Thirty Years After

Thirty Years After:
New Essays on Vietnam War Literature, Film, and Art

Edited by

Mark Heberle

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PREFACE

The essays in this volume derive from a three-day conference at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa and the East-West Center during Veterans Week 2005 (November 8–10), open to the public, that commemorated the thirtieth anniversary of the end of the American war in Viet Nam. No city in America could be more appropriate for such a gathering than Honolulu, the Headquarters of the Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Pacific Command (CINCPAC) throughout the war (and thereafter), the site of a 1966 conference between President Johnson and South Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky, and the location of the U.S. Army Rest and Recreation center at Fort DeRussy, where American soldiers in Viet Nam were eligible for one-week leaves from the war zone from 1966 on.

The conference was part of a larger, ten-day review of cultural productions of the war, including an evening panel, co-directed by Professor Pierre Asselin at Chaminade University, that brought together Vietnam writers and critics with women Vietnam War correspondents still active in academia and media in Hawai‘i. “Re-Viewing Vietnam: Film Representations of the Vietnam War,” a series of showings and presentations from November 1 through November 10 at the Honolulu Academy of Art, ran concurrently with the Conference and was co-directed by Konrad Ng, the Academy’s film curator. Conference panelists also participated in a presentation by Raymond G. Burghardt, who served from 2001–2004 as America’s second ambassador to Viet Nam. They were also present for the Veterans Week University Distinguished Lecture by General Eric Shinseki, Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army (1999–2003), a native of Hawai‘i, and the first Asian American leader of the U.S. Army in history.

General Shinseki (later appointed Veterans Administration head by President-Elect Obama), who suffered nearly fatal injuries in the Viet Nam War, was repudiated by Secretaries Wolfowitz and Rumsfeld after arguing before Congress for larger American troop deployments in Iraq. He was right, they were fatally wrong, and the United States still (2009) occupies Iraq with a force of more than 100,000 combatants thirty-five years after the end of the war in Viet Nam. Literary and cultural connections between our military interventions in the Middle East and those in Southeast Asia were one of several subjects that I invited conference participants to

address in their papers. Others included defining and disrupting the canon of American War literature, film versions of the war, and Vietnamese and Vietnamese American perspectives. The conference was organized around featured presentations by Tim O'Brien, Wayne Karlin, Andrew Lam, and Philip Beidler, with fourteen different panels of presenters. The quality and variety of presentations was impressive, as Beidler's essay in this volume attests. Reflecting both its scope and its innovativeness, this collection has been divided into four sections: canonical and non-canonical European/American works; Vietnamese perspectives; other artistic, popular culture, and media representations; and Vietnam War literature and American war-making.

I am grateful above all to everyone who participated in 2005 for making the book a wish and now a reality. In the end, I hope, *Thirty Years After* fulfills the expectations of all of us to reflect both what has been the conventional focus of Vietnam war criticism and scholarship, and what it might become. Although the volume contains far fewer pieces on film than the conference featured, there are more discussions of other media representations than I had anticipated in my original conference call. In the interim, Jen Dunnaway, Armando Prats, and Jeff Sychterz (and perhaps others) have published later versions of their talks, and Kathy Phillips a book that includes it (*Manipulating Masculinity: War and Gender in Modern British and American Literature*). Alex Vernon and Gina Weaver have books forthcoming as well as pieces in the book, and Susan Eastman, Lorrie Goldensohn, and Andrew Wilson have provided new essays that replace their original talks. Jerry Lembcke's special presentation on "Hanoi Jane" will soon be out as a biography from University of Massachusetts Press.

Since this book would never have appeared but for the 2005 conference, I remain grateful to all at the University and in Honolulu who made that event possible: English Department; College of Languages, Linguistics, and Literature; East-West Center; Distinguished Visiting Scholar Program in Liberal Arts; Distinguished Lecture Series; Diversity and Equity Initiative Committee; UH Special Fund for Innovative Scholarly and Creative Work; UH Creative Services; Matson Chair of Global Business (Tung Bui); Matsunaga Peace Institute; Departments of History, Political Science, East Asian Languages and Literatures; Center for Biographical Research; *Hawai'i Review*; *Mānoa: A Pacific Journal of International Writing;* Hawai'i Council for the Humanities; UH Humanities Endowment Conference Program; Honolulu Academy of Art; Chaminade University; Hale Koa Hotel at Fort DeRussy**;** Vietnamese-American Chamber of Commerce; *Honolulu Weekly*. To thank all the

individuals who helped make the "Thirty Years After" conference and affiliated activities possible would take several more pages, but I would like to mention two whom I neglected to thank publicly in 2005: General David A. Bramlett (US Army ret.), who served combat tours in 1965–6 (25th Infantry Division) and 1968–9 (101st Airborne), an admirer of Tim O'Brien's work who arranged for O'Brien's 2005 Veterans Day reading ("The Man I Killed" and "Dear Timmy") for military personnel at Fort DeRussy; and Stephen D. O'Harrow, Professor of Indo-Pacific Languages and Literatures, the university's resident scholarly expert on Vietnamese film and literature, who seemed to attend every panel in 2005 and to participate in every discussion.

I am also grateful to earlier editors of Vietnam War collections who conceived such an idea and made it possible for their contributors to carry it out so well. These include Timothy Lomperis (*"reading the wind": the Literature of the Vietnam War*, Duke, 1987), William J. Searle (*Search and Clear*, Bowling Green, 1988), Owen W. Gilman, Jr. and Lorrie Smith (*America Rediscovered*, 1990), Philip K. Jason (*Fourteen Landing Zones*, Iowa, 1991), John Carlos Rowe and Rick Berg (*The Vietnam War and American Culture*, Columbia, 1991), Robert M. Slabey, Jr. (*The United States and Vietnam from War to Peace*, McFarland, 1996).

My last debt for this volume, but also the first and the most indispensable, is to Cambridge Scholars Publishing, which invited the volume shortly after the 2005 conference and waited patiently while I disentangled myself as well as I could from other professional and administrative obligations. They extended their invitation generously enough to accommodate changes, mistakes, and further delays in *Thirty Years After* so that finally four years after my initial proposal they have been able to please all the contributors, and (we hope) most readers. Amanda Millar initially and finally, as well as Carol Koulikourdi, have seen this project through to completion, and I will always be grateful to them for their advice, help, and patience. Thanks also to Nuala Coyle, the CSP staff, and Wayne Karlin for providing such an appropriate cover illustration for "Thirty Years After".

INTRODUCTION

Finishing my book on Tim O'Brien near the end of 2000, I ended the Preface with the hope that the new millennium might "enjoy a Pacific Century that is free at least of another American war, hot or cold" (xii). That pious hope was not only hopelessly naïve but personally incoherent, perhaps even dishonest. It ignored my own support for the deadly, small-scale American bombing of central Europe that helped bring about a Bosnian ceasefire but no final peace and my uneasy judgment that the large-scale and annihilating American-controlled liberation of Kuwait in the Gulf War clearly fulfilled the principles of *jus ad bellum.* This at least seemed to be a just war, opposing and reversing past Iraqi aggression, probably deterring the future invasion of one country by another, and supported by the governments and armed forces of other nations.

Now we Americans are engaged in two more wars with no clear end in sight, the spawn of 9/11, of course, but also a consequence of our heavy military presence in the Middle East after 1991 and our ill-conceived and ill-implemented invasion of another country. There are of course as many differences as parallels between Iraq—and now Afghanistan—and Vietnam (if I can employ the metaphorical figure we Americans use to transform other nations linguistically into our wars). But no one can deny that the same deadly cultural and historical ignorance and arrogance that helped destroy Viet Nam also effected the destruction of Iraq and brought greater insecurity to everyone from the Middle East to the Homeland itself. The liberal notion that American intervention in Viet Nam was an uncharacteristic crime or mistake by a nation that was otherwise upright, well-meaning, and judicious in its application of force seems to me now an illusion not far removed from the conservative delusion that the United States always acts nobly and honorably overseas. Both viewpoints discount the number of citizens of other countries killed in pre-millennial and post-millennial American wars since 1945—surely more deaths of foreigners than any other nation on earth has been responsible for since 1945. Whether these wars, interventions, and peace-enforcing missions have been necessary and justified or not, they have been bloody for Americans and infinitely more costly for other citizens of the world. In my fall 2007 sophomore-level Vietnam literature course, I invited my students to consider the titles of Vietnam history books and what they imply about

authors' interpretations. No title excited more controversy and bemusement than Marilyn B. Young's *The Vietnam Wars 1945–1990* (published just before the beginning of the Gulf War); no book now seems more outdated in its title and any new edition must certainly extend it: *1945—date of publication*.

My initial call for papers in 2003 asked in particular for discussions of Vietnam War literature in relation to the Iraq War at about the time that the Mission seemed to have been Accomplished in Baghdad and environs. When participants in the Thirty Years After Conference met in Honolulu in 2005, Iraq had been destroyed as a country and an unimaginable hell of daily killings and mutilations confronted would-be American nation-builders. Now, three years later, the Surge has come and gone after greatly reducing and stabilizing the killing, but the vast majority of Americans now believe the Iraq invasion was a mistake, millions believe it was a deception, and many believe it was a war crime—and the Iraqis want us to end our occupation of their country as soon as possible.

The disturbing political and ethical issues and the moral squalor that have followed American intervention are of course familiar to readers of American Vietnam war literature and the best American Vietnam war films, including the destruction of a society that we had come to save. A chopper pilot sums up "Vietnam, man" for Michael Herr in words that could apply to the application of American power in Iraq and Afghanistan as well: "Bomb 'em and feed 'em, bomb 'em and feed 'em" (Herr 10). The phrase can be identified as paradox though not quite oxymoron, but any merely literary or figural reading would be an offense against the intention of the author if not the G.I., who has accommodated himself to the way in which the mix of human slaughter and humanitarianism has become routine. For Herr and for the reader, in this and in other cases in *Dispatches* too specific, too palpable, and all-too-human to ignore, the finger of accusation points upward through the chain of command to those who are responsible for the grunt's being where he is, perhaps his commanders and certainly the policy makers who have brought America and Viet Nam together in lethal embrace. For several of the contributors to this volume such as Neil Baird and Gina Weaver, however, responsibility cannot be simply shifted away from the soldier who is there to kill others in their own country and carries palliatives along with his weapon. Moreover, if "support the troops" means supporting anything they do, then exonerating the Vietnam (or Iraqi) veteran for atrocities and crimes in a war zone saturated with foreign nationals who happen to live there may amount to vicarious participation in brutality and depriving the Vietnamese (or Afghani, or Iraqi) other of his or her citizenship, humanity,

and, perhaps ultimately, his or her life. Of course, that is exactly what wars do and need to do to carry out their work—enemies and the enemy nation must be demonized, comrades and our own country sanctified. And once violent intervention has occurred, civil society—and civilization—must be set aside: another phrase from *Dispatches*, "for years now there had been no country here but the war" (3), could be applied to America-supported Iraq as well as to South Vietnam. The U.S. may have sent the best-educated and most idealistic army it had ever fielded into Viet Nam, and at their best the American cultural productions of the war register a profound moral unease seldom found in earlier American or Western war literature, as Matthew Hill's essay on Vietnam war poetry illustrates: "guilt" may fall short of empathy for the Vietnamese on both sides, but it is an ethical advance beyond pity for one's comrades as helpless victims of war that characterizes the best pre-Vietnam war poetry.

If American Vietnam war literature cannot be viewed or judged simply as literature, symbol, or myth as it tended to be in earlier important studies by Philip Beidler, John Hellman, and Thomas Myers, the critique it offers cannot in 2009 simply be confined to one war and the battlefields of Southeast Asia. The idea that Vietnam was an anomaly in the history of what has been fundamentally a quasi-isolationist and peace-loving nation, content to let others determine their destinies and intervening only to free their path to self-determination from external threats has recently been exposed as wishful thinking from both sides of our political divide. In *Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq*, Stephen Kinzer critiques, from a conventionally liberal point of view, a consistent pattern of destructive and self-defeating American interventions to destroy and replace foreign governments, placing blame on the symbiotic relationship between big business interests and American foreign policy. Much more subversive is the work of Robert Kagan, one of the co-founders of the neoconservative Project for the New American Century (1997) and the brother of American Enterprise Institute scholar Frederick Kagan, the intellectual architect of George W. Bush's Surge policy in Iraq. In *Dangerous Nation: America's Place in the World, from its Earliest Days to the Dawn of the 20th Century*, Kagan argues that interventions, overthrows, and foreign and domestic wars against the enemies of the nation have been the natural accompaniments of a popular will to unfettered material and commercial acquisition justified by an ideological program for spreading democracy and liberty to the ends of the earth. The "dangerous nation" is the United States, a characterization all too evident to Cambodians, Laotians, South Vietnamese, and North Vietnamese caught up in the maelstrom unleashed after 1965 when

American combat troops first landed in force at Da Nang, and, since at least 2003, for Iraqis and too many Afghans. Kagan's argument, to be extended through the Iraq War in a forthcoming second volume, sees this ad hoc American imperialism as a predatory and aggressive but also dynamic and ultimately global engine of political and economic transformation. Seen from within the transformation, however, Michael Herr's verdict on American interventionism seems as apt today as it did thirty years ago: "There was such a dense concentration of American energy there, American and essentially adolescent, if that energy could have been channeled into anything more than noise, waste, and pain it would have lighted up Indochina for a thousand years" (44). The fall 2008 crisis in world equity markets and international banking, which derives from hyper-capitalism run amuck on Wall Street, provides perhaps the ultimate example of how "dangerous" American exceptionalism has become to the rest of the world that the U.S. has attempted to so eagerly globalize in its own image.

Another observation from *Dispatches*—"to read the faces of the Vietnamese. . . was like trying to read the wind" (3)—points to an unanticipated but more positive outcome of America's intervention in Vietnam, although Herr's striking phrase itself is notorious for its ethnocentrism. Communist victory and national reunification brought brutal and destructive consequences for many of the losers in Viet Nam and a bloodbath in Cambodia, but thirty years after the Vietnamese diaspora began, American society and culture have been enriched by the new arrivals from a lost war, Vietnam and the United States are reconciled politically, and the overseas Vietnamese, the *viet kieu*, are participating profitably in the dynamic economic development of their homeland. These days, I can write a recommendation letter to Johns Hopkins's pharmacy program for a brilliant student from Ho Chi Minh City, and she can study a war that ended ten years before she was born and read Graham Greene, Bao Ninh and Bruce Weigl in my Vietnam literature course. Like nearly all the canonical American Vietnam literature, *Dispatches* is automatically American in its viewpoint, but a younger generation of Vietnamese American writers is successfully breaking new ground in American literature, and Vietnamese literature from the other side is available in translation and is read and taught throughout the U.S. It may be more likely, however, that valuable literary works free of the war's traces will be produced by writers in Viet Nam rather than by Vietnamese writers in the U.S. After all, the war and its consequences brought their families to America, just as American slavery brought the families of most African Americans here, with important consequences for the literature that comes

out of that legacy. At least the earliest generation of Vietnamese American writers are likely to be "sojourners," to use Michele Janette's phrase, traveling between Viet Nam and their present home both physically and spiritually, to the benefit of both cultures. In Part II ("The Vietnamese War"), *Thirty Years After* only begins to suggest avenues of approach to postwar Vietnamese literature in English and in America. Like Renny Christopher's path-breaking 1995 study, such work promises to right the balance of creative production and criticism of Vietnam War literature toward Viet Nam and the Vietnamese. Certainly no future collection of criticism like this one ought to be supervised by an editor who is largely ignorant of Vietnamese, like this one.

Its ethnocentric bias granted, the best American work generated by the war is nonetheless extraordinary in its range and quality. It includes National Book Awards for *Fire in the Lake*, *Dog Soldiers*, *Winners & Losers*, *Going After Cacciato*, *Paco's Story*, *Bright Shining Lie*, *An American Requiem* and Pulitzers for *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* and *Dien Cai Dau* as well the nonfiction masterpieces by Frances Fitzgerald and Neil Sheehan. Oscars of various sorts for *Coming Home*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Apocalypse Now*, and *Platoon* only begin to suggest how the war has resonated in popular culture and film, a theme explored further in Bruce Esplin's chapter on Vietnam War video games in this volume. These national awards only touch the surface of the Vietnam War's enduring significance in American literature and art. Philip Beidler notes in "Thirty Years After: The Archaeologies" that Vietnam has produced more books than any other American war, and Denis Johnson's 2007 National Book Award for *Tree of Smoke* shows that thirty years after it ended, the war remains significant in the consciousness of writers, readers, and citizens. And why should it not? The nation still seems haunted by Vietnam even as Iraq, Afghanistan, and the endless "war on terror" raise questions that were left unresolved, unexamined, ignored, or repressed after 1975. What did you do in the war remains an explosive public question for all presidential aspirants, not just participants like Al Gore, John Kerry, and John McCain but also for those who did not serve like Bill Clinton. Even Barack Obama, who was eight years old in 1969 when Bill Ayers co-founded the Weather Underground in opposition to the war, was tarnished by association within the spectacle of American democracy in 2008.

Part III of *Thirty Years After* attests to the pervasiveness and endurance of the war's representations beyond literature and film in a wide variety of cultural productions that variously translate Vietnam for large popular audiences. Vietnam, the first but also the most fully televised war in

history, could have been seen and overseen by everyone around the world who owned a TV set. It was also a subject of virtually every serious American artist, and many from other countries, between 1964 and 1975, from the works of Norman Mailer, Adrienne Rich, and Takeshi Kaiko to the Pulitzer Prize in Photography, won by Horst Faas (1965) and Kyoichi Sawada (1966—killed in Cambodia in 1970) for their Vietnam combat photography. The prize was split into the categories of Feature (David Hume Kennerly—1972, Slava Veder—1974) and Spot Photography in 1968, the year that Eddie Adams won that prize when he shot General Nguyen Ngoc Loan's execution of a Viet Cong prisoner in the streets of Saigon during the Tet Offensive. Few works of any genre have had the immediate and widespread impact of the Adams photograph or Huynh Cong Ut's 1973 prize-winning shot of children in flight from a napalm attack ("The Terror of War"). Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial may be the most universally recognized and most enduring sculpture created by an American artist in the last half of the twentieth century, memorializing the war now and forever for millions of visitors to Washington or to its numerous facsimiles throughout the United States. And ever available digital representations provide all American families the means to experience Vietnam through their TV sets (or computer monitors) once again anytime they wish, although their visits will be mediated or controlled by the webmasters or the game creators, as Esplin and Neil Baird inform us.

Thirty Years After revisits Vietnam through thirty-four essays organized in four parts that suggest the variety of focuses and approaches to the war three decades and more since its historical end. Part I ("The American War") concentrates on American treatments, the dominant focus up to now of most writers and most critics outside of Viet Nam. It begins with revised versions of two of the 2005 conference featured presentations, the Keynote Address by Tim O'Brien and the final conference presentation, Philip Beidler's discussion of the literature, film, and criticism of the war. Besides considering the indispensability (and the limitations) of artistic representations of a historical tragedy, both essays—by the most important American Vietnam fiction writer and the dean of American critics—provide bibliographies of the enduring works and go beyond the American canon to include those created by Vietnamese and others. The two essays that follow focus importantly on the translation of text to film. Rebecca Kumar, employing a post-colonial critical perspective, studies Graham Greene's prophetic and seminal text of 1955, *The Quiet American*, and the American films that have (mis)represented it,

while Gina Weaver, employing a feminist perspective, critiques the (under)representation of rape and sexual abuse in American films, using *Casualties of War* and *Full Metal Jacket* as examples. Essays by Susan Farrell, Mark Heberle, and Warren Rawson analyze the three most critically acclaimed works of Tim O'Brien from the perspective of mythology (*Going After Cacciato*), trauma (*The Things They Carried*), and Supreme Court legal discourse (*In the Lake of the Woods*). Studies by Matthew Hill and Nancy Esposito of four award-winning American Vietnam war poets (W. D. Ehrhart, Michael Casey, Bruce Weigl, Yusef Komunyakaa) focus on how American Vietnam war poetry revises the perspectives of previous Western antiwar poetry and how the racial divides of black, white, and yellow are reflected in the work of the most honored American poet of the war, who happens to be African American. Esposito's study of Komunyakaa is followed by the first of two comprehensive surveys of American perspectives largely left outside the canon, both of which argue for its revision and/or their inclusion. Shirley Hanshaw treats the great variety of African American narratives from an Afrocentric viewpoint, emphasizing the importance of a collective and socially responsive rather than merely individualist perspective; Catherine Calloway defines and illustrates the theme and reality of social injustice in the work written by and about Chicano Vietnam veterans.

Part II ("The Vietnamese War") presents critical studies of a variety of North Vietnamese and South Vietnamese/diaspora perspectives, beginning with revised versions of presentations from the 2005 conference by two important writers whose own work has done much to rejoin Viet Nam and America after the war. Wayne Karlin explains how cultural and political reconciliation between Viet Nam and America can be effected by literature, while Andrew Lam discusses how the Vietnamese diaspora has changed and enriched Vietnamese and American culture, with particular reference to California. The next three chapters examine Vietnamese works related to Viet Nam's anti-colonial struggle against the French and its aftermath. John Schafer treats the "dark shadow" cast upon post-colonial Vietnamese history by the disastrous Land Reform campaign of 1953, providing an authoritative account of that program and analyzing three novels, written after Vietnam's Doi Moi (Renovation) reforms of 1986, that critique the earlier campaign's crimes and costs: *Paradise of the Blind*, *Marriage without a License*, and *Three Different People*. Steven Liparulo's examination of *Paradise* shows how its woman-centered, domestic yet politically engaged critique of the lasting consequences of Land Reform paradigmatically contrasts with the private, masculine, war-centered ethos of canonical American Vietnam literature. Michele Janette

uncovers a neglected but prescient South Vietnamese perspective in Tran Van Dinh's 1965 novel, *No Passenger on the River*, which presents a quasi-allegorical account of Vietnamese-American relations as well as a "sojourner" rather than "exile" model of Vietnamese American identity. The four essays that follow examine North Vietnamese war poetry, fiction, film, and song, frequently illustrating distinctive emphases of Vietnamese creative works that were highlighted in the preceding chapters: a domestic, private, or family-centered focus with important women figures coupled with the representation of narratives and emotional experiences to embody collective experiences that are politically significant. Ryan Skinnell analyzes the most celebrated North Vietnamese war novel, *The Pity of War*, through the lens of trauma theory, while Pierre Asselin treats *When the Tenth Month Comes*, the Vietnamese film best known in the West, and provides a more general guide to Vietnamese filmmaking in the context of the war with the Americans. Andrew Wilson analyzes and contextualizes two relatively unknown but paradigmatic North Vietnamese lyric poems, and Jason Gibbs provides context and interpretation for nine North Vietnamese popular songs about the war recorded and broadcast between 1979 and 2005. Finally, in her study of the translator/editor/poet Linh Dinh, who lives in Philadelphia but whose work incorporates America, Europe, and his native Viet Nam, Susan Schultz examines another writer who like Andrew Lam is a sojourner between Viet Nam and America.

Essays in Part III ("Other Cultural Productions") address past and ongoing appropriations of America's war in Vietnam in forms other than films and American literature in English. Jerry Lembcke outlines his investigation of a CBS "documentary" on American POWs that was ultimately derived from pulp fiction, urban legends, and Hollywood films that channeled paranoid fantasies about the war. Bruce Esplin studies the phenomenon and models for Vietnam-based video games. Neil Baird analyzes virtual Vietnam memorials, while Susan Eastman studies a real one, the Vietnam Women's Memorial, but both writers critique the ideological assumptions and expectations that guide the construction of how to remember and memorialize the war. While American popular music about Vietnam is widely known and still popular, the art songs inspired by the war are neither, but Timothy Kinsella's chapter provides them authoritative discussion as well as a bibliography. The essays by Alessandro Portelli and Stefano Rosso on Italian popular Vietnam War songs and translations of American Vietnam literature incidentally remind us that most of the world opposed America's war in Viet Nam, as it does its invasion and occupation of Iraq today. Portelli uncovers pro-North Vietnamese Italian popular songs, and Rosso provides a comprehensive

bibliography of Italian translations of American Vietnam War fiction. Both authors suggest that the Italian government's unpopular support of American interventions in Bosnia, Lebanon, and Afghanistan as well as Iraq (where Italian soldiers have been killed in terrorist attacks) measures the distance between the 1960s, when there was a socialist alternative to democratic capitalism in Italy and elsewhere, and today.

These two chapters thus touch indirectly on the subject of the last group of essays in *Thirty Years After*, militarism and the American way of life. At the beginning of this Introduction, I reflected discursively and perhaps reductively on the subject of Part IV ("The American Wars"). The essays in the final section do so more indirectly and imaginatively while laying the groundwork for further cultural and literary studies of how and why "no more Vietnams" has given way to a war on terror with limitless sites for intervention and no time frames for withdrawal—after all, whatever their differences otherwise, both 2008 presidential candidates promised increased troop levels in Afghanistan and armed vigilance against Iran and the Taliban in Pakistan, two Islamic republics with American combat brigades dug in on their borders. Michael Herr suggested an origin for "round-eye fever" in "the proto-Gringos who found the New England woods too raw and empty for their peace and filled them up with their own imported devils" (49), but in the first chapter of Part IV, Alex Vernon definitively finds at least in the Tarzan books and films an internationally recognized figure for America's mission in the world. Like Gina Weaver, Lorrie Goldensohn critiques the representation of misogyny in *Casualties of War* and notes how films revise texts into more popularly palatable form, but she pairs her analysis of that work with an Iraq war film, *In the Valley of Elah*, and focuses less on degraded women than on how young American soldiers are transformed into beasts who turn on themselves in wars that mean nothing to them. Michael Zeitlin and Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton trace the influence of Vietnam on Gulf War narratives, whether through the recycling of Vietnam films and scenarios in *Jarhead* or, in the second essay, which deals with two lesser known Gulf War novels (Kim Ponders's *The Art of Uncontrolled Flight* and Andrew Huebner's *We Pierce*), through a younger generation's relationship to family members who were involved in Vietnam.

In the final two essays of *Thirty Years After*, Janis Haswell and Christopher Schreiner provide telling and timely reflections on America's addiction to overseas wars through what might seem to be unlikely novels: Andrew Jolly's *A Time of Soldiers*, which tells the story of three generations of American soldiers in one family through endless retrospective narrations but has no battle scenes, and *Outerbridge Reach*, the story of an

ultimately suicidal boat race, written by Robert Stone, author of the classic Vietnam novel *Dog Soldiers.* For Jolly, writing in 1976, now is a time for soldiers to tell their stories in the light of moral principles to counter the public's "willful appetite for delusions and platitudes"—more than thirty years later, it seems past time. The story of Owen Browne, Stone's deluded and doomed protagonist, who survives Vietnam only to drown himself in the middle of an attempt to sail around the world, looks back to that war, from which America seems to have learned nothing or else the wrong lessons, and ahead to current and future ones. The instincts that motivate him—self-promotion through public relations in the absence of expertise or even competence, the will to action without reflection, endless ambition for its own sake, dissatisfaction with staying at home, embracing the possible rather than the actual, clinging to lost causes, impatience with or unawareness of limits—prove dangerously fatal to him, but they have also come to be dangerous for the United States and for the world more than thirty years after Hawks and Doves agreed that there would be "no more Vietnams."

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PART I:

THE AMERICAN WAR

CHAPTER ONE

KEYNOTE ADDRESS: THIRTY YEARS AFTER

TIM O'BRIEN

I begin with a disclaimer. Even as a novelist and a former (very reluctant) infantryman, I cannot and do not claim any special expertise regarding the vast literature that has emerged from the American war in Vietnam. Alas, I'm barely competent to discuss my own books, much less the rich and varied poetry of Bruce Weigl, Michael Casey, John Balaban, Joe Cox, Carolyn Forché, Bill Ehrhart, Kevin Bowen, and Yusef Komunyakaa. Or the powerful journalism of David Halberstam, C. D. B. Bryan, Frances Fitzgerald, Bernard Fall, Neil Sheehan, Gloria Emerson, Jonathan Schell, Seymour Hersh, Michael Herr, Malcolm Browne, and Don Oberdorfer. Or the wrenching personal memoirs of Lady Borton, Ron Kovic, Philip Caputo, Robert Mason, Truong Nhu Tang, and Le Ly Hayslip. Or the stage plays by David Rabe, Romulus Linney, and John DiFusco. Or the novels and short stories by far too many to begin naming. The literary legacy of our nation's misadventure in Vietnam is probably beyond the full mastery of anyone, but to be explicit about the matter, I bluntly and emphatically repudiate any such claim.

Beyond that, I know next to nothing about literary analysis, and, fearful of never writing again, I do everything within reason to keep it that way. I work entirely by trial and error. I don't outline. I don't plan. I am enrolled in no school of literary thought. I am not a modernist or a postmodernist or a magical realist or a magically unrealistic deconstructionist. With one exception, which I much regret, I have never consciously implanted a symbol or a metaphor in my work, although it is also true that specific incidents, physical objects, names, places, and fictional personages have, as if by their own volition, mysteriously taken on meanings and associations well beyond themselves. I distrust excessive and programmatic explication. I distrust the application of any single theory, or set of theories, as an approach to appreciating works of art. I distrust pronouncements about authorial intent. (In my own case, as I work

my way through a story, I don't know *what* the hell I intend. The story seems to intend itself.) Sad as it may be, I just blunder along, sentence by sentence, scene by scene, trusting that the characters and action will lead me to interesting places.

What I do for a living, and for fun, is in many ways the precise reverse of what I'm doing now—writing an essay. Good stories are concrete, not abstract. Good stories do not often generalize, or, better said, generalizing is not what a story does best. A good story does not have instruction—historical, philosophical, political, psychological, or otherwise—as its primary purpose, nor does a decent story offer simple messages or advice or morals. What's the moral of *Thumbelina*? Eat your carbohydrates? What's the message of *Slaughterhouse Five*, or *All Quiet on the Western Front*, or *Dispatches*, or *The Deer Hunter*, or *Cutter's Way*, or *A Farewell to Arms*, or *Tigerland*, or *Apocalypse Now*, or *Jacob's Ladder*, or *Paco's Story*, or *A Rumor of War*, or *Dog Soldiers*, or *The Iliad*? If a movie or a poem or a piece of fiction can be meaningfully reduced to a moral, I doubt it will endure as art. (In this regard, I have yet to encounter an artistically successful "anti-war" novel, any more than I have encountered a decent "pro-war" novel.) In works from which one can draw a conspicuous and unmistakable message, there is almost always an equally conspicuous loading of the dramatic dice—wholly villainous villains and wholly heroic heroes—which to my taste makes a work seem cartoonish, lopsided, and stale. (Here, in an uncharacteristic exercise of willpower, I will refrain from mentioning a film called *The Green Berets*.)

In one of my own books, *The Things They Carried*, I wrote

> A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done. If a story seems moral do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. There is no rectitude. There is no virtue. As a first rule of thumb, therefore, you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil.

This passage reflects my conviction that even the most gallant or self-sacrificial or otherwise virtuous human behavior in war is ultimately subsumed by—and most often in the service of—man's butchery of man. To participate in warfare, no matter how heroically, is to participate in evil. An example: A soldier jumps on a grenade, as the old story goes, and saves his buddies at the cost of his own life. Physically brave, yes. But