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Introduction

Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans – born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage – and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world. (John F. Kennedy, “Inaugural Address,” 20th January 1961)

Something isn't right here. Something has gone desperately wrong. And those in charge cannot be trusted to fix it.
(Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture* xiv)

Vietnam. When John F. Kennedy stepped onto the podium to make his inaugural address in 1961, the word suggested nothing but the promise and infinite possibility of “the American Century.” As Kennedy would proclaim, this was to be a new age, one characterised by the exceptional American values of democracy and liberty, and one in which the United States would continue to fulfil its Manifest Destiny. Few could have foretold that less than fifteen years later “Vietnam” would become a phrase that Americans everywhere would come to hear ‘not as a name of a country but as a word for death and disgrace’ (Emerson 48).

Yet long before the last of the helicopters left Saigon in 1975, and long before a multitude of veterans and journalists attempted to expose their nation's hubris in literary form, two novels had already epitomised the exceptionalist ideology which would lead the United States into an unnecessary war in Southeast Asia. Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* (1955), a text narrated in the first-person and describing a litany of events matching many of the author's own well-documented experiences in Vietnam, depicted a native people reluctant to embrace a foreign culture being forced upon them. Three years later, *The Ugly American* written by Eugene Burdick and William Lederer and, according to statements by the authors, 'based on fact' (180), demonstrated the widespread inefficacy of the "American Way" in an agrarian Asian nation not unlike Vietnam. But both of these narratives were fictional. The decision by Greene to incorporate fictitious characters into his narrative, and that taken by Lederer and Burdick to situate their collection of accounts in the imaginary "Sarkhan", meant that the significance of the political messages contained within these narratives was often undermined and trivialised.

But what if Greene had decided simply not to name Fowler, an act which would have left his protagonist as an arbitrary "I" whose voice may or may not have been that of the author? What if *The Ugly American* had been written as nonfiction as originally intended?¹ If each had been framed to the reader as creative nonfiction, as an autobiography or a memoir, a piece of reportage or an oral history, would the ominous tidings contained within these narratives have had greater significance to a

¹ While these questions may seem frivolous given that both *The Quiet American* and *The Ugly American* were both presented as works of fiction, there is much within each text that allows the reader to at least entertain the thought that each work was in some way referentially valid. In his autobiography and in many subsequent interviews, Greene admits that 'there is more direct rapportage in *The Quiet American* than in any other novel I have written' (Greene, *Ways* 139), and that many of the scenes were represented in the text exactly as they had occurred. Similarly, in an article written for the *New York Times* in 2010, Michael Meyer reveals that *The Ugly American* had originally been commissioned as a work of nonfiction by publishers W.W. Norton but that editors 'suggested it might be more effective as a novel' (Meyer). *The Ugly American* received attention from many political luminaries, the most prominent of which being future president John F. Kennedy, which resulted in its subsequent use by U.S. tourists and diplomats as 'a sort of how-not-to-travel guide' (Meyer). However, remarks such as those by Senator William Fulbright, that *The Ugly American* was 'sterile, devoid of insight, reckless and irresponsible' (qtd in Meyer) challenged such praise in the eyes of many.

generation of Americans moving inexorably towards one of the most tragic wars in their nation's history? I argue that although written too late to counteract the catastrophic effect that the war would have on both American and Vietnamese societies, the creative nonfiction inspired by the conflict went some way towards correcting the exceptionalist ethos which had pervaded the American psyche since the Indian Wars of the 1800s. As such, the central argument of this study is to show that not only did creative nonfiction assist this corrective process, but that it did so by depicting the events of the Vietnam War in a narrative form which encouraged the American people to revisit their preconceived ideas about the war by presenting an equally plausible alternative.

'As a City upon a Hill ...'

The interpretative lens through which U.S. society viewed the conflict in Vietnam differed drastically in the years before, during and after the war. However, the perception of America as an "exceptional" nation was not one which originated with the onset of the Cold War. It had first entered the public lexicon in 1630 in a sermon given by John Winthrop on board the *Arbella* en route to the New World. As leader of one of the earliest groups of European settlers to arrive in America, Winthrop had urged his fellow colonists to behave with morality and integrity as their actions would become the example by which all others who came to the New World would be judged. Over the following centuries, the mantra that America was 'as a city upon a hill – the eyes of all people are upon us' (Winthrop) took a firmer hold on the national psyche. As the United States grew in stature, the prevailing

myth was that it was the laudable aspects of its culture, liberalism, individualism and egalitarianism, which had “allowed” it to evolve from a British colony into a global superpower. This belief was amplified in the nineteenth century by the view that America’s on-going expansion was not motivated by a desire for territory, but rather the nation fulfilling its Manifest Destiny. This decreed that the United States was ‘the instrument of Divine Providence for bringing liberty and democracy to all of humanity’ (Guggisberg 268). The exalted nature of this task resulted in what Martin Seymour Lipset describes as a ‘utopian orientation’ in the American people, a trait which caused them ‘to view social and political dramas as morality plays, as battles between God and the devil, [in which] compromise is virtually unthinkable’ (22).

Such a Manichean outlook would prove to be a critical characteristic of the American ethos throughout the following century. It allowed the United States to view any party it deemed to be “un-American” as inherently wicked, a stance which also provided the moral justification for total war against those parties. This type of warfare deliberately targeted the social structures of a people. Destroying towns and settlements, and making no differentiation between soldiers and their kin, its intent was to annihilate the chosen enemy. Such a strategy was used to its fullest during the Indian Wars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Landmarks such as Sand Creek and the Marias River became synonymous with the slaughter of defenceless women, children and the elderly by the U.S. military.² The primary consequence of this total warfare was that the nation’s first Anglo-Saxon inhabitants settled on what

² The massacre of the Cheyenne at Sand Creek (Colorado 1864), and of the Piegan Blackfeet at the Marias River (Montana 1870) resulted in the combined deaths of approximately 306 Native Americans by the U.S. military. Atrocities of this kind were so commonplace during the American-Indian Wars that they number too many to mention here. However, the aforementioned were amongst the most infamous. Each involved the unprovoked attack on a defenceless tribal settlement consisting primarily of women and children, the sick and the elderly, and played a crucial role in the demise of each tribe. For a more comprehensive account of these and other such incidents of the American-Indian War, see Dee Brown’s *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West*. While his narrative focuses primarily on the American-Indian War from 1860 to 1890, Brown does refer to the events preceding the final decades of this one-sided conflict. Most significantly, by comprehensively detailing the almost complete annihilation of a native population by an alien race who generally thought it ‘right and honorable to use any means under God’s heaven to kill Indians’ (87), his account also gives an indelible insight into the Frontier-heritage ideology which would go on to shape American values and beliefs for centuries to come.

was largely stolen land, exploited and enslaved both the native population and other indentured peoples, and frequently murdered or waged war against anyone else who opposed them. But the collective memory of these times didn't view such conflicts as the virtual genocide of another race. Akin to the manner in which Jay Winter saw 'the individual's memory [being] fashioned by the social bonds of that individual's life' (25), the barbarity of American actions during this period were rationalised by what Slotkin calls 'the Indian-War model' (493).

Echoing the bipartisan mind-set between good and evil mentioned by Lipset, this paradigm 'insists that when faced with such a reversal of historical destiny *compromise is unthinkable.*' Slotkin goes on to state that "'progress" can and must be defended by "savage war," prosecuted until one side or the other is annihilated or subjugated' (493 my emphasis). In keeping with America's mythic vision of itself, those responsible for any atrocities committed against the native population were only able to carry out such acts by imitating the "evil savage". This characteristic of the genocidal process was crucial. It sanctioned American barbarity against the native Indian as a cathartic act, one which was subsequently mitigated by the perception of a victory over evil. Slotkin refers to this practise as 'regeneration through violence' (352). Never has Walter Benjamin's edict that history empathises with the victors rung so true. Yet such a belief became an intrinsic part of the national narrative for many Americans. As a consequence, war, and all other similar forms of government-sanctioned violence, came to represent 'the only valid path to historical progress' (493). Motivated by a sense of Manifest Destiny, the Indian Wars were not viewed as a unique occurrence in the history of the United States, but as proof of the moral rectitude of its national philosophy, one which proclaimed America's singular place as the epitome of enlightenment in a hostile and uncivilised

world. Because of such rose-tinted views of the nation's origins, all subsequent acts of military aggression, and particularly those in Southeast Asia, became interminably linked with the idea that the U.S. 'stood only for what was true, good and right and [its people] were the great liberators of the world from totalitarian tyranny' (Caputo, *Writing 4*).

Vietnam presented the United States with an obstacle similar to those it had so successfully overcome in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Indeed, it was assumed by virtually every one of the powerbrokers in Washington that the conflict in Southeast Asia would follow the nation's traditional blueprint of war. As described by David Halberstam in *The Best and the Brightest*, his acerbic account of the political machinations which led to the escalation of the Vietnam War from counterinsurgency to one of the longest and bloodiest wars of the twentieth century, 'the American military command thought [the Vietnam War] was like any other war: you searched out the enemy, fixed him, killed him, and went home' (185). It was the final characteristic of this intervention which made the American approach so unique in comparison with other First World nations. Whereas the latter had fought colonial wars in order to conquer and keep, the U.S. soldiers 'were fighting in order *to go home*' (Halberstam 185 my emphasis). Complying with the principles of its Manifest Destiny, American involvement in Southeast Asia was motivated purely by moral and ideological concerns. Needless to say, because the United States had been a 'work of Providential design' (Ignatieff 14) since the moment of its inception, the prospect of defeat was never even countenanced. Just as it had been against all others who had resisted the American brand of civilisation, victory against Communism in Vietnam was assumed to be inevitable.

This assumption was buoyed by the words of such prominent political figures as John F Kennedy, whose “City on a Hill Speech” in Massachusetts in January 1961, as well as his inaugural address in Washington eleven days later, provided a familiar lexicon for Americans to interpret all future geopolitical crises. Any pending conflict between the United States and its enemies was subsequently suffused with a ‘transformational grammar’ (Pease 157) derived from the same mythic designs which had both described the “battle” for the American frontier, and justified the Indian Wars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In his presidential speeches, Kennedy spoke of ‘a perilous frontier’ (“City”), of revolutionary beliefs, and of God-given purpose as his nation assumed ‘the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger’ (“Inaugural Address”). The tone of this new idiom, by a president later described by Philip Caputo as ‘the glamorous prince of Camelot’ (*Rumor* 16) for the idealism of his rhetoric, subsequently influenced the American people’s understanding of virtually every significant historical and political event of the decade thereafter. However, the Indian War model which was the basis of the American mythic vision began to come apart during and after the Vietnam War. The fabled image of the United States which had orchestrated and influenced its intervention in Southeast Asia became ever more inconsistent with the reality being reported by the independent media both domestically and internationally. Reports coming home from the war told of the widespread indifference, and even of the resentment, of the ordinary people to the presence of American personnel in Vietnam, of the general ineffectiveness and ineptitude of the military, and of numerous atrocities committed by U.S. soldiers in what quickly became ‘the world’s most intense brush-fire war’ (Halberstam 164). These revelations, combined with increasing anti-war sentiment at home, and the growing awareness that the prevailing

hegemony was a fallible entity, meant that the United States was becoming more associated with massacres such as My Lai than its Constitutional ideals of liberty, democracy and freedom.³

The disintegration of this paradigm was ultimately compounded by the ever-increasing realisation that an American victory in Southeast Asia was highly unlikely. The immediate impact of this pending loss for a nation whose mythic vision was based on military strength and success was that there could now be no regeneration in Vietnam, no self-fulfilling justification of the millions of lives lost, or of the wanton destruction of an agrarian nation. For a country which had imbued its storied vision of itself with a messianic truth, there was now only ‘an inability to reconcile myths of national virtue with the history of the conflict’ (Walsh, “American Writing,” 229). The result was an ideological crisis within American society unlike anything seen since the time of the Civil War. As the U.S. intervention in Vietnam came to a close, a new vision of America was needed, one which would acknowledge ‘what was shameful about [its] historical past,’ and most significantly, ‘enable its victims and oppressors to take up a different position about the future’ (Pease 73). While many attempts were made to achieve this goal, few were as successful, as powerful, or as widely available as the creative nonfiction written by the veterans and journalists who witnessed the war in Vietnam at first-hand.

‘A Special Kind of Fiction ...’

³ On March 16th 1968, a company of American soldiers attacked the village of My Lai in the Quang Ngai province of Vietnam. Between 347 and 504 innocent men, women and children were murdered. Countless other incidents of rape and mutilation were also reported as having occurred during the assault. Initially covered up by the American military, reports of the atrocity came to light eighteen months later as several U.S. Congressmen were contacted and informed of the truth of My Lai by a helicopter door-gunner who had served in the area at the time. An investigation was launched which resulted in the conviction of just one man, Lieutenant William Calley. Details of the My Lai Massacre can be found in virtually every history of the Vietnam War, but probably the most comprehensive are *My Lai: A Brief History with Documents* by James Olson and Randy Roberts, and *My Lai: An American Atrocity in the Vietnam War* by William Allison. While the My Lai Massacre was without argument one of the worst *confirmed* atrocities of the Vietnam War, it was by no means the only incident of this kind committed by American soldiers during the conflict. For further insight into the full extent of U.S. military action against the civilian population of Vietnam, see Nick Turse’s *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam*.

But before such claims can be substantiated, questions must be answered regarding creative nonfiction as a literary form. The most prominent of these is what *exactly* is creative nonfiction? Often overshadowed by more literary and poetic forms, creative nonfiction is a genre which portrays actual people, places and events using the techniques of fiction. Since the mid-1700s, the genre is one which can be best described as having ebbed and flowed throughout history. Considered to represent what Truman Capote would later describe to George Plimpton as ‘a failure of imagination,’ it was seen as offering little in the way of cultural worth and frequently marginalised by academia as a consequence.

Creative nonfiction has, however, existed in several other guises over the centuries, and since the mid-twentieth century, there has been a shift of opinion which has allowed it to re-emerge as a significant American literary genre. Literary journalism, long-form journalism, new journalism, the nonfiction novel, the nonfictional narrative, the personal essay, life-writing, memoir, and autobiography are all terms that have been used to describe creative nonfiction at some point.⁴ Consequently, definitions of the genre are many, but few offer any conclusive insight into its actual make-up. Despite this variety of titles, each manifestation has generally presented an account which the author believes to be an accurate and unadulterated retelling of events. A closer examination of the genre’s current title does nothing to shed any further light on this description.⁵ Juxtaposing a pair of terms which would appear to resist any form of dialectic, “creative” suggests something imaginative, new and previously unseen while “nonfiction” would seem

⁴ Just as with creative nonfiction however, many of these generic titles have also been the subject of criticism regarding their suitability to accurately describe their respective narratives.

⁵ Having only been brought into common usage in 1983, “creative nonfiction” is still a relatively new title for the genre. Considered to be ‘the godfather behind creative nonfiction’ (Gutkind 10), Lee Gutkind introduced the term “creative nonfiction” in the late Seventies. However, this generic label was not officially recognised by the American National Endowment for the Arts until 1983 in order to bestow creative writing fellowships to authors of the nonfictional form.

to be a binary opposite. Instantly striking the reader as the antonym of fiction, it implies a narrative derived from a pre-existing series of facts which can be referentially verified. Thus, rather than definitively indicating the nature of the genre, its most recent label of “creative nonfiction” would appear to perpetuate an intrinsic generic which allows it to be interpreted as either fact or fiction.

Nonetheless, citing creative nonfiction’s dependence on a number of poetic literary techniques for the construction of its narrative, the majority of critics insist on viewing creative nonfiction as ‘a species of fiction’ (Foley, *Telling* 41).⁶ But characterised by a verisimilitude amplified beyond that found in traditional realistic or historical novels, each theorist interprets works of creative nonfiction as quite unlike *conventional* works of fiction. I see this view of the genre as the most logically appropriate, and one that can be rationalised quite easily.

In “The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse,” John Searle attempts to differentiate between fiction and traditional nonfiction (newspaper reportage, documented histories, and educational texts, etcetera) using a model of vertical and horizontal rules.⁷ These indicate whether a work should be interpreted as fact or fiction. Although Searle applies them to a piece of “straight” journalism and an obviously fictional text, they can also be brought to bear on the ontologically uncertain creative nonfiction. The vertical rules ‘establish connections between language and reality’ (326). They are literal and empirical, and encourage the referential reading of an account. Such precise, unambiguous constructs are at the

⁶ While many theorists endorse this view, Barbara Foley’s *Telling the Truth: The Theory and Practise of Documentary Fiction*, Ronald Weber’s *The Literature of Fact: Literary Nonfiction in American Writing* and John Hellman’s *Fables of Fact: The New Journalism as New Fiction* do so more capably than many other comparable texts on creative nonfiction. Their view that creative nonfiction was a unique form of fiction finds further support in Paul John Eakin’s description of autobiography in *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography* as ‘a special kind of fiction’ (25). This autobiographical understanding of the genre will be comprehensively examined in chapter 2.

⁷ These traditional sources of nonfiction are described as ‘noncreative nonfiction’ (xxvii) by Robert Root Jr in *The Fourth Genre: Contemporary Writers of/on Creative Nonfiction*. This term is used by Root to describe ‘all nonfiction outside [creative nonfiction]’ (xxvii).

core of creative nonfiction's narrative. However, Searle accompanies these vertical rules underscoring the referentiality of an assertion with a set of horizontal rules. Defined as 'a set of extralinguistic, nonsemantic conventions that break the connection between words and the world' (326), they allow the author to use words 'without undertaking the commitments that are normally required by [their literal] meanings' (326). More concisely phrased, these horizontal rules refer to any method of poetic description, such as metaphor, omniscient narration or free indirect discourse, available to an author. These literary devices are rarely found in conventional referential texts. But as a genre which emphasises the craft of its narrative as much as the content, they are common in creative nonfiction. Therefore, although describing empirically legitimate entities, the expressive language used within the genre to represent the experiences of the author transforms the nonfictional narrative into the 'non-deceptive pseudo-performance' (325) which Searle views as the identifying trait of fiction, despite the illocutionary intentions of the author of creative nonfiction being committed to the portrayal of a referential truth.

Because, as Weber states in *The Literature of Fact*, 'all forms of writing offer models or versions of reality rather than actual descriptions of it' (14), the world portrayed by creative nonfiction should be viewed as one *analogous* to the actual world rather than an identical reproduction. Very much like Baudrillard's simulacra, it is both real and unreal. The goal of the creative nonfictional author is that his or her work be read as an empirically viable text. Yet for it to exist, the narrative must first pass through the interpretive lens of both memory and the mind's eye. Immersed in such subjectivity, the world represented in the narrative is transformed from the reality which Baudrillard saw as the source of representation due to 'the principle of

the equivalence of the sign and of the real' (6). Highlighting quite clearly the tension between fact and fiction that is intrinsically part of the genre, such an interpretation is ideally suited to the generic hybrid that is creative nonfiction. While the narrative is posited to the reader as being empirically legitimate, the manner of its construction means that the discourse can only ever be described as being closely similar to, or derived from, accepted fact. This duality was one of the characteristics of the genre which made it so attractive to those who sought to challenge the version of events being disseminated by the American government during and after the Vietnam War. Its hybridity dovetailed perfectly with the radical ideology that sought to demonstrate that the cultural depiction of certain events in U.S. history was extremely susceptible to distortion by specific ideological or hegemonic forces.

However, viewing creative nonfiction as a type of fiction does give rise to further questions. What distinguishes creative nonfiction from other fictional discourses, and what is it about the genre that encouraged readers to believe that it possessed a "truth" lacking in other fictional forms? Creative nonfiction's most noticeable feature as a fictional genre is its commitment to only representing people, places and historical events which have actually occurred. Offering a different trope of suspense to that found in standard fiction, its narrative structure is generally one which reveals *how* and *why* certain events occurred more so than presenting a dramatic retelling of events. This approach means that the 'textual elements' of creative nonfiction can be understood as 'possessing referents in the world of the reader' (Foley, *Telling* 26). As many of these entities can be verified by the public, they amplify the existing verisimilitude of the narrative. However, as quite often occurs in creative nonfiction, these 'historical realemes' (McHale 87) are frequently located in the uncertain temporal zones defined by Brian McHale as the 'dark areas'

(87) of history. These are ‘the aspects [of history] about which the “official” record has nothing to report’ (87). This characteristic of the genre means that often less tangible “facts,” such as the inner thoughts of characters or the private conversations of the persons documented, are presented in the text. But it must be stated that regardless of whether their narratives are referentially “hard” or “soft,” portraying the trivial details of an old friendship or the revised version of a widely-known event with potentially widespread consequences, the authors of creative nonfiction consider their respective accounts to be as accurate as those found in any piece of newspaper journalism or historical text.

This empiricism is primarily derived from creative nonfiction’s status as an experiential genre. It is important to note that while this trope is usually derived from the author’s own involvement in an event, it can also refer to the process of documenting one’s experiences of researching an event that has passed.⁸ As noted by Linda Hutcheon in *The Poetics of Postmodernism*, it is this assertion of personal testimony within creative nonfiction that provides the basis of the genre’s claim that its narrative is a replication of truth or historical fact. A consequence of this trait is that authorial subjectivity is thus an intrinsic part of the narrative’s composition. In

⁸ Some critics of the genre have suggested that there exists an absolute identity between creative nonfiction and all other forms of life-writing, most commonly, the autobiography and the memoir. However, this is only partially accurate. Although located towards the softer side of the fact-based spectrum characterising the genre, *all* works of memoir and autobiography should be considered works of creative nonfiction. This is because, by definition, the constitutive elements of each of these forms of narrative should have corresponding loci in the real world. However, the inverse rule does not apply. This is primarily because of how creative nonfiction presents and portrays events, both public and private. Despite the experiential texts having a noticeably autobiographical tone, the self-reflexivity which characterises autobiography and memoir is not always present in creative nonfiction. Authors of the genre frequently have not directly experienced, or are immediately affected by, the incidents contained within the narrative as much as a person documenting the personal emotions and experiences which have shaped their lives. In the context of this study of Vietnam War creative nonfiction, examples of such works include Neil Sheehan’s *A Bright Shining Lie*, David Halberstam’s *The Best and the Brightest* and C.D.B Bryan’s *Friendly Fire*. This associative property of autobiography correlates with the author of creative nonfiction’s desire to document his or her experiences of an event, either as participant or independent observer. However, memoir and autobiography generally do not utilise excessive or unnecessary bibliographic material to corroborate the verifiability of their texts to the same extent as the more factually-derived works of creative nonfiction. While personal dedications and photographs are occasionally integrated to encourage a referential reading, authors of autobiography and memoir rely more on an ‘implicit or explicit contract’ that Paul John Eakin refers to in the introduction of Lejeune’s *The Autobiographical Pact*. This pre-established arrangement between author and reader ‘determines the mode of reading of the text and engenders the effects which [...] define it as autobiography’ (xi). More concisely phrased, this contract implies that the reader subconsciously agrees that the documented events occurred as they have been portrayed in the text. Ultimately, autobiography and memoir should be understood as part of the biological subgenre within creative nonfiction’s ‘generic umbrella’ (Bradley 204) rather than either offering any kind of verisimilar rival.

Writing True: The Art and Craft of Creative Nonfiction, Sondra Perl considers this aspect of creative nonfiction to be as important as the ‘factual truth’ (81) of the narrative. Incidents are portrayed as they would be in referentially-assured texts. But for Perl, the goal of the creative nonfictional author is *to represent his or her own personal responses* to these events as much as represent the events themselves. The ‘who, what and where that most people agree upon’ is thus counterpointed against ‘the experience seen through the writer’s eyes’ (81). Daniel Lehman summarises this idea quite clearly when he states that ‘the writer of nonfiction produces a document for an audience that reads history as both text and experience’ (*Matters* 2-3).

Significantly, however, while Lehman’s statement reiterates the genre’s refusal to prioritise between the rival elements of its narrative, it also offers an alternate means of understanding how the portrayal of authorial experience reinforces the empirical viability of the text. The accuracy of the events documented within the nonfiction novel is assured to the reader in what can be understood as an outward exertion of referential pressure. Its textual elements are ‘phenomena [...] available to and experienced by the reader outside the written artefact’ (*Matters* 4). As the places, people and events experienced by the author exist in actuality, bar the most extreme instances of violence or war, it is not outside the bounds of possibility for the *reader* to engage with these elements of the text on their own terms. A corollary to this potential for a shared narrative experience external to the text is that the “names” in the text are often real names. Unlike the arbitrary signifiers found in fiction used to describe a character whose existence is directly linked to the author’s imagination, these “names” have the power of reply. Should the account drastically differ from the accepted version of events (as most infamously was the case in 2003

with James Frey's addiction memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*), those documented in the narrative 'can talk back to their authors,' enabling them to either 'endorse [...] or undercut' (Lehman, "Proper Name," 68) the integrity of the account.⁹ Creative nonfiction can thus be said to exist on what Lehman calls 'a multi-referential plane' (*Matters* 4), one which occupies a common realm between the narrative and the experiential world, and which bolsters the veracity of the text.

In any discourse claiming to represent reality, there is controversy surrounding the manner in which it portrays both the verifiably historical and the unquantifiably private parts of its narrative. By deliberately using methods drawn from fiction, creative nonfiction's claim that its account is a mimetic representation of historical reality means that it is one of the genres most susceptible to these kinds of criticisms. The artifice begot by the use of these techniques is most commonly demonstrated by extended periods of authorial reflection and a belles-lettres style of prose, both of which emphasise the sensory details of that being described, whether it be person, place or event. For example in *The Armies of the Night*, Norman Mailer's nonfictional account of the Pentagon Peace marches in 1967, Mailer's description of Robert Lowell's physical appearance is noticeably infused with his own emotions for the poet laureate:

His features were at once virile and patrician and his
characteristic manner turned up facets of the grim, the

⁹ James Frey achieved notoriety after it became known that he had lied about many of the incidents he had described in his memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*. Having been lauded by Oprah Winfrey on her *Book Club* television show, Frey's harrowing tale of the depths his drug and alcohol abuse had taken him to had sold over 3.5 million copies. However, *The Smoking Gun*, an exposé website which specialises in uncovering the truth behind events often overlooked by mainstream media using legal records and police documentation, found that much of Frey's narrative had been massively exaggerated. The sources of their investigation, and that of subsequent investigations by many other media, were the "characters" of the narrative who testify to many of the incidents described by Frey as being entirely fraudulent. For further information, see *The Smoking Gun's* "A Million Little Lies: Exposing James Frey's Fiction Addiction" and Laura Barton's interview with Frey in *The Guardian* in 2006, "The Man Who Rewrote His Life."

gallant, the tender and the solicitous as if he were the nicest
Boston banker one had ever hoped to meet. (29)

In James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, something as routine as farmland is portrayed with similar poesis:

Fields are workrooms, or fragrant but mainly sterile work-
floors without walls and with a roof of uncontrollable
chance, fear, rumination, and propitiative prayer, and are as
the spread and broken petals of a flower whose bisexual
centre is the house. (124)

In Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, even an event as terrible as war is related with literary finesse:

Every fifth round fired was a tracer [...] everything stopped
while that solid stream of violent red poured down out of the
black sky. If you watched from a great distance, the stream
would seem to dry up between bursts, vanishing slowly from
air to ground like a comet tail [...] It was awesome, worse
than anything the Lord had ever put down on Egypt, and at
night, you'd hear the Marines watching it, yelling, "Get
some!" [...] The nights were very beautiful. (132-133)

Although most commonly a poetic description of actual reactions and experiences, these literary devices include the selection, omission and manipulation of certain scenes by the author, omniscient and anterior forms of narration, free indirect discourse, the inclusion of unverifiable interior monologues and an inconsistent

movement of time throughout the narrative. Such artifice is also demonstrated by a host of other poetic approaches. The most extreme of these were most famously brought to public attention in Tom Wolfe's "New Journalism." Where the traditional tenets of who, what, where and how had provided the raw data for traditional journalism, the New Journalists sought 'to report events from the inside out' (Staub 55) in order to convey a true and absolute historical reality which encompassed the emotional responses of the actors. This was done with the unorthodox use of a host of grammatical constructs, literary pyrotechnics described by Wolfe in his anthology of New Journalism as 'the lavish use of dots, dashes, exclamation points, italics, and occasionally punctuation that never existed before :: :: :: :: :: ' (21).

The presence of multiple accounts of the same event in a narrative was also very much a characteristic approach of New Journalism's underlying poiesis. Most commonly found in events written during or after the Counterculture, authors of creative nonfiction sought to make their readers aware that they were only viewing a partial, and by no means absolute, account of events. C.D.B. Bryan's *Friendly Fire* illustrates this technique with great clarity. Documenting the struggle of grieving parents seeking to find out the truth about their son's accidental death during the Vietnam War, their investigation only reveals several "versions" of the events which occurred, each as inadequate as that which preceded it. The effect of this trope is often replicated in creative nonfiction by an authorial switching of the narrative stance from the first to the second, and even to the third person. A practise which also extended to the switching of narrative *voice*, this strategy subtly encouraged the reader to integrate their own opinions and beliefs into the nonfictional text by inferring the malleability of written fact. While such meta-narrative tendencies are exemplified quite clearly by Ron Kovic in *Born on the Fourth of July*, they are also

evident in a more subtle fashion in nonfictional narratives such as Susan Sontag's "Trip to Hanoi" in the form of a series of diary entries, and in *The Armies of the Night*, where Norman Mailer juxtaposes for the reader "history as a novel" and "the novel as history." By no means a definitive list, these techniques demonstrate why many critics of the genre cast doubt on the accuracy of events portrayed in creative nonfiction.¹⁰ Described as 'strategies of dramatic immediacy' (323) by Eric Heyne, these methods are crucial to creative nonfiction. Not only do they distinguish its narrative from traditional nonfictional discourses, they provide one half of the ontological bedrock upon which the genre is based.

Regularly found counterpointing such obvious poiesis in creative nonfiction, however, is a multitude of extraneous literary and non-literary material. Integrated into the body of the text, these entities are unessential to the narrative. Yet they create a referential frame which associates the details of the account with independent sources of 'empirical validation' (Foley, *Telling* 26), thus encouraging the reader to interpret the narrative's truth-claims as real. Most commonly found in the guise of fore- and after-words, these literary devices have several functions. They allow the author to personally reassure the reader of the verity of the account. They inform the reader of the (often unusual) lengths undertaken by the author to adequately research the text (For example, as the conflict began to reach its height in 1966, the preface to Frances Fitzgerald's *Fire in the Lake* outlines how the author spent nine months in war-torn Vietnam so that her narrative could be read as an authentic account of events in Southeast Asia). Lastly, by acknowledging people in the text using their proper names, the reader is also provided with yet another source

¹⁰ Many of the theoretical texts on creative nonfiction acknowledge or briefly discuss the varying techniques of fiction used in the genre. However, the most comprehensive analysis and demonstration of these methods is in Gay Talese and Barbara Lounsbury's anthology of the form, *Writing Creative Nonfiction: The Literature of Reality*.

of ‘living partners and/or contestants in the production of historical meaning’ (Lehman, “Proper Name,” 68) whose acquiescence can be interpreted as an endorsement of the narrative.

In addition to the fore- and after-words, these literary devices can include a number of other bibliographic materials ranging from bibliographies to personal dedications. These are in turn often complemented by a host of non-literary materials such as photographs, maps, and newspaper articles. Comprised of empirical elements often taken from historical sources or other similar works, and combined with an authorial commitment to only represent that which had occurred, creative nonfiction is thus also intrinsically capable of educating its reader. This attribute is remarked upon by Lee Gutkind. He states that the ‘information derived from mundane legwork, research, and scholarship are the roots of creative nonfiction; they constitute the important teaching element, the informational content’ (53) of the genre. Dating back as far as the 1700s, this intention to educate its readers on the world around them is apparent as an integral part of creative nonfiction’s portrayal of reality. In *History and the Early English Novel*, Robert Mayer notes how for centuries a number of periodicals and journals argued that Defoe’s *A Journal of a Plague Year* should be interpreted as a referentially viable plague-response manual because of the abundance of historically verifiable, real-world details contained within it.¹¹ This didacticism was also an attribute of nineteenth-century American literature in slave narratives which sought to heighten public awareness of the barbarity of the slave trade still existing in the United States at the time. A century later, it was one of the key aspects of the genre which made it so attractive to a

¹¹For further information on how Mayer outlines in great detail how Defoe’s *A Journal of a Plague Year* was interpreted as a referentially sound document from the mid-eighteenth century up until early stages of the 1900s, refer to *History and the Early English Novel* 210-213.

Countercultural movement looking to highlight what it saw as an attempt by the administration to convince the American public of the rectitude of its war in Vietnam. Instilling legitimacy into the retelling of events, unlike any other fictional discourses, these nonessential entities encourage the reader to believe that the account is a ‘narrative that intersects with actual lives’ (Lehman, *Matters* 153). Deliberately inserted, the cumulative effect of these constructs is thus a realignment of the reader’s perceptions of the narrative from that of an apocryphal recollection of events to one which could be considered as referentially viable as an empirical text.

‘A Tableau of Experience...’

Yet for this study to demonstrate how creative nonfiction attempted to assist this reconstruction of the American ideology in the years during and after the war in Vietnam, as comprehensive a tableau of experience as possible is required. Several critics of Vietnam War literature have approached this task tangentially. However, many of these efforts have been limited to investigating either the referentiality of an allegedly nonfictional account of the conflict, or, how the war and its after-effects are portrayed in contemporary American literature, fictional or otherwise. Philip Beidler’s *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam* is one example of the latter. Examining the full spectrum of writing inspired by the war, from David Halberstam’s pseudo-fictional *One Very Hot Day* to Bruce Weigl’s war poetry, Beidler’s text examines a variety of literary responses which were used as a ‘sense-making’ (Beidler 100) mechanism for those who still remained troubled by their wartime experiences.

Donald Ringnalda's *Fighting and Writing the Vietnam War* surveys a similarly broad scope of literature. However, his text goes beyond the traditional literary media to encompass the attempts to encapsulate the war both theatrically and using a selection of war monuments. Significantly, rather than demonstrating how those who experienced the conflict in Indochina made sense of the many traumatic events they witnessed there, Ringnalda's analysis contends that instead of simply trying 'to make America's experience with Nuoc Vietnam behave by smelting it down into traditional mimetic transcriptions' (Ringnalda 5), these fictional and nonfictional cultural artefacts should be re-examined so that their didactic potential can be truly realised. *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* by John Hellmann is perhaps one of the best and most comprehensive attempts to demonstrate how America's mythic past influenced its approach to the war in Vietnam. But Hellmann's broad survey of American literature does not differentiate between the rich assortment of fictional and nonfictional works he examines in terms of their generic structure, thus neglecting to determine how each text demonstrates its ideological currency.

Hellmann does attempt this task to an extent, however, in *Fables of Fact*. In this theoretical text, he discusses several of the stylistic approaches which allowed Michael Herr's *Dispatches* to be identified as a work of literary journalism. However, limited to one short chapter, his analysis is confined to a theoretical understanding of *Dispatches* and unfortunately does not include the cultural criticism that his later work would go into such great detail to explain. This strategy of using Vietnam War literature to scrutinise the various traits of creative nonfiction is one also used by a selection of other theorists of the genre. Daniel Lehman examines the empirical viability of the works of Tim O'Brien in a chapter-length study in *Matters*

of *Fact*, while Ronald Weber briefly highlights a number of shortfalls of creative nonfiction pertaining to the subjectivity of the author in *The Literature of Fact* using C.D.B. Bryan's *Friendly Fire*. Yet neither critic extends his analysis beyond the structural and ontological issues surrounding the specific texts chosen in their respective studies.

This confusion lies at the heart of much of the scholarship relating to Vietnam War creative nonfiction found in peer-reviewed journals. Tobey C. Herzog, John Timmerman and Marilyn Wesley all offer different approaches to how and why the "truth" of the conflict in Southeast Asia is portrayed in the works of veteran-authors such as O'Brien and Herr, Herzog going to the point of interviewing several authors in *Writing Vietnam, Writing Life: Caputo, Heinemann, O'Brien, Butler*. Others, such as William V. Spanos in "A Rumor of War: 9/11 and the Forgetting of the Vietnam War," engage with Hellmann's attempt to coordinate America's exceptionalist ideology with the literature of the war. However, none attempt to do so in tandem with a specific genre study to establish how the structure of that particular genre enabled such a correlation to occur. Focussing solely on the creative nonfiction of the Vietnam War, this project not only demonstrates the negative effect the exceptionalist ethos was having on the American mind, but it also highlights how the nonfictional genre was ideally suited to the task of convincing the American public to reconsider the widely accepted view that the United States stood apart from all other nations. To do so would require an analysis of the three forms of creative nonfiction most commonly used by authors of the conflict: autobiography/memoir, literary journalism and oral history.¹²

¹² There exists some uncertainty as to the difference between autobiography and memoir. Autobiography, as defined by Philippe Lejeune, is a 'retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is

Works from the first category generally prioritised the private thoughts and personal affairs of the author which were previously unknown to the reader. Describing a pattern of plot which '[takes] its shape from the birth, life and death of an actual individual' (Scholes 214), such narratives were what Robert Scholes saw as examples of 'the biological form' (214). Narrated in the first-person, these texts were frequently derived from diaries or letters sent home by the author during their time in Vietnam, and provided the reader with an account of events founded in what James Campbell refers to as 'combat gnosticism' (203). Campbell describes this as 'a connection to Reality, an unmediated Truth to which only those who have undergone the liminal trauma of combat have access' (207). As a result, many of the people, places and events contained in this type of account are quite difficult to verify. But based on personal testimony, this medium has been described by Jeffrey Walsh as having 'long been a persuasive kind of witness, since their author's experience authenticates them as credible texts both ideologically and epistemologically' ("American Writing" 233).

The emphasis on personal experience was frequently a deliberate approach by the author which allowed him or her to 'move beyond a mere factual understanding of the events [of the war] to a level of illumination, consideration, and learning' (Herzog, "Heavy," 683). While this strategy did place the empirical validity of these narratives under duress, any doubts regarding the veracity of the account were allayed by the author's status as a participant in the war, one in which he has risked his life taking enemy fire and experienced up-close the death of some of his dearest friends. As noted by Kate McLaughlin, the unquestionable integrity of

his individual life' (4) However, I view Lejeune's definition as being equally applicable to the memoir. The forms are only differentiated by the latter's concern with 'a particular period and place in the writer's life' (Zinsser 3). The author remains 'the unifying idea' (Gornick 131) between the events of the narrative and the documented emotional responses in both.

war literature is thus taken from the veteran-author's 'need to keep the record for others' (*War* 19).

In order to decry the myth of exceptionalism, those authors seeking to inspire a Countercultural change frequently highlighted the detrimental effect the ideology was having on American society. In the years following World War II, American foreign policy was motivated by an increasingly expansive sense of Manifest Destiny, and subsequently sought to spread their exceptional ideology to foreign shores. As had been the case in the American-Indians Wars, reluctance by other nations to adopt this belief-system was frequently met with explicit or subversive military aggression. Across Central and South America, Africa and the Middle East, such violence enabled victory, and with victory came the sense of progress that subsequently justified or "regenerated" the American ethos.¹³ However, in keeping with the spirit of the anti-hegemonic Counterculture, the autobiographical creative nonfiction of the Vietnam War tended to refute this approach.

Portraying the perspective of a drafted conscript, an unwilling and temporary combatant 'who belonged by desire and identification to the civilian world' (Cole 31), Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone* presents an "everyman" character representative of the majority of draftees in Indochina. A product of the ordinary, everyday Middle America, his ethical struggles and empathy for the Vietnamese people belies the image of the U.S. soldier as an uncaring and often brutal agent of a neo-colonial power, and instead conveyed an image of someone pressured into serving by societal structures beyond his control. John Sack's *M* offers a similarly humane insight into the Marine infantry, depicting a body of men whose over-

¹³ In *Why Do People Hate America?*, 92-101, Ziauddin Sardar counts 133 different military interventions by the United States at home and abroad. Occurring between 1890 and 2001, they range in scale from America's part in Allied Victory in World War II to the role the Marines took in quelling the infamous 1992 Los Angeles Riots.

arching concern is fear and survival rather than supposedly fulfilling the Manifest Destiny of their nation.

In addition to highlighting the immense racial divide which continued to exist in American society throughout the twentieth century, David Parks' *GI Diary* also emphasised the depths of barbarity that many soldiers sunk to while serving in Vietnam, a level so low that it brought into question whether the exceptionalist ideology upon which the United States had been founded was truly regenerated in Vietnam. Providing an unadulterated insight into the horrors of war, *Home Before Morning*, Lynda Van Devanter's narrative detailing the experiences of an American field nurse serving in Vietnam, operates to similar effect. Revealing the true fate of those injured pro patria, the nation's exceptionalist ideology and the unrelenting pressures it exerted on those it often forced to serve in its name are brought unequivocally to the fore. While Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* is initially marked by a patriotic fervour on the part of the author, it demonstrates how quickly this idealism begins to fade when faced with the harsh realities of war, and also the ease with which Kovic moved from a hegemonic to a radical belief-system as he realises the flawed vision of the America he knew and grew up with.

The trope of mindless, self-defeating violence continues in Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*. An ideologue of the Kennedy age, the author initially envisioned himself 'charging up some beachhead, like John Wayne' (6) to liberate a beleaguered nation from a tyrannical oppressor. However, this patriotic zeal is soon overwhelmed by Caputo's experiences of civilians being tortured and murdered as their homes and livestock are needlessly destroyed by American soldiers. *A Rumor of War* closes with no obvious sense that Vietnam has been "civilised" as a result of the U.S. intervention in Southeast Asia. As with the majority of these nonfictional

narratives, there is only relief by Caputo that he has managed to survive unscathed, at least physically.

These autobiographies and memoirs aren't confined however just to the devastating effects that the American intervention in Vietnam was having on the American people. Both Mary McCarthy's twin set of memoirs, *Vietnam* and *Hanoi*, and Susan Sontag's essay "Trip to Hanoi" in *Styles of Radical Will* clearly illustrate a functional Vietnamese society that did not see American assistance as a prerequisite for survival. In each of her narratives, as a consequence of America's allegedly righteous undertaking in Vietnam, McCarthy describes a culture, society and people being slowly destroyed as both North and South Vietnam are placed under siege by a foreign army with little or no understanding of the task they faced there. Sontag is perhaps more candid in her questioning of the exceptionalist ethos which was supposedly guiding the American intervention in Southeast Asia. Although written at the height of the conflict in 1969, in "Trip to Hanoi" she states that

One can only speculate about the consequences of this defeat for the United States. It could be a turning point in our national history, for good or bad. Or it could mean virtually nothing – just the liquidation of a bad investment that leaves the military-industrial establishment free for other adventures with more favorable odds. (268)

Synopsising the sentiment of the majority of those who opposed the war in Vietnam, Sontag explicitly challenges the thinking that led the United States into Southeast Asia, asking whether it will actually be realised as the catalyst which could turn the superpower away from such conflicts in the future, or would it simply be re-

assimilated by the exceptionalist ideology which glorified such wars as an expression of the United States' continuing Manifest Destiny.

The second type of creative nonfiction, literary journalism, differs slightly. A more referential and discursive narrative reflecting on past events, the second grouping is characterised by incident-inspired accounts that often proclaim what is an unknown but factually accurate and rigorously researched insight into an accepted historical truth.¹⁴ The details of these accounts are frequently reinforced by named sources, and other forms of "evidence" linking the text to the real world, such as maps, photographs, and other non-literary material. Often dealing with public rather than personal experiences of the war, the narrative is a noticeably mediated and structured discourse. However, despite the differences in structure in these nonfictional narratives compared to the personal testimony found in the works of O'Brien, Kovic, Sontag et al, they were still utilised to similar effect by those seeking to radicalise American society. Having worked as journalists in Southeast Asia, in the years before and during the war, many of the authors had directly experienced the horrors of the conflict in Vietnam. Those who hadn't spent time in Southeast Asia also bore 'witness to the experience of the war in the dimension of personal memory' (Beidler 153) by using corroborated witness reports and other accepted forms of evidence.

In perhaps one of the most affecting of all Vietnam War texts, *Friendly Fire*, C.D.B. Bryan demonstrates the irreparable damage caused to the psycho-structures of American society by both the duplicity of the administration and the acquiescence

¹⁴ An insight into the amount of research involved in writing a nonfictional narrative can be garnered from an interview between Truman Capote and George Plimpton in *The New York Times* in January 1966, Capote speaks of how it took him six years to research and write *In Cold Blood*. Approximately half of this period was spent solely interviewing the townspeople of Holcomb, Kansas where the murder of the Clutter family took place. By the time he had finished the narrative, Capote reveals to Plimpton that his research was so extensive that the accumulated 'files would almost fill a whole small room, right up to the ceiling.'

of the American people through Peg and Gene Mullen's struggle to uncover the truth about their son's death. Similarly, in *A Bright Shining Lie*, Neil Sheehan offers a global view of the negative impact the altruism of American bureaucracy had on the Southeast Asian country. Efforts which were supposedly stymying the spread of Communism are condemned by Sheehan as nothing more than 'the lies and vaporings of foolish men' (781). Reports of saturation bombings, destroyed villages, murdered civilians and mutilated corpses contradicted the government rhetoric which eulogised American efforts in Vietnam.

David Halberstam's narratives, *The Making of a Quagmire* and *The Best and the Brightest*, continued to expose this false optimism, and more than just that, directly linked it to noted political figures such as Dean Rusk. Theirs were values which were derived from the Old Frontier, whose 'blending of [...] religion and [...] sense of military duty' had created 'a code which taught that if evil stalked, you did not turn the other cheek; if you were soft or tolerant of evil, it would devour you' (*Best* 315). Adherence to such an ideological outlook left little mercy for those caught in its Old Testament crosshairs.

In *Dispatches* Michael Herr reveals a similar awareness of the influence of the Frontier myth on the events occurring in Southeast Asia. A fragmented insight into the war, *Dispatches*' narrative structure consists of 'a succession of iconic scenes and images, encyclopaedic in their references, and includes all the elements integrated into the mythic tradition of how America began and the condition which it came to be' (Sardar, *Nightmare* 32). Comparisons to John Wayne and other figures of the Old West, and to landmarks such as the Alamo and Fort Apache, are littered throughout. But rather than glorifying these symbols used to such devastating effect by the ruling elite, Herr adheres to the dictates of the Counterculture by using them

to underscore the hollow truth of America's mythic self-image. Instead of being a bastion of peace and democracy, Herr portrays the United States as a nation perpetually at war, with itself or with others, and Vietnam as the culmination of this history of aggression. A text awash with references to the Frontier history of the Old West, the insights *Dispatches* reveals into the Vietnam War deliberately interrogate the historical paradigm of the United States which had manufactured 'a very particular kind of history, narrow in focus and short on acknowledgement of what these "triumphs" depended on and how they were affected by the affairs of other people and nations' (Sardar, *Nightmare* 11). Offering another contrast to the conjured reality of Vietnam being propagated by the American government was the insight into Vietnamese society provided by Frances Fitzgerald's Pulitzer Prize winning *Fire in the Lake*. Rather than portraying the American government as helping a beleaguered young nation to resist Communist invasion and repression, Fitzgerald goes to great lengths to show that the United States was actually hindering the attempts of the ordinary Vietnamese people to overcome a corrupt and totalitarian regime which had been imposed upon them by forces out of their control.

The third prominent type of creative nonfiction describing the events of the Vietnam War was the oral history. An amalgamation of many of the theoretical concepts that were found in the autobiographies and works of literary journalism, the oral histories of the conflict were characterised by the disparity of voices contained within each. Every one of the authors of these "mini-memoirs" had personally experienced or lived through the events they described. Representing an auto-diegetic or first-person account of war time experiences, many of the events retold were hugely subjective and thus quite difficult at times to verify. However, the existence of bibliographic material in many of these narratives, extraneous entities

such as prefaces, and the proper names, photographs and personal details of the interviewees meant that each account was presented to the reader in such a fashion that he or she was actively encouraged to interpret it as a referentially valid retelling. This air of credibility was often reinforced by a chronology similar to that of the conflict itself, or accounts retold in the exact same phraseology or dialect of the speaker. The resultant narratives were a significant part of the attempt to decry the myth of exceptionalism which had led the American nation into such a disastrous war. Each succeeded in bringing the voice of the normal infantryman to the fore. A distant cry from the blinkered rebuttals of Nixon, McNamara or any of the other fabled “Wise Men,”¹⁵ the men and women in each of these oral histories represented an American “everyman,” ordinary citizens who had been entrusted with a responsibility by their government only to be later vilified for their actions.

Many of these oral histories began to emerge at a pivotal time in American history as the ordinary people of the United States began to finally recognise both the sacrifices made by their countrymen and the failures in leadership by their administrators during the years of the Vietnam War. The most prominent of these were Al Santoli’s succession of Vietnam oral histories, *Everything We Had* (1981), *To Bear Any Burden* (1985), and *Leading the Way* (1993).¹⁶ Each of these, to varying degrees, describes the human cost of America’s intervention into Vietnam. *Everything We Had* sought to dispel the hegemonic notion that “peace with honour” had been achieved in Vietnam and show that the veterans had been affected by the

¹⁵ The “Wise Men” was the nickname given to the collection of senior U.S. government officials who developed much of the U.S. foreign policy from the late 1940s until the Vietnam War. The most prominent amongst their number were Generals Omar Bradley, Matthew Ridgway and Maxwell Taylor, Dean Acheson, McGeorge Bundy, Henry Cabot Lodge Jr, Abe Fortas, Arthur Goldberg, George W Ball, Cyrus Vance and John J. McCloy. This group played a pivotal part in prolonging the war in Vietnam by advising President Johnson in 1967 that America should remain in Vietnam. For further information, refer to David Halberstam’s *The Best and the Brightest*.

¹⁶ Santoli actually wrote four oral histories in total between the years 1981 and 1993. However, the third in his series, *New Americans* (1988), focuses on the many different nationalities seeking refuge in the United States rather than the war in Vietnam and its ramifications for the American nation.

war as badly as those they were sent there to protect. *To Bear Any Burden* conveys a similar message. Yet in the second of Santoli's oral histories, his gaze shifts to the many Indochinese, the Vietnamese, the Lao and the Cambodians, affected by American actions during the war. *Leading the Way* realigns Santoli's focus once more to the United States, specifically its armed forces, as it attempts to deal with a lingering effects of the Vietnam War in the aftermath of the First Gulf War.

While Santoli's narratives stretched into the early 1990s, and were often the most famous, or at least, some of the most widely read, they were pre-empted by Gloria Emerson's *Winners and Losers*.¹⁷ Published in 1976, the National Book Award winning narrative was one of the very first of its kind as it gave voice to many of the issues in American society that arose specifically as a result of the Vietnam War. Demonstrating the price many Americans had to pay for their nation's exceptionalism, problems such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Agent Orange, the inadequate standard of Veterans administration (VA) hospital care, anti-war resistance and desertion, in addition to the questionable rectitude of the U.S. intervention, are all brought to the fore in Emerson's narrative.

The oral histories of authors such as Wallace Terry (*Bloods*) and Mark Baker (*NAM*) also cast an unyielding light on real-world consequences for the veterans of the war and their families so that future mistakes could be avoided. Describing the experiences of many African-American soldiers of varying classes upon their return from Vietnam, Terry highlights the manner in which the war pervaded all aspects of American society. This sentiment is compounded by Baker's *NAM*. Although his interviewees are anonymous, when viewed as a cohesive unit, the narrative

¹⁷ Nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award, *Everything We Had* reached number 15 on the New York Times best sellers list on July 5th 1982.

represents a polyphonic entity which mirrored the kaleidoscopic composition of the United States as a nation.

The resurgence of creative nonfiction and its use to achieve these ends during the tumultuous Sixties and early Seventies was not incidental. In addition to the theoretical suitability of creative nonfiction and its longevity in the American mind, several critics have also noted how periods of ideological unease have regularly provided the most fertile environments for new literary genres to emerge. While Richard Slotkin describes this process in *Gunfighter Nation*, where he states that ‘the development of new genres, or the substantial modification of existing ones, can be read as a signal of active ideological concern’ (8), Mas’ud Zavarzadeh was the first to actually comment on the link between creative nonfiction and times of cultural unrest. He viewed it as the literary response to ‘the matrix of reality in extreme situations’ (47). For many, creative nonfiction presented the means for disenfranchised parties to represent a commonly held view by ‘[bringing] into being that very situation to which it is also, at one and the same time, a reaction’ (Jameson 82). Although its narrative is totally symbolic, its empirical footing means that creative nonfiction, more so than many other contemporary genres, has the ability to ignite a previously untapped sense of purpose or awareness in an oppressed class. This property allowed an individual text to subsequently enter into a larger discourse on social order. Playing a pivotal part in both the genre’s ontology and its critical heritage, ideological unrest can be understood as the primary catalyst enabling creative nonfiction’s continued re-emergence.

The Vietnam War can thus be seen as having inspired an unprecedented wave of literature as those who witnessed it attempted to make sense of what had occurred there. But in order to reduce this vast corpus of literature down to a

manageable selection for the purposes of this study, the following criteria were introduced:

- Each text had to be an experiential narrative. Personal witness was essential if the reader was to interpret the respective accounts as historically valid.
- The chosen texts had to reflect more than just the views of those who served in the military. While the experiences of the draftees and voluntary conscripts were of vital importance, so too were the concerns of those who reported the war, both in Vietnam and at home.
- A third parameter which further reduced this sample was a mark of demonstrated quality regarding the author. This could involve either a significant literary award or award nomination, or career longevity as a published author or journalist.

All of the authors represented in this study, Tim O'Brien, Philip Caputo, Neil Sheehan, C.D.B. Bryan and Al Santoli, adhere to these criteria. While this particular corpus of authors is one dominated by Caucasian males, this was not a deliberate strategy. Rather it was a by-product of the circumstances of the war. While African-American soldiers did form a significant percentage of the overall forces who served in Vietnam, the men from these ethnic groups were frequently of working class origins with little or no education beyond high school. Although there were white soldiers from similar socio-economic backgrounds, the latter were of a much greater proportionate number than their African-American comrades.¹⁸ As a result, the

¹⁸ 88.4% of the men who served in Vietnam were Caucasian (This figure included men of Hispanic origin because as Geroge Mariscal notes in *Aztlán and Viet Nam*, the latter were listed as Caucasian by military authorities). 10.6% were African-American, while 1% were of other races. In *Working Class War: American Combat Soldiers & Vietnam*, Christian Appy goes into significant detail about the socio-economic breakdown between African-American and Caucasian soldiers, 76% of all the men who served in Vietnam were from the same lower middle/working class background. However, while Appy acknowledges

likelihood of a Caucasian soldier going on to further education upon his return to the United States and subsequently documenting his experiences in a literary fashion was much higher than his African-American equivalent. There are accounts written by African-American authors on the war, but their number is far outweighed by those written by their white counterparts. Similarly, the total amount of narratives written by women is also much lower than those written by male veterans. The primary reason for this is simply that bar enlisting as nurses or as Army support personnel, women were not allowed to serve in the American armed forces during the Vietnam War.¹⁹ However, as can be gauged by the notable prominence of texts written by female and African-American authors, and the literary criticism of Hispanic theorists such as George Mariscal in this study, the remaking of America's mythopoeic structures was not solely a Caucasian male endeavour

It must also be noted that the works of literature chosen for this study are in no way representative of *all* of the nonfictional literary works written about the Vietnam War. The conflict resulted in the publication of the greatest volume of war writing in American history. Numbering in the tens of thousands, the works found in such a corpus ranged from government-sanctioned histories demonizing the Vietnamese as merciless Communists to the tortured poetry of veterans such as W.D. Erhart and John Balaban.²⁰ Rather, my overall aim is to demonstrate that the creative

that the majority of enlisted men were from what he calls 'the bottom half of the social structure' (22), he also states that '90% of black soldiers in Vietnam were from working-class and poor backgrounds' (22). Thus, for the vast majority of the latter, already proportionately outweighed by their Caucasian peers, an education that extended beyond High School (and in some cases even less) was simply not an option. While some of the most celebrated works on the war were written by African-American authors, a list which includes David Parks' *GI Diary*, *Memphis-NAM-Sweden* by Terry Whitmore and Richard Weber, *Brothers: Black Soldiers in the Nam* by Stanley Goff and Robert Sanders, and Wallace Terry's *Bloods*, it is a paltry number when compared to their white counterparts. As of 1989, Jeff Loeb comments that in Sandra Wittman's bibliography of Vietnam war literature, 'of the almost 400 self-generated memoirs by American Vietnam participants, only seven – less than two percent – are by African Americans' (106). For a much more extensive insight into this issue, refer to Appy's *Working Class War*, 11-43, and Jeff Loeb's "MIA: African American Autobiography of the Vietnam War."

¹⁹ This fact is borne out by the number of female names on the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial. Out of the 58,272 names on the wall, all are male bar the names of eight nurses who died in Vietnam. This number includes only military personnel however.

²⁰ In *Kill Anything That Moves*, Nick Turse notes that 'there have been more than 30000 *nonfiction* books published on the Vietnam War since the conflict began' (257 my emphasis).

nonfiction inspired by the conflict played a pivotal part in the attempt to show that America was mistaken in its intervention in Vietnam, and that such a mistake was directly linked to the nation's exceptional ideology. In doing so, those who opposed the Vietnam War hoped to prevent the nation's participation in such unnecessary wars in the future. In Chapter 1, I contend that creative nonfiction had been used in American culture for centuries to depict many of its most significant beliefs and events, and argue that as a result, many Americans were conditioned to view the genre as possessing an intrinsic ideological validity lacking in other genres. Having achieved such a lofty cultural status, I then demonstrate how creative nonfiction was utilised to instigate a new myth-making process by those who opposed the war. As a genre which emerged from times of ideological uncertainty and unrest, it was only natural that creative nonfiction would gain a foothold in the turbulent Sixties and the Counterculture that occurred during that decade. I clarify how the American ethos fostered the spirit of creative nonfiction more than any other literary genre and demonstrate how it grew in relevance because of the Vietnam War and the various manifestations of the genre that consequently began to appear as a result of the administration's erroneous reporting of the war.

The first of these manifestations, autobiography and memoir, is examined at length in Chapter 2. Using Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*, I illustrate how America's exceptionalist ideology was actually having a detrimental effect on the ordinary Americans who had been conditioned over the centuries to conform to such beliefs. Using autobiographical and narratological theory to demonstrate how they were instilled with a sense of referentiality absent from more traditional kinds of fiction, I argue that these

particular narratives came to represent a collective voice which spoke for all Americans in the aftermath of the war.

The literary journalism of the conflict is the focus of Chapter 3. Using Neil Sheehan's *A Bright Shining Lie* and C.D.B. Bryan's *Friendly Fire*, I highlight the hubris of the American government and the devastating effect it had on the people it claimed to represent. The suggestion by journalists such as Bryan and Sheehan that the American government was the true enemy of the ordinary people of the United States was one of immense cultural capital to those attempting to instigate a change in the American psyche. Using the theoretical workings of critics such as Genette, Sontag and Foucault, I contend that while poiesis is an integral attribute of creative nonfiction, by the inclusion of extraneous bibliographic material, the authors of these nonfictional narratives can thus be seen also to *create* the literary context which predisposes the reader towards an empirical interpretation of the events documented within.

The final chapter acts as a capstone to the previous three. Focussing entirely on *Everything We Had*, Al Santoli's oral history of the war reveals how the veterans of the war were as much victims of the American government's manipulation of its people as the "great silent majority" who had been beguiled by the false information that had been fed by the same bureaucratic hand. Depicting the veteran as an injured party, this final chapter shows how *Everything We Had* and narratives like it were in their essence a synthesis of "everyman" experiences very much in keeping with the zeitgeist dominating the American psyche in the early Eighties. It demonstrates how these oral histories gave voice to a desire to overcome a decade of guilt and shame that had arisen because of Vietnam to become a vital part of any desired process of healing in the aftermath of conflict.

As an event which inspired an unprecedented outpouring of nonfictional literature, no other issue encapsulated the ideological turmoil of twentieth-century America more than the conflict in Southeast Asia. It was a war that was supposed to have been the stage upon which the United States fulfilled its Manifest Destiny, the foundational myth of American culture. But in keeping with the initial spirit of the Counterculture, and those radicals who continued to protest the totalitarian nature of the government well into the Seventies, the creative nonfiction written by the soldiers and journalists, these “true stories” of the war, often contradicted the “realities” being propagated as fact by the prevailing authorities. Regardless of whether they were works of autobiography or memoir, literary journalism or oral history, as the conflict in Vietnam drew to a close, there was an increasing awareness in America that the nation ‘had failed some sacred image of itself’ (Caputo, *Writing* 34-5). The nonfictional narratives written by soldiers and journalists with personal experiences of the conflict played a pivotal role in this dawning realisation.

Chapter 1 – Speaking for a Generation: Creative Nonfiction, an American Genre

America is a memory – a memory of the lives and actions, the beliefs and efforts, of millions of human beings who have lived in American spaces, participated in an American social world, and died Americans. The memory is contained in American names [...] The memory is contained in stories Americans tell one another. (Robertson, *American Myths, American Reality* 3)

Might as well say that Vietnam was where the Trail of Tears was headed all along. (Herr, *Dispatches* 47)

Having ebbed quietly alongside more celebrated genres for centuries, it was a period of cultural anxiety which allowed creative nonfiction once again to flow. The Vietnam War had resulted in an outpouring of nonfiction that was unprecedented in American literature. Inspired by the events and teachings of the Counterculture and the anti-war movement, even as the Seventies progressed into the Eighties, autobiographies and memoirs, histories, both official and oral, political treatises on the rights and wrongs of the war, works of literary journalism, plays and even poetry all attempted to encapsulate the war for the American mind. Yet despite this wide range of media, the three most prominent forms of creative nonfiction published as a result of the war throughout this era were undoubtedly the autobiography/memoir,

works of literary journalism and oral histories. Each documented the war in a radically different fashion, but all were united by a singular aim; to instil into the American psyche the fact that their nation's decision to intervene in Vietnam was a momentous mistake, and that such a mistake was directly linked to an exceptionalist ideology which concealed the true horrors of war behind a layer of idealism and unfounded historical fact. However, creative nonfiction did not just suddenly appear with the onset of the war in Vietnam. It had existed in varying guises for centuries, and was in fact one of the mainstays of American literature since the nation's independence in 1776. In this short chapter, I illustrate how many of the nation's most significant moments, beliefs and concerns had been presented to the American public in the guise of creative nonfiction, and I argue that because of this longstanding union between creative nonfiction and the mythopoeic structures of American society, the genre was ideally suited to the task of correcting the nation's exceptionalist ideology which was having such a detrimental effect on that society.

'A Distinctly American Genre ...'

While there is a widely-held view that creative nonfiction originated in the United States amidst 'bursts of 1960s-era New Journalism nostalgia' (Lehman, *Matters* 4), creative nonfiction's genesis can actually be traced back to Ancient Greece. Like the modern-day authors of the genre, the historian Herodotus maintained that he only represented that which had been seen or retold to him by reliable sources, declaring that 'my business is to record what people say'. However, he also cautioned the reader towards the referentiality of this approach by saying

immediately afterwards that ‘I am by no means bound to believe it – and that may be taken to apply to this book as a whole’ (468). Thucydides made a similar claim regarding the empirical validity of his narrative in the *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Claiming only to depict actual people, places and events, albeit in a storied format, the literary works of such venerable figures of philosophy and history can be read in certain parts as some of the first examples of creative nonfiction.

Other theorists have identified the early novel as the most appropriate origin of the genre. This is a likeness that has been remarked upon by Max Novak in “Defoe as an Innovator of Fictional Form.” Novak states that ‘the novel functions much like the modern documentary novels of Truman Capote and Norman Mailer’ (60). His analogy between the novel and creative nonfiction might appear to be somewhat unusual. The former is firmly associated with fictional discourse, yet the latter insists upon the empirical legitimacy of its narrative. However, the authorial intent of the first proponents of the novel can be seen to have been very much like the authors of the contemporary genre. For Ian Watt, the aim of novelists including Daniel Defoe and Samuel Richardson was ‘the production of what *purports* to be an authentic account of the actual experiences of individuals’ (27). J.P. Hunter and John Richetti echoed this sentiment, viewing the novel as being both ‘subjective, individualistic, realistic’ (Hunter 30) and the medium of ‘the ordinary and the specifically and the concretely experiential’ (Richetti, ‘Introduction,’ 4). Each interpretation of the eighteenth-century genre describes a writing style which mirrors the verisimilitude of contemporary creative nonfiction, one which allowed for a realistic and wholly plausible narrative forged from the same epistemological building blocks as a historical text, and imbued with the same authorial desire that it be received as such. However, despite the noticeable successes of Defoe and his

literary peers in Europe in the eighteenth century, creative nonfiction would soon undergo a trans-Atlantic shift which would forever mark it as a distinctly American genre.

Having achieved independence in 1783, the United States experienced a greater influx of emigrants in the ensuing centuries than ever before, one which brought with it a maelstrom of race, religion and culture into the confines of one nation. As the struggle to assert some form of ideological foothold took place in the newly-found cities and towns, more often than not, words were amongst the primary weapons of choice. A country comprised mainly of Old World émigrés, ideological volatility was an integral and constant part of the American psyche in its formative years. Because of these conditions, creative nonfiction flourished in the United States; virtually every one of the most significant events of American history has resulted in an outflowing of some of the most important works of creative nonfiction, so much so that its canon can actually be read as a reflection of the nation's master-narrative.²¹

From the early stages of its independence many of the nation's Founding Fathers, venerated national figures such as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine, wrote autobiographies or self-reflexive texts which were merely another means of promoting the beliefs and ideals that they held for the embryonic nation in the closing years of the eighteenth century. Accounts written in the earlier part of the 1800s, such as Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1835), Washington Irving's *Tour of the Prairies* (1837), Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Essays*

²¹ It should be noted that a comprehensive historical survey of creative nonfiction is *not* the objective of this section of the study. Nor is its purpose to map every significant event in American history from the late seventeenth century onwards to a corresponding example of the genre. Rather, the intention is to demonstrate how creative nonfiction was a persistently used medium throughout these times by those who lived through such historical events as they attempted to encapsulate their experiences in written form. Should one seek a comprehensive analysis of creative nonfiction's historical origins, the following texts provide a superb insight into the genre's genealogy: Barbara Foley's *Telling the Truth*, Phyllis Frus's *The Politics and Poetics of Journalistic Fiction* and John Hartsock's *A History of American Literary Journalism*.

(1841 & 1844), Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), maintained this practise. As new settlers attempted to carve out a place for themselves in an unfamiliar and sometimes hostile land, the works of Emerson and Thoreau presented an insight into some of the many challenges they would face, while Irving's text brought into view many of the unusual sights, as well as the vastness and opportunity that potentially lay ahead for aspiring settlers. Although de Tocqueville was French, his text found its way to American shores. Like Fuller's text, de Tocqueville espoused the real-world benefits of an egalitarian society, in a narrative which was in perfect harmony with a nation founded on the belief that "all men are created equal." More than just offering a literary panacea to new emigrants however, these texts can be understood as having played a prominent part in advocating the ideologies and principles of America's foundational narratives; that it was an exceptional nation set apart from all others by the values upon which its society was constructed, and one whose inhabitants were endowed with a Manifest Destiny. Creative nonfiction was thus more than just an incidental part of early American culture. Rather, it was an integral part of the process which formulated and concretised the nation's emerging culture.

However, this egalitarianism was offset to some extent by the emergence of slave narratives by authors such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, as well as the works of Francis Parkman in *The Oregon Trail* (1847) and *The Conspiracy of Pontiac* (1851). While the latter perpetuated several tropes of the Frontier-heritage myth in his written works, infused with an exceptionalist ethos, the communion between creative nonfiction and the history of the nation found in these narratives also cemented into the American public consciousness a social paradigm which re-affirmed the cultural and spiritual superiority of the white settler above all other

racess. The slave narratives of Douglass, Jacobs et al attempted to challenge this status quo by presenting to the readers of the time an insight into current events using a medium which was capable of ‘[probing] certain assumptions – about race, history, social order’ (Foley, *Telling* 234) of what was by the mid-nineteenth century predominantly an American problem.²² Rather than confirming the nation’s place as a Utopian nation which all others should seek to imitate, presented as an experiential account, such narratives described the harsh reality of slavery for those forced to endure those circumstances and were hugely important in garnering support for its abolition. In the case of Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, creative nonfiction’s ability to represent reality in a referentially viable manner proved to be of significant importance as the latter actually wrote his account to demonstrate that the experiences he relayed orally were not the figment of his imagination. Although corroborated by the noted *white* abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison, such was the similarity between the events depicted in the creative nonfictional narrative and the real world, that Douglass’s account of his time as a slave served to counter claims of inauthenticity by those who were against the abolition of the practise.

The pending change in slavery legislation is recognised by historians as being one of the primary causes of the American Civil War in 1861, a conflict whose brutality was brought to the fore by nonfictional accounts written by some of the most noted historical figures of the nineteenth century. Pre-empting Walter Benjamin’s edict that history would always be written by the victors, men such as General Ulysses S. Grant used creative nonfiction to further elucidate the politics, morality and socio-economic realities that they felt prompted the war. A bevy of

²² For a more detailed analysis of the nonfictional slave narrative, see Foley’s *Telling the Truth* 233-264.

autobiographies were also published by the ordinary men and women who had lived through the conflict as it was fought out on the ground. One of the most famous was Mary Chesnut's *A Diary from Dixie*.²³ Although not published until 1905, Chesnut's Civil War diaries portrayed a similar reality, albeit from a viewpoint situated on the opposing side of the Mason-Dixon Line. Living in the South and the wife of one of the most prominent officers in the Confederate Army (her husband, Captain James Chesnut, is credited by many historians with having fired the first shot in the Civil War, the reaction to such a momentous event Mary Chesnut describes in her narrative), many of the incidents portrayed by Chesnut in *A Diary from Dixie* were derived from personal experience and thus were instilled with a historical gravitas that many comparable works of fiction depicting the internecine conflict were missing.

The on-going American-Indian Wars, to the forefront of the American mind as an obstacle to be overcome as the United States attempted to fulfil its Manifest Destiny, were also encapsulated through creative nonfiction. Whereas slave narratives had shone a light on the experiences of African-Americans throughout the nineteenth century, captivity narratives crystallised the fears many settlers had of the Native American, and emphasised the Indian's status as an existential threat to be dealt with by whatever means necessary. Often written from the perspective of the victim/survivor, accounts such as those written by Rachel Plummer, Fanny Kelly, and Mary Jemison continued on a tradition made famous by Mary Rowlandson's *Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs Mary Rowlandson in 1682* by presenting first-hand accounts of their experiences (often bloody and barbarous) at

²³ Many of these autobiographies and memoirs of the American Civil War have fallen by the wayside over the decades. However, a digital publishing initiative undertaken by the University of North Carolina has collected many of these narratives and made them publicly available online in their collection "Documenting the American South."

the hands of their Indian kidnappers. A common theme uniting each of these narratives of the nineteenth century was the manner in which they encouraged the reader to interpret the people, places and incidents depicted as having actually occurred. As had been the case a century before, many of the events and belief-systems of the 1800s were read by the American people as historical fact, despite being presented in the guise of creative nonfiction. As a consequence, the divide between the events depicted by authors of the genre and those found in the histories of the nation became ever more difficult to discern.

The years between the Civil War and the First World War saw America undergo an unprecedented metamorphosis. Driven by rapid and unforeseen technological and industrial advances, a widening gap between contemporary society and the pastoral way of life which had immediately preceded it began to emerge. As Hans Bertens notes, ‘the social and economic changes the United States underwent transformed the average American from an independent farmer, tradesman or craftsman into a cog in a giant industrial economic machine’ (96). The on-going cultural anxieties which arose because of these changes meant that creative nonfiction continued to thrive in the U.S. By juxtaposing rural America with a distinctly modern and urbanising nation, Mark Twain’s *Roughing It* and *Life on the Mississippi* encapsulated this struggle between past and present. Bertens describes the latter text as being ‘a lament for what has been lost in the changes wrought by the Civil War and its aftermath’ (98) as the effects of industrialisation such as the railroad became more and more prominent across the American countryside.

Creative nonfiction’s position as a genre with a tradition of encapsulating the ethos of American culture was consolidated even further by the publication of several key works as the century reached its conclusion. Amongst the most

celebrated of these were Theodore Roosevelt's *The Naval War of 1812* (1882), *The Winning of the West* (1889), and *The Rough Riders* (1899). One of the most noted figures of American history, Roosevelt's nonfictional narratives helped to transform the nation's historical past into the story of an exceptional people, blessed by God, who had struggled against and overcome a multitude of obstacles and enemies to make the United States one of the most powerful countries in the world. Not only were these accounts hugely popular at the time of their publication, the manner in which they depicted their events was in synchrony with the general public feeling in America at the turn of the century.²⁴

As the twentieth century began, nonfictional narratives like *The Souls of Black Folk* (W.E.B. Dubois), *Ten Days That Shook the World* (John Reed), *The Education of Henry Adams* (Henry Adams), and *A Hilltop on the Marne* (Mildred Aldrich) were just some of the many attempts to come to terms with the cultural concerns relating to race and socialism, the sudden and unforeseen changes caused by industrialisation, the nation's ever-increasing power in global politics and the First World War. Throughout the 1930s, the Great Depression, President Eisenhower's "New Deal", and the widening class divide added to the aforementioned list of anxieties endured by the American people. Each was manifested in creative nonfictional form by a litany of nonfictional narratives including James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Herbert Agar's *The People's Choice* and James Thurber's *My Life and Hard Times*. While the late

²⁴ Such an ideology was famously brought to the fore of the public consciousness in 1893 by Frederick Jackson Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." In this essay, Turner explained the relentless expansion westward of the American people for the first time in terms of their Manifest Destiny, and that with the absence of a domestic frontier that Americans should seek one further afield. This paper, which was later reprinted in a larger publication by Turner in 1921, was one of the most significant works in American literary history. Although not a work of creative nonfiction, the repercussions of Turner's thesis continue to be felt on the geopolitical arena of today. By instilling a providential undertone into their nation-building, Turner not only reinforced the premise first brokered by John Winthrop in 1630 that the American people were blessed by the divine, but he also framed their conquest of other frontiers overseas with a similar messianic purpose to generations of future policymakers.

Forties and early Fifties was a glory period for the United States in the aftermath of the Allied victory against Nazi Germany, a murmuring unease amongst its citizens provided the unrest needed for creative nonfiction to maintain its momentum as a genre of note.

As the Fifties began, socialism had replaced the threat posed by fascism. In a country where tensions were further increased by the advent of McCarthyism and the McCarran Act, America's self-image as a bastion of liberty and democracy didn't quite correlate with the measures it was taking to preserve those qualities.²⁵ Just as it had done so often for other groups located on the margins of society, creative nonfiction offered some small outlet for those who dared to express a more radical view of society in a credible fashion. Nonfictional narratives such as Edita Morris's *The Flowers of Hiroshima*, and John Hersey's *Hiroshima* exposed the discrepancy between reality and hegemonic myth by highlighting the moral ambiguity surrounding the actions of the U.S. government during World War II. Using personal testimony to describe the carnage of Hiroshima in the aftermath of the first atomic bomb ever dropped on a city, Hersey's *Hiroshima* provoked many Americans into challenging the sagacity of their elected leaders in a manner which would later become commonplace during the Countercultural era. The shocking scenes of widespread death and destruction revealed to Americans the true nature of a war whose horrors had been overshadowed by their nation's victory. No longer absolutely certain of the rectitude of their government's actions, the American

²⁵ Despite being vetoed by President Truman on the basis that it was against the most fundamental principles of the American constitution, the McCarran Internal Security Act (also known as the Subversive Activities Control Act of 1950, or simply, the McCarran Act) was a law passed in the United States in 1950. In keeping with the spirit of McCarthyism which pervaded the U.S. throughout this period, the McCarran Act was designed to counteract the threat posed by what were seen as totalitarianism dictatorships to the United States. While the law was aimed at both potential fascist and communist subversives, as the Cold War between American and the Soviet Union escalated in the years after World War II, it was the latter that were the most severely affected. Penalties for the violation of the McCarran Act included stringent fines, deportation, de-naturalisation, and a refusal of permission to enter the United States.

people grew increasingly uneasy about how far the latter would go to win its “Cold” war against Communism.

Although just one of several modes of protest, creative nonfiction would prove to be a vital part of the Countercultural struggle against the Establishment. The Counterculture undoubtedly promoted a radical belief-system, a student movement whose antecedents were the dissenting subcultures of the previous decade. Organized under the moniker *Students for a Democratic Society* (SDS), these young political activists ‘aspired to become the voice, conscience, and goad of its generation’ (Gitlin 26) and sought to reinvigorate the New Left. As the Sixties progressed, they began to merge with the Civil Rights Movement, the remnants of the Beat Generation and other kinds of avant-garde culture, to form a community of people who felt that they were being systematically misrepresented by an administration still struggling with the legacy of the McCarthy Era. While the attentions of the government were primarily focussed abroad amidst rising Cold War tensions, the concerns of those involved in the Counterculture were largely of a domestic nature. They viewed the lingering issues of racial, gender and sexual inequality, the necessity for a heightened ecological awareness, and, most significantly of all, the ethical imperatives motivating American intervention in Vietnam, as matters in need of far more urgent government attention than an unnecessary arms race with the Soviet Union.

In his analysis of Vietnam War literature, Lucas Carpenter notes how ‘the counterculture was instrumental in bringing an end to direct U.S. involvement in Vietnam’ (33). Endorsing a set of values, and belief-systems drastically different from those dominating traditional society, it introduced a perspective into the public psyche which was more suited to the sensitivities of both an increasingly more

diverse United States, and the rapidly changing geopolitical landscape of the twentieth century. Alongside those written by authors such as, amongst others, John McPhee, Joan Didion, Tom Wolfe and Norman Mailer, the works of creative nonfiction written by veterans of the Vietnam War were of fundamental importance to this project. Despite the events that had occurred in Southeast Asia, many demonstrated that the 'core American values' of 'individualism, equality, self-reliance, democracy and independence' (Nayak 266) were still present in the national character. However, they also revealed that there was an alternative to the Frontier ideology which had led the nation into its present state. In many ways, creative nonfiction formed that 'single matrix of vision' for the Counterculture, one which encapsulated 'both experience imaged forth according to some inherent dynamic of the actual and also experience made to signify in new ways as well through the shaping imperatives of imagination' (Beidler 141).

'The *New Method of Myth-Making ...*'

But what made creative nonfiction more suitable than any other genre for the kind of ideological transformation that many Americans hoped to instigate in their society in the years after the war in Vietnam? Despite its resurgence in the Sixties and Seventies, it was just one of several modes of literary protest available to those authors intent on voicing their concerns about the wisdom and moral leadership of the American government. However, blending known historical figures into the confines of their narratives and describing an actuality virtually mirroring reality,

creative nonfiction stood apart along with one other genre from all the rest as literary discourses capable of conveying a message of valid ideological worth.

Creative nonfiction and historiographic metafiction each presented an alternative reality in the face of government-sanctioned histories. Their ability to ‘call into question the factual grounding of history writing’ (Hutcheon, *Politics* 33) challenged the contemporary conceptions of a historical document as set in stone, and consequently made both genres an important addition to the arsenal of subversive weaponry which had already encompassed virtually every other medium of protest, from anti-war song to silver-screen. However, while the mutual preoccupation with historical fact meant that creative nonfiction and historiographic metafiction were both effective in destabilising the hegemonic grand-narrative, only the *former* was also suited to the task of reconstructing America’s mythic image of itself.

Historiographic metafiction presented people, places and events using fictional methods. But unlike creative nonfiction, the aforementioned genre’s ‘epistemological questioning of the nature of historical knowledge’ (Hutcheon, *Politics* 68) openly questioned the validity of *all* “truths” when portrayed as documented fact, particularly its own. While historiographic metafiction’s narrative did draw from the accepted historical record, its idiom didn’t make any claims to truth in the real experiential world. It wasn’t necessary for the properties and actions of its textual elements to accord with those already depicted in official history. Using Benjamin Hrushovski’s analogy of a man building a boat while rowing it, the construction of the resultant “imagined” world was an incremental process. It operated within an internal field of reference whose composition was decided upon solely by the deistic author, and constituted by a standalone ‘network of inter-related

referents of various kinds: characters, events, situations, ideas, dialogues, etc' (Hrushovski 230). As such, although framed as a historical text, the narrative presented by historiographic metafiction was a fusion of historical events and 'imagined, hypothetical, or invented ones' (White, "Fictions," 121) which highlighted how the textual representation of historical events could produce an infinite number of historical truths.

As a genre with a heavy emphasis on subjectivity, creative nonfiction also allowed for the possibility of a multitude of potential truths. But significantly, authors of creative nonfiction stood by the referential legitimacy of their accounts. As was the case with recognised historical texts, these works of creative nonfiction were only 'concerned with events which can be assigned specific time-space locations [...] which are (or were) in principle observable or perceivable' (White, "Fictions," 121). As a result, they presented an alternate, albeit teleologically certain, narrative which strongly *resembled* accepted historical discourse. The events contained in creative nonfiction thus became more credible to the sceptical reader than those depicted in its more obviously fictional counterparts.

Structured using mythological tropes quite familiar to the American public, these works of nonfiction presented a referentially viable history of the events which occurred in Vietnam. The incorporation of pre-existing cultural artefacts into their accounts meant that despite the differences they bore to government sanctioned accounts, they easily became one with society's collective memory of such events. Now part of a reality which was 'created and simultaneously validated' (Jeffords 25), the authors and poets of the Counterculture realised that it was possible for such narratives to demonstrate that it was because of America's exceptionalist ideology that it had failed in Southeast Asia. As stated by Walter Habling, they '[brought]

forth models of a nation's (or a people's) storifying experience' which in turn enabled 'acts of literary sense-making' (212) in response to certain historical events such as war. The identification in the public conscience of new incidents, or "stories," with pre-existing social convention is also something noted by Slotkin. He declares that,

Although myths are the product of human thought and labour, their identification with venerable tradition makes them appear to be products of "nature" rather than history – expressions of a trans-historical consciousness or of some form of "natural law." (6)

While Jeffords, Hobling and Slotkin discuss myth in relation to general literary cultural terms, the transformation of an apocryphal account into something considered to be common knowledge also bears particular relevance to the creative nonfiction of the Vietnam War. Integrating the glorified symbols and motifs of the American past, and presented as an empirically legitimate document, these works of creative nonfiction were ideally suited to replace the tarnished myths which had held such prominence in the years preceding the war in Indochina. Military veterans had previously been seen as upholding these fantasies with their endeavours. The activities of U.S. soldiers in the "Good War" of World War II, and even the Korean War, were lauded for successfully defeating an apparently godless, foreign enemy intent on conquering the American way of life. Returning home to 'cheering crowds, parades, and the pealing of great cathedral bells' (Caputo, *Rumor* 337), their actions were commemorated gloriously both by Hollywood and television. Their wartime memoirs were widely accepted and read.

However, those returning from Vietnam received little such praise. In the latter stages of the conflict, many of the returning veterans felt that Middle America saw them as ‘immoral, lower-class baby-killers’ (Appy 314). This unease was exacerbated further by the Vietnam veteran’s inability to relate to military veterans of previous generations, a breakdown caused by the view that ‘[their] Vietnam involvement and the conduct of American soldiers had given war a bad name’ (Herzog, “Heavy,” 681). Replete with the kind of incidents traditionally found only in a total war, it is not inaccurate to say that these works of creative nonfiction reflected what Tobey C. Herzog described as ‘a formless, murky, contradictory, fact-and-fiction filled war’ (“True Lies” 911), one characterised by ‘lies, deception, linguistic obfuscation, conflicting angles of reality, unclear military goals, shifting boundaries, an elusive enemy, [and] often demoralised and confused soldiers’ (“True Lies” 911).

Crucially however, these narratives also had the capacity to illustrate the humanity of the individual men and women serving in Vietnam, ordinary people caught up in a conflict the ramifications of which were often beyond their understanding. However, this sense of personal testimony was a fundamental part of the process which sought to rebuild America’s self-image by imbuing these narratives with a heightened credibility. This plausibility is derived from what Kate McLoughlin calls ‘a credibility/closeness ratio’ (“Print” 49) and dictates that ‘the credibility of an account is in direct proportion to the news gatherer’s proximity to events’ (“Print” 47). While McLoughlin’s primary focus is on the role played by the print journalist in the reporting of war, creative nonfiction’s referential frame and status as an experiential genre allows the fundamental principles of her argument to be applied to these verisimilar works. Each manifestation of creative nonfiction

presents a story which has pre-existed in actuality. Conveying what Herzog describes as ‘the social, psychological, and moral unpleasanties of Vietnam’ (“Heavy” 681), the nonfictional narratives of Vietnam were thus considered by their authors to be as empirically viable as any other historical text documenting the war in Indochina. An important corollary of this plausibility for those who opposed the American involvement in Vietnam was that it allowed creative nonfiction to manufacture the mythic space vital to the re-imaging process it sought to undertake.

Slotkin describes this metaphorical zone as ‘a pseudo-historical (or pseudo-real) setting that is powerfully associated with stories and concerns rooted in the culture’s myth/ideological tradition’ (234). Having originated with the emergence of the Frontier, this mythic space was subsequently transplanted onto every event which had previously hindered American expansion and progress in order to justify any aggression meted out to overcome such obstacles. Slotkin saw the ‘sources [of these myths] [...] in our capacity to make and use metaphors, by which we attempt to interpret a new [...] experience or phenomenon by noting its resemblance to some remembered thing or happening’ (6). As the ‘interpretative grid’ (Pease 130) through which people identified with the traditions and culture of their nation, once merged with history, it enabled the mythopoeic elements of American society to achieve a status comparable to fact.

Consequently, the integration by authors of the Vietnam War of these mythical elements into *their creative nonfiction* was an essential part of the *new* method of myth-making. Bolstered by the genre’s insistence upon the empirical integrity of its narrative, and populated by events and figures recognisable from accepted history, creative nonfiction was able to fulfil the Countercultural aim of presenting a new belief-system in an ideologically palatable narrative form.

Crucially, the ‘shifts of emphasis’ (Sardar, *Nightmare* 30) differentiating the creative nonfictional accounts from their government-sanctioned equivalents not only changed the inherent “truths” of these mythic stories but also provided previously unrealised ‘meaning and values [to already familiar motifs] that manipulate the course of [this] change’ (Sardar, *Nightmare* 30). As a result, this appropriation of symbols and themes already associated with the perceived glory of the American past allowed works of creative nonfiction to recreate the metaphorical space which had previously been the domain of the exceptionalist ideology. Nowhere was this process of “re-imaging” manifested as clearly as it was by the nonfictional narratives produced by the veterans and journalists of the Vietnam War.

The cumulative effect of these accounts was one much desired. They demonstrated the inherent fallibility of an exceptionalist ideology which sanctioned violence in the name of progress. For many advocates of the Counterculture, Vietnam was the price that America paid for its exceptionalism. But most significantly, in addition to the enormous loss of life, and the billions of dollars wasted in pursuing a pointless war, the loss of Vietnam to Communism meant that the gloss provided by previous victories was not present to shield those who looked back on history from the harsh realities of what had actually occurred. The sense of nation-building which had both justified America and repeatedly “regenerated” its vision of itself over the centuries had become an impossible dream. While differences in structure and narration existed between the personal testimony of veterans such as Herr, Caputo, and O’Brien, the literary journalism of Sheehan, Fitzgerald and Bryan, and the oral histories of Santoli, Emerson and Terry, I contend that each of these forms was equally integral to the Countercultural defiance of the hegemonic belief ‘that, when properly controlled and disposed by reason, war can be

used to accomplish worthy and beneficial ends' (Carpenter 32). Whether the "truth" being told was the experience of O'Brien's first night of sentry duty, the views of Neil Sheehan on the self-serving ineptitude of American foreign policy, or those of Al Santoli in condemning the myopia of those same policy-makers, in the nonfictional narratives of the Vietnam War, one particular trope frequently comes to the fore: those who served were not always brutal, or uncaring, or reveling in the savagery of their deeds. Rather, they were average, ordinary, everyday Americans, drawn from every class, colour and creed, whose dominant emotion throughout their entire tour of duty was fear.

Having lost a war for the first time in its history, America's exceptionalism had been exposed as a myth. As can be seen, from the mid-sixties onwards, a multitude of authors had attempted to cement this unsettling possibility into the nation's psyche by transforming the reality of their war experiences into literature. These narratives, telling the "true stories" of the Vietnam War, did more than just commemorate those comrades who had died fighting for what many of them believed to be a noble cause. Faced with a public reluctant or unwilling to listen, they represented the collective memory of thousands of their fellow soldiers. But as with all narratives alleging to represent unadulterated accounts of reality, the separation between the nonfictional and fictional accounts of the Vietnam War appeared to be as blurred and as uncertain as the physical frontlines of the conflict. As anti-war sentiment in the United States began to grow, those who opposed the war sought to ensure that its mistakes would never be repeated. The nonfictional accounts became 'an emblem for the presentation of a dominant cultural ideology in contemporary American society' (Jeffords 5) to those who sought to replace the

mythic America derived from the perceived moral and social victories of the Indian Wars with something more suited to the humanitarian societal model it advocated.

Yet to achieve such a lofty ideological status, these narratives had to be distinguishable from conventional fiction. So the questions still remain to be answered. How exactly did these different kinds of creative nonfiction, the autobiographies and memoirs, the works of literary journalism and the oral histories, go about correcting the exceptionalist ethos that had perverted the American mind-set for centuries, and what was it exactly about these accounts that infused them with an authenticity absent from traditional works of fiction? I argue that an integral part of this Countercultural desire ‘to diagnose and to regenerate [the] damaged mental and moral tissue’ (Taylor 298) of America was the creative nonfiction of the Vietnam War written by those who had experienced the conflict at first-hand.

Chapter 2 – Not Facts, Experiences: Creative Nonfiction and Autobiography and Memoir of the Vietnam War

What if I had seen someone like me that day, a guy in a wheelchair, just sitting there in front of the senior class not saying a word? Maybe things would have been different. Maybe that's all it would have taken. Bobby is telling his story and I will tell mine. I am glad he has brought me here and that all of them are looking at us, seeing the war firsthand – the dead while still living, the living reminders, two young men who had the shit shot out of them. (Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July* 109)

You had to hear the history from somebody you could trust, and who else could you trust? (Herr, *Dispatches* 228)

The 1960s was a decade in which many of the fractures that had previously riven American society coalesced once more to present a perfect storm of ideological uncertainty. Racial tensions, the widening gap between rich and poor, the prospect of nuclear war, and an escalation of the counterinsurgency in Vietnam, were amongst the issues which provided the communal anxiety in which creative nonfiction had traditionally flourished. This combination of factors pushed creative nonfiction firmly to the forefront of the American public consciousness. The genre was widely perceived as one capable of portraying events as they were rather than as the

dominant political and cultural forces hoped they would be. Endowed with an inherent plausibility, the autobiographical narratives of the Vietnam War were amongst the most effective of these highly potent weapons used to challenge the administration's version of events. Although more recently recognised by critics as 'a special kind of fiction' (Eakin, *Touching* 25), autobiography has traditionally been regarded as a narrative form capable of providing an unobstructed access to a past reality. In discussing two of the most critically acclaimed works of the Vietnam War, Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*, I claim that by using the personal testimony of the veteran-author as a mechanism to speak for a new generation, creative nonfiction played a prominent part in the Countercultural attempt to resist what it saw as the 'cultural manipulation' (McInerney 1999) of the American people by the presiding political forces of the time. But for such narratives to possess any ideological worth, they in turn had to be imbued with a referential integrity absent from fiction, one which was capable of underscoring the "truth" of their narratives. Therefore, it is also my contention that these accounts were written in a manner which would allow them to be easily distinguished from traditional works of fiction detailing the conflict in Southeast Asia.

'Certain Blood for Uncertain Reasons ...'

Like the majority of autobiographical war narratives, Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone* is explicit and often times unsettling in its description of the atrocities the author witnessed during his tour of duty. Although he took no part in

the political activism so prevalent in Washington in the latter years of the war, in his memoir of his time in Vietnam, O'Brien adopted a trope very similar to that being propagated by those involved in the Countercultural movement. Rather than writing an account which perpetuated 'the patriotic grunt experience' (O'Brien, *Writing* 111) of a war which some in the American military felt that they weren't allowed to win, his narrative showed how the U.S. was less than judicious in its attempts to differentiate between the enemy and innocent civilians. Overlapping with many of the arguments being made by those protesting the war, O'Brien's role as a veteran is essential. By outlining the ethical problems the latter had with the on-going conflict, he acted as a mouthpiece for the dissenting thoughts and values that they endorsed. What helped to give O'Brien's account so much credibility was that he was not some radicalised extremist reared on the peripheries of everyday society. Both of O'Brien's parents had volunteered for active service in World War II. O'Brien's father was a veteran who had served on a destroyer in the Navy in the South Pacific while his mother was a member of WAVES.²⁶ A baby-boomer 'bred with the haste and dispatch [...] of a rejuvenated splendidly triumphant nation' (21), his childhood was spent in south-western Minnesota in the heartland of Middle America 'taking on the Japs and Krauts on the shores of Lake Okabena' (21-2). Consequently, O'Brien was inculcated from his birth in an idiom which reflected his nation's ever-expanding sense of exceptionalism. Thus the obviously rancorous dissatisfaction he displays towards the body politic of the United States was imbued with a gravitas which would have been lacking in the views of a known dissident. As Karl J. Weintraub states 'men reflect in their self-conceptions also the culture in which they live' (834). Therefore, while his narrative would doubtlessly have been expected to

²⁶ WAVES ("Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service") was the U.S. Naval Women's Reserve, an active U.S. Naval division during World War II which was comprised entirely of female recruits.

convey the bloodshed and arbitrary brutality of war, logically, it should also have illustrated the perceived righteousness of the American mission in Vietnam.

The values and beliefs O'Brien demonstrates in *If I Die*, however, were very much at odds with those being advocated by the Establishment throughout the 1950s and 1960s. For the *new* myth-makers of American culture, not just the veterans of the war but also the artists and authors, poets and musicians who wanted to challenge the pre-existing mythopoeic structures of their society, an awareness of the contradictory nature of the United States' own origins was required to underline the hypocrisy of American exceptionalism. *If I Die* presented exactly such an artefact. In its opening pages, O'Brien portrays a nation founded upon the Utopian ideals of democracy and freedom, one blessed by Providence and unique in history as a place where traditional enemies could live in peace. Described as 'Gods in the Earth' (22) by O'Brien, these early settlers represented the Old World sense of humanity and civilisation in the virgin wilderness of an embryonic America. Yet O'Brien also demonstrates an acute awareness of their brutality towards the incumbent residents of the continent, one lacking in many other contemporary representations of U.S. history. He recalls how the farms and woodlands in which he re-enacted his frontier fantasies as a child were built upon the bones of a previous people. Not only were the lands near Lake Okabena plundered by European settlers once the property of the neighbouring Sioux and Cherokee tribes, they had also been 'the site of a celebrated massacre' (22). The bloodshed O'Brien refers to here was, ironically, the result of a raid on an Iowan frontier settlement by a band of Sioux in 1857, one which later became known as the Spirit Lake Massacre.²⁷

²⁷ The Sioux tribe in question had recently been resettled by the federal government on a reservation on the premise that the new lands would meet the quality of the old, and that aid in terms of supplies and education would be provided by the relevant

The incident in question demonstrated everything that was wrong with the exceptionalist ethos that had conditioned the mentality of many of those who lived on the Old Frontier, and which was to persist in American society for centuries to come. Driven to the point of desperation by a harsh winter, the native Indians sought assistance from the European colonists who had annexed Sioux land as their own. Their pleas for help were refused with violence. In what became one of the most infamous incidents in U.S.-Indian relations during the nineteenth century, the Sioux responded in kind by killing almost forty settlers and kidnapping four young women.

But just as with the conflict in which O'Brien became involved over a hundred years later, the prevailing cultural forces of the United States chose to focus instead on the loss of U.S. lives rather than examine the horrific and unjust circumstances the native Other was forced to endure as a result of American actions. Virtually ignoring the genocide of an indigenous race as the country sought to fulfil its Manifest Destiny, a multitude of literary and historical sources were used to successfully distort the reality of what occurred on the Frontier. The result was the creation of a completely new mythic space that was, in essence, a self-justifying simulacrum with little or no bearing on the events that had actually transpired.

Brought forward to the twentieth century, the author finds himself in a conflict where an identical paradigm is being re-enacted, albeit this time on foreign soil. But unlike the machinations which disguised the fate of the Indians behind a veil of Enlightenment, cultural artefacts such as *If I Die* brought the events of Vietnam harshly into the open, illustrating quite clearly the hypocrisy of an ideology blessed by providential design which was also capable of murder and genocide. For

authorities. However, these promises were not kept and the lands provided proved to be incapable of meeting the most basic requirements for cultivation. Starving and desperate, the Indians went to the nearest settlement to beg for food. The ensuing violence resulted in what subsequently became known as "The Spirit Lake Massacre." For further details see *History of the Spirit Lake Massacre and Captivity of Miss Abbie Gardner* by Abbie Gardner-Sharp.

those opposing the war, the explicit portrayal of atrocities committed by American soldiers in the name of civilisation was exactly what was required. Ranging in scale from the mass execution of the My Lai villagers, or the casual cruelty described by O'Brien which was inflicted upon innocent Vietnamese bystanders, the depiction of such incidents in narratives including *If I Die* was crucial to the hoped-for social revolution which would challenge what was perceived to be a pernicious and self-destructive ideology.

Equally damaging was how O'Brien's account illustrated that even those reared in the throes of its exceptionalism were often forced to adhere to the nation's sanctioned belief-system. Unlike the citizens of other nations who were unified by a shared history and culture, as a comparatively new nation, the United States stepped onto the world stage defined by an ideal and a sense of Manifest Destiny. Before it became a country, it had been an idea, and upon achieving independence, it was this idea which shaped the ideological architecture of its people. Thus, to be an American was to make a commitment to the defining principles of that society. Consequently, anyone who disagreed with these beliefs was perceived to be in disagreement with the nation itself.

This intense pressure to adhere to the societal norm, regardless of one's own personal views, is noticeably apparent in *If I Die*. Young men such as O'Brien found themselves in a position where they had to enlist not because of a vaunted sense of patria, but because of an unwillingness to disrupt the ethos upon which 'a whole history of the prairie' (27) and thus the country, was built.²⁸ Forced into a position whereby his patriotism was being tested, the veteran-author dared not refuse. In a

²⁸ In *Working-Class War*, Christian Appy examines this issue using a Department of Defence Survey of draft-motivated volunteers taken in 1968, the same year that Tim O'Brien received his draft notice. The survey reveals that, like O'Brien, 47.2% of respondents 'attributed their enlistment to [...] the pressure of the draft' (Appy 47). In contrast, only 6.1% chose patriotism as their motivation.

society so heavily infused with the exceptionalist spirit, ‘those who [rejected] American values [were] un-American’ (Lipset 7). In what could be interpreted as an example of Freud’s ‘cultural super-ego’ (38) amplified many times over, this trope which O’Brien declares to be as irresistible as gravity persists throughout the text.²⁹ It dictated that the author ‘repay the “debt of honor” he owes [...] his nation, and take responsibility for his portion of the unending survivor mission [...] by answering his call to his war’ (Lifton 245). In conversation with O’Brien, Erik, the author’s only friend in training camp, explains that his sole motivation for obeying his draft notice was the desire for his parents not to endure the embarrassment of having a son who was a draft-dodger, an entity perceived in the eyes of many Americans at the time as ‘the surrogate enemy’ (Emerson 89). Erik, O’Brien and many of those who served alongside them were thus going to Vietnam ‘not because of conviction, not for ideology’ but because of ‘a fear of society’s censure’ (*If I Die* 45).

This “fear of censure” was a very valid entity in the American psyche throughout the Vietnam War. What John Del Vecchio described as the ‘collective consciousness of America’ (132) in his deliberately fictional account of the conflict, *The 13th Valley*, was imbued with a very concrete idea of masculinity which would have exerted a noticeable psychological pressure on young men such as O’Brien and Erik. The United States has always valorised the abstract ideal of the masculine as the protector of the exceptional values and beliefs which past generations had fought

²⁹ Given that the vast majority of Vietnam War narratives were written by male authors, it would seem that the exceptionalist ethos which pervaded American society exerted a societal pressure almost exclusively on its male population. However, this was not the case. Lynda Van Devanter speaks at length about this pressure in her memoir, *Home Before Morning*. Reared by parents who ‘emphasized the obligation we all had to be of service not only to our family, community, church, and country, but to all of mankind’ (27-8), Devanter grew up to believe that she was ‘a citizen of the greatest country in the world’ and that it was her duty ‘to give part of myself to keep America great’ (29). In total, over 7,000 women volunteered to serve in Vietnam. While the vast majority were nurses, many women also enlisted as office clerks, air traffic controllers, security personnel and intelligence officers.

and died for. This was an established practice discussed by Robert Lifton In *Home from the War* who states that

As each generation of young men responds to the call, each produces its survivors who justify and formulate their experience by recasting their war in terms of heroic service to the external principles of group or nation. That formulation is passed along from father to son [...] in a continuous reinforcement of a society's version of the manliness of the socialized warriors (wearing the mantle of warrior-heroes). For each man the immortalizing claim is that of having contributed to the survival of one's group. (244)

As such, every male citizen was expected to be entirely willing to imitate, and even emulate, the sacrifices made by their forefathers.

Susan Jeffords succinctly and correctly captures this philosophy by stating that 'the character through and on which American myth depends was and is a specifically masculine one' (77). Juxtaposed against a largely acquiescent female, this unrelenting force allowed the perpetuation of a patriarchal culture since the time of the Founding Fathers. While this dynamic was always a constant presence within American society, it came very much to the fore of the public mind-set during times of war. 'An exclusively male activity', at least up until the late twentieth century, war represented 'the optimal display of masculine collectivity in America' (Jeffords 73). It allowed the men of that period to meet their commitment to the nation, that 'sense of mutual responsibility and fulfilling of one's promise that comes from

serving in the military during wartime' (Jeffords 74).³⁰ Consequently, it would have been nigh on impossible for someone such as O'Brien to refuse his draft orders. To do so would be to challenge 'the most efficient structural space for the figuration of gender difference' (Jeffords 73), and an act which, if attempted en masse, would undermine the patriarchal paradigm upon which American society had been built.

The only realistic option available to young men such as O'Brien and Erik, apart from serving in the armed forces, was shame. In *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa*, Joshua Goldstein examines the effect this emotion can have on the male psyche. Describing it as 'the glue that holds the man-making process together' (269), Goldstein identifies the power of shame as stemming from the desire to obtain 'prestige in a social group' (269), and one of the most prominent motivations of human behaviour. This 'internalization of the disdain that one perceives in or anticipates from the people around' (Hagopian, *Vietnam War* 105) is exponentially amplified by the hyper-masculinity which occurs during wartime. The frustration in Erik's and O'Brien's conversation suddenly gains greater clarity. In the eyes of American society, to refuse to serve their country in its time of need was 'to avoid manhood' (45). Thus, despite the prominence of the principles of democracy and freedom in its belief-system, the nation's unwavering commitment to fulfilling its Manifest Destiny had paradoxically resulted in a totalitarian demand to conform to its ideology. The unveiling of this dynamic is crucial. It demonstrated a

³⁰ While prevalent in virtually every culture, the idea that that one needed to prove one's manhood was particularly noticeable in American society, and a very evident trope in the majority of Vietnam War narratives. Perhaps the clearest illustration of the internalised belief-system pressuring young American men to serve during times of war can be found in James Webb's fictional Vietnam War narrative, *Fields of Fire*. Beginning with the War of Independence, the novel describes how a male member of the central protagonist's family, Lieutenant Bob Hodges, fought in every American military conflict up to and including World War II. Despite being the last of his line and uncertain about his desire to serve, Hodges is urged by his grandmother, one of the few feminine presences within the narrative, to fulfil this family legacy. Compelled into action by 'ghosts and glory' (38), Hodges subsequently dies in Vietnam trying to rescue soldiers trapped in a surrounded listening post from being over-run by North Vietnamese soldiers. The powerful effect this phenomenon had particularly on Hispanic soldiers, an ethnic minority which was attempting to demonstrate its worthiness of a part in American society, is also discussed at length by George Mariscal in *Aztlán and Viet Nam*, 26-30.

fundamental failing in the accepted American ethos, one which permitted the shedding of what Tim O'Brien saw as 'certain blood for uncertain reasons' (167).

In her essay "Truths and Fiction in Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and *The Things They Carried*," Marilyn Wesley describes the powerful effect of war literature on the masses. She states that 'although fighting a war is a matter of personal experience [...] winning that war [...] is an effect of shared interpretation.' Wesley attributes this communal perception to 'the influence of narrative on minds' (2). This realisation was also made by those involved in the anti-war movement who not only used nonfictional literature to highlight how harmful American exceptionalism was to the American people, but also modified Wesley's paradigm to illustrate the impact it had on their Vietnamese counterparts. Unlike many other narratives detailing the Vietnam War, *If I Die* is one of very few which actually gives voice to the Vietnamese. By transforming 'a very distant and often threatening Otherness into [a figure] that [is] relatively familiar' (Said 21), what had previously been perceived as an alien entity is subsequently humanised. This metamorphosis is represented in the text by an encounter O'Brien had in Prague with Li, a Vietnamese student and soon-to-be lieutenant of the North Vietnamese Army (N.V.A.), two years before the author was drafted.

Unlike other narratives which portrayed the North Vietnamese as a people bent on the destruction of the United States, O'Brien encounters the diametric opposite in Li. The latter describes his country as one very much inspired by the doctrines which led the Thirteen Colonies to secede from the British Empire in the eighteenth century. Demonstrating a sense of national pride as well as a grasp of the global consequences of the struggle for both sides, Li is presented as being rational, understanding, and as patriotic as the veteran-author. Most noticeably however, the

Vietnamese student describes the conflict as a colonial war rather than viewing it in terms of communist expansion. The Vietnamese were simply ‘defending Vietnam from American aggression’ (99). Heavily invested in the Domino Theory of the Kennedy Era, such a sentiment was alien to the administration’s interpretation of the conflict.

Yet it was quite similar to the Countercultural viewpoint which sought to curtail acts of U.S. imperialism abroad. While the suffering endured by American soldiers was the mainstay of most Vietnam narratives, frequently lost are the equally horrific experiences of the native population. Such casualties were often listed in the form of anonymous cipher in news outlets, media and literary representations of the conflict. In what John Timmerman describes as ‘a war fought according to statistics’ (100), the importance of kill-ratios and body counts meant that the deaths of the Vietnamese were to a large extent essentially diluted and ultimately dehumanised in the eyes of the American public. The attempt to remedy this situation was at the forefront of the Countercultural agenda. Authors such as Mary McCarthy and Susan Sontag wrote nonfictional narratives detailing the plight of the North Vietnamese, while actress Jane Fonda notoriously visited Hanoi in the effort to convey to the people of the United States that there were innocent civilians being affected by the conflict. *If I Die* carries on this practise in O’Brien’s portrayal of the Vietnamese people themselves. Far from a nation intent on spreading a monolithic Communism to U.S. shores, they are all non-combatants; the old and the frail, women and children or innocent bystanders, they have all been terrorised by misdirected American aggression. The humanisation of these victims of war is compounded by O’Brien’s account of the friendly-fire incident in which a nearby village is shelled by American artillery. Listing the injured and wounded, O’Brien gives the names and

ages of the Vietnamese dead, in a similar fashion to the ‘connectors’ (237) that J.P. Hunter identified in the novels of Defoe et al as the textual construct which linked the characters of those works to the reality of the author and reader. By inserting this data O’Brien ‘[signals] that a real person lies behind [...] his story’ (Lehman, “Proper,” 66), an act which endows the entire episode with a humanity often lacking in works of fiction.

‘An Old Soldier Looking Back ...’

Frequently portrayed as an outlet for wanton behaviour, drug-fuelled excess and the naivety of youth, the views of the veterans on matters such as Vietnam, particularly those who embraced the Counterculture upon their return home, were often derided or disputed by those in authority. However, the former were of the opinion that they were speaking for a generation, one whose future was being jeopardised by the powerbrokers of contemporary America. Consequently, their protest was reliant on cultural artefacts such as the narratives produced by the veterans of the Vietnam War to mount a credible challenge against what they saw as an autocratic belief-system. But while the ideological potency of these narratives was hugely significant, of equal importance was their referential legitimacy. Those who opposed the war saw nonfictional accounts such as *If I Die in a Combat Zone* as testimonies of the conflict which were capable of resolving the ‘crisis of truth’ (Felman 6) which arose whenever two competing movements sought ideological supremacy. The notion of truth was a highly controversial one during the time of the Vietnam War. Characterised by a prominent media presence, both government and

anti-government sources depicted decidedly different accounts of the conflict. As a consequence of this shifting narrative, many stories of the war in Vietnam were discounted by both sides as ideological propaganda.

However, the nonfictional accounts written by veteran-authors such as Tim O'Brien and Philip Caputo were imbued with a unique attribute, one noticeably absent from the commentaries on the war emanating from many of those located in the relative safety of Saigon or in the United States itself. Both O'Brien and Caputo had served as infantry in Vietnam and their narratives portrayed what life was like for the men who actually fought in the conflict.³¹ As such, the trope of personal testimony within these narratives was crucial to the supporters of the Counterculture.

Presented to the reader as accounts derived directly from personal experience, they did more than just narrate a sequence of events the veracity of which was questionable to say the least. As noted by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, they had the capacity to 'inscribe a collective "I" that voices stories of repression and calls for resistance in ways that have influenced political struggle around the globe' (107). Thus, in the personal testimony which constituted the autobiographical accounts of the Vietnam War, narratives such as *If I Die* could be interpreted as having borne witness to the events which occurred. They were imbued with an authorial integrity derived from what Kate McLoughlin describes as 'the premium of first-hand experience – earning the right to write about war through being there' ("War and Words" 16). By naming real people, places and events, the manner in which the textual elements had the ability 'to leak outside the written text'

³¹ Sources show that for every one American soldier fighting in the field, there were between five and ten support staff working in the rear, and this figure doesn't take into account in any way the vast media presence which was helicoptered in on a daily basis. As such, while there were hundreds of thousands of U.S. soldiers stationed in Vietnam, the number who actually saw regular fighting against the NVA or the Viet Cong was a much smaller percentage than the total number of those who served. For further information see Christian G. Appy's *Working-Class War* 167.

(Lehman, "Proper," 61) meant that these accounts not only represented the past, they could also potentially revise the public's perception of it. Integrated into the overall voice of protest by the prominent agents of the Counterculture movement, such autobiographies served '*to take responsibility [...] for history or for the truth of an occurrence*, for something which, by definition, goes beyond the personal' (Felman 204 my emphasis). As an entity within U.S. society seeking to distance the nation from generations of exceptionalist doctrine, these narratives were consequently framed to the American public as accounts worthy not just of the court of law, but also 'the court of history and of the future' (Felman 204). They were unlike those that had come before them. In refusing to turn a blind eye to the unsavoury aspects of U.S. imperialism in its relentless expansionism, these narratives were to be understood not so much as 'a mode of statement of, but rather as a mode of access to, [the] truth' (Felman 16).

The veracity of these accounts was presented to the reader in a number of ways. Underlining the text's status as the document of a witness, each posited 'the irreplaceable performance of the act of seeing' (Felman 206) as the narrative's primary ontological root. The most prominent of these methods was Philippe Lejeune's autobiographical pact. Briefly mentioned in the Introduction, this refers to the unspoken covenant between the reader of autobiography and the author in which the former implicitly agrees to accept everything documented within the narrative as true. The pivot upon which the correspondence between reality and the autobiographical text rested was that of the author's name located on the liminal areas of the text. The presence of this paradigm within the works of veteran-authors such as Tim O'Brien was one of the central reasons that these narratives presented such an attractive proposition for the alternative culture. By matching the name of

the author located on the cover of the text with both that of the narrator *and* the protagonist of the narrative, *If I Die in a Combat Zone* fulfils Lejeune's primary condition for autobiography.³²

Secondary conditions also need to be met, such as the necessity of a retrospective account detailing the story of one's life in prose form. This is a parameter which *If I Die* can be seen to adhere to. However, what Smith and Watson describe as 'the convergence of authorial signature and narrator' (8) is by far the most significant. Relocating the narrator's name from a textual reality to one shared by the reader, it becomes 'the mediating term between the text and the referential world that lies beyond it' (Eakin, "Foreword," x). For theorists of autobiography, this movement was crucial. It indicated that the protagonist portrayed by the text was 'a person whose existence is certified by vital statistics *and* verifiable' (Lejeune 11, my emphasis).

Within O'Brien's narrative, this model of identity is determined at the level of the narrator-protagonist. Described by Lejeune as the most obvious way of establishing identity, the name of the narrator is the same as that on the cover of the text. In the case of Tim O'Brien the author, *If I Die* provides the reader with a multitude of personal details in the author's biographical profile, all of which correlate with Tim O'Brien the narrator-soldier. Summarily outlining his place of birth, childhood and date of entry into the military, the aforementioned note provides a preliminary timeline which is subsequently elaborated by the contents of the narrative. This parallel between the physical and textual entities that are both christened Tim O'Brien encourages the reader to believe that the experiences and

³² In *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Genette considers this authorial signature to be just one of many key elements located on the periphery and in the interstices of a text which influence how it is read. While this section examines the effect which the presence of the author's name within the narrative has on its interpretation, other bibliographic material such as photographs, dedications, letters and maps will be discussed in Chapter 3.

memories of the latter's time in Vietnam, as shocking and improbable as they may seem, are also those of the former.³³

Not only does this connection adjust the ontological status of these literary events into one which has a bearing on reality, it also opens up the narrative to those seeking to dispute the hegemonic interpretation of the struggle. In direct contrast to the government reports indicating inevitable victory, *If I Die* portrays the conflict as what O'Brien would later describe a 'war [which] was aimless in the most basic ways' (O'Brien, *Writing* 111). Far from emulating the patriotic valour and idealism of World War II, by O'Brien's own admission, he and his fellow conscripts were 'nothing but children and hot civilians of the war, naked and thirsty and without pride' (108) in Vietnam. While their fathers were lauded as liberators in Europe, a tour of duty in Southeast Asia for the author was 'desolate, hostile, utterly and vastly boring' (109).

The presence of the proper name within the text provided the referential assurance to such personal claims. However, it also had an impact on a much wider scale. In linking the autobiography to reality, the existence of a proper name allowed a differentiation to be made from the 'autobiographical novels' (Lejeune 13) of the war. The latter were works of fiction, narrated in the first-person, whose

³³ Given his propensity for the metafictional, the selection of one of Tim O'Brien's works in a study of creative nonfiction is somewhat unusual. Many of the events and characters depicted in his memoir, *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, are also to be found in the obviously fictional *Going After Cacciato*, in *In the Lake of the Woods*, and in the highly metafictional *The Things They Carried*. This ambiguity is further increased by the presence of a character also named Tim O'Brien in *Things*, by an omniscient yet unknown first-person narrator in *Lake*, and by an article written by the author for *The New York Times* which also references several of these incidents ("The Vietnam in Me," 2nd October, 1994). Consequently, O'Brien has become known as a writer who portrays the traumas of Vietnam in a complex and highly sophisticated manner, one continuously blurring the lines between reality and imagination. Beginning with the "straight" prose of *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, it is possible to read O'Brien's oeuvre as an evolution of his writing style which culminates with the dizzying metafiction of his later narratives. While the primary purpose of this research is the consideration of Vietnam War creative nonfiction and not Tim O'Brien's extended works, the claim that *If I Die* represents an almost "Hemingway-esque" type of narrative does have some merit. In an interview with Tobey C. Herzog, O'Brien cites Hemingway as someone he admired for 'the lucidity and clarity of his sentences' (*Writing* 116). In addition to the seemingly chronological and causal manner in which the account is written, the numerous references to Hemingway's writing style on pages 42 and 98, his most well-known characters on pages 142, 143 and 144, and the integration of quotes by the latter into the body of *If I Die* on page 146 provides an intertextually viable basis for O'Brien's account to be interpreted as a narrative attempting to imitate the skeletal realism of Ernest Hemingway.

narrator/protagonist experienced many of the same incidents and emotions as the author.³⁴ Although written both by those who supported and those who were against the war, the structural similarities these texts bore to works of creative nonfiction, one which involved ‘a profound progression from innocence to experience involving some combination of fear, courage, brotherhood, [and] sacrifice’ (Carpenter 31), challenged the intrinsic veracity of the nonfictional narratives. However, unlike these works of autobiographical fiction, textual elements such as the “proper name” anchored *If I Die*, and other similar creative nonfictional accounts of the conflict, to the real world by providing the reader with textual entities that had corresponding loci in reality. Unlike similar works which were a combination of imagination and life-experience, its characters could be perceived as flesh and blood, and the details of the incidents described could be considered as being as empirically legitimate as those found in any historical text. This referentiality was crucial for any attempt to expose “the culture of concealment” being practised by the Establishment during the Vietnam War. Looking to preserve the image of the United States as a nation which all others should aspire to imitate, many of the less edifying actions taken by U.S. soldiers during the conflict went unreported or were changed to present an account of events more palatable to American tastes.

The most infamous of these was the My Lai Massacre in March 1968 and one which official army reports pointedly denied as having actually occurred for months and years after the incident. O’Brien acknowledges he served in the Quang Ngai province of Vietnam almost a year after the actual killings at My Lai took place, and *If I Die* does detail the subsequent investigation, deliberately mentioning

³⁴ Perhaps one of the best examples of the autobiographical novel in the Vietnam oeuvre would be Larry Heinemann’s *Close Quarters*. Although narrated in the first person, this work of fiction tells the story of Philip Dosier, a fictional soldier whose upbringing and experiences in Vietnam mirror in many ways those of the author. As Heinemann remarked in an interview with Tobey Herzog in May 2005, ‘*Close Quarters* began as a memoir, but then transformed into something more interesting’ (84).

the visit of some of its most prominent actors, General William R. Peers and Lieutenant William Calley. Significantly, *If I Die* also demonstrates the general acceptance by the average infantryman serving in Vietnam that such an atrocity occurred, as well as the persistent efforts by the military hierarchy, personified by the militant Major Callicles, to adjust the truth so that it reflected the hegemonic view of events. Obviously, the use of historically recognisable figures and events in a narrative doesn't automatically render an account factual. However, as Robert Scholes states, the inclusion of historical personae was often a strategy used to amplify the alleged reality of a fictional text by '[engaging] the interest of the reader in fictional happenings' (99). Similarly, the integration of accurate information pertaining to actual incidents was often merely the author engaging in the practise of assimilating into their narrative what Zavarzadeh called 'factoids' (60). These were 'factlike details of empirical reality which help to create a fictional likeness of the real world' (60). But when combined with the presence of the proper name, and posited to the reader as personal testimony, these entities allowed the text to move from the realm of resemblance inferred by the autobiographical novel to one of identity as found in autobiography.

Personal testimony would prove to be a critical component of the effort to resist the administration's attempt to manipulate the American public into believing that its intervention in Vietnam was one based on moral rectitude. Unlike many fictional texts of the war, the self-reflexive works of these veteran-authors were identifiable by a first-person form of address, one speaking with 'the authority of the eye-witness' (Scholes 243). Smith and Watson refer to this as 'the autobiographical "I"' (58), a literary construct made up of four constituent parts; the "real" or historical "I", the ideological "I", the narrated "I", and the narrating "I". The

ideological “self” is one which conveys a particular belief-system, while the narrated “I” is ‘the version of the self that the narrating “I” chooses to constitute through recollection for the reader’ (60). Each is commonplace in both fiction and creative nonfiction.

However, it is the presence of the historical “I”, *in tandem* with the narrating “I” in *If I Die*, which encourages the reader to interpret the narrative as a referential text. That the text is positing the “real” Tim O’Brien to the reader can be vouchsafed historically by external sources such as the biographical footnote contained within the text, by written and spoken interviews, or even by official army archives. While these contribute to the perceived veracity of the text, it is the narrating “I” which manoeuvres the reader’s perception of the narrative further into the referential sphere. The narrating “I” is a “voice” within the text which can be interpreted as ‘a composite of speaking voices’ (Smith 60). Not only does it act as the traditional author-narrator, it can also function in the immediacy of an event without engaging in a version of what Philip Beidler describes as the ‘primary process of sense-making [...] ways in which the experience of the war can be made to signify within the larger evolution of culture as a whole’ (xiii).³⁵ More clearly phrased, it is a voice which has the capacity to narrate an event as it occurs.

This dynamic is demonstrated most notably by O’Brien’s harrowing summary of the many different kinds of landmine used by their Vietnamese enemy. Midway through his survey, O’Brien interrupts his primarily retrospective description by stating that ‘in the three days that I spent writing this, mines and men came together three more times’ (128). The sense of proximity that the narrative has

³⁵ This form of sense-making is one of two which Philip Beidler examines in his text *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam*. The other can be seen to relate quite closely to Tim O’Brien’s ‘story truth’ (*Things* 179) by concentrating on ‘the way an experience actually seizes upon us ... as a thing of the senses, of the emotions, of the intellect, of the spirit’ (xiii).

to the incidents described is further amplified by his subsequent claim that ‘the immediacy of the last explosion – three legs, ten minutes ago – made me ready to burn the midsection of this report’ (128). The inference of a vicinity to the events of the war is how *If I Die* can be understood as transmitting the various incidents of O’Brien’s time in Vietnam exactly as they occurred. But most importantly in terms of distinguishing the nonfictional account from a fictional equivalent, the effect on the text resulting from this shift in narrative voice is that ‘the form in which [the] events present themselves to a [...] narrator is found rather than constructed’ (White, “Question,” 2). Their subsequent representation in the text is therefore presented to the reader as one which is seemingly devoid of the distortions of memory, and endowed with the author’s immediate and undiluted emotional responses. In *If I Die* it appears as if the veteran-author ‘is not relating facts, but experiences [...] the interaction of a man and facts or events’ (Pascal 16).

An effect of this style of narration was that the scope and details of events contained in these Vietnam War autobiographies were often criticised as being somewhat limited. Using Stephen Spender’s analogy of someone driving a car during their daily commute, the reader of autobiography experiences only ‘one consciousness within one machine, [while] confronting all the other traffic’ (116). The driver of a car cannot infer the intentions of fellow motorists without explicit indication. Similarly, without obvious signals such as dialogue or deed, the author-narrator of *If I Die* could not provide an insight into the thoughts and mental processes of those around them. Consequently, critics often disregarded these types of war-narrative on the basis that their intrinsic subjectivity distorted or misinterpreted the true happenings of events. Those seeking to denigrate the liberal

movement viewed them as being as comparable to fiction, something which diluted their ideological potency.

However, I argue that rather than hindering the legitimacy of the self-reflexive form, the deliberate solipsism of these accounts distinguished them from comparable fictional texts by imbuing them with an authenticity that exponentially increased their utility as cultural artefacts. Bar what is literally a handful of transgressions that can be related back to the direct observations of O'Brien, the reader is informed only of the various emotional responses of the author's fellow soldiers by explicit reference to conversation or action. Rather than assuming his fellow trainees felt the same suffocating cultural pressure as he, the narrative explicitly states that his friend Erik '*explained* that he felt the war was without reason' (43 my emphasis). Somewhat ironically given its frequent identification by critics as the primary source of poesis within the narrative, however, the subjectivity of the author-narrator can actually be interpreted as one of the literary devices which manipulate the reader into a referential understanding of the text. In *The Nature of Narrative*, Scholes declares that 'the point of view [...] controls the reader's impression of everything else'. More than just providing 'the printer's inked shapes on the page,' the narrative as recounted by the author-narrator has the capability of engaging a multitude of the reader's senses, '[impinging] on our consciousness as a totality, with sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and feelings' (Scholes 275).

Although referring to the varying forms of narration commonly found in the novel, the principle that Scholes describes is equally valid for the solipsistic world-view found in *If I Die*. Many of the events portrayed in O'Brien's text, while frequently disturbing, are unverifiable. They emanate from the areas of history previously identified as "dark" by Brian McHale. Yet their inclusion in the narrative

is crucial. They manifest one half of an ontological dichotomy of fact which O'Brien identifies in a later text which is comprised of what he describes as 'happening-truth' and 'story-truth' (*Things* 179). The former depicts events and places populated by 'real bodies with real faces' (*Things* 179), whereas 'story truth' details the psychological responses and reactions, both positive and negative, to events. This is often manifested in the narrative by a pause which stretches the scene in order to fully encompass the emotional and physical aspects of the incident. While this treatment of time is commonplace in works of conventional fiction, its use in creative nonfiction provides further information to the reader. While happening-truth in such narratives can often be verified by independent sources, for the veteran-author, the provision of such material also allows the enhanced possibility of a similar interpretation of the story-truth of the account. The most significant aspect of this distinction in relation to autobiographies of the Vietnam War is that story-truth enables such texts to tell a *form* of truth, a practice which echoes Paul John Eakin's view of the genre as a unique form of fictional discourse.

This opposition between empirical and autobiographical truth posited by O'Brien mirrors a paradigm put forth by Susanne Langer centring on 'actual events' and 'virtual events' (qtd. in Egan 66) in autobiography. Both are core elements of autobiography. Like O'Brien's happening truth, the former are referentially verifiable. However, the latter, much like his interpretation of story-truth 'are qualitative in their very constitution and have no existence apart from values, from the emotional import which is part of their appearance' (qtd. in Egan 66). As such, they can be interpreted in much the same manner as O'Brien's conception of story-truth. Although by definition a form of poesis, these virtual events, or story truths, can capture the experiential horrors of conflict so frequently overlooked by

conventional historical discourse. Providing the reader with an insight into the conflict that would otherwise remain absent, ‘story truth’ can ‘make things present’ (*Things* 179) to the reader. But unlike fictional narratives where brutal acts can be explained away as works of the imagination, *If I Die* remains grounded in the personal testimony of the veteran-author. Unable to evade the premise that the text represents the experiences of Tim O’Brien, the reader is encouraged to believe not only that the events of the narrative occurred exactly as portrayed, but that they also produced the same level of psychological affect as portrayed.

‘A Devil Dwells In Us All ...’

If I Die in a Combat Zone can thus be seen to highlight what the advocates of the Counterculture saw as the attempted cultural manipulation by hegemonic forces in America. But for many in the administration, accounts of the conflict such as *If I Die in a Combat Zone* were criticised as inadequate sources of fact. By being in Vietnam on an involuntary basis, to the power-brokers in Washington, authors such as Tim O’Brien were already demonstrating a more liberal conscience than the “great silent majority.”³⁶ This claim was true to a point. Draftees were, as described by Sarah Cole, ‘a temporary and often non-voluntary combatant’ (31). Their affinity to the zealous patriotism defining American exceptionalism was generally all but

³⁶ The phrase “great silent majority” was used with regularity by Richard Nixon during the first term of his presidency to engender support for his policies regarding the war in Vietnam. The term referred to the millions of working-class citizens of the United States whose allegedly pro-war voice was apparently being drowned out in the national media by ‘privileged campus protestors, ghetto rioters, and Great Society liberals’ (Appy 39). While a large section of this demographic *was* in favour of American intervention in Vietnam, the figure was no greater than the pro-war sentiment being expressed in other socio-economic groups. However, many of those included in “the great silent majority” did look upon anti-war demonstrators with widespread distaste. But this was because the predominant image of the anti-war protestor in the media was the college student, particularly men in their late teens and early twenties fortunate enough to have been deferred from the draft. Further exacerbating an already tempestuous class divide, members of the working-class viewed this specific subset of U.S. society as the manifestation of ‘an elitist attack on American troops by people who could avoid the war’ (Appy 41). It was this animosity, not an inordinate amount of support for a beleaguered government, which was subsequently used by the administration ‘to muddy the ideological water’ (Appy 41).

non-existent, and as the war progressed, the conscripted soldier actually came to be one of the most recognisable symbols of the American Counterculture. However, Philip Caputo was one such figure whose ideological bias was very much *in keeping* with the power-brokers of the United States. As a consequence, *A Rumor of War*, Caputo's memoir describing his time in Southeast Asia, is even more damaging to the claims of the dominant cultural figures that they were acting on behalf of the majority of U.S. citizens.

Like O'Brien, Caputo was a product of Middle America. In the forests surrounding his childhood home of Westchester Illinois, he also spent his boyhood immersed in a past heavily influenced by the symbols and beliefs of the Old Frontier. Imitating idols of the Old West, Caputo 'would dream of that savage, heroic time and wish [that he] had lived then' (5). This fostered in the young author the sense of patria already widespread in American society at the time. Yet rather than resist as others had done, Caputo and his peers were actually buoyed by the presidential pleas of John F. Kennedy. Having been 'seduced into uniform by [the latter's] challenge to "ask what you can do for your country" and by the missionary idealism he had awakened in us' (xii), Caputo was part of one of the first American combat units to land on the shores of Vietnam in 1965. As one who volunteered to serve in Southeast Asia, the ideologies influencing Caputo's outlook on life were noticeably different to those who had been conscripted. Devoid of the ethical doubts which would consume so many of his countrymen, Caputo was excited at the prospect of serving overseas. Caught up in romantic visions of war drawn directly from the silver screen, he only foresaw 'bayonet charges, and desperate battles against all odds' (14) against a fanatical enemy. Like many of the young men of the United States, Caputo viewed war as 'the ultimate crucible of the American soul' (126). It was exactly this

hegemonic glorification of military conflict which the Countercultural movement sought to challenge.

Having originated from a violent uprising against a colonial power, as noted by Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Win Davies, the United States had ‘consolidated and built the nation through war, expanded and emerged as an empire through war’ and as one of two superpowers in the twentieth century, ‘[maintained] its global hegemony through war’ (*Nightmare* 25). Up until the 1960s, the nation most famously had never *lost* a war, and as such, in the American psyche, conflict was seen as merely a stepping stone on the path to inevitable victory. It was what Richard Slotkin would later describe as the ‘supreme expression of American values’ (500).

The hubris created by such military success inevitably trickled down into the fabric of that society during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Much of the literature, and later also the film, produced during this time depicted American soldiers and other assorted agents of the state defending right and civilisation against hordes of fanatical, godless enemies intent on destroying the United States, and thus by corollary, the civilised world. Richard Slotkin observes how in American culture in the mid-twentieth century in particular, the cultural artefacts produced during these times were deliberately created to re-affirm government policy both at home and abroad. Describing it as ‘a pattern of reciprocal influence’ (350), he states that:

The preoccupations of politics shape the concerns and imagery of movies, and in which movies in turn transmit their shapely formulations of those concerns back to political discourse, where they function as devices for clarifying values and imagining policy scenarios. (350)

While Slotkin is referring to the relationship between the American government and the movie-making industry during the Cold War struggle against the U.S.S.R., the principle is equally applicable to both the literature of the time and that found in previous generations. Before the advent of cinema, the latter played an intrinsic role ‘in keeping collective memory alive [...] where the writing of history was a routine operation dedicated to the glorification of the regime’ (Winter 7). As such, from the beginning, the American memory of war was framed by an idiom which prioritised the valorised concepts of ‘duty, honor, and sacrifice’ (Caputo xiv) ahead of the traumatising realities and horrific aftermath of war. Written by one who had wholly embraced these particular traditions of American society, the manner in which *A Rumor of War* debunked these myths was what made it so relevant to the attempt to defuse the rhetoric of the Establishment.

Throughout his memoir, Caputo makes specific reference to many of the legendary figures and battles which reinforced the view that war was the means whereby the patriotism and bravery of successive generations of American men were tested. Normandy and Gettysburg, Guadalcanal and Iwo Jima are all used by Caputo as cultural touchstones in his struggle to correlate his own experiences of war with those he experienced vicariously as a boy. However, in Vietnam, the grandiosity and momentous sense of accomplishment which had imbued previous military victories for the United States was notably absent. Aware of the vast military strength of the U.S. Army, the North Vietnamese were reluctant to face their more heavily armed adversary in open battle. The NVA and Viet Cong’s most common method of attack was the ambush. This strategy was designed to inflict as many casualties as possible and create ensuing confusion which would allow the guerrillas to disappear once more into the comparative safety of the jungle. With the exception of isolated battles,

the most famous of which occurred in the Ia Drang Valley in 1965, and in Huế almost three years later, the majority of battles the U.S. forces were involved in in Southeast Asia never represented anything more substantial than brief skirmishes.

Unplanned and frequently unprepared for, the American response to such attacks was often panic. Unlike the glorious deaths laid down pro patria in the fields of Europe and in the Pacific Theatre, the reality of the Vietnam War for many American soldiers was that their deaths occurred in singular, sporadic and entirely unpredictable iterations. By Caputo's own admission, 'none of [their] encounters ever achieved anything; none will ever appear in military histories or be studied by cadets at West Point' (xiii). With no defence possible against ambushes, booby-traps and landmines, the veteran-author compares the losses the Americans suffered to murder. They 'had begun to feel more like victims than soldiers' (289).

Unable to defend themselves, Caputo and his peers presented a stark contrast to the military übermenschen played by John Wayne and his ilk. Exemplifying the Frontier spirit and 'the supposed perfection of soldierly masculinity' (Slotkin 519) that had accelerated the United States to its twentieth-century standing as a global superpower, these figures are mentioned repeatedly in the text. Despite the author's upbringing in a cultural climate where masculine valour was a trait exalted above all others, *Rumor* presents the cold truth of war. Contradicting the hegemonic view that those who fought to fulfil America's Manifest Destiny did so for a worthy cause was the reality of conflict; for those who actually fought it, injury or death was the most likely outcome. Active on the front lines of service in Vietnam, Caputo saw the 'thoughts, memories and dreams' of friends, comrades and countrymen 'annihilated in an instant' (162). While each inevitably contributed to his Paulian conversion from ideologue to dissident, the deaths of two of his closest comrades, Sergeant

Hugh Sullivan and Lieutenant Walter Levy, can be interpreted as the catalyst which rapidly expedited this process. Reflecting on the manner in which each man died, Caputo reaches the epiphany that rather than bettering the world, America's exceptionalism was actually having a negative effect on American society.

Ventures such as the incursion into Vietnam had resulted in the death or disfigurement of many of those who could truly be considered "the best and the brightest" of the United States, men and women like Walter Levy who were imbued with 'so much talent, and intelligence and decency' (223) only to be killed in a needless war. Presenting a view which contrasted sharply with a government that sought to mask such deaths behind the hubris of Providential righteousness and misleading reports of pending victory, Caputo declares that 'there were no good deaths in war' (261). Having seen his closest friends die beside him, and having realised what little impact on the world their deaths had made, Caputo presents a withering rebuke to the glorified myth of self-sacrifice that propelled America's Manifest Destiny onto foreign shores; 'those who had lost the struggle had not changed anything by dying' (261).

Unlike the cinematic fantasies with which Caputo formulated his preconceptions of conflict, the realities of war he experienced in Vietnam revealed something to the author about both himself and his fellow countrymen which had little in keeping with those portrayed by his matinee idols. It must be noted that Caputo and the men in his command often demonstrated the myriad characteristics that led generations of Americans to believe that they were a race chosen by God to guide the rest of humanity. At times 'they were to a man thoroughly American' (27), idealistic, patriotic, generally courageous and loyal to their fellow countrymen.

However, the travails of Vietnam also revealed to the author that ‘one of the most brutal things in the world is your average nineteen year old American boy’ (137).

The barbarity portrayed in *Rumor* directly belied the hegemonic narrative of the war that the U.S. was acting on behalf of the greater good in Southeast Asia. Extrapolating the rationale Tim O’Brien’s Major Callicles used to explain the My Lai Massacre across the entire war, ‘dope and whores and long hair [...] were responsible’ (*If I Die* 193) for such behaviour. However, Caputo’s initial and explicit status as an ideologue of the exceptionalism shaping the American nation since its inception challenges any such claims regarding *A Rumor of War*. While deeply affected by his experiences of the war, in his first few months in Vietnam he was still very much a firm believer in the merits of what the United States was doing in Southeast Asia. It is primarily because of this advocacy and the subsequent manner in which his narrative portrays the cruelty of his countrymen, that the hegemonic depiction of what was initially perceived as ‘the splendid little war’ (66) was called into question. The mutilation of corpses, the cold-blooded murder of both innocent bystanders, unarmed prisoners-of-war, *and* fellow American soldiers, and the author’s revelation that he was ‘able to see enemy soldiers incinerated by napalm and feel quite happy about it’ (117) are just some of the shocking realities of a war which had been undertaken by a nation allegedly bringing civilisation to the modern-day wilderness of Vietnam.

What is crucial to the Countercultural goal of undoing the cultural glorification of war is that Caputo makes it explicitly clear that such atrocities were *not* committed by an anarchical subset of the Army intent on dissolving the societal norms which had made the United States a great nation. Rather, the men responsible were frequently those reared from the same communities and homesteads as the

average American. Listing out the names and descriptions of those who served in his company, Caputo describes a cross-section of society which incorporates virtually every ethnic and social group. Many critics have suggested that the American platoon often can be interpreted as a metonymic entity which corresponded with the wider people of the United States. Sardar and Wyn Davies describe the military as ‘the microcosm of America’ (Nightmare 165), while Richard Slotkin correlates ‘the representation of the platoon’ with ‘a metaphorical America’ (359). That those men depicted in *A Rumor of War* adhere to such a paradigm is made explicitly clear by the author. Despite the outrage displayed in the exposure of horrors such as My Lai, Caputo sees those involved as merely succumbing to the pressures that war puts on the human spirit. In an interview with Tobey Herzog in *Writing Vietnam, Writing Life*, O’Brien states that he wanted *If I Die in a Combat Zone* to present an account of the war which differed from the literature of the war already existing in the early Seventies. Rather than accentuating the pre-existing mythic glories of war, he wanted one which highlighted the brutality of, *and* admitted responsibility for, the American actions in Vietnam. O’Brien’s narrative ‘was written through the eyes of a soldier who acknowledged the obvious: [they] were killing civilians more than [they] were killing the enemy’ (O’Brien, *Writing* 111).

But, what is crucial about this statement of intent by O’Brien is that it posits him as *a voyeur* of the events which unfolded in Southeast Asia. By his own admission in both *If I Die* and countless subsequent interviews, O’Brien states that he only ever saw a living enemy once during his entire tour of duty. Thus, while O’Brien claims some part of the overall culpability for what occurred in Vietnam, like the greater majority of American citizens, he can take some small solace from the fact that he personally never physically abused or killed any Vietnamese. In this

respect, *A Rumor of War* offers a stark contrast to *If I Die in a Combat Zone*. Caputo was very much a participant in what occurred in Southeast Asia. He had been in battle and had viewed the enemy up close. He had been shot at and fired back. Unlike O'Brien, he had '[learned] how to hate' (110) the Vietnamese. As such, the personal testimony of his account of the war, and the admission of guilt which it contains, can be interpreted as one which exponentially amplifies the culpability and regret expressed in *If I Die*. Lacking the detachment and pseudo-objectivity of O'Brien's narrative, *A Rumor of War* forced the reader to 'confront his devil' (331), and to acknowledge that if 'good solid kids from Iowa farms' (xvi) were capable of such brutality and violence, every American 'would have to face the truth that they too harboured a capacity for evil' (331).

However, such a revelation was only a part of the negative impact that many saw American exceptionalism as having on U.S. society. *Rumor* also identifies how a warped sense of acceptable behaviour was inculcated into the American ethos, one which made atrocities such as that which occurred at My Lai almost inevitable. The exceptionalist ideology which dominated American self-perception since the country's emergence from British rule in 1776 was the kind of belief-system which Donald Pease would call 'a state fantasy' (1) in *The New American Exceptionalism*. This was an entirely symbolic structure which allowed citizens of the embryonic nation to formulate a sense of exceptional collective identity. However, amongst the most significant nuances that the American iteration contained was that it provided 'its adherents with the psychosocial structures that permitted them to ignore the state's exceptions' (12). The exceptions referred to here by Pease are the many episodes of violence and cruelty carried out against any entity which was perceived to be presenting a threat, real or imagined, to the 'democratic norms underwriting US

civil societies' (106). The resulting state of exception was one highlighted and unconditionally challenged in *A Rumor of War*. Immersed in the mythic traditions which shaped American society, Caputo's narrative brings to the forefront of the American public consciousness the fact that the young men who fought in Southeast Asia were the products of a society which had been built upon, and always lauded, violent expansion. A corollary of this for ordinary Americans was that despite their horrified reaction to crimes such as My Lai, by embracing and advocating the same frontier heritage, they were as responsible as the perpetrators themselves.

Operating in an era presented to many as 'the age of the New Frontier' (16), the conflict was framed to, and received by, Caputo and his peers using an idiom with an ideological bias preloaded towards the propagation of America's mythic tradition. Vietnam was 'Indian Country' (108), and while there, they were to expect 'Indian fighting' (17) from their Vietnamese adversaries. A friendly unit under fire was a wagon train surrounded, and reinforcements were the cavalry come to the rescue. Rather than being welcomed as a respite from the war, periods of silence on patrol were noted for their eeriness and commented on with 'that old line from the westerns: "It's too quiet"' (84). Battlefield customs soon replicated the old Western practice of severing body parts from fallen enemies.³⁷ As was displayed by *Rumor's* portrayal of the summary trial and execution of a Vietnamese prisoner-of-war by a lowly private, frontier justice was something viewed as 'a perfectly natural thing to do' (119). Consequently, the American soldiers can be seen as merely mimicking the agents of exceptionalism which had previously been presented as the societal norm in hegemonic works of literature and film. However, what is essential to the

³⁷ While scalping was the predominant form of dismemberment in the Old West, other body parts such as ears and noses were also frequently removed. They were considered amongst American Indians to be a 'tangible token of a warrior's bravery' (Starkey 30). However, the grisly practise was not a custom solely restricted to the native population. In the American Indian Wars of the eighteenth century, bounties were regularly offered by the government to European settlers in return for the scalps of enemy Indians.

understanding of this argument is that each of these figures which Caputo and his fellow soldiers deliberately imitated in the jungles of Vietnam, the lone cowboy or the fearless soldier, represented an entity which had subverted the established rules of civilised society in order to enact their own form of righteous justice on a relentless foe.

Slotkin's *Gunfighter Nation* presents an extensive examination of how each could be interpreted as a metaphor for American power during the Cold War. In the outlaw Western of the early Fifties, Slotkin notes how the hero-protagonist was usually 'an armed redeemer who is the sole vindicator of the "liberties of the people," the "indispensable man" in the quest for progress' (369). The blockbuster epics of the Kennedy years engaged with the ideology of the New Frontier in a similar fashion, often presenting 'a "hard" and self-willed White male hero [...] who stands for the highest values of civilisation and progress but who is typically besieged from without by enemies [...] and beset from within by the decadence [...] and "softness" of his own society' (505). To refer once more to Donald Pease, in depicting a glorious and significant moment from American history, each of these iconic figures essentially portrayed an individualised *state of exception*.

Indoctrinated into a culture where these figures were venerated, and then given government sanction to act 'by that most articulate and elegant mythmaker, John Kennedy' (69), those who served in Vietnam were thus suffused by a value-system so warped that it had little or no bearing on the world outside of those equally erroneous representations of American history. Mistakenly viewing themselves as modern-day crusaders realising their nation's Manifest Destiny, in the early days of the war Caputo and his fellow ideologues felt that 'there was nothing [they] could not do because [they] were Americans, and for the same reason, whatever [they] did

was right' (69-70). The litany of violence and murder which ensued is unavoidably apparent in *Rumor*.

Such incidents, numerous in the narrative, culminate in Caputo forming his own real-world state of exception. The outcome of the decision to circumvent his superiors and assume the role of 'the real authority out on that isolated outpost' (316) is the death of two innocent civilians. Consequently brought to trial, the modern-day vigilante is unequivocal about his guilt. However, he argues that the U.S. government had taught Caputo and his men how to kill, brought them to Vietnam and directed them to kill, and now was attempting to prosecute them for doing exactly that. In highlighting this inconsistency, Caputo and those acting upon his orders place the Army hierarchy in an ethical bind, one with consequences impinging directly upon the entire ethos of the United States. The only solution which would maintain the spirit of the nation's Manifest Destiny was one which came to the conclusion that no crime had been committed, and that the agents of American power were innocent of all crimes. As such both Caputo and his men are acquitted and relieved of duty with just a minor reprimand on their records to remind them of their actions.

Whether or not it was the intention of the author is unknown, but what he describes as 'the incident at Giao Tri' (325) presents a paradigm to the reader which clearly demonstrates the detrimental effect of American exceptionalism on that nation. The prevailing ideology of the early pioneers encouraged them to be proactive and dynamic, to be self-reliant and independent, and crucially, 'to destroy evil people, and to eliminate wicked institutions and practises' (Lipset 22). Appropriating the right to dispense justice in the name of a providential power, murder and injustice ensued as the people of the United States carved out an empire

over the following centuries. Rather than condemning these deeds as barbaric, the myth-makers of America often remoulded them to further their claims that their nation was in possession of a cultural tradition befitting its exceptional status. Atrocities such as the genocide of the native Indian tribes, the exploitation of immigrant labour in carving out its Western territories, and the barbaric treatment of African-American slaves were frequently overlooked or even completely disregarded in the United States of the mid-twentieth century as acts necessary for the fulfilment of America's Manifest Destiny. To confront the harsh reality of such actions would be to challenge the messianic rationale the ideology was founded upon. But by consigning these incidents to the margins of history, the shallow integrity of American exceptionalism remained intact. Thus, rather than behaving in a fashion anomalous to the national character, Caputo and those acting on his orders were re-enacting a paradigm which had already been practised for centuries by generations of Americans.

The inconsequential reprimands issued in the aftermath of the Giao Tri murders mirrored the reality of these incidents for the aggrieved parties. Both the Indian tribes and the murdered Vietnamese villagers were condemned to the same 'wide gulf that divides the facts from the truth' (329) which relegated them to the dusty archives of history alongside any meaningful repercussions for the respective perpetrators. What is of greatest importance is that this imposition of innocence protecting Caputo in Vietnam highlighted the hegemonic tendency to avoid acknowledging how catastrophic the consequences were for those forced into its sphere of influence. Without this acknowledgement of guilt for a litany of crimes which could be traced back beyond the Trail of Tears, the cycle of violence inherent

in American exceptionalism could not be broken.³⁸ Even more damaging, without this acknowledgement, it could not even be realised, and American soldiers would continue to die because of ‘the charms of political witch-doctors like John F. Kennedy’ (332). Rather than focussing outwards in the attempt to understand the rationale motivating the many different atrocities which occurred in Vietnam, Caputo’s narrative, much like O’Brien’s, demonstrated that the source of the blame the hegemony sought to assign to the alternative culture actually originated within its own cultural traditions. The effect of such a claim was damning for the prevailing power-brokers of the United States. By highlighting how ‘absolute savagery’ (xvi) was an innate property of the ideology, *A Rumor of War* was hugely effective in demonstrating how self-destructive the ‘Ahabian logic’ (Spanos 57) of American exceptionalism could actually be.

‘The Incidents I Do Remember, I Remember Vividly ...’

Presented to the reader as a personal testimony of the author’s time in Vietnam, Caputo’s narrative can also be understood as the representation of an ‘eye-witness point of view’ (Scholes 250). Containing factual descriptions of events which added little gloss to the American character, its discourse was to be read in the same light as works of history or reportage as a source of ‘material evidence for truth’ (Felman 5). This nonfictional status was underlined by the author’s statement in the prologue that *A Rumor of War* was ‘not a work of the imagination’ (xix). This

³⁸ The Trail of Tears refers to the Indian Removal Act of 1830. This involved the forced migration of the American Indian population from newly acquired U.S. territories in the Deep South to various tracts of land designated as “Indian Territory” in Oklahoma and Arkansas. This mass relocation project, undertaken in the attempt to “civilise” the Indian tribes, was often bolstered by the use of military force and resulted in the genocide of tens of thousands of the indigenous peoples of continental America. For further information, see Jahoda’s *The Trail of Tears*.

claim by Caputo would suggest that *Rumor* has more in common with conventional histories of the Vietnam War than creative nonfictional accounts.

However, the multitude of fictional devices used within the text means that the narrative cannot be considered as a work of “noncreative nonfiction.”³⁹ The absence of imagination Caputo refers to relates specifically to his commitment to represent only empirically verifiable people, places and events more so than the narrative’s ability to offer a referentially absolute account of his time in Vietnam. This trope is brought to the fore by Caputo in his use of a number of literary approaches also used by O’Brien in *If I Die*. *Rumor* adheres to Philippe Lejeune’s autobiographical pact by demonstrating an explicit identity between author, narrator and protagonist. In addition, the text contains many of the nuances of first-person narration found in *If I Die* as Caputo jumps between the past, present and occasionally future tenses throughout the text. Documenting incidents and experiences which would be difficult to verify, *Rumor* presents the same blend of story and happening truth which underlay a referential tone into the emotional responses of the author. Each of these attributes combine to make the events of Caputo’s narrative as “present” as those found in *If I Die*.

The cumulative presence of these factors encourages the reader to distinguish the account from comparable works of fiction. However, just as Caputo’s role as an active agent in the war in Vietnam intensifies *Rumor*’s potency as a cultural artefact capable of challenging the administration’s version of events, it also utilises additional methods to augment the referentiality of its account. The most significant of these is the use of precise dates which anchor the events depicted in the narrative to specific temporal and geographic locations. Caputo’s enlistment into the Army,

³⁹ A definition of this term can be found in the Introduction 10 (footnote 7).

his arrival in Vietnam, the deaths of close friends, and his court-martial are all described using the fullest possible range of date, month and year, and in some instances, the exact geographical location and the approximate time.⁴⁰

The verisimilitude implied by the incorporation of these empirical constructs is further increased by the provision of two detailed maps outlining the Area of Operations in which Caputo and his fellow soldiers were stationed. As a result, the uncertainty regarding specific empirical indicators viewed by Benjamin Hrushovski as ‘a typical sign of fictionality’ (245) is considerably reduced in *Rumor*. Many of the fictional narratives of the war in Vietnam contained an idiom which didn’t make any claims to truth in the real experiential world. They operated within their own synchronous, internal fields of reference whose composition was decided upon by the omniscient author. Thus, the properties and actions of their textual elements don’t have to accord with those recorded by official history. However, in providing the reader of *Rumor* with an independent timeline with which they can verify the events chronicled against generally accepted historical fact, Caputo encourages the reader to interpret his account of the Vietnam War as one portraying real, rather than imaginary people, places, and events.

This process is made possible by emphasising the importance of what Hrushovski describes as an ‘External field of reference’, one derived from ‘the real world, in time, space and history’ (243), and most significantly, one which infers that the narrative has ‘a claim to a direct, referential truth value’ (239). Just as Lejeune’s autobiographical pact resulted in a legitimate identity between author, narrator, and

⁴⁰ While critics of creative nonfiction often query how valid these exact recollections of time and location can be, especially in an environment as chaotic as war, like Tim O’Brien, Caputo admitted to Tobey C. Herzog in *Writing Vietnam, Writing Life* to keeping a journal during his time in Southeast Asia. This, and material extracted from letters written to friends and family from Vietnam, has been the primary means whereby the veteran-author has been able to include in his text such a precise chronology.

protagonist, by choosing to weave exact empirical data into the fabric of his narrative, Caputo allows *Rumor* to be subjected to what the former called ‘a test of verification’ (22). If successful, it would situate the text in the real world and allow it to repeat the Lejeunian model of nominal identity, only now also against the reality it purports to represent. The intentions of the author when using literary devices such as the autobiographical pact, or precise temporal and geographical data, are impossible to know exactly. However, as Eakin states, they can certainly be interpreted as ‘[signalling] to the reader an intended fidelity of some kind to a world of biographical reference beyond the text’ (Eakin *Touching* 28).

The ensuing referentiality in *A Rumor of War* is further heightened by the presence of a narratological technique more commonly found in creative nonfiction than most other forms of fiction, ‘anterior narration’ (Genette, “Fictional Narrative,” 764). Genette defines this term as a narrative voice which ‘[refers] in advance to an event that will be told in full in its place’ (*Narrative* 73). This may be interpreted in fiction as a form of omniscience. However, it is slightly more nuanced in creative nonfiction than just a manifestation of the traditional God-like narrator. Generally presented as a prophetic or anticipatory voice, anterior narration allows the author to violate the conventional temporal order of the text by referencing events, and his or her emotional response to such events, before their actual occurrence in the narrative’s historical timeframe. It can also be applied to characters within the text other than the author-narrator. But unlike works of fiction, it can only describe events which occur to that third person, *not* their inner thoughts or reactions. Most significantly however, it does not sanction any form of poesis on the part of the author. The narrative must remain at all times a ‘form of discourse [...] [which] adds nothing to the content of the representation,’ it must always be ‘a simulacrum of the

structure and processes of real events' (White, "Question," 3). Its function is to further impress on the reader that the author is an omniscient entity concerning the events depicted.

Also known as a 'repeating prolepsis' (Genette, *Narrative* 73), this style of narration is noticeable in creative nonfiction, and particularly in the subgenre of war writing. For example, in the narrative's prologue Caputo summarises his entire tour of duty, including his dates of arrival and departure, the many horrifying realities of the war in Vietnam, and most significantly, the double-murder which led to his honourable discharge from the Army. The author repeats this type of prolepsis in the main body of the narrative by informing the reader of the fate of many of those he served alongside long before the relevant incidents are portrayed in the text. However, while veteran-authors such as O'Brien and Michael Herr would go on to use anterior narration in later works as a staging point from which each could repeatedly revisit a particularly traumatising event, Caputo makes no such claim.⁴¹ Instead, Caputo uses anterior narration primarily to detail further information regarding the previously mentioned events. The deaths of Sergeants Sullivan and Levy, made apparent by the nature of their paratextual dedications, are relayed in full by Caputo. Similarly, the injury and permanent paralysis of Sergeant Ingram is initially alluded to and then subsequently described.

⁴¹ Although it is not the principle concern of this study, the presence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in Vietnam War narratives must be acknowledged. Since World War I, the representation of trauma has been an integral part of virtually every written account of war. This has led to a significant amount of research on the issue of trauma as it is presented in literature. In one such work of particular relevance to this study, *A Trauma Artist: Tim O'Brien and the Fiction of Vietnam*, Mark A. Heberle identifies the most common manifestations of PTSD as hyperarousal, constriction and intrusion. It is the latter of these three which is most obvious in the novels of Tim O'Brien. In an interview with Tobey C. Herzog, Philip Caputo admits that PTSD also had a bearing on both his personality and the manner in which he wrote, albeit manifested in a much milder form than many other Vietnam authors. While there is no doubt that he lived through as many of the horrors of the war as O'Brien, Caputo actually plays down the potential effect PTSD had upon him on his return from Vietnam. What Caputo calls 'combat veteranitis' (*Writing* 22), his self-confessed inability to talk about the war and sporadic episodes of depression and anger, would appear to correlate with certain symptoms of PTSD, namely constriction and hyperarousal. Yet Caputo cites education, a stable family background, and a strong religious upbringing as forces which mitigated the impact PTSD had on his post-war personality. Rather than making the issue of trauma a central thematic concern when writing *A Rumor of War*, Caputo's intent was to be deliberately tactile, 'to recreate the war as concretely as possible on a printed page' (*Writing* 37) for the reader.

The author's use of such a literary technique has several effects on a text. As noted by Genette, such interruptions to the main flow of the narrative are 'testimonies to the intensity of the present memory, and [...] authenticate the narrative of the past' (*Narrative* 69). In providing the reader with a proleptic prologue written in the first person that can be seen to act as a road-map for the main body of the text, Caputo replicates the causal methodology discussed in the Introduction. The narrative between the utterance of such events and their eventual occurrence is thus characterised by an additive developmental pattern rather than a complicative version. As noted correctly by Susan Jeffords, 'emphasis in Vietnam narrative is placed less on *what* will take place than on *how* it will take place' (6). In addition to allowing Caputo to replicate the haphazard flow of memories associated with conflict, the autobiographical pact is also reaffirmed. In the context of war writing, the use of anterior narration becomes even more potent, particularly to those seeking to challenge a specific representation of events. Prolepsis infers to the reader that the author is located in a temporal zone beyond the events being described in the text, and that he has seen at first-hand the horrors of war. Referring once more to Campbell's "combat gnosticism," having survived, the veteran-author is endowed with 'a secret knowledge which only an initiated elite knows' (204) and therefore, he is qualified to report on the reality of those experiences. Fictional accounts were susceptible to what Samuel Hynes calls 'the abstractions of war: Heroism, Fame, Glory, [and] Victory' (413), anachronistic ideals that served only to enhance the melodramatic nature of conflict, and which were already endemic in the mythic tradition of the United States. But unlike the fictional constructs created to serve a hegemonic purpose, the 'real war stories [...] are written against romance' (413),

they ‘make war actual, but not familiar’ (413). Through the power of their personal testimony, ‘they bear witness’ (413).

This idea that *If I Die* and *Rumor* could be the literary representation of a greater consciousness is one of particular relevance to those who sought to challenge their nation’s exceptionalist ideology. In his article “Generational Theory and Collective Autobiography”, John D. Hazlett discusses what he calls a ‘virtually new autobiographical subgenre’, collective autobiography. He explains it as ‘a narrative of a generation as told by one who defines the self in terms of generational identity’ (85) which would ‘ultimately define the public identity of the author’s peers’ (85). Describing the characteristics of the form at length, many of them can be seen to mirror the attributes of the autobiographies written by the veteran-authors of the Vietnam War.

Hazlett locates the subgenre’s emergence in American autobiography during the time period from 1960 until 1975. In a similar fashion to how periods of ideological or social anxiety had inspired works of creative nonfiction in the past, Hazlett views collective autobiography as the literary reaction to some form of societal ‘rupture’ (79), one caused by the occurrence of some historically momentous and unpredicted event such as war, famine or economic crisis. However, the characteristic of collective autobiography which demonstrated the greatest affinity with the anti-war movement was the manner in which it manifested a newfound sense of ‘general self-consciousness’ (Hazlett 79). Collective autobiography was the means whereby younger generations could reject existing models of identity on the grounds that they were unsuitable or unjust, in favour of one more in keeping with the spirit of the times. Utilising a narrative voice which ranged from the first-person to the first person plural, it used a narratological mode of address that allowed the

reader to construe the text as presenting a communal rather than individualised view of the past.

As with the narratives of O'Brien and Caputo, they demonstrated that those objecting to the dominant cultural and political forces of America weren't some radicalised subset located on the periphery of society. They were the fathers, sons and brothers of the families which constituted the largest portion of the nation's population. Any brief reading of the works of Caputo, O'Brien et al. can thus be seen to correlate quite closely with the definition of collective autobiography offered by Hazlett, and it is these attributes which made these creative nonfictional works such an attractive mechanism for an alternate ideology seeking to supplant the presiding belief-system. Effectively attempting to speak for a generation, collective autobiography was more than just 'an instrument in the struggle to control collective memory of the past and present,' it was also equipped 'to direct the social and political future of their culture' (Hazlett 94).

Written in the format of a journalistic memoir, *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and *A Rumor of War* describe two separate tours of duty in Vietnam. Yet rather than portraying the conflict as a glorious sacrifice and a natural continuation of America's Manifest Destiny, O'Brien and Caputo chose to focus on the mental and physical horrors that they and their fellow soldiers endured. As their respective terms come to an end, each author makes clear the widespread disillusionment felt by the common infantryman towards the power-brokers of the United States, a position which contrasted sharply with the rhetoric on the war being disseminated by the administration. By writing about having fought on the war's invisible and ever-shifting frontline, both veterans distinguished their accounts from the litany of anonymous casualties, atrocities and failed strategy emanating from government

sources. A “true-to-life” account of just the horrors of the conflict would have been a hugely potent weapon in the arsenal of those attempting to correct the nation’s exceptionalist ethos. However, by incorporating the formative years of their authors’ youth into the respective narratives, both *If I Die* and *Rumor* offered more than that. They put ‘a face on a faceless history’ (Silbergleid 149). By claiming their place of origin along the ‘ragged fringes of the Great American Dream’ (Caputo, *Rumor* 27), both Caputo and O’Brien quite explicitly acknowledge their status as products of a nation ‘fed on the spoils of 1945 victory’ (O’Brien, *If I Die* 21). Reflecting the Countercultural resistance to the perceived manipulation of the American public by the presiding political forces, the actions and reactions of each veteran could therefore be read as both personal testimony and collective consciousness of the men who served for naught in the jungles and paddy-fields of Vietnam.

Chapter 3 – “Experience Captured”: Creative Nonfiction and the Literary

Journalism of the Vietnam War

The journalists kept showing up in the countryside, and it was only a matter of time before they saw how hollow the entire operation was, how many lies were being told, and how fraudulent the war was. It was only a matter of time before a version of the war and of the regime, far more pessimistic, began to surface in the American press.

(Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* 205)

If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement. (Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* 26)

‘A Guardian of the American Empire ...’

In *Tell Me Lies About Vietnam*, Jeffrey Walsh describes the events which occurred in Southeast Asia as ‘an imperialist war fought by a superpower against an underdeveloped country, a war of revolution, a civil war, a war for national reunification, a guerrilla war.’ However, perhaps one of the most significant descriptions provided by Walsh was that the Vietnam War was also ‘a media war’ (“Introduction” 1). Allowed unfettered access by the military, newspaper and

television journalists reporting from the battlefield were a common sight in Vietnam. As a consequence, in addition to those accounts written by veterans of the conflict, the struggle also produced a multitude of accounts written by non-participants. But could these narratives be considered with the same ideological gravitas as the autobiographies and memoirs of those who had fought and suffered in Vietnam, men and women such as Philip Caputo, Ron Kovic, Lynda Van Devanter and Tim O'Brien? The latter were based on personal testimony and constructed using an idiom drawn directly from the lingua franca of the period which was quickly becoming one with public memory of the war. In contrast, the creative nonfiction of the conflict written by journalists often incorporated incidents retold to them which had little in the way of first-hand validation other than the word of those involved. For many, the authority of these nonfictional narratives was derived from the idea that it was characterised by a unique sense of authenticity, one which conveyed to the reader that the war-author's genuine knowledge of the war was drawn from 'knowledge of the war *they experienced*' (Hansen 134-135 my emphasis). The absence of such an attribute was more than just a passing concern. Without this experiential quality, the veracity of the discourse was immediately susceptible to doubt, particularly if it had been written by one known to advocate a liberal perspective against the war. However, using two of the most celebrated works of creative nonfiction written by journalists on the war in Vietnam, Neil Sheehan's *A Bright Shining Lie* and C.D.B. Bryan's *Friendly Fire*, I claim that such accounts were as effective as the autobiographical works of the veterans who had served in Southeast Asia in challenging the exceptionalist ideology underpinning American society. But whereas the ideological potency of the memoir was drawn from its basis in personal testimony, the former attained a similar status through the deliberate

integration of literary and non-literary material ancillary to the primary narrative into the body of the text.

In the years after World War II, the American government worked hand in hand with its military in what they saw as a “winner takes all” struggle against the forces of Communism. But buoyed by their victory over the evils of Fascism less than a generation before, the powerbrokers of these respective institutions became increasingly more arrogant in their dealings with their geopolitical rivals. It was this arrogance which had brought the United States into Vietnam in the 1950s, and kept it there until the 1970s.

Yet if the United States were to avoid such conflicts in the future, a change of mind-set was needed, one which diluted this conceit and replaced it with an awareness of the nation’s true standing on the global stage. Many within American society realised that unless such a transformation occurred, the U.S. was destined to lurch from one conflict to another, leaving a trail of American dead in its wake as a testament to the unrelenting egotism of an isolated few. *A Bright Shining Lie* would prove to be a hugely significant text for those who sought to refashion the cultural memory of the United States in the aftermath of the Vietnam War.⁴² What made it so effective was that through the story of John Paul Vann, Neil Sheehan sought to tell

⁴² Based in Vietnam during the early years of the conflict from 1962 until 1966, alongside David Halberstam, Neil Sheehan was one of the journalists most readily identified with an alleged media bias against the administration which some accused of damaging the American war effort. The role of the media in Vietnam was one of the most controversial aspects of the entire war. Many of those involved in the higher levels of both the military and the administration saw the news coverage of the conflict as contributing to the civil unrest at home by portraying a pessimistic and entirely inaccurate picture of events in Vietnam. However, in *Vietnam: Explaining America’s Lost War*, Gary Hess provides a rejoinder to this claim, stating that these journalists, David Halberstam, Neil Sheehan, Malcolm Brown et al, ‘believed that their criticisms would strengthen the American effort’ (142). This viewpoint is reinforced by an interview which Sheehan gave to Brian Lamb in 1988 in which he stated, ‘the reporters who went to Vietnam early on, like myself, were not anti-war dissenters. We were very much in favor of American intervention in Vietnam.’ Rather than seeing themselves as radicals whose actions were undermining the authority of the administration, Sheehan and his peers felt that ‘our duty was to report the truth, so that the president would know what was happening in Vietnam.’ The possible effect that the media had on the policy-making of the American government is an on-going and contentious issue in all discourses on the Vietnam War. However, a critical insight into this problem is not the issue at hand here. While Gary Hess’s *Vietnam: Explaining America’s Lost War* examines both sides of the argument, for a much more detailed and lengthy analysis see *The Big Story: How the American Press And Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington* by Peter Braestrup.

the story of the war to the American public in a medium devoid of complicated jargon or unceasing political rhetoric. Despite the widespread ambiguity as to the true cause of the conflict, Sheehan's narrative provided the reader with a simple framework to both interpret the rationale that initially led America into the war in Vietnam, and even more importantly, one with which to identify the misplaced hubris that ultimately kept them there.

The implicit insertion of a political message into *A Bright Shining Lie* is something which Sheehan alluded to in an interview with Brian Lamb in 1988, stating that

If I wrote a book about this man [...] I could also write a book about the war that people would understand because they would be seeing the war through a man [...] they would be coming to grips with this experience in a human way because Vann was a [...] way to tell the story.

Sheehan's allegorical approach might seem unusual given creative nonfiction's commitment to representing only those people, places, and events which actually occurred. However, in focalising the American intervention through the words and deeds of one man, Sheehan was actually only replicating an approach which had been used to devastating effect a generation before. In his inaugural address in 1961, John Kennedy called upon his fellow Americans to join with him in 'defending freedom in its maximum hour of danger.' One evil named by Kennedy in this 'struggle against the common enemies of man' was Communism, an entity which was perceived to be threatening emerging

nations with ‘a far more iron tyranny’ than the colonial rule by which they had previously been governed. The acquisition of colonies was allegedly an anathema to the United States, and the expressed American intent towards such countries was solely liberation and enlightenment. Framed in such a Manichean fashion, Kennedy’s speech provided the ideological impetus for many Americans to enter into Vietnam. But what was also significant about the address was the manner in which it inserted the symbolic tropes of a triumphant American past into a twentieth-century Cold War.

This fusion of past and present would prove to be a hugely significant one for the United States. Viewing U.S. personnel in Southeast Asia as a combination of military leaders, missionaries and modern-day frontiersmen, it explained the intervention to the American public in a narrative form they were genetically wired to understand. As John Hellman notes in *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam*, the policy-makers saw in the struggle in Vietnam,

The qualities of America’s remembered frontier triumphs: remoteness from dangerous confrontation with a major European power, a savage enemy who could be righteously hunted down, a wilderness landscape in which the American could renew his virtues where the European had proved only his vices, and the Asian people America historically saw as the appointed beneficiaries of its destiny. (51)

While such a recollection of the American past overlooks the suffering and hardship of those who extended U.S. boundaries across a wild terrain, and, even more significantly, completely obviates the virtual genocide of the continent's native inhabitants, it does highlight the manner in which many Americans remembered the Old West as a place of both righteous intervention and altruism. Even more importantly however, it also copper-fastens the link between the endeavours of those eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Americans and their twentieth-century counterparts in Southeast Asia. Key to this process of remembering in relation to the war was the revitalisation of specific tropes by specific actors actively engaged in the struggle who fused together these mythic archetypes from the Old West. In *A Bright Shining Lie*, John Vann was one such actor.

Harkening back towards some of the nation's most venerated father-figures whose fusion of military and civic duty had propelled the United States towards its Manifest Destiny, men such as Washington, Lincoln, and Roosevelt, the military leader had long been a celebrated myth in American culture. In Vietnam, Vann presented a modern-day incarnation of this historical ideal. A decorated war hero from his service in Korea, he extolled the values and ideals that many thought 'a guardian of the American empire' (43) should possess. Vann is portrayed in *A Bright Shining Lie* as a decisive and charismatic leader who gained the admiration and following of both U.S. and Vietnamese military men through his actions, not his words. He exemplified every one of the 'traits of the frontier' (37) that Frederick Turner had identified towards the end of the nineteenth century as the innate source of the American people's exceptionalism. In all his dealings in Vietnam, Vann personified

That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individual, working for good or evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom. (Turner 37)

Furthermore, he also epitomised the heroism that Americans saw as an integral part of their national psyche. Whether it was driving unescorted on back-roads, or dropping grenades on enemy troops from his spotter plane during the height of battle, Vann exuded a fearlessness and willingness to bring the fight to what he perceived to be a monolithic and unrelenting enemy. More so than his ability as a leader however, it was his desire to forge the South Vietnamese Army into a credible fighting force which reflected most clearly the nation-building ideals of the administration. Vann worked alongside his Vietnamese counterpart in discussing strategy and tactics as equals. Viewing them as ‘potentially good soldiers’ (66), he sought to instil the same soldierly ideals ‘of supreme effort and efficiency [...] the game well played and of sacrifice’ (Robertson 335) into the South Vietnamese soldiers (otherwise known as the Army of the Republic of Vietnam or ARVN) as he saw in American troops; the soldier as ‘the champion of the weak’, who found torture abhorrent, and who ‘valued his honor and understood the purpose of his profession [was not to] deliberately kill or wound ordinary people’ (107).

This desire to show the world through their actions in Vietnam that the United States represented ‘a new and benevolent form of international guidance’ (131) extended beyond the battlefield however. America’s overarching political

credo during the Cold War was that it was ‘neither exploitative, like the nineteenth-century-style colonialism of the European empires, nor destructive of personal freedom and other worthy human values, like the totalitarianism of the Soviet Union and China and their Communist allies’ (131). It was thinking such as this which influenced much of the missionary zeal that shaped attempts to integrate South Vietnam into a twentieth-century ‘pax Americana’ (131). To this end, In *A Bright Shining Lie*, John Vann is frequently portrayed as a metonymic representation of these twentieth-century missionaries. U.S. personnel did their utmost to distinguish themselves from their European predecessors. Viewing their Old World counterparts as ‘a decadent people whose time had passed’ (42), everything Vann and his cohorts said and did in Vietnam reinforced to the reader the view that ‘America was different’ (43). By living and eating with the Vietnamese, Vann got to know the native population, resolved pressing issues and identified new methods of improving their communities in an informal setting far removed from the colonial bureaucracies of French rule. From his rural base, Vann tackled the issue of corruption, built schools and sunk wells, provided livestock and medical aid as well as proper instruction into farming methods, all of which would allow the native population to thrive.

Sheehan illustrates the strength of the positive relationships that John Vann had with the Vietnamese people by detailing an incident in which a local teacher and Viet Cong sympathiser risked her own life to save Vann from nearby guerrillas. In undertaking these programmes away from the cities and heavily fortified military compounds, whether conscious of his actions or not, Vann was once again drawing from the American past. As Vann explored the wilderness of the Vietnamese jungles and acquired the skills necessary to survive from the native population, his actions

mirrored those of the frontiersmen of the Old West as they sought to integrate themselves into Indian society. In doing so, men such as Vann saw themselves as dismantling the generations of class divide that had existed for centuries, and replacing it with a democratic society whose thriving economy and infrastructure would allow it to become a bulwark against Communism. Like the missionaries and pioneers of the American Past, they were there on the twentieth-century “frontier” solely to liberate and enlighten the native Vietnamese, to share ‘the bounty of [their] enterprise and technology with those who had been denied a fruitful life by poverty and social injustice and bad government’ (8).

However, the reality of the war in Vietnam was that it had quickly devolved into an ideological quagmire for the United States. Widespread discontent with several South Vietnamese governments was matched only by ever-increasing support by the native population for the Viet Cong and their North Vietnamese allies. Furthermore, the inability of the world’s most powerful and expensively assembled army to defeat a Third World nation was proving to be a significant embarrassment for the administration. The overriding concern for the American government soon became the desire to avoid the damage that would be done ‘to our reputation as a guarantor’ (535) if they were defeated by the North Vietnamese. A litany of military victories, particularly those in the World Wars of the early twentieth century, had implicitly reinforced the assertion that the United States actually *did* have a Manifest Destiny to guide the world. To contradict this view in any way would undermine America’s claim to be unique amongst all other nations. As a consequence, a distorted version of the war was presented to the American public, one which was infused with hubristic exceptionalism, and capable of cloaking an embarrassing defeat under a litany of misleading terms such as

“Americanization,” “Vietnamization” and “peace with honour.” Most importantly of all however, it was a reality which would allow the United States to emerge from what had been a disastrous foray into Southeast Asia with its Manifest Destiny intact.

Sheehan reflects this attempt to recast as a victory a war that was being rapidly lost through John Vann. By the time of his death in 1972, he had been fighting the war in Vietnam for almost a decade and the corollary between man and nation up until that point is unerring. In many ways, Vann’s actions could be seen to pre-empt the “Americanization” of the conflict which would occur in the aftermath of the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964.⁴³ Despite being there solely in an advisory capacity, Vann frequently undercut Vietnamese orders, interceded directly in the fighting between opposing Vietnamese forces, and at one point, when faced with intransigence from an ARVN officer, even gave orders for the latter’s battlefield execution. Upon his return to Southeast Asia in 1965 however, Vann was a changed man. Having left the Army under a cloud in 1963, his marriage had since failed and a lifetime which had been once marked by an irrepressible rise had suddenly stalled.

Vietnam was the only means whereby he could reverse this stagnation. Just as Turner had identified the Old Frontier as ‘a new field of opportunity, a gate of escape from the bondage of the past; and freshness, and confidence, and scorn of older society’ (38), now it was the primary means whereby Vann could mask his own personal failures and maintain an ascendancy that had begun since birth. Much

⁴³ The Gulf of Tonkin incident refers to two separate engagements between North Vietnam and the United States in the Gulf of Tonkin which occurred on August 2nd and August 4th 1964. The actual confrontation was between the USS Maddox destroyer and three North Vietnamese Navy torpedo boats. The outcome was a conclusive victory for the U.S. Navy. For one damaged aircraft and zero casualties, the U.S. Navy inflicted four casualties on their adversaries, wounded six others and severely damaged the three vessels. However, the incident is riven with controversy as the North Vietnamese insisted that the second attack on the U.S. Maddox was fabricated by the American government in order to escalate the land war in South Vietnam. For further information on the Gulf of Tonkin incident, see Mark Philip Bradley’s *Vietnam at War*, 109, and Mark Moyar’s *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* 310-312.

like the fate of his nation, the war in Southeast Asia had represented an opportunity to fulfil a pre-ordained fate. In 1971, Vann reached his lifelong goal. He made U.S. military history by becoming its first ever citizen general with overall command of American personnel in the II Corps region as well as sharing command of approximately 158, 000 South Vietnamese troops. As Sheehan notes, Vann was the ‘one irreplaceable American’ (7) in Vietnam. What is crucial to note here is that in the context of Sheehan’s claim to be retelling the story of the war through the life of one man is that Vann was at this point, quite literally, as exceptional as his country.

Now with a vested interest in prolonging the war, Vann attached himself to the administration-led programs he had once opposed, such as Nixon’s “Vietnamization,” which were designed to convince the American public that the U.S. was winning the war against Communism. Much like his government, John Vann had invested so much in the conflict that, by the early Seventies, his primary interest lay in promoting his own view of the war in Vietnam; that the ARVN had turned a corner and become a credible fighting force under his guidance and, that the NVA were now on a backward footing as a consequence.

However, the personal cost of this outlook was noticed by friends. Drifting ever further away from the humanitarian, nation-building aims of the American mission of the early Sixties, Vann was seduced by what Sheehan describes as ‘the three Ms’ of American power: ‘money, men and matériel’ (288, sic). Where once these had been used by Vann for the benefit of the civilian population, now they were being exerted *against* them as the conflict against the NVA escalated. The previous outrage at the killing of ordinary civilians and the destruction of their property by random artillery attacks and bombing raids gives way to the planning and execution of the same. Where once Vann struggled to free the Vietnamese

people from the tyrannies of communism, he now advocated for their nation to become an American proxy state, one led by ‘a strong dynamic, ruthless, colonialist-type ambassador with the authority to relieve generals, mission chiefs, and every other bastard who does not follow a stated, clear-cut policy’ (668) (a role he had more than enough experience in). As was the case with many of his countrymen, in the later years of the war, Vann had noticeably ‘lost his compass’ (744). No longer did he wage war in the spirit of ‘the game well played’ (Robertson 335). The man who had once sought to be as one with the natives was now ‘suffused with rage and exaltation,’ someone who revelled in ‘turning the terrain into a moonscape’ (783). John Vann, much like the morals of America, was lost to the war in Vietnam.

‘An Occasional Item of Surpassing Value ...’

But in contrast to many of the Vietnam War narratives which were written either during, or soon after the conflict in Southeast Asia, it was sixteen years before *A Bright Shining Lie* appeared on American bookshelves. Not published until 1988, it would appear that Sheehan’s account of the life of John Vann and the war in Vietnam had missed the Countercultural zeitgeist of the Sixties, one which had spilled over into the Seventies and forced another generation of disillusioned Americans to reshape their preconceptions of the United States. But ironically, it is perhaps *because* of this tremendous writing period that Neil Sheehan’s narrative is the most thoroughly equipped to encapsulate the cultural turmoil of that time. It spanned an era which included Watergate, heightened Cold War tensions with the Soviet Union, as well as controversies regarding the treatment of Vietnam veterans,

Maya Ying Lin's Vietnam memorial, and the very real spectre of what political theorists would call the "Vietnam Syndrome."⁴⁴

Thus, it could be said that the author was actually perfectly placed to survey the damage that had been done to the mythopoeic structures of the United States by the Vietnam War, and to convey the resultant anxieties in *A Bright Shining Lie*. However, by using John Vann's fall as the paradigm through which to tell the greater story of a nation's demise, Sheehan was also forced to integrate into his text a multitude of events, experiences and conversations to which there was no official form of validation other than the word of the person involved. This would be a concern for any creative nonfictional account. But given Sheehan's notable anti-war stance throughout the late Sixties, and particularly in the early Seventies, this was a quite a problematic attribute of the text.⁴⁵ Seemingly bereft of the "authenticity" previously identified as the primary source of a narrative's cultural worth, how was this Pulitzer-prize winning account of the Vietnam War thus accorded the same ideological value as autobiographical narratives of the war?

By demonstrating that he was willing to 'endure discomfort and expose himself to danger by marching through the paddies and spending nights in the field' (270), Sheehan attained a level of personal acceptance from Vann and his peers that

⁴⁴ The term "Vietnam Syndrome" refers to a national sense of guilt and shame felt by the American people as a result of the outcome of the Vietnam War. This psychological malaise translated onto a geopolitical level as a widespread reluctance by policy-makers to sanction overseas military interventions where U.S. interests were not directly involved. For further information on how the "Vietnam Syndrome" gradually abated throughout the 1980s, and was subsequently managed throughout the early 1990s using the Powell Doctrine, see *The Vietnam War in American Memory: Veterans, Memorials and the Politics of Healing* by Patrick Hagopian, 23-48, and *Vietnam in Iraq: Tactics, Lessons, Legacies and Ghosts*, eds. John Dumbrell and David Ryan.

⁴⁵ Sheehan was instrumental in the publication of the infamous *Pentagon Papers*. This was a highly detailed history of America's political and military involvement in Vietnam from 1945 until 1967 which had been authorised by Secretary of Defence, Robert McNamara. The document, numbering over 7000 pages, was passed by Daniel Ellsberg to Sheehan in 1971 who was then employed as a journalist by the *New York Times*. One of the most controversial documents of the twentieth century, the *Pentagon Papers* revealed how the Johnson Administration had consistently lied to both the public and Congress by covertly increasing the scale of the war on all fronts. While the *New York Times* won a Pulitzer Prize for its investigative reporting, the man who leaked the papers, Daniel Ellsberg, was charged with espionage, conspiracy and theft of government property. For further details, see Sheehan's *The Pentagon Papers: As published by The New York Times, based on investigative reporting by Neil Sheehan*, eds. Gerald Gold, Allan M. Siegal and Samuel Abt, and *The Secret Diplomacy of the Vietnam War: The Negotiating Volumes of the Pentagon Papers*, ed. George C. Herring.

was not extended to many reporters by Army personnel during the war. But while Sheehan's ability to withstand his 'soldier's baptism' (270) would endow him with the authority to write about Vann's life, it did not resolve the issue of how Sheehan could *authenticate* those events he had not witnessed but which were included in the text. This lack of personal testimony immediately separated *A Bright Shining Lie* from the autobiographical accounts of the war, and redirected it towards another category of creative nonfiction, literary journalism. As mentioned in the Introduction, the literary journalistic form of creative nonfiction sought to represent a well-known historical figure or event. But because of this foray into the public sphere, the author's assurances that the narrative was true were no longer solely enough. Hence, the pivotal ontological principle of literary journalism came to be what Warner Berthoff would call 'verification' (40). This process was made possible by mobilising what Gerard Genette called the paratext and what Jerome McGann describes as 'bibliographic codes' (77); the numerous literary and non-literary entities which both surround and are incorporated into, the body of a text, but which are 'ancillary to the main textual event' (McGann 13).⁴⁶

It was exactly the 'semiotic potential' (McGann 16) of this kind of bibliographic material which Sheehan would use to authenticate his account. Most frequently manifested in the guise of forewords, dedications and acknowledgments, they can also take the form of photographs, illustrations, elaborate jacket-covers, bibliographies, footnotes and indices to name but a few. In a unique position as a reporter on the war *and* a personal acquaintance of the narrative's central

⁴⁶ Genette breaks down his understanding of the term "paratext" even further into 'peritexts' and 'epitexts' (*Introduction* 264). The former are found within the immediate body of the text. However, the latter are much more ambiguous. Manifested by a plethora of unrelated media, from lecture hall to personal correspondence, they exist on 'a fringe of the fringe' (*Paratexts* 346) of the text, 'circulating [...] freely, in a virtually limitless and social space' (*Paratexts* 344). As a consequence of this ambiguity, when used in this study, the term "paratext" refers to peritextual material only, those literary and non-literary entities *immediately* attached to the text.

protagonist, the author was able to compile a litany of such material relating to the life of John Vann and the events which occurred in Vietnam. Consequently, the narrative details of *A Bright Shining Lie* were verified by data ranging from the mundane to the extraordinary. While traditional sources such as interviews, army records and existing published works were most commonly used, because of the friendship he had forged with Vann, Sheehan was also able to cite ‘an occasional item of surpassing value’ (803) in his narrative. The diary Vann kept while serving in Vietnam, a captured Viet Cong after-action report of the Battle of Ap Bac, and the National Liberation Front letter concerning the kidnapping of Doug Ramsey ‘neatly penned in black ink in a tiny Vietnamese hand on both sides of a small piece of graph paper’ (812) were just some of the unique memorabilia which Sheehan was able to cite which *verified* the more questionable aspects of his account.⁴⁷

Deliberately inserted, they helped to clarify ‘the text’s intentions: how it should be read, how it should not be read’ (Allen 101). But a claim such as this inevitably leads to yet another question; whose intentions exactly are being clarified?

Deciphering the true intentions of the author from the narrative alone is an immensely difficult, if not impossible, task. While he or she may intend to write a text to adhere to a particular generic standard, artistic visions are amongst many of the authorial goals frequently undone by the commercial concerns of the publishing house. As John Frow states, ‘genre is a privileged object because of its mediation

⁴⁷ Fought on the 2nd January 1963, the Battle of Ap Bac was one of the most famous of the entire war and highlighted the many major shortfalls in the American strategy for victory in Vietnam. It was the first battle in which the Viet Cong had abandoned its “hit-and-run” tactics in favour of a staged battle against their South Vietnamese adversaries and the outcome was a massive victory for the guerrilla forces. The American-South Vietnamese forces listed 86 casualties, over 108 wounded and 5 helicopters shot down in comparison to 18 Viet Cong dead and 39 wounded. Despite the obvious loss, the battle was heralded as a major victory by the ARVN leaders and their American counterparts, the most famous of which was General Paul Harkins, commander of all U.S. forces in Southeast Asia. In contrast, it was described as ‘macabre farce’ (258) by Sheehan who witnessed its aftermath. The version of events found within *A Bright Shining Lie* is one of the most comprehensive. However, an alternate account of the battle can be found in the Military History Institute of Vietnam’s *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People’s Army of Vietnam, 1954—1975* 118-120.

between social and textual structure' (142). Consequently, the finished work is often an example of compromise between the two parties.

However, it is my argument that engaged as they were in an attempt to reshape the mythopoeic structures of the American past into something more beneficial to the American future, by incorporating a plethora of bibliographic codes, the nonfictional narratives of the Vietnam War were imbued with an essence that skewed the traditional balance of this compromise in the author's favour. The crux of this claim lies in adapting Walter Benjamin's concept of the "aura" to creative nonfiction. Benjamin insists that for a work of art to have an aura that could be considered an authentic link to a specific era, it had to possess an 'essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced' (221). In other words, the cultural resonances of the zeitgeist in which it was formed had to be deliberately integrated into the work of art's ontological core and made clearly evident to the observer. In relation to the written text, significantly, as George Bornstein notes in *Material Modernisms*, 'the aura emerges in part from the material features of the text' (7), those literary and non-literary constructs included in addition to the primary text, its bibliographical codes. Describing them as 'the original sites of incarnation,' they 'carry with them an aura placing the work in space and time, and constituting as well its *authenticity*' (Bornstein 7, my emphasis). Deliberately inserted, these paratexts are indicative of a specific ideological stance originating from a specific temporal zone, a belief-system which could also be interpreted as that of the author.

In "Motives, Intentions and the Interpretation of Texts," Quentin Skinner discusses at length this issue of authorial intentionality. For Skinner, a writer's intentions could be understood as referring directly to 'his plan or design to create a

certain type of work [...] or to refer to and describe an actual work in a certain way' (401). It is the latter scenario which is most applicable to *A Bright Shining Lie*, and indeed many of the other works of creative nonfiction examined in this study. As Skinner goes on to explain, the writer's intentions can be identified from 'a feature of the work itself', one which is capable of 'characterizing it, in terms of its embodiment of a particular aim or intention, and thus in terms of it having a particular point' (401). For works of creative nonfiction, one such "feature" is the multitude of paratextual material incorporated into the text. Thus, the inclusion of the bibliographic codes in many of the nonfictional narratives of the Vietnam War, and their effect on those narratives is of huge significance. As a consequence, given Sheehan's noted opposition to the war, it may be fair to say that the ideological stance being represented in *A Bright Shining Lie* is that of the author.

This interpretation is supported by Sheehan in an interview with Brian Lamb in 1988. His statements that 'the message I have, if there is a message [...] is that this book will help people to come to grips with this war' and that 'Vietnam will have been a war in vain only if we don't draw wisdom from it' both reveal an authorial intention in the narrative that was unmistakably political. In another interview given to Harry Kriesler in 1996, Sheehan explains how he chose creative nonfiction as the most appropriate genre to represent the events of Vann's life because if they were written as a novel, the narrative 'wouldn't have validity because it wouldn't be real.' As a consequence, 'the story of what we had done in Vietnam was more interesting than fiction because it had happened.'

Foremost amongst the bibliographic codes used to express this sentiment are the thirty-two photographs contained within the interstices of the text. Providing 'visual stimuli' (Graber 90) for many of the significant events of Vann's life, from

his childhood years to his time in Vietnam, these photographs are an integral part of *A Bright Shining Lie*. Allowing ‘instant access to the real’ (164), as Susan Sontag notes in *On Photography*, while they ‘cannot create a moral position [...] they can reinforce one’ (17). In the years after the Vietnam War, this was crucial. America’s self-image in the aftermath of the conflict was one filled with anxiety and uncertainty. Having lost a war for the first time in its history, many of its people were rightly questioning the exceptionalist belief-system which had brought them into the war in Southeast Asia. If authors such as Sheehan were to expose the flaws of this ideology in their nonfictional narratives of the war, they would have to do so in a fashion which was noticeable for the credibility of its discourse.

The incorporation of photographs into the text was one of the ablest means of achieving this goal. Because of the general recognition of photography as ‘reality in a past state’ (Barthes 82), it is generally perceived as authentic evidence of what has actually occurred. More so than most other media, the image comes to represent what Michel Foucault calls a ‘discourse of truth’ (*Power/Knowledge* 93). As Foucault states

There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association. We are subjected to the production of truth through power, and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth.

(*Power/Knowledge* 93)

Through their written narratives, anti-war figures such as Sheehan sought to reconfigure the mythopoeic structures which had led the United States into war in

Vietnam. To do so, they would have to exert a power of influence over the American people by persuading them that accounts of the conflict such as *A Bright Shining Lie* were as empirically valid as those being produced by the presiding hegemony. By incorporating photographic evidence into the text to reinforce the authenticity, or aura, of the text, they attempted to achieve this aim. This was because, as Robert Hamilton notes, ‘much of the “truth” of the Vietnam war was produced by correspondents, TV reporters and photographers [...] and much of the form of that ‘truth’ was in visual images’ (50).

But unlike some of the most infamous photographs of the Vietnam War, such as Nick Ut’s Pulitzer Prize winning picture of a nine year old Kim Phuc running from an American napalm strike, or the photograph of the summary execution of a Viet Cong prisoner taken by Eddie Adams, those found in *A Bright Shining Lie* are largely routine. There are no corpses, no images of fighting. There is nothing beyond what is largely a collection of posed or staged shots of the war in Vietnam. However, uniting the graphic bibliographic codes with the linguistic codes of the text, I argue that they enhance the referentiality of the narrative more powerfully than any other form of paratext.

Each photograph portrays what Mas’ud Zavarzadeh describes as ‘actemes,’ ‘actants,’ or ‘actees.’ These are the constituent parts of ‘the experiential component of the narrative and belong to the external field of reference which reflects the external world’ (85). In other words, they exist, or have existed, in reality. By explicitly referencing photographs of these entities in the body of his narrative, Sheehan provides these bibliographical signifiers with a contextual layer that exerts a powerful force on the reader, making them a much more radical addition to the account. Pictures of the actee Captain Thuong, or of actemes such as the two downed

helicopters outside Ap Bac are relatively impotent on their own. But by being deliberately captioned with information pertaining to the overall narrative, the reader is manipulated into incorporating the picture into a greater context. As Roland Barthes argues, photography 'is subversive not when it frightens, repels, or even stigmatizes, but when it is pensive, when it thinks' (38). The shot of the sadistic Captain Thuong brings to mind the callous manner documented in the text in which he disposed of P.O.W.s, the barbarity of his tortures, his indifference to U.S. outrage at his actions, and most significantly, the American inertia regarding such brutal behaviour by one of their allies.



Figure 1. Captain Thuong (Source: *A Bright Shining Lie*).

Similarly, the picture of the two downed helicopters, with a third crashed in the distance, juxtaposed alongside a shot of the two highest ranking members of the U.S. forces in Vietnam (General Paul Harkins Commander of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam and General Earle Wheeler, Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army and later Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff), arm-in-arm in parade uniforms as they survey the alleged victory at Ap Bac illustrates the myopia which would quickly come to define the administration's interpretation of the war.



Figure 2. Three of the helicopters downed at the Battle of Ap Bac and the two American generals Paul Harkins and Earle Wheeler who subsequently declared the battle an American-South Vietnamese victory (Source: *A Bright Shining Lie*).

These and the many other photographs within the text present the reader with an illustration of the government's "credibility gap" by giving them visual evidence of it at work.⁴⁸ Revealing the truth that lay behind such misplaced egotism, they demonstrate how 'the American generals in Vietnam thought they'd prevail simply because they were American generals' (Sheehan *Booknotes*). But perhaps most

⁴⁸ The term "credibility gap" was one brought into common vernacular in the United States during the 1960s. It was most famously used by Senator William Fulbright in 1966 to speak out against the Johnson Administration when the latter's reports on the war in Vietnam were shown to differ drastically from the realities of what actually was occurring there.

damning of all is the final photo, one taken of the Vann family as they gathered in the Oval Office for John Vann's funeral reception with President Richard Nixon. Captioned so that each actee is identifiable, the picture shows a family literally divided in two by the war in Vietnam.

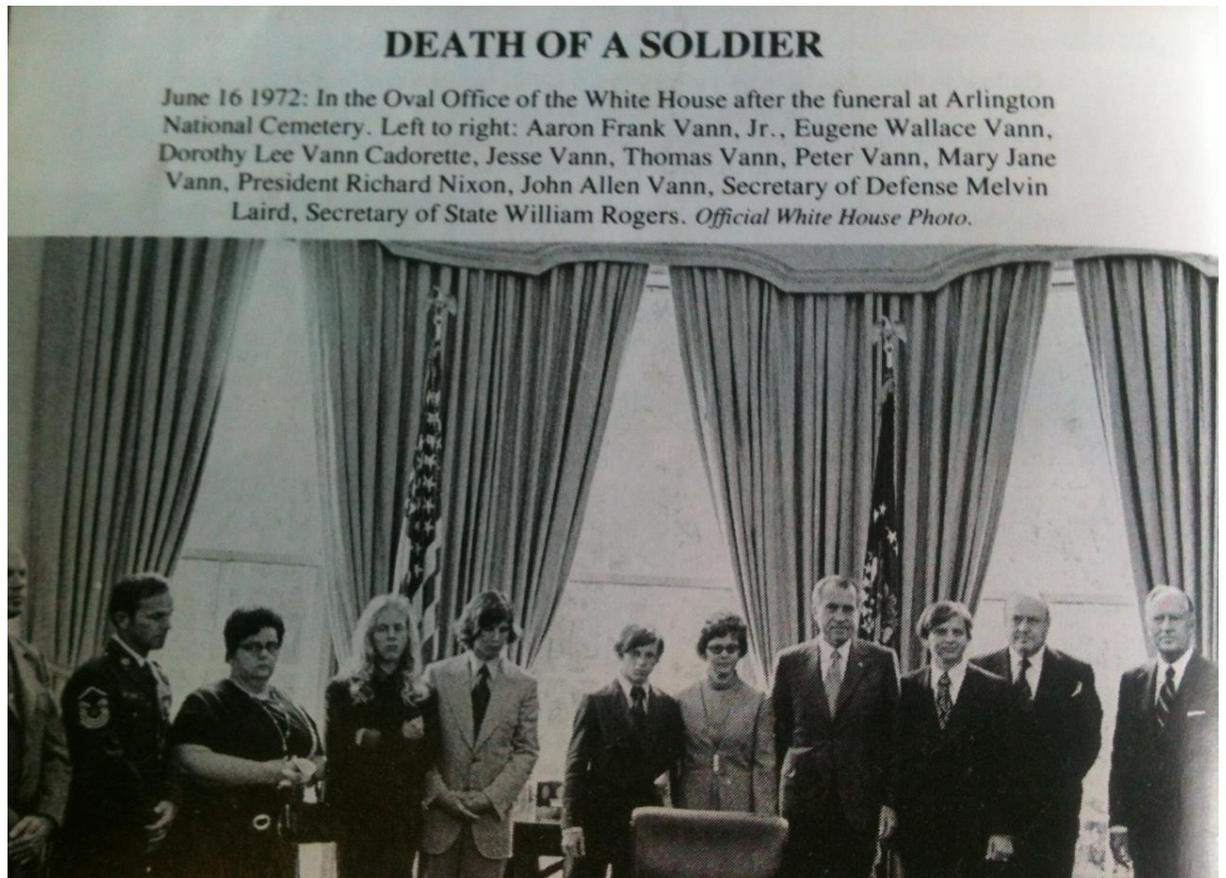


Figure 3. John Vann's Funeral Reception with President Nixon, 1972 (Source: *A Bright Shining Lie*).

One half is dominated by an uneasy looking President Nixon who is depicted alongside two of his most senior members of staff. The other half of the photograph centres on the sullen-looking, long-haired Jesse Vann. Arms folded across his chest in the image, the latter was a conscientious objector to the war who had refused to accept his draft orders. The effect of this photo once again is founded in the context provided by Sheehan's narrative. The reader is aware not only of Jesse's controversial intentions to return his draft-card personally to President Nixon, and of

the measures White House staff-members have threatened to take if he carries them out. Realising the circumstances surrounding the meeting, one also narrated from an auto-diegetic perspective, the picture gives ‘the viewer a sense of participating in an event or, at least, witnessing it personally’ (Graber 87). This incorporation of photographic evidence within Sheehan’s narrative consequently allows the reader additional leeway to “believe” if they should choose to do so. More importantly however, from the perspective of an author who wished to engage and inspire his audience, the photographs provide visual cues which subsequently ‘excel in creating a sense of drama’ (Graber 90).

The latter was a fundamental trope for those such as Sheehan. As noted by Doria Graber, ‘drama enhances learning because it attracts and holds attention by engaging the viewer’s emotions and producing identification between the viewer and the story subjects’ (90). Most crucially of all, ‘drama also inspires political action’ (90). This is because, unlike other discourses, photographs don’t purport to offer something which can be described as similar to reality. Rather, the documented images are presented *as* reality. Depicting many of the key actors and incidents of the text, the photographs in *A Bright Shining Lie* provide a visual reinforcement to the narrative’s claims which the reader can ‘interpret [...] within the gestalt provided for them’ (Graber 87), that is, the aura. The impact is noticeable. The photographs thus become what Graber describes as ‘condensation symbols’ in retelling the American tale in Vietnam, entities which can ‘evoke emotions and entice audiences to associate these symbols consciously or subliminally with particular individuals and their causes’ (94).

For Sheehan’s narrative to have the effect it desired, it had to separate itself from works of fiction by demonstrating that its narrative documented the lives and

deeds, for better or for worse, of real people, places and events. Depicting the demise of both Vann and his nation in Vietnam, by using photographs of the integral character of his narrative, Sheehan both distinguished his account from fiction, and underlined its potency as an ideological artefact. Combined with the persuasive power of the written narrative, the photographs allowed nonfictional accounts of the war to simulate on a microcosmic level Foucault's 'regime of truth' (*Political* 13). As text and image synthesise, each provides a referential aid for the other which manipulates the reader into understanding the given narrative as historically viable. As Foucault states "'truth" is linked by a circular relation to systems of power which produce it and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which redirect it' (*Political* 13).

However, the use of photographs is only one of several paratexts used by Sheehan to emphasise the authenticity of the events depicted in *A Bright Shining Lie*. The narrative also contains numerous examples of paratextual material which shines a further light on the author's approach to writing the narrative. As befitting one of the lengthiest and most comprehensive tomes on the Vietnam War, *A Bright Shining Lie* contains individual sections dedicated to "Acknowledgements," "Documents," "Interviews," and "Source Notes," as well as a bibliography and index. The most detailed of these constructs, and the one with the greatest impact on how the narrative should be interpreted, is the "Source Notes." Strategically inserted as a postface, it is encountered after the primary narrative has been read. Thus the section could be interpreted as a bibliographic code which 'extends, ramifies, and modulates rather than comments on' (Genette, *Paratexts* 328) the text of *A Bright Shining Lie*, without providing new information which would change or distort the events depicted. It outlines to the reader the exact methodology used by Sheehan to

construct the respective sections of his primary text. By identifying specific sources of information, whether it was drawn from a widely available origin such as David Halberstam's *The Making of a Quagmire* or gleaned from his personal relationship with Vann, Sheehan can also clarify how certain details are so unusually precise.

The effect of this process is that the plausibility of the text is more than just amplified. By steering the reader towards a referential interpretation of the text, a generic status is suggested by the author which infers that a distinction can be made between the narrative and comparable works of fiction. Consolidated by the presence of these validating documents, the reader is encouraged to believe that the verisimilitude of the account has been referentially verified. In her discussion of Sutton Griggs and his novel *Imperium in Imperio*, Barbara Foley comments on these 'assurances of factuality' ("History" 397). Foley saw them as bringing the allegedly referential narrative 'temporarily into alignment with criteria for historical evaluation and thus [...] elevating his melodramatic account to the status of legend, if not of strict history' ("History" 397). The application of this framework is perfectly suited to *A Bright Shining Lie*. As a work of creative nonfiction, its aim is not to *be* history, but to be *treated* as such. Eager to contribute to the remaking of the American self-image after the tragedy of Vietnam, Sheehan sought to write a narrative which was both historically verifiable *and* one which would reverberate also with the mythical tropes of the American nation. By prompting the reader into interpreting *A Bright Shining Lie* in such a fashion, Sheehan's intention of presenting a text which could help reshape America's mythopoeic image of itself is greatly aided.

This semblance of verifiability is enhanced even further by the bibliography and index found within the text. As with the elaborate "Source Notes," the presence of these mechanisms predisposes the reader to assign a specific generic category to

the text. The inclusion of an index in Sheehan's narrative incorporates a device rarely found in works of fiction. Acting as an intratextual mechanism within the text, the index allows the reader to follow their own, non-linear pathway through the narrative. Most significantly in the context of a study on creative nonfiction, however, it also serves to reinforce the referential dynamic found usually only in "non-creative nonfiction" by providing a direct and unequivocal relationship between signifier and signified. Despite the literariness of the narrative and the many aspects of the text which could be susceptible to doubt, in this instance the index acts as a paratext which 'provides a kind of canal lock between the ideal and relatively immutable identity of the text and the empirical (sociohistorical) reality of the text's public' (Genette, *Paratexts* 407-8).

The reader is subjected to a similar paradigm by Sheehan's incorporation of the bibliography. But rather than exerting a centripetal dynamic on the text as the index had done, the latter construct imposes a centrifugal force. To reach back once more to Sheehan's motivation for writing the account, he sought to tell the story of America in Vietnam through the life of John Vann. As a consequence of representing the thoughts and experiences of another, his narrative would have been largely susceptible to claims of doubt unless proven otherwise. Should he or she be of a mind to dispute some of the more negligible aspects of Sheehan's account, using the bibliography the reader is presented with the opportunity to examine the constituent parts of the narrative. This paratext provides the database of official information from which the author resourced the referential elements of his text. These include a mixture of government sanctioned reports, journalistic sources including *The New York Times*, and information gleaned from several of the most widely-known nonfictional accounts of the Vietnam War such as those written by Frances

Fitzgerald, David Halberstam and Gloria Emerson. If one were to adapt George Landow's understanding of web-based hypertextuality to the text, the bibliography comes to represent a hypertextual system, albeit one concretised on the pages of Sheehan's narrative. By incorporating it into *A Bright Shining Lie*, the author thus provides the reader with a gateway to an external field of reference comprised of a litany of intertextual sources existing *outside* of the text. Unlike the Genette epitexts (paratexts generally unattached to the primary text but which still have a viable and obvious connection to the text), the works listed in the bibliography are entities existing independently. However, they represent a catalogue of valid historical sources pertaining to the events of the Vietnam War, and alongside them, *A Bright Shining Lie* appears to the reader as 'just one more text in an intertextual, or in this case hypertextual, chain' (Allen 196).

In "This is Your Book: Marketing America to Itself," Lori Ween states that 'all the paratexts that surround the creation of a novel play into the image created by the work itself; more than the text of a novel creates meaning and influences the reading public with rhetoric' (91). While Ween's discourse relates largely to traditional fiction, the scenario she suggests is more than applicable to creative nonfiction, particularly those iterations of the form written on the Vietnam War. Amid the plethora of works being published on what was perhaps the most controversial war in American history, if the nonfictional narratives were to play any part in reshaping the mythical structures which had led the nation in that very war in the first place, they had to be imbued with a referential integrity lacking from comparable works of fiction. Just as autobiographical accounts had the boon of personal testimony as their ontological core, the literary journalistic works written by authors such as Sheehan and Halberstam were bibliographically coded with a

specific aura that encouraged the reader to interpret their versions of events as true. Thus, by including both literary and non-literary materials such as photographs, indices and bibliographies, creative nonfiction imitated the mechanisms of referential texts. *A Bright Shining Lie* as a standalone construct is a powerful indictment of the hubris of the United States. When focalised through the life of John Vann, the man whose 'life had seemed to sum up so many of the qualities Americans admired in themselves as a people' (3), this image becomes even more damning.

'It's Not Your War, it's the Government's War ...'

Throughout *A Bright Shining Lie*, Neil Sheehan seeks to demonstrate the failings of 'the mind set of that era Henry Luce so boastfully called "the American century," the self-confidence and the arrogance, if you will, that had led us to Vietnam' (Sheehan *Booknotes*). His book, in many ways, was thus a book about America. Vann's ascension, from an impoverished 'child of the American South' (3) to someone whose death was publicly mourned by the leader of the most powerful country in the world, mirrored the rise of the United States from colony to global superpower. However Vann's demise also demonstrated an uncanny corollary with his nation's fate in Vietnam. Each was steeped in the same egotistical self-interest which ultimately led to both of their downfalls.

Drawing its inspiration from the events of the Vietnam War, C.D.B Bryan's nonfictional narrative *Friendly Fire* is also a book about America. But rather than focussing on the conflict in Southeast Asia, as nearly every other account of the war

had done, Bryan chooses to concentrate his attention on the American families left behind by the men serving their country in Vietnam. Documenting the efforts of Peg and Gene Mullen to uncover the truth about their son's death, just as was the case with *A Bright Shining Lie*, Bryan's narrative reflected many of the issues which affected American society during and after the war. In an interview with Jean Ross, Bryan notes that '*Friendly Fire* was not about Michael Mullen's death and it wasn't about what happened to Michael. It was about what happened to Peg and Gene Mullen and the impact of the Vietnam War on America' (Hillstrom 120). In adopting this approach, Bryan's purpose is clear. It allowed him to demonstrate that the government was far removed from the ordinary people of the United States, despite its claims that it had the backing of the "great silent majority." Using Peg and Gene Mullen as a metonymic representation of the countless other American families, Bryan would illustrate the truth of the reality 'that the war required a reconsideration of the family's dependence on the moral leadership of the state' (Berg 4). While previous home-based narratives on the war such as Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night* had received critical acclaim in their attempts to highlight this separation between citizen and government, few were as powerfully told as the struggle of this one Iowan family.

As was the case with characters in the works of Philip Caputo and Tim O'Brien, Bryan goes to great lengths to associate the Mullens with the heartlands of Middle America. As Bryan notes in his narrative, Peg and Gene Mullen were 'from a background typical of the "Silent Majority"' (38). Midwestern farmers, from childhood they 'had pledged their allegiance to the flag, been taught to love their country, [and] respect their government' (58). Although Bryan notes that the Mullens could be identified as representative of a number of groups, 'as "Catholics,"

as “Democrats,” “Irish-Americans,” or “Iowans” (38), the foremost impression conveyed to the reader is that Peg and Gene Mullen were Americans. They believed the words of their President; that the United States was in Vietnam ‘to resist Communist aggression’ and that like the Second World War and Korea, ‘Vietnam was a moral war.’ Most importantly however, because they had unbending faith in the wisdom and rectitude of their duly elected leaders, ‘the Mullens believed [...] what they were being told’ (37). Presenting them as stereotypically American, Bryan emphasised the status of the Mullen family, and those like them, as an intrinsic part of their society.

The manner in which the author outlines their Iowan heritage underscores this view that ‘this family weren’t crackpots, they weren’t war-protestors, they weren’t hippy freaks; they were the earth’ (Bryan, *Vietnam* 76). The lands they farmed, like virtually every acre of the American Midwest, had once been Indian land. It had been presided over by the infamous Black Hawk, a Sauk chief who spent twenty years resisting the annexation of his territories to the United States.⁴⁹ What is curious about the narrative however, and noteworthy in the context of the Mullens’ own status as a metonymic representation of the Middle American, is how Bryan specifies the integral role that two of America’s most celebrated sons played in the defeat of Black Hawk and the subsequent appropriation of this particular tract of Indian land. Both Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis, men whose fortunes would ultimately lead them to opposing sides of a bloody Civil War, are cited by Bryan for the hand they took in Black Hawk’s demise. The former had a direct part in what later became known as the “Black Hawk War,” while the latter, Bryan also claims,

⁴⁹ The Black Hawk War was a pivotal war in American history. It gave the U.S. government the opportunity to instigate a policy of Indian removal which would ultimately affect every Native American tribe in the United States. Further information relating to the Black Hawk War can be found in Patrick J. Jung’s *The Black Hawk War of 1832*.

was a member of the prison guard which escorted the fallen Indian chief to a waiting prison cell. Just as Tim O'Brien did in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, and indeed many other Vietnam War authors, the author demonstrates how the policy of land-grabbing imperialism had been a cornerstone of U.S. government policy since the nation's early years. But by deliberately incorporating two historical figures venerated by the American people, the author offers a direct, but also less than edifying, link between the lands the Mullens tilled and the men who signified some of the nation's most significant mythopoeic structures.

This association is reinforced by Bryan's recounting of how the Mullen's ancestors rose from penniless Irish émigrés in the nineteenth century to landowners of over a thousand acres less than sixty years later. Formed in what Meghana Nayak describes as 'the cauldron of the frontier experience,' the Mullens and their ancestors demonstrated the core values of 'individualism, equality, self-reliance [...] and independence' (266) which both enabled their prosperity and set their nation apart from all others in history. What is crucial to note about *Friendly Fire* however is how Bryan depicts the ascendancy of the Mullens as one which occurred in tandem with America's own evolution as a society, stating that

While John Dobshire [Peg's great-grandfather] had gone about his daily chores, the first oil wells in Titusville were dug. Mrs O'Leary's cow set fire to Chicago's heart. General Custer was massacred at the Little Bighorn. Thomas Edison invented the electric light, Alexander Graham Bell the telephone. Four major railroads now crossed the Iowa prairies; New York to San Francisco was but a seven-day trip. (27)

Peg and Gene Mullen are thus portrayed to the reader as modern-day products of an American past. Their ancestors, like those of millions of other Americans, were the ordinary men and women whose endeavours had enabled the United States to become 'the most important state actor in the world' (Hoffman 240). Indeed, as Bryan states, the land they tilled had been a government-sanctioned reward for Dobshire's military service during the Mexican Wars. Consequently, in Gene Mullen's mind, when his son Michael inherited the family farm, he wasn't going 'to fall heir to acres only. He was to inherit all those generations of Mullens and Dobshires who would walk beside him each time he turned the soil' (35). To an extent, in that small corner of the Midwestern prairie, Michael Mullen was to inherit America.

Such information would appear to be inconsequential to the overall narrative. But by incorporating seemingly trivial details about men such as Lincoln and Davis, or the integral part played by previous generations of Mullen in the successes of the nation, Bryan firmly embeds the Mullen family into the American grand-narrative. In providing 'American explanations for American experiences, for the American past, for the existence and continuation of the American people' (Roberston 10), Bryan was able to suggest that more than the political luminaries who dominated the history books, it was the "ordinary" Americans such as the Mullens who had made the nation great in the past, and who would do so again in the future.

This opposition between citizen and state is a persistent theme throughout *Friendly Fire*. Replying to a somewhat negative review of the text by Diane Johnson in *The New York Review of Books* on August 5th, 1976, Bryan insists that

What I tried to show was that this Iowa farm family's anger, bitterness, paranoia, suspiciousness, and heartbreak were the understandable and inevitable result of the insensitive, arrogant, and bureaucratic treatment they had received.

Bryan goes on to emphasise that the primary sources of such treatment were the U.S. government and its military. As a consequence, one would expect that *Friendly Fire* would depict an almost Manichean duality between the everyday Americans who were protesting the war and those who represented the various government bodies seeking to perpetuate it. Ironically however, what is noticeable about Bryan's account is the humanity with which he portrays the ordinary men and women in the employ of such institutions.

This portrayal was fundamental to the re-imagining of the American myth and its effect was twofold. Not only did it reinforce the difference that existed between those who orchestrated the war in Vietnam and the American people, it also highlighted the internal conflict that many Americans felt when faced with the choice of doing, or not doing, one's duty. Examples of such compassion, such as that demonstrated towards Peg Mullen by the secretaries of both Senators Hughes and Miller, are numerous throughout the text. Significantly however, this is a dynamic which noticeably extends also to the soldiers described in *Friendly Fire*. A common perception of the U.S. soldier coming home from Vietnam in the early Seventies was one often influenced by images of atrocities such as My Lai that had lingered on in the American consciousness. To mention that one was a veteran of the war often provoked an uneasy reaction from civilians. However, the soldiers depicted in Bryan's narrative offer no threat to American society. Utilising a similar framework to that used by Caputo in *A Rumor of War*, the soldiers portrayed in *Friendly Fire*

represent a group marked by diversity in terms of race, background, education and class. Yet they are united in their view that the war in Vietnam was a mistake and that those who had sent them there were wrong. ‘As a final gesture of contempt’ (271), and risking disownment and divorce from their families, veterans of the war lined up to throw medals won in Southeast Asia on the marble steps of Capitol Hill. In this scene, one of the most poignant of the narrative, Bryan relays the sacrifices many of the soldiers had to make *at home* in order to demonstrate their opposition to the administration.

However, many of those who expressed sympathy with the Mullens or who openly declared their opposition to the war were the antithesis of the W.A.S.P. patriarchy that comprised the American government in the years after World War II. Portrayed as a combination of students, women, and either working-class or African-American males (often both), theirs were voices seldom listened to by the powerbrokers in Washington during the Vietnam era. Bryan circumvents any issues this may cause for the referential integrity of his narrative by choosing a figure that would very much conform to the archetype that the administration saw as their typical bastion of support. By depicting Lieutenant Colonel H. Norman Schwarzkopf, a white male who in addition to being a father and husband was also a ranking officer in the U.S. Army, as sympathetic to the plight of those such as the Mullens, Bryan belies the claim that those who opposed the war constituted nothing more than a radicalised, albeit highly vocal, minority. But the initial appearances of Schwarzkopf, sporadic as they are, would seem to conform to preconceived notions of how a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army should be. He is described to the Mullens by ex-infantryman Martin Culpepper as a ‘real gung-ho sort of man [...] [who] just wanted to get promoted’ (220), epitomising the kind of officer despised

by the common infantryman, one whose alleged ‘obsession with body counts’ (145) was seen as being largely to blame for many of the needless American deaths in Vietnam. Furthermore, when confronted by the Mullens, Schwarzkopf is said to cut a ‘conciliatory and beleaguered’ (284) figure. Bedbound at the Walter Reed Army Medical Centre, the man is described as ‘a pathetic and defensive invalid crushed by the overwhelming evidence the Mullens accumulated against him’ (284).

Such an image would appear to maintain the duality that the Mullens thought existed between the administration and the ordinary people of America. However, the reality as depicted by Bryan’s narrative is very much different. When met in person by the author, Schwarzkopf displays an unequivocal empathy for the Mullens that surpasses that shown by virtually all others in *Friendly Fire*. Quoting Schwarzkopf as saying that he ‘wanted to treat them with compassion, set their minds at ease’ (293), Bryan describes a man whose stated motivation for speaking to the Mullens stemmed from a desire to help the grieving parents finally uncover the details of their son’s death. Rather than being evasive or difficult to find, it is revealed that it was actually he who invited the Mullens to the Medical Centre where he was being treated. Instead of attempting to justify the extenuating circumstances of the tragic accident in which their son was killed, Schwarzkopf empathises with the Mullens’ anger and sorrow. He tells Bryan that ‘I made it very clear to [the Mullens] that nobody was more upset about Michael’s death than I was. I was furious when it happened’ (293). In place of the arrogant and self-serving mentality that had been ascribed to him by the Mullens and soldiers who had served in his battalion, Bryan reveals Schwarzkopf to be a man with genuine sympathy and remorse for those who were wounded and killed under his command. Citing examples of how he had personally visited his men in field-hospitals, contacted parents on their behalf, and

remained in touch with some of those same injured men after their discharge undoes the perception of a man whose primary concern was supposedly swift advancement through the ranks of the military.

While there exists the possibility that this may all be an elaborate ruse to ensure that the author inserted a favourable portrait of the lieutenant colonel into his narrative, what is significant here is that Bryan *does* include the words of Norman Schwarzkopf, the veracity of which are strengthened by the inclusion in the narrative of a mutual agreement between both parties that their conversation be recorded. This sense of truth is subsequently reinforced by Bryan as he describes how he sent Schwarzkopf a transcript of the interview, one which the latter deigns to be an entirely accurate reproduction of the conversation between them. This assertion in the text that the words exchanged between Bryan and Schwarzkopf are represented exactly as spoken on the page of *Friendly Fire* is of huge significance. As previously stated, in the eyes of the administration, the latter *should* have epitomised the bedrock of their support for the war in Vietnam. However, Schwarzkopf could not be any more forthright in his feelings *against* the war. While initially a supporter of the fight against Communism in Southeast Asia, by the time he met Bryan in October 1971, he is clear in telling the author that ‘Vietnam’s a terrible, horrible war’ (317). Contradicting once more the image of the U.S. Army officer as a bloodthirsty war-monger, he states unequivocally that ‘nobody is more antiwar than an intelligent person who’s been to war’ (305).

Yet there are two crucial things to note about Schwarzkopf’s outlook which underlines what Bryan saw as the difference between the ideologies of those who oversaw the foundational institutions of the United States and those who served in them. Firstly, Schwarzkopf identifies the sacrifices made by the ordinary

infantryman who fought in Vietnam, ‘the kid who went over first as a platoon leader, returned as a captain [...] and then, a third time went over as a major’ (304). Having spent the better part of a decade fighting someone else’s war, the same officer is faced with widespread hostility upon his return. Referring to the fate of many Vietnam veterans, Schwarzkopf’s words echo what John Timmerman describes as the ‘Prufrockian’ (108) anguish of the Vietnam veteran, ‘he doesn’t understand why he’s bearing the brunt of this animosity when the guys who sent him to Vietnam seven years ago are now back on college campuses writing articles about how terrible it is that he’s there in Vietnam’ (304). Furthermore, his views accentuate the dilemma faced by many Americans who sought to reconcile what they felt was morally right with a sense of national duty that often asked them to do something vastly different. Schwarzkopf encapsulates this predicament by stating that ‘the government send you off to fight its war [...] it’s not *your* war; it’s the government’s war’ (305 original emphasis). This outlook on the conflict summed up the source of the problem for many of the veterans of Vietnam. Patriotism, self-sacrifice and the willingness to answer the call of one’s nation were virtues venerated in American culture since the time of the Revolution. By enlisting in the U.S. Army and swearing to protect the United States from all enemies, both foreign and domestic, men such as Norman Schwarzkopf and Michael Mullen were upholding these time-honoured traditions. However, Schwarzkopf caveats this promise by saying also that ‘I didn’t say *I’d* determine who the enemies were!’ (304 original emphasis).

Rather than a means of shifting the blame for the events of Vietnam War onto the shoulders of a monolithic third party, the lieutenant colonel’s words actually emphasise the divide that existed between those who fought and died in the jungles and paddies of Vietnam, and those who told them to do so from the safety of

Washington. This disparity is underscored by the manner in which Schwarzkopf himself begins to question his own willingness to fight in subsequent wars at the behest of such policymakers. Reflecting on the events of Vietnam, Schwarzkopf has the realisation that to follow the orders of those who orchestrated the war in Southeast Asia, there would have to be a balance found in future between what he describes as ‘conscience and duty’ (309). Ironically for the soldier initially portrayed as the epitome of a blood-soaked American imperialism, Schwarzkopf’s questioning of those at the apex of the military and government hierarchies begins to echo the words of those ordinary soldiers who threw their medals onto the steps of Capitol Hill, of the mothers and fathers, sisters, wives and brothers of the men who died needlessly in Vietnam. Questioned by the author about the moral validity of the war, Schwarzkopf’s voice becomes one with that of Middle America in asking ‘where does duty stop and morality begin?’ (309).

Thus, Bryan incorporates a dynamic into *Friendly Fire* which was essential to any desired rehabilitation of the American self-image. Those soldiers who had been ordered to fight had to be absolved to some extent of whatever crimes it was believed they had committed in Vietnam. However, this exoneration was most definitely not extended to those who gave them their orders.⁵⁰ For Americans to ensure that the same mythopoeic structures which led them into war in Southeast Asia would cease to have the same impact on future generations, the institutions advocating those tropes would have to be depicted in a manner which truly reflected the effect they had had on American society. In his reply to Diane Johnson’s review

⁵⁰ This dynamic was played out to some extent by the numerous court-martials which took place in the aftermath of the My Lai massacre in which some of the worst known perpetrators such as Lieutenant William Calley and Private Paul Meadlo were largely viewed as scapegoats for the failings of a much greater institution. The issue of who exactly was to blame for atrocities such as My Lai remains one of the most controversial issues of the Vietnam War. For further information, see *My Lai: A Brief History with Documents* by James Olson and Randy Roberts and *My Lai: An American Atrocity in the Vietnam War* by William Allison.

of his narrative in *The New York Review of Books*, Bryan is unequivocal about who he saw as the ‘real enemy’ of the American people:

The [...] few powerful men who presumed not only to speak for the American people and to know what was best for the American people, but who would not listen to the American people and worse, made every effort to isolate themselves from any situation in which a confrontation or disagreement might occur.

As a consequence, the greatest part of Bryan’s vitriol is invested in his portrayal of the administration. More than a representative mechanism in synchrony with its constituents, the government and its military proxy are depicted in such a fashion that a correlation with the fascism that blighted Europe only a generation before becomes quite unavoidable. Bryan describes an America where it had become routine for known dissidents to have their phone-calls recorded, their public appearances photographed and their private mail read and censored. It is one where the constitutional rights of public assembly and freedom of speech are met with government sanctioned violence. The tragic events which occurred at both Kent State and Jackson State Universities are both referenced at length by Bryan to reinforce this point, a tragedy whose humanity is underscored by the manner in which the author gives both the full names and ages of all those who died.

However subtle the link between American society in the latter years of the Vietnam War and that which existed in 1930s Germany, it is vividly brought to the reader’s attention by the brutal assault Peg Mullen experienced at a peaceful protest held during a visit by President Nixon to Iowa City in 1971. As American citizens

are being attacked by riot-police for exerting what was assumed to be a constitutional right, included in this scene by Bryan is a ‘weeping, near-hysterical older woman shouting that she’d seen it all in Germany forty years before’ (238). The resultant separation between those in power and those inhabiting the heartlands of Middle America is one Bryan repeatedly reiterates. When queried on this topic by Jean Ross, he responded that ‘my own feeling was that if the government had lost the loyalty of a family like the Mullens, who had had five generations on the land, then the government was in serious trouble’ (Hillstrom 120). Whether it was Peg and Gene Mullen, discontented soldiers in Vietnam, or those protesting the war on the streets of Washington, the enemy was no longer just Communism for the administration. As Bryan notes ‘the enemy it had begun to appear was anyone who opposed the war’ (118). Fundamental changes were needed if the institutions which had drifted so far from the people they claimed to represent were to serve any purpose in the years after Vietnam. This was essential for the re-making of the American self-image. Unless such change was enabled, Americans would continue to be caught in a cycle which sought to “regenerate through violence” as it had done since the time of the Indian Wars. Bryan is clear in identifying the superstructures of American society as the source of the hubristic ideology which brought the nation to war in Southeast Asia. The cumulative effect of each of these connections is clear. For Bryan, Peg and Gene Mullen, and for every other American who was affected by the war in Vietnam, and who sought to pick up the shattered ideological pieces in the following years, such incidents and such a government must not be allowed a place in society once more.

But what is unique about *Friendly Fire* is that Bryan also demonstrates how many of those Middle Americans who protested the war in 1971 were actually

complicit in its undertaking less than a decade before. Bryan notes that while the ‘simple, decent people’ of the “silent majority” ‘saw their silence as a form of stoicism’ (58), many within the administration interpreted it as ‘acquiescence’ (58). This issue is broached time and time again in *Friendly Fire* and is probably the most pressing if the mythopoeic structures of the United States were to be successfully remade. Bryan questions whether ‘the Silent Majority’s unwillingness to speak was [...] why the war had been allowed to drag on and on’ (126). More so than any other, this trope of silence is identified as the reason why attempts to reconcile the American sense of duty in Vietnam and the morality of the mission went unanswered. Using Peg Mullen as a mouthpiece, Bryan brings a great unsaid to the forefront of the America psyche, stating that ‘you didn’t question and [...] this was so wrong!’ (126). In a sense, this unwillingness to truly challenge the validity of their nation’s Manifest Destiny made the American people as culpable as those in power for the bloodshed of the war. Significantly, rather than pretending to be an outside observer, Bryan includes himself in such negligence. He too had lost his ‘capacity for outrage and shock.’ He too ‘was simply acquiescing in what this nation’s leaders were permitting our country to become’ (247). By refusing to act as a vocal corrective to the words and deeds of their leaders, *Friendly Fire* portrays ordinary Americans as being equally responsible as the Johnsons, the Nixons and the Lieutenant Calley’s for the tragedy that was Vietnam, and for every other “Vietnam” that they would have to endure in the years ahead. Unless the people were willing to change themselves also, they would be condemned to ‘a vision of America better suited to an innocent history primer [...] an America which probably never even used to be’ (254).

‘In Those Few Instances of Disparate Recollections or Failing Memory ...’

Both *A Bright Shining Lie* and *Friendly Fire* could thus be said to be books about America. Through the story of John Paul Vann, Sheehan warned of the damaging effects of the national hubris which ultimately led the United States to losing a war for the first time ever. Bryan’s narrative also contained a warning. It sought to demonstrate to the American people that silence could also be interpreted as acquiescence. However, while the authenticity of *A Bright Shining Lie* was safeguarded to some extent by both Sheehan’s testimony and the personal relationship he held with Vann, *Friendly Fire* is notably lacking such an attribute. Having never been to Vietnam, unlike Neil Sheehan, Bryan’s *authority* to write *Friendly Fire* is less than obvious.⁵¹ Furthermore, his account of the Mullens’ struggle is almost entirely based on the second and even third-hand retelling of events. Even more troublesome for the referential integrity of the narrative was the

⁵¹ Prior to the writing of *Friendly Fire*, Bryan had had no relationship whatsoever with the Mullen family. He only learned of their tragic story while visiting friends in Iowa in November 1970 and didn’t actually meet Peg and Gene Mullen until April 1971, over a year after Michael’s death in Vietnam. It was this meeting which led to Bryan retelling the Mullens’ story in *The New Yorker* later that year. However, Bryan quickly found that the more research he did, the greater the story became. This initial 6,000 word piece subsequently became a three-part series published in *The New Yorker* in 1976. In turn, this latter manifestation of the Mullens’ story proved in itself to be an abbreviated version of what would become a larger work of nonfiction that Bryan ultimately published as a standalone narrative some months later. While the core detail of each of the iterations is the same, the serialisation of *Friendly Fire* does bring to the fore another pressing issue. The bibliographic codes incorporated into the published text of Bryan’s narrative differ greatly from those usually found in the serialised version printed in *The New Yorker*. Those found in the former predominantly take the guise of the constructs examined in this chapter. However, those present in the latter consist of a bevy of satirical cartoons and advertisements for a host of products including holiday destinations, automobiles, alcoholic beverages, camera equipment and jewellery. As this chapter has attempted to demonstrate, bibliographic codes can influence the interpretation of a text. Using the publication of John Keats’ “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” in the *Examiner* as an example in *Material Modernisms*, George Bornstein notes how its inclusion in a newspaper noted for its leftist politics brings to the fore any radical resonances which may exist in the poem. Surrounded by liberal rhetoric, Bornstein states that ‘any material page on which we read any poem is a constructed object that will encode certain meanings while placing others under erasure’ (31). An identical paradigm is in place when nonfictional narratives of the Vietnam War are serialised. However, accounts of the conflict such as these have appeared across a vast range of periodical publications such as *Esquire*, *Rolling Stone*, *The Atlantic Review*, *Playboy* and *The New York Times*. Given the cultural diversity between such publications, as well as the obvious disparity in bibliographic codes between the respective publications, it is extremely difficult to ascertain the balance mentioned previously between author and publisher/editor. Given the potential enormity of this study, it is an issue which would be poorly served if an attempt were made to address it fully here. However it remains a possible avenue of research in its own right beyond this project.

infamy gained by the Mullens throughout the early Seventies. Where once they had viewed themselves as loyal Americans whose history and future was entwined with that of their nation, the Mullens now existed primarily in a state of self-imposed exile from the ideological state apparatuses of the United States. As Peg stated in a letter to Nixon in 1970, ‘we *were* good members of the Silent Majority, but we cannot remain silent any longer. We are determined to speak out, to expose the government’s lies’ (226 my emphasis). The vitriolic nature of their protest had garnered the attention of the national media, and both had come to be known as dissidents. Just as the veracity of the narratives written by conscripted soldiers were liable to be interpreted with increased scepticism by supporters of the government, the Mullens’ obvious anti-war agenda meant that their views on the conflict and the administration that backed it were always going to be viewed as having a distorted bias. Such a stance, combined with the author’s own lack of witness to many of the events documented in the narrative meant that for *Friendly Fire* to possess any ideological value whatsoever, Bryan would have to find some way to unequivocally *authenticate* his text.

Such factors would have weighed heavily on Bryan’s mind as he struggled to piece together the many different versions of events that he had heard relating to both the night that Michael Mullen was killed, and the subsequent events. But when asked about the referential validity of *Friendly Fire* by Eric Schroeder in an interview in 1991, Bryan replied that he saw his narrative ‘as recording these events as a matter of record’ (*Vietnam* 85). Unlike authors who wrote works of fiction, either historical or allegorical, Bryan wanted his readers to be fully aware of the ideological potential of his text, so much so that his ultimate goal was for *Friendly Fire* to be considered as a record worthy of ‘the Library of Congress of what the

government had done to these people, what the war had done (Bryan, *Vietnam* 85). Thus, while Sheehan made photographs a central focus in *A Bright Shining Lie*, Bryan wove a multitude of letters into the fabric of the text. Reproduced verbatim from a host of government agencies, grieving parents and former soldiers (with spelling and grammatical mistakes as they were written by the original authors), these bibliographic codes exert a force on the reader similar to the images contained in Sheehan's narrative. They are explicitly marked so that the reader knows that the letters are written correspondence between the respective actees, and often detail some of the most crucial actemes of the text. 'Like the photograph,' as noted by Daniel Lehman, these devices bring 'differing planes of actuality together in the narrative present' (*Matters* 119), an act which reinforces the undertone of credibility as powerfully as any written protestations to the same included by the author. However, many of the other codes used by Sheehan, such as the peritextual material towards the rear of the text, the bibliography, and the index, are all notably absent from *Friendly Fire*. So how exactly did Bryan encourage the reader to interpret his account of the Mullens' struggle as one more referentially viable than a work of fiction?

The bibliographic code which has the most immediate effect on the reader is the dust-jacket/cover which covered the first editions published in 1976. Located on the periphery of the text, the cover represents the text's first instance of direct communication to the reader. Virtually always observed before any reading has taken place, it serves to create a semiotic frame which the reader uses to interpret the narrative within. As John Frow notes, such frames are constructs 'within which genres are embedded [that] implicate and specify layered ontological domains – implicit realities which genres form as a pre-given reference, together with effects of

authority and plausibility which are specific to the genre' (19). More succinctly phrased, they designate to the reader which pre-existing 'generic framework' they should use to interpret the text, one comprised of 'information that we may not know we know' and which 'constitutes the unsaid of texts, the organisation of information which lies latent in a shadowy region from which we draw it as we need it' (Frow 83).

As many of these nonfictional narratives were written to help reshape the mythic structures that had led the United States into an unwinnable war in Vietnam, they had to be presented in such a fashion that the account was perceived in the same empirical light as a historical or journalistic account of the war. The arrangement of its front cover is the most obvious means whereby *Friendly Fire* attempted to achieve this goal. It simply states the title of the narrative: 'Friendly Fire: A work of nonfiction by C.D.B. Bryan.'

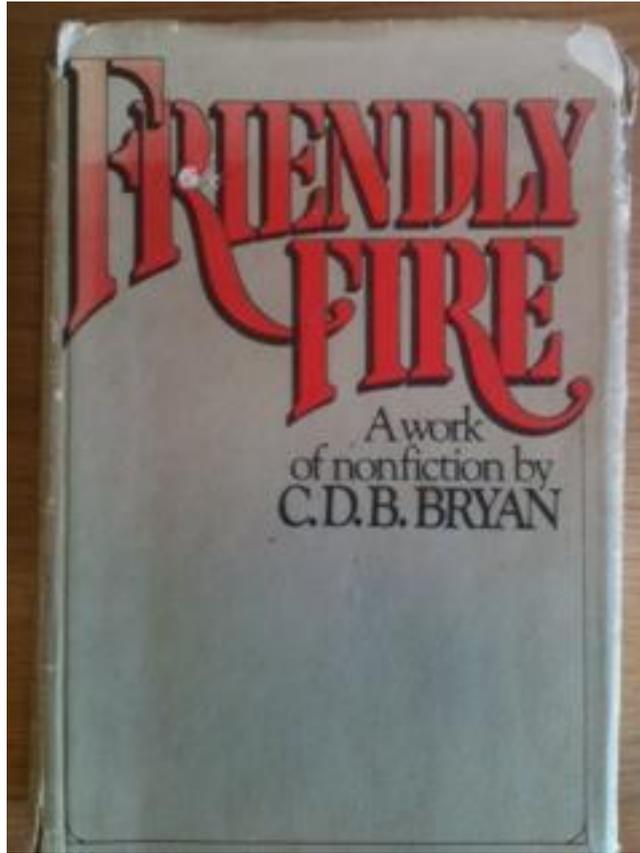


Figure 4. Front-cover of *Friendly Fire* (Source: *Friendly Fire*, First ed., 1976).

Such a sparse approach emphasises the message contained within this bibliographic code. Breaking it down into two constituent parts as per the framework Genette outlines in *Paratexts*, the ‘thematic’ (94) title of the work is ‘Friendly Fire.’ This element of the title, whose typeset in large red lettering fulfils what the latter saw as ‘the most obvious function of the [dust]-jacket’ (28) or cover in attracting the reader’s attention, refers to the literal subject matter of the text. However, the adjoining statement, ‘a work of nonfiction by C.D.B. Bryan,’ is much more significant. Acting as the text’s explanatory or ‘rhematic’ title, ‘its purpose is to announce the genre status decided on for the work that follows the title’ (Genette, *Paratexts* 94). Located on the cover of the text, it is this announcement which provides the initial impetus towards a referential interpretation, and one which is

consolidated by the exact reproduction on the back-cover of an advertisement placed by Peg and Gene Mullen in the *Des Moines Register* on 12th April 1970.

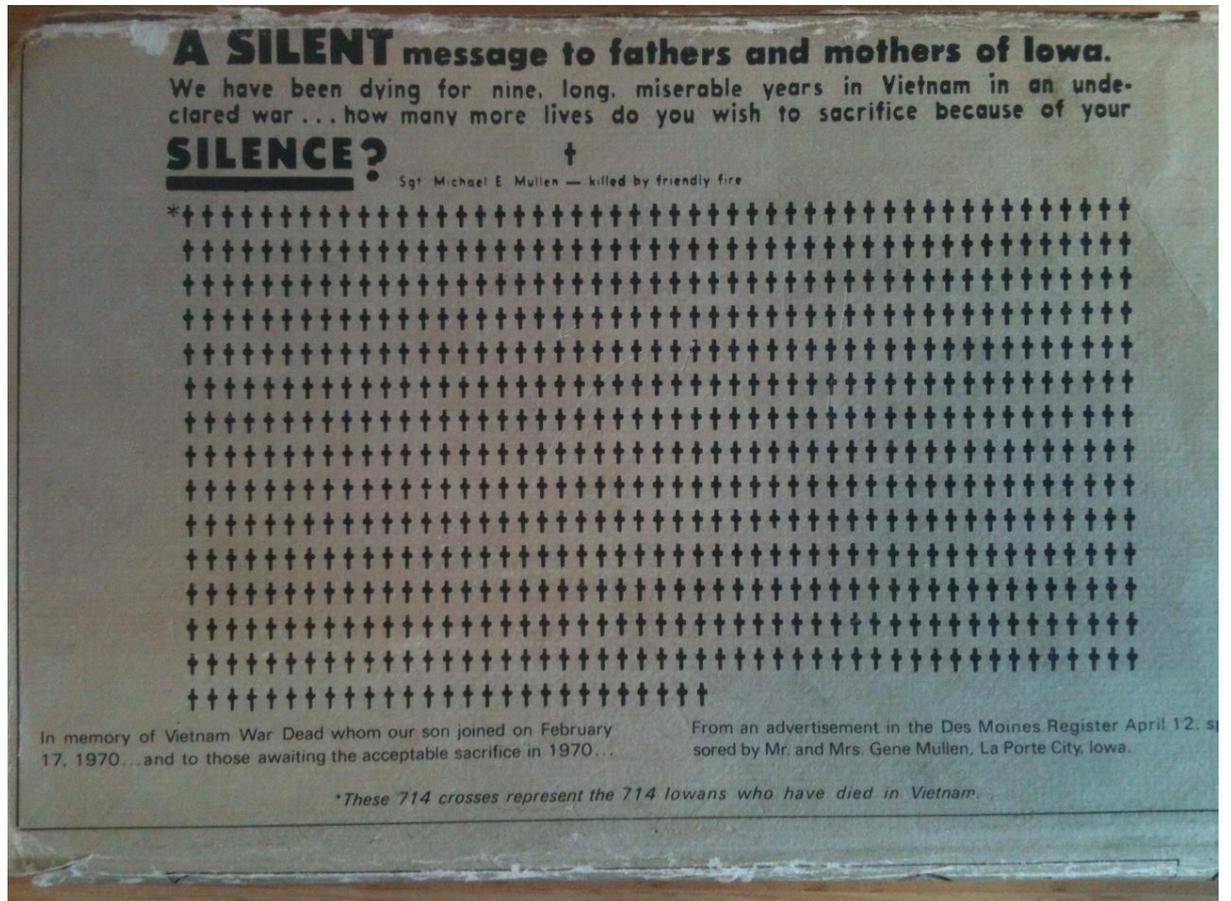


Figure 5. Back Cover of *Friendly Fire* (Source: *Friendly Fire*, First ed., 1976).

Containing an anti-war message that asks ‘how many more lives do you wish to sacrifice because of your silence?’ it depicts a cross for every one of the 714 Iowans who had died in Vietnam up until that point.

The aura emanating from this bibliographic code is exceptionally powerful and unique in terms of Vietnam War narratives. In replicating the advertisement that gained the Mullens such nationwide notoriety, a literary construct from that tumultuous period was incorporated into the text which both imbued the narrative with a sense of authenticity and immediately highlighted the American people’s

unspoken acquiescence of their government's willingness to let U.S. soldiers die in an unnecessary war. This may not represent a conclusive resolution to the issue of whose ideological stance is represented by the narrative. But if one were to refer to John Searle's interpretation of what he calls 'a meaningful sentence' as 'just a standing possibility of the corresponding (intentional) speech act' ("Reiterating" 202), the issue becomes clearer. Searle's thesis is that

The situation as regards intentionality is exactly the same for the written word as it is for the spoken: understanding the utterance consists in recognizing the illocutionary intentions of the author and these intentions may be more or less perfectly realized by the words uttered whether written or spoken. ("Reiterating" 202)

More clearly phrased, what the author says is simply 'the expression of his intentions' ("Reiterating" 202). Thus, the similarities between Bryan's *stated* position, to create a cultural artefact whose primary purpose 'was to say, "This is what your country did to you"' (Bryan, *Vietnam* 85), and the effect on the narrative caused by these paratexts, would strongly suggest that they were deliberately inserted by the author to reflect a specific ideological outlook.

However, the cover-jacket is located on the periphery of the text. In order to maintain the referential tone inferred by these codes, further measures would have to be taken within its main body. Foremost amongst these is the author's preface. A literary device which outlined the methodology used by the author to research and write the account, using the preface Bryan identified 'historical texts, public or official records, original correspondence, journals kept by a participant or extended

interviews with those persons directly involved' (7) as the central sources of his narrative. Encompassing a gamut of empirically viable sources, Bryan implicitly suggests to the reader that by being comprised of such material, his narrative is transitively imbued with similar properties. Reinforcing this trope are the safeguarding measures he explains in his introduction to the text. All interviews were tape-recorded, and the subsequent transcripts were then reviewed by the interviewees to determine any errors.

What is of greatest significance about this section however is the manner in which Bryan attempts to second-guess the reader's own doubts about what he himself calls 'those few instances of disparate recollections or failing memory' (7). His solution in such a case was a judgement call:

In reconstructing those conversations which I was not present at, I have assumed that if an individual recalled what was said and this recollection was confirmed by a second individual and there was no obvious advantage to be gained from a depiction of the conversation as recalled, then a reconstruction using the dialogue as remembered might be accepted as true. (7)

The effect this has on the narrative is to imply that such issues have been considered and assiduously gauged before the relevant material was included in the narrative. But perhaps one of the most crucial elements of the preface are the initials C.D.B.B. which appear at its end. Constituting the signature of the author, they serve to act as what J.P. Hunter identified in the eighteenth-century novel as a connecting link between the reader and writer. The full force of this signature on the reader is

outlined by Jonathan Culler in *On Deconstruction: Text and Criticism after Structuralism*. Here, Culler states that it ‘[attests] to the presence to consciousness of a signifying intention at a particular moment’ (125). In this context of this attempt to establish a link between the creative nonfiction of the Vietnam War and the intentionality of the author, its inclusion in a preface can be understood as ‘[implying] a moment of presence to consciousness which is the origin of subsequent obligations *or other effects*’ (126 my emphasis). While the obligations Culler’s analysis centres on are those of a legal nature, there is no reason to suggest that the “other effects” he mentions cannot be the desire to establish the historicity of a narrative.

Other than some few metafictional works published throughout the latter part of the twentieth century, footnotes are rarely found in works of fiction.⁵² However, they are noticeably abundant in *Friendly Fire*. Primarily utilised by Bryan to rectify errors that he himself has noticed, they provide a greater depth of information to the narrative. The effect here is telling. By rectifying the mistakes of Peg and Gene Mullen, Bryan demonstrates to the reader an authorial omniscience that underscores the rigorousness of his research. He is able to correct the Mullens’ confusion relating to the time difference between Vietnam and the United States, as well clarifying the exact hill upon which Michael Mullen was killed, despite Peg and Gene thinking otherwise. This omniscient undertone is amplified even further by the provision of explanations to terms which would otherwise be meaningless jargon to the uninformed reader. Bryan’s definition of such expressions as “Article 15” and “the Cooper-Church Amendment,” as well as background information regarding historical landmarks and battle-sites in both Vietnam and the U.S. don’t actually

⁵² The one obvious exception in the Vietnam War literature oeuvre is Tim O’Brien’s highly metafictional work *In the Lake of the Woods*.

further the narrative in any meaningful way. However, the footnotes allow the author's 'voice to be rendered into a collective voice of similarly educated authors' (Stevens 211). As the distinction between the words of the author and those of the referential sources he cites becomes ever more blurred, the narrative's claims become ever more credible.

However, the footnotes also serve another purpose. They provide a medium through which Bryan can reiterate the political message of the text. It must be remembered, that like all other bibliographical codes, while not essential to a proper and comprehensive understanding of the narrative, the footnotes are included nonetheless. Incorporated into Bryan's narrative as an otherwise empirical addendum to the primary textual event, they encourage the reader to interpret this information with the same gravitas as the referential material found in previous footnotes. The first and most elaborate of these highlights the nonchalance with which the American government violates the constitutional rights of Peg Mullen. For no other reason than making her feelings against the war more vocal than most, she is placed under surveillance by the F.B.I., an act which would appear to be an anathema to a nation which prided itself on the "unalienable rights" of liberty and free speech.

Two other footnotes incorporated into the body of the text continue to depict the American government in the poorest light. Briefly describing the events of My Lai and the repercussions Lieutenant Calley subsequently faced for his murderous actions, Bryan uses a footnote to show how the trial had come to represent all the crimes the United States had committed in Vietnam, as well as the willingness of the U.S. government to overlook these crimes. In the final footnote of this kind, Bryan inserts a passage from *The New York Times* April 17th 1954 in which he illustrates Nixon's eagerness to pursue a war in Vietnam as early as the mid-Fifties. Quoting

the words of Nixon directly from the newspaper, the narrative states that if the Communist Vietnamese forces won the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, 'the United States [...] cannot afford further retreat in Asia. It is hoped the United States will not have to send troops there, but if this government cannot avoid it, the administration must face up to the situation and dispatch forces' (263). With these words, Richard Nixon's actions towards Vietnam in the late Sixties and early Seventies are no longer just interpreted as a reaction to a specific situation; they become entwined in a premeditated process of thought which had begun almost two decades before. The image of Nixon as a president intent on war, despite the wishes of the American people, is unequivocally brought to the fore.

The relationship between these bibliographic codes and the text is that they serve to 'prolong it, precisely in order to present it, in the usual sense of the verb, but also in its strongest meaning: to make it present, to assure its presence in the world, its "reception" and its consumption' (Genette, *Introduction* 261). More succinctly phrased, the paratexts found within the body of the text are as much an intrinsic part of that text as the central narrative itself. Deliberately inserted in order to act as generic indicators, they enhance the reader's interpretation of the account without providing additional empirical information. Most significantly however, in relation to the nonfictional narratives of the Vietnam War, the presence of these codes in *A Bright Shining Lie* and *Friendly Fire* allowed authors such as Neil Sheehan and C.D.B. Bryan to instil in their narratives an authenticity that would otherwise be lacking. Deliberately inserted, the cumulative effect of any, or all, of these entities is a realignment of the reader's perceptions from that of an apocryphal recollection of events to one which could be considered as referentially viable as an empirical text. It was this attribute which would prove to be the most pivotal for those who sought

to refashion 'a pride in an America they had loved all along, but which they feared might have been lost: an America of the people.' (Bryan 276).

Chapter 4 – History with a Human Face: Creative Nonfiction and the Oral

Histories of the Vietnam War

What happened in Vietnam? What did it look like? How did it smell? What happened to you? Vietnam veterans know firsthand the statistics, the heroism, the evil and the madness. They are the ones qualified to look inside the casket and identify the body for what it is – a dead boy killed in a war, who had a name, a personality, a story all of his own. (Baker, *NAM* xii)

This is a memory book, rather than one of hard fact and precise statistic. (Terkel, *Hard Times* 3)

Returning home to the ideological maelstrom that was the United States after the Vietnam War, it was ironic that those few voices legitimately qualified to relate the truth of what happened in Southeast Asia were the ones seldom heard amongst the multitudes.⁵³ This was because those who had served in Vietnam had very much become like a scarlet letter on the national psyche. However, unlike the insignia which had incriminated Hester Prynne in Hawthorne's nineteenth-century romance, the veteran symbolised not a personal but a communal sense of shame. They

⁵³ The conspicuousness of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) in the anti-war movement from the late Sixties to early Seventies would prompt some to question the validity of this claim. Images of angry veterans expressing their dissatisfaction with their government by throwing their medals on the steps of Capitol Hill are some of the most memorable of the war. However, in the greater context of those who served in Vietnam, according to historian Andrew Hunt, 'membership rolls listed almost twenty-five thousand card-carriers, or fewer than 1 percent of all eligible Vietnam era veterans' (197). My intention here is not to understate the impact that the VVAW had on the outcome of the war or how people would come to perceive it. Rather, my argument is that despite the prominence of the VVAW as a vocal critic of the American government's actions in Vietnam, many of those who fought in Southeast Asia did not play an active part in the subsequent protests.

represented to many Americans the possibility that theirs was not an exceptional nation, and that in their dealings with other peoples, they may not have always acted ‘nobly and generously’ (Herring, “War,” 343). Consequently, as the years after the war rolled by, the veteran existed largely in a state of silent pseudo-exile as those around them, the politicians and the protestors, told *their* truths about the war. In this chapter however, I argue that *Everything We Had* is Al Santoli’s attempt to *reclaim* the narrative of the war for the veteran, and that in using creative nonfiction in the guise of oral history to do so, I contend that his text was not only a credible recollection, but one whose personal insights conclusively rejected the glorification of war which was for so long a key component of America’s exceptionalist ethos.

First published in 1981, *Everything We Had* emerged at a crucial time in the nation’s post-war history. The inaugural year of the Reagan presidency, many Americans were still struggling with the outcome of the war. One of Reagan’s most pressing issues upon being elected to office was to address what Patrick Hagopian describes as the American public’s ‘collective amnesia’ (*Vietnam War* 8) towards the Vietnam War and to recast the conflict as “a noble cause.” The geopolitical rationale for this was simple. The ignominious withdrawal from Vietnam in 1975 had resulted in a national mind-set marked by hesitancy and shame which had crippled the United States on the geopolitical stage.⁵⁴

Whether Reagan’s attempted rehabilitation of the Vietnam War was truly successful or not was for many years an issue of on-going debate.⁵⁵ A significant

⁵⁴ The condition was known as the “Vietnam Syndrome” and refers to the American’s public’s reluctance for the U.S. to intervene militarily anywhere in world, as well as an over-riding sense of guilt or shame towards the nation’s position of strength in relation to smaller countries. For further information, see Chapter 3, 114 (footnote 44).

⁵⁵ Reagan’s effort to recast the Vietnam War was a hugely sensitive issue. The United States was still a country largely divided over the Vietnam War. But, as Hagopian states, ‘the Vietnam War did not divide the nation into opposed prowar and antiwar groups. Instead, the war divided U.S. society into several factions’ (*Vietnam War* 25). There were those amongst the “hawks” who strongly advocated the use of nuclear weapons, while others preferred to put their trust in the policies of their government. Opinion amongst the “doves” as how to solve the crisis in Vietnam was equally divided. Although the vast majority protested

corollary of his political manoeuvring, however, was the hegemonic approval it provided the veterans which aided their re-assimilation into the wider community. This government-sanctioned change of mind became steadily more apparent in American society throughout the Eighties. Films such as *First Blood* and *Platoon*, and television programmes such as *The A-Team*, *China Beach* and *Tour of Duty* began to portray veterans not as disturbed and highly volatile killers, but as they largely saw themselves; survivor-victims of a terrible war who had been much abused by those who sent them to fight. Medical professionals, too, were beginning to officially recognise post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a valid psychological condition, while plans were also coming to fruition for a monument to the soldiers that had fallen in Vietnam to be erected in Washington DC alongside those commemorating the Korean War and World War II.⁵⁶ However, to the forefront of this ‘new discourse about Vietnam veterans: a sentimental and personalized discourse in which the key idea was that veterans had been misjudged and misunderstood by the public’ (Hagopian, *Vietnam War* 18), were the litany of authors writing creative nonfiction about the war. The post-war period from 1975 to 1980 saw an increase in the number of nonfictional narratives portraying the conflict, many of which were lauded by peers and critics alike for their realism and accuracy.⁵⁷ But comprised of the testimonies of thirty-three veterans of the conflict,

peacefully, there was a radicalised subset such as the Berrigan brothers and the other members of the Catonsville Nine, and the Yippie Movement of Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin et al whose actions were not in any way agreeable to many of their fellow protestors. Adding to this morass of confusion was the presence of the veteran in American society. Many hawks and doves viewed the returning servicemen and women with comparable vitriol. The former saw them as the cause of America’s military failures in Vietnam, while in the eyes of the latter, the veteran was a cold-blooded murderer responsible for the deaths of innocent civilians. For further information on this highly complicated political problem, see Hagopian’s *The Vietnam War in American Memory*.

⁵⁶ Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was listed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* for the first time in 1980. This was largely due to the work of Dr Robert Jay Lifton and Dr Chaim Shatan. For a more detailed account of this endeavour, refer to Patrick Hagopian’s *The Vietnam War in American Memory*, 49-78, or for a more personal insight, see Lifton’s own recollection *Home from the War: Vietnam Veterans, Neither Victims nor Executioners*.

⁵⁷ A significant amount of creative nonfiction concerning the conflict was written during and immediately after the war. However, the period of time from the late Seventies until the early Eighties saw a bevy of nonfictional works published, many of which would come to be recognised as the canonical works of the Vietnam War. These included Michael Herr’s *Dispatches*, Gloria Emerson’s *Winners and Losers*, Ron Kovic’s *Born on the Fourth of July*, C.D.B. Bryan’s *Friendly Fire* and Philip Caputo’s *A Rumor of War*.

few, if any, combined a singularity of purpose with such a multiplicity of voice as Al Santoli's *Everything We Had*.

The anger which many veterans felt towards the administration is evidently clear throughout Santoli's narrative. The living, breathing 'reminders of a war that Americans preferred to forget' (Hagopian, *Vietnam War* 18), they had been duped by their government into fighting an unpopular war that had more to do with neo-imperialism than any global struggle against Communism. When the barbaric realities of the war came to light, that same government turned its back on those veterans, leaving them to face the public outcry alone. However, by the onset of the Eighties, the people of the United States were slowly beginning to come to terms with Vietnam. Ronald Reagan exhorted his fellow Americans to remember the conflict not with 'guilt and shame,' but with a sense of 'pride and self-belief' which would 'restore the dead to the place of honour that had been unjustly denied to them and would give veterans [...] the recognition they deserved' (Hagopian, *Vietnam War* 38). Aided as such by the White House, the stigma of being a veteran of the Vietnam War was gradually beginning to fade.

Yet there was an ulterior motive to Reagan's political machinations. If Reagan could eradicate the negativity surrounding Vietnam by transforming it into something which edified the United States rather than degrading it, he would be able to begin reasserting America's position as the world's leading super-power. However, many ex-soldiers were cognisant of this attempt to establish a modern-day "Pax Americana" by trading off of the burgeoning sense of pride in the Vietnam veteran. They were aware that being rebranded as a product of Reagan's neo-exceptionalism would provide a false history to the American people of what actually occurred in Vietnam, and most likely, only perpetuate the cycle of

“regenerative violence” which had blotted the history of the United States up until that point in time. I argue that as a consequence, Santoli sought to impress on the American public that for those who had been forced to assimilate its horrors into the fabric of their being, and not through the protective gauze of a cathode tube or the print of a newspaper page, that more than anything else, the Vietnam war had ultimately been ‘a human ordeal’ (xv), one which caused psychic wounds that no amount of national pride could heal.

‘Oral History, in Practise, is an Art Form ...’

But despite the sincerity of *Everything We Had*, authenticity was an issue for Santoli’s narrative. As the years progressed, the conflict in Vietnam became ever more a hotbed of uncorroborated anecdotes and incidents. As Tim O’Brien observed in *The Things They Carried*, ‘Vietnam was full of strange stories, some improbable, some well beyond that’ (87).⁵⁸ Their purpose, however, ‘wasn’t a question of deceit’ (O’Brien 87). They were more an attempt by the veteran to garner the attention of a wider society with little or no interest in their experiences. Particularly given the abundance of stories being brought back from the war, many of which moved ‘back and forth across the border between trivia and bedlam, the mad and the mundane’ (O’Brien 87), it was highly likely that at least some were comprised of nothing more

⁵⁸ Perhaps one of the most well-known examples of such a tall tale emerging from the Vietnam War can be found in one of the short stories contained in Tim O’Brien’s metafictional *The Things They Carried*. In “The Sweetheart of Song Tra Bong,” one of the soldiers that the narrator served alongside tells of how another soldier managed to smuggle his American girlfriend into Vietnam. While some critics might argue that the veracity of this particular story is undermined by its inclusion in a fictional text, accounts such as these, rooted in the base fears and desires of the U.S. infantrymen, rarely drifted into the realm of verifiable fact. Other unsubstantiated rumours which were prevalent in Vietnam were the widespread belief in the early part of the war that the Viet Cong had tanks and helicopters to rival those used by the Americans and ARVN, and that there were American soldiers who had defected after being taken prisoner and were now fighting for the North Vietnamese. The latter was most famously encapsulated in Gustav Hasford’s fictional Vietnam War novella, *The Phantom Bloop*.

than ‘generalisations, exaggerations, braggadocio, and – very likely – outright lies’ (Baker xiii). So how exactly did Santoli create a text whose apparent authenticity allowed it to resonate so powerfully with the American people?

He did so in part by adhering to several of the tenets of autobiography/memoir. This view that an oral history could be interpreted as a form of “mini-memoir” is supported by several theorists of the historical form. Saul Benison, Paul Thompson, and John Tosh all concur with this belief, with the latter stating that testimonies such as those found in oral histories like *Everything We Had* can be read as ‘a fragment of autobiography’ (Tosh 314). That ‘oral history provides a source similar in character to published autobiography’ (Thompson, “Voice,” 24) is demonstrated by a very brief review of the theory discussed in Chapter 2. The primary caveat is that every interview reveals to the reader a veteran’s true experience of the Vietnam War. Unlike previous accounts whose authenticity were challenged because the author was either not in Vietnam or had not personally witnessed all of the events described, everything within *Everything We Had* could be personally vouched for by the narrator of the respective interview.

In our personal correspondence, Santoli does acknowledge the power of what he calls ‘emotional memory’ (“Re: answers”) in distorting a person’s recollection of events. He states that ‘memory and emotion have a tendency over time to cloud the actual events as they took place’ (“Re: answers”). But as mini-memoirs or autobiographies, each account was intrinsically governed by Lejeune’s autobiographical pact.⁵⁹ As such the integrity of the information relating to people, places and events of the war was safeguarded to some extent from many aspersions of doubt. In addition to these structural measures, the narrative voice in each extract

⁵⁹ For further discussion on autobiography and Lejeune’s ‘autobiographical pact,’ see Chapter 2, 71.

comprised a combination of the historical and narrating “I,” allowing each veteran to convey his or her emotional reactions, as well as recount historically verifiable events of the war. While this nebulosity might be read by some as a sign of fictionality, these measures taken by Santoli to underline the account’s status as a mini-memoir encouraged the reader to view the respective testimonies as works grounded in an empirical reality quite typical of creative nonfiction.

This referential undertone is also increased by the abundance of bibliographic codes present in the text which combine to imbue it with the Benjamin-esque aura so often found in creative nonfiction. Foremost amongst these codes are photographs of twenty-six of the thirty-three interviewees which encourage the reader to view the events described as having actually occurred to a real person and not some faceless entity. This association between the text and reality is further strengthened by paratextual material such as the preface written by Santoli. Unequivocally informing the reader that the events depicted within are a direct representation of reality, this link between the textual and empirical world is subsequently copper-fastened by the unnecessary but significant inclusion of an exact temporal and real world address for the author. Similarly extraneous information is also found in the inter-title of each section. In providing the reader with the “proper name” of the veteran, as well as his or her service details, as per J.P. Hunter, yet another connection is provided which guides the reader towards a factual interpretation of each account.⁶⁰

The cover too offers a generic indicator in addition to these codes located within the confines of the text. In quite a similar fashion to Bryan’s *Friendly Fire*,

⁶⁰ This was not a staple practise for oral histories of the war. Mark Baker’s *NAM* was comprised in its entirety by anonymous speakers, and although Gloria Emerson did name those she spoke with in *Winners and Losers*, the narrative thread she wove throughout her text frequently interspersed Emerson’s own feelings and experiences of the war with the men and women she interviewed.

the title of *Everything We Had* is segmented into two separate thematic and rhematic sections; the actual title of the novel and what is then worded as ‘An Oral History of the Vietnam War By Thirty-Three American Soldiers Who Fought It.’ Unlike many other narratives of the war, ownership of the testimonies contained within is explicitly and directly accorded to the “characters” whose words constitute the account. This is accompanied by prefatorial blurb from other authors acclaimed for their nonfictional works such as Gloria Emerson, who states that:

No book about Vietnam, or about American itself, will ever have the power for me that this one does, with its haunting, remarkable, ghastly memories of what the young were required to endure. Any woman in this country who does not know much about war will learn everything from these voices.

The narratives enclosed within are consequently presented to the reader as something diametrically opposed to fiction. What is most significant about this theoretical interlude is how substantially the *oral history* that is *Everything We Had* adheres to the autobiographical and bibliographic coding principles of creative nonfiction.

Santoli can thus be seen to incorporate a multitude of attributes into the text that encourage the reader to perceive *Everything We Had* in the same light as a referentially viable work. However despite its apparent veracity, as Ronald Grele notes, ‘there is scepticism [...] doubt, and distrust of oral history among professional historians’ (38). Such concerns are common to creative nonfiction and centre primarily on the fallibility of memory and the unavoidable poesis that occurred as a result. But they also include issues relating specifically to the selection of

interviewees, the transcription of interviews and the intrinsic ideological biases of the interviewer. With particular reference to the oral narratives of the Vietnam War, Patrick Hagopian notes that oral histories such as *Everything We Had* are at best the ‘nodal points around which the recalcitrant memory of the war is being contested and negotiated’ (“Oral Narratives” 148). This can easily be seen to be the case in Santoli’s text as many of the issues that critics of oral history, such as Betty McKeever Key, David Henige and Ronald Grele, have regarding the form are prevalent in the narrative. Raising the question of traumatic memory and its unreliability, several of the scenes included by Santoli are particularly harrowing and thus even more questionable in terms of their referential validity.⁶¹

Similarly, while Santoli’s narrative is an admirable attempt at providing an insight from a cross-section of those who served in Vietnam, other than their veteran-status, there is no obvious methodology apparent in his selection of interviewees. Furthermore, several of the interviews included in *Everything We Had* are dual interviews, an aspect of the text that brings what David Henige refers to as ‘small group dynamics’ (50) into play. This type of situation is one recognised by psychologists and often occurs when groups of people are questioned on a topic as a singular entity rather than individually. The resultant outcome is frequently not an accurate synopsis of events derived from the memory of the entire group, but rather that remembered by the more dominant or expressive members of the collective. This paradigm is clearly apparent in some of the joint interviews found in *Everything We Had*, as the words of Santoli and Bruce Lawlor visibly outstrip those of Jonathan

⁶¹ Thanks to the work of authors such as Tim O’Brien and Michael Herr, the Vietnam War has become synonymous with the representation of trauma in American literature. The study of trauma is an enormous field and one which has been covered in great detail by noted theorists such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub. However, for greater insight into the study of trauma in specific relation to the war writing of the Vietnam War, see Alan Gibbs’ *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives* and Kali Tal’s *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*.

Polansky and Thomas Bailey in their respective dual accounts. With no means to ascertain as to whether the former two veterans spoke at greater length, or whether the latter two merely had very little to say on the subject at hand (or, having spoken at length, had had their words edited down by Santoli), it is extremely difficult to decipher if the interviews accurately reflect the events which occurred in Vietnam.

Given Santoli's presence in the narrative itself, this latter issue becomes even more pressing. Emotionally invested in the experiences of those he spoke with, it is difficult to imagine him adopting the part of a detached and silent sounding-board as those he served with relived their most pressing and often troublesome memories of the fighting in Southeast Asia. In reality, he actually admits to being quite the opposite in the narrative's preface. He describes his role in of *Everything We Had* as that of one who 'travelled around the country and spent countless hours talking, crying and laughing with other veterans and their families' (xvi). Despite being labelled as an oral history of the war in Vietnam, much to the ire of many academic historians, *Everything We Had* actually manifested many of 'the fictions of factual representation' ("Fictions" 121) which had been so controversially brought to light by meta-historians such as Hayden White.

It is of little surprise to learn that Santoli played quite an active role in the poetic reconstruction of the text. He repeatedly cites Studs Terkel, the author of two of the most celebrated oral histories of the twentieth century, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* and "*The Good War*": *An American History of World War II*, as 'an influence and inspiration' ("answers"). Although the latter's texts were lauded as works of creative nonfiction, presented as conversational narratives obviously guided by Terkel himself, and each devoid of source notes, they were also a source of frustration for many academic historians trying to appraise

them in accordance with traditional parameters. Santoli's approach can be seen to mirror that of his mentor. Speaking to Patrick Hagopian in 1991, the transcription process Santoli related told of how he used actors to re-read the many transcripts he had compiled, a practise which enabled him 'to edit and reedit them between readings until he had distilled the stories to their essence' ("Voices" 597). Working in cohesion with a team of editors (and actors), the manner in which he constructed a text was one which was also marked by a 'dramatic style where punctuation [was] for emotional effect and not the King's English' ("answers") and in which 'every page packed a punch' ("answers").

But remarks such as these by Santoli emphasise his belief that 'oral history, in practise, [was] an art form' ("answers"). Taking it upon himself to be what Alessandro Portelli describes as 'a partner in the dialogue [...] a "stage director" of the interview [...] an "organizer" of the testimony' (72), the part Santoli played in the composition of the text is celebrated, not hidden. He freely admits to the respective interviews being led along a pre-established path. He states that while he 'did not present questions,' he did have 'notes which I used to structure discussions ("answers").' Candid about the fact that his narrative represented 'a combination of literature, dramatic arts and journalism' ("answers"), rather than attempting to prove the empirical validity of *Everything We Had*, Santoli embraces the poiesis which allowed him to convey what he and his fellow veterans felt about the Vietnam War.

Further damaging to the historical worth of his work was Santoli's admission to both Hagopian and I that he had used the Japanese haiku as a literary model to structure this editing process. The original conversations with the veterans chosen for his narrative were thus rendered into a succession of 'spare raw images' ("answers") which were then wielded in 'an impressionistic manner as illustrative support for the

various themes discussed' (Tosh 321). The outcome of such lexical origami was an account of the war which was at best a paraphrased version of what actually occurred, and one whose congruity to the original set of events was nigh on impossible to verify due to the absence within the text of interview transcripts or other related source documentation. While academic historians such as David Henige saw this reduction of the original testimony into a succession of sound-bites and images as a destructive act, such a practise was totally in keeping with Santoli's view that oral histories were a site of poetic endeavour. He was 'not "editing",' he was producing 'written art' ("answers").

As Hagopian states in "Oral Narratives: Secondary Revision and the Memory of the Vietnam War," while the testimonies of the war such as those found in *Everything We Had* are 'offered as raw' (139), in reality, they had 'in fact been diced and cooked in accordance with recipes concocted by the editors and publishers' (139). But for Santoli, instead of creating a historical document which depicted a sterile and apathetic version of the war, the paraphrased testimony presented to the reader in the most efficient and powerful way possible 'the complicated psychic and physical realities of what [the veterans] went through in Vietnam' (xvi).⁶²

Much to the chagrin of historians, it thus becomes quite difficult to differentiate between the views of Santoli and those around him. But it must be stated that this study is one of literary, not historical analysis. As such, many of the perceived historical failings of *Everything We Had* can be seen to be of great benefit when the text is viewed as a work of creative nonfiction. As Hagopian stated, these oral histories were sites in which memories of the war were incredibly ductile.

⁶² Santoli is not alone amongst Vietnam War historians in his view oral histories represented an art form. In an interview with Eric Schroeder in *Vietnam: We've All Been There: Interviews with American Writers*, 66, Wallace Terry (*Bloods*), describes an editing process which mirrors Santoli's.

Although quite important, absolute historical veracity was not the utmost priority. What mattered most was that the reader was encouraged to *interpret* the text as a document directly representing reality. Santoli clarifies this aim in our personal correspondence, stating that he had ‘a mission which was to give a voice and turn into literature the collective experience of fellow soldiers, who could not convey all that they had experienced and were feeling about their experiences which isolated them’ (“Re: answers”). Quoted in a personal correspondence in June 2014, what is significant to note about Santoli’s comments is how he affiliates the phrases “to give a voice” with “turn into literature.” Santoli acknowledges that to produce an effective and credible oral history, the interviewer ‘must make the commitment to study the chronology and facts and figures that are associated with a given event (“Re: answers”).’ However, his overarching view of the form was that ultimately it was ‘dramatic literature which gives a meaning to the academic history of events’ (“answers”).

So what was it exactly about Santoli’s oral history that lent it to such a convincing recollection of the events of the Vietnam War? The most apparent aspect of *Everything We Had* is that, despite the multitude of narrators contained within the text, it appears to adhere to the chronology of the war. Beginning with the early years of the conflict, Santoli’s text describes the reactions of American soldiers to important early historical milestones of the conflict, such as the fall of the Diem regime in 1963 and the Tonkin Gulf incident of August 1964. Largely complying with this historically verifiable timeline, moving from the American landing in Da Nang in 1965 through to their final withdrawal from Saigon a decade later, the structure of *Everything We Had* encourages the reader to view the events enclosed as comparable to history. This consistency in relation to other accepted historical

sources allows the narrative to satisfy what Paul Thompson calls one of ‘basic tests of reliability’ (*Voice* 153). The historical events documented in Santoli’s narrative mirrored the general recollection of those same events which had been engrained in the public conscience. His status as a veteran offered further validity to the verity of the enclosed narratives. In our personal correspondence, Santoli spoke of how ‘being a war vetran was a bond of trust with the veterans I interviewed’ (“answers,” sic). Having served in Vietnam, and been wounded in action, Santoli was more than qualified to appraise the words of his fellow veterans with regards to the integrity of their content.

A similar dynamic would appear to be in place regarding the selection of interviewees. Encompassing speakers who were male and female, black, white and Hispanic, infantry and officer, military and non-military, Santoli’s narrative encourages the reader to believe that it is giving voice to just about every demographic who served in Vietnam.⁶³ But by being seemingly allocated a place in the text in accordance to their time in Vietnam, a methodology orchestrating the precise placement of each interview in the overall narrative is implicitly conferred to the reader. Not only does it present the reader with a relatively smooth, and thus seemingly authentic, narrative-flow in the text, significantly, it also elides the active role taken by Santoli in the construction of the narrative, making the narrative seem even more credible. Furthermore, the fragmentary nature of each account is accepted by the reader as a condition of the sizeable amount of veterans recollecting their memories of the war contained within the text. Characterised by a noticeable brevity (one amplified even further by Santoli’s rendering of the individual pieces), each interview is exempt from the demand of thoroughness in terms of detail that would

⁶³ This was actually his intent. Santoli told Patrick Hagopian in his interview that he had picked speakers ‘for reasons of racial diversity’ (“Re: Al Santoli”), while gender was also spoken of by the veteran as a very prominent concern.

be expected from a single life narrative. Characterised by an obvious dissatisfaction towards the U.S. government, an underlying dissent matching the zeitgeist of the early Seventies becomes apparent, one whose authenticity is reinforced as seemingly veteran after veteran reiterates either the same or similar sentiments to the reader.

Rather than representing the views of one ex-soldier, who may or may not have been content with his or military service, the accounts of the war found within *Everything We Had* now assume an air of typicality regarding the average veteran's time in Vietnam. As Paul Thompson notes, 'in general, a historical interpretation [...] becomes more credible when the pattern of evidence is consistent, and is drawn from more than one viewpoint' (*Voice* 228). A significant aspect about what Hagopian describes as this 'Frankensteinian quality' ("Oral" 138) of the narrative was that it prevented its veracity from being undermined by a specific ideological position held by the author. This was an important concern for the perceived authenticity of the work. If one were to look at just the works included in this study, Tim O'Brien's status as an unwilling conscript, the circumstances of Philip Caputo's ignominious discharge from the army, Neil Sheehan's association with known anti-war campaigners such as Daniel Ellsberg and David Halberstam, and C.D.B. Bryan's obvious sympathies for both the Mullen family and for Norman Schwarzkopf could all be cited as potentially distortive influences on the veracity of their respective texts. Yet by being comprised of an immensely heterogeneous group of "authors," a group of assorted gender, class and ethnicity, any such concerns regarding *Everything We Had* would appear to be vitiated.

The underlying authenticity of the narrative is further enhanced by the actual wording of the individual accounts. In each interview, each serviceman or woman's referentially verifiable historical information, what Mas'ud Zavarzadeh called

‘factoids,’ is given to the reader.⁶⁴ Before they even begin to share a veteran’s experiences, they are provided with his or her name, rank, regiment, dates and area of service while in Vietnam. As discussed in the Introduction, identifying the personae depicted within the narrative by their proper names also gives them the power to “answer back” should the events described differ from those that actually occurred, a practise which acts as a double safeguard for the perceived verisimilitude of the text for the reader. Most crucially however, these veterans, as is the case with all the others, are presented to the reader as if speaking their own words.⁶⁵ The repetitious phrases, and unique vernacular of the war, what David Henige describes as ‘crutch words’ (107), as well as pauses, cadence, and other minutiae of speech indicating the physical condition of the interviewee are incorporated into the text as if told to Santoli by the veterans themselves. Spoken in a multitude of differing dialects and tones, the respective narratives not only reinforce the view that the interviewees were drawn from all strata of American society, but also provide the impression that each spoke from ‘some kind of spontaneous, ideologically innocent position’ (Hagopian, “Oral,” 142).

Santoli also goes to the extent of minimising the possibility of third-party interference in *Everything We Had*. He states quite clearly that the number of veterans included in his text was a choice solely of his making, and when asked about the role that the publisher played in the construction of the text, he declares that ‘the best thing [they] did was stay out of my way’ (“answers”). The resultant

⁶⁴ See Chapter 2, 75, for the full definition of this neologism by Zavarzadeh.

⁶⁵ In keeping with Santoli’s underlying proclivity towards poiesis, it was of little surprise to discover in my correspondence with two of the surviving veterans interviewed in *Everything We Had* that this was not the case. In reading his account in *Everything We Had*, Jan Barry noted that only certain portions of his interview were used in the text, while also feeling ‘that’s not the way I talk!’ Similarly, Stephen Klinkhammer states that there were ‘some instances where I was relating to issues in the third person that appeared as if I was the first person.’ However, both men are unequivocal in stating that the integrity of the events and emotions they were trying to express were intact. Despite the editing that took place, Barry noted that ‘the facts and opinions I presented weren’t changed.’ Klinkhammer makes a similar claim. Describing his experiences of the war as encompassing a ‘raw and biting recollection,’ he felt that Santoli ‘summed it up as best that could be accomplished.’

piece is one which David Henige considers to be in the same vein as ‘testimony’ (2) and which Mark Baker would describe as ‘bearing witness’ (xiii) in *NAM*, his oral history of the war.

Unlike Terkel’s explicit authorial interventions in *Hard Times* and in *The Good War*, bar the odd explanation of a specific military term, there is no obvious evidence of Santoli’s presence in the narrative, or indeed any clue that such large-scale editing took place.⁶⁶ It is important to note that at no time does Santoli refer to himself as an “author” in the text. Most often self-described as a veteran, the greatest divergence he makes in terms of this act of labelling is to call himself an ‘interviewer/editor/writer’ (“answers”) in our correspondence. While we know the opposite to be true, the effect of Santoli’s reluctance to align with any obvious form of poesis encourages the reader to view the accounts contained within *Everything We Had* as a tapestry of unadulterated experience, with the latter’s role in the construction of the text merely that of a facilitator rather than a creator.

This undertone is further emphasised in the preface. Referring to himself as just another member of a collective group of veterans, his words, those of the men and women he served alongside and their inherent sincerity are actually juxtaposed against two of the most maligned sources of fictitiousness during the Vietnam era; the Hollywood scriptwriter and the Washington speechwriter. Crucially, in a marketplace dominated by narratives on the war written by politicians, singularly talented veteran-authors and journalists who had reported from Southeast Asia, *Everything We Had* offered an opportunity for the “everyman” who served in Vietnam to speak of his or her experiences. Only now the primary source wasn’t

⁶⁶ The revelations regarding actors and haikus only came much later in conversations where questions regarding the editing process were specifically asked.

some pseudo-celebrity of the war, but a normal person living an everyday life quite possibly in the same city or town as the reader. Supported in many cases by a photograph of the veteran, the speakers put a human face on what had become through the mass use of technology, a very inhuman war. Buffered by Santoli's prefatorial claim that *Everything We Had* 'tried to put into honest words the raw experience of what happened to us' (xv), the reader has no reason to believe that what he or she subsequently reads is anything other than a sincere recollection of the events of Vietnam. The reality, as discussed, is something much different. But using these empirical structures to create a vestige of referentiality throughout the text, Santoli was able to craft an account of the war in Vietnam which appeared to be devoid of ideological purpose yet which spoke with an authority based on personal experience, and an authenticity derived from historical fact.

This personalization of history is one much discussed by Paul Thompson, and its significance is fundamental to any attempt to tell a true account of the Vietnam War. While once the private domicile of hegemonies and the ruling elite, oral histories such as *Everything We Had* had the potential to alter the balance of history-making and replace it with a process much more democratic and thoroughly entwined in the interests of the people. Thus, oral historians such as Al Santoli, as well as Studs Terkel, Wallace Terry, Gloria Emerson and Mark Baker hoped 'to give back to the people who made and experienced history, *through their own words*, a central place' (Thompson "Voice," 22 my emphasis). The veterans of the war in Vietnam were these people, and their memories of the war represented those of their countrymen. With this purpose in mind, *Everything We Had* was presented to the American public with the 'hope you will see what we saw, do what we did, feel what we felt' (xvi). But for Santoli to convey this humanity to the reader, he had to first

reclaim the narrative of the war from those who sought to use it to further their own ideological purposes. This required distancing those who had served in that war from what had become the widely accepted portrayal of the veteran as ‘deeply disturbed, often homeless, and always alone and misunderstood’ (Honeycutt Baldwin 323). In addition to this negative depiction, Santoli also had to confront the new-found jingoistic ardour which Reagan’s Administration was conveying for the veterans. Therefore, in order to quell the contradictory “baby-killer”/John Wayne stereotypes, Santoli would have to depict not just the physical horrors of the war in *Everything We Had*, but also the harrowing *psychological* effects that the conflict had had on the veterans.

‘We Were the War ...’

Transcending boundaries of race, gender and class in one single narrative, *Everything We Had* provided the reader with a panoptic view of the war in Vietnam. Drawn from a cross-section of American society, Santoli sought to present the true realities of the war as experienced by those doing the fighting. This version however, would differ greatly from that which had been fed through the hegemonic spectrum and subsequently disseminated by the American media on the other side of the globe.⁶⁷ Central to these emotions were feelings of anger towards an administration

⁶⁷ The role of the American media throughout the Vietnam War has traditionally been depicted as one at odds with the U.S. government. However, in reality, the exact opposite was actually the case. Bar a few outspoken reporters such as David Halberstam and Neil Sheehan, the majority of newspaper and television news reports actually propagated a view of the war that supported the American intervention into Vietnam. As Gary Hess notes, ‘Among the battles witnessed on television, 62 percent were presented as U.S. “victories” and 28 percent as successes for the other side. In 80 percent of the over-all assessments of the war, the American effort was depicted favorably; only about 7 percent of the assessments described the situation as favorable to the other side, and about 7 percent as stalemated’ (145). For much greater insight into the misconception that the media played an instrumental role in heightening anti-war sentiment in American society throughout the war, see *Vietnam*:

that seemed far removed from the conflict, unconcerned by the toll it was taking on American lives and which betrayed in Vietnam many of the exceptionalist ideals which had initially prompted its incursion into Southeast Asia. Although largely hidden or over-looked in government-sanctioned accounts of the war, this anger is a constant reoccurrence in *Everything We Had*.

In a damning indictment of ‘the people who controlled the war (114),’ Platoon Leader Robert Santos describes parallel realities for those who led in Vietnam and those who followed. In one of the longest interviews of the text, Santos’s account demonstrates the combination of historical “I” and narrating “I” discussed in Chapter 2 which made these “mini-memoirs” such credible recollections of the events of Vietnam.⁶⁸ The manner in which he portrays the U.S. officer overseas is a far cry from the image of the great defender of democracy striving to liberate lesser nations from the iniquities of Communism. Showing clear evidence of the misplaced hubris Neil Sheehan identified in the American military during his time in Vietnam, to many ordinary infantry the officer corps were a throwback to an age of colonialism, men existing in a world cossetted by time and space from the reality of the war. Recounting his experiences of a brief visit to the Military Assistance Command centre (MACV) in Saigon, Santos recalls how the officers spent their time ‘drinking and talking about the old days, when the war was going to end real quickly and people would come across from Washington and sit on a hill and watch the war going on in the distance’ (113-4). The only disturbance to the reminiscing officers in such an absurdly tranquil wartime scene was the sight of enlisted men scurrying around them carrying out menial chores.

Explaining America’s Lost War by Gary Hess and *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Consent of the Mass Media* by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky.

⁶⁸ See Chapter 2, 75-76, for further discussion on these components of the autobiographical “I.”

A platoon leader who had watched his troops fight and die in the Vietnamese jungle, Santos is presented to the reader as a contrast to these modern-day heirs to the colonial tradition of Southeast Asia. Unlike the 'Saigon warriors' (Devanter 158) seeing out the war in the cocoon of the MACV however, in a series of self-reflexive episodes the latter describes several firefights and ambushes which inflicted both serious wounds and death upon the men in his command with frightening regularity. Ordered to seek out the Viet Cong and disrupt their infrastructure by whatever means possible, Santos was faced with the brutal realities of the war in Vietnam for a largely innocent native population throughout his tour of duty. Asking himself how he would react if the everyday occurrences of rape and murder were taking place in his hometown, Santos displays the insight and sense of tragic awareness so often lacking in the words and deeds of those orchestrating the war. He belies the stereotypical portrayal of a dispassionate and detached leader, and instead admits to being like 'a father and mother to these guys' (107). Demonstrating the obvious care and affection of a parent more than a commanding officer, the world he describes is a society characterised by needless violence and loss, and one largely unknown to those in the loftier ranks of the military hierarchy.

While Santos's ironic observation regarding the total disparity between the experiences of the enlisted men and those above them is striking, this reality of the war is further presented to the reader by the inclusion of interviews juxtaposing the experiences of two men whose tours of duty were drastically different: Supply Officer, Scott Higgins, and Fire Team Leader, James Hebron. The former epitomised what was known as a "Rear Echelon Motherfucker" (REMF). Operating as a barracks-master in Saigon, Higgins compares his role in the war to 'almost like running a hotel' (79). Sheltered from the misery and terror of the frontlines, his only

experiences of an enemy attack during his time in Vietnam were two errant missile strikes, both of which landed relatively safely in the distance. His impression of the war was that while it was ‘out there and around you, and some of your friends were getting killed or wounded or whatever [...] you, on the other hand, could carve out an okay existence’ (82).

If presented to the reader as a standalone interview, the recollections of Supply Officer Higgins would present a pretty damning insight into how those who escaped the frontlines lived through the war. However, presented by Santoli as a joint interview, Higgins’ experiences of the war are interspersed amongst those of fellow veteran, James Hebron. As the latter relates the living horror of Khe Sanh, the difference highlighted by this dual structure between their respective experiences of the Vietnam War is stunning. Ill-equipped and underfed throughout his time in Southeast Asia, unlike the apathy of Higgins’ account, Hebron’s recollections are noticeably defined by anger at the mistreatment and abuse he encountered at the hands of the U.S. Army. While Higgins’ daily routine consisted of the hiring of Vietnamese bar-girls or the overseeing of maintenance and repairs to the officer’s billets, Hebron’s included walking point on patrol, fire-fights, avoiding ambushes and incoming artillery, *in addition* to what he describes as ‘the most terrible fucking humping I ever did in my life’ (81).⁶⁹ In contrast to the air-conditioned and well-fed tour of duty put down by Higgins, for Hebron, basic acts such as a change of clothes or washing one’s teeth were seen as unnecessary luxuries. In an anecdote which truly

⁶⁹ To walk “point” meant that whilst on patrol, Hebron had to lead the other men as they walked in single file through the jungle. It was often seen as one of the most precarious positions of the platoon as the person in front was at greater risk from ambush or any hidden booby-traps. The term “humping” referred to the forced march of American troops for periods of up to 30 days. Often having to cut through dense undergrowth and elephant grass, a journey which would normally take a few hours on foot could turn into an entire day’s endeavour. Several authors, such as Michael Herr in *Dispatches*, have dwelt on the manner in which the loss of human life was effectively sterilised by this distinct idiom of the Vietnam War, ‘the cheer-crazed language of the MACV Information Office’ (224). However, for the most extensive study to date on the many unique terms and colloquialisms used by American personnel during the Vietnam War, see Linda Reinberg’s *In the Field: The Language of the Vietnam War*.

reveals the reality of Khe Sanh for those marooned there, Hebron recalls to Santoli how helicopters bringing in his unit's first hot meal in weeks were forced to abandon their mission due to enemy sniper fire. In recompense to the men below, the pilots dropped ice-cream from above. Hitting the landing zone from a height, Hebron recollects that 'it just splattered all over' (81). Eager for at least some semblance of the comforts of home, Hebron and his peers 'all dove for it and had it all over our faces' (81). That it was melting into the Vietnamese earth was no deterrent to the desperate American troops.

In "The War That Never Seems to Go Away", George C. Herring describes benevolence as the cornerstone of the American ideology. In protecting an ally from a totalitarian enemy threatening invasion, it was this benevolence which ostensibly motivated the U.S. intervention in Vietnam. As a metonymic representation of a wider society, it was thus axiomatic that the U.S. military should have been one of the leading upholders of such an altruistic belief-system.⁷⁰ Intent on demonstrating the righteousness of their global crusade against Communism, any use of force by American soldiers was consequently recast as one 'done so only in the pursuit of noble goals' (Herring 343).

However, undermining this alleged confirmation of America's status as a nation marked by Divine Providence were the accounts contained with *Everything We Had* which coalesced a multitude of viewpoints into one unified voice to reveal the true nature of the American intervention in Southeast Asia. The words of Kit Lavell and Bruce Lawlor echo one another as both veterans detail how the behaviour of U.S. personnel in Vietnam expressively betrayed the exceptionalist principles which were supposed to be an intrinsic part of the American psyche. Each claims

⁷⁰ See Chapter 2, 87, for a greater insight into how the U.S. military was frequently seen to represent the American nation.

that many of the missions undertaken by the U.S. military in Southeast Asia were either used ‘to settle old scores’ (175) between rivalling South Vietnamese political factions, or as a means of consolidating the local ruler’s power over a region. Rather than protecting the people of the embryonic nation of South Vietnam from their Communist neighbours, Lavell, a pilot for the U.S. Navy notes that ‘quite often [...] targets were dreamed up by the province chief if people didn’t pay their taxes or whatever’ (121). Any Vietnamese casualties that arose as a result of such actions were largely dismissed by the American military as collateral damage. However, the ability to write off these deaths as the unfortunate happenstance of war was greatly challenged by the public discovery of military approaches such as the infamous Phoenix Program in 1967.⁷¹

Again, any ambiguity regarding the true intent of the Phoenix Program is diminished by the manner in which it is described by several of the veterans interviewed by Santoli. Thomas Bailey terms it as ‘an assassination program’ (174), while Bruce Lawlor uses a similar idiom with his phrasing of it as ‘an extermination program’ (175). The sinister undertone conveyed by these two men is further reinforced by Mike Beamon’s recollection of it being made up of Vietnamese criminals, ‘guys who were doing time for murder, rape, theft and assault’ (177) who worked in bizarre cohesion with American and Australian Special Forces.

Yet, while the program was shut down in 1971 after being brought to public attention in a series of Congressional hearings, in reality, the barbaric practises it had carried out against the Vietnamese people were actually a mainstay of many a

⁷¹ The Phoenix Program was a strategy devised by the CIA whose central aim was to neutralise the Viet Cong infrastructure in South Vietnam. Beginning in 1967, it was responsible for the deaths of between 20,000 and 40,000 Vietnamese. One of the most controversial aspects of the American war in Vietnam, the final figure is unknown but it is believed up to 5,000 of these deaths were innocent of any ties with the Viet Cong. For a much greater examination of the successes and failures of the Phoenix Program, refer to John Prados’ *The Hidden History of the Vietnam War* 204-220.

veteran's experiences of the war in Southeast Asia.⁷² Recollections of the abuse of prisoners, the dismemberment of corpses, the needless killing of livestock and the destruction of entire villages in *Everything We Had*, all support the claim that the American spirit was corrupted in Vietnam. In a fashion similar to how Tim O'Brien had questioned the integrity of America's Manifest Destiny in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, Doug Anderson, a corpsman who served with the Marines near Danang between February 1967 and 1968, recalls two separate incidents of needless brutality which he describes as 'not compatible with the ideals I'd been brought up to believe in' (59). In the first he tells of how he witnessed a fellow American soldier 'push an old man into his family bunker [...] and throw a grenade in after him' (60). In the second, he recounts how a prisoner of war was beaten, tortured and chained to the back of an Armoured Personnel Carrier, and then dragged 'until all the flesh was torn off his body' (61). Occurrences such as these however were frequently disregarded by the military hierarchy as the work of a few "rotten apples" or the result of a particularly bad week in terms of men lost to booby traps and sniper fire.⁷³

But again, this hegemonic view is undone by the multitudinous voices within *Everything We Had* repeatedly testifying to the exact opposite case. As Gayle Smith, an American nurse who was stationed in Binh Thuy, states 'I thought organized crime was the last word in bad guys, but I swear, the Army had them beat. You just paid off the right person and that was it' (128). Yet many veterans had arrived in Southeast Asia with the same preconceived notions as Douglas Anderson. In the

⁷² Virtually every text on the Vietnam War gives some mention to the atrocities committed by American soldiers in Vietnam. However, by far one of the most comprehensive is Nick Turse's *Kill Anything That Moves*.

⁷³ This act of "lashing out" in response to unrelenting casualties caused by booby traps and sniper fire is a commonplace occurrence in virtually every Vietnam War narrative, fictional and nonfictional. Having experienced the emotion while patrolling the heavily mined and immensely hostile Quang Ngai province (known to the American soldiers as "Pinkville") in the months immediately after the My Lai Massacre, Tim O'Brien describes the resultant combination of terror, frustration, anger and helplessness in *If I Die in a Combat Zone* as akin to a heart transplant operation which is interrupted midway by the realisation that the replacement heart is missing. While O'Brien played no part in any atrocity while serving in Vietnam, he understood how men such as Lieutenant Calley and those like him succumbed to 'the wickedness that soaks in your blood and heats up and starts to sizzle' (O'Brien "Vietnam In Me") and obeyed their most animalistic instincts in committing some of the most heinous war crimes of the twentieth century.

global standoff between the United States and the combined forces of Communism, the former was ‘supposed to be the good guy’ (59). But upon their departure twelve months later, the opposite was generally agreed to be the actual reality. Rather than fulfilling the role of “the world’s policeman,” veterans such as Lavell, Lawlor, Anderson and Smith began to view the U.S. military as some kind of international “gun for hire.”

This belief would appear many times throughout *Everything We Had*. The ex-soldiers themselves admit to being somewhat culpable for this transformation. Karl Phaler readily admits that ‘I was an American. I was party to all this. I was responsible for it. You can’t say I’m just a cog in a machine’ (46), while Jan Barry simply states ‘we were the war’ (5, original emphasis). Yet this acceptance of responsibility by the veterans for the events which occurred during the war leads onto what is perhaps the most pivotal aspect of *Everything We Had*. There is little or no equivocation about the primary cause of the American metamorphosis in Vietnam. It was not just found in the actions of those who served on the ground, but also in the actions of those who directed them from above, the statesmen in Washington. However, these politicians were duly elected representatives, which meant that responsibility for the killing in Vietnam lay not *just* with them, but ultimately with the ordinary American people themselves.

This was the essential truth that the veterans of Vietnam sought to express to an American public who, regarding the servicemen and women with suspicion and unease, had ostracised them from society. The veterans had been asked by their government to uphold a tradition which had existed in their society since the War of Independence, and they did so because they had been taught to believe the same values and ideals that had also beguiled men such as Philip Caputo in *A Rumor of*

War. This was the longstanding belief that ‘when your country needs you, you go. You don’t ask a lot of questions, because the country’s always right’ (44). Thus, in the classroom that was American society, while some pupils may have run amok, they had only done so at the behest of their teachers.

This reality of the war was one largely hidden from the general public. Any instances of animosity, subversion, or worse, were concealed by the military so that the U.S. Army could maintain its image of a body of men united as one by an esprit de corps and the rectitude of the American mission in Southeast Asia. But stories such as those of murder, inefficiency and dissent are littered throughout *Everything We Had* in a narrative form whose credibility is reinforced by the inclusion of the historically verifiable ‘actees’ (Zavarzadeh 79). As discussed in Chapter 2, the inclusion of historical figures doesn’t transform an account into an empirically valid representation of events. However, as noted by Scholes, their integration into a scene which is already buffered by both the presence of a proper name and an auto-diegetic narrative actively encourages the reader to interpret the account as referentially viable. Describing the veteran’s reactions to a military hierarchy both removed from the realities of the war and, at times, apathetic to the deaths of those who fought in its name, perhaps the most jarring are told by Santoli himself.

While working as a physical therapy assistant on the amputee ward in Fort Gordon, Augusta, Georgia, he describes the meeting between two parents and their son who had just returned from Vietnam. As Santoli derisively recalls, ‘this kid from [...] somewhere in the mountains of Tennessee [...] had lost both legs and part of a hand’ and all he had to show for his sacrifice was ‘this goddamn picture of this fucking general shaking his hand’ (134). Santoli is equally scathing as regards the squalid medical conditions wounded veterans faced upon their return home. Housed

in an old barracks built during World War II for German prisoners of war, the Veteran's Association (VA) hospital Santoli worked in was in an appalling state. Infested with cockroaches and freezing cold, it bore greater resemblance to an establishment found in Victorian England than the United States of the twentieth century. Highlighting one of the many flaws of an administration whose priorities lay elsewhere, Santoli comments that 'they were spending millions of dollars a day on the war at the time, but they couldn't afford to build a new hospital' (134). However, the lion's share of his ire was reserved for the 'actee' (Zavarzadeh 79), Secretary of Defence Melvin Laird.⁷⁴

Visiting the hospital as part of a government tour, Laird is exposed to the harsh and bloody truth of the war in Vietnam. Santoli describes how, as he was attending to the needs of a fellow soldier whose legs had been amputated, Laird and his entourage 'walked by, single file (135).' The fates had combined to bring the Secretary of Defence face to face with the human cost of his government's policy-making. But despite the poignant sight of a young man on a stretcher whose life had been ruined, Santoli is disgusted to note that 'that son of a bitch walked head on – didn't even look to the right or the left of him' (135). Symbolizing all those who came before him, and many of those who would follow in his bureaucratic footsteps, Laird remained oblivious, 'he didn't bat an eye and he didn't look' (135). In that corner of America, the true reality of the war for the ordinary infantryman is conveyed to the reader. Regardless of the gravity of the sacrifices they made for their country in Vietnam, their 'lives and ideals meant nothing' (Santoli, *Bear* xxii). Cast aside once their tour of duty was over, they became nothing more than 'just cold statistics in Washington's political computers' (Santoli, *Bear* xxii).

⁷⁴ For more elaborate discussion on actants, actees and actemes, see Chapter 3, 120.

The practise of using historical figures to encourage the reader to interpret the individual accounts as true finds even greater prominence in the testimony of Karl Phaler, a communications officer aboard the U.S. Navy Destroyer *Richard S. Edwards* during the Tonkin Gulf incident. Yet rather than using the misdeeds and prejudices of an anonymous officer or statesman, *Everything We Had* identifies one specific figure as the source of Administrative folly, one whose integrity should have been all but impeachable in the United States of America, President Lyndon Johnson.

The latter is portrayed as deliberately misleading the American public as regards the exact nature of the war in Vietnam, and the enemy they were facing. Phaler describes in *Everything We Had* how dubious radar information was interpreted specifically to allow the American boats to fire on their North Vietnamese equivalents, an order issued directly by President Johnson himself. Compounding this duplicity was Phaler's comments about the president telling the people of the United States that 'he was not going to send American boys to fight an Asian war' (14). But as Phaler recollects from that day in August 1964, 'I looked across the water and there was a whole bunch of Americans getting ready to fight that Asian war' (14).

Johnson's role in the manipulation of the American people is further highlighted by David Ross recalling that 'I remember President Johnson in one of the psy-op flicks we saw saying that the communists weren't like us – they didn't have feelings' (41). The veracity of each of these incidents can be interpreted as questionable, and in the greater context of the Vietnam War, they would appear to be of relatively minor importance. However, just as C.D.B. Bryan made explicit mention of President Nixon's willingness to send American troops into Vietnam as

early as 1954 in a footnote in *Friendly Fire*, what is significant is the *inclusion* of these events in the text and the mentioning of Johnson as an integral part of these machinations. Furthermore, they are found in the opening sections of the text.

Depicting the events which catalysed America's "official" entry into the war in Vietnam, by correlating with the overall chronology of the war, testimony such as Phaler's which incorporated both the President Johnson actee and the Tonkin Gulf factoid implicitly manipulates the reader into interpreting the text as referentially valid from the outset. By inferring that the American president would knowingly and willingly deceive the American people, Santoli could show how the government had manipulated everyone in its remit, whether they were citizen or soldier. Both were 'ordinary human beings' and both were hugely affected. The only difference was however, that the government's deception had subjected the latter to 'an awesome nightmare not of [their] doing' (Santoli, *Bear* xix).

'Survivors and Victims ...'

More than the awful conditions many of those injured in Vietnam had to endure in some of the older VA hospitals scattered around the States (as briefly described by Santoli during his fleeting encounter with Melvin Laird), disclosing the true realities of the conflict also meant presenting to the reader the trauma of fighting the war in Vietnam. PTSD had lingered around the peripheries of accepted medicine since World War I. It had been loosely defined as an anxiety disorder caused by exposure to a terrifying incident in which severe physical harm was threatened or actually occurred. As such, PTSD was a particularly pertinent medical condition for those who served in the military. Listed in *A Trauma Artist: Tim O'Brien and the Fiction of Vietnam* by Mark A. Heberle, the symptoms of PTSD are many and include

Psychic or emotional numbing; apathy; repressed anger, rage and hostility; anxiety and fears associated directly with combat; sleeplessness and recurrent nightmares; irritability; suicidal thoughts and feelings; self-destructive behaviour; survivor guilt; flashbacks to traumatic events; self-deceiving and self-punishing patterns of relating to others, inability to discuss war experiences with them, and fear of losing them; fantasies of retaliation and destruction; negative self-image; alienation and feeling 'different'; and a sense of meaninglessness. (12)

Although often unnoticeable to the naked eye, these after-effects of the war were as damaging to the veteran as a physical wound, and an unforeseen reality that many had to live with. Reflective of a horrendous ordeal more than an opportunity of glorious sacrifice for one's country, the interviews of the military personnel comprising *Everything We Had* are replete with these signs of trauma.⁷⁵ Most commonly found amongst the thirty-three testimonies is the inability to discuss the war with others. Again drawing on more than one singular viewpoint to convey the widespread effect that trauma had on the veterans of Vietnam, in a variety of different ways, Lee Childress, Doug Anderson, Donald Smith, Brian Delate, John Muir, David Ross, Gayle Smith and Thomas Bird all demonstrate obvious difficulties in sharing their experiences of the war with those around them.

⁷⁵ As studies of trauma have progressed, the issue of perpetrator trauma has become ever more pertinent. This refers to an anxiety disorder suffered by the *perpetrator* of an incident rather than the victim. Manifested by a noticeable sense of guilt or shame, a desire to confess or a refusal to discuss a particular act or deed, and a tendency to identify oneself as a victim, particularly when he or she is 'subject to the whims and incompetence of their commanding officers' (Gibbs 184-5), perpetrator trauma is evident to some extent in virtually every Vietnam War narrative. For further discussion on perpetrator trauma and its literary representation, see Alan Gibbs' *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives*.

Bird's inability to relate his trauma is one of those most noticeable. Even though he is speaking to Santoli, a fellow veteran who went through many of the same horrors of the war, Bird is unable to communicate the emotions he felt as he heard the final cries of his fellow countrymen who lay dying on the battlefield, 'they kept asking for medics and some of them started screaming, "Shoot me. Kill me." I got very confused in returning fire. As it got darker ... the wounded guys ... I started knowing that ...' (35). What is crucial to note is that the ellipses are inserted by Santoli and indicate to the reader Bird's inability (or unwillingness) to relive the anguish of his experiences. In the words of Brian Delate, many of the veterans 'ended up being the same way. Almost mute' (117).

Compounding this silence was a society that was not willing to re-embrace its returning soldiers. In *Home from the War*, Robert Jay Lifton explains quite clearly the effect that these returning soldiers were having on American society. Neatly summarizing the model of "regenerative violence" posited by Richard Slotkin, Lifton states that

In the past, the warrior as hero could be a repository for broad social guilt. Sharing in his heroic mission could serve as a cleansing experience of collective grief from whatever guilt had been experienced over distant killing, or from the need to feel any guilt whatsoever. (132)

However, the role of the American soldier in the years after Vietnam was somewhat different as Lifton goes on to say

But when the warrior-hero gives way to the tainted executioner-victim, not only is his repository taken away, but

large numbers of people risk a new wave of unmanageable
guilt and a profound sense of loss, should they recognise
what their warriors have actually become. (132)

To accept the veteran, despite an awareness of what had occurred in Vietnam, would possibly allow some greater admission of guilt by American society in relation to its propensity for violence and perhaps even an implicit acknowledgement of the bloodiness of the nation's historical past. As a consequence, many veterans were rejected by their countrymen, a course of action that further exacerbated the sense of alienation many of those who had been to Vietnam already felt from the greater American society. For many veterans, life upon their return to the U.S. was one which was marked by frustration and meaninglessness. Describing his attempts to readjust to life with friends and family, Lee Childress encapsulates a common difficulty faced by many of his fellow soldiers. He states 'today I go down the street and I see things in a way that nobody else sees them' (55). Robert Rawls testifies to a similar issue telling Santoli that 'you try to talk to somebody about it, they think you're out of your mind or you're freaked out. They want to put you in a strait jacket' (137-8). Having been forced to survive in an alien land where the morals and ethics of normal civilisation didn't always apply, one in which violent death or injury was an accepted occurrence, and where everyday language frequently took on a nuanced and often ominous form, even the veterans who *wanted* to talk about their experiences in Vietnam saw those at home as being unable to truly comprehend the magnitude of what they had been through.

Other signs of trauma are equally prevalent throughout the narrative in the individual testimony of each of the veterans, men and women whose recollections are each reinforced by photographs or other empirical data such as their full name,

dates of service, and whereabouts in Vietnam they served their tour of duty. Whether it was the realisation that the NVA was receiving aid from American charities, the poor treatment of the ordinary soldier or simply just the sheer waste of human life in wartime, the testimonies of Robert Santos, James Hebron and Gayle Smith are noticeable for the anger and hostility each contains. Similarly, Scott Higgins tells of having repeated nightmares about artillery strikes even when stationed in the safety of Fort Lee, Virginia, while Karl Phaler, Douglas Anderson and Jan Barry are all shown to be still struggling with a negative self-image in the aftermath of the war. Survivor guilt is prominent in the words of James Bombard, a Rifle Platoon Leader in Saigon during the Tet Offensive who saw close friends killed, as it is in those of Robert Rawls, who expresses clear suicidal tendencies as he declares that 'I can't say now if I was one of the lucky ones. Sometimes I wish I could've went ahead and died with my friends' (140). Describing altercations with police, motorcycle gangs and fellow soldiers, as well as a litany of exploits which would be considered serious crimes if committed in peace-time, Mike Beamon presents evidence of self-destructive behaviour. Likewise, when he sees Secretary of Defense, Melvin Laird, Santoli's desire 'to strangle him, to pull a Frankenstein, put a death grip on his neck and not let go until he's dead' (135) indicates the presence of a number of symptoms of PTSD from rage and hostility to fantasies of retaliation and destruction in the veteran's psyche.

But while each of these was detrimental to the ex-soldier's psychological well-being, possibly the most damaging symptom for the veteran in the long-term, and also one of the most evident throughout the text, is mental constriction. Described by Mark Heberle as 'the shutting down of physiological, emotional and cognitive responses' (12), this had resulted in the veteran's noticeable apathy

towards the war, society, and everything else around them. This mood is best surmised in *Everything We Had* by David Ross who describe it simply as ‘not knowing whether to laugh or to cry [...] and kind of doing both at the same time’ (222). But what were actually the protective processes of a mind trying to integrate the horrors of Vietnam into the everyday living of normal society were often misinterpreted by civilians as an unwillingness to re-assimilate back into U.S. society. In many ways, this apathy could be interpreted as the primary causal factor for the veteran’s pseudo-exile from the wider community. Although the American public was eager to forget the war and misdeeds that had occurred within it, ones which challenged the apparent benevolence and civilisation of the nation’s ethos, the returning soldier could not take partake in what for them would have been an elaborate sham.

This entire dynamic is played out in a scene recalled by Stephen Klinkhammer who describes the reception met by ex-prisoners-of-war at the Great Lakes Naval Station, Illinois. Despite the gaiety of the affair, Klinkhammer remembers one particular POW who deliberately took no part in the celebrations, slipping away as Brian Delate had described himself leaving his own return-home party earlier in the text. But unlike Delate, whose exit was the angry response to the tactlessness of a neighbour who had ‘no idea of the dimension of [her] question’ (117) in asking the helicopter door-gunner whether he had killed anyone in Vietnam, this unnamed POW bore very obvious marks of having lived through a harrowing physical and mental ordeal. Malnourished and uneasy in the presence of such a large crowd, Klinkhammer notes that he ‘looked like a man who was very tense and very bitter and had a whole lot to say and no one was letting him say it’ (202).

One of several veterans with two contributions to the text, the textual location of Klinkhammer's testimony is fundamental towards consolidating a referential interpretation of *Everything We Had*. Reflecting on the plight faced by POWs as they returned from the war in the early to mid-seventies, and the emotions of frustration, anger and confusion that he and many other military personnel doubtlessly felt as news emerged that Saigon had ultimately fallen to the North Vietnamese in 1975, his recollections on the war are amongst the very last given. Fusing together the same combination of factoid and auto-diegetic narration that highlighted the contributions of Karl Phaler, Klinkhammer's memories of the final days of the war actually bring the text to what appears to be a natural end. By concluding the narrative in this manner, one that portrayed the lasting malaise which would continue to afflict the psyche of the Vietnam veteran for years to come, the reader is encouraged to view the entire text of *Everything We Had* as an absolute rendering of the American experience in Vietnam, one which impinged on every aspect of society.

Framing it in the context of 'Greek theatre' in an interview with Lois Lindstrom in 1996, Santoli asks that his narrative be read as a form of chorus to the tragedy that was the war in Vietnam. Representing a *collective* voice, the traditional function of the chorus was to assist the audience by further clarifying the events occurring onstage. It was a mechanism which could express a truth that the actors could not; their fears, their secrets, their unspoken thoughts. In the context of the Vietnam War, the veterans were this chorus; faceless voices that were seldom heard in the 'theatre of ideological warfare' (Hagopian, *Vietnam War* 431) that Vietnam had become. But unlike the homogenous entity found on the stages of Ancient Greece, Santoli's chorus was comprised of real people whose experiences in

Vietnam had equipped them to act as a chorus should, and reveal the unspoken truths about the war.

The veteran's attempts to reclaim the narrative of the Vietnam War can thus be seen to be much more complicated than the "morality plays" previously put forward by rivalling parts of American society. The true reality of the war for those who fought it was that they saw themselves as survivors and victims, more than warriors and heroes. Their words and tears were indicative of a catharsis, and signalled a sense of humanity and an emotional awareness that many Americans had not recognised in its Vietnam veterans, one that was often hidden by apathy or anger. But expressing a mixture of shame, sadness and fury, with the pride of serving one's country, *Everything We Had* spoke with an honesty that penetrated through the competing ideologies of the lingering hawks and doves, and revealed a final and lasting truth about the events which had occurred in Vietnam. For the veterans knew and saw this truth. They had seen the atrocities committed by the sons of Middle America at the behest of their surrogate military and political fathers. They knew that America had 'lost more in Vietnam than the troops [they] lost' (95). They had personally witnessed this reality of the war, and *Everything We Had* was their response to a very deliberate attempt by the United States to forget it.

Ultimately, *Everything We Had* became the mouthpiece for an entire disenfranchised generation as it reiterated the words of O'Brien, Caputo, Sheehan, Bryan and countless other veteran-authors of the war. It emphasised how the nation's expectations had been shaped by its Frontier past, how brutal the American persona could be, how the nation had lost its moral compass, and how responsibility for the war in Vietnam lay not just with the veterans, or with the politicians, but with the American people as an entire nation. But unlike previous nonfictional narratives,

Everything We Had coalesced each of these issues into one voice as the call grew stronger to recognise that the efforts of those who served in Vietnam were as valiant as those who had fought in previous wars. While many other works of creative nonfiction combined the referential validity of the official accounts of the conflict with what Tim O'Brien called a 'story-truth' (*Things* 179), *Everything We Had* was a historiography of multiplicity which sought to instigate even further the burgeoning dynamic of social change for the veteran. Fittingly, given that its composition would appear to be a democratic affair, the oral history presented by Santoli could be seen as representing the first uniquely American interpretation of the war as it sought to bring recognition to all those who had served, suffered, and some say needlessly died, on a field far away from home, in order to ensure that such a tragedy never occurred again.

Conclusion - A Story Told

The war was about names, each name a special human being who never came home. (William Broyles, qtd in *To Heal a Nation*, Scruggs,7)

E Pluribus Unum – Out of Many, One. (Original Motto of the United States)

In “The War That Never Seems to Go Away,” George C. Herring cites one possible reason for the Vietnam War’s lasting ‘hold on the national psyche’ (336); it had ended with ‘most of the major issues unresolved’ (336). Questions such as ‘was it a good war or a bad war, a noble cause or essentially immoral?’ (345) remained unanswered, and the only ones who could truly provide such answers were the veterans, the men and women who had witnessed the deeds and misdeeds of the U.S. forces fighting there.

However, post-war America was a far cry from the halcyon days of the Kennedy Administration, when a nation had stood as one ‘to play cop to a Communists’ robber’ (Caputo, *Rumor* xii). Having lost a war for the first time in its history, the 1970s saw the United States divided into opposing and seemingly irreconcilable factions. But if the nation was ever to move on from the Vietnam War, to learn its lessons so that future “Vietnams” could be avoided, reconciliation between the veterans and the society which had mostly vilified and alienated them was essential. For historians such as Patrick Hagopian, the starting point of such a

process was the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The monument was intended as an apolitical attempt to separate ‘the warrior from the war’ (Hagopian, *Vietnam War* 82). To be placed in Washington, this brainchild of ordinary conflict veterans such as Jan Scruggs was privately funded and sought to rehabilitate the memory of the Vietnam veteran in the consciousness of both the American people and their politicians.⁷⁶

Despite never receiving an official seal of approval from the White House, its unveiling in November 1982 finally brought about the societal recognition which the veterans had desired for so long, and enabled them to begin reintegrating once more into American society. The effect of this monument on the national psyche cannot be underestimated. It listed every one of the names of those Americans who died in Vietnam, and in doing so, connected the ‘veterans’ emotional wounds with society’s wounds’ (Hagopian, *Vietnam War* 401). Those names were not empty signifiers, devoid of meaning. They represented real people with real lives. Each was a father or a son, a mother or a daughter, a brother or a sister who had died simply because they, like virtually everyone else, had believed in the ‘the fantasy of American exceptionalism’ (Pease 12). As such, the monument became a centrifugal force which radiated across the United States, affecting not just those who served in Southeast Asia, but also their friends and family, their neighbours and colleagues. The creative nonfiction of the war also contained such names. Commemorating those who answered when called, they too spoke to the American people of those who

⁷⁶ Although situated in Constitution Gardens alongside memorials to World War II and the Korean War, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was *not* a government funded endeavour. Its purpose was not to commemorate the Vietnam War, but rather to honour the American men and women who had served and died in the conflict. While the construction of the monument was supported to some extent by prominent Washington figures, and had to meet with the approval of statutory bodies such as the National Capital Planning Commission and the Commission of Fine Arts, it was a privately funded memorial which was never formally sanctioned by the White House. At all times, the impetus guiding the monument towards completion lay with the veterans who had served in Vietnam, and without their persistence, it is highly unlikely the project would even have been undertaken at the time. Ultimately, while historical sources indicate that President Reagan was in favour of the memorial, his desire not to isolate particular political supporters meant that he never actually gave the Vietnam Veterans Memorial an official endorsement. For the most comprehensive insight into what was a hugely contentious and complicated political situation, see Hagopian’s *The Vietnam War in American Memory* 79-110.

sacrificed themselves for what Norman Mailer would later describe as ‘the hubris of the American vision’ (*Vietnam* 96).

Like the aforementioned monument, the status of these nonfictional narratives as cultural artefacts of ideological worth was derived from the emphasis each placed on the “proper name,” the semiotic construct that connects an arbitrary collection of signs and letters with a fellow human being. Both the monument and these works of creative nonfiction shared with the American public the names of those who served their nation. No longer ‘mute signifiers’ (Hagopian, *Vietnam War* 146) confined to the pages of a text or to the surface of a wall, they were now ‘redolent with meaning’ (Hagopian, *Vietnam War* 146). They imbued the accounts that contained them with an authenticity absent in traditional works of fiction. The horrifying and often tragic experiences within these texts suddenly mattered much more. If nothing else, these names were a testimony. They spoke for ‘those who were there and can no longer speak for themselves, and those who were not there and need to be told’ (McLoughlin, “War and Words,” 19). Thus, while not mounted on a plinth amongst other stones of similar ideological stature, the nonfictional narratives written by Caputo, O’Brien, Sheehan, Santoli and Bryan were noticeably imbued with a gravitas very much akin to that which characterised Maya Lin’s monument. They too had the potential to be used as cultural artefacts capable of instigating what many saw as a much needed change in American society.

The autobiographical accounts written by O’Brien and Caputo unequivocally underlined the fallacy of the long-held belief that war was an intrinsic part of the American psyche. Rather than describing his wartime experiences as something to be lauded, Tim O’Brien portrays them as aimless, ineffective and nothing less than terrifying. It was not strength of conviction that brought O’Brien to Southeast Asia.

It was fear of society's censure. He had been drafted into the Army. His decision to fight in Vietnam was not one motivated by a sense of patriotism, but by a sense of shame. As the Tim O'Brien narrating the metafictional *The Things They Carried* would later state, 'I was a coward. I went to the war' (55).

In contrast, Philip Caputo was a voluntary conscript and one of the first soldiers to land in Vietnam. Yet his narrative, *A Rumor of War*, offers a similar message to the reader. He insists that the true nature of war was a far cry from that which had been portrayed with such confidence and poise by Hollywood supermen like John Wayne. In reality, it had been a grief-stricken experience, one which had brought the veteran-author to the brink of madness by exposing him to death on an unforeseen scale. Caputo portrays Vietnam as a place which had exposed the venerated tenets of American culture – duty, honour and sacrifice pro patria – as nothing more than 'the myths with which old men send young men off to get killed or maimed' (xiv). For so long a cornerstone of the American belief-system, Caputo refutes the concept of "regenerative violence," revealing it to be little more than an ideological cosmetic masking centuries of invasion, murder and injustice.

In a similar fashion to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the authors of *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and *A Rumor of War* utilised 'artmaking in the service of a social purpose' (Carroll 10). Presenting the reader with a version of events deliberately constructed to encourage a referential interpretation of the text, authors of autobiographical accounts of the war transplanted the sacrifices made by American personnel from a psychological on to a physical plane. By crystallising the suffering of those who fought in Indochina, the narratives of both Caputo and O'Brien refuted the hegemonic glorification of war which had become such a prevalent part of American culture. Demonstrating how the United States as a nation had been

beguiled for centuries by the myths of the Old Frontier, and wrong to intervene in Vietnam, each veteran vocalised the thoughts of a greater consciousness and spoke from the political present to critique the historical past in the hope of a better future.

The creative nonfiction of the war written by journalists was frequently used to similar ends. However, such journalistic narratives often lacked the premium of first-hand witness so prevalent in the works of the veteran-authors. Although imbued with an authenticity derived from a litany of photographs, prefaces, maps and letters which linked each account directly to the zeitgeist of the Vietnam era, challenging the cultural valorisation of war with the same efficacy as their autobiographical counterparts remained an issue. Yet such a shortcoming did not prevent them from highlighting the need for a radical change in American society. Neil Sheehan's *A Bright Shining Lie* and C.D.B. Bryan's *Friendly Fire* were two such texts which repeatedly highlighted the growing divide which had emerged between the American government and those it claimed to represent.

Using the life of John Paul Vann as a template, the former provided the American people with a blueprint of their nation's involvement in Southeast Asia. But it was far from an edifying description. Analogous to the portrayal of a John Vann becoming increasingly more lost in a fog of arrogance and delusion, Sheehan depicts an America straying ever further from the self-affirming ideals of its forefathers as those who governed desperately sought to maintain the erroneous belief that 'America's cause was always just, [and] that while the United States might err, its intentions were always good' (Sheehan 8). In many ways, the untimely death of Vann, the one who 'exemplified [the U.S.] in his illusions, in his good intentions, in his pride, in his will to win' (Sheehan 3), conveyed a clear message to the power-brokers of Washington responsible for guiding the nation into an

uncertain future; unless they found some way to temper the hubris which had somehow been subsumed into American culture, the nation was destined to waste generation upon generation of future American lives in meaningless conflicts.

Friendly Fire is laced with a similar political intent. But rather than citing the U.S. government and its military as the sole cause of the nation's failings in Vietnam, Bryan also identifies the "great silent majority" as being *equally* responsible. While he is unerring in his criticism of the administration, for Bryan, it was the silence of the ordinary people which had allowed the U.S. government to act as they did. Describing *Friendly Fire* in an interview with Eric Schroeder as 'propaganda in the purest sense' (*Vietnam* 85), Bryan's narrative is essentially an invective aimed at these Middle Americans as much as their government. He was more than cognisant of what the United States had become by the mid-twentieth century, a nation marked by apathy, arrogance and excess. Using Peg and Gene Mullen as archetypes, *Friendly Fire* demonstrates that not only are the humble values and beliefs of the ordinary people which had made the United States the most powerful nation on the planet still existent in the national psyche, but that they were also a panacea to the passivity which had crept into the American mind. Capable of effectively challenging the exceptional egotism that had come to dominate the thinking of those on Capitol Hill, Bryan underlines the huge importance of these core American values to any hope of a "new" America. Like the monument in Washington, works of creative nonfiction such as *Friendly Fire* and *A Bright Shining Lie* played a significant part in any hoped for 'reconstruction of social order' (Carroll 5) in the years after war. Not only did they remind 'audiences of culturally important events and persons and of the commitments, values, virtues, and beliefs, for which they stand' (Carroll 7), each also emphasised how far the primary governmental

institutions of the United States had drifted from those they claimed to represent during the Vietnam War years.

These homespun virtues weren't confined however to those who had remained behind. Many narratives, particularly the oral histories of the war such as Al Santoli's *Everything We Had*, sought to convey that these attitudes were equally prevalent in the mind-sets of those who served, and that as a consequence, the veteran was someone to be celebrated as a worthy part of American society, not reviled. Presented in the words of the ordinary servicemen and women, Santoli was able to demonstrate the human consequences of the conflict. The men and women who fought the war were not disturbed or dangerous to themselves or those around them, but rather often frightened and alone as they struggled to make sense of what they had been forced to live through. The government's war might have ended with the fall of Saigon in 1975. But as they continued to deal with the multitude of physical and psychological injuries they had suffered in Vietnam, the veteran's war was still on-going.

Emphasising the 'narrative of societal neglect' (Hagopian, *Vietnam War* 156) that they had to endure upon their return from Vietnam, creative nonfiction in the guise of oral histories such as *Everything We Had* functioned in more ways like a traditional monument than virtually all other narratives of the war. By conveying a newfound awareness in the American people largely absent until the events of the war in Southeast Asia unfolded, they transformed 'individual experience into an icon of communal redemption' (Clark 199). Drawn from a multiplicity of voices, their historiography of the war demonstrated that conflict didn't create heroes, only victims. It revealed that the true source of American morality was to be found within

the ordinary people who served, not those who sought to lead, and that despite being a nation divided, it showed how, in reality, America was truly only one.

The Vietnam War was a war which *should* have re-affirmed the nation's Manifest Destiny. But for the first time in its history, the United States had tasted military defeat. As a consequence, unyielding faith in government had been replaced with cynicism and mistrust, and those once regarded as national heroes were now largely looked upon as cold-blooded killers. But as the years rolled by, governments changed. The broken promises of past administrations were frequently forgotten as new vows of prosperity and change took their place. However, the veterans were unable to erase the stain of Vietnam with such ease. They felt they had been betrayed by their government, and rejected by their countrymen. Even though they had fought and died for their nation, there had been virtually no recognition for the sacrifices they had made. But as 'living embodiments of the war' (Hagopian, *Vietnam War* 49), it was they who continued to bear the brunt of society's blame for America's failures in Vietnam. They were the ones most often associated with the images of brutality and murder. They were the ones held most responsible for the mistakes America had made in Vietnam. Most importantly of all, they were the ones that many Americans simply wanted to forget. But the men and women who served there would never forget the trauma they endured in Vietnam. They were the ones who had taken the nation's teachings closest to heart, and as a result, they were the ones who had been forced to endure the harshest consequences.

If every other American was to realise the lessons learnt by those men and women who suffered for their nation, a means would have to be found to nurture a new cultural ethos, one far removed from the blinkered exceptionalism which led the nation into war in Southeast Asia. Fusing fact with experience, history with raw

emotion, creative nonfiction's disparate collection of autobiographies and memoirs, works of literary journalism and oral histories told a story of the war that few would have believed possible in 'the age of Kennedy's Camelot' (Caputo, *Rumor* xii). In the closing pages of *Dispatches*, perhaps the most celebrated Vietnam War narrative of them all, Michael Herr encapsulates this mood, those feelings of confusion, frustration, anger and disbelief. He simply states that the Vietnam War 'didn't end like any war story I'd ever imagined' (262). In hindsight, maybe that was for the best.

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