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The Vietnam War

The Vietnam war pitted the United States and the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) against the National Liberation Front (also known as the Vietcong) and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) in a struggle for control of South Vietnam, which in 1954 had been partitioned as a separate political entity by the Geneva Accords. The conflict was viewed by U.S. policymakers as a "test case" of American institutions and a demonstration of American resolve in the global fight against international communist expansion. SEATO allies agreed: Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, and South Korea sent troops, while the Philippines provided civilian personnel. In the early days of the conflict (1954–64), the United States provided advisors and economic support; in 1965, as the communist insurgency grew in strength (accompanied by political instability within the south), U.S. infantry units were committed. The number of U.S. forces peaked in 1969 with the deployment of 543,400 troops. Unlike most of their cinematic counterparts, U.S. troops aggressively pursued their missions. As historian George Herring has concluded: "American troops fought well, despite the miserable conditions under which the war was waged—dense jungles and deep swamps, fire ants and leeches, booby traps and ambushes, an elusive, but deadly enemy. In those instances where main units were actually engaged, the Americans usually prevailed, and there was no place in Vietnam where the enemy enjoyed security from American firepower" (153). Yet, by 1975, the war was lost,

owing to a number of factors—many of them diplomatic and political—that are still the subject of heated discussion and debate. Ironically, Hollywood would virtually ignore the conflict while it was a contemporary controversy, but, after the debacle in 1975, it would exploit the military clash in a series of major feature films and documentaries.

Background

Vietnam, a French colony since the 1880s, was one of the first targets for the Japanese in the opening days of World War II. After the war, the French regained control of their former Indochina colony. In part because of fears that Communists would take over in France itself, the United States shunned the forces for independence in Vietnam (Herz, 15). The French-Vietnamese war (1946–54) ended in France's defeat at the hands of Ho Chi Minh's Communist Viet Minh. The Geneva Accords of 1954 divided the country into two parts—with the North occupied by the Communists and the South under the authoritarian regime of Ngo Dinh Diem, one of the last living noncommunist nationalists—who governed with benefit of extensive support from the United States.

In the meantime, Premier Nikita Khrushchev announced that the Soviet Union would spread Communism through "wars of national liberation." In 1959, the North Vietnamese initiated such an offensive, and, after a series of reversals for the South, American troops were brought into the conflict in force in 1965. Although there are different interpre-

tations of its meaning, the Tet offensive of 1968 marked a turning point: despite a disaster for the Vietcong on the battlefields of South Vietnam, the media reports of Tet eroded public support for the conflict in the United States and seemed to confirm the worst predictions of the antiwar movement. American troops fought on, but morale in the field eroded steadily after February 1968. When Richard Nixon assumed the presidency in 1969, he vowed to "Vietnamize" the fighting and to withdraw U.S. forces gradually. By March 1973, all U.S. combat units had departed Vietnam. With the passage of the Case-Church Amendment in 1973, all U.S. support of the South ceased, despite previous pledges during the Paris Peace negotiations by President Nixon and Secretary of State Kissinger. After some false starts, the North invaded the South in a traditional, cross-border assault in the spring of 1975 and took possession of Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) at the end of April, bringing the military phase of the struggle to an end. In response to the subsequent repression by the North, hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese took to the sea, becoming "boat people." Many would die in this desperate flight to avoid Communist tyranny and "reeducation," but many others would become American citizens—immigrants who are now among our most hard-working and successful neighbors.

America's involvement in Vietnam was an outgrowth of what was called "the doctrine of containment," elaborated by diplomat George Kennan. It called for the United States to resist Soviet expansionism where it affected vital interests. In 1947, President Harry S. Truman announced what was called "The Truman Doctrine," an unambiguous statement that the United States would oppose Communist aggression. Much of the disagreement about the meaning of the Vietnam conflict stems from the varying interpretations of the putative threat—or nonthreat—of the Soviet Union and Communist China. McGeorge Bundy and

Walt W. Rostow, national-security advisors to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, saw their Vietnam strategy as a logical extension of the stance defined for America by Kennan and Truman.

For many reasons, the U.S. government decided against "selling" the commitment to Vietnam as it had the struggle of World War II. Most historians believe that Lyndon B. Johnson, who inherited Vietnam when he became president in 1963, feared that too much beating on the war drums would distract attention away from his Great Society programs; both Johnson and his secretary of state, Dean Rusk, also feared that the delicate efforts to win the struggle through gradual escalation would be disrupted if the American people became too aroused. (Many would later regret this decision to soft-pedal public information.)

Meanwhile, commercial television reported the war. Believing that the press would serve them in a patriotic fashion, the armed forces provided reporters with helicopter rides and full access to military operations. That assumption proved to be misguided. Night after night, American viewers saw their boys hurt or dying on the nation's television screens in a conflict insufficiently justified by their government. Especially during the Tet offensive of 1968, the stories from Vietnam stressed ineptitude and defeat, disaffecting the public permanently. Vietnam has been called America's first television war, and the ramifications of that novelty are still being explored by scholars and filmmakers. Referring to Walter Cronkite's famous special reports during the offensive, one insightful commentator with a gift for exaggeration described the Vietnam War as the first American military conflict to be called off by a television anchor.

Vietnam was a watershed event in modern American history; the war had a profound impact on American national identity. Indeed, the "Vietnam Syndrome" still casts a shadow over the country's foreign policy. The much-vaunted "Powell Doctrine" concerning the

commitment of U.S. forces is a direct outgrowth of Secretary of State Colin Powell's experience as an infantry company commander in Vietnam and was formulated to avoid the "quagmire" that sullied the international reputation of a superpower with the best of intentions.

Historical Scholarship

The rationale for U.S. involvement in Vietnam is most succinctly described in Martin F. Herz's *The Vietnam War in Retrospect*. Ambassador Herz explores the historical roots of the conflict, the Geneva Accords, the concerns about "Wars of National Liberation," the Tet offensive, and television, together with the post-Tet offensive trends. He clearly links the defeat of the South to America's failure to live up to its commitments. Henry Kissinger's monumental volume *Diplomacy* (1994) devotes considerable attention to the Truman Doctrine and the doctrine of containment—to include their successful application in Korea from 1950 on as opposed to their inept application in Vietnam. It was Kissinger, of course, who extricated America from Vietnam and who led the negotiations with Hanoi during the Paris Peace talks of 1973. Long before Kissinger's overview, Guenter Lewy in *America in Vietnam* (1978) studied the moral issues in relation to the war and concluded that the repression imposed by the Communists after 1975 "lends strength to the view that the American attempt to prevent a communist domination of the area was not without moral justification" (441).

The interpretations of the war are varied, but—in relation to U.S. policy—they tend to stress that either the United States miscalculated how difficult it would be to win its war (while simultaneously reforming an authoritarian regime in the South) or that our involvement was both politically and morally wrong—that we were meddling in a civil war in which the Vietnamese people were struggling to determine their political destiny. Still others have argued that the destiny of Vietnam

was not of vital interest to the United States—and, therefore, the U.S. commitment was a mistake from the beginning.

The most strident attack on U.S. motives and policies is Gabriel Kolko's *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, The United States, and the Modern Historical Experience* (1986). For Kolko, every Vietcong is a self-effacing nationalist yearning for freedom and every South Vietnamese official a corrupt and dictatorial puppet of the American exploiters. Also stridently critical, albeit less ideological, is Neil Sheehan's Pulitzer Prize-winning volume *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (1988), a monumental work adapted for television by HBO in 1998. So much of the writing from this perspective takes America to task for its (supposed) arrogance after the great victory in World War II. The Kolko approach stresses our unconscious transformation into a society that promotes the interests of exploitative corporations over people—a trend Kolko traces back to domestic developments during the Progressive Era at the end of the nineteenth century. The Sheehan approach condemns America for losing its democratic roots and sense of humanity in our blustering efforts, after World War II, to transform other cultures into mirror images of our own.

In recent days, there has developed among military historians what might be labeled a "Krepinevich School" of criticism—named for Andrew F. Krepinevich, whose *The Army and Vietnam* (1988) attracted much attention because the critical study was written by an Army officer on active duty. According to the Krepinevich critique, General William Westmoreland, the commander in Vietnam from 1964 to 1968, made a fundamental strategic error by focusing on destruction (attrition) of main force units rather than concentrating on pacifying—and occupying—individual villages. Neil Sheehan supports this analysis, attributing this alternative approach to General Victor Krulak, a close advisor to President Kennedy, whose innovative ideas about counterinsur-

gency were rebuffed by the Army. Rebuttals of these criticisms can be found in books by General Phillip Davidson, Westmoreland's intelligence chief. Colonel Harry Summers (d. 1999) took the position that the United States should have blocked infiltration into the South, leaving to the army of the Republic of South Vietnam (ARVN) the task of village pacification. The military strategists continue their debate with Westmoreland as the villain. Not even mea culpa books by major players such as Robert S. McNamara have relieved the shadow over a caring leader's legacy.

Documentary Films

The documentary record of the Vietnam war is rich and reflects the kinds of debates found in scholarship about the conflict. Although the U.S. government made a deliberate decision not to propagandize the American public, one film, *Why Vietnam?* (1965), closely follows the Frank Capra World War II model. The film opens with President Lyndon B. Johnson reading a letter from the mother of a young soldier in Vietnam. She wants an explanation of why her son is hazarding his life in a faraway land; the film uses Lyndon Johnson, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and an omniscient narrator to explain the doctrine of containment and the threat of wars of national liberation. It argues that America has learned from the Munich Crisis before World War II—and in Berlin and Korea after the war—that “aggression unopposed is aggression unleashed.” *Why Vietnam?* promises that all will end well if America learns from the past and takes a firm stand.

Peter Davis's *Hearts and Minds* (1974) is a powerful documentary that takes the Kolko/Sheehan approach to the war, with special emphasis on the notion that Americans have lost their sensitivity to other cultures. According to Davis, our obsession with communism has blinded us to the real nature of the struggles in the Third World; indeed, our wealth, our competitiveness, and our racism make us a menace to aspiring peoples around the globe.

Through intercutting techniques and by pulling clips from hokey anticommunist feature films of the Cold War era, Davis creates a devastating portrait of a misguided superpower. When the producer, Bert Schneider, read a thank-you note from Hanoi at the 1974 Academy Awards presentations, his action spoke volumes about the Hollywood creative community's “spin” on the war. Michael DeAntonio's *In the Year of the Pig* (1968) is a more honest film by a declared radical who clearly and unequivocally opposed what he saw as American colonialism. Unlike Davis, DeAntonio does not sneer at his country and its warriors in the style of *Hearts and Minds* but opposes its policies with clear and powerful arguments. (De Antonio was a severe critic of *Hearts and Minds*, albeit from a leftist perspective.)

In 1983, the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) aired a thirteen-part series about the war entitled *Vietnam: A Television History*. (The series was recycled at least three times during the next five years and purchased by countless schools and universities across the land.) The series was supposedly based on Stanley Karnow's *Vietnam: A History*, but many who have seen the series and read the book hold that the latter is a far more balanced presentation of the war and its complexities. The television series was so unbalanced that it sparked public protests by Vietnamese refugee groups in Washington, Houston, and Los Angeles. An outgrowth of these protests was a book entitled *Losers Are Pirates* (1985), a critique—episode by episode—of the errors and distortions of the series. In 1985, a Washington-based media watchdog group, Accuracy in Media, came forward with two programs that attempted to counter the PBS version: *Television's Vietnam: The Real Story* uses interviews with diplomats and historians—some of whom had been consulted by PBS and then ignored—to refute the PBS series. *Television's Vietnam: The Impact of Media* looks at the Tet offensive of 1968 in an attempt to examine, through specific stories, the impact of reporting on the American view-

ing audience, to include people working within the Johnson White House. Both films draw heavily from the work of Peter Braestrup, whose two-volume *Big Story* (1977) provided a scholarly foundation of media criticism by a working member of the media itself. (Braestrup, who died in 1997, had been a Marine infantry officer in Korea; in Vietnam, he served as *Washington Post* bureau chief. His previous combat exposure gave him a less alarmist perspective on battlefield pyrotechnics.)

With the explosion of the video market, the major networks have produced multiepisode boxed sets from their archives; unfortunately, they have not, for the most part, revised the errors and distortions of their reporting during the war years but recapitulate the same egregious misrepresentations—this time in the service of “history.” A significant exception to this stale video record is a PBS series entitled *Battlefield: Vietnam*—a cluster of three programs that maintained an admirable objectivity toward both sides of the conflict as it presents detailed studies of specific engagements. (The series Web site included equally praiseworthy resources for study at www.pbs.org/battlefield-vietnam.)

Feature Films

Other than John Wayne's much-maligned *Green Berets*, which reached theaters in 1968, Hollywood was so afraid to cover the war during the conflict that Julian Smith wrote an entire book about the avoidance, *Looking Away: Hollywood and Vietnam* (1975). Smith concluded that if Vietnam themes emerged in motion pictures during and immediately after the war, they did so indirectly in such “historical” productions as *Little Big Man* (1970) and *Soldier Blue* (1970), where contemporary clashes between first- and third-world cultures were projected into the American past.

Boot Camp: Indoctrination of Killers? During the 1960s, opposition to the “Establishment” was one of the most important themes

in the counterculture. For that reason, it is not surprising to find that boot camp and infantry training are assailed in films about the era. These forms of indoctrination seemed to embody the regimentation and conformity demanded by those on the other side of America's “generation gap.”

In the motion picture version of the musical *Hair* (1979), the Oklahoma protagonist, Clod (John Savage), participates in the love and freedom of the Age of Aquarius but is then drafted and sent to Vietnam. The Establishment's attack on Clod's individuality is symbolized by his haircut. Naturally, not long after he is shipped out to Vietnam, he dies—an innocent victim of a senseless war machine. The screen adaptation of Philip Caputo's autobiographical novel *A Rumor of War* (1977; film 1980) carefully establishes that Marine Corps hazing misled young Philip, turning him into a callous, small-unit leader who forgot the morality of his Catholic upbringing. These portrayals in *Hair* and *A Rumor of War* are both a comment on the ostensible subject—the impact of the military regimen on impressionable, young men—and a statement about the nature of American institutions in the era of Woodstock.

The most devastating motion picture portrayal of military training is Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). The title refers to the cover of the 7.62-mm bullet fired by the M-14 rifle used by the Marines in the film, but it relates as well to the hard carapace with which the armed forces (supposedly) coat the sensibilities of raw recruits. Some of the young are destroyed by the unrelenting harassment of their stentorian drill sergeant; others succumb to the training and become distorted, amoral monsters when they reach the battlefield—confusing sex and violence, love and death in ways that could only be unraveled by a disciple of Freud. As an outsider to the Corps, Kubrick missed the positive effects of boot camp on most young Marines. They typically gain a sense of pride and self-confidence in having



FIGURE 11. *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). Stanley Kubrick depicts the vicious and unrelenting training of the marines. Gunnery Sergeant Hartman's (R. Lee Ermey, center front) constant abuse of recruit Leonard Lawrence (Vincent D'Onofrio, left) will finally incite the private to kill the sergeant and himself. The recruit known as "Joker" (Matthew Modine, center rear), the narrator and moral center of Kubrick's film, looks on. Courtesy Warner Bros.

completed a physically and mentally challenging thirteen weeks of training. As a film experience, Kubrick's version of Vietnam, based on the novel *The Short-Timers* by Marine combat veteran Gustav Hasford, is a powerful (and unfair) indictment of the Marine Corps and its sacrifices on the battlefield. For an entirely different view of Marine boot camp, see Jack Webb's 1957 film *The DI*, a post-Korean War paean to the tough training and discipline of a proud Corps. Webb's film was updated, though with an antiwar twist, in the 1970 made-for-TV movie *Tribes*, in which a tough-as-nails drill instructor (Darren McGavin) and a rebellious hippie draftee (Jan-Michael Vincent) face off with tragic consequences.

Small Units in Combat

Elsewhere in this volume, Robert C. Doyle speaks of the small unit as the core for war stories (see "The American Fighting Man"). Early in the war, two documentaries attempted to convey the textures of experience for soldiers in small units. In *A Face of War* (1968), Eugene Jones distills a three-month experience

with a Marine unit into an hour-length cinema verité film. Half of the unit was injured during that period, as was the filmmaker, who was wounded twice. There is fighting, the pain and excitement of combat, but there is also the birth of a child—an event the tough, young Marines witness in awe. The company's gunnery sergeant has a prominent role in the film and exemplifies the kind of professionalism (and caring) that veterans associate with people in that venerable role—tough, but fatherly. An Army counterpart to this film is Pierre Schoendorffer's *The Anderson Platoon* (1967). The unit is named for its African American platoon leader, and this slice-of-life production—like *A Face of War*—shows how cooperatively combat soldiers lived and worked. There are firefights and wounds, but there is also time for play and for humor. No fraggings, no rapes, no shooting of prisoners or civilians enter this record of a typical U.S. Army unit in Vietnam. Indeed, both of these black-and-white documentaries convey an accurate portrait of American combat troops in Vietnam, 90 percent of whom told Harris pollsters in 1980 that they were happy to have served, and nearly 80 percent of whom denied that the United States had taken advantage of them (Rollins, "Popular Culture," 334).

Two feature films explore the war in close-up, taking two diametrically opposed perspectives: John Irvin's *Hamburger Hill* (1987) and Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986). *Hamburger Hill* focuses on an infantry squad (twelve men), part of a platoon (thirty-eight men) from the 101st Airborne Division involved in a ten-day assault on a North Vietnamese position near the Laotian border during May 1969. This battle was debated in the U.S. Senate as it was being fought and was condemned by Senator Edward Kennedy for its waste of American lives during a period in which the American military was supposed to be disengaging. The Army's response to the senator's criticism was that Hill 937 (Ap Bia Mountain) was fortified and occupied by an enemy regiment and that



FIGURE 12. *Hamburger Hill* (1987). An infantry squad and a platoon are ordered to take Hill 937 even as the U.S. military was under a call for disengagement. Courtesy RKO Pictures.

the U.S. Army's role in Vietnam was to seek out the enemy regular forces—with luck, away from built-up areas where civilians might be hurt—and to destroy them, especially during a time of disengagement. When the Americans finally reached the summit of the fortified mountain, they had lost fifty-six soldiers while killing more than six hundred of the enemy. Sam Zaffir's eponymous book explores both the home- and warfront dimensions of the battle, while Irvin's feature film—not based on the book—examines the weapons, tactics, frustrations, hopes, and comradeship of Americans in battle. Black and white, schooled and unschooled, the soldiers of the 101st do their best to survive the maelstrom of war while completing their perilous mission. Michael L. Lanning, a Vietnam veteran who is also a military historian, has said that "this picture is extremely accurate in weaponry, equipment, [and] the use of artillery and air support" (240). Lanning also praises the film for showing the dedication and discipline of our troops in battle—factors foreign to most Hollywood histories.

Labeled by Lanning "the unkindest movie yet made about the Vietnam war," Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986) is a powerful study of

a small unit in combat—but it is much more, in that the director depicts the unit as a microcosm for the cultural changes affecting American society in the 1960s. Viewers are led to believe that American troops regularly shot civilians, that our field commanders used troops as "bait," and that our servicemen were so undisciplined that they spent more time "fragging" each other than fighting an elusive enemy. ("Fragging" was a slang term during the era for attacks on officers and noncommissioned officers by disgruntled subordinates—who used fragmentation grenades to kill or injure their victims.) Stone, himself a combat veteran, comments broadly about American history when the most sympathetic father figure in the film, Sergeant Elias, explains, "We've been kicking ass for so long, it's about time we had ours kicked." The central character, Chris Taylor (Charles Sheen), is torn between the polarized values in the unit—he admires the grit and tenacity of Staff Sergeant Barnes (Tom Berenger), but he also aspires to the New Age masculinity represented by Elias (Willem Dafoe). Naturally, the two father figures are icons of the cultural forces of the day; significantly, Chris Taylor has to murder Barnes (the old values) to begin his new life. Unfortunately, along the way, the American platoon rapes Vietnamese villagers and shoots civilians indiscriminately—all at odds with the actual behavior of most American troops in Vietnam. Exasperated by Stone's distortions, Lanning concludes: "What is a shame for the viewer and an insult to every Vietnam veteran is that the vast majority of those who see it believe it is the ultimate true story of what really happened in the war" (293). To unmask Stone's claims about the autobiographical basis for *Platoon*, Robert Hemphill—Oliver Stone's company commander in Vietnam—produced a narrative entitled *Platoon: Bravo Company* (1998). Hemphill wrote the book, in part, because Stone's film had been successful in depicting "the average American soldier in Vietnam as a cruel, racist, pot-

headed malcontent" (9), a view which the author tries to refute by narrating the events of a busy, painful, but professional year in combat with Bravo Company, 3d Battalion, 25th Division of the U.S. Army in Vietnam, 1967-68.

The Vietnam Veteran

There are almost 3.5 million veterans of the Southeast Asian conflict. Their attitudes toward country and service were plumbed by Harris pollsters in 1980—with results that inevitably surprise students because of the misrepresentation of veterans in popular Hollywood productions. Vietnam stories are stories of losers who return to our country as pathetic remnants, "walking wounded." Vietnam veterans (VVs) are rapists in *Platoon* and *Casualties of War* (1989)—indeed, the latter film is an extended rape over two hours in length; VVs are a "haunted generation" in the *Rambo* series starring Sylvester Stallone and in the Chuck Norris *Missing in Action* films; the VVs are psychologically haunted in *The House, Jacob's Ladder*, *Jackknife*, and *Taxi Driver* (in the last, Robert De Niro plays a troubled young man obsessed by violence); VVs are emotional loose cannons in *Welcome Home*, *Soldier Boys* (1972), where veterans go berserk and destroy a town; future VVs become enamored with "the Horror" in *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and the omnipresence of death in *The Deer Hunter* (1978); VVs (at least the unrepentant ones) suffer from masculinity problems—witness the Bruce Dern character in *Coming Home* (1978), the Henry Winkler character in *Heroes* (1977), and the John Terry character in *In Country* (1989); VVs are "guns for hire" in a Mafia underworld in *The Stone Killer* (1973). Little wonder that the public perceives VVs as victims at best and walking time bombs at worst. In marked contrast to these macabre portraits of veterans is an HBO documentary entitled *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam* (1987), produced by the New York City Vietnam Veterans Memorial. This television program shows sensitivity to the variety of



FIGURE 13. *Coming Home* (1978). An angry Captain Bob Hyde (Bruce Dern, left) confronts Luke Martin (Jon Voight, right), a paraplegic former infantryman in Vietnam who has been having an affair with Hyde's wife. Courtesy Jayne Productions and Jerome Hellman Productions.

Vietnam experiences while paying homage to all who served in a controversial overseas conflict.

In *Coming Home*, Jon Voight plays a paraplegic infantryman who is brought back to health and sexual fulfillment by the wife (Jane Fonda) of a Marine officer serving in Vietnam. Much of the dialogue for the film was extemporized; once into the production, Bruce Dern (who plays the Marine officer and husband) realized that his character was being trashed by Fonda and Voight. In response, Dern stopped telling his fellow actors what the Marine officer would say, hoping to rescue a modicum of dignity for his character. Like *Platoon*, director Hal Ashby's *Coming Home* propagandizes for countercultural values: the old kind of masculinity (Dern) is on the way out, to be replaced with a softer manhood represented by the paraplegic veteran (Voight), who has come to peace with himself by joining the antiwar movement. As Michael Lanning has observed, "Regardless of the merits of the film, anyone seeing it will understand why many Vietnam veterans are not 'fonda' Jane" (196).

Ron Kovic assisted Hal Ashby with details about paralyzed Vietnam veterans. His own story would reach the screen under the guid-

ance of Oliver Stone in *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989). This biography of a young patriot turned antiwar protestor taps a powerful national myth, the myth of the American Adam. Ron Kovic was a gung-ho Marine who was a squad leader and a two-tour veteran. He protested against the Vietnam war only after he was wounded and lost his faith in God and country, in part because—the story explains—he was mistreated by an uncaring Veterans Administration. Rather than turning inward for strength, Kovic turned outward and became a spokesman for Vietnam Veterans Against the War—a role that culminates in his protest at the 1968 Republican convention in Florida and his opportunity to speak at the 1972 Democratic national convention. Oliver Stone created a powerful story of an American innocent who was first hoodwinked by patriotic slogans and then crushed by an impersonal government; in the end, however, the victim triumphs by talking back to power. In shaping this personal story, Kovic and Stone vindicated the rebellion of all who embraced the counterculture in the 1960s—especially Abbie Hoffman, an activist who appears in the film and to whom the film is dedicated. Hoffman,

whose antiwar activities receive near-mythic treatment in the 2000 biopic *Steal This Movie*, died of an overdose of drugs shortly before *Born on the Fourth of July* was released—a sad ending, to be sure, but one more appropriate to the counterculture than to the experience of most Vietnam combat veterans.

Reconciling Visions

In spring 1999, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that two professors at Barat College, in Lake Forest, Illinois, were team-teaching a course entitled "The Politics and History of the Vietnam War." James Brask was a reluctant draftee during the war, Robert Arnoldt a volunteer. The two veterans said that their chronological distance from the war has allowed them to disagree without being disagreeable. Ideally, such binocular vision will lead to dispassionate and detached studies that explain America's tragic loss in Vietnam—with luck, without explaining it away. Brask and Arnoldt's willingness to entertain complex analysis is exemplary, although this ecumenical attitude will take some time to reach America's newspapers, cable networks, and movie theaters.

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- The DI* (1957, F)
- A Face of War* (1968, D)
- First Blood* (1982, F)
- Full Metal Jacket* (1987, F)
- Gardens of Stone* (1987, F)
- Good Morning, Vietnam* (1987, F)
- The Green Berets* (1968, F)
- Hair* (1979, F)
- Hamburger Hill* (1987, F)

- The Hanoi Hilton* (1987, F)
- Hearts and Minds* (1974, D)
- Heroes* (1977, F)
- In Country* (1989, F)
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