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TANGLED TWILIGHT. DESTINY, HORROR, AND TRANSFORMATION IN NATURE: AMERICAN CULTURE OF PROGRESS DURING THE VIETNAM WAR 1965-1975.

An Abstract of a Thesis

Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

Alexander Newkirk

University of Northern Iowa

December 2019

ABSTRACT

This work is an exploration of shifting American attitudes toward key cultural myths during and after the Vietnam War from 1965-1975. Using sources such as memoir, film, and relevant historiography of the time this thesis emphasizes an exploration of the shifting attitudes of Americans during the Cold War. An epoch defined by a “utopian” vision of American history that was codified in a Post War period. This included a tradition of enlightenment values, liberal consensus, a technocratic order, and a deep abiding myth in progress. While this period has been extensively studied, I suggest there has not been enough attention given to the existential dialogue, using American conceived interpretations of nature, to explore this transformative period in American history.

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has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the

Degree of Master of Arts

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DEDICATION

To both my parents Sondra and Thomas Newkirk.

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INTRODUCTION

American soldiers officially first set foot in South Vietnam in March 1965 when marines arrived in the strategic city port of Da Nang. The next eight years saw harsh guerrilla warfare that defied all expectations of military and civilian experts. The American public was shocked to its core by the tone of the war, the lying by its government, the anti-war protests, and other disruptions that seemed to mirror the events in Vietnam. As one man wrote in a letter to his veteran friend after the war.

> Your time in Nam resonates with me, quite deeply. Like many of our generation, Vietnam was at the center. From 1965-1975, Vietnam seemed (to me) the black hole around which the decade floated. The music, the protests, the drugs, the clothing, the long hair, the changes in academic curricula, the attitudes towards the "establishment," Chicago in 1968, Watergate, Nixon, Nixon' resignation, LBJ not running for re-election McGovern, free speech, Woodstock, Altamont, rights for blacks & women, environmental concerns, open sexual mores… it all seemed to float around the darkness that was Vietnam. Like many others, I spent a number of years making sure I did not go to Nam.[1]

American expectations before Vietnam came from their throne as a dominant global power. American power was triple-fold: its military was legion, its economy hummed with growth, goods, and services, and its culture was confident emitting purpose and strong belief in itself. To American leaders Vietnam would be just another front against communism. The war served as an exercise in America's power to construct democratic nations. As Vice Lyndon Johnson explained in a memo sent to President John Kennedy, "In large measure, the greatest danger Southeast Asia offers to nations like the United

[1] James Wright, *Enduring Vietnam: An American Generation and Its War* (New York: Saint Martin Press, 2017), 3.

States is not the momentary threat of communism itself, rather that danger stems from hunger, ignorance, poverty & disease. We must – whatever strategies we evolve – keep these enemies at the point of our attack and make imaginative use of our scientific & technological capability in such enterprise."[2] However, instead, Vietnam became one of the most controversial events in American memory.

The war would be waged with all American modern armaments of war from rockets, bombs, napalm, B-52s, phantom jets, Army, Marine, and Navy forces in the small nation hugging the Southeastern Indochina coast cost 58,000 American lives, and upwards of several million Vietnam soldier and civilian deaths. War came to Vietnam for a variety of reasons including the fading desires of old empires, the sweeping calls for sovereignty from colonization by the Vietnamese people from the French, to the powerful rallying cry of socialist rhetoric, and the influential presence of the two Cold War super powers those being the United States and the Soviet Union. The story began when the French had reinvaded Vietnam to restore some of their former empire. However, after their defeat at the battle of Dien-Bien Phu it was clear the Vietnamese resistance led by their leader Ho-Chi Minh would secure the country.

Unwilling to see a nation sprout in Asia supported by the communist powers of China and the Soviet Union the U.S. stepped in to the fray slowly becoming more and more embroiled in the country's affairs between 1955-1964. From President Eisenhower, to President Kennedy millions of dollars and military advisors flooded into South Vietnam long before the war officially started in 1965. South Vietnam came into being

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[2] *The Pentagon Papers: As Published by the New York Times* (New York: Bantam Books, 1971).

after the end of the French Indo China war and the signing an end to the hostilities in 1955 at Geneva. With the Vietnamese nation split north and south along the 17th parallel conflict was inevitable. The North sent supplies and men south to topple the weak despot regime of South Vietnamese President Diem. America stepped in officially in 1965 to prop up the collapsing South Vietnam government.

The political and cultural consequences caused by this decision would occur slowly, but eventually they would form into a giant wave, surging through the arteries of American consciousness that disrupted their Post War myths, identity, and confidence. Not only had America's political climate and landscape changed fundamentally, but a larger cultural shift occurred affecting American attitudes toward authority, tastes in film, dress, music and darker perceptions of their nation's future. As Timothy J Lomperis noted, "the real Gordian Knot to the understanding of the Vietnam War is not over unfathomable facts but a deep-seated clash over values."[3] When the last American soldier left Vietnam in 1973 many considered this the symbol of the end of a great epoch. There was a new popular awareness that a historical transition had just occurred. What that transition, the ending of the previous epoch, or what the new epoch meant would be debated endlessly in America for the next several decades.

[3] Mark Taylor, *The Vietnam War in History, Literature, & Film* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003), 23.

CHAPTER ONE

IN THE GARDEN OF EDEN

U.S. Marine Lieutenant Philip Caputo squatted into the earth, cold mud gripping his army issued boots, and plotted murder. His hollow, bruise-rimmed eyes, soaked in the valley aesthetics with its cosmic cornucopia of greenery, winding rivers, and far-off misty mountain tops. For Caputo the landscape was no longer beautiful. He had once appreciated it, long ago when he landed on the beaches of Vietnam in 1965. Caputo had been so filled with hope and eager boyhood energy to play the game of war back then. A lifetime ago, it seemed. Months of being trapped here taught him the reality of this place. He was now intimately familiar with the dangers lurking beneath the sea of green foliage before him. It had transformed from a siren call of adventure and nation building into a maddening, and utterly alien wilderness: an experience that had led him to doubt his country and even his identity as a U.S. Marine. The landscape wasn't the only thing that had changed as Caputo's state of mind had become transformed by this "wilderness." He had grown to hate it as he described here.

> A few yards outside the perimeter, the walls of a half-ruined building shone bright white in the sun's glare… I looked at them for a long time. I don't know why I just remember staring at them. The building had been a temple of some kind, but it was now little more than a pile of stones. Vines growing over the stones and over the jagged, bullet scarred walls, which turned from white to hot-pink as the sun dropped into the clouds. Behind the building lay the scrub jungle that covered the slopes of the hill. It smelled of decaying wood and leaves, and the low trees encircled the outpost like the disorderly ranks of a besieging army. Staring at the jungle and at the ruined temple, hatred welled up in me: a hatred for this green, moldy alien world in which we fought and died. [4]

[4] Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1977), 315.

His thoughts festered as the sun passed high into the sky and the heat of the day grew. An impatient need to retaliate against the mines, jungle, and the Vietnamese people welled up inside the Lieutenant. It would be easy. He knew the location of his two targets. They occupied a small hut below in the valley, and his warriors could arrive unexpectedly at night. But who to send? The camp behind him - a mockery of the official name “forward fire base” given by the camps leaders - was marked by crater shells, rotting sandbags, trash, a stubborn fecal aroma, and discarded sheets of metal and ammunition. It was a disgusting place, and full of men who would follow his orders to kill the two old Vietnamese farmers without hesitation. Men too tired from the exhausting heat, too tired of this war, and too tired of being rained on incessantly to protest. By the next morning Caputo had gotten his retaliation. Two old men - most likely innocent farmers - lay dead in their huts.

Many consider Philip Caputo emblematic of the fallen American spirit in Vietnam. He was a young man who had been filled with a noble desire to fight a war against communist expansion. Instead in the Vietnam War he became transformed into a man who saw two old men as dangerous military targets and ordered their assassination. Within this hazy moment of history, we see themes of the American perspective of the Vietnam War. A story that essentially tells a narrative of the American soldier falling into the alien world of Indochina that traps him within a din of violence. From setting off trip wires or stumbling blindly into mines, sniper fire, and Viet-Cong ambushes Caputo and millions of other soldiers like him cannot escape the “green moldy alien world” they are trapped within. Philip Caputo’s story is highlighted by the historical context with the

ending of an epoch. It was the ending of nearly two decades of an American postwar technocratic liberal order with a populace that believed firmly in their nation's myth of historical progress. In Caputo's story we read the themes common to many stories dealing with the emergence of the perceptions that came after this epochs end: themes of disruption, disillusionment, death, dystopian projection, alienation, and confusion.

I suggest that American attitudes and ideas about nature are key to understanding themes around this shift in American history between 1965-1975. Nature and human perceptions of it, I suggest, linked themselves within the use of a metaphor that disparaged the American myth of progress A piece of this myth of progress was the process of driving back the forces of chaos identified within categories of nature such as wilderness. This ideology of the myth within America society identified American actions and their history as part of a grand story of human progress: a major aspect of this progress was their conquest of nature. The fruits of progress included increased life spans, food stability, convenience, transportation, communication, and improved numerous social nodes of the technocratic liberal power structure of the 20th century by then industrial society of America had produced an abundance and prosperity unseen in human history.

The idea of progress was an important ideal in Post War America. President Kennedy's ideal of a romantic frontier past became linked with his New Frontier. Secretary of State Robert McNamara and other liberal idealists saw Vietnam as a blank canvas to continue the American myth of progress. These men would do so by using their theories of industry, warfare, and nation-building to re-forge another "frontier" region

from its wilderness of poverty and chaos into a democratic bulwark against the corrosive powers of communism. It is in this view that Vietnam was a new metaphor for the wilderness of Americas long lost frontier. The war in Vietnam was supposed to have been a continuation of their story of bringing enlightenment, democracy, economic prosperity, and liberty to a dark corner of the world ruled by chaos and tyranny.

However, Vietnam would actively disrupt this story and instead create a new metaphor of dystopian disillusionment. In a manner of speaking the wars memory and iconography constructed a twisted mythos of the war vocalized through the Vietnam metaphor. In this metaphor Vietnam became a land that imbued disillusionment within popular memory that actively attacked the ideology of progress. This was a story where America did not conquer a "wilderness" like their ancestors had done, but instead, became defeated by it. Both the landscape of Vietnam, its people, the jungles and rice paddies, and American actions within it became a vivid metaphor of the failure of American belief in technology, the American frontiersmen, and by extension the grand utopian American optimism: ideas that buoyed the American myth of progress. By observing Vietnam in this view, I suggest, part of its metaphor took on the traditional role of "wilderness" in the struggle of American power vs nature. In American myths chaos is usually represented by nature, and its story followed a people using enlightenment and scientific ideals to slowly remove themselves from chaos, and bring about a world of order and purpose.[5] Nature in this historical perception is an antagonistic force

[5] James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed* (London: Yale University Press, 1998), 18.

representing reality that imposes chaos on otherwise "logical," "spiritual," and "meaningful," human systems.

Going back to Philip Caputo's fall from grace on the hilltop overlooking the ruins overrun with vines and in his camp surrounded by an "army of trees," and observing the "valley of death" below him, we see the building blocks for the ecological Vietnam metaphor. As we see Caputo using his conceptions of nature as both antagonists, setting, and metaphor.

> The air-conditioned HQ in Saigon and Danang seemed thousands of miles away. As for the USA we did not call it the "world" for nothing: it might as well have been on another planet. There was nothing familiar out where we were, no churches, no police, no laws… or any of the restraining influences without which the earth's population of virtuous people would be reduced by 95%. It was the dawn of creation in the Indochina bush an ethical as well as geographical wilderness. Out there, lacking restraint, sanctioned to kill, confronted by a hostile country and a relentless enemy, we sank into a brutish state.[6]

In this quote we see Caputo framing his understand of a progressive society that generated feelings of optimism but also anxiety and insecurity: before eventually clashing with the "ethical and geographic wilderness."

Within the abundance of America's suburbs, Caputo along with many young men felt they could not participate in their nations' journey toward progress: but only bathe in its afterglow. American had created a wonderous myth for the nation in the post war years. Myths help construct identity and connect individual actions within a larger narrative of meaning.[7] Nature, like previous understandings and narratives within

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[6] Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1977), xciii.
[7] Joseph Campbell, Bill D. Moyers, and Betty Flowers, *The Power of Myth* (New York: Anchor Books, 1991).

America's myth was a way to conceptualize a path out of the stifling over-civilization he found himself within. Caputo yearned for not just any nature, he yearned for a place of adventure and meaning. In the myth of America this place was defined by the frontier or as Americans perceived it a vast wilderness full of peril, but also, of great potential. He sought a return to wilderness which would allow him a chance for his glory. Thus, for Caputo his journey into Vietnam was as much about meeting a brutal ecology as it was coming to terms with his country's myth of progress, finding the two were very much linked.

The American soldier in Vietnam became a key actor within the Vietnam metaphor: serving as an unwilling vanguard against ideals of American progress. Like the pioneers of old whose rough existence against the ecological reality of the frontier falsified the romantic visions of urban poets and intellectuals, Caputo, along with thousands of other veterans took on a similar role in their works of fiction and memoir. Within the wilderness of "jungle," "bush," or "quagmire" soldiers interactions highlighted themes of anti-heroism, moral decay, relativism, barbarism, apocalypse, and spiritual loss. Their war story unlike that of World War II translated a metaphor which contradicted the myth of American heroism, adventure, progress and ultimate victory. Instead, they infused themes of pain and suffering in their narration that translated profound alienation within American society during this time.

An important part of the early metaphor tied to ecology was the title in journalist David Halberstam's book *The Making of a Quagmire.* The title of his work imprinted a vivid image that became so popular it would sum up the orthodox interpretation of the

Vietnam war for years. This history, broadly speaking, argued that Americans' good intentions became marred inside an Asian "wilderness" of guerrilla warfare that forced America leaders like Presidents Kennedy and Johnson to commit deeper into a situation that they could not remove themselves from: much like a naive man walking further away from the city until he finds himself sinking into a hellish bog. Orthodox histories such as *Neil Sheehan's A Bright Shining Lie,* David Halberstam's *The Making of a Quagmire*, and the more historical chronicles of the war like Stanley Karnow's *Vietnam: A History* explain the war largely within this narrative.[8] The W*ashington Post's* political cartoonist Herblock gave this idea a visible portrayal in the striking image of an ever worrying President Lyndon Johnson sinking further into the Asian bog.

Journalist David Halberstam's heavy use of ecology to interpret the Vietnam experience represented the first wave that broke from the official accounts of what was happening in Vietnam, but it would not be the last. In 1968 after the Tet Offensive, Bobby Kennedy used another ecological phrase to explain the failure of American military strategy. "We have misconceived the nature of the war… we have sought to resolve by military might a conflict whose issues depends upon the well and conviction of the South Vietnamese people. It is like sending a lion to halt an epidemic of Jungle Rot."[9]

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[8] Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988); Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984); David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire: America and Vietnam During the Kennedy Era* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1965).

[9] A Broadside by Bobby. *Newsweek*, February 19, 1968, 24.



Fig 1: Herbert Block, Uncle Sam carrying a machine gun over his head while caught in a swamp labeled ASIA, Political Cartoon, *Washington Post,* c. 1968. Library of Congress.

Iconography of landscapes played a big part in crafting the American memory of the Vietnam war. Expressions, descriptions, and visuals of “quagmire,” “bogs,” “jungle rot,” “hellish jungle,” and “the bush” illustrated the scene of the war as a stinking morass of dense foliage. Another important aspect of this iconography that helped build the Vietnam memoir was the use of American technology.

Chemical warfare and the primitive scenes of sickly, frightened villagers were hard to ignore. Images of C-123s dropping gallons of orange mist also quickly cemented

itself in the war's iconography. Works by the scientists such as Arthur H. Westing, E.W Pfeiffer, John Dux and Peter Young, and by historians like Edwin A. Martini have given great focus to the devastation of the people and the natural world in Indo-China.[10] The power to devastate the natural world on an industrial scale, and for that devastation to be understood as irreversible fit neatly within new global anxieties about environmental decline, that highlighted a new concern within a global understanding of environmentalism. It also represented a theme of the American "weakness" witnessed within their over-reliance on technology instead of strategy and diplomacy. These historians in their own way used the environment to narrate a symbolic "fall" witnessed in the wanton destruction of the biological space of Southeast-Indochina by an arrogant superpower.

The United States' mistaken faith in technology was further examined by Historian James Gibson's *The Perfect War* that highlighted a culture within the American military and government that simplified the war for the sake of convenience. According to Gibson this culture of technophiles went on to create not only high civilian, and military casualties, but also helped conduct a losing strategy as American technology could not always navigate the difficult Indo-China terrain.[11] Other environmental historians highlighted this disgust in a new global context over the American's use of chemical weapons, wide scale aerial bombing campaigns, and vegetation clearance with

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[10] See. Edwin Martini, *Agent Orange: History, Science and the Politics of Uncertainty* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012); Arthur H. Westing and E W. Pfeiffer, "The Cratering of Indochina," *Scientific American* 226, no.5 (1972): 20-29, Doi:10.1038/scientificamerican0572-20; John Dux and Peter J. Young, *Agent Orange – the Bitter Harvest* (Sydney: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980).
[11] James Gibson, *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986).

Rome plows and tanks. Historian D. Zierler highlighted an investigation into America's chemical warfare during President Nixon's administration that, ironically, helped develop legal language recognizing the rights of environmental spaces to not be destroyed. This resulted in the official recognition of words like *ecocide* to describe intentional harm on ecological spaces by governments or individuals.[12] However, within Vietnam's historiography, fights over the cultural aspects of the war have overshadowed the environmental context, and I would suggest that this is despite nature being clearly represented symbolically both within these cultural battlefields in vast Vietnam's literature, and iconography.

The cultural historiography of the Vietnam War is too large to list here, as Historian David Anderson wrote in the preamble to the *Columbia History of the Vietnam War,* "The study of the war, as the thousands of titles on the subject demonstrate, does not now and may never approach a level of intellectual agreement that can be labeled definitive."[13] Works like Richard Slotkin's *Gunfighter Nation,* Bruce Franklin's, *M.I.A, or Mythmaking in America,* and Tom Engelhardt's *The End of Victory Culture* highlighted massive shifts in American perceptions toward their history, violence, and values. Historical interpretations highlighted cultural battles, and the nodes that served as sparks for political movements, new conservative ideologies, and a new cultural

[12] D Zierler, "Against Protocol: Ecocide, Détente, and the Question of Chemical Warfare in Vietnam, 1969–1975," in *Environmental Histories of the Cold War*, eds. J. McNeill & C. Unger, Publications of the German Historical Institute (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 227-256.
[13] David Anderson, *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), x.

perceptions of American history.[14] The influence and subtle motivations of racial and gender based perceptions were each separately highlighted by Richard Drinnon's *Facing West: the Metaphysics of Indian-hating and Empire Building*, and Susan Jeffords *The Remasculinization of America*.[15] Other historians such as Andrew Martin in *Receptions of War* continued to explore the role of technology and film in shaping post war attitudes. The role of technology and iconography in giving weight to false narratives was further explored by Jerry Lembke in *The Spitting Image*, as the imagery of the beaten veteran so widely used by politicians was reexamined and found to have never occurred.[16] Given this massive array of interpretations, the role of nature in influencing the orthodox, revisionist, political, or cultural narratives that emerged after Vietnam is something to note. Nature as a symbol and metaphor, I suggest, clearly represented something larger than indicated by the number of authors who have written about it as environmental Historian David Biggs alluded to here.

> The arrival of American troops in Vietnam in 1965 inaugurated one of the bloodiest engagements of the Cold War: it also triggered a surge of writing on the conflict that has yet to abate.... Yet despite all the artistic and scholarly work, few have yet to consider the role of environments-historic, built, or natural – in shaping the events of the conflict. Nor do very many post-war scholars consider lasting effects of the conflict on Vietnamese places.[17]

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[14] Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* (New York: Athenaeum, 1992); Bruce Franklin, *M.I.A, or Mythmaking in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993); Tom Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation* (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995).
[15] Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1980); Richard Drinnon, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire-Building* (New York: Meridian Books, 1980).
[16] Jerry Lembcke, *The Spitting Image: Myth Memory and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: University of Press, 1998).
[17] David Biggs, *Quagmire: Nation Building and Nature in the Mekong Delta* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012), 197.

Biggs was correct to point out that nearly every ounce of creative, ideological, and historical method of inquiry has been used to wring all sorts of narratives from the Vietnam War. Yet, very little energy has been used to emphasize how nature is deeply connected within these narratives. As human geographer Linda Nash said in her book *Inescapable Ecologies, "*the most radical notion to emerge in the 20th century was that people were inescapably tied to a larger ecosystem."[18] A notion that also emerged with Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring,* and the Vietnam War, and other breaches that alerted people to the reality that separation from these ecosystems was an illusion: nature did not follow the logic of progress. The Vietnam War's role in this discovery was largely symbolic, becoming codified in minds and hearts through the defeat of American technology and its soldiers by the Vietnamese. A people who became represented as incarnations of "nature" in their "primitive" exitance and military strategy. In the personal accounts of soldiers many became radicalized against various paradigms that favored technology and progress.[19] These men became radicalized not through ideological indoctrination, but by discovering themselves as fragile, biological organisms in a hostile ecosystem. A pain they later reconstructed within the Vietnam metaphor that launched subversive attacks on various narratives of progress and American ideals of liberalism.

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[18] Linda Nash, *Inescapable Ecologies: A History of Environment, Disease & Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

[19] See William Pfaff, "The Decline of Liberal Politics," *Commentary*, Oct 1, 1969; Lucas Carpenter, "It Didn't Mean Nothing: Vietnam War fiction & Post Modernism," *College Literature*, 30, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 30-50, 32; Robert Tome, *Apocalypse Then: American Intellectuals and the Vietnam War, 1954-1975* (New York: University Press, 1998).

Historian John Hellman's *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* is one of the few to make a direct connection between perception of nature and the growing unrest back in America. As Hellman states here, "But in the version of this landscape that the New Left was able to create from Johnson's war, Americans who wanted to align themselves with nature against the machine would have no alternative but to reject the American society itself."[20] The metaphors of the collapse of civilization, of the American psyche, the sense of despair and hopelessness rooted in nihilistic observations of nature itself are key components of the themes surrounding the Vietnam war. Iconography like the burning B-52s in Khe Sahn, the spraying of orange chemicals over jungles, the harrowed hallow eyed stares of GI's going out on patrol, the burning of thatched villages with zippo lighters, the strange wilderness of Vietnam and the "primitive" existence of its people with bamboo huts, elephant grass, rice paddies, ancient canals - all alien, and foreign, and ultimately "victorious" against the American Techno Empire of sensors, bullets, bombs, machines, and empire filled with imagined John Wayne heroes became imagery ingrained in the American psyche.

The presence of nature in Vietnam was built American expectations and narratives about their own forms of their narration within areas of "wilderness," places such as the Wild West and the expanding frontiers of the 18th and 19th century. These narratives were born in part from the vast North American interior where American writers and intellectuals often searched within nature for key metaphors to understand

[20] John Hellman, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: Columbia Press University, 1986), 75.

American culture and its values. As sociologist Burch Williams wrote in his observations of tribes, "the tribesman looks into nature & sees himself, but Western man consistently looks into nature to find himself."[21] American poets, writers, and filmmakers conceptions of the frontier, and wild west, were imbued with hopes of individualism, and anti-civilizational cultural primitivism: to larger state and civic orders such as Jeffersonian equality, yeoman farmers and transcendental naturalism.[22] Many of these ideas derived from their similar European conceptions and myths of society and nature. This included concepts such as dominion over nature and the separation of mankind and nature as in the story of Adam and Eve. Held within these views were beliefs of geography that was good or evil: geographies within landscapes of social and techno-orders. For example, the Germans name for this sacred landscape was called Landschaft, a medieval conception of land and space as a symbol.[23] Sacred geography was evident in the early medieval aesthetic order of villages and the church. These were sacred geographies to these people that denoted a social order, history, memory, identity, and meaning. This was the bulwark to the natural and "supernatural" forces of chaos in human perceptions of far off wilderness.

These narratives of progress within nature were fundamental to the American mythos. American history is rife with physically remaking wilds into gardens, plots of land, acres to be toiled farmed and overseen. It was a process of removing chaos and introducing control and order that was key to the myths function as a pragmatic and

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[21] William Burch, *Daydreams and Nightmares: A Sociological Essay on the American Environment* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 58.
[22] Burch, 75.
[23] John Stillgoe, *Landscape & Images* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 33.

philosophical tool. Modern America viewed the past as a landscape of ceaseless transition from one disaster to the next, catastrophes such as food shortages, famine, plague, and war that plagued human endeavors for order and stability. Before this golden age of abundance anxiety abounded around the cycles of these disasters. The 19th century painter Thomas Cole created a series of paintings titled *The Course of Empire* that reflected this perception. Through the five stages of *The Savage State, The Arcadian or Pastoral State, The Consummation of Empire, Destruction,* and finally *Desolation* we a narrative that mirrors a meta-historical reality of the recurring cycles of growth, peak, and decline. *The Cycle of Desolation* related the final victory of ecology as legions of varying fauna return and grew eagerly over the decaying ruins of a once great human city. The cobbled market, the great stone works, and their once industrious and clever inhabitants were gone and trampled, buried beneath the inexorable growth of these invasive plants and vines: now free to reconquer the land for their own obtuse and empty end. The narrative emphasized the transformation of "wilderness" into something of human use, and through this transformation a great empire is birthed and rises, before it eventually collapsed, and nature returns to oversee the ruins.







Fig 2: Thomas Cole, Painting, oil on canvas, *Course of Empire, The Savage State, The Arcadian State, The Consumption of Empire, Destruction*, c. 1836. Library of Congress.

Americans ideas about empire had built themselves on ideas of a conquest over nature such as the conception of Manifest destiny, the frontier, and popular imagery of the Wild West. This included a form of storytelling and narrative that used ideas of nature to help identify themes of American character or important pieces of their social order such as freedom, autonomy, liberty, change, and democratic inclusion. This process was articulated by Historian Frederick Jackson Turner in the late 19th century during the "closure" of the frontier. Turner suggested that part of the American character and energy came from the constant shifting cycle of bringing order to the American West. Throughout this grand process that saw exploration, conflict, taming, and eventually settlement the unique charm and power of the American character was born. Thus, for Turner and many others the physical closure of this process evoked a turning point in American history.[24] Turner and others expressed uncertainty about the physical closure of expansion and what it held for their country's future. Without a "west" would the American enterprise become another fading power like that of Europe? These fears of growing weakness, lack of purpose, and fretting over identity were reawakened again during the deep anxieties of the height of America's technocratic liberal order in the middle of the 1950s.

This cultural yearning for meaning occurred during a period that historian Eric Hobsbawm called the "Golden Age," a time of relative safety, social and political cohesion, rapid economic growth and stability.[25] It was an era defined by its economic

[24] Frederick Jackson Turner, 1861-1932, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1894).
[25] Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* (London: Abacus, 2001).

booms, expansive government, a rising middle class, and massive reductions in poverty, homelessness, and increases in high wages and job security.[26] In America, a large liberal coalition guided this growth: their reign largely unchallenged as they maneuvered policy and bills that subsidized housing, education, and other programs.[27] This was the domination of a new modern industrial mind which valued the virtues of progress through Keynesian economic models, which in the dreamy enclosure of such wonderous growth, seemed to have allowed America to break from the previous cycles of the history depicted in Thomas Cole's paintings of desolation and destruction. The government provided capital for infrastructure and large social safety nets like the New Deal and Fair Deal programs and eventually President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programs of health care and welfare. It was a small age that represented a broad homogenous consensus culture of intellectuals, society, and politics, but also symbolically resonated with many mythological conceptions of American history.[28]

This Golden Age led many intellectuals to find utopianism in America's enterprise. Utopias are defined by their "placeless-ness," existing in their conceptions within satire and critique in a sort of far-off fantasy world. This was the case because utopian worlds exist outside the state of history. They were removed from the tragic story of disaster, horror, war, the rise of civilization and then eventual collapse in human

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[26] Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: Free Press, 2001), 4.
[27] Brink Lindsey, *The Age of Abundance: How Prosperity Transformed America's Politics and Culture* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2007).
[28] Nills Gillman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2003).

society.[29] In America, utopianism as a reality fit neatly within the apex of technocratic liberalism in the 1960s, as its architects saw American society as a framework for the whole globe through economic and social development. This goal of this American liberalism was perceived to ensure American preeminence, and also, to combat communist subversion.[30] Conceptualized primarily by intellectuals and industrialists, this utopian idea found its champion in President Kennedy, who seemed to embody the next development in the American spirit as he led his people to overcome the lethargy and anxiety of the Eisenhower administration and forge it into a powerful message of nationalistic idealism: born of the deeper American myths of historical progress. As the relatively young president intoned in his acceptance speech in 1960:

> Let the word go forth 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 to at home and around the world.[31]

Armed with both the power of their machines, industrial capacity, and new commitment to liberty, Americans were highly optimistic about the future. This optimism was also framed in the absence of pain in the context of America's mini "utopia."

That generation was reaping the rewards of the culmination of the works and labor of past generations, who as Lyndon Johnson remarked had, "for half a century we

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[29] Leonidas Donskis, *The End of Ideology & Utopia? Moral Imagination & Cultural Criticism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2000), 3.
[30] Michael Latham, "Redirecting the Revolution? The USA & the Failure of Nation Building in South Vietnam," *Third World Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (2006): pp 27-42. 31.
[31] William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1976), 47.

labored to settle & to subdue a continent. For half a century we called upon unbounded invention & untiring industry to create an order of plenty for all our people."[32] This *plenty* was an also a way of saying that Americans had finally conquered nature and had reduced its danger into an extension of human utility. The once far off kingdom of air, sea, and mountains were now filled with U.S. war planes, battleships, and military installations. Mirroring the military domination was a private sector of industry and trade that eclipsed all previous economies in human history. Hunger and disease were conquered through the green revolution of high yields, and the development of cures for polio, smallpox, and malaria.[33] In this epoch Americans had seemed to separate themselves from the once troubling states of hunger, disease, and misery. However, their absence created several reactions within American society during the post war era.

The post war economic boom and the abundance also created new anxieties. Within certain circles there grew a perceived weakness of character and spirit born of the vast industrialized American machines. At the same time there was also a beaming optimism and hubris that with new technology came more control over nature and with more control came another notch toward an abstract goal of progress: a goal that was utopian in nature. Utopia in fiction and social critique were presented as the accumulation of vast scientific and technological projects that created a land of plenty and comfort.[34] Human societies often tried to separate themselves from nature in different techno orders:

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[32] Jim Heath, *Decade of Disillusionment: The Kennedy-Johnson Administration* (Bloomington: University Press, 1975), 193.
[33] Nills Gillman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2003).
[34] Leonidas Donskis, *The End of Ideology & Utopia? Moral Imagination & Cultural Criticism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2000) 3.

from the Christian order centered around the church, peaceful village, and orderly fields; to the enlightenment aesthetic of gardens, townships, and exploration; to the industrial landscape of dams, highways, factories, and suburban sprawl. These techno orders helped enforce a separation between human beings and nature that served as justifications for the social contract of the societies. They believe in God, they toil in the garden, they value the social contract because otherwise without them they will find themselves abandoned in an unmarked grave amidst wilderness and beasts. Thus, these techno orders powers came, in part, from their semblance toward for the preferred human states of neatness and order. Early sixties liberalism, perhaps, was where this illusion of the separation was at its highest.[35] A time that had seemed impossible within past generations suffering from disease and discomfort, was now swept away by the magic of science. What was once make-believe, parody and satire had now nearly become reality.

The illusion was anchored by the Christian myth that began the first social order, and the first separation told through the biblical tale of Adam and Eve. It was in the first moments where Adam and Eve found themselves outside the Garden of Eden that the Christian idea of "nature" was born. Nature became what these societies perceive as a place in the absence of the guidance of the human hand to craft from its chaos something of value. This was the genesis of cultural ideas like that of wilderness, frontier, and nature which became a protagonist to human endeavor: as they could not exist without the countering protagonist agent like a farmstead, a church, or city. They existed in a world

[35] Krafe Maltzahn, *Nature as Landscape: Dwelling & Understanding* (Montreal: McGill Queens University Press, 1994), 36.

that was not a human world. Inside it, according to the perception of the ancients, people became powerlessness, prone to the nihilistic cycles, rooted in the primal manifestations of might makes right in an intense fight for survival. In this wilderness humans were not at their strength but vulnerable to the wild animals.[36] In western ideas of nature the concept of separation from this world is key to justify social orders, civilization, and in America's liberal technocratic state it was at perhaps its greatest cultural strength.

The separation allowed very idealistic and romantic perceptions about nature to propagate without a bloody counter of physicality. In the Golden Age of the 1950s and 1960s there were few, if any, pioneers suffering in heat and bloody toil to falsify the naïve idea of separation from ecology. Views of nature within America combined ideas of the natural world with American optimism that projected nature into a cultural view of "frontiers," a far-off place of constructed fantasy, utopianism, and dreamy calls for nationalism. Writer Henry Luce in his influential piece *The American Century* called for America to become the herald for a new form of empire. An empire not based on conquest and authoritarianism but freedom, liberty, and a new global mandate to ensure these values for all people. As he stated, "it must be an internationalism of the people, by the people, and for the people."[37] Luce believed in American manifest destiny and described its conquest of the frontier as an integral part of this narrative toward a transcendent empire. Reworking this process into an idea that fit his conception of American internationalism he wrote:

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[36] Krafe Maltzahn, *Nature as Landscape: Dwelling & Understanding* (Montreal: McGill Queens University Press, 1994), 24.
[37] Henry Luce, *The American Century* (New York: Farrar & Kinehart, 1941) 32.

> Other nations can survive simply because they have endured so long sometimes with more and sometimes with less significance. But, this nation, conceived in adventure and dedicated to the progress of man – this nation cannot truly endure unless there courses strongly through its veins from Maine to California the blood of purpose and enterprise and high resolve…
>
> Throughout the 17th century & the 18th century and the 19th century, this continent teemed with manifold projects and magnificent purposes. Above them all and weaving them all together into the most exciting flag of all the world and of all history was the triumphed purpose of freedom.[38]

Luce was part of a long line of American leaders who wished their country to adopt a unique mandate that offered the world liberty and hope. President Kennedy's victory in 1960 was another step toward this mandate. President Kennedy's cabinet would cleverly restate these ideals through icons and imagery of the American past such as the wild west and frontier to market to American voters a new energy within a broad set of policy goals titled the New Frontier. This New Frontier involved a series of economic and social goals, but without question the most important theme was the emphasis on American rediscovery of their identity as pioneers, explorers, and people of action.[39]

This moved away from the anxiety found in nuclear warfare and at the same time addressed the insecurity of the abundance society in America. By using past American mythological heroic imagery, already propped up by Hollywood John Wayne films, and popular cowboy iconography, many Americans were eager to take up President Kennedy's internationalist call. Kennedy began preparing the ground for his landscape of

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[38] Henry Luce, *The American Century* (New York: Farrar & Kinehart, 1941), 40.
[39] Jim Heath, *Decade of Disillusionment: The Kennedy-Johnson Administration* (Bloomington: University Press, 1975).

American action, and purpose in 1960 in the Los Angeles Coliseum where he said the following:

> For I stand tonight facing west on what was once the last frontier. From the lands that stretch 3,000 miles behind me, the pioneers of old gave up their safety their comfort and sometimes their lives to build a new world here in the West… But the problems are not all solved and the battles are all not won, and we stand today on the edge of a New Frontier – the frontier of the 1960s, a frontier of unfulfilled hopes and threats… for the harsh facts of the matter are that we stand on the frontier at a turning point in history.[40]

In this turning point in history there were two sides. On one side were the forces of evil, a great eastern empire of communism the Soviet Union, and on the other side were the godly forces of liberal, capitalistic democracies, and Americans were to rediscover the energy to fight for this world order in Kennedy's New Frontier. By extension of the Cold War rhetoric, the New Frontier became part of a military strategy titled "Flexible Response" which sought to combat communism with special forces.

Popular attention shifted away from American Navy and Air Forces to the Green Berets and the army. While the Navy and Air Force housed titanic wonders such as the B-52 bomber, nuclear submarines and other pieces of American technological might, they were also subconsciously associated with nuclear annihilation. As President Kennedy spoke to West Point graduates in 1962 on the new hot spots in the Cold War such as Korea and Cuba, "No massive nuclear retaliation has been considered appropriate. This is another type of war new in its intensity, ancient in its origin – war by

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[40] Richard Drinnon, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating & Empire-Building* (New York: Meridian Book, 1980), 429.

guerrillas, subversives, insurgents, assassins, war by ambush instead of combat."[41] President Kennedy understood that the population valued individual heroism, and the flagship for this shift came in the creation of a new special force. Kennedy saw within the Green Berets a romantic vision. These special forces embodied the American character, being both rough and noble warrior scholars, and dangerous men who traveled exotic wilds like the mythic American frontiersmen of old. They became the posters for the heroic action of Kennedy's new frontier as *Time* magazine wrote in 1961 of the Green Berets, "Green Berets can remove an appendix, fire a foreign-made or obsolete gun, blow up a bridge, handle a bow and arrow, sweet talk some bread out of a native in his own language, fashion explosives out of chemical fertilizer, cut an enemy's throat… or live off the land."[42]

Historians would come to call this time Kennedy's Camelot, a name which invoked hope, but also a more adult, and somber interpretation of the era as fairytale. During this era one of the great pitfalls of progress, the fear of civilization gone rampant, had seemingly been solved. American anxiety was forged into a spiritual mission of enlightening and historical purpose. President Kennedy offered a new frontier and a new "wilderness" to conquer: this one was largely metaphorical being made up of the general state of ignorance, poverty, and the larger fight against communism. America in this narrative would continue its myth by finishing what their ancestors had started by bringing civilization to replace wilderness. This message was popular in the technocratic

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[41] William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1976), 46.
[42] Mark Taylor, *The Vietnam War in History, Literature, & Film* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003), 25.

paradigm by intellectuals and regular citizens alike. As Philip Caputo remembered, "Once in a while I found flint arrowheads in the muddy creek bank. Looking at them, I would dream of that savage, heroic time and wish I had lived then, before America- a land of salesman and shopping centers… That is what I wanted, to find in a common place world a chance to live heroically. Having known nothing but security, comfort and peace I hungered for danger, challenges and violence."[43] Philip Caputo, Ron Kovic, Tim O'Brien and other voices of veterans would get their chance for danger as the situation in Vietnam worsened in 1962. Long before people imagined a hypnotic nightmare land of war, burning villages, spooky Viet Cong, and crazed GI's with flamethrowers, the strange small country seemed to echo with adventurous potential

Vietnam would remain an enigma to most Americans. Throughout the 1960s many viewed Vietnam as one among a legion of backward third world nations. Its alien interior was filled with innocent, but ignorant, and misguided peasantry: a place fitting to be on the front lines against communist insurgency. Hollywood would present Vietnam in this light in popular films such *The Quiet American* (1958) or *China Gate* (1957), films that delegitimized the North Vietnamese and framed the conflict in the American Cold War perspective of good vs evil.[44] Military men were optimistic in the Kennedy era and approved of his supportive gestures toward the Army. But they still wanted a proving ground. They wanted a war to prove themselves to not only their president, but to their

[43] Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1977), 5.
[44] Scott Landerman, "Hollywood's Vietnam, 1929-1964: Scripting Intervention Spotlighting Injustice," *Pacific Review* 78, no. 4 (2009): 578-607, 596.

fathers who had fought in World War II.[45] As the situation worsened, South Vietnam would emerge as the proving grounds for American men like Ron Kovic, Tim O'Brien, Karl Marlantes, Philip Caputo. Alongside strategists and policy makers like secretary of State Robert McNamara, who saw Vietnam as an opportunity for their own designs of nation building.

In the brimming competition for influence between America and the Soviet Union, Vietnam had been divided up by Cold War foreign policy. Infested by agents, spies, and diplomatic representatives of each power the land seemed ripe for a future conflict. However, for Americans, Vietnam had no prior history, it was merely a place concocted in fantasies of adventurous frontiers and made to be foil to modern civilization: appearing on the periphery of an unknown frontier of the Cold War with no expectation for future disaster. But Vietnam had a long history that predated many civilizations. Archeological evidence suggests that the first people who entered the valleys and coastal plains of Vietnam entered the region some 15,000 to 30,000 years ago. Vietnamese legends spun tales of the yearly flooding, the indomitable mountains, and jungles as home to fairies, spirits, heroes and ancestors. The land was full of shrines and graves of their ancestors that had in their own way found ways to control nature and build an agrarian civilization.[46] Over their history these people created a legacy of defeating powerful empires like the Chinese, Mongols, and the French, using their natural

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[45] Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), 58.
[46] Eleanor Sterling, Martha Hurley, and Le Duc Minh. *Vietnam: A Natural History* (London: Yale University Press, 2006), 27.

ecosystems of triple canopy jungle, mountainous terrain, highlands and deltas to tire out their enemies in brutal guerrilla warfare.[47]

South Vietnam lies against the China Sea stretching to be about the size of California. Its capital, Saigon, located below the immense Mekong Delta, lies some 500 miles south from Hanoi, the capital of North Vietnam. In South Vietnam, 80% of the 16 million people lived on 40% of the land. Another 40% of the land was uninhabited; dominated by scrub brush, elephant grass, swamps, and jungle. Thin strips of arable land and lowlands clung to the coast along the length of the country, except at the Annamite mountain range, which cut into the country below the city of Hue, and eventual settled in the area known as the Central Highlands.[48] In the Northwest province near the demilitarized zone, the Annamite Mountain range reaches heights of 8,000 feet and is often covered by triple canopy cover and lush, thick fauna. This range extends along the back of the country like a spine, only broken by the Central Highlands where the mountains break down into a wide plateau of steep mountain passes and dense jungle. This plateau lies in the center of the country below the strategic city of Hue that connected South Vietnam's north and southern portion. The foreboding Annamite mountains are just a small subdivision of the titanic Himalayan mountain range whose peaks stretch from Vietnam all the way to Pakistan. These mountains birthed the great rivers of Vietnam such as the Yangtze River in the north and the Red and Mekong rivers

[47] Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), 161.
[48] William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1976), 61.

in the south, waterways which coursed through the lowlands and coastal plain, and created deltas such as the immense Mekong Delta.[49]

It was in the Mekong Delta that American military advisors would first encounter Vietnam's first test of ecology. Through 1962 through 1964 the war remained a fantasy of adventure, and Americans' contact with the harsh ecological reality did not immediately dampen these feelings.[50] Optimism came from an assumption the war would be over soon, and many in the military wanted a piece of the action before it ended. As General Charles Timmes, a veteran of D-Day spoke, "It isn't much of a war but it's the only war we've got, so enjoy it."[51] The eagerness by American captains to camp with their South Vietnam allies, to go out on patrol, and the general feelings of empathy and welcome experienced toward the Vietnamese and Americans reflected the dreamy start to a grand campaign. For Americans in these dreamy years they imagined hunting Viet-Cong in the Delta would be like fighting Indians in the old American west. The military jargon reflected the boyish enthusiasm to equate the past with the current war in Vietnam. Names for operations were ripped right from 17th and 18th century vernacular with names such as "Daniel Boone," "Cochise" and "Crazy Horse." These names created a narrative link between the past, and this new war of chasing communist guerrillas into a vast swampy wilderness with APC's and helicopters, manned by their grinning American

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[49] Eleanor Sterling, Martha Hurley, and LeDue Minh, *Vietnam: Natural History* (London: Yale University Press, 2006), 52.
[50] Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie. John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), 65.
[51] Sheehan, 58.

technicians and sergeants leading the awestruck and grateful Vietnamese to victory.[52] But as time went by, the real situation became clearer even as the situation on the ground grew more chaotic and murkier.

It was not their father's war. There were no stationary targets to destroy like factories, no precise territory to conquer like Paris and Berlin, and often no visible enemy to fight like the Germans or Japanese regulars. The air was thick with heat and humidity causing the thick hairy American bodies to sweat and wear down in exhaustion. Americans came with expectations: they would get their hands dirty, feel the mud in their socks, and feel the beating hot rays of the sun on their necks. However, the experience of pain quickly overtook the early charms of fatigue and adventure. The reality did not meet the opaque intellectual conception of nation building, nor the popular cultural conception of "roughing it" in some wilderness.

Vietnam had emerged as a cultural and historical parallel with past American struggles against wilderness such as the Wild West. The story was supposed to have ended like that of their ancestors: in overcoming wilderness and defeating it. However, the ecological reality was the first to disregard this dream of transcendental purpose. As time went on the men on the frontlines in the Mekong Delta and central highlands such as the sergeants and advisors began to feel the effects of something in the air, a thing that the French in the previous war had called *la cafard,* a sickness of the spirit that sapped the strength of the large American bodies unused to such heat.[53] Moving all day in heavy

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[52] Milton Bates, *The Wars We took to Vietnam: Cultural Conflict and Storytelling* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996) 866.
[53] Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1977), 68.

gear and chasing an elusive foe turned out to be a great challenge. Unlike some Hollywood jungle landscape that had a cache of communists at the end of it, there usually was little to see for their efforts. While Philip Caputo entered the war in the north near the DMZ in Da Nang, he summed up what many began to feel in the Delta in the early years of 1962. "The novelty of our surroundings wore off," he wrote, "the lack of action and the long days of staring at that alien landscape: a lovely landscape, yes. But after a while all that jungle green became as monotonous as the beige of the desert or the white of the artic."[54]

The Delta transformed from an American ideal of wilderness of adventure and bravery into the reality of a harsh ecosystem breathing a world of misery. The Mekong Delta is an immense floodplain stretching in a southernly arc underneath the capital of South Vietnam, Saigon, over some 15,000 square miles. Canals crisscross the plains in a patchwork pattern with some places reaching a depth of 15 meters. Daily temperatures routinely reached 90 degrees with high humidity. In this maze of fauna and water more than 80% of South Vietnam's total peasantry lived in scattered villages. Journalist David Halberstam when observing operations in the Mekong Delta in 1962 would remark, 'when I first went to the Delta, I saw that this was what the war was all about."[55] What Halberstam saw was the first tremor in the web of American confidence: the unnerving competency of the Viet-Cong, the lack of morale in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, or ARVN for short, soldiers, and the quality of warfare without any measurable

[54] Caputo, 68.
[55] David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire: America & Vietnam During the Kennedy Era* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1965), 39.

progress. As one American officer said in the Delta, "This is what it was like, hot and frustrating and unrewarding."[56]

Nature was quickly becoming the central orientation of discovering the credibility gap: a gap between the formal statements made by the United States Military and Washington, and their lack of imagination, and overreliance on technology to provide what they perceived as a quick fix to the Vietnam problem. Assistant to the president, W.W. Rostow suggested in a memo sent to President Kennedy, "the sending to Vietnam of a research & development & military hardware team which would explore with General McGarr… the various techniques & gadgets now available or being explored might be relevant & useful in the Vietnam operation."[57] Ironically, despite the personal desire for individual heroism and glory, the industrial state and its abundance of technology was still the primary means of addressing the growing crisis in Vietnam. Chemical weapons, advanced halftrack troop carriers like the APC, helicopters, fighter jets, and thousands of weapons for AVRN soldiers were poured into the country during the early period of 1962-1964, and this represented the low point of what would become a massive campaign of bombing, shelling, and chemical spraying of Vietnam's landscape. It was the large bureaucracy of false progress reports and the overuse of technology further widened the credibility gap between soldiers and their leaders.

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[56] David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire: America & Vietnam During the Kennedy Era* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1965), 39.
[57] *The Pentagon Papers: As Published by the New York Times* (New York: Bantam Books, 1971); Edwin Martini, *Agent Orange: History, Science, and the Politics of Uncertainty* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012).

The credibility gap was many things. It was the elemental disparity between the progress reports, the perception of technological power equaling victory, the American generals' opinions, the official press releases made by Washington, and then reported by mainstream news outlets that denied the chaotic conflict in Vietnam which even as early as 1964 created wide dissonance between soldier and their leaders. As veteran Colin Powell remembered of his experience on the ground in Vietnam:

> Secretary McNamara… made a visit to South Vietnam. Every quantitative measurement, he concluded, after forty-eight hours there, shows that we are winning the war. Measure it and it has meaning. Yet, nothing I had witnessed… indicated we were beating the Viet Cong. Beating them? Most of the time we could not even find them."[58]

This simple observation guided the primary metaphor and symbolism of Vietnam in much of the critique, protest, and counter-culture movements that came later in the decade.

As American soldiers were discovering during 1962-1964 in the Mekong Delta the ideal of nature as adventuring in frontier could not match the hellish reality of wading waist deep in sludge through a humid environment, of winning a hill each day and losing it at night, or finding a blown off foot and calling it another enemy body. Previous American wars contextualized the pain of cold and heat in a context of "the front." Vietnam highlighted pain as a mundane, demeaning, and directionless experience part of being "in country." It was a frightening reminder of mortality and the fragility of the human body. As environmental historian Patricia Limerick explained, "Nature is on one

[58] Ben Ramalingham, *Aid on the Edge of Chaos* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). 45.

count a reminder of the individual's own biological vulnerability."[59] This kind of reminder would pass over the heads of state like Robert McNamara, General Westmoreland, and others who could not see the physicality of the land war developing before them.

Secretary of State Robert McNamara, who in 1962 after a brief visit in Vietnam said infamously, "every quantitative measurement we have shows that were winning this war."[60] If President Kennedy represented the symbol behind the dreamy age of Camelot, then McNamara was its magical Merlin. Robert McNamara hailed from the afterglow of World War II and the industrial scale of logistics that help the Allies win that war. McNamara preached the "Fordian" model, a method of identifying a problem or goal and working to create a system to fix it at maximum efficiency. Believing whole heartedly that the problem in Vietnam – and any problem for that matter – could be solved by systematical methods, monitoring progress, analytics, and industrial output, McNamara embraced this theory to solve the Vietnam riddle.[61] Using these magics of the technocratic enterprise McNamara took a complex situation and boiled it down into his industrial theory that required updates of paper and graphs to show progress. Numbers of hamlets built, number of peasants registered, number of Viet-Cong killed, number of patrols run. Numbers became the preferred tool of the state to reduce the immense complexity of Vietnam to something identifiable and measurable.

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[59] Patricia Limerick, *Desert Passages: Encounters with the American Deserts* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985).
[60] Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), 290.
[61] Ben Ramalingam, *Aid on the Edge of Chaos* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 45-46.

In 1963 after the Assassination of President Kennedy in Dallas, newly sworn in President Lyndon Johnson under advice from his cabinet and the new commander of American forces in South Vietnam General William Westmorland ordered the deployment of marine elements into South Vietnam. The move came after attacks against airports in Da Nang and Saigon as well as bases within South Vietnam's hinterland. Vulnerable against Viet-Cong ground forces and with the ARVN still largely incompetent, Johnson ordered the deployment of two marine battalions on February 22, 1965. Over the next 3 years operations would be handled with a degree of purpose and resolution as commanders and soldiers believed they were fighting a just war.[62] 11 million Americans served in uniform during the Vietnam War. 2.8 million were sent to Vietnam, but only 10% of them would fight in the enigmatic "bush" as line infantry. Many came to the war to escape poverty, because they were drafted, serve their country, or to find purpose. Some 8 million would sign up during this time, and millions more were drafted.[63]

[62] James Wright, *Enduring Vietnam* (New York: Saint Marin's Press, 2017), 11.
[63] James Ebert, *A Life in a Year: The American Infantry in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1993), 4.

CHAPTER TWO

DECENT INTO THE "WILDERNESS"

"No country is so wild and difficult, but men will make it a theatre of war."
– Ambrose Bierce.[64]

Arrival to Vietnam for American soldiers came in four frames according to veteran James Gilliam. The first frame was landing either by plane or boat. An experience that for new arrivals was a mixture of terrifying, beautiful, and boring. James Gilliam personally described the landing as "imitation of a falling stone." Next was the heat. The heat became a staple of the experience in the Vietnam War. Except for the air-conditioned HQ's in Saigon and other American military bases, it was impossible to escape the high temperatures. James Gilliam described the heat as "a malevolent being determined to kill us all before we could fire a shot." The next step was taking a series of battered buses, being transported to various centers, being given their orders, some gear, and awaiting further transportation to their assignments. The bus hemmed the men in a din of claustrophobic heat as they looked at a strange people and immense poverty through grime-covered windows shielded by a wiry screen to protect the bus's passengers from grenades. The final frame was combat. Not all experienced it equally, nor did it come at the same time, but for the 10% of the 2.8 million U.S. soldiers in Vietnam who served frontline duty, combat was inevitable.[65]

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[64] James Ebert, *A Life in a Year: The American Infantryman in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1993), 189.
[65] James Gilliam, *Life and Death in the Central Highlands: An American Sergeant in the Vietnam War, 1968-1970* (Texas: University of North Texas Press, 2010), 44.

These frontline soldiers would be part of General William Westmoreland's "limited plan" to defeat the Viet-Cong forces given the diplomatic limitations set by Washington. Unable to directly invade North Vietnam which President Johnson feared would start a war with China, General Westmoreland conceived of a war of attrition as he said with some bitterness in his memoir.

> In any case what alternative was there to a war of attrition? A ground invasion of North Vietnam was out, for the U.S. National policy was not to conquer North Vietnam, but to eliminate the insurgency inside South Vietnam and President Johnson had stated publicly that he would not broaden the war. … Meanwhile I had to get on with meeting the crisis within South Vietnam and only by seeking, fighting and destroying the enemy could that be done.[66]

General Westmoreland would attempt to accomplish this through three stages. The first was to secure various enclaves or base areas – a plan like the hamlet program – and secure them with infantry. These enclaves would be bases of operation for infantry patrols who would conduct a traditional ground war that Westmoreland called "Search and Destroy." These patrols would be the lure for larger North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong units who would be drawn under the umbrella of American artillery and airpower. Stage two would see offensive operations including deep patrolling with AVRN forces in the hinterlands and mountains for Viet-Cong bases, regiments and supply caches. This phase would disrupt enemy movement and teach the ARVN how to fight proper warfare. At the same time the goal was to keep the enemy away from population centers along the coast like the cities of Hue, Da-Nang, and Saigon. Stage three would begin a slow withdrawal of American soldiers and the arrival of ARVN to

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[66] William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1976), 199.

take over security of South Vietnam. This final phase would see Americans only offering logistical and special operations support.[67] If all went to plan, Westmoreland and the war planners envisioned their enemies becoming mincemeat in perfectly orchestrated killing fields of firepower, and the war ending as soon as 1966.

In conjunction with ground operations, the United States Air force launched daily airstrikes at targets in South Vietnam and North Vietnam's industry – also called sorties – alongside massive bombing and chemical spraying campaigns that would begin in 1965 and continue until the war's end in 1973. Operations such as Rolling Thunder and Operation Ranch Hand, one of chemical warfare and the other the start of a massive bombing campaigns, were integral to American strategy. These efforts of America's techno-empire were expected to be the war's deciding factors, as the Vietnamese would be grounded up in a charnel house of explosive extravagance. Whatever failure existed in terms of strategy; the American logistics were a miracle of industry. Historian Harry Summers described the feat of arming, feeding, clothing, moving, and supplying over 10 million men halfway around the world "incredible."[68]

As manpower and weapons poured in Vietnam and operations began in earnest General Westmoreland would watch confidently as his plan took shape across the country, from search and destroy operations in the jungle of the central highlands and the canals of the Mekong Delta, to air sorties in Laos and Cambodia, and constant patrolling of the Vietnamese countryside. All the while air sorties dropped bombs in the Vietnam

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[67] William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1976), 173.
[68] Harry Summers, *On Strategy*: *A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (New York: Random House, 1982), 2.

hinterlands included the passes in the Central Highlands, in the wilderness of Laos and Cambodia, and on industrial targets in North Vietnam. Chemical spraying of Agent Orange disrupted Viet Cong food supplies and their cover as the machinery of the United States grounded their enemy to dust. This at least, was the perception.

On the ground for frontline soldiers like Philip Caputo, Tim O'Brien or James Gilliam the war had a different tone than the excessive confidence expressed by their generals. Whether it was new army companies in the Central Highlands, or in the Mekong Delta, or the Marines protecting the DMZ and the airport in Da-Nang, they all entered Vietnam's frontlines in earnest between 1966-1968. As they unloaded from trucks and helicopters on far-off bases or frontline outposts, the reality of the situation hit them. Men reached the front and discovered that in fact no so-called front even existed. They operated from camps in the middle of large areas of operation they would then patrol in search and destroy operations. The heat continued to wear on the new arrivals. As veteran Tom Magedenz recalled, "It was so hot we could wring our T-shirts every 5 minutes or so. The sweat just ran and heat enveloped part of our bodies."[69] As weeks passed and men went on their first patrols, the pain and drudgery of the war revealed itself. Hauling nearly 70 pounds of gear in mountainous or heavy jungle canopy in humid 100-degree heat was sheer agony. As historian James Ebert wrote on the frontline experience, "the reality that typified the existence of the field soldier in Vietnam was not so much combat with enemy forces as it was the day to day hardships, the fatigue and

[69] James Ebert, *A Life in a Year: The American Infantryman in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1993), 214.

frustration of living and coping with that harsh and hostile environment."[70] Search and destroy operations were less about efficient, clever movements than the blind groping of exhausted men through difficult country.

The search and destroy operations did not go well. American soldiers slowly searched 1000-meter grid squares that appeared on maps in places like A Shau Valley and The Iron Triangle near Saigon. Westmoreland's strategists did not see the hacking through thick foliage of elephant grass, vines, bush, and trees, in the jungle or how his soldiers' sight was limited to 10 feet at times in the thick jungle. For the American command structure, their only link to these ecological realities was a map. In the south these maps held symbols of rice paddies and jungles and in the north the maps held tight symbols that showed the mountainous jungle terrain. Intersecting lines of supposed enemy troop movements and areas of operation colored their surface, but for the grunts these maps were deeply flawed. As veteran lieutenant Frank Boicca said in his fictional retelling of his experience in Cu Chai near Hue. "The S3 Shop – command – would look at a map, pick out a spot they wanted you at and tell you to move. But up here… they look at a map and tell you to move the same distance – on the map - and don't realizes that you're climbing up and down some of the steepest jungle in the world… and a hundred meters in mountainous terrain is infinity."[71] Even on flat ground walking into the jungle for the first time was a disorientating experience, and most men never got used to

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[70] James Ebert, *A Life in a Year: The American Infantryman in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1993), 189.
[71] Frank Boccia, *The Crouching Beast: A United States Army Lieutenants Account of the Battle of Hamburger Hill, May 1969* (London: MacFarland & Company, 2013).

it. As Philip Caputo remembered during an operation near the Annamite mountain range during a search and destroy operation:

> It was like walking from brilliant sunshine into a darkened room. Though the dense canopy overhead the light fell in splintered shafts, bathing everything below in greenish twilight. No wind blew. The air was heavy & wet & the jungle smelled like a damp cellar. We could hear things slithering and rustling in the underbrush. We could hear them but not see them. It was difficult to see much of anything through the vines & trees, tangled together in a silent, savage struggle for light and air. A war of plant life.[72]

The idea of an invisible foe was reinforced by an operational tactic called the mad minute. This was when the commanding officer of a more remote post would quickly muster all soldiers around the base perimeter and give the order for all to blindly and furiously fire their weapons into the unknown of the surrounding jungle for at least 60 seconds. It was hoped this would scare off approaching Viet-Cong ambushes, but more often than not, it revealed how the lack of visibility forged deep fears of phantom enemy movement.

Moving across these landscapes, Americans searched for an enemy who often never revealed itself in force. It was an existence of marching themselves mechanically up hills, and down dusty roads, or through dense foliage. Meanwhile their bodies were assaulted by booby traps, heat, sharp elephant grass, leeches, frequent cases of malaria, and bouts of heat exhaustion. A big day of moving for these patrols was considered 15 kilometers. The lack of enemy contact eclipsed the thoughts of American soldiers and generated feelings of frustration. As veteran Vernon Janick remembered, “We never got

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[72] Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York: Rinehart & Winston, 1977), 83.

hit by anything big, it was usually just a lot of Viet-Cong. And they operated on their own as one or two here or there. We had constant booby traps and snipers… you could never find them or see them or nothing. You would get up move a-little ways and then bam, bam."[73] As casualties in the American ranks rose due to these traps, ambushes, and heat exhaustions Westmoreland would incessantly urge Washington for more and more troops.

Meanwhile the politburo in Hanoi took advantage of Washington's plodding overconfidence in their strategy that emphasized mechanical weaponry like airpower, and between 1965-1966 and 1968-1975 shifted tactics away from set piece battles that favored American fire power: and instead, they focused on drawing out the war for as long as possible in what a Vietnamese veteran who fought the Americans Truong Nhu Tong, called "*fighting while talking and talking while fighting*." This saying represented the Vietnamese strategy to defeat an enemy who was technological and militarily more powerful than they were, but could not match their intuitive use of their geography, their spirit, or the enterprise of total war under which all of North Vietnamese society took part, as well as major resistance cells and pockets of support in the South.[74] The entire population was involved in rebuilding bridges, paving roads, working in factories, participating in defense drills, studying socialist revolution, and serving in the army. The entire population was geared toward the final victory against the American imperialist.

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[73] James Ebert, *A Life in a Year: The American Infantryman in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1993, 228).
[74] Truong Nhu Tang, A Viet Cong Memoir: Truong Nhu Tang (New York: Harcourt Brace Javonich, 1985), 241.

The most important piece of flooding these weapons and people into the fight in the South was the creation of the infamous Ho Chi Minh trail.

Located within the vast mountainous jungles of Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, the Ho Chi Minh trail extended hundreds of miles as the logistical backbone of Hanoi's war effort. Made of thousands of individual roads, the trail constantly expanded and widened as the war went on. Its construction began in 1959 by early pioneers of Vietnamese resistance cells regrouping after the establishment of the 17th parallel during the Geneva accords. The original paths were small and the time it took to complete its full journey took 6 months crossing over a vast wilderness of mountains, jungle, wetlands, tigers, snakes, rain, and malaria. Over time Hanoi increased the work force from tens of thousands to eventually hundreds of thousands of laborers. These included large youth groups of men and women who worked in difficult conditions to widen the trail and repair it as rain and mudslides constantly created damage and blockages. As American bombs began to fall on this large area of Laos and Cambodia in 1965, the danger multiplied greatly. However, by 1968 the trail had become nearly impervious to air attacks. Even as early as 1966 the trail consisted of too many interlocking pieces and would only continue to grow despite incessant American air strikes and bombing campaigns. By 1974 with a workforce well over 100,000 men and women, the Ho Chi Minh trail was a vast network of roads, bases, hospitals, vehicle depots, ammunition dumps, fueling stations and even anti-air defense stations.[75]

[75] Truong Nhu Tang, A Viet Cong Memoir: Truong Nhu Tang (New York: Harcourt Brace Javonich, 1985), 241.

The trail was the heart of the war and it became the central experience for an entire generation of Vietnamese. For the Vietnamese it became the opposite of the American experience of Indo-china's environment. The trail became sacred geography to the Vietnamese. It embodied the spirit of Ho Chi Minh to reunite North and South Vietnam. Labor on the trail was done with a spirit of deep comradery and purpose, and despite facing B-52 carpet bombing, phantom jets dropping napalm, rockets, and bombs, and diseases such as malaria, dysentery, and yellow fever, the Vietnamese never gave up in the trail's maintenance.[76] Death and pain in this Vietnamese "wilderness" unlike the American situation was given meaning, and thus a mental reinforcement occurred that help counter the often horrendous conditions by the trail's workers. The trail's success represented the energy behind the Vietnamese cause. It was this disparity in spirit and purpose that became one of the primary cultural mechanism that disrupted the American myth and consensus. But, amid intense jungle warfare in 1966 and 1968, this breaking of spirit had not yet entered the American mainstream consciousness. It would appear with a vengeance in the "baffling" Tet offensive televised for the American public in 1968.

As the war stretched into 1967 American soldiers died and became maimed by an ever-increasing landscape of booby traps and mines. In the Vietnam war, amputations and lower limb injuries were 300% higher than the previous two American wars.[77] By 1967, booby traps typified the American grunt experience with over 1,000 being killed in 1966, and 6 months into 1967 over 6,000 Americans became victim to these devices. By

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[76] John Prados, *The Blood Trail: The Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Vietnam War* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1999).
[77] James Ebert, *A Life in a Year: The American Infantryman in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1993), 236.

the war's height in 1968, 25% of American combat deaths would be a result of mines and traps.[78] This cut and deeply disturbed the psychological stability of American soldiers. Their sense of safety was eroded away by fear of mines, an ironic statement perhaps given the war, but accurate in the context the war was fought. Most trips into "the bush" went uneventfully with nearly 90% ending without enemy contact. Finding objectives like supply caches or enemy patrols were also rare, and men saw little direct reward for their efforts other than new skin lesions forming jungle rot, red cuts from sharp elephant grass, trench foot, stingy sweat, and dehydration. As the prolific writer veteran Tim O'Brien wrote of a fictional platoon on patrol, "they plodded along slowly dumbly, leaning forward against the heat unthinking, all blood and bone, simple grunts, soldering with their legs, toiling up the hills… just humping one step and then the next.."[79] Then suddenly the sleepy exhaustion was broken by a violent crack and the sound of wet smacks of the patrol dropping to the wet muddy jungle floor.

There was no rhyme or reason to the violence. No town taken, no hill conquered, no territory won, and rarely any enemy bodies spotted or killed. The trap just went off when a foot or leg applied pressure to the trigger or broke the taunt wire holding back the explosive's energy. Sometimes it was a bouncing betty, a stolen American claymore, a "toe popper" made of shotgun shells, or sometimes primitive punji sticks covered in human feces that drove a bamboo spike through feat and bone. Vietnam's violence in this way was both deeply intimate, painful, and incredible in its shortness. It often left the

[78] Ebert, 236.
[79] Tim O'Brien, *The Things They carried* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 15.

survivors in a rage as one veteran recounted, “We went into the jungle totally different from that moment on. We walked in there looking to kill, looking to get back at what had been done to us.”[80] More than anger, which could only be sustained for so long, there was a deeper and more acidic constant fear of the mines with men unsure which step would be their “last step,” a phrase that eventually became a common form of the American soldier’s vernacular that euphemistically reflected the horrifying idea of stepping on something that removed genitals, legs, arms, and spilled innards. As one veteran remembered, “Nothing happened but the fear, man, the fear, man.”[81] The fear represented a problem of strategy, but also grew in the environment that subtly played at men’s primal fears. As a veteran remembered, ‘He – the Viet Cong – could be 10 feet away and you’d never know it. He’s right back down in the ground and you don’t even know where the shot came from.”[82]

Booby traps were just one of many troubling problems for frontline soldiers. Snipers hid perfectly camouflaged in trees and with deadly accuracy they could pin entire platoons down for hours in the baking sun. The sun, like all of Vietnam’s environment, seemed to mirror the brutal, yet meaningless, narrative of the suffering American soldiers. The alien faces and villages of the Vietnamese also infuriated and disturbed Americans who couldn’t seem to relate to these people, and their perception, of the Vietnamese strange stoic demeanor. Soon, what trust may have existed in the first weeks of American deployment evaporated as many men turned to openly hate the Vietnamese

[80] Bernd Greiner, *War Without Fronts: The USA in Vietnam* (New Haven: Value University, 2009), 135.
[81] Greiner, 130.
[82] Greiner, 132.

and likewise the Vietnamese responded with equally antagonistic emotions of apathy or anger. As one peasant told a *Newsweek* reporter in 1968 in the coastal enclave of Da Nang, "I don't know who will win the war," he said, "but I miss the bamboo of my village and the tombs of my parents. I don't worry about who will lead the country."[83] The peasantry was not just apathic, but active actors in a war that squeezed them between American suspicion and Viet-Cong pressure to house and feed them. Did a peasant tell the Americans which trails are mined? What then? Perhaps his family would be taken by the South Vietnam police for more interrogation, maybe the Viet Cong would find out and kill him? The Americans in turn wondered if the peasant knew anything, and what they weren't telling them.

Tim O'Brien called this "provoking madness," a term that described how the war was fought and the dissonance by command to ignore the reality of the ground war. Men became described by O'Brien as "aimless, irritated monsters, with short tempers, and even shorter trigger fingers."[84] O'Brien and many other veterans were not only relaying the war's dizzying effect on their mental state, but also were preparing the reader and audience for the reasoning – or lack thereof – for the numerous cases of massacre and violence against civilian targets. Anger sometimes was released by calling in an airstrike against a sniper position, seeing the falling warheads and napalm canisters generated immense feelings of power.[85] Other feelings of power came from the various artifacts of American power and comfort like the helicopter. As Philip Caputo remembered, "the

[83] Klien, Carrol & Watson, "How Goes the War?" *Newsweek*. January 1st, 1968. 20.
[84] Tim O'Brien, *Going After Caccito,* (New York: Random House, 1978), 105.
[85] Karl Marlantes, *What it is like to go to War* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2011).

helicopters had made it seem familiar. Being Americans, we were comfortable with machines, but with the aircraft gone we were struck by the utter strangeness of this rank and rotted wilderness."[86] Here we see a marked separation as Caputo referred to the alienation he felt toward the "wilderness" around him. Even as he wrote of the comfort offered by machines these same devices would become sources of great insecurity and doubt among many writers and veterans.

Historian James Wright wrote, "Vietnam had no benchmarks remotely comparable to those of the army sweeping from Normandy and to Paris in the Summer of 1944. There were no headlines shouting of territories won, of happy villagers cheering their liberation. There was no iconic flag raising such as Iwo Jima in 1945."[87] Instead the Vietnam War became a metaphor that took on a narrative took on themes of nihilism, disillusionment, and apocalypse. This was usually depicted in a story of corruption and transformation within an ecological "wilderness." It was a transformation of bright, romantic boys marching off to war who then changed within the wilderness into nihilistic killers or apathetic warriors. Another view was deeply nihilistic that saw in the simple pain and suffering a madness where the soldier's death without context or meaning created a gap of purpose within traditional perceptions of sacrifice. This kind of death in the tradition of Christianity and the west mirrored the death of an animal: a creature perishing without a history or purpose. Another narrative resonated power bridging a supernatural resource of primal energy into the Vietnam landscape. Giving power to the

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[86] Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1977), 83.
[87] James Wright, *Enduring Vietnam: An American Generation and Its War* (New York: Saint Martin Press, 2017), 9.

brutal imponderableness to the trees, fauna, animals, and sounds. Popular memoirs related this narrative through their prose as seen here in Philip Caputo's description of patrol:

> Patrol had the nightmare quality which characterized most small unit operations of the war. The trail looped and twisted and led nowhere. The company seemed to marching into a vacuum, haunted by a presence intangible yet real, a sense of being surrounded by something we could not see, it was the inability to see that vexed us most in that lies the jungles power to cause fear: it blinds. It arouses the same instinct that makes us apprehensive of places like attics and dark alleys.[88]

With use of words like "intangible," "haunted," and "twisted" landscapes, Caputo is relating a direct physical causation to fears like the inability to see. The deep primal fears whispering danger to the human psyche. This was a world of irrationalism and perceptions of ancient human nature and heritage that fought desperately in far off wilderness to survive.

The war for frontline soldiers became a battle against nature itself as Philip Caputo said, "it was the land that resisted us, the land, the jungle and the sun."[89] Many motifs of Vietnam's War stories followed this "heart of darkness" narrative. As Joseph Conrad wrote in his work *Heart of Darkness*, "Land in the swamp, march through the woods, and in some inland past feel the savagery. The utter savagery, had closed around him, all the mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the havens of wild men… And it has a fascination too, that goes to work on him. The fascination with the abomination."[90] Philip Beidler, a professor of American literature

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[88] Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1977), 84.
[89] Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1977), 84.
[90] Tobey Herzog, *Vietnam War Stories: Innocence Lost* (London: Routledge, 2004), 27.

who is considered a founder of Vietnam War studies, said "Out there, in Vietnam. 'Beyond' is to run the risk of cutting free from whatever it once was that defined humanity and even worse, perhaps never being able to get it back again in it."[91]

In the Vietnam War memoirs, the literary and symbolic themes related a feeling of nihilism highlighting the human experience as nothing more than an animal. Tim O'Brien wrote in his book *The Things They Carried* about patrol.

> …toiling up the hills and down the paddies and across the river and up again and down: just humping, one step and then the next and then another, but no volition, no will, because it was automatic, it was anatomy, and the war was entirely a matter of posture and carriage, the hump was everything-g a kind of inertia, a kind of emptiness, a dullness of desire and of intellect and conscious and hope and human sensibility. Their principles were in their feet. Their calculations were biological.[92]

Nature in this narrative was evil and nihilistic. It was a place without meaning and without meaning the humanity of narrative is pulled out and stripped down to a series of random chronicles. An experience of this randomness was displayed in the story of Veteran Paul Meringolo:

> We'd been going all morning and all afternoon and probably covered 7-8 miles. Then all the sudden, one of the men in the company stepped on a mine. He was carrying a LAW. A LAW is a modern version of a bazooka. This particular fellow had been carrying this LAW sort of strapped over his shoulder when he stepped on the mine, the mine engaged the LAW & the rocket fired & blew off part of his head. He was killed, obviously. There you are all day sort of going along. You are getting tired, exhausted from the heat, exhausted from moving along, checking, wondering if you are going to run into something. By the middle of the afternoon the tiredness has taken over your body and all the sudden something dramatic like this happens and it just sort of unnerves you. We called a medevac chopper and

[91] Herzog, 26.
[92] Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 15.

> they took away the guy's body and we just started walking again. It was like a surreal existence.[93]

The narrative was taken away and what they were left with is reality: a random series of chronicles toward a violent and surreal death.

The American historical context of a post war "Eden" created a deep reaction against this experience in the Vietnam war. The experience of animal fear and animal vulnerability in ecology, along with the symbolic defeat of American machines represented a harsh critique of the American enterprise. Volunteer soldiers, students, draftees, and anti-war activists along with others came to view America not as a rich and fulfilling civilization, but instead, a hypocritical decadent empire reaching its peak. In part the reason for this was the difficulty in the Vietnam war to find any coherent narration that created a deep cognitive dissonance in American society.

Past narrations of wars such as World War II put soldier's death in a context of strategy, advance, and ultimate victory. Men marched to a hill and took it and then marched forward. As journalist David Halberstam evoked through a veteran of D-Day in his fictional work *One Hot Day:*

> We didn't know how simple it was, and good we had it. Sure, we walked, but in a straight line. Boom, Normandy beaches, and then you set off for Paris and Berlin. Just like that… All you needed was a compass and good sense. But here you walk in a god damn circle and then you go home and then you go out the next day and wade through a circle and then you go home and the next day you go out and reverse the circle and then you go home and the next day you go out and reverse the circle you did before, erasing it. Every day the circle gets bigger and emptier.[94]

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[93] James Ebert, *A Life in a Year: The American Infantryman in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1993), 222.
[94] David Halberstam, *One Very Hot Day* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), 114.

For the average soldier, the lack of clarity defined the war for them. As Tim O'Brien said in his book *The Things They Carried,* "for the common soldier, war had the feel – the spiritual texture of a great ghostly fog, thick and permeant…"[95] Talking later about the war, an anonymous CIA operative related, "I'm grateful I went to Vietnam in the position I went because I knew what was going on. I read the cables. When there was a new offensive or a new strategy, I knew what it was, and I could relate it to what was happening in the village. But I knew grunts – the poor bastards jumped out of helicopters onto hot LZ's and didn't even know where the fuck they were…"[96] He contrasted the man in the valley perspective vs the man on the hill. Both perspectives were flawed- one relating to bitter survival, and the other living in comfort and dissociated with the reality of the war. The loss of any kind of meaningful trust between the common soldiers and high command would signify a new trend of anti-authoritarianism and deep skepticism that would not just stay in the jungles of Vietnam but transferred to the American heartland and became a piece of its deep disillusionment with previously perceived paternal institutions like the government and military. A new disbelief in a system that had grown bulky and opaque in a empire of logistics.

American commanders in Saigon and their army of logistical officers, sergeants, clerks, cooks, bureaucrats, statisticians, surveillance operatives, intelligence operatives, and drivers were part of a system that was built only to accept progress reports. A system that was a carryover from the technocratic American state, as General Harkins who in

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[95] Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 88.
[96] Milton Bates, *The Wars We took to Vietnam: Cultural Conflict and Storytelling* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 220.

1962 spoke of three M's as the keys to victory: men, money, and material. Journalist Neil Sheehan wrote that this culture, "had replaced insights, maneuver, and flexibility."[97] Through 1964-1968, Westmoreland commanded two powerful armies. One was a machine army of helicopters, jets, and bombers, and the other a vast kingdom of paper. Graphs and charts detailed every operation, every Viet-Cong killed, body counts, sorties run, tons of bombs used, patrols completed, enemy supply caches destroyed, targets – be they a factory or village hooch - destroyed. Without territory to claim this was the only way to gauge success.[98] But this did not match the reality of the ground war or the decision-making that typified a common soldier's daily existence. Eventually these men developed a popular slang to characterize those in the back lines referring to them disparagingly as the REMF: "rear echelon mother fuckers." As veteran James Gilliam recalled, this was "a man who lived somewhere safe like a base camp, and treated grunts like they were practically the enemy when his comfort was compromised."[99] Another veteran, Karl Marlantes, recalled a moment that put this dissonance between grunt and command in full view:

> Unknown to us, someone in Da Nang or Saigon was putting the final touches on a plan that called for the opening of a new firebase on top of a certain mountain located in a certain area. Now in the "area" is relative. To someone in Da Nang or Saigon, with large scale maps, one finger width covers a lot of ground, and our company was only a finger widths away. From our scale maps we were 16 finger widths, as the crow flies… in one day, humping from dawn to dark we made about 2 and a half finger widths. It is impossible to convey to a staff officer who has never had to watch his hands blister away from having to hack his way

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[97] Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), 288.
[98] James Gibson, *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam* (New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986).
[99] James Gilliam, *Life and Death in the Central Highlands: An American Sergeant in the Vietnam war, 1968-1970* (Texas: University of North Texas Press, 2010), 188.

> through thick jungle with a machete just how slowly you move. Most North Americans had seen wild blackberry patches that stand well above head height. They consider it madness to try to enter one of these. This is the kind of thick I mean by thick jungle. Add this to the fact that every chop sends a precise signal of where you are and, by the way, you're working uphill at about 46-degree angle. Oh and you haven't eaten for two days.[100]

Ignoring the physical difficulty of the geography became a glaring weakness of American high command to implement its strategy of attrition. As writer Michael Herr wrote after looking upon on old French map, "We know that for years now, there has been no country here but the war. The landscape has been converted to terrain, the geography broken down into its more useful components corps and zones, tactical areas of responsibility, vicinities of operation, outposts, positions, objectives & fields of fire."[101] As Herr insinuated American command could not truly see the war around them. They could not see the villages, the people and peasants trying to coexist between two dangerous forces at war. They could not see the grunts, and their harsh existence that fought them at every turn and blows to morale, of walking endlessly in circles that were mined and watched by Viet-Cong snipers waiting in ambush. As Michael Herr wrote about those in the rear:

> Roof of the Rex, ground zero. Men who looked like they'd been suckled by wolves, they could die right there and then, and their jaws would work for a half an hour. This is where they would ask you "are you a dove or a Hawk?" and "would you rather fight them here or in Pasadena?" Maybe we could beat them in Pasadena, I'd think, but I wouldn't say it especially not where they knew that I knew that they weren't really fighting anybody anyway, it made them touchy.[102]

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[100] Karl Marlantes, *What it is like to go to War* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2011), 148.
[101] James Wright, *Enduring Vietnam: An American Generation and Its war* (New York: Saint Martin Press, 2017), 146.
[102] Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), 60.

They could not see the psychological toil of the war and instead buried the war's complexity under simple platitudes of honor, good vs evil, manhood, and the power of America's machinery. Words and methods that began to taste bitter as American soldiers experienced the absolute worst conditions with no gain or meaningful purpose. The war of attrition championed by American military command bore very little to the romantic nostalgia of John Wayne heroism. So, as the war progressed it violently wrung any meaning or personal glory.

This narrative of circles reinforced a mountain of emptiness, and a growing lack of any purposeful narrative behind the soldier's actions. These circles would continue to grow as President Lyndon Johnson increased the number of soldiers in South Vietnam from 300,000 in 1965 to 500,000 in 1968. Despite the troop increase the sheer size of the South Indochina's geography proved troublesome. While the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong took incredible casualties, Hanoi always found an abundance of replacements.[103] Despite millions of American volunteers and draftees it was never enough to cover the hundreds of miles of jungle and mountainous frontier-land that the enemy used as cover, infiltration and staging grounds for attacks. As historian James Ebert said, "Vietnam is a beautiful country, but proved to be almost impervious to American technology and it was particularly adept at sapping the physical endurance of American soldiers."[104] The American enterprise in South Vietnam was like a great

[103] Francis Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1972).
[104] James Ebert, *A Life in a Year: The American Infantryman in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1993), 189.

wooden ship sinking from thousands of tiny holes and with only a hundred corks to plug them.

By 1968 after the Tet offensive and the ending of the siege of Khe Sanh, the war entered a very dark phase for most American soldiers. Tet was a military victory for American command, but a disaster for the war's public perception. The popular perception of the war had been that Americans were fighting a weak, elusive enemy in the hinterlands of South Vietnam. In the months leading up to the Tet Offensive, Westmoreland and President Johnson both had promised the American public that the enemy was approaching a breaking point, and end of the war was not far off. The fact that Hanoi could launch this assault despite millions of tons of bombing on their industry, and the promises of their leaders shocked Americans to their core. Senator Bobby Kennedy in an expression of disgust would go on to say, "our enemy strikes at will across all of South Vietnam, has finally shattered the mask of official illusion which we have concealed by our true circumstance even from ourselves…"[105]

Senator Kennedy voiced a growing doubt in not just the moral clarity over the Vietnam war, but the efficient and competency of the American military enterprise. Robert McNamara would highlight this when he proposed a massive mechanical wall of sensors, booby traps, mines, barbed wire, and bombing to cut the trail in two. For obvious reasons of logistics and practicality this wall never went beyond wishful thinking. The fundamental problem also unveiled one of the insecurities of American involvement. As

[105] A Broadside by Bobby. *Newsweek,* February 19, 1968. 24.

Newsweek stated, "America was rich in machines, but poor in front line soldiers."[106] This disparity of spirit, energy, and purpose was further elaborated by Senator Kennedy who would go on to say after Tet, "The Viet-Cong have demonstrated despite all of our reports of progress… that half a million American soldiers with 700,000 allies with total command of the air and sea backed by huge resources and the most modern weapons are unable to secure even a single city from the attacks of an enemy whose total strength is 250,000."[107]

After the Tet Offensive the American media turned against Washington and gave voice to what many in the anti-war movement had been saying for years. No other battle more illustrated this growing discord then the Siege of Khe Sanh. With their faith rattled by the Tet Offensive, the American media and public eyes turned toward a small valley northwest of the DMZ. Khe Sahn is pinched between the North South Vietnam, and Cambodian borders, and was projected by General William Westmoreland to be a vital staging area for enemy infiltration. Over the course of several months, two marine regiments supported by elements of the Air Force and Army fought against 3 divisional sized regiments of North Vietnamese Army and Viet-Cong. Headlines showed desperate Marines huddling in trenches, their faces plastered with red dust hunkering down under heavy enemy shelling. American machinery and equipment lay strewn about mimicking a garbage heap more than an organized base of operations. Eventually the valley would be abandoned and while General Westmoreland claimed victory the powerful symbolism of

[106] Ibid.
[107] Ibid.

American soldiers' helplessness in the valley was symbolically difficult for many Americans to perceive as "victory." The end of Khe Sanh would be one of the last major set piece battles for the rest of the war operations while sometimes huge in scale never made significant enemy contact. It would signal the beginning of an even darker chapter for many frontline American soldiers.

As writer and veteran Tim O'Brien related in his story *Going After Cacciacto* men saw the war in terms of time. Time left on patrol, time left until dawn, time left until their tour was over. Everything else was based on luck. Men asked questions such as would they step on a mine today? Would a sniper watch the trail today? Would their CO get a command from Da Nang to hump 10 miles in midday, would their water supply last until then? Unspeakable daily toil for these frontline soldiers caused immense misery. Pride came from the unspoken brotherhood from facing the pain together, even as it slowly gnawed at everyone's tolerance for misery. By 1969 large army operations like Tet and Khe Sanh had become rarities as the Viet Cong shifted their tactics to more of evasion, booby traps, and ambush. Without the ability to stop supplies entering the south and without any meaningful change in American strategy, the war dragged into a political stalemate.[108]

While other American offensives and political scandal would occur between 1969 and 1975, the narrative of the war did not shift from the military stalemate and the increasing political pressure on the United States to abandon South Vietnam. It was also

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[108] James Ebert, *A Life in a Year*: *The American Infantryman in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1993). 229.

during this time that one of popular memories of the Vietnam War was forged. It started with the shock of Tet and continued in the incredible transformation within American military morale during a 5-year period that would see the nadir of American military morale. Patrolling the jungles during this time would be one of the most meaningful steps for soldiers toward realizing the meaninglessness of the war. Patrol was something so mundane and yet so deadly without a wider purpose it buoyed an immediate and resonating symbol of the madness of the war from the American perspective. It was to the point where simply going out on patrol became a deep act of subversion against the official reasoning for the war.

Amidst these stark realities, trust in and even the act of following the chain of command broke down, and open mutiny and threats toward over-eager officers were not entirely uncommon.[109] In extreme cases officers were killed in acts American soldiers called "fragging." This happened when officers, who were usually lifers, or worse stupid, got men killed or took them up trails they knew were booby trapped to "find' an enemy that could not be found. Men understood that there was no longer any truth to the official reasons of why they were in Vietnam, thus making every death meaningless in their eyes. They were not there to save peasants from communists. Many American soldiers hated and mistrusted these people and often killed them out of suspicion. They were not there to win the war as any designs of victory had evaporated long ago. Men's plans had become biological, not ideological.

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[109] James Gibson, *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986).

CHAPTER THREE

TRANSFORMING THE MYTH: FROM PROGRESS TO DISILLUSIONMENT

Literature, memoir, and film became crucial to building Vietnam as a metaphor for the wider American public.[110] Historians have noted a great distortion that occurred during this time in American history as the Vietnam War created an ever-shifting landscape of popular imagery, film, literature: all subjected to the ever changing mores of popular culture and mass media. [111] While the narratives and conclusions where not always based within truth their impact on the American memory of the war is impossible to ignore. One such narrative that was in these stories was a highlighting of ecology in Vietnam's War story. I suggest that this use of ecology gave what William Burch would call a "supernatural authenticity" that myths are granted with time.[112] This authenticity helped build the metaphor of Vietnam's "wilderness."

This metaphor of Vietnam as "wilderness" was explored by many different voices. Veteran James Webb claimed classical historical accounts were no longer appropriate to explain or narrate the Vietnam War.[113] Historian Kate Meyers would also say, "Because Vietnam is so different from other wars in modern memory no good model exists for translating it into a traditional chronological narrative."[114] I suggest the ecology

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[110] Mark Taylor, *The Vietnam War in History, Literature, & Film* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003), 25.
[111] Andrew Martin, *Receptions of War. Vietnam in American Culture* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 50.
[112] William Burch, *Daydreams and Nightmares: A Sociological Essay on the American Environment* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 58.
[113] Taylor, 25.
[114] Taylor, 25.

of Vietnam became a narrative device for metaphors and explanations about the Vietnam war. For example, the Jungle itself ecologically spoke to the tangled, shadowy, and alien environment that mirrored the fantasies of the war. It was a foreign environment to American minds and could easily be molded within a narrative of "spooky" warfare, and "supernatural" transformation. In the Vietnam narration ecology is a source of authenticity, but also of chaos. It could be at times constructed as the foil to the false techno-reality imposed by a world of authority of the American world of modernism, liberalism, and progress. Or, in other instances a realm where nihilism and pain reign to disempower men's attempts at gaining meaning and order. A primary arena for these metaphors was the literature and film on the Vietnam War.

Vietnam literature by the early 1990s numbered well over 600 works of fiction and memoir helping generate many classic narratives that emotionally resonated with American audiences. Movies like *Platoon*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Deer Hunter*, *Rambo*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, and *Hamburger Hill* also crafted a unique popular memory of the war's violence. Infusing tones of striking violence, loss of sanity, tragedy, disillusionment, and cognitive dissonance. Memoirs by eyewitnesses to the ordeals of the conflict such as journalists and frontline soldiers also became very popular in works such as *A Rumor of War* by Philip Caputo, *If I Die in a Combat Zone* by Tim O'Brien, *Born on the Fourth of July* by Ron Kovic, and *Dispatches* by Michael Herr. Fiction – some based on real life accounts – also exploded into the discourse with numerous works of varying narrative structures and thematic tones. Tim O'Brien's large collection of works stands tall with highly notably and critical acclaimed novels such as *Going After Cacciato*, *The*

Things They Carried, and *In the Lake of the Woods.* Other well-known fictions include *Meditations in Green* by Stephen Wright, James Webb's *Fields of Fire, and* William Eastlake's *The Bamboo Bed*.

One of the nastiest characters in Vietnam literature is its "wilderness." Battles like Khe Sanh and Hamburger Hill related elemental themes of foggy, disturbing hillsides that evoke powerlessness, confusion, and waste. A twin theme of biology and conceptions of human nature can be found throughout these narratives. As the walls between the human world and the reality of nature begin to melt, as human geographer Linda Nash spoke, "historical agency becomes distributed among a multitude of entities: human, insects, microbes, trees, groundwater & chemicals. It is no longer easy to separate the human from the nonhuman world, to insist that modernity represents the triumph (for better or worse) of humans over nature."[115] Just like disease could influence human agency of empire and society, the metaphors of Vietnam removed illusions of a world that was orderly, logical, and with a progression: instead, Americans are left without victory, over a powerful, but mindless, savage "jungle." A major piece of the American Vietnam experience was the highlighting of how powerless men were against the array of environmental forces before them. This experience became so pronounced that it was given a name by psychologist Guenter Levy, who classified the soldiers despair at facing their enemies use of the environment as, "inverted warfare." Levy described this as a reversal of the values that were supposed to have been common sense. The American

[115] Linda Nash, *Inescapable Ecologies. A History of Environment, Disease & Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 8.

military machine was a product of rationality, efficiency, and scientific principles and it was soundly defeated by nature and its protectors the Vietnamese.[116] A view that could be seen in battles such as Khe Sanh or Hamburger Hill where hundreds of thousands of explosives were dropped by machines of war only for the enemy shortly after to pop up again from their dug in hiding places and continue to snipe, mortar, and attack American positions.

This regression was often a framework by literature on the war that resembled environmental historian Patricia Limerick's idea of "attitudes of nature." Attitudes of nature is a complicated phrase that contains the wild and varied realm of human subjective experience and interpretation of the natural world.[117] Thus, within American accounts of nature in Vietnam the attitudes changed considerably in both tone, use, and philosophy. Or, what environmental historian Donald Worster called the third form of environmental history that examines how nature can become part of a civilization's rituals, identity, and culture.[118] In the American context Vietnam and nature, often synonymous with each other, could appear as a deadly metaphor of madness, and sometimes as a fondness for the brutal primitiveness of the jungle: or, sometimes both, as spoken through the despondent voice of Captain Willard in Francis Ford Coppolla's film, *Apocalypse Now*:

> Saigon, shit. I'm still only in Saigon. Every time I think I'm going to wake up back in the jungle. When I was home after my first tour it was worse. I'd wake up

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[116] James Gibson, *The Perfect War: Techno War in Vietnam* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986), 122.
[117] Patricia Limerick, *Desert Passages: Encounters with the American Deserts* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985), 6.
[118] Donald Worster, *The Ends of the Earth* (England: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

> and there'd be nothing…. When I was here I wanted to be there. When I was there, all I could think of was getting back into the jungle. I've been here a week now. Waiting for a mission, getting softer. Every minute I stay in this room I get weaker. And every time Charlie squats in the bush he gets stronger. Each time I look around the walls move in a little tighter.[119]

Other voices used nature to describe a transformation into savagery as United States Marine Lieutenant Philip Caputo echoed in his preface to *A Rumor of War*.

> The air-conditioned HQ in Saigon and Danang seemed thousands of miles away. As for the USA we did not call it the "world" for nothing: it might as well have been on another planet. There was nothing familiar out where we were, no churches, no police, no laws… or any of the restraining influences without which the earth's population of virtuous people would be reduced by 95%. It was the dawn of creation in the Indochina bush an ethical as well as geographical wilderness. Out there, lacking restraint, sanctioned to kill, confronted by a hostile country and a relentless enemy, we sank into a brutish state.[120]

Nature was also interpreted as opportunity to inspire as Lyndon Johnson spoke to West Point graduates shortly before the start of the conflict in Vietnam, "The communist will find, that a nation which produced Davy Crockett and Daniel Boon, and Jim Bowie is afraid of no forest and no swamp and no game of fighting however toughly it is played."[121] Johnson used vivid American mythic imagery of it's heroes to create a link between the past actions of these heroes and a new crop of young American soldiers.

However, this landscape of heroism and romantic idealism often did not survive the war, and instead nature often fit into more nightmarish visions of American experiences in Vietnam. Nature would become distorted into an almost supernatural realm disconnected from America's romantic mythos that upheld wilderness – at least –

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[119] "Apocalypse Now. (1979) by John Milius, Francis Coppola. Transcript," sfy.ru, accessed 2018, https://sfy.ru/transcript/apocalypse_now_ts
[120] Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1977), xciii.
[121] William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1976), 41.

as a place to conquer and find meaning. In the Vietnam lore of fiction, memoir, and reflection natured was used as constructed landscape: or, a form of fiction to make the setting a hyper, horror show of violence, and "mystery." Nature was projected as a scary, inhospitable hellscape to help imbue the war with a deeper psychic meaning of horror and reinforce the fear of the unknown as seen in the Michael Herr's well-known book - part fiction and part history – *Dispatches:*

> Everything up there was spooky, and it would have been that way even if there had been no war. You were there in a place where you didn't belong, where things were glimpsed for which you would have to pay and where things were unglimpsed for which you would also have to pay, a place where they didn't play with the mystery but killed you straight off for trespassing. The towns had names that laid a quick chilling touch on your bones: Kontum, Dak Matlop, Poli Klang….[122]

In fictional works based on the experience of some writers like veteran Frank Boccia nature was viewed as it had been for centuries as an inaccessible ancient presence:

> The mountains were unlike any I had ever seen… Furthest away, barley seen were a subdued green: farther off, a grey green. Farthest away, barely seeing the Western sky, they were smoke grey. Over all of them lay a carpet of unfamiliar vegetation: tall slender trees, branchless until the spreading crowns of light green a their very tops: palms, fonds vines, low thorn bushes, eight-foot-high saw grass, and here and there dark green bamboo. I would learn to walk these mountains over the next 200 days, but they would remain forever alien.[123]

Philip Caputo would also invoke the mountains around his own deployment in Da Nang as he spoke:

> We were flying parallel to the mountains the cordillera spread out before us. It was the most forbidding thing I had ever seen. An unbroken mass of green

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[122] Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), 95.
[123] Frank Boccia, *The Crouching Beast: A United States Army Lieutenants Account of the Battle of Hamburger Hill, May 1969* (London: Macfarland & Company, 2013), 9.

> stretched westward, one ridgeline and mountain range after another, some more than a mile high with forests the color of old moss. There it was the Annamae Cordillera, hostile and utterly alien. The Vietnamese themselves regarded it with dread, "out there" they called the humid wilderness where the Bengal tiger stalked and the cobra coiled beneath its rock and the Viet-Cong lurked in Ambush. Our mission was to find an enemy battalion. A battalion a few hundred men. The whole North Vietnamese Army could have concealed itself in that jungle sea and we were going to look for a battalion… I half expected those great mountains to shake with contemptuous laughter at our presence.[124]

In these accounts' nature has become something unknowable to these men. Before it had been a great landscape of potential: a place that held the secrets to manhood or honor in a fight against communism, and a place of adventure, intrigue, and history. Instead, it became an undecipherable primordial presence that they skirted over like flies on some great beast. Like the Indians and other primitive peoples of the world it was perceived that to live in these dangerous places invited men to return to a desperate savagery. This powerful primitivism could imbue men with great power to stalk, hunt, and fight, but also risks their death and separation from the spiritual nodes that connected them to civilization. These places in Vietnam were structured in Vietnam's memory to be amazingly frightful, alien, and bizarre – at least – for those who did not belong within these places. It was a setting which fit veterans experience of their biophysical reality of pain and exhaustion, but also a historical myth of wilderness that views these places as far off realms of danger if not evil, as Michael Herr wrote in *Dispatches.* "The puritan belief that Satan dwelt in nature could have been born here, where even on the coldest, freshest mountain tops you could smell Jungle and that tension between rot and genesis

[124] Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1977), 82.

that all jungles gave off. It is ghost country and for Americans it has been the scene of some of the wars vilest surprises."[125]

Here we see nature through the eyes of fiction, prose, politicians, myths and contested landscapes of imagination, but nature was also a real ecological space. Indo-China's environment imposed a biophysical reality which highlighted both American and Vietnamese history, identity, and military tactics. The brutality and violence in the Indochina bush mirrored and invented several American cultural understandings of wilderness, as Philip Caputo showcased here:

> For weeks we had to live like primitive men on remote outposts, rimmed by alien seas of rice paddies and rainforests. Malaria blackwater fever, and dysentery… At night we squatted in muddy holes, picked off leeches that sucked on our veins and waited for an attack to come at us from the blackness beyond the perimeter wire.[126]

As another soldier in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried.* "Don't believe it – fine with me. But you don't know human nature. You don't know Nam."[127]

These memoirs and fictional works about the Vietnam War used a style of narration that used Vietnam's ecology as a landscape to project a disillusionment, and the rapid disintegration of American Post War confidence. This disillusionment occurred in the various narratives of fiction and memoir along several themes such as alienation, subversive ideas against American myth, nihilism, and a distinct "meaningless" or "randomness," to reflect the chaotic nature of the Vietnam War. I suggest that each theme

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[125] Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), 94.
[126] Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1977), xvii.
[127] Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 108, 115.

interacted with specific American attitudes of nature and projected these attitudes onto a culturally constructed Vietnam landscape. These attitudes changed based on author and intention, but overall, represented a "Fall" from the previous "Garden" of optimism, idealism, and American liberalism. One of the most pertinent and consistent dialogues was the new distinction and skepticism of a world of technology vs a "natural" ecology found within the Vietnam war.

The popular ideological technocratic worldview that saw technology to improve the world was subverted by American machines causing destruction, erosion, and poisoning instead transforming Vietnam into a paradise. American technology embodied waste and weakness instead of power and confidence. The translation of this war between technology and nature appeared in the film *Apocalypse Now* by Francis Coppola. Through the narration of Captain Willard, the audience hears the voice of his target, the elusive Col. Walter Kurtz, who reveals in his manifesto his discovery of the war's hidden truth:

> *Commitment and Counter-Insurgency*, by Col. Walter E. Kurtz.
>
> As long as our officers and troops (sic) perform tours of duty limited to one year, they will remain dilletantes in war and tourists in Vietnam. As long as cold beer, hot food, rock and roll and all the other amenities remain the expected norm, our conduct of the war will gain only impotence. (In the document, but *not* read aloud - The wholesale and indiscriminate use of firepower will only increase the effectiveness of the enemy and strengthen their resolve to prove the superiority of an agrarian culture against the world's greatest technocracy...The central tragedy of our effort in this conflict has been the confusion of a sophisticated technology with human commitment. Our bombs may in time destroy the geography, but they

> will never win the war...)...We need fewer men, and better; if they were committed, this war could be won with a fourth of our present force...[128]

Vietnam's "nature" in these forms even reached to influence the realm of science fiction as *Aliens* director James Cameron explained in an interview on that film.

> One of the themes of the film is that these technologically advanced soldiers succumbed to a technologically inferior, but more determined enemy that they don't know how to fight, which is really kind of a Vietnam metaphor where basically U.S. forces got their buts kicked by barefoot guys running through the jungle. Because they didn't understand how to fight that war. They didn't understand their enemy, or the determination of that enemy.[129]

As the "ultimate" set up for this idea James Cameron discussed the scene where the cocky marine Hudson loudly boasted of the advanced tools and weaponry they had on hand as they descended to the wild frontier planet below, loudly proclaiming they were the "ultimate badasses!"

These fictions suggested another candid way nature impacted American views of narration. Instead of the narrative of progress, the *Aliens* metaphor for Vietnam was a reminder of the natural forces that exist outside of humans control no matter their technological state. It was a reminder of human's limitations to use technology to control the world. The narrative here was less confident and more existential in tone then the bombastic films of the previous decades. Technology became an immediate villain for many intellectuals who viewed its overuse as a piece in the eventual decay of America's future. As historian Andrew Ross wrote, "There has long been and still is, an unlikely consensus among certain voices from the right and the left about the intrinsic evils of new

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[128] "Apocalypse Now. (1979) by John Milius, Francis Coppola. Transcript," sfy.ru accessed 2018, https://sfy.ru/transcript/apocalypse_now_ts

[129] James Cameron (dir.), *Aliens* (20th Century Fox, 1986), DVD.

technologies and the monstrous mass cultures they give birth."[130] By extension the opposing world of "Alien," and its power of tooth and claw was extended to the Vietnamese guerrillas who were portrayed as representations of the power of nature, and societies willing to live within them. This was a narrative that mingled with broader and ancient American myths and traditions about the savage native and the power residing in their ferocity and knowledge of dangerous wilderness. The inability of Americas to conquer that wilderness was a direct repudiation of the traditional American mythos of exploring, conquering, and settling nature into civilization. It was a myth predicated on a large narrative of progress across a vast series of barbarism and wilderness until the light civilization and progress reaches from sea to shining sea.

America's perception of its character of pioneers and adventurers was brought low by the reminder of human biological fragility in difficult terrain and the mindless suffering found within. Attempting to conquer the Vietnamese environment ending in defeat, and instead created a new cultural fascination with wilderness: only, it was one steeped in deeply dystopian and nihilistic themes. The faith in democratic liberalism was also deeply disturbed. The idea of an inclusive world order of democracy led by the paternal hand of the United States was brought low by a visibly uncaring, alien, hostile, and victorious Vietnamese people. America had offered only hardship, pain, and acts of atrocity instead of John Wayne grit and cowboy heroism. Events such as My Lai disturbed and disquieted American spirits more than any other moment in the war. It was

[130] Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals & Mass Culture* (London, Routledge, 1989), 209.

a moment of utter disbelief that American actions could compare or resonate with that of Nazism or Communist atrocities.

As a result, a new skepticism arose within America over its past and the reliability of narratives to represent reality. As Historian Bruce Franklin stated,

> There is a third view that has gained considerable influence in intellectual circles that sees any master "master narrative" or "meta-narrative" or, for that matter, any coherently structured narrative – as a socially constructed fantasy that radically falsifies the fragmentary, conflicted, and de-centered character of social experience.[131]

In the immediate aftermath of the war during the 70s this would result in what historian Bruce Schulman called a culminative "letting loose" of American society.[132] Intellectuals from the right and left both expressed fears of new evils of what previously during the age of liberal consensus had been integral pieces of the social cohesion, development, and progression of society.

Later trends in historical and journalistic accounts often found themselves tracing the war's meaning back toward the existential enemy of heat, nature, and alien landscape which they could not overcome. Both as soldiers and as. As Historian Francis Fitzgerald invoked in her influential book *Fire in the Lake:*

> Young American men from the small towns of America, the GIs who came to Vietnam found themselves in a place halfway around the world among people with whom they could make no human contact… And they found themselves not attacking fixed positions but walking through the jungle and through villages among small yellow people... but the enemy remained invisible, not only in the jungle but among the people of the villages – an almost metaphysical enemy who

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[131] Bruce Franklin, *Vietnam & Other American Fantasies* (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 4

[132] Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York, Free Press, 2001).

> inflicted upon them heat, boredom, terror, and death and gave them nothing to show for it – no territory taken, no visible sign of progress except the bodies of small yellow men.[133]

I find it compelling that even in the most critical voices and narratives of the war such as Francis Fitzgerald's, where American actions in Vietnam are compared to the likes of Nazi Germany nature found itself at the center of these narratives. Ideologies such as imperialism, American racial attitudes, and crony capitalism competed with the Indochina landscape to explain the death of Vietnamese civilians and American belief in progress. As historian Richard Drinnon showcased:

> Yet where were the targets of such operations with their surface names? Unobliging they would not "stand up and fight," but glide back into their leafy hiding places or into their villages. Spectral enemies, they were at once nowhere and everywhere in their land with its mines and booby traps, rice paddies you slashed through waist deep and mountainous jungles you hardly penetrate with its heat and dust of the dry season and mud of the wet. With its cloud of flies and mosquitos and its stench of animal and human dung.[134]

Other accounts of the daily massacres of Vietnamese civilians such as *Kill Anything That Moves* by Nick Turse also showcased the environment as helping lead men toward murder, as he wrote here:

> From them I learned something of what it was like to be twenty years old, with few life experiences beyond adolescence in a small town or inner city neighborhood, and to be suddenly thrust into villages of thatch and bamboo homes that ripped straight from the pages of National Geographic, the paddies around them such a vibrant green that they almost burned the eye. Veteran after veteran told me about days of shattering fatigue and the confusion of contradicting orders, about being placed in situations so alien and unnerving that

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[133] Francis Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1972), 370.
[134] Drinnon Richard, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating & Empire-Building* (New York: Meridian Book, 1980), 451.

> even with their automatic rifles and grenades they felt scared walking through hamlets of unarmed women and children.[135]

Perhaps due to the intimate symbolism of Indochina's vast wilderness and landscape of green jungles and "primitive" dwellings, the metaphor of ecology became such a prominent tool to explore the end of many people's belief in American progress. Authors began to use the new spectral landscape of Vietnam's nature to infuse narratives that resonated powerful new ideologies of alienation from American society. As Historian John Hellman stated:

> In these works, we can see how the American story, the American idea of its meaning in the flow of history, was transformed for many Americans by the landscape they now saw in Vietnam. Perceiving Vietnam as a confrontation between the forces of technology and nature… the American frontier: however, this landscape reveals the meeting of savagery and civilization to have a different meaning from that of traditional American myth.[136]

The eventual defeat in Vietnam resonated a tremor in the web within America's mythos. Symbolically, this belief systems defeat in Vietnam reasserted several older American and European myths surrounding ecology viewed as "dangerous" or "painful." Another narrative tool was to find soldiers, draftees, and other American men caught in the tragedy of the war falling away from their morality in wilderness. These narratives depicted a nihilistic, and illogical world of ecology. Certain traditions have often referred to this world as "wilderness" and its form varied in representation of Vietnam War

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[135] Nick Turse, *Kill Anything that Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2013), 16.
[136] John Hellman, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 79.

fiction. This was the realm of Captain Konrad Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now*, Sergeant Bob Barnes in *Platoon*, or fictional Vietnam guerillas torturing American POWs in *Rambo.*

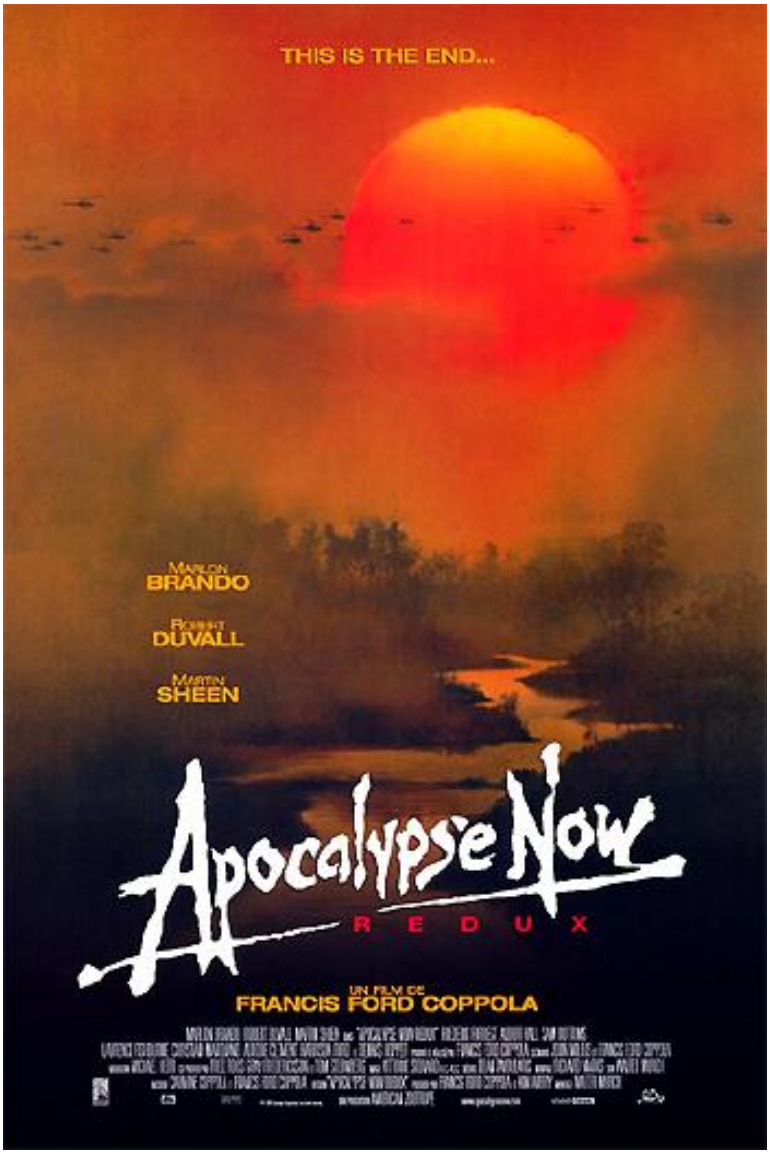


Fig. 3: Francis Ford Coppola, motion picture poster, Apocalypse Now, Zoetrop Studios,. c.1979. From https://www.loc.gov/item/2013645941/

The poster for this eerie horror landscape was Francis Ford's *Apocalypse Now.* The poster for the film displayed all the tropes of the classic Vietnam imagery. Far away American choppers in huge numbers flying to some distant target, and below a slow winding river descending deeper and deeper into a blood orange horizon, surrounded by a mist shrouded jungle. Unlike depictions of nature in previous decades of film the morality of *Apocalypse Now* relates a subversive ideology against the clear themes of good vs evil seen in cowboy heroism of past films. The subversion told of chaos, human primitivism, brutality, violence, and insanity as markers of not a time lost to American frontiers but born of present American actions. This violence became more pronounced the further the characters in the film descended into the Jungle. It is important to note this as the physical separation from safety, civilization, and human constructs like buildings grew so too did insanity, violence, and incoherence for the characters. At one-point Captain Willard and his small band of men arrived in the middle of the night at a stranded American outpost. Around them flares shot into the sky and the world was pitch black with men who crawled toward their boat pleading to be let on so they could escape from the nightmare.

The jungles, villages, and rice paddies of Vietnam took on the form of landscape of horrors and surrealist nightmares. Even the tamest descriptions invoked a deep unease with Americans years after Vietnam as Susan Brownmiller remembered about a Vietnamese restaurant in New York the locals called Vietnam Village. "The name gave me the shivers – concertina wire, strategic hamlets, GIs torching thatched roofs with Zippo lighters. In a matter of months, the restaurant closed for lack of business. I

probably wasn't the only neighborhood person who just couldn't make it through the door."[137] Vietnam's "wilderness" served as a landscape of the great unknowns. In Jayne Philip's *Machine of Dreams* Billy spooke to his sister through letter of the kind of war he was fighting, a war that is unreal and surreal. As he wrote here:

> My real feeling is that I'm not so scared of being dead, if its fast-I'm scared as shit of lying in some Jungle all fucked up, waiting for a dust off that can't get to me because the zone is too hot….On the ground it can be hell and crazy and you still never see any Cong but dead ones. It's like they've just been there and turned everything to fuck or their invisible, raining ammo in. Like cowboys and Indians, except the Indians are ghosts and they can't lose because nothing really kills them.[138]

In the crime drama True Detective, the pessimistic ex detective Rust Cole related the scene of finding two children brutalized in the backwoods of the Louisiana bush. "Man, that place I never… it reminded me of my pop talking about Nam. And the Jungle thing."[139] It was a place away from the eyes of the protector's society or of any kind of law and decency. The horror came from the doings of men who returned to brutality in a wild state. Soldiers discussed the horror in the aftermath of the massacring of Vietnamese villagers in the film *Platoon:*

> Now, he's taken us this far, right? He'll take us the rest of the way.
>
> A Christian don't go around a village cutting off heads and shit.
>
> This shit is really getting outta hand, man. Way outta control.

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[137] Susan Brownmiller, *Seeing Vietnam: Encounters of the Road and Heart* (New York: Harpers Collins, 1994), 4.
[138] Jayne Philips, *Machine Dreams* (New York: Seymour Lawrence, 1984), 280, 290.
[139] *True Detective*, Season 1, episode 3, "The Locked Room," HBO, January 26, 2014, directed by Cary Joji Fukunaga, written by Nic Pizzolattto.

Seems to me that you don't seem to know the difference, the way you shoot up that shit all the time.

I don't know, brothers, but I'm hurting really bad inside.

Don't worry about it. Elias won't be able to prove a thing.

- He's a troublemaker. - Elias is a water-walker.

Like them politicians in Washington trying to fight this war...

with one hand tied around their balls.

Ain't no need or time for a courtroom out here.[140]

Tim O'Brien in *The Things They Carried* also referenced soldiers dismay at the strange supernatural energy that the enemy moved through the difficult landscape, turning order and power from an environment that sapped and weakened American bodies. As he wrote here, "The countryside itself seemed spooky – shadows and tunnels and incense burning in the dark. The land was haunted. We were fighting forces that did not obey the laws of twentieth century science."[141] The war also follows a traditional war story with the laws of violence and confusion amped to the maximum. The violence heightened by the disorderly surroundings of the landscape, as writer Larry Heinemann wrote in *Paco's Story.*

> Tracking an NVA company they fuckin' tell us, and guys're dropping like flies, Jack-horrible fucking heat exhaustion, ordinary ambushes, sniper fire, Chicom claymore mines as big as tractor tires… Guys with their heads cracked open like walnuts ,bleeding from the ears and the scalp. Guys with their chests squashed flat from fucking-A booby trapped bombs. Guys with their legs blown off at the thighs … Shi! Mean and evil blood all over everything and my ass in it up to the elbows. I still dream about it nights – nightmare monsters that smell to high

[140] "Platoon. (1986) by Oliver Stone. Transcript," sfy.ru, accessed 2018, https://sfy.ru/?script=platoon.
[141] Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 229.

> heaven, nasty whirligig looking contraptions that keep snatching at you, slobbery looking warlocks with the evil fucking eye that gives you cold sweats and shivers so bad you think you got some dynamite case of malaria… We thrashed around in that fuckin woods – the Goongone Forest, you understand-that night, the next day, the next night, and that day. And we were always lost.[142]

These stories displayed nature within narrative tropes of madness, seduction, and disillusionment. A primary mechanism was to emphasis points of geography or wildlife to illustrate a metaphor of a personal experience: or, to create a resonating image for the reader. This could be a hill, a jungle, a rice paddy, or even a Vietnamese village. Throughout the films and memoir these areas became identified with this "wilderness." For Americans this "wilderness" was traditionally a place of power, a symbolic node in their nations crest of myth. American traditional views of wilderness were a place to be conquered, protected. It was both an antagonistic force that shaped American heroes and its people, and a space of opportunity for the ideals of freedom and democracy. In the Vietnam narrative wilderness emerged to serve as the chaotic realm of disillusionment.

In an environmental context nature can help transform narratives of a people. It can either inform the story with confidence or power or dread and terror. The American myth of nature before Vietnam was one of victory and conquest. It was a story of a people subduing a continent, conquering savagery and turned it into an enlightened civilization. This is Donald Worster approach of cultural environmental history or the third way of environmental history that sees the means in which humans codify aspects of the natural world into our rituals, symbols, tradition, and iconography.[143]. The agency of

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[142] Larry Heinemann, *Paco's Story* (New York: Farrar Status Giroux, 1986), 20.
[143] Donald Worster, *The Ends of the Earth* (England: Cambridge University Press), 1989.

ecology in the Vietnam War within this methodology was to reinforce the metaphor of disillusionment. Part of the power behind this metaphor came from the physicality of the war itself: the legs turning to jelly and the stomach turning into soup amidst the heat and exhaustion of humping up and down and up and down the same hills and paddies for months on end. Men became in this instance utterly biological beings that must conceive of death in rather nasty and uninspiring ways.

In Tim O'Brien's work *The Things they carried* one soldier told another a classic tale of the spooky jungle. As Rat, the charming storyteller, told his friends of the lost platoon:

> And man, I'll tell you – its spooky. This is mountains. You don't know spooky till you been there… everything all wet and swirly and tangled and you can't see jack, you can't find your own pecker to piss with. Like you don't have a body. Serious spooky. You just go with the vapors – the fog sort of takes you in… and the sounds man. You hear stuff nobody should ever hear…"[144] This wonderous series of prose invokes a fearful experience by these men caught in a world that is alien and dangerous. What happens next according to the storyteller "Rat" the nervous soldiers begin to hear strange music from the mountains, and a rising swell of human voices singing and talking. The land itself comes alive with spectral sounds as the soldier told his skeptical friend here, "All these different voices. Not human voices though. Because it's the mountains, follow me? The rock its talking. And the fog, too, and the grass & the god damn mongooses. Everything talks the tree talk politics, the monkeys talk religion. The whole country. Vietnam. The place talks. It talks. Understand? Nam it truly talks.[145]

The story ended with the panicky platoon calling in everything they had to burn the forest and mountains around them in a cornucopia of destruction as Rat told here,

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[144] Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 80.
[145] O'Brien, 81.

"The guys can't cope. They lose it. They get on the radio and report enemy movement – a whole army, they say and order up firepower…. They make those mountains burn."[146] I think ultimately the point of this story told by O'Brien through a fictional soldier to another is recreate the great presence of the unknown in Vietnam. And in response to that unknown America destroyed and burned with its technology what it could not understand. America's rationalistic universe responded in utter fear and panic which resulted in wanton destruction. The spookiness of the Vietnamese jungle, the mountains, the spectral misty hillsides, the unfathomable heat, the Vietnamese people, the endless trail humping, low visibility and countless other aspects of the war that made men feel helpless and vulnerable. As writer Bobbie Mason wrote In *Country* through the characters of Sam and Pete where the veteran Pete explained the incomprehensible to the questioning teenager Sam, "Stop thinking about Vietnam Sambo. You don't know how it was, and you never will. There is no way you can ever understand. So, just forget it. Unless you've been humping the boonies, you don't know. "What's humping the boonies?" "that means going out in some god forsaken wilderness and doing what you have to do to survive…"[147] By constructing nature in this way in Vietnam it helped give authenticity and subtly played on a basic fear felt inside humans, that is, the fear of the unknown.

Many pieces of literature presented Vietnam's nature as eldritch form, or something that is unfathomable. Narratives used nature here for the purpose of

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[146] Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 82.
[147] Bobbie Mason, *In Country* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 136.

highlighting corruption of the human soul.[148] For Tim O'Brien the unknowable construct of nature was both a destructive force and an alluring call for his characters. In another story O'Brien told a tale of an American woman named Mary Anne who was brought over to a remote outpost by her boyfriend, something that started as a joke. However, over time she slowly succumbed to the corruption – or, as indicated by some, purifying - allure of the wilderness around her. The riveting experience of wandering the jungles for enemy patrols and living in a state of primitiveness invigorated her mind and body unlike anything back in America, a world of comfort and convenience. Eventually Mary abandoned the world of rationalism and enlightenment for the more barbaric, but liberating, life of the war out in the jungle. As she would later tell her boyfriend, "When I'm out there at night, I feel close to my own body, I can feel my blood moving my fingers, and my fingernails, everything, it's like I'm full of electricity – I'm on fire. Almost – I'm burning away into nothing – but it doesn't matter because I know exactly who I am. You can't feel that anywhere else."[149] After several instances of Mary Ann sneaking off with the mysterious Green Berets, her boyfriend confronted her in the Green Berets makeshift camp which was a place of reeking primal energy as the narrator recounts:

> The place seemed to echo with a weird deep wilderness sound – tribal music – bamboo flutes and drums and chimes – the smell – two kinds of smell. There was a topmost scent of joss sticks and incense, like fumes of some exotic smokehouse, but beneath the smoke lay a deeper and much more powerful stench. Impossible to describe, Rat said. It paralyzed your lungs. Thick and numbing, like an

[148] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction with a New Epilogue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 10.
[149] Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 121.

> animal's den, a mix of blood and scorched hair and excrement and the sweet-sour odor of moldering flesh – the stink of the kill. On a post at the rear of the hooch was a decayed head of a large black leopard: strips of yellow brown skin dangled from the overhead rafters. And bones. Stacks of bones – all kinds – to one side propped against a wall, stood a poster in neat black lettering: assemble your own gook. Free sample kit![150]

Attempting to confront Mary Ann over her dangerous forays instead turned into a total rebuke of the men sitting at the edge of the forest "playing" at a game of war. As Mary Ann told her troubled boyfriend:

> You are in a place," Mary Ann whispered softly, "where you don't belong." She moved her hand in a gesture that encompassed not just the hooch but everything around it, the entire war, the mountains, the mean little villages, the trails and trees and rivers and deep misted over valleys. "You just don't know," she said, "you hide in this little fortress, behind wire and sandbags, and you don't know what's out there or what its all about or how it all feels to really live in it. Sometimes I want to eat this place. Vietnam. I want to swallow the whole country – the dirt, the death. I just want to eat it and have it there inside of me.

America viewed their encounter, and ultimate failure, with Vietnam under a specific narrative of progress. They expected enlightenment ideas of freedom, science, and rationalism to transform Vietnam. However, these values had an opposite effect that transformed American soldiers into people who had become alienated from this rationalistic and progressive universe. Some were driven insane, others became monsters, and others simply "fell away" and disappeared into the wilderness just like Mary Ann, who eventually suffered this fate as the narrator recounted. "She wanted more, she wanted to penetrate deeper into the mystery of herself. And then one morning, all alone, Mary Anne walked off into the mountains and did not come back."[151] As soldiers

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[150] Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 119.
[151] O'Brien, 124.

discussed later, they said that Mary Anne had, "… crossed to the other side. She was part of the land."[152] In a common obsession with nature's hand in causing a return to primitiveness or barbarism, O'Brien told of a person who met Indochina's wilderness and was lost within it.

In the short story *Kid McArthur* by Stephanie Vaughn a character related the loss of a family member to the horror of Vietnam. "Even in my imagination, I could not go where he had gone. All I knew was that somewhere in the Jungle had been a boy named Dixon, a boy from Oklahoma who had grown up on land just like my father used to hunt… But now Dixon was a nut who sent ears through the mail…"[153] Other works such as *Heavenly Blue Answer* told of another lost American soul as shown here. "And late that night James found his way home, through LA streets and the Vietnam jungle, to his apartment… The next day was a warm smoggy day in the jungle. James was out on the sidewalks early, laughing and mumbling to himself with the best of them. Yet the Jungle was here to stay now. He was sure of that. He would never force it all back into his head again. It was too big for that."[154] James and Dixon were lost to the war. They succumbed to the violence and drifted from their sanity and humanity.

Perhaps the most iconic character within this narrative of jungle and wilderness is Walter E. Kurtz played by actor Marlon Brando in the film *Apocalypse Now.* Like the book *Heart of Darkness,* that the film is based on, Walter Kurtz had gone insane in a wild

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[152] Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 124.
[153] Bruce Franklin, *The Vietnam War: In American Stories, Songs, and Poems* (Boston: Bedford Books of Saint Martin Press, 1996), 174.
[154] Ronald Cross, *The Heavenly Blue Answer, The Vietnam War: In American Stories, Songs, & Poems* (Boston: Bedford Books of Saint Martin's Press, 1996), 156.

dangerous land. The lands of Africa, or in the American context Vietnam, serves as a projection of a frontier. A place that in the American context traditionally offered opportunity for bold entrepreneurs and heroic adventures: the kind of men who built civilizations. However, much like *Heart of Darkness* this frontier was different. The frontier created a dark mirror into the adventure's soul. The would-be hero becomes a twisted figure mocking the values of his homeland by escaping deep into the jungles where he discovered the ancient human "heart of darkness." This metaphor in Conrad's Heart of Darkness is a broad analysis of the darkness within the human soul, and the corruption of slavery, imperialism, within the west's spirit.

In Apocalypse Now Kurtz is a vehicle to attack the values of his society upon realizing Vietnam for what is was: a maddening horror show. Once a proud soldier dutifully serving his nation Kurtz fell into madness and sequesters himself deep within the Mekong wilderness. There, fighting both Viet-Cong and American forces alike, Kurtz was deemed a dangerous madman by American military command, and they sent out a team to find and eliminate him. As the story unfolded the audience saw a wide array of disturbing imagery of the war. It came to be that Kurtz was driven insane when he observed the war for what it really was – a representation of the mass revealing of the war's true horror. It is through Kurtz and many others that I suggest one of the primaries uses of Vietnam's ecology occurred. What we are saw in Kurtz was the fall of American idealism and optimism. As the film depicted of the wilderness of Vietnam American men met the chaos of war and lost their sanity and morality. They lost sight of their guiding star of manifest destiny and purpose. Progress ended and history began again, and

America emerged defeated: yet another decadent empire that reached its peak, instead of reaching the transcendent Eden of paradise.

Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*, or James Webb's *Fields of Fire* and other classical stories also involved ecology into their own personal tales of disillusionment. In *Meditations in Green* by Stephen Wright nature appeared in short stories where plants and vegetation were given a chronicle of growth only to disappear in an explosion by American interdiction bombing.[155] Writers emphasized ecology to relate the loss of any meaning behind suffering. As Frank Boicca spoke of in the final battle in *The Crouching Beast:*

> We lifted off, and as the pilot turned eastward, the beast lay before me naked and blood ugly in the grey afternoon light. I stared at it without really understanding the emotions I felt: Anger, yes & hatred, for the hill itself, for the uncaring mass of rock & clay, this beast lying sprawled before me, baneful even in death. I hated the beast not simply because of the guilt and grief I felt for the death of my men… it was much more than that. I hated the thing because in the end, it had so effortlessly demanded everything from me and taken it, without my consent, without my volition, without even my understanding. I had been sucked dry, stripped bare & cast away as a fly, snared and bound and eaten by a voracious spider is discarded into hellish midden. .. But the worst of it was the knowledge I was no helpless fly struggling in the web. I had moral choice. That was what the beast had done to us and why I had hated it so. Father how can you forsake me and bring me to face an evil I had no hope of avoiding? You left me to confront the beast with no other weapon than my will and no armor except my humanity. In the end, it barely noticed its victory.[156]

Frank Boccia related this fall is the failure of his men's humanity in the presence of something that ultimately didn't care either way.

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[155] Stephen Wright, *Meditations in Green* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 36.
[156] Bruce Franklin, *The Vietnam War: In American Stories, Songs, and Poems* (Boston: Bedford Books of Saint Martin Press, 1996).

This return to a state of living as an animal without a broader meaning upset the men who fought in Vietnam. As James Webb wrote in his book Fields of Fire:

> I can sleep in the rain, wrapped inside my poncho, listening to the drops beat on the rubber like small explosions, then feeling the water pour in rivulets inside my poncho, soaking me as I lie in the mud. I can live in the dirt, sit and lie and sleep in the dirt, it is my chair and my bed, my floor and my walls, this clay. And like all of you, I have endured diarrhea as only an animal should endure it, squatting a yard off a trail and relieving myself unceremoniously, naturally, animally. Deprivations of food. Festering, open sores. Worms. Heat. Aching crotch that nags for fulfillment, any emptying hole that will relieve it. Who appreciates my sufferings? Who do I suffer for?"[157]

In *Meditations in Green* Stephen Wright wrote an inner dialogue of a fighter jet pilot who spent his days bombing the Vietnamese jungle incessantly. "My analyst claims playing in the shrubbery is dangerously regressive. Doesn't Satre seem to indicate that vegetation is, all contraire, an oppressive presence, a distasteful reminder of the essentially nihilistic and somewhat detrop quality of nature's palliative force?"[158]

The experience typical for a war had become meaning without the context of victory, support, or a broader narrative to attach the suffering to. Many men dreamt of a way out of the combat as Marine Johnnie Clark remembered. "We called it "World Dreaming" Sometimes it was air conditioning or driving a car again. Sometimes it was strawberry shortcake and ice cream.[159] The American dream reminded men of the material abundance and many joked that the only way to win the war was to convert the Vietnamese with their cornucopia of excess. As two soldiers recounted jokingly in

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[157] James Webb, *Fields of Fire* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1978).
[158] Stephen Wright, *Meditations in Green* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 91.
[159] James Ebert, *A Life in a Year: The American Infantryman in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1993), 221.

Stephen Wright's *Meditations in Green.* As far as I can tell, the only way we are ever going to get a leg up on this war is to give every damn gook his own two-bedroom ranch complete with nice shrubbery, a lawn, and a white picket fence. What about a garage, they're gunna need a garage to."[160]

These dialogues suggested a rising insecurity over a spiritual malaise in America caused by its abundance. The Vietnam War opened the door to a deep spiritual scar over American faith in its society. The Vietnamese popular narrative remembered the war and the landscapes of jungle as a place of pain and violence. However, unlike the Americans their pain was in sacrifice for a noble cause with many veterans remembering the jungle fondly.[161] They fought for unification and against American Imperialism. As General Tran Van Tra wrote in a Poem after the war:

We eat the fruit. But we must honor
Those who planted the tree.
When you return to the city in Victory.
Never forget your life in the Jungle.
Thanks to your comrades
Now in success
Forgot not their friendship.[162]

The disparity of views of nature was put on vivid display in Tim O'Brien's dialogue between soldiers and a Vietnamese officer in *Going After Cacciato*. "The land." Li Van

[160] Stephen Wright, *Meditations in Green* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 65.
[161] Truong Nhu Tang, A Viet Cong Memoir: Truong Nhu Tang (New York: Harcourt Brace Javonich, 1985), 174.
[162] Truong Nhu Tang, A Viet Cong Memoir: Truong Nhu Tang (New York: Harcourt Brace Javonich, 1985), 164.

hgoc said softly, “The Soldier is but the representation of the land. The land is your true enemy.”[163]

The desire to return to the jungle was felt by American soldiers as well and was another trope in Vietnam War literature. As seen in Bobbie Mason’s *In Country* where the veteran Tom described the need to escape the town. “Sometimes when I feel homesick for those memories, I get on a dirt bike and just go out and bump around the woods behind the fairgrounds. I just let the memories come. It’s like being back with them... But you must go someplace like that, off to the bottom, or out on a dirt bike trail. You can’t stay in town and afford to think about what happened.”[164]

Ultimately, I suggest that the Vietnam War can be interpreted as part of a larger story of the human form of narrating events, and how they present ecology within those events to impart different emotional meanings. Nature in the human context can mean a great many things from the real to the imagined, but with Vietnam nature happened to come into deep contact with American identity. American values were partly so disturbed because their own mythology was centered on the grand human project of a liberal democratic order. An order that was upheld to be a final solution to the historical ebb and flow of empire and disaster. The Vietnam War emerged as the biggest setback for this ideology, if not setting the groundwork for its defeat entirely. The symbolic reversal of so many American myths compounded upon one another creating a feeling of apocalypse for those who had viewed this era with such great optimism. At the heart of this

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[163] Tim O’Brien, *Going After Cacciato* (New York: New York, Random House, 1978), 86.
[164] Bobbie Mason, *In Country* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 79.

disruption as I suggested in this thesis was a central obsession with certain forms and ideals of "American" nature in pre-Vietnam imagery, political rhetoric and national myth, and these same ideals transforming in a new post-Vietnam war context. What Vietnam showcased was the uses of specific narratives about nature that perceived certain ecology as deeply disturbing or were useful to construct metaphors for larger cultural meanings such as disillusionment, despair, and subversive ideas of the ideals of progress.

While much of this thesis centered on the war itself, I wish to emphasize narration. The seemingly intrinsic human need to narrate our actions above random chronicle is what made so many of the primary sources stand out to me while doing research for this Thesis.[165] Above anything else there is almost an unconscious commentary in these works occurring over the ancient problem of humankind's battle against an uncaring chaotic universe. In the context of the Vietnam war this narrative was rediscovered: resonating violently against the American conceptions of their quasi utopianism. A narrative detailing the struggle between the height of American civilization in the middle 20th century and a troubling return to the "wilds" of nature's embrace.

[165] For a broader discussion into the problem of narration and its interaction with the natural world see. Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987), and Cronan William, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History & Narrative." *Journal of American History* 78, no. 4 March (1992): 1376. 1349.

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Francis Ford Coppola Presents - Apocalypse Now. 1979. [s.l.: s.n] Photograph. https://www.loc.gov/item/2013645941/

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