2. The "stab in the back" and anti-state patriotism

> British general Sir Neill Malcolm. Malcolm asked Ludendorff why it was that he thought Germany lost [World War I]. Ludendorff replied with his list of excuses, including that the home front failed the army.
> Malcolm asked him: "Do you mean, General, that you were stabbed in the back?" Ludendorff's eyes lit up and he leapt upon the phrase like a dog on a bone. "Stabbed in the back?" he repeated. "Yes, that's it, exactly, we were stabbed in the back". And thus was born a legend which has never entirely perished.[1]

Restoring patriotic American pride required coming up with a face-saving explanation for failure in Vietnam so as to keep intact the reputation of the military, as well as to restore a powerful self-image. The conservative movement had long cultivated a distrust of the state dating back to the pre-Civil War nullification proslavery movement and more recently reinforced by decisions of the Warren Court desegregating the schools and banning school prayer. But distrust of the state was also exacerbated by the exposure of government misinformation and lies by the antiwar movement. As the antiwar movement had largely demobilized after the war, the emboldened right was better positioned to take advantage of general distrust of the government. In his speech at the VFW, quoted in Point 1, Reagan resuscitated a complaint that right-wingers had maintained throughout the war: politicians prevented the US from winning the war. Reagan blamed both the squishy soft Democrats and the Nixon/Kissinger strategy of détente. Détente signified a dangerous retreat from the holy war against the Communists and a humiliating acknowledgment of American weakness. Reagan's bellicose words, belying a cautious foreign policy in practice, seemed to pay off with the collapse of the Soviet Union just a couple of years after he left office.

In urging support for the first Gulf War, George H. W. Bush made good on Reagan's promise of unleashing the military: "with the greatest degree of protection possible for American and allied service men and women. I've told the American people before that this will not be another Vietnam, and I repeat this here tonight. Our troops will have the best possible support in the entire world, and they will not be asked to fight with one hand tied behind their back."[2]

This resentment and disparagement of establishment political leaders of both parties form the right was evident not just in Reagan's words, but more glaringly in the vituperations of the new right culture that began to flourish in the Reagan era and beyond. We have already cited the acolytes of *The Turner Diaries* and the growth of the Christian Identity movement in Point 1. These helped inspire a militia movement to police the borders and attack the 'un-American *other*', as well as institutions of the federal government. Eventually the right developed a sophisticated media strategy including talk radio, FOX News, Breitbart News and numerous sites on the web, which brought greater outreach. For many Americans, with the decline of traditional media, these became the main sources of news and analysis. The appropriation of patriotic symbols by the Minutemen and, more successfully, the Tea Party also signaled entrée into mainstream America.

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[1] *Wheeler-Bennett, John W. (Spring 1938). "Ludendorff: The Soldier and the Politician". Virginia Quarterly Review. 14 (2): 187–202.*)

[2] (http://www.historyplace.com/speeches/bush-war.htm

As the New Right movement targeted the establishment, it maintained its attacks on anti-establishment forces on the Left who had gained initiative in the 1960s. The antiwar movement had been vilified throughout the war. Pro-war hawks accused war opponents of being, if not Communists, tools of the Communists, cowards, and a source of troop demoralization. A new twist was added or rather expanded. Stories began to circulate that the antiwar movement not only had opposed the war, but also had spat on soldiers on their way home from the battlefields of Vietnam. Despite the proliferation of stories, in fact, no instance of antiwar activists attacking returning soldiers had been documented during the war, as Jerry Lembcke has demonstrated.[3] No newspaper report or photograph of an antiwar protestor spitting on a Vietnam veteran has been shown to exist, in spite of the ubiquity of Pentax cameras and free photo processing for members of the military; nor is there any record of anyone doing so in any police reports of the Special Committee on Demonstration Observation, and there are no records of anyone ever being arrested or prosecuted for assault for doing so in the files of the Bar Association. The only documented instances, instead, showed hawks abusing anti-war veterans or soldiers. The mythology aimed to demonstrate that privileged antiwar students, often women, had expressed their class disdain for working class soldiers by spitting on them. These rumors functioned to contradict the reality of the GI coffee house movement as well as many other efforts to support dissenting GIs by the antiwar movement.

More crucially the mythology completely erased the unique and widespread opposition to the war inside the military. Col. Robert D. Heinl wrote in 1971 in the *Armed Forces Journal* that "by every conceivable indicator our army that now remains in Vietnam is in a state approaching collapse, with individual units having refused combat, murdering their officers and non-commissioned officers, drug-ridden, and dispirited when not near-mutinous."[4] There were more than 300 antiwar underground newspapers circulated among GIs and over half–a-million reported incidents of desertion (503,926 to be exact).[5] Fraggings of officers (by fragmentation grenades) rose from 126 in 1969 to 333 in 1971. "An army-commissioned survey of troops on five major US military bases in 1970-71 found that 47 percent admitted to acts of dissent or disobedience.[6] In early 1971 Vietnam Veterans Against the War organized the Winter Soldier Investigation of war crimes and atrocities with 116 veterans testifying in Detroit. That spring, during Operation Dewey Canyon III veterans threw away 700 medals at the Capitol Building. The resistance of antiwar active duty GIs and veterans was unprecedented. Today most Americans are unaware of this powerful movement, but are sure that spoiled antiwar protestors spat upon returning GIs. The master narrative has not permitted acknowledgment that soldiers and veterans, not just draft dodgers, were key and effective parts of the antiwar movement.

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[3] *The Spitting Image*; Lembcke, Jerry; New York University Press; 1998

[4] https://msuweb.montclair.edu/~furrg/Vietnam/heinl.html

[5] 5An estimate of the US Department of Defense; see http://books.google.com/books?id=_Rzy_yNMKbcC&pg=PA212&lpg=PA212&dq=desertion+503,926&source=bl&ots=hOFO9rsb1B&sig=KX4JXAvwn2xw4eGFR_nfsKtB36k&hl=en&sa=X&ei=V15sUfv5KaXYyQG9gYGABg&ved=0CDEQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=desertion%20503%2C926&f=false

6See http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/2343923 or http://rense.com/general77/hdtage.htm or http://winoverptsd.com/wp/category/disturbing-facts-about-vietnam-veterans/or for estimates from low to high.

[6] Christian G. Appy, (2015) *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity*, Viking Press, p. 212.

In the early postwar period, the narrative did allow for the image of the deranged Vietnam veteran. Hollywood embraced this theme early on with movies too numerous to list exhaustively, but include *Targets* (1968), *The Ravager* (1970), *Stanley* (1972), *To Kill a Clown* (1972), *Deathdream* (1974), *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Rolling Thunder* (1977, *The Exterminator* (1980), *Fleshburn* (1984), and *Combat Shock* (1986). While the war certainly had a deleterious effect on many soldiers, manifested in PTSD and a high number of suicides,[7] these movies did not result in increased treatment for veterans. They did serve to undermine any critical experience of the war expressed by veterans. That the war drove soldiers crazy somehow represented, in funhouse distortion, a way for the public to assimilate the war; or was it that our 'boys' had become infected with an Oriental virus? These unhinged veterans are not entirely distinct from the Rambo-like warriors who, as we shall see, Hollywood came to make into heroes.

The early postwar period also featured the demonization of Jane Fonda as a traitor. Though her FTA (Free of F… the Army) tour had been extremely popular among GIs and her infamous posing on a North Vietnamese tank took place quite late in the war (1972), the right had turned her into a symbol of the antiwar movement's supposedly treasonous behavior. The notion that the anti-Vietnam war movement had been anti-soldier became accepted even by the anti-war movements of the next generation.

Even before the war in Vietnam ended, Nixon had begun an unprecedented effort to make heroes of American POWs and MIAs. This was the initial effort to transform Americans from outside aggressors to victims of the war. As Jonathan Schell once noted, that getting POWs home and accounting for MIAs (traditionally accomplished at the cessation of hostilities) became the public rationale for carrying on a war which was sure to generate more of both. The POW/MIA myth initiated by Nixon (and Ross Perot) was buttressed by all Presidents who succeeded Nixon. But for those on the ultra-right, the fact that no POWs or live MIAs have ever been found since the war ended served as proof of he hypocrisy and duplicity of the federal government. The lack of evidence for the claims of the POW/MIA movement has been demonstrated over and over again by numerous Congressional and other investigations. To quote one retired Army colonel:

> All U.S. POWs captured during the Vietnam War were released, either at Operation Homecoming (spring, 1973) or earlier. The only men captured and not released are 113 who died in captivity; their identities and the circumstances of their deaths are known; some of their remains have been recovered/returned.
> No U. S. prisoners of war have been abandoned by the U. S. government.
> No U.S POWs remained in captivity after the conclusion of Operation Homecoming.
> There is no conspiracy within the U. S. government to conceal the abandonment of prisoners of war (who were not abandoned in the first place).
> No U.S. POWs from Indochina were taken to the Soviet Union, China, or any other third country.
> The U.S. government has been -- since well before the end of the Vietnam War -- exerting all possible efforts to recover or account for missing men. That effort continues today and is unprecedented in the history of warfare.[8]

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[7] http://www.brianwillson.com/memorandum-accelerated-mortality-rates-of-vietnam-veterans/
[8] http://www.miafacts.org/

Antiwar activist and scholar H. Bruce Franklin[9] has explicated the political purposes of this mythology as well as the facts of the matter:
Here are statistics from his book and other sources:

US	Total Deployed in theater In theater (not all combat)	POWs	MIAs	Total Deaths
WW I:	4,734,991	4,120		116.516
WW II:	16,112,566	130,201	30,314	405,399
		124,079 (estimates vary)		
Korea:	1,789,000	7,140	8,025	36,516
Vietnam:	3,403,000	725	800	58,209
		766	1,719 (estimates vary)	

What stands out here, despite the imprecision of some figures, is the relatively small number of MIAs compared to other wars (including Korea, a shorter war with fewer troops deployed and fewer killed). On the other hand, the Vietnamese government claims 300,000 Vietnamese MIAs.

The POW/MIA myth lived on in the movies and on TV. First came Chuck Norris's 1978 *Good Guys Wear Black*, which featured a cynical U.S. government writing off MIAs on a phony mission. 1983's *Uncommon Valor*, starring Gene Hackman and Norris again in 1984 with *Missing in Action* had similar approaches. The most successful movie, was, of course Sylvester Stallone's *Rambo: First Blood Part II* in 1985, which did the most to popularize the idea that American POWs had been left behind after the war and that the government had no real interest in their rescue. Rambo was a haunted Vietnam veteran commando. At one point, realizing he was betrayed by the U.S. government and under torture from the Vietnamese and their Soviet allies, Rambo is put into radio communication with the officer who ordered the mission and tells him, "Murdoch. I'm coming to get *you*!" Rambo and the Norris films were commercially successful in both the United States and in parts of Southeast Asia. *Rambo* was followed by Norris's 1985 prequel *Missing in Action 2: The Beginning*, as well as other films such as *P.O.W. The Escape* (1986) and *Dog Tags* (1990). The Vietnam war POW/MIA theme was also part of some television series. The long-running series *Magnum, P.I.* included multiple episodes in the1980s whose theme was the possibility of American POWs remaining in Vietnam. The 1997 *The X-Files* episode "Unrequited" also trafficked in the myth. POW/MIAs were also part of a key story line in the series *JAG* in the late 1990s where the father of a central character had been an MIA in Vietnam.

Outside of the media, numerous efforts were made to find MIAs or rescue POWS, all to no avail. Retired Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Jack Bailey created Operation Rescue, which featured a former smuggling boat named *Akuna III*. Bailey never produced any prisoners

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[9] See H. Bruce Franklin, *M.I.A. or Mythmaking in America*, New York: Lawrence Hill and Co., 1992. Revised and expanded paperback edition, New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1993 and
AMERICAN PRISONERS OF WAR (POWs) AND MISSING IN ACTION (MIAs); Office of the Assistant Secretary for Policy, Planning, and Preparedness (OPP&P); April, 2006 (http://www.gmasw.com/pow_list.htm);
https://www.va.gov/opa/publications/factsheets/fs_americas_wars.pdf

and the boat spent years docked in Songkhla, Thailand, but the effort proved successful at bringing in money through the Virginia-based Eberle Associates direct mail marketing firm.

During the 1980s, former United States Army Special Forces member Bo Gritz undertook a series of highly publicized trips into Southeast Asia, purportedly to locate American POWs. One such mission in 1982 was to free POWs reported to be in Laos; Gritz led 15 Laotians and 3 Americans, but they were ambushed shortly after crossing the border from Vietnam to Laos and the mission failed. Gritz later ran for President on the Populist Party (United States) ticket in 1992. A vocal advocate for the re-institution of racial segregation, Gritz ran in 1992 under the slogan: "God, Guns and Gritz," and published an isolationist political manifesto entitled "The Bill of Gritz", which called for the complete closing of the border with Mexico, abolishing the federal income tax, the dissolution of the Federal Reserve, opposition to "global government" and "The New World Order", ending all foreign aid, and abolishing the federal income tax.

Also in the 1980s, Scott Barnes, claimed he had seen an American POW in Cambodia. He caused significant dissension among POW/MIA activists, especially once he claimed that he had seen more American POWs in Laos but had been ordered by the Central Intelligence Agency to assassinate them. Barnes later became a controversial figure within Ross Perot's 1992 presidential campaign.

POWs had become heroes and the POW/MIA flag an American icon:

> In 1982 it became the only flag, other than the Stars and Stripes, to fly over the White House, after it was first displayed there on POW/MIA Recognition Day. In 1989 the flag was installed in the Capitol Rotunda …[followed by] a 1990 law to recognize the POW/MIA flag and designate the third Friday of September as National POW/MIA Recognition Day. In 1998, Section 1082 of the Defense Authorization Act—codified as Title 36, Section 902 of the U.S. Code—mandated that the POW/MIA flag be flown over the Capitol, the White House, the Korean and Vietnam Veterans Memorials, the offices of the Secretaries of State, Defense and Veterans Affairs, of the Selective Service System, and on the grounds or in the lobbies of every major military installation, every post office and all VA Medical Centers and national cemeteries on six days: POW/MIA Recognition Day, Armed Forces Day, Memorial Day, Flag Day, Fourth of July, and Veterans Day.
> Since then, some states have passed laws that also mandate flying the POW/MIA flag. Oregon, for example, requires that the POW/MIA flag be flown on or near the state capitol on the same holidays as the national law. In Washington, a 2002 law requires every state agency, every state institution of higher education, and every county, city and town to display the flag on the same six holidays. Florida requires the flag at state parks year round. Arizona enacted a law requiring the POW/MIA flag to be flown over every town and city hall, Superior Court building and county office on the designated holidays. And in 2011, Idaho became the first state to require that the POW/MIA flag be flown over all state buildings, 24 hours a day, seven days a week "or until such time as all our unaccounted for and missing members of the Armed Forces return.[10]

[10] http://www.historynet.com/the-story-of-the-powmia-flag.htm)

Most mainstream commentators predicted that Donald Trump's campaign was done for after he attacked former POW John McCain as a "loser" for having been captured. What they missed was how this appealed to his right-wing base--long suspicious of McCain, who supposedly betrayed his country in the POW camp, and who had become a vocal opponent of the use of torture--and how little it mattered to anyone else. Trump exposed the hollowness of the POW hero story. Trumpism aims to replace the shame-imbued mythology of the POW with the hyperbolic symbology of the winner who will banish the memory of losers. They've been fired.

The flag remains a symbol for all Americans lost at war, but its origin story is intimately connected with efforts to newly demonize the Vietnamese enemy. As we have noted, the Nixon Administration created the POW/MIA issue as a rationale for the war when other rationales had been delegitimized. After the war, besides families concerned about the fate of loved ones the POW/MIA issue served not only as a retroactive justification of the war, but to demonstrate the extreme barbarity of a nation who would continue to hold and torture prisoners after the end of hostilities. And then it became a rhetorical litmus test for politicians and simultaneously a means of attacking them. The establishment was so craven that it sacrificed American lives to the barbarous Vietnamese. The betrayal continued after the war. While Trump disparages some POWs and Muslim veterans, he elevates to new heights the accusation that American political elites have betrayed the American people, and embellishes the mythology of the outsider, savior hero—in his incarnation, less muscular, but equally plainspoken, if not always coherent.

Richard M. Hunt has argued that the 'stab-in-the-back" myth commanded the force of irrefutable emotional convictions for millions of Germans. Behind these myths was a sense of communal shame, not for causing the war, but for losing it. It was not the guilt of wickedness, but the shame of weakness that seized Germany, and "served as a solvent of the Weimar (the regime that preceded the Nazis) democracy and also as an ideological cement of Hitler's dictatorship"[11] Much the same can be said for those on the right in the wake of defeat in Vietnam. For the left and much of America the shame was in fighting the war, for the right, the shame in losing it. Having been brought up on the notion that America's strength in war was proof of its ethical superiority, defeat also undercut American claims of moral exceptionalism. America needed to be redeemed by a new class of warriors not tainted by association with a corrupt system.

[11] Hunt, Richard M. (1958) "Myths, Guilt and Shame in Pre-Nazi Germany", *Virginia Quarterly Review*. 34, pp. 35-71.