Now Playing: Vietnam

“We are here to help the Vietnamese, because inside every gook there is an American trying to get out.” Pogue colonel in Full Metal Jacket

"With a heavy dose of fear and violence, and a lot of money for projects, I think we can convince these people that we are here to help them,” Lt. Colonel Nathan Sassaman, Abu Hishma, Iraq, December 7, 2003.

Many veterans of Vietnam will tell you they went to war with images of John Wayne and the Sands of Iwo Jima in their heads. They have probably forgotten that Wayne played a depressed, angry alcoholic in the movie, that he dies in the end, and that the intended hero of the film is not Wayne at all but the gentle John Agar, who would never want his son to grow up to be a Marine. Not very long after the release of the movie, the men who fought in Iwo Jima or their younger brothers, went back to war -- in Korea. Their sons came of age in time for the TV re-runs of Sands of Iwo Jima, and service in Vietnam.

The manifest content of the war movies of the 1950s, whether set in World War II or Korea, was pro-war. Every service in the military got at least one feature film celebrating its exploits: frogmen, submarines, aircraft carriers, close air support units, the service academies (West Point Story in 1950, Air Cadet in 1951), the Coast Guard, the Marines (several times) even the exploits of the ex-enemy (Desert Fox, 1951). The pull of World War II, the film historian Thomas Doherty has written “wasn’t merely the attraction of adventure romance, or high melodrama but the consolation of closure and the serenity of moral certainty. For Hollywood and American culture the Second World
War would always be a safe berth.”¹ But many of these films, including *Sands of Iwo Jima* contain a powerful undercurrent that pulls the other way, towards a recognition of the futility of war. The movies set in Korea protest against its renewal so soon after what had seemed a conclusive victory. William Styron was one of those recalled for service in Korea. He observed bitterly, “War was no longer simply a temporary madness…. War had at last become the human condition.”² No one went to Vietnam cherishing images of the *Bridges of Toko Ri.*

Vietnam War movies reverse the pattern. The manifest content of almost all of them is anti-war, but according to Anthony Swofford that is not how they were viewed by young men on their way to the battlefield. At a Marine Corps base in the Mojave Desert in 1990, waiting to be sent to war, Swofford’s platoon drank beer and watched *Apocalypse Now* and *Full Metal Jacket.* Civilians might leave the theatre weeping over the inhumanity of war, Swofford observes. The men in the Mojave were “excited by them, because the magic brutality of the films celebrates the terrible and despicable beauty of their fighting skills. Fight, rape, war, pillage, burn. Filmic images of death and carnage are pornography for the military man….,”³ A young man “raised on the films of the Vietnam War,” Swofford wants his “ammunition and alcohol and dope, I want to screw some whores and kill some Iraqi motherfuckers.”³ I am not certain what movies young men and women are raised on these days, but it is important for those of us who teach the history of the war in Vietnam to understood the shifting resonance of movies whose meaning we may have thought constant.

The coda to many courses on the Vietnam War is a discussion of the war in memory. Sometimes the war in memory is the course taught, whatever the intention of
the instructor. Novels, memoirs, feature movies, are all available in abundance to help make the war vivid to undergraduates, for whom it is increasingly remote. Of course, the movies the faculty may have experienced as fresh renderings of the recent past are themselves now to be seen only on late night TV or in college classrooms. Teaching the history of the war in the late 1970s or 1980s meant classrooms filled with students who felt they had been there. They were 18 and 19 year-old Americans who went to movies about Vietnam as if to the country itself and remembered the movies later as would one a trip to another country. Young Americans had little difficulty inserting themselves into these movie memories because, like most of the novels and memoirs Vietnam, the Movie was mainly populated by Americans at war with an unseen enemy. The country was an unchanging jungle stage set, a faraway place where bad things happened to Americans who regrettably did bad things in turn. I think that is still the case, although these days it’s an old movie, seen on a small screen or in a scratchy print which enhances its versimilitude for student viewers. For that reason I think it is essential, now, to teach students that the films of the war have a history; they are not the history of the war.

One could begin a history of Vietnam War movies with Samuel Fuller’s *China Gate* (1957), in which one of the characters explains that, having fought in Korea, he had now joined the French in Indochina because there were “still a lot of live Commies around.” But a more reasonable starting point would be *The Green Berets* (1968), John Wayne’s explicit effort to sell the war to the American public. The packaging was familiar. As Michael Wayne, the producer, explained: “We’re not making a political picture; we’re making a picture about a bunch of right guys…Cowboys and Indians…. The Americans are the good guys and the Viet Cong are the bad guys. … Maybe we
shouldn’t have destroyed all those Indians, but when you are making a picture, the
Indians are the bad guys.” What is particularly interesting, however, is the effort the
film must make to explain why the Indians are the bad guys and why they must die. In
the old days, movie goers could tell the good guys from the bad guys without a scorecard.
Now, the justice of the cause must be explained – and at considerable length. Very early
in the film, the upstanding men of the Green Berets answer the hostile questions of an
aggressively liberal press corps: why is the U.S. fighting such a useless war? Isn’t it a
civil war? Do the Vietnamese want us there? Isn’t the Saigon government dictatorial?
Patiently, one by one, their questions are answered. It falls to a black master sergeant to
describe how desperately the Vietnamese desire U.S. intervention: “If this same thing
[the NLF insurgency] happened in the United States, every mayor in every city would be
murdered. Every teacher…every professor…every Senator, every member of the House
of Representatives and their families….. But in spite of this, there’s always some little
fellow out there willing to stand up and take the place of those who’ve been decimated.
They need us…and they want us.” “It’s strange that we never read of this in the
newspapers,” a housewife complains. “Well, that’s newspapers for you, m’am…..” one
of the officers responds.  

Nor did one see such things in the films that followed The Green Berets. The
movies made during the war and in its immediate aftermath did not try to justify or sell
the war. They, not John Wayne, set the initial terms of the many of the myths of the
war: returning veterans were filled with homicidal/suicidal, rage (Welcome Home,
Soldier Boys, 1972, Tracks, 1976, Taxi Driver, 1976, Deer Hunter, 1978); the war was
about American loss (of innocence, lives, purpose, working class solidarity – Deer
Hunter, Apocalypse Now, 1978); the war was without cause, context or meaning, though individual salvation was possible (Deer Hunter, Coming Home, 1978). In all of them, powerlessness, anger, guilt – though towards whom is never very clear – are at the heart of the matter. All take the American dilemma as central, most definitively rendered in the conclusion to Platoon (1986): "We didn't fight the enemy in Vietnam," the hero declares at the movie's end, "we fought ourselves, and the enemy was in us." With the exception of movies that fantasize a surrogate victory, such as the Rambo series, Hollywood makers seem to agree with Richard Nixon: only Americans can defeat America. The movies ask few questions and provide no answers.

Two movies break this mold and they remain exceptional in the canon of Vietnam War films, from the earliest to the most recent: Twilight's Last Gleaming (1977) and Go Tell the Spartans (1978). Both briefly appeared on the movie circuit and then disappeared into videoland. The first remains singular. It not only asks but also offers an answer to the question, why were we in Vietnam? Twilight's answer is political: because those who ruled the country believed it was essential to demonstrate to the Soviet Union that the “United States meant business.” The New York Times panned the film. “All of the characters,” Vincent Canby scoffed, “whose minds are so tiny they’ve totally forgotten the Pentagon Papers and Watergate, are convinced that such a move towards ‘open’ government would result in the collapse of the American way of life and death.” But Watergate, as Canby well knew, wasn’t about Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers were hardly an official admission of guilt. Indeed, at the time the movie was released, no senior U.S. official had come close to acknowledging Twilight’s hard truth.
Spartans is set in a period when the war was, at it were, already Vietnamized (1960-1964). The movie is based on a novella by Daniel Ford, *Incident at Muc Wa* and portrays the graveyard Vietnam had been for the French and would soon become for the Americans. The Vietnamese guerillas in Spartans, are nameless but not faceless. In a sense, Spartans is an anti-Western: there are some noble cowboys, but the Indians will have the last word. Young and old, male and female, they are the eternal enemies of foreign intruders, as comfortable in the jungle of Vietnam as on the plains of North America.

Pat Aufderheide has named the subgenre of the Vietnam movies of the late 1980s (among them, *Platoon*, 1986, *Full Metal Jacket*, 1987, *Good Morning, Vietnam*, 1987, *Hamburger Hill*, 1987, *Casualties of War*, 1989): the “noble-grunt movie.” The war, she writes, “is seen from the viewpoint of the American soldiers…. [It] is confined to the years in which the most ground troops were present. The battlefield has been internalized, and the enemy is not so much the Vietnamese as the cold, abstract forces of bureaucracy and the incompetence of superiors.” No matter how searing the footage, how morally ambivalent the message, in these movies the Vietnam War is distilled as an American tragedy. “We are on our way, in the movies, to forgiving ourselves not for anything the U.S. government and forces did in Vietnam but simply for having felt so bad for so long. … It is a profoundly personal matter rather than a political or historical one, emotionally predicated on a sense of loss and propelled by a therapeutic tone of self-help.”

This is a persuasive analysis. Yet at the same time, the war movies of the 1980s mark an unravelling of the American war story: they do not end in total victory, the cause
in which the troops fight is obscure and probably unworthy, honor and courage can be salvaged but only by abandoning patriotic rhetoric. In the aftermath of U.S. victory in the Gulf war, the first President George Bush was optimistic that the country had “kicked the Vietnam syndrome.” But the syndrome continued to manifest itself in the popular imagination of war. The Rambo series had tried to reverse the verdict of defeat, but it left standing the public conviction that Vietnam was not a good war. Despite a victory intended to vanquish the memory of Vietnam, the only notable movies made about Desert Storm -- *Courage Under Fire*, (1996) and *Three Kings* (1999) – were haunted by it. The first, in its insistence that post-Vietnam America must have heroes, underlined their absence. *Three Kings* opens with black and white text informing us that the war is over even as a soldier shouts the question: “Hey! Are we still killing people?” No one seems to know the answer. The soldier peers through the scope on his gun, sees an Iraqi on a distant hilltop, white flag in one hand, weapon in the other. Before either the audience, or the soldier, can tell whether the man intends to shoot or surrender, the American fires and the man falls dead. “Congratulations,” his buddy says. “You got yourself a raghead. I didn’t think I’d get to see anyone shot in this war.”

The movie explicitly links Iraq and Vietnam in a press conference that mocks both the press and the soldiers who perform for them: “They say you exorcised the ghost of Vietnam in [this war with its] clear moral imperative,” the reporter informs the soldiers, who readily agree: “We liberated Kuwait.” The rest of the movie makes deadly fun of this answer. “I don’t know what we did here,” George Clooney’s Special Forces officer bitterly complains to a friend, “just tell me what we did here.” “Do you want to occupy Iraq,” the friend answers, “and do Vietnam all over again?” But in effect, the
Gulf War, as *Three Kings* presents it, is Vietnam all over again. There is no clear moral imperative; on the contrary, Shi’ites and Kurds are cynically encouraged to rebel against Saddam Hussein and then abandoned to their fate. Even the bad guys drive the point home: “Do [sic] your army care about the children in Iraq,” one of Saddam’s Republic Guard soldiers, pausing in the act of torturing an American captive, asks. “Do your army come back to help the people? … My son was killed in his bed. He is one year old. He is sleeping when the bomb come… Can you think how it feels inside your heart if I bomb your daughter?” Individual Americans, like Clooney, through their honesty, virility and disregard for authority, redeem the country’s honor, but only in opposition to, or apart from, the government, never in support of its stated aims. In this, *Three Kings* is a sardonic re-telling of the “noble-grunt” Vietnam war movie.

To erase Vietnam, something profoundly to be desired as the country was ordered to gird itself for an endless war against terrorism after September 11, 2001, Hollywood would have to go back to Vietnam. In 1941, in an effort to take the bad taste out of WWI and the powerful anti-war movies which dominated the inter-war years, Hollywood released *Sgt. York*, a moving tale of a pacifist turned war hero. “We can sit in the theater and see [York] go fight a better World War I for us,” Jeanine Basinger has written. Films like *Sgt. York*, she explained, “wipe out earlier images and replace them with new ones, appropriate for the times.” To create a “new mythos” for WWII, Thomas Doherty wrote, “Hollywood had to recast the Great War as a reasonable national enterprise, not as the crazy slaughterhouse depicted in literature and film for the previous twenty years. … Outright obliteration was a prerequisite.”
To fight the new war against terrorism, the films, literature and histories of Vietnam would have to be obliterated. *We Were Soldiers,* (2002) in what may be the first of many returns to Vietnam, is the 21st century’s *Sgt. York.* It was released ahead of schedule and Paramount was pleased with the test screening: “The movie has very, very patriotic American values. The audience embraced those values.” Joseph Galloway, who, with Lt. Col Harold Moore, wrote the book on which the movie is based, was delighted. As he explained to a reporter, “audiences would be drawn to the story because it is not defeatist about what eventually became the misadventure of Vietnam.” The book, like the movie, is relentlessly patriotic. “This,” the prologue reads, “is about what we did, what we saw, what we suffered in a thirty-four-day campaign in the Ia Drang Valley of the Central Highlands of South Vietnam in November 1965, when we were young and confident and patriotic…. It was a “love story,” about men “proud of the opportunity to serve [the] country…. It was also a story about the “far more transcendent love” that comes to men “unbidden on the battlefields…. We killed for each other, we died for each other, and we wept for each other. And in time, we came to love each other as brothers. In battle our world shrank to the man on our left and the man on our right and the enemy all around.” The film version, makes it also a story about family values, a manly reporter ready to pick up a gun, and worthy enemies.

As it happens, Moore’s unit, the 1st battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Division, was also Custer’s and in the movie, before leaving for Vietnam, Moore is shown thoughtfully leafing through an illustrated account of the battle of Little Big Horn, along with a French book describing what is called the “massacre” of French troops in a battle along Route 19, near where he will soon find himself fighting for his life. Mel Gibson’s
brow furrows as he contemplates the fate of the French (a brief scene shows Vietnamese soldiers slaughtering French prisoners) and of Custer’s men. The domestication of the Vietnamese enemy, common during the war itself, strikes an odd, discordant note. After all, the Indians, in the last couple of decades of films and novels, have been victims; which would make Moore and his men the executioners, and that can’t be right. Still, the scene is crucial, the first of many reversals of the images of the Vietnam War. The victims of massacres in Vietnam, it turns out, were white men. My Lai disappears; there are no burning villages but instead well-armed, uniformed Vietnamese regulars; napalm strikes burn Americans and Vietnamese alike (the B-52 sorties crucial to the battle are never shown); the American commander is everywhere in the midst of the battle, barely protected and always in danger; the Vietnamese commander gives his orders from the safety of a clean, well-kept, underground tunnel complex. Americans die in great numbers but are anyhow victorious over the far more numerous Vietnamese and a soldier’s last words express gratitude that he has sacrificed his life for his country. Vietnam has become a war of which Americans can feel proud. The pride derives from the demonstration of courage and the memory of suffering, irrespective of the cause in which the one is displayed and the other endured. Both are proof that the nation, if it would only embrace its heritage, now explicitly including Vietnam, has not gone soft.

The men in We Were Soldiers, sacrifice their lives only for one another. “In the new metaphor war movies seem to be presenting,” Neil Gabler wrote, “Americans are no longer distrustful of authority and no longer doubt the cause. Rather, we trust each other and see the cause as us.” The legitimacy of the state, incarnate in the nation-at-war, is vested in the wars the United States has fought and the new ones the Bush
administration plans to fight, all of them justified by the way they are fought for the “man on our left and the man on our right and the enemy all around.”

Hollywood is a sensitive barometer. The Disney Corporation, for example, ran trailers throughout the fall of 2003 for a new movie on the Alamo. The music and the voice-overs featured: a small band of heroic Americans pitted against the one of the world’s strongest standing armies. The movie was intended to “capture the post-Sept. 11 surge in patriotism,” but as the war in Iraq began, linguistically at least, to resemble the war in Vietnam (quagmire, hearts and minds, friend from foe, Ramadan Offensive) the studio seems to have lost heart. The release date was postponed. Frank Rich speculated that Disney thought “it would be financially prudent to delay until there’s another surge.”

Perhaps the capture of Saddam Hussein will free Michael Eisner to release the movie.

The ultimate Vietnam War movie is Fog of War, Errol Morris’ two hour distillation of 23 hours of interviews with former Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara. McNamara is by turns sentimental, defensive, contrite, meditative and self-serving. But the context in which he puts his role in the Vietnam War will surprise most viewers and some historians: the fire bombing of Tokyo in WWII. LeMay had famously said that if the U.S. lost the war “we’d all have been prosecuted as war criminals.” McNamara agrees and asks: “What makes it immoral if you lose and not immoral if you win?” He does not answer the question. It is a good one on which to conclude a course on the history of the Vietnam War.


4 NYU students taking a course on the Vietnam War in the fall of 2003 consistently referred to the films they viewed as “accurate.”


6 Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 132. On a trip to Vietnam, the screen writer, James Lee Barrett, was told by an army officer: “These people don’t want to be free, but by God, we’re going to make them free!” Barrett found the view “a new and exciting concept.” Pp.99-100.


11 Doherty, *Projections*, p.100

12 The passage of time has made the displacement easier. For example, *Coming Home*, a 1978 anti-war movie, was summarized in the February 25, 2002 *New York Times* TV Late Movie listings this way: “Jane Fonda, Jon Voight, Bruce Dern. Strong, stinging triangle of wife and Vietnam vets.” P. E7.


14 See Charles J. Hanley, et al, *The Bridge at No Gun Ri* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2001) The history of the 7th Cav includes several massacres going the other way: the Battle of the Washita, in 1868, when the 7th Cav ordered a large group of Indians into a constricted area and then slaughtered them; Wounded Knee, in 1890, when the 7th Cav massacred 370 Sioux, many of them women and children; the massacre of Korean villagers in July 1950.

15 The ABC documentary, “We Were Young and Brave,” produced in 1994, is very clear on this point: air power was the deciding factor in the battle. A Vietnamese colonel describes watching, unprotected, as a “sea of fire” engulfed his troops – “if you saw it you would think we all died.”

16 This is in direct contrast to the documentary, in which some of the survivors of the battle returned to the Ia Drang along with their Vietnamese counterparts. The mood is elegiac, sometimes bitter, and the overall effect is of the terrible waste of lives, however bravely sacrificed. Moore and Galloway both accuse the military of stage-managing the post-battle assessments of Ia Drang. “You can almost date the rot at the heart of the American effort in Vietnam to that week,” Galloway insists. By depicting the battle as a
victory, the ABC narrator explains, the military “pulled an unsuspecting nation further into war.” Post-
battle newsreels described the Ia Drang as proof that the “best of the enemy’s forces could be stopped dead
in their own territory.” Survivors were expected to join in a ghastly charade – clips of which are included –
in which Westmoreland congratulated them on their victory. The men are unsmiling and many of them
look away, refusing eye contact with the general. The battle itself is brilliantly depicted, using both North
Vietnamese and US Army film footage, and the critical commentary of Moore, Galloway, and other
combatants is far more stark than anything in the movie.

17 This is also the case in Black Hawk Down (2001) and Saving Private Ryan (1998).
20 Quoted in Samantha Power, “War Means Never Having to Say You’re Sorry,” New York Times,