

**VIETNAM WAR LITERATURE**

**REFLECTIONS OF THE SUSTAINED TENSION BETWEEN POLITICS,  
HISTORY, MORALITY AND THE EFFECT OF WAR ON HUMAN  
NATURE.**

by

**CATHERINE-JEANETTE MELISSAKIS**

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## INTRODUCTION

Vietnam War literature is a reflection of a sustained tension between politics and history on the one hand and morality and the effect of the war on human nature on the other hand. Although the authors under discussion urge the reader to forget the political, moral and historical milieu of the Vietnam War, it is impossible to separate the war from those three factors and by extension, the literature that stems from it.

I have chosen Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* (1977) and Robert Mason's *Chickenhawk* (1983) because I think they represent, perhaps in the simplest and least obtrusive way, the voices of 55 000 men whose names appear on a black, granite wall in Washington. The authors chose to write their respective memoirs for the Everyman who died in, or lived through, the aberration that was Vietnam. Through their reconstruction of the war and their experiences, they keep the demand for recognition of those who fought (whether morally sanctioned or not) in Vietnam for their country. While American society tried to force the war from its psyche because so many of them thought it was unjust, immoral and unnecessary, authors like Caputo and Mason demanded that the nation examine itself on the whole and reconsider its political endeavours. But perhaps one of the starkest revelations is their portrayal of the corruption of innocence, loyalty and idealism of those soldiers who represented their country abroad.

Philip Caputo joined the United States Marine Corps, as we will see later, to prove something to himself and to his parents. He grew up in the arms of the

American Dream; clean and safe. When he was old enough to realise that he might like more out of life, he made a decision that would alter his life – he decided to join the Marine Corps. I discuss his motivations for joining in detail, but essentially, he was caught up in the *zeitgeist* and the concomitant political aspirations of ‘the brave new world’ espoused by the Kennedy era. When Caputo went to fight in Vietnam he did so out of nobility and bravery. By the time he returned to America, these ideals were turned inside out. *A Rumor of War* is the product of those experiences.

*A Rumor of War* takes the form of a memoir – a record of events written from personal knowledge and experience. It depicts Caputo’s experiences in Vietnam and delves into the horrifying and sometimes morally numbing conditions of the war. This memoir contains a prologue, several chapters, an epilogue and a postscript. The last was added post facto. The prologue explains the author’s motivation for joining the military and for writing the book. His motivations in both instances are discussed in the chapter, but ultimately, Caputo was dismayed at the reception veterans received when they returned home. In the prologue, Caputo urges the reader to move away from his preconceived ideas about the Vietnam War and those that served in the military. It is almost as if the author gives the reader guidelines on the appropriate way to interpret *A Rumor of War*.

Caputo seems to have been influenced, in part, by earlier war memoirs and writers because he begins each chapter with quotes by Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, Ernest Hemingway (who worked as a war correspondent during World War II), Hobbes and Shakespeare (from *Henry IV* and *Henry V*). All the

quotes relate to some kind of disillusionment with war and the 'greater aims' men try to achieve by fighting wars. Excerpts from, among other sources, Sassoon's 'Aftermath', Wilfred Owen's 'Apologia Pro Poemae Meo', Hemingway's *Across the River and into the Trees* and Hobbes' 'Leviathan' highlight the context of each new chapter.

*A Rumor of War* was written after the fall of Saigon (1975), which Caputo incidentally covered as a journalist. He was a war correspondent for the *Chicago Tribune* and claims to have had an urge to return to Vietnam at the time of the fall - perhaps for some kind of closure. He was disenchanted by the fact that all those who had served (and died) in Vietnam did so, in essence, for nothing.

*A Rumor of War* is an indictment of the way Americans perceived (and perhaps still perceive) Vietnam veterans. It is also a commentary (though it claims not to be) on the way politics influence people and the way in which war alters men.

Robert Mason's *Chickenhawk* (1983) is also a commentary on the way veterans were dealt with. The memoir traces Mason's motivation for joining the US Army to a point ten years after returning home, when his life's consistent downward spiral finally culminates in a distinctive breaking point. Again, the absurdity of this specific war is a major aspect in the book. Mason served as a helicopter pilot who carried troops in and out of the war zones in Vietnam.

*Chickenhawk* contains a simple author's note and a very short prologue. Both memoirs contain an inherent disclaimer: the memoir is not to be interpreted as

a political history of the war; it is supposed to highlight the author's individual experience in Vietnam.

The Vietnam War has become synonymous with all three aspects - politics, history and morality - and the very mention of it, thirty years later, still evokes strong emotions among those who have some knowledge of it. In fact, even today, journalists and analysts seldom fail to take the opportunity to outline a relationship between America's current activities and the mistakes made in Vietnam.

The Vietnam War has borne a contentious aura. Since America's initial involvement there, it has sparked much controversial debate. It has also highlighted perhaps the worst in American politics because the Vietnam War revealed the extent to which a nation (as represented by its government) would go to effect its greater political ambitions. Politically, things may have been different if the war was won from the 'hearts and minds' perspective. In other words, although some military historians have claimed that the war was won from a military perspective (this is debatable), the war was certainly not won with the popular support of the Vietnamese civilians. This study deals with the literary manifestation of the unique characteristics of the politics and morality of the war and the men who lost heart and mind in fighting this war.

The first section, which deals with the general history of Vietnam and American involvement there, has a specific function in this thesis. The historical synopsis I provide is intended to portray the historical background as the fertile soil that spawned the contentious issues surrounding the Vietnam War. History (the context in which all the politics took place) provided the necessary nutrients

that allowed the controversy surrounding Vietnam to grow rank and fetid. The Events (embodied in the history) are almost a metaphorical, emotional jungle which was worse, in many ways, than the physically tangible, vegetative malice represented by the Vietnamese jungle. In this essay, the purpose of the history section is to illustrate the prelude to the war. It serves only to underscore the political and historical events and not to discuss them from an analytical point of view, as this dissertation is not a historical study. A systematic description of the topics discussed in the history section provides the reader with a general sense of the events of the war and, by implication, the content of the chapter.

Vietnam was the first fully-fledged guerrilla war America fought abroad. In this lies a special and mitigating factor: America went to the theatre of war bearing the hangover of battle strategies dating back to the Second World War. The unique quality of a guerrilla war prevents a traditional engagement in war and calls for a specific *modus operandi* that the Americans lacked. In the Elysian fields of war, America represented the brutish, brusque quarterback, while Vietnam, on the other hand, represented the ancient Thai Chi master.

Sun Tzū, the legendary battle strategist c. 490 BC, stated two very relevant and important points which can be seen as among the fundamental reasons for America's failure in Vietnam. Firstly, Sun Tzū says (as documented by James Clavell in *The Art of War* (1981)) that 'The supreme act of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting' (7). In other words, the act of fighting a war is to be avoided through other strategic means (for example through political manoeuvring). But if war is unavoidable, the least amount of financial and

physical effort should be expended on winning. Perhaps that indicates the difference between the approaches represented by the metaphor supplied in the paragraph above – America arrived guns blazing and the ancient Thai Chi master sat patiently observing the tactics of the over-eager quarterback.

The second relevant thing Sun Tzū said, relates to the nature of guerrilla warfare and the methods employed in such a war. His statement indicates the pervasive and sustained effect guerrilla warfare can have, if properly applied. The statement reads as follows:

Indirect tactics, efficiently applied, are inexhaustible as Heaven and Earth, unending as the flow of rivers and streams; like the sun and moon, they end but to begin anew; like the four seasons, they pass away but to return once more. (31)

Indirect tactics (small unit sappers and reconnaissance missions are commonly used in indirect tactics) are those that do not conform to conventional warfare. Indirect tactics are used in covert wars because of the elusiveness small units command. A brief synopsis of Vietnam's history will introduce the reader to the Vietnamese struggle for independence and will indicate that many centuries of training in the 'art of fighting without fighting' resulted in finely honed skills which, in the end, proved to be overwhelming for the Americans.

The next step is to consider the events that led to America's systematic involvement in Vietnam. I trace this involvement back to the early days of the Second World War. America required intelligence on Japan's activities and



since the latter had forcibly taken Vietnam (among other territories), it was a good place to start compiling this intelligence report. Ho Chi Minh was a protagonist in the quest to achieve Vietnam's independence and was also in a good position to assist America in its intelligence activities. In return for his help, Ho Chi Minh asked that America assist him with his dream of an independent Vietnam – free from Japanese and French rule. America was the great cash cow and a stepping stone towards the independence of Vietnam. This relationship marked the beginning of the ideological and political quagmire America was becoming involved in.

When Japan surrendered in 1945, the political situation in South East Asia changed dramatically. The chapter goes on to describe what these changes entailed and how they influenced America's attitude and perception of Vietnam in the new 'red' context. Truman's overt recognition of Ho Chi Minh's declaration (1950) that Vietnam was officially the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) was subverted by his financial assistance to the French. This dual participation in the events in Vietnam reflects the double roles America played in the ensuing French-Vietnamese conflict.

In Ho Chi Minh's DRV, the nature of the 'new', independent government influenced later American involvement. The primary problem regarding the government of Vietnam during the early 1950s was the fact that it was ineffectual and corrupt. Politicians could be bought and sold like meat at a market – everyone, it seems, had a price. The French, assisted financially by the Americans, reached an agreement with the Bao Dai regime. Emperor Bao Dai had installed himself (with the assistance of the French) in South Vietnam.

Despite the fact that the Bao Dai administration was non-communist, something for which both America and France were grateful (because there was an alternative to communist rule), things were not all well; France was generally disgruntled with the events in Vietnam and subsequently decided to re-capture the airstrip at Dien Bien Phu in 1953, with disastrous consequences. The events at Dien Bien Phu caused a ripple effect in the international political arena and the world focused on the proceedings in Vietnam. The result was the Geneva Accords. I discuss some of the stipulations prescribed by the conference and how these stipulations were not met.

In the meantime, American meddling (in the form of financial and political support) resulted in the installation of Ngo Dinh Diem in place of Emperor Bao Dai in South Vietnam. This marked yet another step in America's systematic embroilment in Vietnam. In other words, America had moved from a distant participation in the actual politics in Vietnam, to a very direct and tangible involvement in that country's affairs. But, two assassinations later, things begin to sour dramatically for the quarterback.

Kennedy's death suddenly dumped a catastrophic political quandary on Johnson's desk in the Oval Office. He was forced to become involved in a war which stood in diametric opposition to his ambitions as president. While he called for improvements at home, the 'hawks' cried that he needed to take decisive action in Vietnam. Three events convinced Johnson of the necessity of escalating events in Vietnam. Two jets were shot down over Laos, eight Americans died at Pleiku and there were supposed attacks on two American

destroyers. He consented to the bombing of North Vietnam. Simultaneously, in Vietnam, events were taking a turn for the worse.

The 1968 Tet Offensive is used as a thermometer for America's failures in Vietnam. The Tet Offensive indicated American shortcomings in a very punitive fashion, specifically around its intelligence-gathering capabilities. Tet illustrated precisely the difference between America and Vietnam's battle strategies. It demonstrated how large unit tactics were unable to quell the small, well-orchestrated offensives of the Vietnamese. Yet, despite the effectiveness of the Offensive, American military speakers continued to insist, myopically, that Vietnam was a success. Back in The World (as soldiers often referred to America), the effects of political disjunction were being felt. As a result, demonstrations reached all-time highs.

It is essential not to underestimate the changes within the American military machine from World War II up to the end of Vietnam. These changes had a profound effect on the way America approached the war and by extension, the way the war was fought. Colonel David Hackworth's book *About Face* (1989) looks at these changes and their implications. Although his part is controversial as a personal, military indictment of the events in Vietnam, he does shed a clearer light on the context of the two authors' (Caputo and Mason) experiences in Vietnam. The changes Hackworth describes include the emphasis of 'ticket-punching' within the military command and how that affected leadership in Vietnam as well as the upper echelons' near-sightedness when it came to training soldiers with pertinent and suitable skills that matched the war they were involved in. Finally, Hackworth discusses the

conditions American soldiers faced when dealing with the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) soldiers.

The following chapter, which is the main body of this dissertation, deals with the literature growing out of war. Although Robert Mason and Philip Caputo urge the reader to forget the political, moral and historical milieu of the Vietnam War, it is impossible to separate the war from those three factors. A systematic exploration of the books will illustrate, how, in spite of the authors' intentions and aspirations, it is impossible to detach the work from the three factors mentioned above.

The authors make explicit 'disclaimers' in their respective author's notes, prologues, epilogues and postscripts. It is exceptional that authors 'disclaim' the actual context of their works. I discuss the nature, implications, effects of, and reasons for, these disclaimers.

Further, I trace how ideology, politics and propaganda can be seen as the trident that spurred the nation into acceptance of the war. Simultaneously, an overview of the personal histories of both authors will reveal the mutation from innocence to corruption that is associated with all wars, but also that which is unique to Vietnam.

At this point, I hope to have clearly illustrated how the ideology, politics and propaganda were interwoven in the fabric of authors and their literature. Thus, having re-created the vehicle that motivated them to participate in this war the ideology, politics and propaganda brought them to the reality of their presence of the war. It is here, on the battlefield, that the mode of

representation truly portrays how intrinsically their experiences were entwined with the politics, morality and history of the Vietnam War.

The mode of representation also underlines the factors contributing to the inversion of normality and to the ambivalent realities the authors claim to have experienced in Vietnam. We investigate the techniques each author uses to bring the presence of war to the reader. We see that it is not a monotonous succession of relaying events and that the chosen mode of representation, as well as the act of superimposing the multidimensionality of human experience on a two-dimensional canvas, adds significantly to the memoirs' engaging qualities.

To demonstrate the inextricable links between history, politics and morality of the war and the authors' works, we will turn our attention to Tom Wolfe. He may perhaps be considered the 'father' of New Journalism – a kind of 'journalism' that does not rely on the cold, detached reporting of facts.

Finally, Ross McGregor (*A Terrible Irony* (1990)) notes that critics have criticised Vietnam War literature for being written by Americans about Americans, and for only hinting at the Vietnamese. Ultimately, he concludes that the Vietnamese emerge in these representations as flat and superficial in their own country and that what stands out most about the war is the American experience in that country. The authors under consideration do not claim, for themselves, the viewpoint of the Other in the postcolonial sense. I discuss three reasons for this literary phenomenon.

Perhaps one of the most enduring elements, throughout Vietnam War literature, is the subdued tension between Eastern and Western philosophies. The difference between America (obviously symbolising the Western philosophies in the context of this portion of history) and Vietnam's approaches to the political, social and practical dimensions of the war is subliminally implied and clearly palpable when one undertakes any study pertaining to the Vietnam War. While any statement made on behalf of the East in this essay is mainly cursory (since it would take an essay of great length in its own right to discuss the details of their involvement in the war) it is obvious that their strategies - politically, morally and practically - were completely different to those of the Americans.

This essay ends with the conclusion that the American literature which deals with the Vietnam War is not separated from the war, but is intertwined with the history, politics and morality of the war.

## WHO SAID WAR? A CONCISE HISTORY OF THE EVENTS OF THE VIETNAM

### WAR.

There are two dichotomous certainties about war. For the Chiefs of Staff that order war, the intricate myriads of diplomatic, financial and political considerations are ultimately mind numbing. For the soldiers on the ground things are straightforward: you live or you die. For the political honchos and the military strategists, the constellations of obligations with allies are apparent everywhere and plans are formulated in accordance with all the complexity of quantum physics. For the soldiers on the ground, however, war means following orders and risking life. Under what guises these orders are given frequently remain a mystery and oftentimes they are so clouded by propaganda that they might as well remain a mystery. The brass makes mandatory visits to those on the front lines, expressing equally brassy gratitude and support after which they can return to the relative safety of their bases, bunkers or, in some cases, even countries. Soldiers in modern warfare are moved to foreign countries to assist allies in wars that bear no relevance to their immediate lives at home. War is no longer fought to protect their interests at home or to protect one's own country – rather, it is fought to protect international interests abroad.

No better example of the nature of international war exists than that of the Vietnam War. American soldiers were sent off to the jungles of Vietnam to fight the 'potential' threat of communism and to help some members of a nation gain a free democracy (an oxymoron if ever I encountered one), but few

Americans had even heard of Vietnam. It was not as if Vietnam was exactly Cuba. However, war is war and soldiers obey orders. To give the main body of this essay a clearer perspective, I shall describe some of the antecedents that led to the Vietnam War, and some of the events that occurred during the war.

Vietnam has a long history of war – primarily fought over its independence. Michael McClear writes in *Vietnam: The Ten Thousand Day War* (1981), 'From 207 BC' (32) to 1975 Vietnam has tried to unify and solidify its own autonomy. The Vietnamese people were accordingly not new to war and it is within this climate that General Ho Chi Minh came to represent Vietnam and its desire to become and remain sovereign.

General Ho Chi Minh had spent roughly thirty-four years 'seeking support for the independence of a country known centuries earlier as Vietnam. For almost a hundred years his country had been occupied by the French and amalgamated as part of their Indo-China colony' (5). Vietnam

'had a recorded history of more than two thousand years – and it had been an almost continuous chronicle of resistance against the feudal Chinese. Endless war, rebellion and privation had become the permanent subculture of a people who were as tough and durable as the mountainous jungles' (5).

Ho Chi Minh was determined to cease this tyranny of occupation (and attempted occupation).



At this point, it becomes important to introduce Major Archimedes Patti who was sent on a mission by the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). The OSS was the ancestor of the Central Intelligence Agency, the CIA. The US was, at that time, seeking an intelligence network in Indochina to elaborate on Japanese activity in that region. Essentially, it meant that the US was compiling an intelligence dossier on Japan before World War II and needed all the allies it could muster in this regard.

Patti sought this intelligence network in Indochina because Japan had occupied French Indochina (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia etcetera) in 1940 and the United States perceptively assumed that France wanted Indochina back from the Japanese while General Ho Chi Minh also wanted Vietnam back for the Vietnamese, ruled by Vietnamese.

Therein lies the familiar rub: America wanted to utilise both the French and Ho Chi Minh's support base, but both America's 'allies' were on totally opposing spectrums of the political situation in Vietnam. The French felt, at the time, that if the US would not assist them in re-taking French Indochina from the Japanese, France would not aid the United States. America's policy regarding the French-Vietnamese issue was, in no way, to support the return of Vietnam to French rule. America's reluctance to assist with the French Indochina issue was clearly illustrated when Major Jean Sainteny arrived in Indochina with a plan called Mission-5 that sought to re-establish French rule in the region and required American backing – American orders were to 'not assist the French in re-occupying Indo-China in any way whatsoever' (McClear 1981: 9). Naturally, the French were annoyed and averse to helping the US with its interests

pertaining to Japan. It has to be remembered that in 1939 Germany invaded France and France remained occupied for an extended period. As Germany struck France, Japan struck French Indochina. Later, the Americans and the British would assist in freeing France at Normandy. In the meantime, France was having a difficult time and saw America's resistance towards regaining Vietnam etcetera as insensitive and short-sighted.

The relationship between Patti and Sainteny deteriorated in a hostile way; Patti declared Sainteny's meddling in Vietnam, and the region overall, as ineffectual and puerile. France in turn, suggested that the Americans were naive, Ho Chi Minh was clouding American perspective, and that it would ultimately mean loss for the Americans and the French.

Ho Chi Minh had tirelessly attempted to find financial support for his cause in Vietnam. He wanted no part of French or Japanese (and later American) rule for his country and thought that the Americans could, in return for his assistance with the Japanese issue, help him find a way to free his country from colonial and imperial rule. Not only would Ho Chi Minh gain by making the Japanese's stay in Vietnam (and the rest of Indochina) more uncomfortable, he would also be in a better position to drive out the French.

There were some ideological concerns, however, in the American-Ho Chi Minh alliance because General Minh was a supporter of Communism. Ho Chi Minh was a 'co-founder of the Communist Party of France' (6) and was imprisoned by Nationalist China. America was instrumental in Minh's release (6) after which Minh proved rather helpful with the Japanese issue – McClear (7) writes that Minh 'provided intelligence and translation services for the US Office of

War Information [and] provide[d] 'target information' on Japanese bases and troop movements'.

America seemed as if it was playing a dangerous game of Communist Cat and Capitalist Mouse. In its desperation, America was aiding both Chinese Communists and Chinese Nationalists (again diametrically opposed factions) in stemming the tide of the Japanese. Additionally, the climate in America was building towards what can easily be called Senator McCarthy's 'Red Witch Hunt'. It seems difficult to grasp why one nation so intrinsically bound to independent, 'free' governance would aid the very enemy of their ideology. This relationship is complicated and ironic. This complicated, contradictory and even ironic relationship between America and Ho Chi Minh can also be seen as one form of sinister political meddling. There were many such instances and these are discussed, in brief, in the essay. Nevertheless, to put the matter into perspective, Patti observed that Ho Chi Minh's primary objective was to acquire America's assistance toward a free Vietnam and that aspiration offered no deviation from American policy. So it was that the US and a Communist leader became strange bedfellows.

Chronologically speaking, the surrender of Japanese Emperor Hirohito on the 16th of August 1945 brought the release of Vietnam from Japanese rule. General Ho Chi Minh immediately grasped the opportunity and called for a general uprising in Vietnam on the next day. By the 19th of August, Minh had seized Hanoi in the northern part of Vietnam. By the 25th of August the uprising had spread to Saigon in the south and on the 2nd of September 1945, General Ho Chi Minh declared the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) (Bates 1998:

772). France was decidedly displeased with the new arrangement and felt America was generally blind to Minh's strategies. France then commissioned British, Indian and a small number of Japanese troops to Saigon in an attempt to crush the Viet Minh (the military wing of Ho Chi Min's uprising) in Saigon.

As president of the newly declared DRV, Ho Chi Minh was not going to let his long-awaited independence slip from his hands. Conflict ensued between the French and the Vietnamese but it, albeit grudgingly, abated when Minh and Sainteny signed an agreement on the 6th of March 1946 that concluded that Vietnam was a free state in the French Union (McClellan 1981: 25). This was seen as a compromise on the side of the French but it marked only an academic change for the nature of Vietnam's independence. The terms of the agreement meant that Chinese troops would have to be withdrawn from the north and that by 1952 all French troops would have to be evacuated from Vietnam (25). The Viet Minh were urged to stop guerrilla activities in the south. The agreement marked only a moot truce and events would later unfold that would shatter the pretences of this agreement.

In the meantime, the United States had successfully culled the Japanese and Nazi threats. With that out of the way, however, America discovered an immediate threat from the Soviet Union. Relations between the US and the Soviet Union would eventually deteriorate to icy stagnation. America pre-empted the evil red rumblings and suddenly took a greater interest in communist movements abroad. Accordingly, moral questions regarding Ho Chi Minh's political assertions and his apparent observance of Communist philosophies were raised. It became difficult to reconcile America's support of

Uncle Ho with their behaviour and stance towards the Soviet Union. Communism became a major talking point in the American realm of politics.

Washington had by 1947 become wholly convinced that the Soviet Union was in some crucial manner guiding many of the political and social upheavals in the world...and that it was, thereby, seriously subverting the United States' attainment of its political and economic objectives of a reformed, American-led capitalist world order. (Kolko 1987: 77)

To complicate matters, France and Ho Chi Minh were still slogging it out in the jungles of Vietnam and the political halls of France. America was somewhere in the middle which made it the butt-end of the political tension. Michael McClear (1981: 23) notes that Abbot Low Moffat, who was head of the Division of South-East Asian Affairs at the Department of State from 1945 to 1947, believed that 'France played on the fact that the US was contending with question of communism on the home front to divert attention from France's intentions in Vietnam – that is, its attempt at re-establishing itself as the colonial master' (24). This convoluted state of affairs eventually resulted in a kind of stalemate for the United States; they could not continue the open support of a communist government in Vietnam and they were expending a lot of energy arguing with a professed ally (France). Somehow, Vietnam dropped off the American version of the world map once again. Tito was becoming a real nuisance and needed some consideration.

Once again the situation in Vietnam had to be resolved by the French and the Vietnamese. Discussions on a new agreement between the two countries in

Paris were a disaster. Ho Chi Minh returned to Vietnam 'empty-handed' (McClear 1981: 30) and French-Vietnamese relations deteriorated further. D'Argenlieu, the French High Commissioner in Saigon, was a particular hindrance to these relations because, as General Vo Nguyen Giap (to all intents and purposes, Ho Chi Minh's second-in-command) notes, D'Argenlieu was cunning and mean-spirited. D'Argenlieu maintained the same tenacity regarding continued French occupancy as De Gaulle and French Premier Bidault. French and Viet Minh troops subsequently clashed on the 20th of November 1946 over the control of the customs house in Haiphong. By implication, the side that controlled the customs house was the side in control of the arms tide (31). The French began bombing Haiphong on the 23rd of November (31) killing around 6000 civilians (Bates 1998: 772). It is not surprising then that the Viet Minh began an offensive against the French in Tonkin on the 19th of December 1946. Support for the Vietnamese cause came in the form of Chinese Communist soldiers which arrived at the north Vietnamese border just prior to the Tonkin offensive. In 1950 Ho Chi Minh declared that the DRV was the sole government in Vietnam, contesting any and all previous rule from any other power (774).

Although the Truman government recognised Ho Chi Minh's DRV, it simultaneously aided the French against the Viet Minh uprising and increased French aid further at the start of the Korean War in 1950. America appears to have spent much time burning and building diplomatic bridges.

The Korean War was an important war for the Americans and there were a few lessons that they should have scrutinised more closely before embarking upon

a full-size war in Vietnam. The immediate effects of Korea were still fresh, but a deeper analysis of Korea was postponed to some more appropriate time. Let us consider the following quote in this regard:

The Korean War tested the U.S. military's overwhelming superiority of firepower and technology, along with its capacity to sustain the economic and political costs of protracted war. Given the inconclusive end of the war [...] after three years of combat, and given the total failure of Washington's September 1950 goal of reuniting the country by force of arms, the war had fully revealed the limits of American power...In a word, the United States had undertaken a massive effort and achieved only inconclusive results; this reality raised the issue of the credibility of its power. No less important was the fact that it had become bogged down in Asia at the very moment its main priorities and attention were focused on Europe and the Middle East. To resolve these dilemmas became an obsession in Washington, one that affected every area of the world and influenced the U.S. strategy debate for the remainder of the century. (Kolko 1978: 77-78)

This meant that the United States needed to reaffirm its credibility and re-establish itself as a coherent and sustaining force in the world arena. This ultimately culminated in Senator Dulles' 'New Look' speech of January 1954 in which he stated that the US would, in essence, assume the initiative (in the

military sense) and that it would not be ruled by the dictations of others pertaining to international affairs. America would not be caught off-guard. Ultimately, America would better prepare itself for international quarrels that were in direct conflict with its perception of the way the world should work.

As with many fledgling, independent countries, Vietnam suffered from malignant instability. From Ho Chi Minh to General Kahn, Vietnam was mired in political and nepotistic institutions where money and contacts often meant more than honesty and jurisprudence. In this climate it became increasingly difficult to obtain (and maintain) any semblance of stability in a country that needed it more than anything else. Added to this was French intervention which provided the only consistent and stable government, but which stood in total opposition to Vietnam's desires.

The French, now receiving American aid, signed a treaty with the Bao Dai regime on the 8th of December 1950. The Bao Dai regime was a non-communist government instated by the French to 'head a "State of Vietnam"' (Kolko 1985: 80). The United States had stopped its all its support for communism and France was receiving money from the Great Source of Income as well as ideological support for their cause. Both Western powers were cheerful.

The next few years marked increasing hostility between the Vietnamese and the French as well as a substantial increase in guerrilla activity. The Viet Minh were receiving aid from the Soviet Union and America was becoming increasingly concerned about the latter's looming presence.



1953 was an important year because the French decided to re-occupy the airstrip at Dien Bien Phu in an attempt to stop the Communist tide of supplies through Laos and other related activities conducted in that country. When the decision was made to re-occupy the airstrip, the French felt that the enemy forces in the area were inferior to their own (McClear 1981: 49) and perceived no real threat. General Vo Nguyen Giap surrounded Dien Bien Phu with a force of 40 000 men on the 7th of May 1954. The French had 10 000 men stationed there and were totally overrun by Giap's troops. 6 500 French soldiers were captured and 2 000 killed. Although the losses on Giap's side were heavy, 8 000 of his men died (Bates 1998: 774), the operation was an unquestionable victory for Giap.

Then came the Geneva Accords that called for a ceasefire in Indochina. The conference demanded for prisoners to be sent home and ordered opposing armies in Vietnam to re-group on their respective sides of the 'provisional military demarcation line' near the 17th parallel. The conference also demanded that Vietnam hold general elections nationwide in July of 1956. Nobody signed the agreement and nearly 1 million refugees moved from north Vietnam to the south, while 10 000 Viet Minh remained in the south (Bates 1998: 776).

In 1955, Ngo Dinh Diem usurped the Bao Dai regime in the south, appointing himself president and declaring that there would be no elections in Vietnam. Diem was a veteran of complicated political activities. Gabriel Kolko (1985) gives us a brief outline of Diem's history and his link with America.

Ngo Dinh Diem had worked in the French bureaucracy for a decade until 1933, when he became Bao Dai's minister of interior. He retired from politics after a bitter dispute with the French over his powers, and during the war [WWII] he established relations with the Japanese and came under their protection. In March 1945 he negotiated with them to become prime minister, but they could not reach terms in time. Diem was by 1954 one of the very few unequivocally anti-French and anti-Communist politicians of any note to whom the United States could turn. (83)

When it became apparent that Diem was mainly interested in sustaining his political stature in Vietnam, the US concluded that he was ineffectual in fulfilling their aims. Not only was Diem unpopular with the Americans, he was also extremely unpopular with the Buddhists. His brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu (also his senior advisor) was in charge of the special police, raided several Buddhist temples across Vietnam (McClellan 1981: 89). McClellan writes that 'thirty monks had been injured and 1,400 arrested' (89). The special police were also apparently 'planning a purge of the military' (90) which could see many generals out of work. Diem, it must be understood, was not a particularly popular figure. These potentially disenfranchised generals intimated to the Americans that their hand would be forced and a coup to overthrow Diem and his cronies might become a reality (90).

Nhu's meddling was aggravating an already disastrous political state of affairs. This situation was unsuitable for the Americans and they sought to, at

the very least, have Diem remove his own brother from office. Naturally, Diem was reluctant to do so, which only worsened the circumstances. The Americans were planning to stop all economic and military assistance to Vietnam in an attempt to force Diem to cooperate. In the same vein, America conversed via cable to the generals in Vietnam. Assistant Secretary of State Roger Hilsman claims that

'The overall gist of that cable was to say that we [the Americans] would prefer a government under Diem, but if they – the generals – felt they had no choice [but to stage a coup], then we would examine the government that they established on its own merits. Now of course there is no question that this, with all of its hedges, does encourage them [the generals]' (91).

Thus, his reign ended when the Americans did not oppose the coup which led to his elimination in 1963.

Diem was unable to stop the flood of Communism and the French decided to leave Vietnam on the 28th of November of the same year; the fight had been too much.

Between 1957 and 1958 there was a marked increase in the number of Viet Minh in the south engaged in assassination and terror campaigns against government officials in the region. The communist-led insurgents in the south stemmed from the Viet Cong, also known as the Viet Nam Cong San. The Viet

Cong were Vietnamese communists operating in the south and obviously supportive of a communist government in the country.

America's involvement in Vietnam steadily increased from the Fifties until they were inextricably involved in what can be classified as a civil war in Vietnam. American advisers in Vietnam steadily increased from the inception of the Military Assistance and Advisory Group, Vietnam (MAAGV) in 1955. This body would later become Westmoreland's MACV or Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (Bates 1998: 776). Between 1961 and 1962, the number of military advisers in Vietnam increased five-fold (777) totalling 11 300. Meanwhile, Diem asked for further American assistance in combating the Communists and in December of 1961, President Kennedy agreed to send American helicopters to Vietnam.

1963 brought the horrific scenes of the seven Buddhist monks setting themselves alight. The self-immolation suicides sent American hippy sentiments careering for university campuses in protest and disgust. Kennedy subsequently lost faith in Diem. A coup, led by General Duong Van Minh, ousted Diem and resulted in the latter's elimination on the 2nd of November 1963. Ironically enough, President Kennedy would be assassinated exactly twenty days after Diem. Vietnam underwent yet another change of power in 1964 when Major General Nguyen Khanh (a Viet Minh defector) ousted the ruling military committee in Saigon on the 30th of January (779).

When Kennedy died, Johnson suddenly found himself trudging in the political jungle of Vietnam right in the Oval Office. His original vision for the United States entailed a more America-centred approach to poverty alleviation and

government spending on the home front. However, Johnson had little choice in inheriting the Vietnam War and subsequently agreed to bombing raids on the North Vietnamese coast by South Vietnamese naval commandos under the command of US advisors. Johnson agreed to the bombing raids that commenced on the 4th of August 1964.

Trouble was brewing. Two reconnaissance jets were shot down over Laos, the Ho Chi Minh Trail was enlarged by the North Vietnamese Army extending this supply route deep into North Eastern Cambodia. There was a definite escalation of attacks on government installations in the south as the Viet Cong increased their presence and extended their activities. The 'attacks' on the destroyers *Maddox* and *C. Turner Joy* in North Vietnamese waters seem to have precipitated the bombing raid on the North Vietnamese coast referred to above. War was now a reality.

Perhaps one of the most famous battles in Vietnam was the Tet Offensive that began on the 30th of January 1968. The Tet Offensive was remarkable in the sense that its architects sought to inflict the greatest amount of chaos in the American battle strategy by scattering the great phoenix and dividing its resources. Another anticipated result of the Tet Offensive was to reinforce an already-developing negative image of the Americans and their war in Vietnam. I shall refer to this in detail below. The Special Forces camp, Khe Sahn, was used by the North Vietnamese as a diversion for the attacks that would take place all around the country. Large troop build-ups around Khe Sahn on the 28th of January prompted American military minds to move troops away from the Cambodian border towards the interior in anticipation of the

coming attack. In a crafty and necessary utilisation of the dissemination of intelligence, the Vietnamese succeeded in creating panic amongst the Americans. The planning of the Tet Offensive was a neatly kept secret until the end of 1967 but the dissemination of the intelligence to Americans assumed the form of misinformation. In other words, the Americans were acutely aware of an impending attack that was to alter the course of the war, and they were cognisant that these attacks did have an urban element to them, yet they were unable to pinpoint precisely where and to what extent these attacks were a threat.

In war, one speaks of 'initiative' which is (loosely) a term given to the party on the attack. Closely related to initiative is the element of surprise. When one party has the element of surprise, obtaining the initiative is easier than obtaining it in combat. The Tet Offensive had both initiative and surprise and hence the Americans were caught off guard.

The impact of the Tet Offensive achieved much by way of illuminating the nature of the war the Americans had become embroiled in. In Washington, the pressure appears to have come to a head when President Johnson announced on the 31st of March 1968 that he would not run in the upcoming presidential elections. Gabriel Kolko (1985) notes in *Vietnam: Anatomy of War 1940-1975* that

Only during crisis does the real locus of power and interest expose the decisive constraints on political decision makers. To the extent that a society then defines its core needs and goals, the state's alleged autonomy and discretion in the

balance of forces and power within a society tend to disappear. (312)

The quote above has a certain resonance when viewed in relation to Johnson's resignation. His health had deteriorated and the stress that he is rumoured to have endured is evident from photos and images from the time he was in office. Johnson had an entirely different vision for the US if ever he was elected President, and that vision was forced into the proverbial backseat with the looming Vietnam War. Critics have placed such an inseparable tie between Johnson and the war that the Vietnam War is referred to as Johnson's War. In truth, however, he never initiated the diplomatic quagmires inherent in the American involvement in Vietnam, neither did he attack the war with a suitably Gung Ho attitude. It seems that for Johnson, Vietnam was a disfigurement on his Administration's intentions and stood in the way of more nationally directed positive reforms.

According to Guenter Lewy (*America in Vietnam* (1978: 76) the Tet Offensive of 1968 had several negative effects. Apart from the concomitant death and destruction, it also contributed to the already flagging opinion of the US government's presence in Vietnam. To be sure, the Tet Offensive illustrated to the local populace that there was, in essence, no real 'safe' zone – even ostensibly 'autonomous cities' were attacked. America could not protect everybody all the time – in fact, America could not protect many people at all. Naturally, Tet dealt a huge blow to the 'Hearts and Minds' campaigns the Americas were so committed to. This was a huge victory for VC and NVA propagandists. Back home, in America, things did not look much better.

Television viewers saw house-to-house fighting in the midst of ruined and smoking cities which seemed to belie the assurances of victory given out by military and civilian officials. After almost three years of a contest in which the U.S. had claimed steady progress, the VC were still strong enough to launch a devastating countrywide effort. (76)

Essentially, Lewy suggests that misrepresentation in the media of events taken in isolation and out of context, resulted in a skewed perspective of the questionable activities in Vietnam. This contributed significantly to the negative perspective many Americans had regarding US soldiers and the Vietnam War in general.

The massive demonstrations in the US during October and November of 1969 were another manifestation of the American stress. As many as 250 000 protestors attended the demonstration on the 15<sup>th</sup> of November, with numbers increasing at each new demonstration. And while the American public was in a furore about Vietnam, the military machine was also experiencing a peculiar phenomenon.

Matters inside the army, and the military apparatus in general, were also undergoing a series of changes and alterations. The US Army was a different place from what it had been during the Second World War. Korea was a war that did not end as promptly as it was supposed to, and things in the army looked like they might be coming apart – albeit to only the most fastidious observer. To everybody else, in and out of the army, the situation did not receive any attention. Being in the army meant more than being a soldier in



the traditional sense – all the ‘undesirables’ were weeded out on the basis of intellect and those considered warrior-types in previous wars were the first to get the infamous boot. To be in the army meant you had to be smart, cocky and willing to work in an organisation that was fast becoming a corporation more than a military institution. ‘Ticket-punching’ (the process of acquiring essential stamps on your record towards promotion) appears to have been the order of the day. As Colonel David Hackworth (in his 1989 indictment (*About Face*) of the US effort in Vietnam) indicates, ticket-punching was perhaps one of the major shortcomings of the American effort in Vietnam because many officers did their rounds in Vietnam simply to get their ‘tickets punched’ with vital ‘combat experience’ that would further their careers at the expense of the troops they led. The individual rotation system was bad enough, says Hackworth, because it limited the amount of time soldiers spent together and with their commanding officers that in turn limited the sense of unity and identity which was so vital to the survival of troops in the field. Troops which worked as a team were more likely to look out for one another and this would make fighting together more cohesive and thus more effective. In this climate ticket-punching proved to be a completely new weed.

The damage that career-orientated officers (who sought nothing more than to further themselves) caused, not only manifested itself in a genuine disinterest in getting their hands dirty in the war, but also permeated the higher echelons. The measure of an operation’s success was to be found in the bizarre and arbitrary ‘body count’. This, in theory, meant that after a battle American soldiers had to loiter on a battlefield and count the dead Viet Cong (VC) or

the North Vietnamese Army's (NVA) soldiers' scattered remains – and the US Army command attached itself to this yardstick like a leech to a groin. The dogmatic adherence to a body count essentially expected soldiers to risk life and limb just to tally all the number of dead enemy on the battlefield. A fairly successful battle could be termed totally ineffective by the lack of bodies to prove its achievement, yet the body count system, despite this and other criticisms remained the official (albeit ineffective since the VC and NVA troops were quite proficient at removing their dead soldiers from the battlefield) gauge. Owing to this continuous emphasis on a body count and the nature of the beast in Vietnam, many officers (and Hackworth documents many, many incidents) actually altered after action reports so that they would indicate a high number of enemy killed in action (KIA). Since dallying on the battlefield oftentimes proved a dangerous exercise the body count was left to estimation and exaggeration by those who sought recommendations. These after action reports were then presented to the travelling brass as indications of (in particular) the officers' success and (in general) America's success in Vietnam, which in turn was sent higher and higher up the chain of command. One extremely telling incident that Hackworth reveals is the case of Brigadier General S. L. A. Marshall (alias Slam), famous for his military analyst-type books (*Pork Chop Hill* (1958), *Battles in the Monsoon* (1967)) who was commissioned to undertake a study of the incidents in Vietnam. Slam's *professed* point of view regarding the situation in Vietnam was that they 'had dropped the ball' and that 'We [the Americans] aren't learning from our experience there. The lessons learned there are not being recorded and passed on, and we're

taking unnecessary casualties because of it' (Hackworth 1989: 548). To this end, Slam wanted Hackworth to accompany him to Vietnam (Hackworth had been sent to the Pentagon which he loathed and was happy to return to Vietnam) to set up a system of 'postcombat interrogation techniques' (548). It is important to note that during Hackworth's training on a Career Course at Fort Benning he had noted a severe, if not myopic, deficiency in the tuition of guerrilla tactics and jungle training. When he was in Vietnam he had noted that large battalion manoeuvres straight out of World War II textbooks were not making the grade there and that, due to these redundant and very inappropriate tactics, Americans were losing their lives needlessly. Hackworth had written articles and conducted studies, made suggestions and lodged complaints in a variety of different tones in which he indicated that there should be more emphasis on small unit excursions and more stress on guerrilla methodology. These went unheeded and an opportunity to confirm his beliefs was not to be passed up. He accompanied Slam in Vietnam only to discover that the brigadier general was not truly interested in portraying the war based on the study and that Slam actually reinforced the insular view of the higher echelons that the United States was truly making progress in Vietnam with World War II tactics. And that the falsified body counts on the after action reports were, in fact, true indications of America's success. Hackworth was justifiably appalled. Not only did Slam go on to send his partial version of the report to General Harold K. Johnson, the Army Chief of Staff, he also collected enough information for 'eight solid books' (578) as an 'insurance policy' for his wife and children. Slam, like many other 'tourists', perpetuated a false litany of

reports that 'bore no relation to the facts...gleaned' (577) during their travels in Vietnam.

Hackworth's book is interesting, if for no other reason, because it proposes that much of the problem in Vietnam was due to the fact that right from the bottom of the ladder the information relayed upwards followed the order of a game of broken telephone (or, as Hackworth put it 'a policy of command musical chairs' (484)). How could Westy make an honest judgement when all the information he received was styled for the General's own tastes by the fine-fingered tailors on their way up? He was one man and he depended on many for his 'intelligence' – he could only be at one place at one time and if everybody wanted to impress him, how was he going to get to the truth? However, Hackworth does not suggest that if this was the case, that Westmoreland was without blame; if the honest-to-goodness critics of the strategies employed in Vietnam were small voices in the void, they did nonetheless exist in all spheres of the chain of command. In fact, in 1968 Westmoreland asked a panel (of which Hackworth was a member) to compile a document that portrayed each member's assessment of the war and asked for suggestions on how to remedy the problems members encountered. Again, Hackworth's suggestions and worries were ignored and considered virtually heretical if not utterly naïve.

Ironically enough, years after it was already too late for Hackworth, Slam would be discredited on such a fundamental level that it would only further indicate the poor judgement and obvious blind-eye of the US Army's upper strata. He had professed to grand conquests in both World Wars, in Korea and

in Vietnam and as Hackworth would later discover, 'Slam would speak with pride of being the only American soldier to serve in all four of America's great wars in the twentieth century, it was a claim more than a little deceptive' (584).

If we are to take his book as fact, then Hackworth seems to have tried throughout his career, and specifically throughout America's conquest in Vietnam, to suggest constructive and fairly economical methods to enhance the US's effectiveness while at the same time limiting the number of injuries and fatalities. His requests and suggestions, according to his book (and perhaps the Vietnam War itself is testament to this and proof of his assertions), were turned down, ignored and / or misinterpreted. A poignant example of the kind of stupidity Hackworth's suggestions were met with is illustrated by the following example: in 1965 after a two major baptisms of fire (Operation Gibraltar and the Ia Drang Valley) Hackworth thought it would be worthwhile to enlist the help of the Australians to train platoon leaders 'to gain jungle-fighting knowledge that they could bring back and infuse throughout their units' (495). It has to be remembered that the Australians had some valuable experience and aptitude in the art of jungle warfare learned during World War II in New Guinea and Borneo as well as during the post-war Malayan battle (which they shared with the British) (495). Hackworth was of the opinion, and not inaccurately so, that the 'Australians understood the war [in Vietnam] better than our guys ever would' (495) and the Australians were happy to oblige. Hackworth spoke to his superior who would 'check with the people in Saigon [at HQ], and within days word had come back that the concept was a "no-

go", the reason given that sending American troops, *particularly* troops from the 101<sup>st</sup>, America's finest, to the Aussies would be like admitting we didn't know what the hell we were doing' (498). This suggests that saving face was more important to men at the top than saving lives.

If internal politics plagued the US Army in places only few could reach, racial politics beset the men on the ground. Let me add that from the novels and factual documents I have read, I have noted that racist concerns were not necessarily the status quo and that it was, according to much of the literature, exaggerated by the media and other sources. What sometimes seemed like irreconcilable views regarding the war, civil rights and the draft were exchanged and did, in some cases, result in clashes. But it was the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) troops and their chain of command that brought many an American ire to the boil. ARVN colonels and generals (etcetera) were purported to be amongst the most blatantly corrupt and devious 'fat cats' on the continent. The ARVN troops themselves would, together with other things, not arrive for a battle, run from the battlefield, not support American troops and in general seemed to be disinterested in a war everybody else was fighting for them. The war had been Americanised. Cowardice (or so it seemed to the US troops) and Corruption for the account of the Americans (paid both in greenback and lives) added up to an extremely bitter hatred for the ARVN. Hackworth caricatures his Vietnamese counterpart at MACV where he served as an advisor:

Yet there was no question the [Colonel] Hahn was a corrupt, lazy bum. With his overstuffed physique, his French accent

and droopy moustache, his FDR cigarette holder dangling between his teeth, and his aviator shades, he was an unabashed warlord who got a percentage from every activity that went on in the Zone. He controlled all GI laundry and bar activities in Cao Lanh...A Vietnamese could not open any business at all without Hanh's approval, a nod that invariably cost an ongoing, fixed percentage of the profit. When I went with him on his rounds of all the provinces, Hanh didn't hide the fact that each province chief paid off [...] Meanwhile, back at the war, under Hanh every major operation we had was compromised; the VC found out what we were doing faster than our subordinate units did. I felt sure they were getting copies of our operations orders, which could only mean there was at least one high-ranking VC in our camp...As a countermeasure, I pushed for minimum warning orders and fake OPORDs [Operation Orders] whenever possible. Of course, Colonel Hanh fought me all the way on this and virtually everything else... (Hackworth 1989: 745)

Of the G-2 in the II Corps Hackworth describes the way in which a Vietnamese Colonel would conveniently 'ignore any and all intelligence his counterpart [American Colonel Wyatt Mitchell] passed on to him' (711). There was another commander, Lieutenant General Lu Lan, 'who like most of the Viet corps commanders, generally acted more like a feudal baron in medieval Europe than a tactical leader' (711).

On one occasion, the General [Lu Lan] refused to conduct an operation, despite reliable intelligence that it was a fat, soft target, because his astrologer told him he'd have bad fortune if he ran such a mission during that particular period. (711)

It is easy to understand that that kind of conduct struck the American sentiments as being utterly imprudent, if not irresponsible, because discussing confidential information pertaining to strategic war operations with an *astrologer* could very easily compromise the entire mission, and the Americans believed that that is what happened. Accordingly, the ARVN counterparts did not create an environment conducive to trust and the Americans felt that they could not respect, or at times even remain civil, to these disinterested, self-serving Vietnamese. It appears to have been a particularly difficult time in the history of the war because America was preparing to leave and the ARVN foot soldiers desperately needed training despite a general feeling that they did not really deserve it.

After all, the US was fighting *their* war. When the Americans decided that they had spent enough lives and too much money on the Vietnam War, the ARVN troops would have to take over. It is important to remember that, initially, America's presence in Vietnam was premised on the fact that they would *advise* the South Vietnamese, and not necessarily fight the war for them (cf. Kosovo and Iran). Throughout the war many authors document the overall apathy and inefficiency of the ARVN troops. When the time came for America to turn the war back into a Vietnamese concern with its 'Vietnamization' program, the ARVN was no better off than in the late fifties and early sixties



when the Americans first arrived with their wallets and brains. It was inevitable that the ARVN would not get its act together in time for the Americans to hand their war back to them and this certainty proved that all those young, American men that died in Vietnam died for nothing. And perhaps, for Americans, that was the most bitter of pills to swallow.



## THE VIETNAM LEGACY

### A GHOST THAT HAUNTS EACH SURVIVOR

To begin with, Caputo and Mason claim that they do not wish to discuss history, politics or morality. Yet it is impossible to divorce these three factors from an exceptionally political and morally ambiguous war. Vietnam has become synonymous with American politics and national division. Therefore, both *A Rumor of War* (1977) and *Chickenhawk* (1983) perpetually, though not necessarily by design, raise the issues of history, politics and morality. These factors are deeply interesting in both works given that each author (but specifically Philip Caputo) goes to great lengths to inform the reader that their books are neither about politics nor about the moral correctness of having become involved in Vietnam in the first place. The authors make use of author's notes, prologues, epilogues and postscripts to express this attempt at divorcing the literature from history, politics and morality, but since the war cannot be divorced from any of them, these three factors continually crop up throughout the narratives. Before we consider what I refer to as 'disclaimers', let us look at the title of each book.

It is interesting that Mason chose *Chickenhawk* as a title as we will see from the quote below, because (according to the proffered definition) he did serve in Vietnam and did not overtly promote the war before he became an actively serving member. However, it does speak of the two conflicting opinions Americans held on Vietnam. It also harks back on his relationship with the air

and his love of flying while at the same time suggesting, perhaps, that, despite his love for flying, he was still afraid. What is a 'Chickenhawk' then?

Those who fervently support or advocate military solutions to political problems, and yet who have personally declined to take advantage of a significant opportunity to serve in uniform during wartime are classic Chickenhawks.

(<http://expage.com/notowar10> sourced on 28 April 2004)

But perhaps the most interesting of the two titles is *A Rumor of War*. The title was taken from the book of Revelations in the Bible (Matthew 24:6) where Jesus says to his disciples

And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all [these things] must come to pass, but the end is not yet.

(<http://www.blueletterbible.org/kjv/Mat/Mat024.html> sourced 23 November 2005)

*A Rumor of War* is perhaps not only on a personal level, but on a national level too, a revelation of the Vietnam War. Caputo seeks to show the best and the worst of the war, the most fulfilling and the most isolating events of his experiences in country. He seems to imply that *A Rumor of War* may reveal to the reader, if he or she is not a veteran of the war, some new understanding of these often conflicting situations.

The 'disclaimers' referred to earlier contain similar elements. The section below will illustrate, using quotes from both authors, that these disclaimers address the

reader in a way which hopes to prevent any further political criticism. The authors tacitly press the reader to forget the historical milieu of the political events and emotions surrounding the Vietnam War. They would like the reader to begin with a tabula rasa.

I hope that throughout this essay the implicit suggestion that the authors were the subject of much criticism permeates sufficiently because it is, to my mind, something that seeps into their work constantly. In light of that, to invoke a historical view when reading either book would be to subvert the authors' overt appeals. However, reading the text with no knowledge of the Vietnam War would be imprudent.

It is true that Caputo specifically wants the book to be 'simply a story of war' (Caputo 1977: xiii). But (as will be indicated a little further down) it is impossible to view the book without some kind of historical context. *A Rumor of War* cannot be another story about a war; it is the story of a soldier in a unique war (if only for the American soldiers who fought there and in the sense that it forced American society to re-evaluate some of its principal values).

In a way, both authors seek to dissociate themselves from the aberration that was the Vietnam War and all its related criticism and, instead, to explain their respective encounters as they experienced them, before the 'legacy' of Vietnam became what it did: sordid and negative. The very first thing Robert Mason writes in his author's note is

This is a personal narrative of what I saw in Vietnam and how it affected me . . . . Instead of dwelling on the political aspects

of the war, I have concentrated on the actual condition of being a helicopter pilot in Vietnam in 1965-1966. The events, I hope, will speak for themselves. (Mason 1983: Author's Note)

Similarly, Philip Caputo opens his Prologue with

This book does not pretend to be history. It has nothing to do with politics, power, strategy, influence, national interests, or foreign policy; nor is it an indictment of the great men who led us into Indochina whose mistakes were paid for with the blood of some quite ordinary men. (Caputo 1977: xiii)

In other words, the reader is asked not to misconstrue each author's intention. Although Caputo claims *A Rumor of War* is categorically not about history, politics, or foreign policy, the memoir cannot, by virtue of its very association with the war, be divorced from these aspects. They are fundamentally and intrinsically bound together.

It is rather interesting, though, that Mason hopes that 'the events...will speak for themselves'. Perhaps the author tacitly presses the reader to suspend his or her opinions on Vietnam, momentarily, to allow the author to put forward his side of the case, without prejudice. However, if the events were truly allowed to speak for themselves, then such a disclaimer might not be necessary. By immediately introducing each book with a request to forget the politics of the Vietnam War, the authors directly highlight the political nature of their memoirs and of the war. In essence, they, as writers whose message is in contrast to the official opinion of the war, instantly subvert their aim by drawing attention to

these politics. Caputo, although writing a book which speaks about his experiences in Vietnam, writes that the 'book does not pretend to be history'. However, he seems to forget that it is, in fact, a history of his experiences in Vietnam and therefore the book does not pretend to be a history because it is a history – albeit one version of history. As I will highlight later in the essay, the book is also not devoid of reference to foreign policy, national interests, or influence. Caputo explicitly states that he was influenced (and ultimately betrayed) by the Kennedy Administration's propagated claims – in effect, he was so motivated by these claims that he joined the Marine Corps. Mason, on the other hand, claims that he was unaware of the greater politics of Vietnam and America. However, I digress. By drawing up a relationship between an 'indictment of the great men' and their 'mistakes' and those mistakes which 'were paid for with the blood of some quite ordinary men', Caputo illustrates his disdain for the great military machine and its effects on men and humankind. By extension, he indicates that the literature, the essence of *A Rumor of War*, is indivisible from the history or the politics of the war and the era.

Neither memoir claims to want to persuade the reader of the politics of the war. Ultimately, however, they do not accomplish writing about their experiences devoid of politics; they were, after all, the products of a society which elected a government that espoused freedom and that elected government utilised the notion of freedom to justify its entrance into Vietnam. Additionally, by beginning each book with a statement that negates the book's relationship with politics, each author (as I have suggested)

immediately brings the politics into play and therefore the authors cannot allege that their accounts are untainted by political affairs. If the 'events could speak for themselves' then they would; they would not require an alternative, ancillary disclaimer. Mason does, despite this appeal, allow the events to speak for themselves (if only to a degree), as we will see later on in the essay.

A second element in the disclaimers emphasises the personal nature of each account. Mason speaks of 'a personal narrative' and reiterates that 'these recollections of my experiences will encourage other veterans to talk. I think it is impossible to know too much about the Vietnam era and its effects on individuals and society' (Mason 1983: Author's Note). Caputo writes: 'I tried to describe what the dominant event in the life of my generation ... was like for the men who fought in it ... ' (1977: xxi). It is almost as if, in an attempt to bring the reader closer to the author by humanising the interaction between the reader and the text (and by inference, the author), the author immediately distances himself. Again, it is a circuitous route to the point, but by suggesting that the nature of the author's experiences in Vietnam is unique and different and, as Mason writes, the war's 'effects on individuals and society' are shrouded in contention and misapprehension, the author creates a chasm between reader and text because it, to a degree, implies the reader cannot be a part of that understanding. Here, by suggesting that the war had a profound effect on the soldiers as well as the civilian population of America, the author indicates the inherent relationship between the morality and contention surrounding the war and the nature of his literature.

It remains true to say, then, that the authors sought to elicit an empathic reader who might be amenable to viewing their plight sympathetically. Whether that was successful or not remains a matter of debate (how much does the reader know about the history of Vietnam? Was he or she a veteran of sorts?). In other words, what preconceived ideas do the readers contribute to the text? I explore this concept further and use Tom Wolfe as a primary reference for that section of the discussion. However (in the meantime), it appears that a careful reading of the disclaimers presented to us highlights where these authors might have failed in creating a particularly receptive readership. It is nonetheless curious that the authors would want to make such pointed emphasis in their relative disclaimers.

It seems that authors like Caputo and Mason wanted readers to understand the nature of the circumstances facing them in Vietnam and wanted Americans to see that they, as soldiers, were in some respects also ultimately cheated. In the quote below, we see the desire of the author to reiterate the peculiar moral condition of the Vietnam War. In this instance, he addresses the self-righteousness of the civilian voices of dissent. Caputo explains what he hoped to achieve by writing *A Rumor of War* (1977):

I wanted *A Rumor of War* to make people uncomfortable – in effect to blow them out of their snug polemical bunkers into the confusing, disturbing emotional and moral no-man's land where the warriors dwelled .... I wanted to communicate the moral ambiguities of a conflict in which demons and angels traded places too often to tell one from the other, even within



yourself. In a way, the book was designed to be a vicarious tour of duty, and when the readers came to the end, I hoped they would look into the mirror, or, better yet, into their souls, and ask themselves, "NOW what do I think? How would I have behaved if I had been there?"' (350)

Unfortunately, Robert Mason does not offer us such an in-depth explanation into the literary process nor into his aims. In this regard, he does let 'the events speak for themselves'. *A Rumor of War* is certainly the more 'literary' of the two books under discussion; the author is more concerned with the work's reception and analysis than Mason and it is for this reason that I engage with Caputo in the following section of the chapter.

In light of the quote above, Caputo hopes (perhaps not directly, but implicitly) that his memoir will arouse a sense of alienation. It is something of a paradoxical hope because, as I will indicate, the author is torn between two ambivalent alternatives: to shock the reader enough so that the reader is forced to re-evaluate his opinion regarding Vietnam, and to bring the reader close enough to the text so that the reader will adjust his or her opinion based on Caputo's justifications.

Let us consider the following definition: Alienation is, as defined by M.H. Abrams (1981) in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (4<sup>th</sup> Edition), an attempt to 'make the familiar aspects of reality seem strange, and so to prevent the emotional involvement of the audience with the characters and subject matter of the play [he is referring to Bertolt Brecht's theatre work]. Its aim is to effect a critical attitude on the part of the audience and to arouse them to take action

against, rather than simply to accept, the social reality presented on the stage' (44). If we look at Caputo's quote above, we see that it contains precisely the elements emphasised by Abrams.

In the first instance (making 'familiar aspects of reality seem strange'), Caputo highlights that Vietnam itself had this effect on men.<sup>1</sup> While the effect of alienation is partially tangible as the author's intentional device, it is also significant as an effect of the war. Therefore, the sense of alienation, shaped by circumstances in Vietnam, naturally finds its way into the literature.

By making 'reality seem strange' (perhaps because the events at issue are inherently strange) the reader is automatically distanced from the events. At this point things become more complex. Caputo wants the reader to jettison his preconceptions pertaining to Vietnam: he highlights the absurdity of the circumstances in Vietnam and he wants the reader to be blown out of his safe but critical attitude. But at the same time, he utilises tools<sup>2</sup> that bring the reader closer to the text. It is a contradictory and conflicting desire, which perhaps in itself adds to the alienating effect of the 'social reality presented on the stage'. It also further highlights a direct correspondence between the contents of *A Rumor of War* and the moral uncertainty embodied in the Vietnam War.

At the very least, *A Rumor of War* was intended to provoke the reader to reconsider his point of view regarding events in Vietnam. Perhaps, if Caputo's book succeeds in convincing the reader that the distinction between ignobleness and morality was not always cut and dried, he has succeeded in 'effecting a critical attitude in the audience'.

Does Caputo alienate the reader sufficiently so that he is compelled to take action against the social reality presented in the book? He does indeed hope to extricate the reader from his pharisaic misconceptions (assuming the reader had any). But, at the same time, he also hopes to evince in the reader a kind of empathic recognition of the events that happened in Vietnam. Therefore, the alienation has a conflicting effect that perhaps, on a meta-level, makes the reader more uncomfortable in his preconceptions. Ultimately, Caputo wants the reader to consider as many perspectives as possible on the war before coming to a conclusion. Caputo wants 'to make people uncomfortable' by urging the reader to become part of his experience in which he touched the memorable, Heart of Darkness. He refers to the 'confusing, disturbing emotional and moral no-man's land' and to 'moral ambiguities' that ultimately made even the most familiar parts of oneself seem foreign; one's 'self' was no longer a dependable and durable 'thing' that could be turned to in times of doubt and uncertainty. The reason why one's 'self' was no longer steady, resides in the professed fact that experiences in Vietnam were so stressful that they profoundly affected men's psyches. In this lies the alienating effect.

Additionally, Caputo attempts to recreate the sense of moral disjunction within the memoir by 'recounting' the events that led to his corruption. By making the reader 'uncomfortable' he 'blows them out of' their comfort zones and thus creates a space where the reader is somehow forced to re-evaluate his stance and persuasions regarding his perception of a veteran and a veteran's

experiences in Vietnam. Ultimately, the invocation of the dream-like state that Caputo often refers to is an additional alienating effect.<sup>3</sup>

Again, stating his overt desire to dislodge the reader from his preconceived ideas, the author creates a proposal in the reader's mind that there might have been something fundamentally wrong with the way society in general viewed events of the Vietnam War. In this instance Caputo succeeds. Throughout the prologues, author's notes, postscripts and epilogues (the last two appear in Caputo's book and not Mason's), both authors reiterate the fact that society had a flawed perception of the veteran. They also seem to maintain that this flawed perception has much to do with the fact that American society did not have the time or inclination to foster a better understanding of the events and conditions facing its fighting men in Vietnam. In line with this thinking is the fact that the veteran perceived America (home) to be a hostile environment. Derision, dislike, criticism and contempt were often hurled at veterans who returned. Many could not understand why they were so severely criticised, nor could they process the self-righteousness of those who criticised them. Caputo writes that 'Vietnam was considered a legitimate subject for journalism, but as a subject for literature as taboo as explicit sex had been to the Victorians' (Caputo 1977: 349).

The press, as Caputo indicates above, covered Vietnam extensively. In fact, Vietnam was probably one of the most publicised wars in history; it was a TV-war. Caputo's reasoning leads him to believe that journalism and literature were accorded such disparate receptions in the US because

journalism – good journalism, that is – makes its appeal to the mind, literature to the senses and emotions; and there was far too much emotion loose in the country, too many passions unleashed by the war. People didn't want to know about the tumults of the warrior's heart, to hear the cries that came howling straight out of the heart of darkness, the belly of the beast. (350)

At the time, there was no neutral space in which the Vietnam veteran could safely discuss his emotions and experiences without being denigrated or considered a lunatic. Traditionally, and according to Caputo's proffered definition, journalism is intended to be a cold, academic medium; it is expected to discuss the news from a perspective that is without emotion. There is no real threat of personal unravelling in traditional (and maybe stale) journalism, no great emotional undoing. Journalism is, accordingly, dictated by its subject matter, ruled only by the situation. In other words, Caputo's definition suggests that journalism, as he understands it (and he is not wholly without some understanding of the medium since he worked as a war correspondent and as a journalist)<sup>4</sup> is premised on the 'accurate' reporting of facts. Caputo juxtaposes journalism and literature. Literature, consistent with his suggestion, takes personal, subjective details and explores more than just the practical dimensions of a subject. In other words, according to Caputo, literature may use factual elements, but it is different from journalism because it adds up to more than the sum of its parts and in doing so creates concepts that can damage a national self-concept. That is what Caputo means when

he refers to his distinction between journalism and literature because, as he writes, 'Vietnam was the epicentre of a cultural, social, and political quake that sundered us [Americans] like no other event since the [American] Civil War' (352). Journalism offers a less threatening medium of discussion because it is meant (in keeping with Caputo's proffered suggestion) to exist without emotion while literature (creative writing) has the ability to fracture perceptions because it seeks to explore the buried significance of a subject matter.

It is noteworthy that Caputo makes such a distinction between literature and journalism because it shows up precisely the extent to which the contention surrounding Vietnam cannot be divorced from the subject matter and content of both Caputo's and Mason's memoirs. 'Literature' was not permitted to express the soldier's mind because it offered a threatening mode of communication as it did not have to rely solely on the facts. The memoirs do rely on 'facts' but discuss these 'facts' from the point of view of central characters who experienced them which, in turn, means they do not necessarily need to conform to an 'objective' and cold discussion of the 'facts'. Vietnam War literature, Caputo insinuates, was not widely read or accepted because it brought the human ingredient of the events in Vietnam to the fore and the public was not interested in this angle. Again, because the literature seeks to 'educate' the reader on a new perspective, it cannot be free of the pertinent elements (morality, politics and the history) of Vietnam. These elements are so intrinsically bound to the literature and cannot, even as Norman Mailer attempts<sup>5</sup> in *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, be separated.

Caputo claims that the Vietnam War highlighted enormous fractures in American society which are still widening today. He believes that literature was capable of highlighting those fractures and that American society was not ready to come to terms with its new identity. According to Caputo, the United States

is balkanized by 'group-think', as if the fissures opened during the upheavals of the '60s – between hawk and dove, black and white – have spread and spiderwebbed, so that now the great American tribe is split into subtribes...Some of the more egregious theories of the politically correct, for whom Columbus and the Pilgrims are villains instead of heroes and the larger story of America a shameful instead of an inspiring narrative, suggest that the concern over a unified and traditional, national self-concept is 'far from over.' (354)

Society, both academic and political, was reluctant to address the troubles of the men it sent to Vietnam to fight for 'freedom' and 'democracy'. One can also surmise that this is the reason why a good deal of the literature that emerged from the Vietnam era followed the format of a memoir. Caputo writes that 'by the mid-1970s, the public had heard enough about Vietnam from journalists, commentators, and analysts of every kind. More words than bullets had been expended on that war – and miles and miles of film footage' (Caputo 1977: 349).

Tom Wolfe offers us some, albeit slightly cynical, insight into why authors write:

The reason a writer writes a book is to forget a book and the reason a reader reads one is to remember it.

([http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/t/tom\\_wolfe.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/t/tom_wolfe.html) sourced on 07 October 2005)

Perhaps the memoir was the most effective way of effecting some kind of necessary catharsis. However, Caputo (1977) maintains that he 'didn't write *A Rumor of War* as personal therapy', but that he believes his book and others about Vietnam 'have been therapeutic for a wounded nation' (353). In fact, he stresses that he 'did not write *A Rumor of War* as a form of therapy. Writing it was a trial; living with its publication an ordeal' (352). From the reader's perspective, it is debatable whether the book was personal therapy. Caputo's vehement denial that writing *A Rumor of War* was therapeutic is brought into question in his postscript. Right at the beginning of the postscript, Caputo writes 'I had a story to tell and a profound need to tell it' (347).

In light of that, it may be safe to surmise that it was a therapeutic attempt by the 'battle singer' (355) to 'wring order and meaning out of the chaotic clash of arms, to keep the tribe human by providing it with models of virtuous behavior – heroes who reflected the tribe's loftiest aspirations – and with examples of impious behavior that reflected its worst failings' (355). In itself then, it may have had therapeutic qualities that could be extended to American society at large, and in doing so, the writer considers '*A Rumor of War* as a success, not in the commercial or critical sense, but in the sense that it does most of what [he] intended' (353). From his prologue, epilogue and postscript, we can garner that part of his intention was to expose the reader to



the fact that were heroes who committed 'act[s] of shining self-sacrifice, showed that we can rise to the better angels in our nature, even in conditions where it is all too easy to succumb to our demons' (355). Earlier I noted that the authors attempted to create a readership that was empathic towards their plight. In light of the above, we again see the recurrent need of the author to illustrate that although morality was skewed in Vietnam, there were still those soldiers who represented pure hopes and whose acts embodied decency. This is indicative of the fact that Caputo's book directly incorporates the moral questions pertaining to Vietnam as part of the narrative and provides these questions as a parting thought which the reader is left to ponder. Ultimately, the author instantaneously reasserts *A Rumor of War's* connection with the moral issues of the war and thereby illustrates that the literature is not, and can not be, removed from the morality of the war. Perhaps it is slightly redundant to state, but the war and its concomitant events and experiences is the sole reason for the existence of literature pertaining to the war.

Caputo is of the opinion that his and others' work (among them Larry Heinemann's *Close Quarters*, Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* (which was turned into a film)) has contributed substantially to making 'the Vietnam War a legitimate subject for literature and the warrior's voice respectable' (1977: 353). In this, perhaps, is the 'therapy' he refers to and what Mason hopes the documentation of his 'experiences will encourage' (Mason 1983: Author's Note) – that is discussion and education on the effects of the Vietnam War.

Philip Caputo indicates that the rationale for *A Rumor of War* (1977) is to 'show that war, by its nature, can arouse a psychopathic violence in men of seemingly normal impulses' (xviii). He speaks of entering the war as a young man and leaving it, one year later, as a mature person, having lost all semblances of youthful immortality. Caputo further intimates throughout the memoir that he was by all accounts a relatively normal young man and that Vietnam changed that. Vietnam precipitated a series of events that he never considered part of his congruent self-concept. The most striking example of this is his instigation of the unofficial snatching and / or assassination of two suspected Viet Cong from the village of Giao-Tri. The operation went wrong when the squad (sent out on Caputo's orders) captured and killed their informant instead of the suspects the latter had pointed out.

By the time Caputo had his charges of murder (for the botched, unauthorised kidnapping and killing described above) against him dropped, he was so disillusioned that he refers to Kennedy as a 'political witch doctor'. Caputo writes: 'I was finished with governments and their abstract causes, and I would never again allow myself to fall under the charms and spells of political witch doctors like John F. Kennedy' (332).

In the affirmative (as opposed to a disclaimer) *A Rumor of War* is intended as 'simply a story of war' (Caputo 1977: xiii) and the effect war has on the soldiers who fight wars. *A Rumor of War* is Caputo's account of his experiences and the consequences of his going to war in Vietnam. However, perhaps by stating that *A Rumor of War* is 'simply a story of war' is to overlook a fundamental discrepancy: *A Rumor of War* is not only a story of war, it is a story of the things

war does to the men that fight in a war. It is a story of a man and his cohorts and the things they experienced. As I have indicated earlier, he aims 'to describe [...] the dominant event in the life of [his] generation' (xxi) of which the war was a ubiquitous element.

This next section deals with the ideology that 'motivated' and 'justified' the Vietnam War. More precisely, we investigate how this ideology influenced the two authors under discussion. What becomes apparent is that both authors view the propaganda foisted on the nation by the likes of President Kennedy and President Johnson in a similar fashion. We investigate how this ideology, and its associated subversion, manifests itself in the literature, that this substantiates the thesis of this study: Vietnam War literature cannot be written from a perspective that negates the influences of politics, morality and history as factors that influenced the literature. Initially, before experiencing Vietnam first-hand, both authors view the attendant politics from a traditionally American perspective. That is to say, they believe that the principles America stands for are basically good and can be applied to any nation. A comprehensive definition of these principles is to be found in the Declaration of Independence (signed in Congress on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, 1776) which states

We [members of the thirteen states of America] hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

-That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,

-That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness...[But] when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security. (<http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document> sourced on the 13th of September 2005)

Inherent in this declaration is the notion that the people (who are endowed with inalienable rights) select the government. These rights are intended to allow people to live freely and happily. If the government does not ensure that these rights are observed, then the people have a duty to abolish the inadequate government and reinstate a new government. What this means (and it is the most important element of the declaration) is that Americans must actively seek to maintain their inalienable rights, in the face of all adversity. The American system of governance – democracy – is a natural extension of the Declaration of Independence. The American Constitution is

founded on the Declaration of Independence. In fact, almost all levels of American society are based in some way on the Declaration of Independence and, by extension, the freedoms imbued in this declaration.

These are the same principles upon which the presidential administrations based their motivation for going to Vietnam in the first place.<sup>6</sup>

This chapter draws attention to the fact that the nature of innocence (and its subsequent corruption) associated (specifically) with *America in Vietnam*, is fundamentally ideological in nature. In other words, an innocence constructed upon the basis of an ideology is a carefully crafted creed and it stems from the beliefs and values of a certain sect, group or movement. These values are not without motive and may not embrace the notion of innocence. Being an innocence of ideology, it emerges that, by its very nature, it is not 'innocent'. Therefore, when American literature speaks of the loss of innocence it speaks of a double jeopardy. Ideology is carefully constructed around ethics and principles that are drawn from an ideal system of reference (this system of reference can be political, ethnic, religious etcetera). Propaganda is effective when it appeals to beliefs and values. In other words, propaganda is based on some kind of ideology. Propaganda is disseminated among a group of people that need to be persuaded. If it is effective, those people are persuaded. Therefore, a constructed innocence and moral good is in the end not innocent. Though the people may believe it, it is ultimately corrupt because its inherent motive is constructed, with calculation, to achieve an end. Thus, when reference is made to the loss of innocence, we should bear in mind its additional poignancy. Because a central theme of Vietnam War literature

(and specifically the two memoirs under discussion) is this corruption of innocence, the literature is once more unable to divorce itself from the overwhelming effect of the politics, history and morality of the war. It is not simply the loss of innocence associated with war, so common and 'normal' – the loss of innocence referred to is fundamentally disturbing and sinister. Those that believed the propaganda and the believed in the ideology, naively, were the victims of ironic contradictions, dark political meddling and betrayal.

The quintessential example of such dark cynical meddling can be found in the Kennedy administration's participation in and contribution to the ousting and murder of Ngo Dinh Diem, who was installed with the help of the same administration. At the 1954 Geneva Convention, it had been decided by the relevant parties that Vietnam should be allowed to have 'free and fair' elections. This was, if we are to believe the propaganda motivating American involvement in Southeast Asia (that is, the establishment of a freely elected government and so on), in line with American desires. However, when it appeared that the Viet Minh (a communist movement) would win the elections, the United States started grasping at straws. It would certainly shed a bad light on America's already tarnished reputation as the contender in the world arena. America's reputation was in question because of its shaky victory in Korea. They (and in particular General J. Lawton Collins, as stated in Kolko 1978: 85), after considering their options, decided that installing Diem as president of the Republic of Vietnam was the best option. Further political meddling resulted in this subversion of the Geneva Accords. Diem 'seemed a major step in the nation-building process and in the creation of political

legitimacy as well as the extension of their [America's] sphere of influence' (Kolko 1978: 85). Diem (not a blameless character by any means) considered familial ties very important and accordingly installed his family members as important figureheads in the state of Vietnam. He also inducted senior military officers in civil administration positions to secure his consolidation of power. The appointment of military staff in civil offices led to the 'militarization of the civil order' (Kolko 1978: 88). Eventually, the US had had enough of Diem and his ilk's self-serving and totalitarian antics.

The emergence of Diem's totalitarian, personalized regime caused increasing ambivalence among American officials, especially after it became starkly clear that his army's ultimate function was not to fight either conventional or guerrilla war but to maintain Diem in power (90).

Though the politics, whatever they might have been, might have made little difference to men who had National Service duties, they certainly did influence others who voluntarily went to the military. It is also assumed that those who went to the military to further their own dreams (in the case of Robert Mason) were in some way (as I will illustrate) influenced by the general propaganda circulated throughout the US. Both authors hail from seemingly similar backgrounds, in the sense that they were both members of Middle America (financially); they were not the poor, underprivileged kids who had no choice (they had choices). They still, with some education, decided that the reasons supplied by the government were convincing. They did assume that

the principles upon which they based their faith in their country were inherently valid and worthy.

Most engagements in war are either the result of a forced hand or a desire to achieve some specific end; that much we know. The Vietnam War, in some ways, fulfils both these criteria. America believed that if Indochina succumbed to communism the whole of Asia would fall – the (by now) hackneyed domino effect. The 'specific end' refers to the propagated desire to establish a Western form of government in Southeast Asia because the one that existed (or might potentially exist) conflicted with American aims and desires. The presidential shamans (Dean Rusk as Secretary of State and Robert McNamara (in the early part of the involvement in Vietnam) serving as Secretary of Defense) used this desire / end, to widen the reach of democracy, to persuade Americans of the moral good in serving their political ends. They claimed that there were a set of similar-minded people across the vast expanse of ocean who wanted to be free from the clutches of communism and the US wanted to assist in this regard. This is how American men became involved in the conflict in Vietnam. Rusk and McNamara, among others, used the idea that America could make a difference to the 'oppressed' people of Vietnam to motivate Americans to support involvement in Vietnam and therefore, when the authors speak of their relevant motivations for joining the armed forces, they instantly bring the politics of Vietnam under analysis.

Philip Caputo seems to be the prototypical American boy. He grew up in a safe suburb, on the outskirts of Chicago, called Westchester. It was a characteristic post-World War II success story. Westchester was a small town



that rose from the affluence following the War as the need for housing arose, along with enough money to buy these new houses. It had all the fundamental ingredients of the American pie: 'sleek, new schools smelling of fresh plaster and floor wax; supermarkets full of Wonder Bread and Bird's Eye frozen peas; rows of centrally heated split-levels that lined dirtless streets on which nothing ever happened' (Caputo 1977: 4). Given all this, young Caputo was restless and found the safe, suburban life dull. He writes that he enjoyed the neighbouring Cook and Dupage County forest reserves because they offered a diversion from the security of home in the sense that he found 'flint arrowheads in the muddy creek [Salt Creek]' that reminded him of 'that savage, heroic time ... before America became a land of salesmen and shopping centers' (4). He indicates that he was 'a restless boy caught between suburban boredom and rural desolation' (4).

In this sense, history stretching further back than the immediate events leading up to Vietnam (for example, Caputo's standard of living which was a product of the years following the Second World War and so forth) has an effect on the literature. We must consider that the years immediately following the Second World War were years of 'introspection' for the American nation, in a way, because America sought to develop itself and to avoid, as far as was possible, getting involved in international conflicts. Caputo's lifestyle, described above, was a product of that era and his mentality was, in the same light, a product of those years. History from that time influenced the way he lived, experienced things and understood the world. Perhaps if he grew up in a time that espoused different things and represented different desires, he would never

have chosen to become a soldier. One can even go as far as to say that his understanding of Vietnam was influenced by the era immediately following World War II. When viewed like this, one can see the inextricable nature of history and the effect it had on men who experienced it – and, by implication, those who wrote about their tours of duty.

Innocence and security were not every young man's dream. In this respect, the old adage 'you never know what you've got till you've lost it' rings ironically true. Caputo was 'sick of the safe, suburban existence [he] had known most of [his] life' (4). He had an ambition to 'live heroically' in a 'commonplace world' but 'had no clear idea of how to fulfil this peculiar ambition until the day a Marine recruiting team set up a stand in the student union at Loyola University'. On the recruitment poster stood a lean man who 'looked like a cross between an All-American halfback and a Nazi tank commander' (6). This was to be his escape.

It is perhaps somewhat ironic that Caputo invokes both these figures (the football player and the Nazi tank commander) and that he finds in these images, the embodiment of his 'escape' from his 'safe, suburban existence'. Both figures are brusque and brutish, male figures. Naturally, these characteristics appealed to his desire to live heroically. An element of their brutish attitudes and demeanour can also be seen as embodying the *esprit de corps* of the United States Marine Corps (henceforth the USMC). On even a superficial reading of literature pertaining to the USMC, it is easy to come to the conclusion (as it is often self-professed by its members) that the USMC is particularly proud of its gung-ho attitude. The USMC is an aggressive and

tough force which relies heavily on its reputation as such for a negative psychological effect on its enemies. Caputo writes of the gung-ho attitude and the indoctrination necessary to achieve such an attitude.

Throughout [their training at Quantico], we were subjected to intense indoctrination, which seemed to borrow from Communist brainwashing techniques. We had to chant slogans while running: "Hut-two-three-four, I love the Marine Corps". And before meals: "Sir, the United States Marines; since 1775, the most invincible fighting force in the history of man. Gung ho! Gung ho! Gung ho! Pray for war!" Like the slogans of the revolutionaries, these look ludicrous in print, but when recited in unison by a hundred voices, they have a weird hypnotic effect on a man. The psychology of the mob, of the Bund rally, takes command of his will and he finds himself shouting that nonsense even though he knows it's nonsense. (12)

If these statements were in anyway inherently nonsense, why would so many men have believed them? Perhaps the reason why men believed such apparently ludicrous programming can be ascribed to the strong and determined indoctrination of the USMC. The invocation of the Nazi tank-commander and the Bund rally illustrates a relationship between the same brainwashing that the Nazis were so famous for and the USMC. I have illustrated, at least in part, that esprit de corps of the USMC embodies images of right-wing thinking. By calling on the image of the Nazi tank-commander,

Caputo emphasises the right-wing element of the USMC's esprit de corps. For the record, Caputo is not suggesting that the Nazis, communists or America were all fighting for the same cause. He is, however, suggesting that they shared similar approaches towards tackling their respective causes and that that likeness was sinister. The ultimate result of such indoctrination is that a group of individuals becomes a team that functions in harmony as one (dangerous and uniformed) machine.

The purpose of drill was to instill discipline and teamwork, two of the Corps' cardinal virtues...we had learned to obey orders instantly and in unison without thinking. Each platoon had been transformed from a group of individuals into one thing: a machine of which we were merely parts. (10)

Caputo succumbed to the political indoctrination of the USMC. Beyond this indoctrination, he lists further motivations for joining the Corps: 'I needed to prove something – my courage, my toughness, my manhood, call it whatever you like' (6). And then there is another vital motivation: 'I got swept up in the patriotic tide of the Kennedy era' (4). Although Caputo does not list this as the most important reason for joining the USMC – stating instead that it was the boredom of his safe life that was the primary factor – it remains a vital incentive because so much of the politics governing that safe life were the result of Kennedy's policies. Vietnam might not have happened at all if it was not for those policies.

At this point it becomes relevant to recall the section above which deals with the indoctrination of soldiers in the USMC. Caputo refers to the Nazi tank-

commander and the Bund rally as well as to the similarity between communist brainwashing and that of the USMC. This relates to the fact that Caputo claims he was influenced by the Kennedy administration's 'patriotic tide' which drove him to war. Bear in mind, too, that the indoctrination Caputo received during his training with the USMC was strongly allied to Kennedy's policies since he (as president) was the ultimate commander of the military. By looking at why Caputo conjures up two strong images borrowed from the Nazis as well as referring to the similarity between the communist brainwashing techniques of the USMC we can see that there is another implicit inference to be made: both the Nazis and communism are particularly infamous for their emphasis on propaganda. Both movements relied heavily on propaganda for purposes of indoctrination. For argument's sake, let me suggest that democracy also relies on propaganda (that which convinces its people that they are 'free' and which is no less effective), but because the system of governance is not founded solely on the coercion of its populace, the propaganda is used more to persuade citizens. The difference, it seems to me, is that communism and fascism (of which Nazism was a prime example) seek to convince and coerce their citizenry into compliance with the norms and reforms of the respective movements. Therefore Caputo groups all three movements under the same banner: evil.

Having explained the result of the indoctrination, we might explore the overall general effect of it in *A Rumor of War*. Because Caputo wrote the book some ten years after having served in Vietnam, it may be assumed that he had a lot of time to think on the events there. It then becomes somewhat interesting to

note that, given the reflections of hindsight, he still chose to bring the elements of Nazism and communism into play – it creates a link between the propaganda of implied innocence (no less effective) and the overt, forceful indoctrination of the other Nazism and communism. It seems that Caputo seeks to liken the effect of the American president's office to that of the Nazis and the communists. In essence, he suggests that all forms of propaganda are equally evil and sinister. In doing so, Caputo subverts the aims of his government's propaganda. The American government created an image of a menacing and ruthless communist enemy who relied on underhand and sly tactics as his source of power. Caputo says that both Kennedy's 'witchdoctoring' and the evils of communism were uniformly malicious.

By concluding that propaganda is evil by its very nature, and by speaking at some length about the effects of propaganda, Caputo again reiterates that his memoir cannot be, despite his most vehement protestations and disclaimers, detached from the effect that propaganda had on him. If we are to suggest, if only by proxy, that both Mason and Caputo's works are in anyway indicative reflections of the genre of Vietnam War literature, then it would be safe to say that, by extension, the literature pertaining to Vietnam is fundamentally linked to this propaganda.

Being inspired by Kennedy's passion and having been suitably psyched up by the Marine Corps, Caputo appropriately notes that

The country was at peace then [when he joined the USMC],  
but the early sixties were years of almost constant tension and  
crisis; if a conflict did break out, the Marines would be certain

to fight in it and I could be there with them. Actually there.  
Not watching it on a movie or TV screen, not reading about it  
in a book, but there, living out a fantasy. (6)


This seems to have pleased him. Finally, the young Caputo would have entry to a fellowship beyond the abstract statistical definitions of success in Middle America; it was a fellowship of soldiers. However, with hindsight he would bitterly remark

In the patriotic fervor of the Kennedy years, we had asked, 'What can we do for our country?' and our country answered, 'Kill VC.' That was the strategy, the best our best military minds could come up with: organized butchery. But organized or not, butchery was butchery, so who was to speak of rules and ethics in a war that had none? (230)

There was something (and it is somewhat indefinable) that Kennedy espoused that has, to date, never been repeated. The Kennedys as a family captured American imaginations. Jacqueline was a young, vibrant woman with a penchant for fashion and always dressed in accordance with the trends. She represented a youthful, well-to-do woman and 'happy' wife. President Kennedy was charming and evinced a sense of power which, as some critics have noted, attracted many women. Because of his vivacity and refreshing persona, he was a pleasant figure for the media to report on. They took advantage of his popularity with Americans by publicising and furthering his reputation and allure. Kennedy had also served heroically during the Second World War when his boat the PT-107 collided with a Japanese vessel. He was

injured and so was his crew. Kennedy managed to tow a fellow crewman for three miles in the dark to an island where they were later rescued. He received a medal for his bravery. Having served his country heroically, he inspired other men to do the same. Hence, his speech that forced men to 'ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country' had an added resonance.

Another factor adding to the Kennedy mystique is perhaps the fact that he was assassinated so soon after his inauguration. Perhaps the circumstances surrounding his death, and the numerous conspiracy theories run in parallel to his death, make him all the more intriguing. Yet, despite all these added possibilities, in his lifetime he was able to capture and crystallise so many American imaginations. Kennedy brought Vietnam to the American public's attention.



'Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty.' (as quoted in Denenberg 1995: 9)

These words did not fall lightly on a nation whose enthusiasm for liberty is unbounded. However, for Caputo, the war in itself was more than just sobering. He witnessed carnage and death; both would eventually be in vain because Vietnam was handed back to the Vietnamese ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam, North), who were wholly ill equipped to deal with the crisis and sometimes came across as being disinterested in remedying the situation.



However, before the proverbial rot set in, the men of the 9<sup>th</sup> Marine Expeditionary Brigade (the unit Caputo went to Vietnam with) were full of conviction. Caputo writes that: 'War is always attractive to young men who know nothing about it, but we had also been seduced into uniform by Kennedy's challenge to "ask what you can do for your country"' (Caputo 1977: xiv). Among the men, 'pride and overpowering self-assurance ... prevailed'. Most of the men from the brigade 'were shaped by that era, the age of Kennedy's Camelot. We went overseas full of illusions, for which the intoxicating atmosphere of those years was as much to blame as our youth' (xiv). Caputo speaks of America's apparent supremacy and of the men serving in uniform's 'missionary idealism'; the US was to 'play cop to the Communist's robber and spread [its] own political faith around the world' (xiv). The fact that men were influenced by 'Kennedy's Camelot' and its related propaganda, illustrates that neither *A Rumor of War* nor *Chickenhawk* can be divorced from the national politics or policies. The works are so intrinsically bound to the relevant politics that to attempt to divorce them only results in a gross oversight of the facts.

Similarly, *Chickenhawk* (1983) is a memoir that traces another youthful American man's path on which his innocence and naivety is lost. His tour in Vietnam is not more unusual than others who also served there, but his frank portrayal of his experiences in the country makes the book unique and interesting. Beyond his portrayal of the events as he saw them, another aspect stands out in the book: his return home. Mason's life goes completely awry after Vietnam. He appears to be an average American youth upon entering

the war, but by the end of his tour he fails to maintain even a modicum of normality. Ten years later, his life was still a mess and he was arrested and jailed for importing marijuana into the US. Mason became a sad statistic of war: he came home with shellshock and could not lead a normal life. What drove him to those extremes?

Mason spent his time in Vietnam under many illusions, which were ultimately shattered. He writes that 'I joined the army in 1964 to be a helicopter pilot. I knew at the time that I could theoretically be sent to war, but I was ignorant enough to trust it would be a national emergency if I did go' (Mason 1983: 13). The inversion of expectations is a fundamental point in the understanding of Mason's experience in Vietnam. We trace how he enters Vietnam a young, sprightly soldier to where he leaves, broken and altered.

Robert Mason grew up on dreams of levitation. His father was a farmer, and, between errands, Mason would dream of flying, 'to the extent that' he 'built tall towers to get off the ground' (17). When he graduated from high school, he had already obtained a private pilot's licence. Naturally, he sought to expand on this dream by working as a pilot. The military, especially in first world countries, offered excellent opportunities to many people in similar circumstances. Mason simply states, 'I joined the army in 1964 to be a helicopter pilot' (13).

Mason did not seek to make any great alteration to the American political face, and if he did intend so, he did not know enough about the unfolding politics of that era to effect a change. He describes his (lack of) understanding of the political conditions surrounding America's involvement in Vietnam. We

can see, from the quote below, that Mason was embittered by the fact that he was not aware of the details surrounding America's participation in the Vietnam War.

I knew nothing of Vietnam or its history. I did not know that the French had taken Vietnam, after twenty years of trying, in 1887. I did not know that our country had once supported Ho Chi Minh against the Japanese during the Second World War. I did not know that after the war the country that thought it was finally free of colonialism was handed back to the French by British forces with the consent of the Americans .... I did not know that our government backed an oppressive and corrupt leader, Ngo Dinh Diem, and later participated in his overthrow and death, in 1963. I did not know any of these facts .... I did know that I wanted to fly. And there was nothing I wanted to fly more than helicopters. (13)

This naive view is one of many such views expressed by Americans fighting in Vietnam. Robert Mason clearly was no exception. Like Caputo, Mason was influenced by the political propoganda and blind belief in the fundamental morality of the principles of American society. Mason quotes President Johnson as follows:

'We do not want an expanding struggle with consequences that no one can foresee, nor will we bluster or bully or flaunt our power. But we will not surrender and we will not retreat' – Lyndon Johnson, July 28, 1965. (43)

Johnson's words draw attention to the political complexities of yet another administration. It is, therefore, important to introduce another piece of history at this point so that the thread of chronology and ancillary understanding sheds light on precisely the extent to which the politics influenced the war and men's subscription to it as well as the direct influence it had on the literature that spawned from the war. Johnson's words indicate the ambivalent approach he took to the war. The Vietnam War is often referred to as Johnson's War. Johnson seems to have had two reputations pertaining to the war: the first was that he was all for war. The second was that he was not able to stop the internal, political ball from rolling. However, neither reputation accurately, or completely, captured his involvement in the war.

Johnson preferred political reform at home to make life for Americans better. The pressures surrounding the impending Vietnam War stood in diametric opposition to these aims in the sense that all the effort and money that might have been spent at home was injected into the war effort. Added to this diversion of resources was the traumatic loss of American lives, which in many ways was worse than any lack of political reform at home. There were four options available to Johnson pertaining to America's involvement in Vietnam (Young et al. 2004: 335). The first option was to withdraw from any involvement in Vietnam. It may seem obvious with hindsight that this would have been the correct avenue to pursue, yet there were certain constraints that limited such a decision. Given the intensification of the Cold War and chilling relations between the Soviet Union and the United States, retreating from a communist war was like admitting defeat and exposing a soft American underbelly.

Johnson had kept most of Kennedy's foreign policy advisors (335) during his administration and the voices of dissent, those opposed to further escalation in Vietnam, were far outnumbered by those in the administration that sought greater involvement.

The second option was to continue with the status quo in Vietnam (335) – that is to say, the Americans would continue with their advisory role. However, this option seemed as inane as withdrawal in the sense that the Americans in Vietnam were growing considerably more aggravated with South Vietnam's ineffectuality. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution (1964) altered events in Vietnam. The 'attacks' on *C. Turner Joy* and *USS Maddox* in North Vietnamese waters caused a furore in Washington. Warmongers in Washington became frenzied.

The third option entailed a massive 'build-up against Hanoi' (335). However, there was the concomitant danger of aggravating communist China. Given that the Korean War ended in a stalemate, the United States did not want to provoke China (who was more formidable than Korea) into a hasty, costly intervention that had that could potentially spell disaster for America's fight against communism.

The fourth option was

a gradual application of pressure against the North to strangle its support for the Viet Cong. Such pressure would take the form of bombing but, since this might not break the North's resolve and might even provoke it to greater efforts, some of

the Working Group also wanted to deploy US combat troops on the ground. (335)

Johnson was reluctant to accept the bombing of North Vietnam. However, with mounting volatility in the South he felt compelled to increase American involvement in Vietnam. Young and Kent (2004: 335) suggest that Johnson might have felt even more driven to bomb North Vietnam in a castigatory fashion when, on 6 February 1965, 'a Viet Cong attack on Pleiku killed eight Americans'. Added to the attacks on the two American ships in Vietnamese water, this attack applied additional pressure on Johnson to become more involved in Vietnam.

Mason was ignorant of the affairs of state and political dealings. President Johnson had to contemplate regarding America's involvement in Vietnam. To him, learning to fly a helicopter was more important than learning about the precise political manoeuvrings his government was involved in. Young people, however, are sometimes prone to being 'me-bound' and consequently try to do what makes them happiest – and that is how young Mason found himself in the Army. Mason was determined to make his venture into the armed forces a success with the same youthful determination as Caputo. He too had something to prove. He writes that: 'If they washed me out of flight school, I would have to serve my remaining three years of enlistment as an infantryman. The embarrassment was intolerable' (Mason 1983: 21).

Both authors had similar motivations for signing up – they had something to prove. Ironically, neither Mason nor Caputo realised the gravity of America's political intentions. Both believed that the war, if there was to be one, would

be fought from a morally justifiable perspective. Typically, Mason and Caputo refer to a president's words and cite those words as important factors governing their respective decisions to join.

Let us consider the following: the Cold War, it is widely recognised, was a grand arms and technology race. The two superpowers, the Soviet Union under the leadership of Nikita Khrushchev and the United States under the leadership of John F. Kennedy, were locking horns on fundamental ideological differences. Both nations had at their disposal vast sums of money and manpower with which to build nuclear weapons, spacecraft and other technological marvels. Neither liked the other much, but both realised the impact a full-scale war might have on their respective countries. I am not suggesting that either power was particularly concerned about the fate of the rest of the world. Perhaps a more realistic reason for the fact that the Soviet Union and the US were never involved in a full-scale war was that neither side could be certain of the other's military capabilities. The United States could not be sure that the Soviets did not have bigger, nastier guns than she had. Naturally, this led to an intensification of espionage activities by both countries. The fact that there was no conventional contact between the two nations meant that both relied heavily on the services of spies. One can even go as far as to say that the role of spies was more important during the Cold War era than in any other period of history.

As more funds were pumped into research and development programmes, more amazing machines surfaced. The more amazing machines the US churned out, the more Americans felt proud to be a part of it. It was easy to stir

young men up and send them off to fight for the principles of a country that launched the likes of the Syncom 2 satellite (the first geosynchronous satellite) from Cape Canaveral in 1963 or produced clever men like Theodore Harold Maiman, who invented the first operable laser in 1960. There was, and rightly so, a sense of national pride. Americans felt as if they lived in a place worth protecting. Coupled with the propaganda fed to American ears on the airwaves of The Voice of America and the alarming achievements of the Soviet Union in April of 1961 (I am referring here to the first manned space mission conducted by Yuri Gagarin in Vostok 1), Americans were in hurry to make sure that they were not left behind. Or, maybe the thought of having to learn Russian was too daunting a thought.

Philip Caputo felt that it was honourable to serve in the military of a country that represented effervescence and pride. Mason, on the other hand, felt that because he was a part of a successful America and because this unbeaten nation provided him with an opportunity to realise his dreams, he would serve it while the country served him. Ultimately, though, it is apparent that both men were, in some (fundamental) way influenced by the fervour and vitality evinced by the American administrations of the 1960s.

As mentioned above in the section introducing the Declaration of Independence, the nature of the 'innocence' in America's involvement in Vietnam (specifically) was unique in the sense that it was a carefully constructed notion based on several, nationalistic tendencies (generally) borrowed from the Declaration of Independence. Beyond those factors, which, having had a profound effect on the psyche of the returning veteran,



resulted in a deep-seated sense of betrayal, many veterans were also horrified to find out that they were considered 'fools'. Since they premised (however naively) their personal justifications on a set of beliefs they trusted, they found out that these beliefs, too, were flawed. The literature does not sway from its stance, specifically in *A Rumor of War* and *Chickenhawk*, that the veterans were misunderstood and unjustly condemned by Americans at home. Despite the moral questions of the Vietnam War, veterans felt that the public was, on the whole, far too critical of the ex-combatant. After discovering that the belief system they had used to construct their own system of ideals and morals, was inherently flawed and based on lies, they still had to contend with the fact that as veterans, they were the convenient scapegoat for a sense of national shame and guilt.

All wars involve a loss of innocence to some degree. However, the Vietnam War was a very complex example of this phenomenon. It must be remembered that before Vietnam the United States had not lost a single war. It came close to losing Korea, but the West (under American leadership) prevailed. The mere fact that Vietnam was the first war the Americans lost, albeit not militarily<sup>7</sup> meant that the experiences of American soldiers in Vietnam were unique.

Wright (*The History of the World: The Last Five Hundred Years* (1984: 719)) observes that the war in Vietnam was symbolic of the American presidency's desire to extend the American Dream to other parts of the world. Yet the fact that America lost (in every sense other than militarily) indicates that that country was not as powerful as it had believed itself to be. This was yet another

shattered ideal – the fundamental integrity of American ideals could not ensure a categorical victory. The inability to extend a lasting and positively meaningful influence on Vietnam illustrates that the moral ‘rightness’ which many Americans assumed upon their involvement in Vietnam was actually flawed and not suitable for everybody. To be sure, many high-ranking American politicians and military strategists believed that the war would be over quickly. In particular, ‘Conservatives [in the Johnson Administration]...predicted total victory [in Vietnam] because of America’s virtue, strength and perseverance’ (Chenoweth (1974) in *The American Dream of Success: The Search for the Self in the Twentieth Century* (153)). Despite the fact that the US was endowed with riches like few other nations, and despite its related military strength, it was still unable to force a victory out of the situation in Vietnam. Wright notes that the defeat in Vietnam illustrated ‘the inability, short of involvement in total war, of a great power to impose its will when met by determined opposition ...’ (Wright 1984: 719). It was a continued and myopic determination to continue fighting in Vietnam in the face of such inveterate contradictions as presented by the government’s policies that led to the anti-Vietnam War sentiment and to the inevitable corruption of innocence.

By way of substantiation, Guenter Lewy (in *America in Vietnam* (1978)) highlights an important distinction between World War II and the Vietnam War. He speaks directly of the lack of moral sanction in relation to the Vietnam War. It remains true to say that, without moral sponsorship, a war is ultimately genocide and the men who are involved in such a war are criminal. Yet,

bearing in mind, again, that soldiers embarking on a voluntary tour of duty in Vietnam did so because they associated their principles with those provided by their government. Again, the fact that the soldiers premised their respective beliefs on certain principles within the American philosophy meant that when these beliefs turned out to be flawed, it caused major moral unrest in each soldier. This is often depicted in the literature and can certainly be seen as a pertinent element in *A Rumor of War* and *Chickenhawk*.

Being civil servants in a way, these soldiers were not only an organ of that government, they were also a representation of the people that government served, since it was a democratically elected government. For the civilian population of America to do a volte-face in such a drastic manner was largely a slap in the face for the veterans. Lewy offers the following distinction between World War II and Vietnam:

Every war causes large-scale death and suffering, to the soldiers fighting it as well as to the civilian population on whose territory it is fought. But the moral outrages inherent in war are often ignored when the fighting is crowned with success and when the moral justification of the conflict is seen as sufficiently strong. Thus, despite the fact that the Allies in World War II engaged in terror-bombing of the enemy's civilian population and generally paid only minimal attention to the prevention of civilian casualties ... hardly anyone on the Allied side objected to these tactics .... The Vietnam War, on the other hand, dragged on for years without a real decision

and was never perceived as a clear-cut struggle between good and evil. (Lewy 1978: 223)

Because nobody could really pinpoint where the Americans were making progress and where they were failing, few (if any) had a clear sense of the success or failure of the war. Further, as Lewy points out, there was no unambiguous distinction between right and wrong. Therefore, the inversion of expectations is a common theme in *A Rumor of War* (1977). For Caputo, having been in Vietnam and having fought in that war, everything that was disseminated by way of political justification dissolved into a filmy mist.

Because his expectations were born from the seeds of propaganda, their reversal was very dramatic.<sup>8</sup> Coupled with this reversal was an implicit sense of betrayal; Caputo believed what the keepers of his country told him and when it turned out that the administrations did not reveal the extent to which they were subverting their own claims in Indochina, he was devastated. Not only did he witness, firsthand, the effects of such political meddling in Vietnam, he (like the other veterans) also was the opportune scapegoat for at least two administrations' mistakes. The inversion of expectations upon which he entered the war and the way he left Vietnam is dramatic.

when we marched into the rice paddies on that damp March afternoon, we carried, along with our packs and rifles, the implicit convictions that the Viet Cong would be quickly beaten and that we were doing something altogether noble and good. We kept the packs and rifles; the convictions, we lost. (Caputo 1977: xiv)

If one compares the quotation above to the one below, a decisive inversion of expectations can be observed. Time, in Vietnam, seems to have followed strange rhythms. Interchanging between a dream-state (which I will discuss a little further on in this chapter) and the realities of war, when a man completed his tour of duty he felt as if a lifetime lay between his entry to Vietnam and his exit from it.

[T]he humiliation of our exit from Vietnam, compared to the high confidence with which we had entered, made it seem a century lay between them [Caputo's experience with the Marines in 1965 and 1966 and the time he covered the fall of Vietnam to the North Vietnamese in April 1975]. (xiii)

Mason's alteration happens post-Vietnam, when he is safely back in America. Mason wanted some recognition for the men who served, and were still serving, in Vietnam. Both Caputo and Mason share this desire. The difference between Mason's and Caputo's stories is that Caputo succumbs to the pressures of Vietnam, in Vietnam. I have referred to this above; he is a 'casualty of war'. In other words, Caputo's discontent and realisation finds its catharsis (macabre and temporary as it may seem) in an act perpetrated in Vietnam. This corruption is as much due to the normal, associated degradation of morality in all wars, as well as to the fact that once the moral ground (that which separated the morality of World War II and Vietnam) had eroded away, there remained little to restrain men from becoming tyrants. Because these experiences were such an innate part of the war and, by extension, an intimate part of each soldier's daily life, it is impossible to relay the experiences

without a great deal of the sense of corruption spreading through even the most adroit attempt at recreating the events in Vietnam.

Mason, however, suffers from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and his life, after Vietnam, becomes a tortured existence. His loss of innocence is not an overt experience in the sense that he does not undertake some kind of explicit physical act that defines his corruption. Again, like Caputo, Mason also saw the horror of war in Vietnam but was not involved in direct combat, in the sense that he rarely had to pull the trigger; he had to airlift the men who did the actual shooting. He was often under fire and seldom able to do anything about it other than insert men and extract the men who did the shooting as quickly and safely as possible. That is not to say that Mason did not witness his share of horror and experience Vietnam as an extremely traumatic war. Certainly, in the last instance it was probably more harrowing for him because he was essentially unarmed in a Slick Huey (a troop carrier, not a gunship). However, Mason does not enact a kind of retaliation and does not convey an inability to cope with the events in Vietnam.

Instead, his trauma finds its expression upon his return home, where he lumbers through his days drinking and taking barbiturates to stop the shaking and the bad dreams. As he puts it, back home 'the war was still going on in Vietnam, and inside my head' (Mason 1983: 398). His situation systematically deteriorates. In other words, the manifestation of Mason's corruption is latent and slow. When he returns to the US as an Instructor Pilot at Fort Wolters, Texas (389) he observes things with a more critical and concerned eye. As far as he was concerned, 'The school was interested in getting numbers out the door'

while he 'was interested in their [students'] survival' (390). Finally, though, he loses his job because he blacks out while flying.

Thinking he needed some time out, he decided to resume his studies at the University of Florida.

I saw student demonstrations that accused veterans of being fools for going to Vietnam. I felt like a double loser; some internal flaw had caused me to lose my flight status, and now I learned how dumb I had been for going to Vietnam. (397)

He sees the faces of young people pass before him and cannot grasp that while these young faces are smiling there are as many young men facing their deaths in Vietnam. The contrast is too much for him: 'I couldn't face a campus filled with young, smiling faces while guys still leapt screaming out of helicopters, killing and dying for a cause unworthy of their bravery. They deserved to be heroes, but they were fools' (397).

To him there is a moral disjunction between what he experienced in Vietnam and what he was experiencing at home. He was neither against the veterans (to put it simply) nor was he for the war. He was caught in a chasm between the two, realising that the war he fought in, and which still raged, was pointless and at the same time realised that there were men there, in Vietnam, doing things they deserved recognition for and would never get. It dawns slowly on Mason that that 'internal flaw' that he attributes to his failure was not one of his own doing in the sense that it was not an inherent personality flaw, but rather a flaw in his judgement. He believed, as stated earlier, that if the United States

was going to become involved in a war, it would be 'a national emergency' (13).

Both *Chickenhawk* and *A Rumor of War* employ the memoir as the dominant mode of representation. In doing so, they ultimately try to capture the presence of the moment. It becomes interesting to note that although the dominant mode of representation appeals to the reader's sense of 'reality', both authors still try to create an awareness of the inversion of reality. Circuitous perhaps, but it is almost as if the Vietnam War memoir brings two opposing ends of a scale into one solidly written text. Inherently, the texts, despite being texts of representation, communicate by use of their modes, the ambivalence of reality and the disjunction between what is morally correct and what is not. The very procedure of recollecting the memories of Vietnam is one that deals with the treatment of the subversion of reality and therefore highlights, yet again, the mutually inclusive relationship between Vietnam War literature and the politics, history and morality of the war.

Vietnam, in general, seems to have been a war that drastically kaleidoscoped the subversion of a constructed innocence. It brought with it bloodshed and pain without the appropriate moral justifications which ultimately serve to qualify and cleanse soldiers of the acts they committed during war. The absurdity of the war, the obscure landscape, the indeterminate battle progress and the inability to capture the enemy and pin him down to a fixed battle all contributed to the inverted sense of normality many soldiers experienced in Vietnam. Imagery sometimes forces the reader to understand the surreal extremes of the Vietnam War. Nothing is permanent or fixed in Vietnam – only



death and the ubiquitous jungle. Caputo speaks of 'ambivalent realities' (xvii). The following remark indicates precisely how things in Vietnam assumed such 'ambivalent realities': 'Once I had seen pigs eating napalm-charred corpses – a memorable sight, pigs eating roast people' (4).

This image points towards the subversion of normality – people eat roasted pigs, not the other way around! While the extent of the corruption of innocence is only truly appreciated at the end of the war, much of the process of that corruption occurs during the war. The abstraction of reality poses an additional sense of horror, as the quote above suggests. In other words, the more the war progresses and the more difficult it is to find morally acceptable justifications, the more soldiers begin to experience a sense of dissociation. Consequently, Vietnam assumes a nightmarish, dreamlike quality, contributing further to the sense that the soldiers were not part of reality.

The following quote by Philip Caputo gives us insight into the techniques employed by the authors. I say authors, because although Mason does not supply us with a theoretical or analytical synopsis of his intentions in the technical sense, his work contains similar elements to Caputo's. This quote illustrates a telling point regarding the chosen mode of representation.

In this book, I tried to give meaning by turning myself into a kind of Everyman, my experiences into a microcosm of the whole. My own journey, from the false light of youthful illusions, through a descent into evil, and then the slow, uncertain ascent toward a new and truer light of self-knowledge, I hope, reflects our collective journey. (Caputo 1977: 355)

Mason's frank engagement of his readership and subject matter almost has a familiarising effect. Mason's forthrightness is not necessarily a conscious, 'literary' tool employed by the author to create some kind of pretentious or calculated interaction between reader and text. By this I mean that he does not seem to have researched the various literary theories and studied relevant modes of representation with a mind to superimposing his 'story' on such a theory – I think the mode of representation in *Chickenhawk* is a product of Mason's experiences rather than being shaped by a dominant literary theory. Mason does not employ extended metaphors or layer his writing with unfathomable allegories. His is an uncomplicated text, and perhaps therefore the more 'journalistic' (according to Caputo's definition discussed above) of the two in the sense that it emphasises 'fact' rather than the 'experience of fact'. Mason is more of an Everyman, I believe, than Caputo because his text is written by and for Everyman. Mason's narrative is less formal in that it does not vary much with regard to style. He uses conversations between the various characters as the main device to relay the events. The conversational tone of Mason's work tends to engage the 'Everyman' reader because it bridges the chasm created by the disclaimer in the author's note which highlights the personal nature of the author's experiences in Vietnam. It does so by connecting with the reader on an informal basis that, in essence, draws the reader into the Mason's world which has been made familiar with his conversational tone. It is almost as if the reader is a bystander at the events, a fly on the wall.

*Chickenhawk* is not without any variation in style whatsoever. Mason employs three different methods to relay the events in their entirety. However, he places less emphasis on the emotive depiction of the war, rather relying on the 'events to speak for themselves' and therefore his work is more 'journalistic' (again, as Caputo describes). Firstly, as I have indicated, he uses the conversations between people as a way of relaying events. This is perhaps an ambiguous, and not necessarily reliable, way of imbuing the text with a deeper level of significance because it gives the reader another perspective on how the events were construed. The characters 'speak' their minds and, in that way, offer us their different points of view. In this way, Mason offers us an alternative interpretation of the events as he saw them. Secondly, Mason speaks to the reader. He does not address the reader directly, but the narrative is written for the reader's benefit and thus addresses the reader. This narrative style also aids in giving the reader more detail. When Mason addresses the reader, it may be viewed as his authorial descriptions of the events. Finally, Mason utilises internal monologue which builds on his subjective descriptions. Further, they also allow the reader into the author's mind, even if it is only retrospectively since both books were written after the fact and Mason's later than Caputo's.

Mason's narrative is, as I have just stated, interspersed with internal monologue. Mason reflects upon one of the valleys near a landing zone and tells the reader that it is one of the most valuable valleys in Vietnam, supplying the population with a large chunk of its annual rice. He also considers the current political affairs in Vietnam as the quote will illustrate. He explains this to the

reader plainly. He then states the following which illustrates his use of internal monologue:

The people who lived here [in that particular part of Vietnam] were sympathetic to Uncle Ho, as was 80 percent of the rest of Vietnam. The other 20 percent, in the American-controlled cities, was engaged in maintaining the colonialist system installed by the French and now run by the Americans. I knew this because Wendall had told me. He said, 'Just read *Street Without Joy* and you'll see.' But there weren't any copies of that book around here, and it wouldn't have made any difference anyway, because I just didn't believe it. I didn't believe, because Kennedy and McNamara and Johnson and all the rest certainly knew about *Street Without Joy*, and they sent us here anyway. It was obvious to me that Bernard Fall was just another flake, the father of the dreaded Vietniks who were attacking our country like so much cancer. And of course the proof of all this was that Wendall himself was still here doing everything I was doing. And even Wendall wasn't that dumb. (Mason 1983:222)

Clearly, the internal monologue gives us insight into the inner workings of Mason's mind. He is critical of America's presence in Vietnam, but at the same time believes that the US and Wendall would not, in spite evidence to the contrary, continue in Vietnam without proper reason and morality. Obviously, according to Mason, the military knew something he did not and that was why

there were in Vietnam. The internal monologue appears to be Mason's ironic attempt to raise issues he did not raise during the conversations he had in Vietnam.

Caputo, on the other hand, utilises more literary techniques (alienation, allegory, alternates between first person narrative and conversations had with others, attempts to re-create 'ambivalent realities' of war, he speaks of purposely wanting reader to 'experience' (1977: 350) the war)) to convey his narrative. The effect of these literary techniques is that they create a more sensory, tactile description of the war than Mason's. It is, according to his proffered distinction, the more literary of the two books under discussion.

It would thus be unrealistic to suggest that Caputo's book is divorced from the three fundamental elements of this thesis; neither *A Rumor of War* nor *Chickenhawk* may have been considered a remote success if the reader was not able to conjure up a context (by implication, history) in which the war took place. Nor would the reader find any points of reference in the text if they were without an appropriate contrast which showed how the authors had changed because of the war (morality and politics).

Caputo suffered from an inexplicable and incurable exhaustion – psychologically, physically and morally – during his tour of duty. His exhaustion is almost bone-deep and it contributes largely to the obscure light in which he sees the events in Vietnam.

Psychologically, I had never felt worse. I had been awake for no more than a few seconds when I was seized by the same

feeling that had gripped me after my nightmare about the mutilated men in my old platoon: a feeling of being afraid when there was no reason to be. And this unreasoning fear quickly produced the sensation I had often had in action: of watching myself in a movie. (314)

The relationship between the prevailing mode of representation and the surreal qualities of the war makes for an interesting tension because, as I will illustrate in the following paragraphs, the authors in general attempt to capture the multi-dimensionality of the sensory world on a 'restricted' format – the printed page. Plainly put, given that both authors have chosen the memoir as a vehicle for conveying their relevant stories, there remains no other way of expressing the absurdities these men claim to have experienced; they simply have to put them down in linear form, on paper because they chose to write memoirs. That is to say, they did not deliberately embark upon works of obscure and complicated double-meanings that, in turn, leave them, as authors, open to further criticism. I do not want to suggest that a complex literary work that functions on many levels is a negative thing, but I do want to highlight that the mode of representation (in this case, the memoir) has an advantage in this context. Not only does a complicated and multi-faceted work leave the authors open to further derision (because it is not necessarily accessible to Everyman), it pries open the existing disjunction between veterans and the readers they hope to touch in some way. Additionally, by complicating the mode of representation, the authors would (perhaps) undermine the blatantly shocking nature of the war as they experienced it.

Vietnam was, as the authors continually point out, a brutal and ugly war and to attempt to inculcate it with deeper illustrations would be to add to its already negative and 'inaccessible' image. The authors' intentions were not to dissociate the reader from the subject of Vietnam, but to bring him closer to the experiences other men (and women) shared during that war – to find some commonality between those who were there and those who were not. There were, according to Caputo, 'too many passions unleashed by the war' (349) already, and by creating a work which did far less than tell the story as it was (and did far more by implementing an alternative, more complex mode of representation), would only serve to distance those already detached further.

The fact that both *A Rumor of War* and *Chickenhawk* employ the memoir as the principal mode of representation infuses the literature with a refreshing sense of what it must have been like for a soldier in war. Limited by the medium of writing (explicitly, pen and paper), the authors wanted to recreate a multi-dimensional sequence of events that functioned on a non-verbal level (those things which are the art of the senses and sentimentalities, like touch, smell, taste, feelings and emotions<sup>9</sup> on a two-dimensional canvas. The work itself is made inherently more complex by the fact that the author, when writing, 'converts' the contents of the mind (a complex and multi-dimensional 'world') into a word canvas. It takes an artist to even begin to recreate such a world and to transpose one such world on another, limited one. Caputo concedes that 'No writer ever truly succeeds' (352) and that the 'writer merely achieves an acceptable level of failure' (353). It is for this reason (the fact that authors

only ever achieve approximations of success due to this 'translation' of 'realities') that *A Rumor of War* and *Chickenhawk* are exceptionally interesting books, and perhaps why all forms of literature, in general, evoke so much discussion.

Considering that the events in Vietnam - as experienced by the authors - were multi-dimensional (like everything else we experience) and that Caputo and Mason chose to represent the full gamut of those experiences (distinctive in their own right) ensures that the reader experiences each event in a unique way. It therefore shifts the focus of the memoir away from the desensitising effect of repetitive references to the horrors of war because, as Caputo puts it: Vietnam was 'a monotonous succession of ambushes and fire-fights' (xv). Instead, when the author attempts to recreate the experience (in the sensory and tactile sense, as well as the psychological and emotional sense) of the war, the next 'atrocities' is perhaps more shocking than it would have been if it were not preceded by superimposing the multi-dimensional on the two-dimensional. In *The New Journalism* (1973), Tom Wolfe explores the unique quality of transforming one kind of experience into the medium of writing.

Print (as opposed to film or theatre) is an indirect medium that does not so much 'create' images or emotions as jog the reader's memories. For example, writers describing drunk scenes seldom try to describe the state of drunkenness itself. They count on the reader having been drunk at some time in his life. They as much say as say, 'So-and-so was drunk - and, well, you know what that's like.' (With regard to more arcane



highs, such as LSD or methedrine, the writer can make no such assumption – and this has stymied many writers.) For that matter, writers have a hard time even creating a human face. Detailed descriptions tend to defeat their own purpose, because they break up the face rather than create an image. Writers are much more likely to provide no more than a cartoon outline...The reader's memory (if any) of such [events] is invited to fill in the rest. (Wolfe 1973: 63)

In other words, Wolfe is suggesting that all works of literature are by their very nature transcendental in that they work in conjunction with the reader's preconceived ideas and understanding of the world. They expect the reader to contribute that collection of memories to the written page. The notion of literature going beyond the confines of the written word is an interesting one. Wolfe believes that 'even bad novelists are able to' take 'the audience inside the mind or central nervous system of a character' (64) as a matter of course. It is something, he believes, that film makers are rarely able to do.

Mason focuses on 'the actual condition<sup>10</sup> of being a helicopter pilot in Vietnam in 1965-66' (Author's Note). He does, in a sense, 'create' images of what it was like to be a pilot, because few readers have been helicopter pilots. But, in the 1983 edition there is a detailed and labelled drawing in the book of the parts of a helicopter. Mason also 'recites' his notes detailing what the various parts of a helicopter are responsible for. In doing so, he introduces the reader to a set of (somewhat) unfamiliar concepts. The effect this introduction to the various parts of the helicopter has on the reader is that Mason has created a

portal into the world of being a helicopter pilot. In this instance, the 'creation' of the image (as Wolfe has suggested) is crucial for the reader to engage with the text on any meaningful level. Certainly, to Mason's credit, he does not get overly complicated in his (necessary) technical descriptions.

Caputo also expects the reader to 'fill in the gaps'. It is impossible, naturally, for the author to reconstruct, physically, the past so that the reader actually feels something just described. Again, the author has to introduce the reader to the 'experience' of Vietnam. Caputo's descriptions of Vietnam are vivid, it is true, but perhaps the more important point is that his conjuring of emotional states is dramatic. Because we are emotional creatures, we have all (at some point) felt one kind of emotion or another (even if it was felt in varying degrees). That is where the reader is supposed to 'fill in the gaps'. However, Caputo feels that he tried to recreate the jungle and Vietnam in more detail.

I did not want to tell anyone about the war but to show it. I wanted readers to feel the heat, the monsoons, and the mosquitoes, to experience the snipers, booby traps, and ambushes. Above all, I wanted to communicate the moral ambiguities of a conflict in which demons and angels traded places too often to tell one from the other, even within yourself. In a way, the book was designed to be a vicarious tour of duty. (350)

In other words, Caputo believes that his memoir is not only intended as a discussion based purely on the 'facts', as he saw them, but it is expected to convey something beyond what is written on each page. However, since the

reader uses his memory and ideas as the tool with which to interact with the literature, it means that the reading of a text is an intensely intimate and subjective experience. Therefore, to speak of 'accuracy' or 'truth' in any work is perhaps a little optimistic. Consequently, the suggestion that one mode of representation is more 'accurate' than another does not necessarily hold much merit in light of my proposal that the intrinsic nature of the process of writing and Wolfe's proposal that the reader approaches a text with a set of memories, allows for a lot of distortion and variation of interpretation.

[The] basic operation – jogging the reader's memory – has some unique and rather marvellous advantages. If students of the brain are correct so far, human memory seems to be made up of sets of meaningful data – as opposed to what the older mechanistic theory presumed: viz., that it is made up of random bits of meaningless or haphazard data that are then combined and given meaning by the mind. These memory sets often combine a complete image and an emotion. The power of a single image in a story or song to evoke a complex feeling is well known. (Wolfe 1973: 64)

Accuracy (in the so-called objective sense), as Caputo points out, is a fallacy if the intention of the author is to recreate a world in which he attempts to implant his sensory experiences on the reader. The reader needs a degree of space, something to capture the imagination. As master of the text, it is the author's work to create nodes into which the reader's mind and memories can plug so that he or she can experience the work with his or her own array of

feelings and emotions. Wolfe offers the following statement regarding the work of the author:

The most gifted writers are those who manipulate the memory sets of the reader in such a rich fashion that they create within the mind of the reader an entire world that resonates with the reader's own real emotions. The events are merely taking place on the page, in print, but the emotions are real. Hence the unique feeling when one is 'absorbed' in a certain book, 'lost' in it. (64)

Wolfe describes the art in reconstructing past, multidimensional worlds on different formats in the future. It gets rather esoteric, but ultimately, the author has to build some kind of skeleton upon which the reader can add the flesh and muscle of his imagination. How does the author do this? Again, Wolfe offers us some invaluable insight into the elements of such a task.

Only certain specific devices can jog or trigger the memory in such a rich fashion however; the same four devices I have already mentioned scene-by-scene construction, dialogue, point of view and the detailing of status life. Two of these devices, scenes and dialogue, can be handled better on film than in print. But the other two, point of view and the detailing of status life, work far better in print than on film [...] Certain realistic novels are successful because they dwell so realistically, so effectively, on the mental life and emotional atmosphere of a particular character. These stories are almost

always disasters when put on screen... The makers of such movies usually run up the flag of defeat by finally having someone, via voice-over or on screen, recite great chunks of the novel itself, as if in the hope that this will recapture the power of the goddamned book. The power, unfortunately for them, is completely wrapped up in the unique physiological relationship between written language and the memory. (64-65)

The art of altering 'worlds' from one format to another raises the next topic under discussion: the issue of time in the texts. Time is closely linked with 'reality'. In following a linear development, the authors lead the readers into a progressive world of 'reality' in which the reader is expected to become systematically more involved in the 'plot'. Having been led into the world of the author's mind and experiences, the reader creates a connection and familiarity with that world. Within that lies yet another attempt by the authors at bridging the gap that existed between the 'warriors' and the people at home. This also points to the success of any work, in my view, because if the author is not able to engage the reader long enough to see the plot through, then the author has failed to bridge the divide between the work-presented and the work-interpreted; he has not been able to convey his point.

Do *A Rumor of War* and *Chickenhawk* successfully lead their readers into a progressively more complex world? Perhaps. The narrative structures of the works are fundamentally similar and uncomplicated. Time, in both works, follows a linear chronology. Both authors start their works, much like this essay,

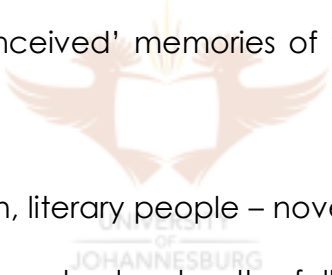
with an introduction in which they state their aims and motivations for writing their respective books, their motivations for joining the military and the propaganda associated with those motivations. They then write of their training, their arrival in Vietnam, their units and the people they served with. Finally, they describe the events of the war and how they experienced these events. Ultimately, the authors come to a similar of conclusion regarding the moral (in) correctness of the war. Their summaries essentially seek to highlight the moral ambiguity associated with the war and the consequences of allowing themselves to be influenced by the various administrations' propaganda.

Caputo writes that he wanted *A Rumor of War* to communicate beyond the confines of time and hoped that readers of future generations would also read the book and that they would find 'in it some quality that resonates in their own lives' (Caputo 1977: 353). Tom Wolfe (in *The New Journalism*) offers us yet another sceptical insight into a generally held perception regarding novels and their transcending qualities. However, I think this can, to a degree, be relevant to the memoir also since it is a kind of 'novel'.

The idea that the novel has a spiritual function of providing a mythic consciousness for the people is as popular within the literary community today as the same idea was with regard to poetry in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in England. (Wolfe 1973: 54)

In this sense, Caputo strives to communicate the 'moral ambiguities' by recreating his experience in Vietnam. Mason wants the 'events to speak for

themselves'. In saying that, he admits that he expects the events in *Chickenhawk* to add up to something that extends beyond the events put on paper. If the book succeeds in surpassing its limits as a text, Mason hopes that it will edify the reader on the particular circumstances American soldiers faced in Vietnam and open the doors to discussion. In other words, the authors themselves suggest that their work provides, maybe not a mythic consciousness, but a consciousness that seeks to expel inaccurate myths and therefore transcends the boundaries of time in that way. Not only do the authors attempt to transcend the boundaries of time, past, present and future, they also aspire to transcend the confines provided by the margins of a two-dimensional format. And finally, the authors hope to effect some kind of alteration on the 'preconceived' memories of the reader. Again, Tom Wolfe substantiates my point.



From the 1860s on, literary people – novelists as well as critics, I should add – began to develop the following theory: Realism is a powerful but is of trivial interest unless it is used to illuminate a higher reality...the cosmic dimension...eternal values...the moral consciousness...a road the led them right back to the classical tradition by and by, to the idea that literature has a spiritual mission, that it 'speaks to men unborn,' that it is magic, fable, myth, the mythos. (56)

Caputo has stated that he hopes *A Rumor of War* will 'speak to men unborn'. Mason hopes that his memoir 'encourage[s] other veterans to talk', in other words, that it will go beyond its form as the written word and translate into a

spoken word which ultimately has a cathartic effect. Aptly then, the authors (perhaps what Wolfe calls 'literary people') are in agreement with Wolfe's summary of the effects realism is expected to have. *A Rumor of War* and *Chickenhawk* are in that regard, textbook cases.

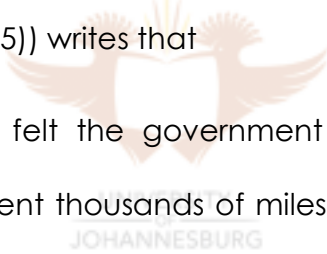
Punctuating the literature with recollections of the surreal experiences of Vietnam can have the added benefit of absolving soldiers of certain acts of violence because the characters may be seen as not acting in their full capacities as normal, functioning men. In other words, Caputo, who urges his readers to move out of their safe disputatious foxholes, suggests that Vietnam was such a disturbing experience for him that he could not merge his actions there with his normal behaviour. Caputo says that 'most reference points from the country's [Vietnam] moral map' had long been destroyed by the time the Americans arrived there (Caputo 1977: xviii). He adds that 'men who did not expect to receive mercy eventually lose their inclination to grant it' (xix). Another contributing factor to the moral descent, according to Caputo, was 'retribution for friends who had been killed' (xix), an 'overpowering greed for survival' and Westmoreland's 'strategy of attrition'. And, finally, the dreamlike quality of certain scenes in the literature acts as a counter to the tension involved in the hours of waiting.

The mode of representation speaks to the reader on another level. By attempting to be as 'objective' as possible, the author gives himself the 'freedom' to be as candid and frank as he desires. I am using 'objective' here in the following sense: using the memoir as a mode of representation (and all its allied associations), the author attempts to recreate both a tangible and



comprehensible ordering of events; he tries to recreate the events of the war as he experienced them, both emotionally and accurately. Because both authors denounce any greater political motive, they have created along with the 'objectivity', a space in which they can engage the reader openly and truthfully. Once this space has been created, and perhaps having 'won the reader over', the author feels it appropriate to express his views on how he felt regarding the derision and betrayal he experienced upon his return home. The return home, as I have indicated, is peppered with hurt and mistrust.

There is much evidence that suggests that veterans experienced a deep sense of betrayal; they were the victims of society's misapprehensions and the government's blind eye. Of this sense of betrayal, Denenberg (in his book *Voices from Vietnam* (1995)) writes that



Many [veterans] felt the government had betrayed them. They had been sent thousands of miles from home, and then the government did nothing to help them when they got back. It was as if the government, like their neighbors, wanted to make believe they didn't exist. It was as if the government, like the population at large, was ashamed of them, wanted to put the war behind them and make believe it hadn't happened. They had laid their lives on the line for the country. And now, somehow, they were the ones being blamed for what went on there [in Vietnam]. (Denenberg 1995: 213)

A feeling of fickleness was not isolated to a few degenerates returning from Vietnam. It was a rather ubiquitous trend. Caputo describes his interpretation of the situation at home:

Both sides of the Vietnam debate in the United States shared a suspicion, at times a contemptuousness, of the veteran. The war was fought by the children of the slums, of farmers, mechanics, and construction workers. The debate was waged by elites. The establishment that got us involved in Vietnam did not send its sons and daughters there; in fact, its sons and daughters were at the forefront of the antiwar movement. By the time Saigon fell in 1975, a lot of “hawks” had an almost cartoonish view of the Vietnam veteran as a drug-addicted, undisciplined loser, the tattered standard-bearer of America’s first defeat. The Left drew an equally distorted picture of him as, at best, an ignorant hardhat with a gun, at worst as a psychopath in uniform. In the eyes of the antiwar movement, each soldier was the incarnation of what it considered a criminal policy. (Caputo 1977: 349-350)

Arnold R. Isaacs (in his book *Vietnam Shadows* (1997)) notes that there was a distinction between veterans of the Second World War and veterans from the ‘Bad War’. Veterans in the former category understood that the World Order (such a fragile and elusive concept it deserves capitalisation) was directly threatened by Japan’s activities and that, despite the absurdity of war, the dirty work had to be done. Vietnam veterans, born to World War II veterans

were, in some respects, shrouded in the myths surrounding their fathers' sense of duty and honour (Isaacs 1997: 1-8). When their war did not represent their fathers' achievement and moral superiority, they experienced an inevitable sense of failure. That sense of failure was redoubled when American society shunned the veterans. The shattered generation of boy-men<sup>11</sup> came home only to be mocked and derided. Caputo understands that in a country that holds the freedom of speech as one of its primary tenets many differing opinions would come to the surface. However, he does not believe that these antiwar/anti-veteran opinions were justified in being sanctimonious and arrogant.

As citizens of a democracy, the noisy patriots and protestors had a right to their opinions about Vietnam, but not, it seemed to me, to the smug righteousness with which they voiced them, because they hadn't been there. (Caputo: 1977: 350)

It appears that so many people, men and women, returning from Vietnam could not tolerate the self-satisfied smugness of those who stayed at home. A nurse, Winnie Smith (US ARMY), writes about returning from Vietnam;

Though our homes are safe from mortars and our countryside from snipers, controversy ranges over the war. It's the warmongers against the peaceniks. Caught in the middle are the returning warriors. Everyone is too busy taking sides or going on with his or her life...

I'd like them to get off their self-righteous asses and learn about war firsthand. I want them to be terrified for their lives day in and day out, to watch a couple of buddies get blown to pieces and then see how long they can hang on to their high-and-mighty ideals. (Denenberg 1995: 212-213)

Mason feels that there was not enough freedom for discourse in the US and that it negatively affected people returning from Vietnam. About this he writes (again in the Author's Note):

I hope that these recollections of my experiences will encourage other veterans to talk. I think it's impossible to know too much about the Vietnam era and its effects on individuals and society.

Mason's remark speaks of American society's reluctance to come to terms with the events of the Vietnam War and those who served there. Perhaps another illustrating point regarding this unwillingness of Americans to sympathetically view those who served there is the quarrel about the design of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Isaacs's *Vietnam Shadows* discusses the controversy pertaining to the war. He writes that 'The names unify, while other words about the war continue to divide' (Isaacs 1997: 1). However, more controversial was the disparate views pertaining to the division of opinions vis-à-vis the actual design of the wall. Maya Ying Lin's design was criticised for being either too heroic or not heroic enough. Tom Cahart, a West Point Graduate who was wounded twice, links the wall to sorrow and dishonour (Isaacs 1997: 2). Conversely, poet Bill Ehrhart suggested that the wall was an

acknowledgment of the Vietnam War and that suggested that the war was honoured in some way. He felt that there should not have been a memorial, and called instead for 'an end to all monuments' (Isaacs 1997: 2). The wall speaks of the desperate desire Americans had to heal.

McGregor appropriately notes: 'Although the war was fought externally amidst another people, the American literature which emerges from it is self-absorbed and introspective' (1990: 34).

It is appropriate that the literature that has materialised from the Vietnam War is meditative. The Vietnamese did not emerge, as some critics would like them to, since the veterans first had to come to terms with the predicament at home. Accordingly, Vietnam War literature is a 'narcissistic yet introspective literature in which the portrayal of Vietnam is dominated by the question of what it is to be American' (McGregor 1990: 5). It appears that the authors first needed to create a readership that was receptive to their experiences in Vietnam before they could tackle the more subtle issues surrounding the portrayal of the Vietnamese. It seems logical that what would have concerned veterans more than the sensitive and correct descriptions of the Vietnamese would be to make the American public come to accept their own kind first. This brings me to the final part of my discussion in this chapter: the memoir as a dominant mode of representation has one other effect.

Ross McGregor suggests that one of the main criticisms of Vietnam War literature, as written by Americans, is the fact that the Vietnamese are essentially only hinted at as peripheral spectres: 'Those mostly affected by the

tragedy in Vietnam were the Vietnamese, although this is only barely suggested in the American novels' (McGregor 1990: 34).

McGregor puts this 'syndrome' down to the fact that the Americans 'lacked sufficient knowledge' of the Vietnamese and were therefore not comfortable characterising them. Unfamiliarity with the Vietnamese culture can certainly be attributed to some novels. Yet, returning to the fact that the literature sought to create a readership and further sought to free the veteran from his scapegoat role, it seems only natural that the literature would neglect the accurate characterisation of the Vietnamese. The American memoir regarding the Vietnam War does not pretend to discuss the Vietnamese situation as seen by the Vietnamese; the authors I have chosen unashamedly seek to relay their American perceptions and experiences. If the authors attempted to write novels from the Vietnamese perspective, they would be grappling with notions of the perilous, post-colonial 'other' and, refreshingly, they do not. They risk being dishonest and inaccurate (given the level of accuracy attainable in an attempt at objective writing); they risk not being true to the author's experiences. We see how (detrimentally) authors have attempted to define, and write from, the perspective of the Other – yet criticism perpetually informs us that we should leave the Other unblemished and untarnished by our own perceptions of what it must be like to be that oppressed 'other'. That is the only hope the Other has of remaining unique and intact. This thesis does not directly intend to discuss the Other further; any ancillary deductions made pertaining to the Other are unintended.

Numerically the Vietnamese did indeed suffer more losses:

More than 58,000 American military personnel died in Indochina between 1959 and 1975 ... South Korea lost 4,400 men killed in action in Vietnam. Australia and New Zealand lost almost 500 dead. Thai losses in Vietnam and Laos are not known, although it is estimated that 30,000 Hmong died during the war. Cambodia lost at least 180,000 dead between 1970 and 1975, and at least one million Cambodians were executed, starved, or worked to death under the Khmer Rouge between 1975 and 1978; ... South Vietnam lost 220,000 military dead and at least 300,000 civilian dead during the war, and tens of thousands of Vietnamese refugees died at sea after 1975. It is estimated that at least 50,000 civilians were killed by American bombing in North Vietnam. In 1995 the Vietnamese government stated that 1,100,000 North Vietnamese and Viet Cong soldiers died between 1954 and 1975. (Bates et al. 1998: 799)

Despite these horrific numbers, critics have noted that this suffering is not the feature of American literature (fiction or fact) relating to the Vietnam War. Through my reading, I have come to three conclusions for the existence of this phenomenon: the first is that American authors wrote the novels about their experiences in Vietnam. The second conclusion is that American veterans were not at liberty to discuss these personal (and often life-altering) experiences of the war without derision and criticism from a particularly vociferous society that was in no mood to accept stories from men it

perceived as fools and warmongers. A third conclusion is that even if the American society aspired to be more generous in its acceptance of the veterans, few civilians could actually have shared or understood what the American soldier had gone through in Vietnam.

McGregor discusses Steven Wright's *Meditations in Green* (1983) and writes that for the main character in the novel, Griffin, 'the war is the dominating event which displaces all past assurances' (McGregor 1990: 117). It is not much different for Philip Caputo.

Caputo is not setting out to describe the dominant event in the life of his Vietnamese counterparts. They are not the feature of this memoir. Whether it is right or wrong according to any political, psychological or humanitarian opinion is irrelevant because the author clearly indicates that his intentions are to express the prevailing event of his generation.

It might be said that Vietnam was an American tragedy because it overturned such soaring expectations and debased Kennedy's lofty ideals. The inversion of ideals and expectations coupled with the utter loss of innocence was traumatic and that is why Americans perceived Vietnam, despite the country's own appalling losses, as an American tragedy.

Finally, then, the American Vietnam War memoir attempts to generate a greater understanding of the American situation versus that of the Vietnamese state of affairs – and understandably so. One cannot speak with authority on a subject that one has no knowledge or comprehension of. Moreover, why would the American memoir even attempt to make sense of the Vietnamese



perspective when it had so much explaining to do? In the memoirs I have chosen, the authors (quite admirably) remain true to their individual experiences. I think that Vietnam War memoirs are, as a rule, memoirs of self-exploration and memoirs that seek to extract a brand of empathic recognition that was not fully granted. In many instances it was, and still is today, not acceptable to have been involved in the conflict in Vietnam. It is for these reasons that authors 'merely sketch them [the Vietnamese], preferring to concentrate on the American tragedy' (McGregor 1990: 34).



## CONCLUSION

It is clear from the discussion that the literature reflects the persistent tension between the history, politics and morality that encapsulated the Vietnam War. Rather than being isolated from these aspects of the war, both memoirs and, by extension, much of the genre of Vietnam War literature, highlight, analyse, comment on and evaluate the intrinsic relationship between these three characteristics and the literature of the time. No war is devoid of politics or without a historical context, and morality is an extension of certain political ideologies. Furthermore, the brutality of war naturally raises moral questions and brings the motivation for war into question. Both memoirs are written in the historical context just after the Vietnam War. What took them to war were the pervading political ideologies of that time – the moral issue is the consequence of their involvement in the war.

The overarching motivation for both authors was their naïve belief in the political leaders of their time. Administrations, Kennedy's and Johnson's, held the war as a moral obligation of the American people to furnish another nation with the principles of freedom which are so dearly held by the American nation. The very format of Mason's and Caputo's individual memoirs does not allow for the detachment each author asks the reader to develop when reading their respective texts. The authors automatically describe their upbringing, their motivation (because it has to serve as a contrast for their leaving the war). The authors give some kind of description of the *zeitgeist* in America and use that as yet another motivating factor in their decisions to join

the military. When the war degenerates (because that is precisely what Vietnam did, it degenerated and deteriorated rapidly and over a long period so that it was a pungent quagmire of moral and political questions), each author describes their relevant perceptions of the war, thereby reiterating the fact that neither book is 'simply a story of war' and that each memoir is an indictment of war in general, and also of the men who sent a nation's men to fight in one of the ugliest wars of the twentieth century.

Although all wars have certain characteristics in common (the loss of innocence, death and politics, for example) they do not, however, share exact historical contexts. Vietnam occurred in the aftermath of the Second World War and Korea (both fairly conventional wars) and in the midst of the Cold War. Historically, Vietnam was the first TV-war and America's first guerrilla war. The significance of this is that no soldier (nor the authors) had an accurate frame of reference with which to compare the war. This provided the source of much misunderstanding of the American public regarding the veterans because the public still sought to evaluate the war in an 'outdated' context because they saw only the failures in Vietnam. Not only did this thinking influence the public, it also influenced the military minds of that time in the sense that the overall battle strategies for Vietnam were based on large unit, conventional tactics. The authors strive, within this historical context, to give meaning to another kind of war and because they are caught in a specific moment in time, they cannot move away from the historical reality of the war.

Part of their frustration as authors and veterans, was the fact that the American public could not, or would not, comprehend the war in a manner congruent

with the historical context. The public's perception of the war did not fit with the historical context of the war and resulted in, as both Caputo and Mason stress, a flawed and incorrect interpretation of the soldiers who returned from Vietnam. This war is an historical event (that took place in a certain moment in time) which serves as a stage upon which the authors played their roles as enlisted soldiers. Having returned from Vietnam and with the progress of time, the authors moved away from that specific moment in time to a new time. Although the authors seek to divorce their works from the specific context of the history, they return to that 'moment' of the war and that historical event becomes the compelling force that implored them to write their respective memoirs. Because Vietnam War literature is a product of the history that precipitated the war, the events of the war and the moral implications of the war, the literature cannot be without these three background contexts.

Because the public could not view Vietnam in an 'appropriate' manner, the veterans became the target for the public's misapprehensions. For the authors and other veterans, this public display of disregard was a major point of concern. The moral problems surrounding America's involvement in Vietnam were questionable at the best of times. These moral uncertainties and ambiguities resulted in a conflicting tension for the veterans and the public. Since the propaganda used to justify the war was based on principles most Americans assumed to be infallible, the reversal of their expectations had a profoundly shattering effect on their self-concept as individuals and as a nation. For the man in the street, this effect was manifested in a general disavowal of the American government and its relevant organs of state, of

which the soldier was an inseparable part. For the veteran, that same shattering effect was worsened by the horrors experienced in Vietnam and by the general public's indifference towards his trauma and experiences. Veterans were made to feel as if they were not equal citizens in their own country.

The moral implications of the war manifest themselves in both the authors' own moral degeneration and loss of innocence. Caputo is charged with murder and Mason is relieved of his job as an instructor pilot and is later arrested for the smuggling of marijuana – both speak of the author's descent into the moral wasteland that stemmed from the fact that Vietnam was a particularly ferocious war and the fact that the veterans were not considered victims by the general public and the men who sent them to war.

The war was morally inspired because of the American dream and both the authors had no moral objection when joining the military and even when they went to war because they trusted the principles of their country and its government. The moral introspection only came once they were faced with reality on the battlefield. It is this moral introspection that compelled them to take a certain view of America's involvement in the war and of the American public's perception of the war. Both the authors were trapped in the moral ambiguity with the administrations on the one side and the public on the other side. Although they do not want to take a moral standpoint they both express their disdain at this flawed morality that first misled them and then abandoned them. They believed they were on the moral high ground when they went to

war, but having returned they realised that they had become hollow men in a moral wasteland.

Both authors' downfall speaks of their inability to rely on their old 'selves' for reassurance. Since morality is one of the cornerstones of identity, and because morality was so subverted in Vietnam, both authors struggle with their identities. Despite the fact that the authors do not seek to make a moral statement as to the correctness of the war, and because they lose their selves in the war, the effect of Vietnam is ever more fascinating because it explores the effects war can have on soldiers and the effect an unpopular war can have on a nation on the whole.

While the drums of history and morality beat in the foreground, the unremitting voice of the politics (which created that period of history and resulted in the moral issues of the war) sang in the background. The history of the Cold War meant that some kind of clash over ideologies would at some time manifest itself in an indirect war so that each power could prove some kind of ideological point.

The course of history has often been directed and carved by political ideologies and the Khrushchevs, Kennedys, Stalins, Castros and Hilters who pursue these ideologies, while the Everyman is born into a specific political culture. In the case of Caputo and Mason, they inherited a system of democracy which provided some theoretical sense of freedom. Being the products of a system that claims to have embodied one of the West's fundamental tenets (freedom) they believed that their system was reliable and trustworthy and hence they failed to question its tenets when they went to war

in Vietnam. However, as we have seen, they were the unintentional victims of the misleading assertions their governments made.

In spite of their apolitical stance, they remain the involuntary product of their specific political culture in that historical context and therefore their memoirs cannot be separated from them as authors. By inference, their works also cannot be separated from their subsequent disillusionment with the politicians and the whole system that inspired them to go to war.

Propaganda is the vehicle that carries each politician to his destination. In other words, the policies and political viewpoints pertaining to Vietnam were strongly supported by a system of propaganda that motivated, justified and indemnified the American government. Propaganda motivated Americans to be supportive of a war in Vietnam because the politicians claimed that America would be supporting a nation that sought, as the Americans did with the Declaration of Independence, to be free from the oppressive forces of an imperial government. Mason and Caputo (and many others like them) joined the military on the strength of that propaganda.

Propaganda justified America's presence in Vietnam because, despite the gruesome images transported on the airwaves, the United States government claimed it was making progress in the war. While the propaganda machine was churning up large body counts as means to substantiate American progress in Vietnam, soldiers like Caputo and Mason were faced with the stark reality of the slow, deteriorating conditions of the war which, more often than not, highlighted the lies which constituted the propaganda.

And, finally, propaganda indemnified the government because it claimed that the war was ultimately won, albeit only from the military perspective. Thus the subtleties of propaganda finally allowed the politicians to shift the blame for the unsuccessful war of hearts and minds onto the shoulders of the soldiers. Although the authors made it clear that they did not intend to utilise politics as the core of their discussions, the inevitable relationship these politics had with their situations in Vietnam is inescapable. The effect is that, by default, their works carry a message that warns against the simple, blind acceptance of political complacency.

Each author asks the reader to forget Vietnam's 'legacy' but to remember the acts of goodness and bravery committed during the war. The message the book of Revelations bears for Christians is that although the 'rumours of wars' may be heard, 'the end is not yet'. Although the lessons of Vietnam may be learnt, it does not predict the end of wars. It is perhaps hoped by Mason and Caputo that nations should take note of their soldiers' efforts and the consequences of war. Caputo hopes that *A Rumor of War* will cause readers to re-evaluate their opinions regarding Vietnam veterans and the motivations for starting wars. Ultimately, both authors hope that their works will foster a better understanding of the dire consequences of the war. Caputo's title, *A Rumor of War*, is a kind of warning against the myopic and naïve adherence to political systems. He warns that if wars are fought unthinkingly and if the lessons of wars are not learnt, that mankind will inevitably face 'end'. As for America's involvement in Iraq today, one wonders whether the lessons in Vietnam were carried forward into the twenty-first century. It is not with hope,



but with apprehension, that we watch each day's car bombings unfold and each new politician inform us on the airwaves of CNN that America is winning the war on terror. Does it not sound strangely familiar?



## END NOTES

1: Caputo speaks of 'angels and demons [that] often traded places' and of the subversion of reality when he refers to an incident where pigs eat 'roast people'.

2: See section on 'modes of representation' (p 84)

3: See section on 'modes of representation' (p 84)

4: While at the *Chicago Tribune* he was part of a team of journalists who won a Pulitzer Prize for their investigations into election fraud. As mentioned in the introduction, Philip Caputo worked as a war correspondent covering wars in the Middle East. When he heard of the fall of Saigon, he writes that he was compelled to go to Vietnam to witness the last days – to see it end.

5: Norman Mailer mentions the word Vietnam once in the book, and that is in the title.

6: 'The nature and identity of the opposing forces was as always a major political focus of the war. The US depicted a war in which an independent country was fighting international Communist aggression, thus depicting the NLF [National Front for the Liberation of Southern Vietnam: claimed it was the national front of everybody who opposed the existing government] and even the PAVN [People's Army of Vietnam] as puppet armies' ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vietnam\\_War](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vietnam_War) sourced on 07 October 2005).

Kennedy announced that Vietnam 'represents the cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia, the keystone to the arch, the finger in the dike. Burma, Thailand, India, Japan, the Philippines and obviously Laos and Cambodia are among those whose security would be threatened if the red tide of Communism overflowed into Vietnam' (quoted in Lewy 1978: 13).

7: This too is questionable, because America set out to install a government sympathetic to their cause and finally did not succeed in that. Their method of installing such a government was war and if the objective was not attained, then how can the battle be a success? (This is only a thought in passing and should not be considered as a point of criticism.)

8: See the section that deals with the corruption of ideological innocence earlier in the dissertation (p 58).

9: Not only is the world of the mind multi-dimensional, the experiences of the author outside of the mind (therefore in the realm of the senses), as well as being *in the past* add to the incredibly complex format of experience. Due to this, the task of 'converting' or transposing one experience onto another 'limited' format is made doubly complex. It is, perhaps, impossible to translate the full experience of the war (or anything else for that matter) into words).

10: Recall that the authors want to create a set of nodes into which the reader can plug his or her 'memory set'. Because the authors assume the reader was never in Vietnam, the authors have to create these nodes by utilising familiar things to describe the unfamiliar and to give the reader some kind of reference point. Further, the author also has to 'convince'

the reader of his point (that the veterans were not innately baby killers and so on).

<sup>11</sup>: Boys because when they left they were 19, and men because when they came home, their lives had passed before them the way it does for men of 50.



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