Mythologizing the Vietnam War

Mythologizing the Vietnam War: Visual Culture and Mediated Memory

Edited by

Jennifer Good, Paul Lowe,
Brigitte Lardinois and Val Williams

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INTRODUCTION

The Vietnam War is evolving from contemporary memory into history. Fifty years on, it still serves as a benchmark in the history of war reporting, and in the representation of conflict in popular culture and historical memory. But as contemporary culture tries to come to terms with the events and their political, psychological and cultural implications, the "real" Vietnam War has been appropriated and changed into a set of mythologies which implicate American and Vietnamese national identities specifically, and idea(l)s of modern conflict more broadly, particularly in shaping the mediation of the twenty-first-century "War on Terror". This collection of interdisciplinary critical essays explores the cultural legacies of the US involvement in South-East Asia, considering this process of "mythologizing" through the lenses of visual media and tracing the war's evolution from contemporary reportage to subsequent interpretation and consumption. It reassesses the role of visual media in covering and remembering the war, its memorialization, mediation and memory.

The origin of this collection was an international conference titled "Considering Vietnam" and held at the Imperial War Museum, London, in February 2012. The focal point of the conference, which was co-organized by the museum and the University of the Arts London Photography and the Archive Research Centre (PARC), was the major exhibition *Shaped by War: Photographs by Don McCullin*, curated by Hilary Roberts. Along with some of the academic voices represented in this collection, the cornerstone of the event was a series of "conversations" with some of the figures who were most influential in forming the Western media's representation of the war as it was happening. Michael Nicholson, multi-award-winning journalist and former Independent Television News (ITN) Senior Foreign Correspondent, is synonymous with the television coverage of the Vietnam War for many British people. As well as reflecting on the legacies of this war for modern broadcast media, he shared stories of his own experiences in Vietnam between 1969 and 1975, including the incident in 1972 when he and Don McCullin interrupted their coverage of the South Vietnamese retreat towards Saigon and worked together to rescue a badly injured South Vietnamese soldier. Philip Knightley, another senior British journalist honoured by multiple awards for his service, including twenty years as special correspondent for the

Sunday Times, spoke of the extraordinary media conditions of this war, which in part prompted the most celebrated of his numerous books, the definitive critique of war reporting and war propaganda: *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist and Myth-Maker*. Finally, Don McCullin himself gave frank and moving testimony of his experience in photographing the conflict with which he is now most strongly associated, and through which he became a household name. Each of these figures, in one way or another, represents the origins of the Vietnam War's Western mediation. Theirs is the contemporaneous, first-hand reflection that forms the basis of its multifaceted mythology.

This mythology is the subject of this book. Not first-hand experience, but second-hand, third-hand and far beyond, as the conflict and its associated imagery are appropriated on behalf of a whole spectrum of political agendas, psychological subject positions and cultural associations. A very important strand of this mythology, which several of the authors discuss, is its co-opting into the service of subsequent wars, both in the rationale for policing their media coverage and in shaping the political arguments for their waging. The "War on Terror" and its iterations in Iraq and Afghanistan have taken place in the shadow of the Vietnam War, and may even have been unthinkable without it. Another central theme, addressed by more than one contributor here, is that of sex, and specifically sexual violence. More generally, mythologies of the masculine and the feminine run through the whole collection in one way or another, from the definition of manhood as signified by rock and roll to the "feminization" of entire nations by default.

As well as their interdisciplinary origins, the presence of such varied unifying themes has made the process of framing the essays difficult. As will become clear, this web of contested narratives defies neat categorization, but ultimately the material coheres around the three focal points of the state, the screen and the body.

Part I, "The State", considers the appropriation of Vietnam War imagery and testimony in the service of national politics and foreign policy – specifically the impact of Vietnam's legacy on the "War on Terror" and the articulation of national identities within South-East Asia. These first essays deal primarily with contested national histories, state ideologies and that most problematic of concepts, "collective memory". Jeremy Kreusch considers the soldier's photographed body as a site onto which entire mythologies of war, nationhood and honour (or dishonour) are loaded, and through which mythologies about war photography itself are perpetuated. Huong Nguyen asks how the legacy of the "American War" has filtered through Vietnamese generations, continuing to affect

national identity and perceptions of the US into the twenty-first century; and Richard Ruth uses the example of Thailand's involvement in Vietnam to show how the power of state mythology can be so pervasive that defeat is turned to victory.

Alluding to the Vietnam War's status as the so-called "first television war", Part II examines the processes by which the war has been glamorized on-screen for the consumption of subsequent generations. Television, movie and video-game screens are arguably the sites of the war's most radical evolution from contemporary experience into popular mythology. Peter Hope focuses directly on the myth of the "rock and roll war" by tracing the nostalgic uses of 1960s music to cement a whole set of associations around the Vietnam War in films and computer games made long afterwards; and Richard Daniels provides unique insight into the making of one of these films, Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*, by showing what the film-maker's London-based archive reveals about the very particular "Vietnam" he sought to create.

The three essays in the final section are unified by the theme of the body, tackling both the uses and deliberate avoidance of sex within America's mythologizing of the war, as well as the effects that some of the war's most iconic bodies have had on its legacy. Images of bodies – living and dead, male and female, Vietnamese and American, aggressor and victim – constitute some of the most contested territory in this war's cultural aftermath. These essays consider the ways in which bodies have been made to speak, signify, shape identities and negotiate subject positions. Madeleine Corcoran follows the complex story of the deliberate gendering of both Vietnam and the US within the war's American representation, and how these gendered and sexualized mythic systems have been set up, underlined, subverted and remembered. Valerie Wieskamp exposes the process by which sexual violence has been written out of America's Vietnam mythology in favour of virtue, even in the context of one of the most shameful episodes in American military history: the Mai Lai massacre of 1968. Finally, Susan Schuppli tells the fascinating story of the original mechanical transmission of one of the most iconic war photographs ever, finding in its technical details a fresh understanding of how and why the body of a young Vietnamese girl touched not only the hearts, but also the bodies, of those who viewed it for the first time. This story also carries a reminder of just how many factors are implicated in the process by which image-memories become "iconic", including chance.

PART I:

THE STATE

CHAPTER ONE

VIOLENT REPRESENTATION: PHOTOGRAPHS, SOLDIERS AND AN IDEOLOGICAL WAR

JEREMY KREUSCH

By the close of the Vietnam War in 1975, several photographs had helped to serve what became a national cause in the United States: the anti-war movement. Many of those photographs pictured the brutality and violence engendered by Americans and their allies in the jungles of Vietnam. Powerful images as they were, they produced similarly powerful sentiments. The photographs themselves were not created as propaganda, yet they were usurped to serve an ideology.

In this essay, I begin by discussing how photographs become iconic, and as a consequence ideological, by using a popular metaphor for photography favoured by the theorists John Szarkowski and Thierry de Duve. I apply this metaphor to explain the role of photographs in swaying the public to indict the war in Vietnam. In the next section, I pay specific attention to the violence inherent in the process of representation – a process that laid disproportionate blame for the horrors of war upon the soldiers who fought in Vietnam. In the third and final section, I turn to some comparable images from the two recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. I discuss what I view to be a reactionary theme directly related to condemnation of the Vietnam War and its participants via photography – photographs that were used to bolster patriotism despite widespread popular resistance. Ultimately, I argue that the soldier is trapped in the bind of being the embodiment of war; of acting as metonymy when photographed and therefore masking the systems and figures that shape and initiate war, whether presented and received as a perpetrator or presented and received sympathetically. In conclusion, I elaborate on some of the problems and paradoxes inherent in photojournalism when it functions iconically and ideologically.

Windows, Mirrors and Iconicity

Almost since its inception, photography has granted noble journalists an opportunity: the possibility of showing audiences a window into worlds otherwise described by words alone. This opportunity could be viewed as a chance for visually richer reportage, and for reportage with a greater objectivity. Photographs are indeed capable of revealing a kind of truth about the world. Or, if the attribute of revealing worlds is too extreme, photographs at least possess a modicum of honesty in the view that they capture. But for every instance where a photograph can be metaphorically called a window into another place, an objective record, it likewise can just as legitimately be named a mirror. Oliver Wendell Holmes was perhaps the first to suggest that photographs were a kind of mirror – describing the camera as a "mirror with a memory".[1] Later, John Szarkowski divided his 1978 survey of American photography at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, into those same two categories: windows, which are truthful representations, and mirrors, which are reflections of the photographer's subjectivity. Photographs are not only window-like representations of fact: they are also mirrors that reflect a viewpoint, a politic or a polemic.

What do these almost mystical names for a medium of mechanical reproduction say about the agency of photography at war or in crisis? In 1978 Thierry de Duve wrote, similarly to Szarkowski, that one type of photograph, confused with its referent, is "reality-producing, insofar as the only reality to be taken into account is the one framed by the act of taking a photograph", while another type is "image-producing", creating, instead of reality, a "semiotic object, abstracted from reality".[2] At a glance, here again are photographs described as windows and mirrors. Yet de Duve's notion of the photograph as semiotic object clearly implies more than just direct mirroring of a photographer's intention. So, in which cases is a mirror photograph more than a simple reflection? When does it become a rhetorical construction, a semiotic abstraction?

At its root, the difference between these two definitions, window and mirror, reality-producer and image-producer, is a problem of ideology, not just ontology. They are not mutually exclusive, as Szarkowski seems originally to have thought them, but rather can coexist. Mirrors can be

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[1] Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Stereoscope and the Stereograph", *Atlantic Magazine*, June 1859. Accessed 28 January 2014. http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1859/06/the-stereoscope-and-the-stereograph/303361/#.

[2] Thierry de Duve, "The Paradox of Photography", *October*, vol. 5 (Summer 1978), 114.

constructed as windows. Ideology, likewise, constructs itself in the guise of truth. As Roland Barthes famously pointed out, photography's problem of objectivity isn't just a matter of false representation, because the referent is in fact always one of the things signified by the photographic sign.[3] The problem has a more sinister implication because it is not as simple as a case of mistaken identity. Ideology *hides* in the guise of truth, in that it is not necessarily *false*, but the *truthfulness* of it is an accurate ruse. Mirror photographs are capable of the same symbolic violence of ideology; they can be used to "impose a certain universe of meaning", functioning as semiotic objects rather than merely reflective ones.[4]

Photojournalism as a mirror construction is especially problematic not only because of the presumption of unbiased reporting that is expected from reputable news organizations by their viewing publics, but, more importantly, because of the referential slippage that occurs. Art photographs-as-mirrors openly reflect the photographer and his or her intentions. But journalistic and documentary photographs, since they are generally intended as windows for the news-consuming public to peer through, reflect not only the photographer's subjectivity, but also, to a certain degree, the subjectivity of the entire viewing public. They create a climate of meaning for the viewing public to internalize as their own. Photojournalists can accurately reflect their public's viewpoint, creating news images that are meaningful and personal for millions of people disconnected from the photographer, and reinforcing fundamental truths they already hold to be self-evident.

Those photographs that accurately reflect a viewing public enter the cultural vernacular and become like signs; they lose some of their nuances and come to function metonymically for certain ideas. This is one of the reasons that some photographs are eventually called "iconic" – in the sense that an icon is a representative symbol of something. This is true of many iconic war photographs. The content stands ubiquitously for a larger idea, characterizing, for example, war and soldiers in general.

However, it is necessary to point out that this characterization is not necessarily just of content; it is not the clarity of the window that determines the accuracy of characterization and iconicity. Photographs connote just as well as they denote. Due to that connotation, iconicity also relays the ideological bent of that content onto the idea to which it refers more generally. This ideological photographic metonymy is ripe for appropriation by whichever political leaning finds the connotation apt.

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[3] See Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image", *Image/Music/Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).
[4] Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (New York: Picador, 2008), 2.

The Vietnam War presented an interesting historical microcosm worth analysing in regard to iconicity and ideology. Rather than presenting to the world a reification of the government-approved narrative, a narrative that spoke to the righteousness and glories of war, iconic photographs from the Vietnam War spoke more frequently to war's horrors. That is not to say that tragic photographs of war had never existed before. But in this case the tragic photographs went from being exceptions, records of peculiar and uncharacteristic events, historical footnotes even, to being the very metonyms for the war at large. The contrast here is between icon (universal symbol, not unique to specific things, generally applicable) and event (something singular, unforeseeable and unique).

Sadness, violence, death, despair – these have long been themes of war photography. However, most photographs exhibiting these themes are not considered iconic. In fact, rather than standing as metonyms for war, until the Vietnam War they were largely considered profane because they seemed to disturb the sanctity of death or the honour of a soldier. *LIFE* magazine was permitted by government censors to print photographs of dead enemies as early as 1943 (and dead Americans only a year later), a quarter of a century before the My Lai massacre.

Ralph Morse's photograph of the 'screaming' skull of a Japanese soldier is one photograph of the vulgarity of war that stands out as an exception to the otherwise more politically correct milieu of iconic photographs from World War II. The backlash from the publication of that image alone forced *LIFE* to defend its policy to disturbed readers. Having received letters complaining about Morse's photograph, it responded, "War is unpleasant, cruel, and inhuman. It is more dangerous to forget this than to be shocked by reminders."[5]

As another example, the photographs of the piles of dead from the aftermath of the Dresden bombings during World War II, when published in the post-war world, drew cries of outrage and accusations of indecency.[6] Photographs from the events at My Lai on the other hand successfully made the massacre a *cause célèbre* for those who would condemn the war, and was coopted as propaganda art. What was the difference between these sets of photographs that warranted such different responses?

One important difference between photographs of the Vietnam War and photographs from previous wars was *how* the photographs presented

[5] "Letters to the Editors", *LIFE*, 22 February 1943, 8.

[6] For a recent example, see Luke Harding, "German historian provokes row over war photos", *Guardian*, 21 October 2003. Accessed 3 April 2012. http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2003/oct/21/artsandhumanities.germany.

death and pain – in the moment rather than after the fact. To partially explain this, Susan Moeller has made the connection between photojournalists working in Vietnam and the popularity of the street photographer aesthetic of the 1950s and 1960s practised by the likes of Robert Frank, Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand:

> Instead of careful compositions isolating decisive moments of combat, the images that seemed to dominate and characterize the bulk of the photographs from Vietnam appeared simply to arrest randomly selected scenes – random, yet all the more significant for their seeming representativeness precisely because they were "random."[7]

Shot-from-the-hip photographs are perceived as more authentically objective because of the photographer's lack of control over the image. The content is interpreted as being untainted by the photographer's intentions precisely because the photographer snapped the photograph spontaneously and without deliberate forethought. Where the assumption of objectivity exists, however, there is a place for ideology to slip in.

Eddie Adams's famed photograph of Major General Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing the Vietcong prisoner (1968) is the quintessential photograph of an event being captured in the moment rather than after the fact. It is the frozen moment, another mystical property of photography typified. This is not a photograph of death as an accomplished fact. It is a photograph of certain and impending death, and of the agony of knowing that death is to come, but not yet. It was a specific event, an ugly event, and it was also a celebrated icon capable of characterizing the Vietnam War in general, despite its specificity and despite its brutality. Why?

This face of death was self-reflective for much of the American viewing public. It was as if, like Narcissus, they had recognized that it was themselves in the image, and they were confronted with their own horrifying impotence. When Thierry de Duve wrote of this photograph that viewer's experience was traumatic not because of the depiction of violence, but because of the "paradoxical conjunction of the here and the formerly", he meant that the viewer experienced being

> always … too late, in real life, to witness the death of this poor man, let alone to prevent it; but by the same token, always … too early to witness the

[7] Susan Moeller, *Shooting War: Photography and the American Experience of Combat* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 407.

> uncoiling of the tragedy, which at the surface of the photograph will of course never occur.[8]

When looking at this photograph contemporaneously, the slippage to the symbolic was inevitable. Viewers were too late to stop the violence of the war in general, yet were frozen in hellish ineptitude, unable to realize the true nature of its crisis, mirroring their inabilities to affect or accept the Vietcong's demise. At this point in 1968, experiencing the fallout from the Tet Offensive, Americans were at once passionately hopeful that they could make the war end and hopelessly unable to end it. The same is true of all of those photographs that broke from precedent to symbolize the Vietnam War: they became iconic because they mirrored and reinforced a pre-existing public sentiment. The catch is that this effective mirroring of public sentiment can be created regardless of the accuracy of the photograph or the photographer's intentions.

Throughout his life, Adams felt he had framed the content of his famous photograph in a way that led the viewer to sympathize with the wrong soldier. Margot Adler of *National Public Radio* explained in an article eulogizing Adam's life and career that he

> considered himself a patriot and a Marine, [and] never came to terms with the fact that the anti-war movement saw that photograph as proof that the Vietnam War was unjustified. In fact, he believed to the end of his life that the picture only told part of the truth. The untold story was that on the day of the execution, an aid to Loan was killed by insurgents. After Loan pulled the trigger, he walked by Adams and said, "They killed many of our people and many of yours."[9]

From these examples, it is possible to distinguish two levels of trust that viewers put into photographs. One is in their denotation, the event depicted – that what is depicted is *what had been*, as Roland Barthes terms it. However, the other contradicts the first almost entirely. Content frequently yields to connotation. The content of a photograph can be deemed untrustworthy. Perhaps, for example, it excludes some significant factor from the frame. Nonetheless, the trust put into the connotation of an image is often a lasting one. The mirror trumps the window.

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[8] Thierry de Duve, "Time Exposure and the Snapshot: The Photograph as Paradox", *October*, vol. 5 (Summer 1978), 121.

[9] Margot Adler, "The Vietnam War, Through Eddie Adams' Lens", *NPR.org*, 24 March 2009. Accessed 28 January 2014. http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=102112403.

Soldiers Behaving Badly

On the surface, the net impact of many of the damning photographs from the Vietnam War was positive because they helped to quicken the end of a war that cost countless lives. That same positive impact is nonetheless problematic because, when a photograph is translated from the specific, detailed and denoted to the general, universal and connoted, nuances are lost in the process of representation. The thing often depicted – soldiers behaving badly – also connoted war as disgraceful. In the process of making a generalized representation of war, there is also a laying of blame and an implication of responsibility. If we see that war is horrible because we see soldiers committing contemptible acts, the logical conclusion is that it must be the soldiers who are making the war condemnable. What is cut out of this circular reasoning is of utmost importance: the invisible hierarchical power structure through which the military and government characteristically functions.

We consistently see the soldier-as-disgraceful trope when looking at celebrated, iconic photographs that illustrate the Vietnam War. For example, Kyoichi Sawada's photograph of a US armoured vehicle dragging the body of a Vietcong through the streets is marked both by the horrible act and the soldiers who seem unfazed by the brutality of their behaviour. The photograph, often called "Dusty Death", was taken in Tan Binh in late February 1966 and that year was awarded first prize for news by *World Press Photo*. Tan Binh was not the site of a brutal struggle or a climactic battle in the war. The soldiers were sent there to build a road under operation "Rollingstone". They met with opposition, but it was quickly squelched, and Sawada snapped the photo in the aftermath of this battle. The Vietcong never attempted to retake the site, choosing instead to simply annoy the Americans with occasional sniper and mortar fire. The road was completed by the beginning of March.[10] Without diminishing the gravity of the loss of lives, it is safe to say that this was a relatively routine and successful endeavour for the Americans. At the very least, it was not the kind of endeavour that would warrant especially acerbic animosity from the victors.

And yet Sawada's photograph shows US soldiers unabashedly dragging the body of a Vietcong enemy through the street. Any image of a dead body speaks on some level to the horrors of war, but when this dead body is seen in conjunction with the soldiers' nonchalance the effect is

[10] John Carland, *Combat Operations: Stemming the Tide, May 1965 to October 1966* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2000), 179–80.

even more chilling. The responsibility for perpetuating this kind of brutality falls on the two men driving the armoured vehicle, regardless of their actual role. In the photograph, the parading of the corpse appears completely unwarranted.

Perhaps the most egregious examples of images open to this kind of interpretation are the previously mentioned photographs from the My Lai massacre. The events that took place at My Lai have become notorious only because of the photographs taken by US Army Photographer Ronald Haeberle. The story of the events that occurred at My Lai initially went unheard until *LIFE* magazine published Haeberle's images after they surfaced in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* some eighteen months after the event (November 1969).[11]

The photographs are unique specimens because they provide such a comprehensive record of the carnage. But again, the photographs did not just depict the aftermath of violence. It is important to note that the photographs were of soldiers caught red-handed as agents of that violence. Haeberle did not just photograph the now infamous bodies in the street picture that was appropriated by the *Art Workers' Coalition* for their "And Babies?" poster. Interspersed among the graphic images of slain civilians are photographs of soldiers acting destructively. Historian James Olsen has remarked that these photographs have become "ubiquitous" in that they "symbolize evil".[12] Images like these alter the identity of the soldier in American collective memory. These soldiers have become, for Olsen and others, the personification of the evils of war rather than the embodiment of its glories.

When John Smail, one of the squad leaders of the Charlie Company who was responsible for the events, heard the news break about My Lai, he feared for his safety. The patrons of the bar in which he was sitting were screaming "fucking baby killers" at the television.[13] This image of harassment conjured by Smail became a common one in the final years of the war and in the years that followed. Soldiers like Smail who had committed specific crimes were co-opted to symbolize the despicable qualities of the war at large. Keith Beattie, in *The Scar that Binds*, explains the cultural understanding of the veteran wild with violence (as exhibited in such films as *Taxi Driver*, 1976, and *Rambo: First Blood*, 1982):

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[11] *American Experience: My Lai* (DVD, Public Broadcasting Service, 2010), dir. Barak Goodman.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.

> [since] the violence at My Lai was so excessive – so outside acceptable or accepted boundaries (even in war), and was therefore determinately insane – [it] opened the way for a further demonization of the veteran as mentally deranged or psychotic.[14]

The soldier's reputation in general was, on some level, utterly despicable, since he or she was held responsible for all of the atrocities shown photographically in the news. This was problematic for two reasons.

First, the criticism did not discriminate. Regardless of whether a specific veteran had actually participated in such crimes, he or she was often hastily blamed for the horrors of war in general. Mike Cook, one of the veterans featured in the documentary *Vietnam: Homecoming* (2007), remembers being harassed excessively upon returning to the US, despite being innocent of any serious war crimes:

> When we drove out [of] the gate, there were people yelling and screaming and throwing crap at the bus – I mean literally crap at the bus. You could hear them yelling and screaming, and it wasn't "welcome home," it was "S.O.B.," "baby killers." They told us when we debarked the bus, "Don't tell anyone where you came from, keep it to yourself. Go home and enjoy your family."[15]

The protesters in this case attacked Cook as if he were the problematic aspects of the war incarnated before their very eyes. Others, namely government and military officials responsible for giving orders to soldiers to commit violent acts, did not face such criticism, in part because they avoided becoming visible symbols of wrongdoing.

Second, despite the fact that many activists rallied around images like those from the My Lai massacre, most people within the anti-war movement were not specifically against soldiers, and actual incidents of the kind Cook describes were few. Some of the most fervent supporters for withdrawal from Vietnam were those who had been there to witness the events first hand. However, that did not stop politicians, activists and news organizations from arguing their position with the soldier's embattled identity in mind. This is another problematic aspect of the photographic metonymy. Officials who were actually responsible for perpetuating the continued hurtfulness of war – those who gave the orders for destruction

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[14] Keith Beattie, *The Fear That Binds* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 65.

[15] *Vietnam: A Televised History*, The History Channel (DVD, A&E Home Video, 2007), 00:17:30–00:18:30.

of villages and burning of hamlets – had a scapegoat, and it was a scapegoat they could successfully defend.

On one level, it should not be surprising that many came to conflate the inhumanity of war with the inhumanity of those who took part in it. In so many of the iconic images from Vietnam, the American soldiers – or, more often, their South Vietnamese allies – are implicated in the ethically questionable or outright atrocious acts depicted. Since soldiers have always been the subjects of war, when this war turned ugly, the soldier became the body politick upon which its ethicality was argued. Nonetheless, the relationship between photographs and the public that commends or disparages them is not simple or consistent.

The nuances of the issue were not lost on US Vice President and war proponent Spiro Agnew. In April 1971, Agnew made a speech at the 25th anniversary meeting of the Veterans Administration Volunteer Service. Selections from that speech were reproduced in the *Wisconsin State Journal*. In it, Agnew said that war critics were unjustly criticizing American soldiers. He not only said that this criticism was unwarranted, but also went as far as to say that these critics were "demoralizing Americans on the front lines".[16] As if in deliberate reinforcement of the US government's attempt to align itself against the anti-war movement via condemnation of its supposed demonization of soldiers, the facing page reported Lieutenant William Calley's remarkably light sentence for his part in the orchestration of the My Lai massacre – a point of heated contention among war protesters.

This critique of the anti-war movement may have been hypocritical, but it was nonetheless quite effective. It was hypocritical because the US government notoriously neglected Vietnam War veterans after the war, so they defended the respectability of the soldier in rhetoric only. The critique was effective because it exposed the war protest in general as depending largely upon the image of the soldier as tragic and malignant, all the while deflecting the critique away from the higher levels of command.

In an article for the 17 November 1969 issue of the *New York Times*, Nan Robertson approached the very point of potency in Agnew's claims: are wounded pro-war veterans embittered by war critics? Robertson interviewed several veterans recovering from their wounds at Walter Reed Army Medical Center.[17] She characterized them as proud and appreciative of the experience of war in maturing them. She also says that these same

[16] "Agnew Lashes 'Negative' Critics of War Effort", *Wisconsin State Journal*, 4 April 1971, 4.

[17] Nan Robertson, "Wounded Unembittered by War Critic", *New York Times*, 15 November 1969.

men felt little hostility towards the anti-war movement. While none truly agreed with the anti-war movement's message, most felt the protesters were in some way honouring the soldiers' sacrifice. One veteran, Staff Sergeant Barry Baron, went as far as to say, "One reason we are fighting in Vietnam is so that people can have long hair and beards and protest the war in Vietnam."[18] While there is factual merit to instances of veterans being harassed by anti-war protesters, the inflation of its prevalence into a binary of pro-war veterans/anti-veteran protesters is nonetheless a distortion.

Interestingly, Robertson found that the thing by which these men felt most insulted was the more officially sanctioned rhetoric of war protest. In the late 1960s it became common practice for war protesters to read aloud the names of war dead (or to wear the names of fallen soldiers on placard necklaces, as the protestors did during the "March Against Death" on 13 November 1969) in a provocative attempt to demonstrate the toll of the war. Captain Corbin Cherry, a chaplain in the war, was quoted as saying:

> I'm with that lady that promises to sue the moratorium if they read her son's name again. Thousands and thousands of parents who lost children don't appreciate their names being read.[19]

Apparently these veterans did not really find either particular polarization of ideology demoralizing or despicable, be it left-wing protest or right-wing warmongering. They did, however, find the practice of utilizing the war dead to make points about the ethicality of war to be reprehensible.

The opinion of those soldiers casts projects like *LIFE* magazine's "One Week's Dead" in a problematic light. Although the editors of *LIFE* made an attempt at impartiality in acknowledging that they could "not speak for the dead", the intention of showing the portraits of hundreds of men who had died during the week of 28 May to 3 June 1969 was obviously aligned with a kind of humanistic argument for withdrawal from Vietnam. If this was not evident in the pages of "One Week's Dead", it was easily divined from the testimonial immediately following, which recounted the story of one such photograph as symbolic of a "broader tragedy".[20] While the warmongering right appropriated disgraced veterans as a symbolic tools to define the war in its own terms – as slowly derailed by lack of support and eventually sabotaged by outright resistance – the protesting left coopted the war dead to illustrate the scale of what they considered a tragedy. In

[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Unattributed, "I see death coming up a hill", *TIME* magazine, 27 June 1969, 32.

either case, the soldiers were usurped into a struggle of ideology that mischaracterized them for political gain.

While the photographs certainly cannot be perceived as solely responsible for the subsuming of the soldier into the body politick in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, we cannot underestimate the role of Vietnam War photographs in shaping later images such as the one shot by Mike Kamber, which depicts soldiers on the back of a vehicle during a mission in Afghanistan threatening the photographer with brandished weapons (2007). No soldier wants to be the poster boy for the brutality of war.

Patriotic Fables

The American soldier is a well-established character in the history of photography. But the problem with this character is that, following the Vietnam War, the soldier has fallen from grace. This is not simply because soldiers during the Vietnam War were sometimes pictured as a malignant presence, blindly muddling problems that were not their own. It is also because, ever since all the photo opportunities in Vietnam ended, the American soldier has still been used to tell the unfavorable story of the Vietnam War. Since the tragedy of the Vietnam War has become associated with the face of the soldier, the image of the soldier has been problematic for those who would seek to tell a favourable story and to garner support for the efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Throughout the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, allegations of gross collateral damage resulting from US combat strategies were rampant, just as they had been during the Vietnam War. R. J. Rummel estimates that between 800,000 and 1,200,000 civilians died in both North and South Vietnam during the twenty years of US involvement in Vietnam. The Iraq War Logs released by *WikiLeaks* showed 66,081 civilian casualties in Iraq from January 2004 to December 2009 as a result of the US-led invasion. No such numbers definitively exist for the war in Afghanistan, as was famously confirmed by US General Tommy Franks: "You know we don't do body counts."[21] Aggregate numbers based on collective reports estimate that between 10,000 and as many as 60,000 were killed by US and coalition forces from 2001 to 2011; however, many consider those numbers to be inaccurate due to the absence of systematic documentation.

Images of unintended deaths were numerous and available to the public during and after the Vietnam War, much more openly than they had

[21] Quoted in "Success in Afghan war hard to gauge", *San Francisco Chronicle*, 23 March 2002.