 1 U.S. public opinion on the Vietnam War (chronological and intergenerational comparison)¹⁷

15 Dumbrell, *Rethinking* (2012), pp. 13–14.
16 For more information, see Yvan Arreguin-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
17 The author would like to thank his friend and colleague, Thomas Laloux, for the creation of this graph. The precise numbers are available on the following page: “CBS News Poll: U.S. involvement in Vietnam”, *CBS News* (2019), Available on: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/cbs-news-poll-u-s-involvement-in-vietnam/>. Accessed 11 November 2020.

(relative) increased popularity of the opposite narrative which, from now on, will be called “revisionist”.¹⁸

On this side of the spectrum, “revisionist” scholars question the idea that the Vietnam War was “unnecessary” and “unwinnable”. While their “orthodox” colleagues tend to condemn the U.S. Cold War policy that led the country to intervene in Southeast Asia, the “revisionists” “defend U.S. motives and conduct in Vietnam, and even (argue) for some degree of American success”.¹⁹ Their underlying claim is that, in the study of this conflict, military strategy issues have long been misunderstood. Unlike their orthodox colleagues, they do not perceive Ho Chi Minh as a leader relatively independent from his (Chinese) Communist allies, which leads them to give credit to the “domino theory”.²⁰ Some even argue that South Vietnam was winning the war under the leadership of Diem – wrongfully depicted by “orthodox” scholars as “despotic” – and that the country began to lose the war after his death.²¹ Their stance on the reasons for the U.S. defeat also echoes one of Ronald Reagan’s most iconic punchlines about the war (“we must never again send our young men to fight and die in conflicts that our leaders are not prepared to win”).²² Indeed, some of them subscribe to the “backstabbing” or “betrayal” thesis, the idea that the armed forces were not defeated on the ground but by “a disloyal internal enemy in the form of the anti-war movement”.²³

As far as *TVW* is concerned, the narrative promoted by Burns and Novick can roughly be labelled as “orthodox”. In the very first minutes of the show, Peter Coyote (the voice-over of the series) depicts the war as unwinnable. This is particularly clear when he asserts: “[the war] was prolonged because it seemed easier to muddle through than admit that it had been caused by tragic decisions made by five American presidents belonging to both political parties.” The blame put on the various presidents is also perfectly in line with orthodox depictions of the political mechanisms that led to the Vietnamese stalemate. The logic

¹⁸ In the following pages, “revisionism” and its derivatives will only refer to this particular approach in the debates surrounding the Vietnam War. In spite of the negative connotation that is sometimes attached to this term, we do not consider the “revisionist historians” more or less legitimate than their “orthodox” colleagues.

¹⁹ Dumbrell, *Rethinking*, op. cit., p. 17.

²⁰ Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, (2006).

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² McMahon, “Rationalizing Defeat”, (1999), p. 539.

²³ Moyar, “Vietnam: Historians at War”, (2008), p. 40. The epitome of this alleged domestic treason is Hollywood actress and peace activist Jane Fonda who, in 1972, paid a visit to Hanoi, during which she took a picture while sitting on a North Vietnamese anti-aircraft gun.

underpinning the “domino theory” is denounced. Johnson – even though the dilemmas he faced are thoroughly explained and contribute to his humanisation²⁴ – is blamed for his lies, and Nixon’s alleged betrayal of the South²⁵ is also pointed out. However, the show does not endorse more radical views of the war. What the last quote also reveals is that *TVW* mainly blames the flawed political views that prevailed among the vast majority of the U.S. political elite. Accordingly, some scholars lamented that the series never questioned the potential “colonial” dimension of the war nor presented the conflict as the expression of American imperialism.

TVW’s position on the “orthodox/revisionist axis” can also be deduced from the criticisms it received. Even though the show received positive reviews from both viewers and leading newspapers (e.g. *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*), it also raised a series of controversies. The aim of the present section is not to give a complete overview of all the real or imaginary problems pointed out by journalists, veterans and/or scholars. Rather, the most recurring and mediatised ones will be selected and put in relation with the aforementioned “orthodox” versus “revisionist” debate. From the former side, criticisms began to arise even before the broadcasting of the first episode. The very first sentences of the prologue had indeed been leaked to the public and one sentence sparked a fierce controversy: “It [the Vietnam War] was begun in good faith, by decent people.” Immediately, some critical writers denounced a “pro-military” bias.²⁶ Another question came up after episode two: the depiction of the nature of the war. As Jeff Stein summed it up in *Newsweek*:

Burns and Novick (...) explicate the turn of events with admirable force and verve (...). But then they quickly abandon the groundwork they’ve laid putting the Vietnamese struggle in an anti-colonial context. By Episode Two...the war has been framed as a civil war, with the United States

24 After John F. Kennedy’s death, Johnson pledged that he would pursue his legacy and presented himself as his legitimate successor. If this allowed him to implement his ambitious domestic agenda on civil rights and poverty, this posture also forced him to pursue Kennedy’s policy in Vietnam. Besides, Republicans were willing to support domestic reforms as long as the president pursued his muscled agenda against communism. For more information on Johnson’s dilemmas during the 1964–1968 period, see Dallek, *Lyndon B. Johnson*, (2004).

25 For more information on this question, see Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files*, (2004); Hughes, *Fatal Politics*, (2015).

26 Bass, “America’s Amnesia.”, (2017).

defending a freely elected democratic government in the South against Communists invading from the North.²⁷

Once the subsequent episodes had been aired, more radical critics denounced the depiction of the Peace Movement activists, arguing for example that:

By leaving the impression anti-war activists mistreated veterans, the film sadly contributes to a negative impression of [the peace movement] when it was among the only positive things to come out of the Vietnam War. By exaggerating the levels of heroin addiction in Vietnam, the film also ever so subtly reinforces a narrative that has been used to promote the War on Drugs.²⁸

However, given *TVW*'s proximity to the "orthodox" narrative, fiercer reactions came from the other side of the spectrum.²⁹ "Revisionist" historian Mark Moyer was among the most vocal critics of Burns and Novick's work. In a typical "revisionist" vein, he claimed that the main problem with this series was the directors' anti-war bias, which led them to omit important facts that go against their viewpoint. For example, Moyer argued that the directors neglected the U.S. and South Vietnamese military successes at the beginning of the 1960s. Instead, he lamented that both directors "cherry-picked" the six or seven battles with the worst possible outcomes for the Americans and/or their South Vietnamese allies, thereby reinforcing the idea that war was futile and unwinnable from its beginning.³⁰

In spite of their fundamental differences, scholars from both sides point out to the same problem, namely that both directors "urge[d] towards healing

27 Stein, "Vietnam War", (2017). The author would like to stress that Jeff Stein distorts Burns and Novick's argument: in *TVW*, Diem is never depicted as a "freely elected leader" and the abuses he and his government committed are repeatedly stressed in the series.

28 Kuzmarov, "Burns Novik Film", (2017). From an empirical point of view, Jeremy Kuzmarov neglects some aspects of the drugs consumption among the U.S. military personnel who served in Vietnam. This issue has been carefully studied and discussed. For more details on this question, see Hall and Weier, "Lee Robins' Studies", (2016), pp. 176–180.

29 See for instance Owens, Thomas M., "Mission Failure: The Burns & Novick 'The Vietnam War' Misses its Target | A Review (Part 1)." *Providence* (2017). Available on: <https://providencemag.com/2017/10/vietnam-war-ken-burns-novick-pbs/>. Accessed 6 February 2020.

30 Moyer, "What Ken Burns Omits". In this article, Moyer claims that, between 1966 and 67, hundreds of battles took place in Vietnam and that most of them were "overwhelming victories for the United States." However, he does not provide the reader with any names.

and reconciliation, rather than truth”.³¹ The idea that Burns and Novick had an agenda brings us back to the notion of memory entrepreneurs discussed in the introduction. These entrepreneurs resort to the past in order to convey *their* narrative, *their* vision of the past, with all the political implications it includes. Even though the narrative Burns and Novick promote is largely disseminated and accepted in U.S. public opinion, their reconciliatory bias somehow turned against them. In this case, the impression of “distorted truth” may have been reinforced by Ken Burns’ affinities with the Democratic Party. For decades, the director has indeed contributed to the funding of several electoral campaigns, including those of John Kerry in 2004 and Barack Obama in 2008.³² This proximity with Democratic elites seems to have had negative implications in terms of reception. “Orthodox” scholars may argue that Burns is too close to political leaders, which makes him too “soft” in his depiction of the leaders responsible for the stalemate. For “revisionists”, it seems that Burns’ political views may have reinforced their vision of Burns as a liberal, therefore as a memory entrepreneur who will not question the idea that the war may have been won by keeping Diem at the head of South Vietnam.

Reconciliation Through Veterans. Squaring the Circle?

The narrative that Burns and Novick promoted in order to achieve reconciliation does not only stem from the text of voice-over: it is mainly conveyed via the testimonies of veterans. Giving the floor to “those who fought” was crucial for Burns and Novick. In an interview, they declared:

Nothing will ever make the tragedy of the Vietnam War all right. But if we are to begin the process of healing, we must first honor the courage, heroism and sacrifice of those who served and those who died, not just as we do today, on Memorial Day, but every day. As filmmakers, we have tried to do so by listening to their stories.³³

Numerically, this focus on veterans is obvious. As mentioned in the introduction, 30 of the 51 U.S. interviewees served in Vietnam, for one or several tours. Moreover, a handful of analysts from the CIA or the Pentagon were also

31 Bass, “America’s amnesia”, *op. cit.*

32 Ken Burns, https://web.archive.org/web/20110815003542/http://www.newsmeat.com/celebrity_political_donations/Ken_Burns.php. Accessed 12 February 2020.

33 Burns and Novick, “Vietnam’s Unhealed Wounds”, (2017).

interviewed. Conversely, the attention devoted to the anti-war movement – which played a crucial role in the evolution of the conflict – is somewhat marginal. Only six anti-war activists delivered their testimonies on screen, including Robert McNamara's own son, Craig McNamara, who vigorously opposed the war his father contributed to escalate when in office.

This marginalisation is not merely quantitative but also substantive. One scene from the final episode is iconic of the place that the anti-war movement occupies in *TVW*. When talking about her visit to the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington DC, a few years after the end of the war, a former anti-war activist begins to cry and apologises for her behaviour towards the “Viet’ vets”. In other words, one of the main anti-war activists featured in the series is shown apologising for her alleged radicalism and explicitly acknowledges the suffering of the veterans. Even though some of the “Viet’ vets” featured in the documentary-series adhered – at least to a certain degree – to the peace movement narrative after they returned from Vietnam, the series is not sufficiently interested in depicting how these veterans turned against the war. Besides, none of them is shown apologising for their conduct towards their former brothers in arms. In other words, she is the only peace activist to be filmed asking for forgiveness.

From a societal point of view, this resort to veterans was a subtle way to convey a certain narrative to an audience that did not necessarily share it beforehand. As Ellen Moore puts it: “[In the United States], everyday consciousness is informed by a militarized common sense,” which she defines as “the embedded worldview that war is a natural and necessary aspect of maintaining and protecting nationhood; [that] military priorities are more important than non-military ones”.³⁴ In this context, veterans – and the tributes paid to them in various places and occasions – are the most visible part of a process that blurs the limits between the interests of the U.S. military and those of the nation and its citizens.³⁵ Recent Gallup polls have shown that the military is one of the only institutions in the United States in which a substantial part of the population continues to trust (more than 70% of the interviewees).³⁶

Moreover, resorting to veterans is one of the most relevant ways to appeal to more conservative audiences, that are not the most likely to subscribe to the general narrative promoted by *TVW* given its political implications. By doing so, Burns and Novick tried to avoid a major pitfall. In general, any reflection on the service for which the veterans are acknowledged often tends to be dismissed

34 Moore, *Grateful Nation*, (2017), p. 3.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

36 Gallup, “Confidence in Institutions”, (2018).

as unpatriotic and disrespectful towards “those who served”. Therefore, by acknowledging their suffering and listening to their stories, both directors avoided this kind of criticisms. Even those who, like Moyar, criticised the show, were forced to admit that “Burns and Novick make a very conscious effort to say they would not malign Vietnam veterans, as so much of the previous anti-war history had done”.³⁷

Nevertheless, the same author evoked an alleged lack of respect towards veterans in order to question *TVW*’s general narrative and, hence, promote a “revisionist” view of the war:

To some extent they avoid overt disrespect, but I think they still do a disservice to veterans. The Vietnam War interviews a huge number of anti-war veterans. (...) Burns presents very little about American soldiers’ camaraderie and pride. I think this is very much a deliberate attempt to undermine veterans’ experiences. (...) Instead, the series leads viewers to believe that Vietnam veterans were victims of the war, that there was not much redeeming about them, and hence, again, that maybe going to Vietnam wasn’t the right thing to do.”³⁸

In sum, Burns and Novick’s recipe for reconciliation was, *prima facie*, quite subtle: resorting to veterans in order to convey a critical vision of the conflict and try to convince more intractable audiences. However, this strategy has its limits: the “orthodox” narrative continues to be contested, not only for historical reasons but also for its political implications. Therefore, any critical vision of the war will be judged as disrespectful towards “those who fought” by more conservative viewers. Moyar’s remarks are illustrative of how some “revisionists”³⁹ blur facts and political judgements:

Burns and his interviewees go out of their way to claim that the Vietnam War debunked the notion of American exceptionalism.⁴⁰ They seem to want us to believe that the US, the world’s first modern democracy and

37 Mark Moyar, “What Ken Burns Omits”, *op. cit.*

38 *Ibid.*

39 See for instance Del Vecchio, “Burning History”, (2017).

40 What seems to be at stake here is a four-century old debate about the nature of “American exceptionalism”. In an interview, Burns indeed declared: “I do believe in our exceptionalism. I am not Pollyanna-ish; we simply have to hold ourselves to a much higher standard than anyone else is held to. I think that’s part of the American promise.” Patt Morrison, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-ol-patt-morrison-ken-burns-vietnam-war-20170906-htmlstory.html> For an overview of the sources of this debate, see for instance Litke, “Varieties of American Exceptionalism”, (2012).

principal guardian of the world order since 1945, is on a moral par with North Vietnam, a dictatorship that waged several brutal wars in the name of Marxism-Leninism and slaughtered tens of thousands of civilians before deciding that Marxism-Leninism wasn't such a good idea.

This aversion to American exceptionalism and patriotism has pervaded too much of our society since the Vietnam War. For those of us who think the US is a force for good in the world, that our country is so good that we'd risk our lives for it, the accurate retelling of the Vietnam War is imperative. That's why I think it's important to let the country know just how fallacious the Burns series is.⁴¹

This kind of comment reveals the potential political implications of the narrative promoted by *TVW*. For the "pro-war" side, narratives such as those endorsed by Burns and Novick may, in the last resort, question crucial myths such as American exceptionalism that, for its most zealous promoters,⁴² states that the U.S. always stands for noble causes. The debates surrounding *TVW* remind us that this kind of national myth fulfils a crucial function in modern-day nations: "It is a shared memory of a common history – of glories, sacrifices, common suffering, and so on – that affectively motivates the present will to bind together, to act together in unified fashion".⁴³

This is why Lembcke resorts to myth theories to explain the enduring popularity of the "revisionist" narrative, some supporters of which seem to have been the most vehement critiques of *TVW*.

By providing an alibi for why the war was lost, namely that we were defeated by a disloyal internal enemy in the form of the anti-war movement, the story allowed those of us who wished to continue to believe that our military presence in Vietnam really was desired by the Vietnamese people and that our mission was righteous.⁴⁴

Therefore, if we stretch this logic to its conclusion, the United States was not defeated by a third-world nation but by itself, the only enemy capable of inflicting such a defeat. In this regard, this narrative fulfils a role traditionally

41 Moyer, "What Ken Burns Omits", *op. cit.*

42 McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*, (2003), p. 90.

43 Abizadeh, "Historical Truth", (2004), p. 292.

44 Lembcke, *The Spitting Image*, *op. cit.*, pp. 138–139.

filled by myths: binding the group together by encouraging its members to act towards a particular goal or by providing a common ideal.⁴⁵

The “Viet Vets” at The Heart of Conflicting Memories

Regardless of the controversies about the potential political biases of *rvw*, the fact that Burns and Novick resorted to the “Viet’ vet” figure in order to achieve reconciliation is indicative of the progressive importance they came to gain over the last decades in official narratives. It must be reminded that the situation of these veterans was unique in U.S. history. Unlike their predecessors, a huge portion of public opinion did not endorse their fight. The psychological consequences of this uncertain domestic support were acknowledged by Jimmy Carter as early as in 1979:

It is easier to offer one’s life, if necessary, if you have assured knowledge that people at home support you and appreciate what you are doing and share with you the commitment of our Nation. But to offer one’s life in the most horrible possible circumstances, the most dangerous circumstances, with the realization that people back home do not give you that support [...] requires an extra measure of patriotism and sacrifice.⁴⁶

In other words, the “Viet’ vets” were not the most celebrated veterans in U.S. history. As David Lembcke puts it, “the vast majority of Vietnam-era veterans re-entered a society of divided attention and fractured emotions, a society insufficiently prepared to give veterans their due. Thus was born the perception that Vietnam veterans were neglected.”⁴⁷

In this context, some pro-war veterans directed their animosity towards anti-war protesters. Some of them began to subscribe to the so-called “spitting myth”, which postulates that several anti-war protesters spat on soldiers coming back home from Vietnam. Even though some scholars openly question its veracity,⁴⁸ this story came to epitomise not only the alleged hatred of the anti-war activists towards the military, but also all the divisions generated by the war. Historically, the question of anti-war activists’ hostility towards the veterans never really arose during the conflict. Even though some casual acts

45 Flood, *Political Myth*, (2013), pp. 33–38; Soltkin, *Regeneration*, (1973), pp. 6–7.

46 Jimmy Carter, Remarks at the Vietnam Veterans Week, 1979.

47 Lembcke, *The Spitting Image*, *op. cit.*

48 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

of violence against returning GIs did take place, relations between veterans and the anti-war movement were more symbiotic than what has later been portrayed in popular culture.⁴⁹

This debate is nevertheless iconic of the larger divide the Vietnam War generated within the U.S. Like in other post-conflict societies, competing narratives emerged in post-Vietnam America, which led to struggles “between a variety of actors who claim recognition and legitimacy of their voices and demands”.⁵⁰ The narratives conveyed by the various sides of such protracted conflicts often lead to the description of “the other side [...] as having evil intentions, low morality and inferior traits”.⁵¹ This general characteristic of deeply entrenched conflicts can be observed with the so-called “spitting debate”: in these stories, the pro-war demonstrators are depicted as aggressive cowards who physically assault innocent, patriotic veterans.

In this case however, there is more at stake than the recognition of the alleged suffering of the Vietnam War veterans. In his research about the veracity of the “spitting debate”, Lembke shows that this myth conveys broader narratives about the meaning of the war itself. For instance, one of the goals pursued by those who promoted the myth was to discredit the veterans who later turned against the war. It was a way to suggest they “were not the real thing. ‘Real’ Vietnam veterans would have been rejected, not embraced, by the anti-war movement.”⁵²

Lembke also notes that, as early as the Nixon presidency, the myth of spat-upon veterans was mobilised to change the framing of the war:

the “remembered” Vietnam War was not the conflict itself but the home-coming experience of the Vietnam veterans. [...] It called to mind the image of the “good” pro-war veteran as a counterbalance to the image of the “bad” anti-war veteran.⁵³

49 The links between the main pacifist organisations and the Vietnam soldiers and veterans strengthened during the war, which led, in the United States, to common actions (marches, demonstrations against the war etc.). Idem, p. 78. To prove the enduring popularity of this myth in popular culture, the author mentions movies such as *Tracks* (1977) or *Coming Home* (1978) which, even before the release of more conservative films such as the *Rambo* saga, “created an American mind-set receptive to suggestions that veterans were actually spat upon.” Idem, p. 9.

50 Jelin, *State Repression*, op. cit., p. 29.

51 Rosoux, “Reconciliation”, (2009), p. 550.

52 Lembke, *The Spitting Image*, op. cit., p.5.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

In this narrative, the peace movement became the main enemy, the reason of the defeat in Vietnam. Therefore, debates on more sensitive issues such as the rightness of this conflict, its winnability or even the crimes committed by the U.S. military were occluded.

In this regard, the social-political context played an important role in the focus on the 'Viet' vets". In 1976, the election of Carter seemed to mark the beginning of a phase of introspection. During his campaign, the future president of the United States strongly "criticized [the] decisions made by a generation of American leaders in Vietnam", and pledged that America, having learned from this excess of hubris, would no longer intervene in a foreign country's domestic affairs.⁵⁴ Yet, as his aforementioned speech suggests, this critical stance did not last very long. Once Carter arrived in the White House, one task was, in his view, essential: America needed to move beyond the Vietnam trauma. Among other things, this led him to pay tributes to all veterans,⁵⁵ while avoiding more contentious aspects of the war.

His successors would have different opinions about the war. During the 1980 presidential campaign, the future 40th president of the United States – Ronald Reagan – labelled the Vietnam War "a noble cause" and openly called for a greater U.S. involvement in the defence of freedom abroad. Once in the White House, he even established a parallel between the morality of the U.S. involvement in World War Two and in the Vietnam War.⁵⁶

However, regardless of their vision of the war, all of Carter's successors sought to "heal the wounds"⁵⁷ of U.S. society by emphasising the sacrifice of veterans. In this regard, Bill Clinton's presidency has been seen as a milestone.⁵⁸ A former anti-war activist and alleged draft-dodger, the President decided, on Memorial Day 1993, to pay tribute to the "Viet' vets", exhorting his fellow citizens to "continue to disagree if [they] must about the war, but [not let it] divide [them] as a people any longer".⁵⁹ This official stance has a powerful corollary: it avoided reviving more painful and controversial issues. This avoidance of contentious questions had one goal: bringing about the "great national reconciliation" that Gerald Ford already called for in 1975. Nevertheless, more than forty years after the end of the war, Burns and Novick attribute America's current divisions to

54 Schulzinger, *A Time for Peace*, (2006), p. 7.

55 For an in-depth analysis of the presidential attitudes towards the Vietnam War veterans, see Kalb and Kalb, *Haunting Legacy*, (2011).

56 McMahon, "Rationalizing Defeat", (1999), p. 539.

57 "Transcript of Kissinger's News Briefing to Explain Vietnam Cease-Fire Agreement", *New York Times* (1973).

58 McMahon, "Contested Memory", (2002), pp. 169–170.

59 Clinton, "Remarks", (1993).

the lack of an effective domestic reconciliation. The two directors therefore chose to start from this consensual figure to tackle the issues that their progressive sacralisation had come to hide. Or, as they put it:

For more than a generation, instead of forging a path to reconciliation, we have allowed the wounds the war inflicted on our nation, our politics and our families to fester. The troubles that trouble us today – alienation, resentment and cynicism; mistrust of our government and one another; breakdown of civil discourse and civic institutions; conflicts over ethnicity and class; lack of accountability in powerful institutions – so many of these seeds were sown during the Vietnam War.⁶⁰

In Conclusion: A New Milestone in the “Viet’ vets” Depiction

In this regard, *TVW* marks a new milestone in another deep trend: the progressive rehabilitation of the “Viet’ vet” figure through popular culture. In the immediate aftermath of the conflict, most TV series and (often low-cost) movies depicted the veteran as an ultra-violent and marginal individual. In this regard, the deeper, more complex depictions of these veterans in *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now* are exceptions, despite the enormous artistic impact of these movies.⁶¹ At the beginning of the 1980s, as Reagan’s conservative discourse gained momentum in the U.S. society, the veteran began to be depicted “as a victim of society, the guardian of the ‘true American values’ (righteousness, honesty, valor, loyalty) with whom the spectator could easily identify”.⁶² At the end of the decade however, more nuanced movies were produced [*Platoon* (1986), *Good Morning Vietnam* (1985), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989)]. In this new set of films, the veteran came to be seen as the main “purveyor of truth”. Or, as Boutet puts it: after “the silence that followed their return” and the “simplification of the “revisionist” movies”, these veterans came to be seen as “guarantors of authenticity in the depiction of this conflict”.⁶³ In this regard, Burns and Novick’s documentary series stretches this logic to a new level. The “Viet’ vets” are not only guarantors of authenticity:

60 Burns & Novick, “Vietnam’s Unhealed Wounds”, *op. cit.*

61 Boutet, “Le Vietnam et l’Amérique”, (2008), pp. 75–82.

62 *Ibid.*, p. 78 (translated by the author).

63 *Ibid.*, p. 79 (translated by the author).

they now seem to be the only persons able to convey a common narrative of the war they fought.

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