

By Howie Machtinger

1. The restoration of national 'pride' and the link to white supremacy

To justify the invasion of Cambodia in 1970, Richard Nixon lamented that the US would not act "like a pitiful, helpless giant." He and Henry Kissinger eventually settled for what they termed a decent interval (before the Vietnamese opposition took power) to 'preserve peace with honor'. Kissinger was obsessed with restoring the image of American power. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, Kissinger told reporters, "the United States must carry out some act somewhere in the world, which shows its determination to continue to be a world power."¹ In 1976, he testified to the Senate about Africa policy: "If the United States is seen to emasculate itself in the face of massive, unprecedented Soviet intervention around the world, what will be the perception of leaders around the world?"² Appointed by Reagan in 1983 to head The National Bipartisan Commission on Central America, Kissinger's report asserted, "The triumph of hostile forces in what the Soviets call the 'strategic rear' of the United States would be read as a sign of US impotence."³

As the US-supported South Vietnam was about to collapse in April 1975, Gerald Ford initially preached amnesia: "Today America can regain the sense of pride that existed before Vietnam [note how the nation of Vietnam is here reduced to a war]. But it cannot be achieved by refighting a war that is finished as far as America is concerned."⁴

Ford's successor, Jimmy Carter detected a "crisis of confidence" in Americans after the war, but didn't "feel that we ought to apologize or castigate ourselves or to assume culpability... I don't feel that we owe a debt, nor that we should be forced to pay reparations at all."⁵ But contributions "to postwar reconstruction of the DRV of Viet-Nam and throughout Indochina" had been stated in Article 21 of the January 1973 Paris Peace Accords⁶ followed up immediately by a letter from Nixon to DRV Prime Minister Pham Van Dong⁷ (not declassified until 1977) which promised upwards of \$4 billion in postwar aid.

More disingenuous, in Carter's view "the destruction was mutual."⁸ Accurate estimates are hard to come by, but as many as three million or more Vietnamese were likely killed, including two million civilians, hundreds of thousands seriously injured and disabled, millions internally displaced, croplands and forests destroyed: long-term harm – physical, environmental, institutional, and psychological. The term *ecocide* was coined to try to capture the devastation of the Vietnamese landscape. From 1964 to August 15, 1973, the United States Air Force dropped in Indochina, "a total of 6,162,000 tons of bombs and other ordnance... This tonnage far exceeded that expended in World War II and in the Korean War combined."⁹ Thus Vietnam War bombing represented roughly three times as much (by

¹ Greg Grandin, (2015) *Kissinger's Shadow: The Long Reach of America's Most Controversial Statesman*, Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt & Company, p. 140.

² Ibid. p. 123.

³ Ibid., p. 192.

⁴ <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=4859>

⁵ <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=72290>

⁶ Marvin E. Gettleman, Jane Franklin, Marilyn B. Young, H. Bruce Franklin, *Vietnam and America: A Documented History* (NY: Grove Press, 1995), p. 479.

⁷ Ibid. pp. 477-8.

⁸ <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=72290>

⁹ Clodfelter, Michael (1995), *Vietnam in Military Statistics: A History of the Indochina Wars, 1772-1991*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.

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weight) as both the European and Pacific theaters of World War II bombing combined and about 13 times the total tonnage in the Korean War. From 1961 until 1971, the US military dropped more than 19 million gallons of toxic chemicals — defoliants and herbicides — on approximately 4.8 million Vietnamese in southern Viet Nam in Operation Ranch Hand. The chemicals were identified by the colors painted on their 55-gallon-drum shipping containers. The best known and most sprayed was Agent Orange, an herbicide known by the late 1960s to contain often dangerous levels of a “finger-print” (i.e. specifically identifiable) dioxin, 2,3,7,8-tetrachlorodibenzo-p-dioxin, which the World Health Organization has cited as among the most dangerous persistent-organic-pollutant (POP) toxins. And of course, the Vietnamese enemy never set foot on or attacked American soil.

In any case, in an attempt to restore the US’s eroding moral standing in the world as a result of the war, Carter drew a distinction between his policy and the policies of his predecessors, noting that they had pursued the “flawed and erroneous principles and tactics of our adversaries.” As a result, the United States had moved away from what Carter saw as its core values. The interdependent world of the 1970s required a “new American foreign policy” grounded in cardinal principles, including the “commitment to human rights as a fundamental tenet of our foreign policy.”¹⁰ But his foreign policy failed to fulfill this high standard and it came crashing down around US support for the Shah of Iran, leading to the seizure of Americans by militant Iranians. Despite Carter’s increased defense spending from 4.7% of GDP to 5.2% of GDP, and his strong support for the mujahedeen against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, but because of his fumbling attempts to address American malaise and his response to the Iran hostage crisis, Carter was tagged as soft and anti-military. Headlines screamed: “America held Hostage” even as the fifty-two captives were professional diplomats, CIA agents, and marines representing a nation, which had installed the very dictator who had been overthrown. A new nationalism abetted by Islamophobia (even as the US bankrolled jihadists including Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan) took root as the media fanned the flames. After a failed rescue of the hostages turned into ‘the debacle in the desert’, Carter was done for. When the hostages were finally released at the beginning of Reagan’s presidency, the country was festooned with yellow ribbons. Like POWs, the hostages had been anointed heroes without having done anything heroic, except for being symbols of American victimhood, and of the hoped for rebirth of patriotic pride.

Hollywood began contributing to the frenzy after initially struggling to find its footing and a receptive audience. The Academy Award winning 1974 *Hearts and Minds* (which had initial trouble finding distribution the US) was a powerful antiwar documentary made by a journalist turned filmmaker, named Peter Davis. *The Deer Hunter* (winner of 5 Academy Awards, including for Best Picture in 1978) reversed iconic images of the war by showing North Vietnamese as sadistic killers as opposed to the sensitive, if tragic, ‘bromance’ of American working class soldiers. “Most famously, it appropriated a then-unforgettable Pulitzer prize-winning photo of Lt. Colonel Nguyen Ngoc Loan, South Vietnam’s national police chief, executing an unarmed, bound prisoner during the Tet Offensive with a point blank pistol shot to the head. In the film, however, it was the evil enemy which made American prisoners do the same to themselves as they were forced to play Russian Roulette

¹⁰ <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=7552>

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for the amusement of their sadistic Vietnamese captors (something that had no basis in reality)."¹¹

The tone was set for almost all films about the war (including those ostensibly antiwar such as *The Deer Hunter's* Oscar competition, the Jane Fonda vehicle, *Coming Home*)—either excluding or stereotyping the Vietnamese enemy, while almost exclusively focusing on Americans, as if the war had taken place in America. This remains the case even in explicitly antiwar movies, which have scenes in Vietnam such as *Platoon* (as extras, largely excluded), *Apocalypse Now* (stereotyped), *Full Metal Jacket* (as extras, largely excluded, except for the female sniper), and *Born on the 4th of July* (evoked, but mostly as extras). Only the Robin Williams vehicle, *Good Morning Vietnam* allows for real Vietnamese characters and an articulate voice of the enemy. Otherwise, the war in Vietnam was reduced to an American psychodrama.

There were more disturbing developments on the fringes of the culture. Ultra-right groups that had a history that preceded the war--stemming from the McCarthy era and going back to the Civil War--revived and expanded in the postwar period. For instance, from 1974 to 1979, membership in the Ku Klux Klan rose from an historic all-time low of 1,500 to 11,500. For these groups, non-whites (including Jews) were the same as, or agents of the same Communists who had troubled the US in Vietnam. For the Christian Identity movement, including groups such as Posse Comitatus, the loss in Vietnam seemed to forebode the Apocalypse and the job of white Christians was to bring on the Apocalypse by engaging in holy war. A less religious message was articulated in *The Turner Diaries*, a 1978 novel by William Luther Pierce (founder of the white nationalist organization, National Alliance). *The Turner Diaries* depicts a violent revolution in the United States which leads to the overthrow of the federal government, nuclear war, and, ultimately, a race war. By the year 2000, more than 500,000 copies of *The Turner Diaries* had been sold. The book became a bible for the white supremacist, nationalist movement and was found among the belongings of Timothy McVeigh (the perpetrator of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing).

These groups encapsulated two contradictory tendencies, which Leonard Zeskind has called vanguardists—who saw themselves as a militant minority with a pure message, and mainstreamers¹² like David Duke and Pat Buchanan (both Trump supporters) who like Steve Bannon and Breitbart, today, are willing to somewhat sanitize the message so as to appeal to a broader public and achieve electoral success.

The movement to rehabilitate the war and restore American pride and aggressiveness really took off with the Presidency of Ronald Reagan. In a major speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) during the 1980 campaign, he asserted:

“For too long, we have lived with the "Vietnam Syndrome." Much of that syndrome has been created by the North Vietnamese aggressors who... over and over ... told us for nearly 10 years that we were the aggressors bent on imperialistic conquests. They had a plan. It was to win in the field of propaganda here in America what they

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http://www.alternet.org/story/86093/hollywood_is_becoming_the_pentagon's_mouthpiece_for_propaganda

¹² <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2009/expert-leonard-zeskind-reflects-white-nationalist-movement>

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could not win on the field of battle in Vietnam. As the years dragged on, we were told that peace would come if we would simply stop interfering and go home. It is time we recognized that ours was, in truth, a noble cause. A small country newly free from colonial rule sought our help in establishing self-rule and the means of self-defense against a totalitarian neighbor bent on conquest. We dishonor the memory of 50,000 young Americans who died in that cause when we give way to feelings of guilt as if we were doing something shameful... There is a lesson for all of us in Vietnam. If **we are forced to fight** [emphasis added], we must have the means and the determination to prevail or we will not have what it takes to secure the peace. And while we are at it, let us tell those who fought in that war that we will never again ask young men to fight and possibly die in a war our government is afraid to let them win.¹³

Who exactly had forced the US to fight in Vietnam? Claiming “our government [was] afraid to let [US soldiers] win was a strange accusation against those American leaders (Democrats and Republicans alike) that had put great energy into promoting the war. But these and other accusations would have legs because they served to excuse and immunize the military and, by implication, the American people, from feeling responsible for defeat. At its peak of the war, the US had 540,000 troops (plus another 100-200,000 supporting from outside Viet Nam) in a country slightly larger than Florida. As noted above, the bombing campaign exceeded that of all previous wars; and the massive use of dangerous pesticides became notorious. What more would have been required to win is left unexplored. Were the use of nuclear weapons being suggested or perhaps a wider war that might have resulted in World War III? And what exactly would victory have meant if we preclude the total destruction of Vietnam—which some extreme hawks advocated both during and after the war. Wars are generally fought for specific political purposes. They are not all-out street fights until no one is left standing. Of course, they are politically driven. The goal in Vietnam was presumably the survival of a pro-western South Vietnamese government. But US strategy was based on a contradiction that Reagan failed to address: the more outside intervention there was, the less indigenous and legitimate the South Vietnamese government, the more it appeared to be a puppet of the American outsiders.

For all of Reagan’s pro-soldier rhetoric, “his first act in office was to freeze hiring in the [Veterans] Readjustment Counseling Program. He soon moved to eliminate all Vietnam veteran outreach programs, including an employment-training program for disabled veterans.” This was in line with the positions of pro-war veteran groups, such as the American Legion and the VFW.¹⁴ More Vietnam veterans committed suicide due to psychological problems after the war by 1990 than those who had died during the fighting. At least three-quarters-of a million veterans become homeless or jobless.¹⁵ What mattered to Reagan was to reinvigorate America’s martial spirit and increase the defense budget, not providing actual help for veterans. Reagan’s administration revived the B-1 bomber program, which had been canceled by the Carter Administration, and began production of the MX Peacekeeper missile. He approved NATO’s deployment of the Pershing II missile in West Germany. He provided both legal and illegal support for the contras in their war against the Sandinista in Nicaragua, as well as for the repressive regime in El

¹³ <http://reagan.wingslikeaneagle.com/8.18.80.html>

¹⁴ D. Michael Shafer, “The Vietnam Combat Experience: The Human Legacy,” in *The Legacy: The Vietnam War in the American Imagination* (Boston: Beacon, 1992), 97, quote in Marciano¹⁴⁰

¹⁵ <http://thevietnamwar.info/vietnam-syndrome/>

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Salvador. By the end of his Presidency, he had expanded the U.S. military budget to a staggering 43% increase over the total expenditure during the height of the Vietnam War. That meant the increase of tens of thousands of troops, more weapons and equipment, not to mention a beefed-up intelligence program.

Reclaiming the war as a noble cause allowed a lifeline to those more critical of it than Reagan. Yes, too many innocents had died, but the US had meant well before it got stuck in a “quagmire” and realities took us astray. The Washington Post had already articulated this viewpoint in its editorial as Saigon fell: “if much of the actual conduct of the Vietnam policy was wrong and misguided—even tragic—it cannot be denied that some part of the purpose of that policy was right and defensible ... the hope that the people of South Vietnam would be able to decide their own form of government and social order... how good impulses can be translated into bad policy.”¹⁶ Even when the US makes a mess, its honorable intentions must be applauded. The actual historical record shows little to demonstrate these good intentions: from the subversion of the 1954 Geneva Accords to the US role in numerous coups. Nor did its strategy and tactics show much concern for the lives of Vietnamese civilians.¹⁷

Reagan’s iconic *Morning in America* 1984 campaign ad (along with the subsequent *America is Back*) was successful in shifting the American mood. Its cheery manipulation of traditional American symbols effectively communicated the message that after a generation of social tumult, riots, scandal, and an unpopular war, Reagan had returned the United States to the tranquility of the 1950s, the Garden of Eden of American political sentimentality. He thereby became a hero for the Republican Party, who even Barack Obama has saluted as a game-changer.¹⁸

Overcoming the so-called Vietnam syndrome became not just a Reaganite theme. At first Reagan’s successor, George Bush (Bush I) echoed Gerald Ford’s plea for historical amnesia in his inaugural: “The final lesson is that no great nation can long afford to be sundered by a memory.” But the war still lurked beneath the surface, an ongoing sore point. In the flush of victory in the one-sided first Persian Gulf War (Operation Desert Storm), Bush could hardly contain himself when he more confidently exclaimed in March 1991: “It’s a proud day for America. And by God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all.”¹⁹

The Reagan era into the 1990s also featured the flowering of right-wing intellectuals. Having witnessed the influential role of intellectuals in opposing the war, right wing funders built up or started new foundations, including the American Enterprise Institute, the Manhattan Institute, the Center for Security Policy, Foreign Policy Institute, and the Project for the New American Century (now the Foreign Policy initiative). Generally speaking, all these are supportive of a Reaganite, aggressive foreign policy and a unique role for the United States. Many of the leading figures in these groups (Richard Perle, Robert Kagan, Paul Wolfowitz, Alexander Haig, Dick Cheney) became advisors to a succession of

¹⁶ (Washington Post, April 30, 1975, quoted in Marilyn Young’s “Epilog” in in Marvin E. Gettleman, Jane Franklin, Marilyn B. Young, H. Bruce Franklin, *Vietnam and America: A Documented History* (NY: Grove Press, 1995). p. 516.

¹⁷ Nick Turse. (2013.) *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam*. New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt and Co.

¹⁸ <http://www.nytimes.com/ref/us/politics/21seelye-text.html>

¹⁹ <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=19351>

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Republican Presidents. Dick Cheney, for one, has become a strong Trump supporter, and he is Mike Pence's role model for the Vice-Presidency.²⁰

For all of Reagan's and Bush I's bluster about having buried the Vietnam syndrome, conservative pragmatists such as Reagan's Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger²¹ and General Colin Powell (chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under Bush I called for a more cautious approach to the use of American troops, including calls for a viable exit strategy, clear and limited goals, support from the American people and from the rest of the world). A doctrine of low-intensity warfare aimed to pursue American imperial aims in Central America and the Middle East with little risk to American lives. These doctrines were the military's considered response to the Vietnam debacle. The second Bush's (W) doctrine²² repudiated this caution by touting an unrivaled military supremacy, legitimizing preemptive war, and arrogating to itself the right to act unilaterally. Trump's response to the foundering of W's doctrine in the Iraqi desert has been to criticize the Iraq war, but to coopt the rhetoric of military supremacy and unilateral capacity in his own name. In a nation that beset by "war and destruction abroad," "I am your voice. I alone can fix it. I will restore law and order."²³ Only a great and powerful political outsider is capable of making America great again.

Democrats, too, have indulged in language that celebrated the uniqueness of America, which legitimized its aggressive role in the world. Bill Clinton's Secretary of State Madeline Albright asserted her version of America's reinvigorated role: "But if we have to use force, it is because we are America; we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future, and we see the danger here to all of us."²⁴ Under Obama, as well as W, Vietnam-era counter-insurgency was re-introduced with a new twist, a la General Petraeus.

In the 2016 campaign Barack Obama tried to counter Trump's message by proclaiming, "America is already great. America is already strong."²⁵ He earlier, in part to undercut Republican accusations of his un-Americanism, had asserted, "I believe in American exceptionalism with every fiber of my being."²⁶ But as the election demonstrated, the Democratic attempt to coopt a Reaganite message failed. Obama tried to promote an inclusive exceptionalism to include, say, civil rights activists and those who fought at the Stonewall for gay rights. This proved not as compelling as Trump's message that America needs to be exceptionally tough; and while his negative picture of American life was thought to contradict Reagan's morning in America rhetoric; in fact it was more in accord with Reagan's muscular unilateralism and resonated to Americans more than Obama's careful multilateralism. Note Trump's critique of American exceptionalism:

²⁰ <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/mike-pence-role-model-vice-president-dick-cheney/story?id=42170897>

²¹ <http://www.indepthinfo.com/articles/weinberger-doctrine.htm>

²² <http://www.peace.ca/bushdoctrine.htm>

²³ <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/07/full-transcript-donald-trump-nomination-acceptance-speech-at-rnc-225974>

²⁴ NBC's *Today Show* (February 19, 1998)

²⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jul/28/obama-hillary-clinton-convention-speech-trump>

²⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jul/28/obama-hillary-clinton-convention-speech-trump>

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I don't like the term. I'll be honest with you. People say, "Oh he's not patriotic." Look, if I'm a Russian, or I'm a German, or I'm a person we do business with, why, you know, I don't think it's a very nice term. We're exceptional; you're not. First of all, Germany is eating our lunch. So they say, "Why are you exceptional. We're doing a lot better than you." I never liked the term. And perhaps that's because I don't have a very big ego and I don't need terms like that. Honestly. When you're doing business—I watch Obama every once in a while saying "American exceptionalism," it's [Trump makes a face]. I don't like the term. Because we're dealing—First of all, I want to take everything back from the world that we've given them. We've given them so much. On top of taking it back, I don't want to say, "We're exceptional. We're more exceptional." Because essentially we're saying we're more outstanding than you. "By the way, you've been eating our lunch for the last 20 years, but we're more exceptional than you." I don't like the term. I never liked it. When I see these politicians get up [and say], "the American exceptionalism"—we're dying. We owe 18 trillion in debt. I'd like to make us exceptional. And I'd like to talk later instead of now. Does that make any sense? Because I think you're insulting the world. And you know, Jim, if you're German, or you're from Japan, or you're from China, you don't want to have people saying that. I never liked the expression. And I see a lot of good patriots get up and talk about Amer—[sic] you can think it, but I don't think we should say it. We may have a chance to say it in the not-too-distant future. But even then, I wouldn't say it because when I take back the jobs, and when I take back all that money and we get all our stuff, I'm not going to rub it in. Let's not rub it in. Let's not rub it in. But I never liked that term.²⁷

The bottom line had moved over the years from using 'dog whistles' to stoke fears and, in Reagan's case, to then cheering up the fearful; to now openly and blatantly fomenting and exploiting their fears; 'dog whistle' code replaced by forthright attacks on racial groups and women. Being negative about America could be effective if put forward by a muscular leader, a self-proclaimed winner. What Trump shares with Reagan was not an avuncular personality, but the ability to project manly toughness to protect America—along with a perceived ability to call out others' political BS. Hillary Clinton, too, was ineffective in painting Trump as un-American because he demurred from ideas of American exceptionalism and was too negative about the state of the country. As a patriotic slogan, *Stronger Together* could not measure up to *Make America Great Again*. (It should be noted that the 2016 Republican platform does contain a ringing endorsement of American exceptionalism. Here as elsewhere Trump departed from the Republican playbook).

Moving on to our second point, we can be sure that the rehabilitation of American pride worked hand in hand with other right-inspired initiatives.

²⁷ (<http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/06/donald-trump-american-exceptionalism>)