

“Is That You, John Wayne?” Clarity, Resolution and Narrative in *A Rumor of War*

Taras A. Sak

The scene is a familiar one. A young man, as yet unsure of himself, sits in a dim auditorium, surrounded by his classmates, and waits to be addressed by a pair of military recruiters. All his life, he had fantasized about becoming a soldier and going to war, to test his “manhood,” to “serve his country” and to live up to his parents’ expectations. He had thrilled to the exploits of various Hollywood action heroes. On the weekends, he had run out into the woods with his friends and “played war.” So, when the Marine Corps recruiters finally appear, marching down the aisle in crisp uniforms and immaculately polished shoes, the boy’s heart skips a beat.

As he describes this exact moment in his acclaimed memoir *Born on the Fourth of July*, Ron Kovic writes, “It was like all the movies and all the books and all the dreams of becoming a hero come true.” At the end of the presentation, Kovic got up and walked down the aisle to meet the recruiters. “As I shook their hands and stared up into their eyes,” he wrote, “I couldn’t help but feel I was shaking hands with John Wayne and Audie Murphy. They told us that day that the Marine Corps built men—body, mind and spirit. And that we could serve our country like the young president [Kennedy] had asked us to do.”

Kovic signed up. After all, he had just been handed a veritable “map to manhood.” Yet, when the Marine Corps sent him to Vietnam, he suffered a profound disillusionment. As a child, he had imagined battlefields where he could test himself and live up to the example of heroic forebears. What he experienced instead was chaos, frustration and disorientation. During his tour of duty, Kovic saw his unit fire upon a

group of children that they thought were enemy combatants, and he himself accidentally shot a fellow American soldier.

“He’d never figured it would ever happen this way,” Kovic explains, eerily—and significantly—describing himself in the third person, almost as if at a distance or as speaking of a character in a film. “It never did in the movies. There were always the good guys and the bad guys and each of them killed the other.” On Kovic’s final afternoon in combat, a bullet entered his shoulder, made its way through his lung, and wound up severing his spinal cord. “All I could feel,” he later wrote, “was the worthlessness of dying right here at this moment for nothing.”¹

I would like to invoke Kovic’s tragic story to enter into an examination of Philip Caputo’s deeply troubling memoir of Vietnam, *A Rumor of War*, possibly the most famous and widely taught example of the genre. My intention is to focus upon how that very sense of clarity and resolution, which is stressed by Caputo—and emphasized in literary theorist William V. Spanos’ reading of the text—necessarily ends in an Ahabian monomania that easily, perhaps necessarily, turns murderous when confronted with an “enemy” that is invisible or spectral—in other words, one that refuses to be answerable to the American narrative, most recently epitomized by George W. Bush’s “Strategy for Victory” in Iraq, firmly grounded as it is in the European, metaphysical tradition. We have already seen how this narrative *begins*, so in the course of the following essay I would like to chart a course to its dreadful *end*, through the transformation that Caputo undergoes during his time in what he resonantly refers to as “Indian Country,” by following Spanos’ reading of *A Rumor of War* and closely examining four of what he calls “threshold moments” in the text, before finally connecting this to the current bloody quagmire in Iraq.

¹ Quoted and adapted from Turner’s summary of Kovic’s memoir in *Echoes of Combat*, 143-144.

Clarity, resolution, as well as a sense of narrative progression (by which I mean, among other things, coming to some sort of “end”), all combine to create a discursive formation that is repeatedly stressed throughout Caputo’s memoir, almost as a refrain, but first and most tellingly in the recruitment materials and imagery of the military (the promise that recruits will develop a clarity of vision, a sense of purpose, and be turned into “men,” if they enlist), and as Spanos’ reading demonstrates, this discursive formation lies at the heart of metaphysical thinking and the Imperialism that it enables—be it Roman, European or American.

However, following Spanos (and as Caputo’s memoir bears witness, if only unconsciously or symptomatically), we could say that this discursive formation is quickly and decisively deligitimized in the face of that which it would deny or annul, that which it cannot think—namely, what Spanos calls the “spectral Other,” epitomized by the tactics of guerilla warfare. This deligitimization greatly contributed to the murderous violence that Caputo orders his men to commit, which he blames on either the terrain and people of Vietnam or on the nature of “war” itself, and we must see it as a reflection of the American conduct of the war more generally—the proverbial “can of worms” (323) that he is warned not to open during his trial for murder—and understand it in all of its complexity.

In the third chapter of *America’s Shadow*, entitled “Vietnam and the *Pax Americana*,” and after charting how the dominant culture via its intellectual deputies and cultural apparatus—most notably the Hollywood film industry—re-presented the tragedy of the American war in Vietnam through what he terms “a process of remembering that, in fact, has been a willful forgetting” (133)—in other words, a “recuperative national project” (Ibid.) or “re-narrativization” (141) of the war that reaches its culmination in the so-called “surgically executed ‘victory’” of the first Gulf War, thereby enabling then-president George H.W. Bush to declare that “we’ve kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all”—Spanos symptomatically reads Caputo’s memoir as an exemplary case of

the “complicity between the ontology of presence and[...] centering violence” (161) that attends a metaphysical orientation toward Being. Spanos employs the phrase “ontology of presence” in the manner of Martin Heidegger, and in some ways as Jacques Derrida has used the neologism “Logocentrism,” seen in this view as the metaphysical basis of so-called “Western philosophy.” The “spectral Other,” in this case the Vietnamese guerilla soldier, is precisely that “absence” that such a worldview cannot understand—more precisely, it is that which this “ontology of presence” cannot *grasp*. As in Herman Melville’s classic, *Moby-Dick*, this un-graspable phantom creates a sense of panic for the Logocentric orientation toward Being—with Captain Ahab’s prototypical “centering violence” being the desperate, yet futile, attempt to view, name, grasp and control, ultimately to destroy, the “spectral Other” (the white whale, in Ahab’s case). Caputo’s memoir is, as Spanos phrases it, “a retrospective meditation on the always and increasingly dislocating evanescence of the enemy—and the consequent ‘irresistible compulsion to *do something*,’” which, as we learn after reading Caputo’s harrowing text, “culminates in a [complex and rather distorted] recollection of his fateful decision to order the cold-blooded execution of two young Vietnamese boys suspected of being Vietcong” (Ibid., emphasis added).

Spanos locates in this climactic sequence of Caputo’s narrative an allotrope for the larger American project in Southeast Asia—what he describes elsewhere through recourse to that infamous, resonant quote concerning “hav[ing] to destroy” Vietnam “in order to save it”—by following Caputo’s “symptomatic[...] resist[ance] to the reductive charge of murder leveled at him by the Marine Command in its characteristically cynical effort to exonerate itself (and ‘America’) of culpability.” “But,” Spanos quickly points out, “like virtually all of the testimony of those ‘eye-witnesses’ who fought the war, [Caputo] fails to conceptualize adequately the necessarily analogical relation between the logic informing his private act and that intrinsic to the United States’s public practice. Instead, he attributes his temporary aberration to the dehumanizing effects of ‘the war,’ whereas

his text at large,” as Spanos argues, “points to the absolute complicity between his *American* (anthropo)logic and the culminating act of violence” (162)—which he himself describes as being precipitated by a “focusing,” or rather “more than [a] focus[ing],” but a “fix[ing] on” the targets of his wrath “like a heat seeking missile.”

Spanos contrasts Caputo with Herman Melville, who, unlike Caputo, neither “fails[...] to perceive” nor “resists acknowledging” that this logic [that is driving Ahab in Melville’s narrative and both Caputo, in his personal act of “retaliation,” as well as the larger American conduct of the war, by association] is, in fact, “the logic of the culture he represents;” more specifically, unlike Caputo, Melville is fully aware of how this “reifying logic is [in fact] one that finally and inexorably manifests itself in an obsessed ‘focus’ and ‘fixing,’ a ‘monomaniacal’ reification[...] of the omnipresent uncanny force of the spectral Other” to which Ahab affixes a name—“Moby Dick”—in order to render it “practically assailable.” As we know from reading Melville’s epic, Ahab then proceeds to “burst his hot heart’s shell upon” his nemesis, “Moby Dick,” sailing headlong to his doom, as well as to the destruction of his ship and entire crew—except for the “errant” Ishmael, who alone survives to tell the tale.

What I would like to accomplish in what follows is to “unpack” this rather dense passage from *America’s Shadow*, by reading a later essay by Spanos, entitled “*A Rumor of War: 9/11 and the Forgetting of the Vietnam War*,”² and attempting to follow this analysis in my own reading of four “threshold moments” in Caputo’s narrative that help us understand exactly how the murderous act was committed and what bearing it might have on our present occasion, as we attempt to grapple with whatever lessons the Vietnam tragedy can offer those who care to examine them.

In a close reading of Caputo’s narrative, which constitutes the heart of the essay, Spanos points out how the author “begins [his tale] by declaring that he enlisted in the

² *boundary 2*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (Fall 2003): 29-66.

Marine Corps partly because he ‘got swept up in the patriotic tide of the Kennedy era,’” which, he later recalls, the young president aptly christened “the New Frontier” (35). Caputo calls himself a “restless boy caught between suburban boredom and rural desolation” who would often “dream of that savage, heroic time” of the Indian Wars and the Old Frontier, wishing he had lived then, “before America became a land of salesmen and shopping centers” (Caputo 5): in short, he longed for “a chance to live heroically” (Ibid.) and “prove [his] manhood” (6), as he had been instructed by what the late Edward Said would term his “textual attitude,” largely made up of “Hollywood fantasies” (15). Throughout the first chapter, Caputo describes the reasons for his enlistment in ways remarkably similar to Kovic’s—and familiar to anyone who has studied the long history of the American mythology of the frontier and the backwoodsman, with its tropes of manliness, rugged self-reliance, heroic struggle, and what historian Richard Slotkin called “regenerative violence.”

After briefly discussing how the United States Marine is the contemporary allotrope of the colonial frontiersman, Spanos focuses upon Caputo’s description of the soldier in the recruiting poster, which emphasizes how “clear and resolute” the man’s eyes were. This leads to a brief but highly suggestive discussion of clarity and resoluteness, and their relation to “getting something done,” which I would like to focus upon here and quote at length:

“Clarity, the essential value of Western epistemology[...] implies a *charted field* of (super-) vision that is not impeded by diversionary obstacles but, rather, sees contradictions *as* obstacles to the decisive achievement of the end and thus to be accommodated or, if that is impossible, to be obliterated. Resoluteness implies not simply the decisive certainty of purpose but also the decisive certainty of the end to be accomplished. Together, they assume a disciplinary epistemology that spatializes temporal events before they occur—reduc[ing] their differential, errant, obscure, and menacing living force to a strategic map on which no detail is superfluous or unaccounted for to the calculative mind—and, crucial to Caputo’s text, they enable [the sense of] *getting something done*” (Spanos 37, emphasis in original).

Spanos then proceeds to discuss how Caputo’s vision and horizon of expectations are mediated by the image of the pragmatic, and paradigmatic, “American character,” first epitomized by the “path-breaking and civilization-rejuvenating frontiersman,” later by the problem-solving, “household Plato” Benjamin Franklin (as Melville describes him in his

satirical *Israel Potter*), and eventually by the “melodramatic Hollywood western and its World War II allotrope[...] symbolized by the ubiquitous mythological icon of the actor John Wayne”—a figure, as Spanos points out, that traverses all three of these major, symbolic phases of the Imaginary American past, as envisioned and re-presented by the Hollywood dream factory: the Frontier, as Davy Crockett in *The Alamo*; the “Wild West,” most notably in *Stagecoach* and *The Searchers*; WWII, most notably in *Sands of Iwo Jima*; and also Vietnam, most infamously in the Defense Department-sponsored *Green Berets*. I would like to return to this point later in this essay, when Caputo describes watching his own actions as if his “doubled” self were in a movie, particularly while this sense of dislocation and distanciation gathers momentum as the narrative speeds to its terrible climax and troubling “end.”

At any rate, this imagery, or this manner of seeing, and this expectation of what things would or *should* look like on the battlefield, which Caputo and countless others carried with them to Vietnam, so deeply inscribed in them even before they ever stepped foot on Vietnamese soil, very quickly proves false in the face of an “entirely unfamiliar” land and a spectral, “evanescent” enemy—particularly and decisively when he leads his first “search and destroy” mission in the jungle. During this nightmarish sequence, wherein he “encounters the tremendous difference between that part of [the] Vietnam[ese] [bush] seen from the Panoptic distance enabled by a microcosmic map—and the ‘hammer and anvil’ tactics based upon this spatializing vision—and the actualities of entering this[...] menacing jungle landscape” (38), Caputo reflects upon the folly of American Optimism and Confidence in the face of what even the native people simply refer to as “out there,” a “foreboding,” “hostile and utterly alien” (*Ibid.*) wilderness that Spanos reads symptomatically as an indirect allusion, on the part of Caputo, to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and, by association, to the “complicity of the American ethos with that of European imperialism,” which “belies the myth of American exceptionalism [vis-à-vis

the rapacious Imperialism of the French or the ‘Old World’] on which its intervention in Vietnam was based” (39) in the first place.

At this point, as Caputo journeys “out there,” he crosses a line—entering a literal *terra incognita*, a space like nothing he’s ever known (in its terrors) and yet, I would argue, one which is oddly familiar through the aforementioned mediation of countless tales and images of the wilderness in the frontier mythology upon which he was raised (as he phrases it: “impressions[...] based[...] on a boyhood diet of war movies and blood-and-guts novels”, 136)—that Spanos suggests is, in fact, marked by an experience of *das Unheimliche*, the Uncanny (being an uneasy commingling of the familiar and the strange), which in turn precipitates *Angst*, a feeling of generalized anxiety that has nothing (nothing) as its object, in which Caputo and his men feel ill-at-ease or “un-homed,” a sense of “not-being-at-home,” wherein they “can get no hold on things” (40), literally an *in-com-prehensible* experience that leads to a slippery, spectral and, at times, claustrophobic sense of being watched and surrounded by something invisible, something everywhere and yet nowhere. This, in turn, gets displaced, or rather *pro-jected*, onto the very land—“the land, the jungle, the sun” that seems to “resist” the invading army, as Caputo describes it (82; quoted in Spanos, 42), as well as onto the Vietnamese people, who cannot be broken down or classified into stable categories of “friend” or “foe,” combatant or civilian—and with tragic results.

This overriding sense of anxiety or *Angst* is coupled, according to Spanos, with a sense of the “dislocating inconclusiveness” of the mission itself, during which nothing is accomplished, nothing happens, “nothing gets done” (Ibid.), which further maddens Caputo and his comrades—as he records, and as Spanos emphasizes in his reading (which makes up the first of the four threshold moments in Caputo’s text, as I see them):

“There was no pattern to these patrols and operations. Without a front, flanks, or rear, we fought a formless war against a formless enemy who evaporated like the morning jungle mists, only to materialize in some unexpected place, it was a haphazard episodic sort of combat. Most of the time, nothing happened; but when something did, it happened instantaneously and without warning” (Caputo 89; quoted in Spanos, 42-43).

As Spanos points out, in “recounting this chaotic time, Caputo[...] cannot give the events a narrative sequence: ‘Because of the sporadic, confused nature of the fighting, it is impossible to give an orderly account of what we did. With one or two exceptions, I have only disjointed recollections of this period, the spring of 1965. The incidents I do remember, I remember vividly; but I can come up with no connecting thread to tie events neatly together’” (Caputo 90; quoted in Spanos, 43). This crucial sequence, which ends with Caputo informing his readers that “we [he and his platoon] are learning to hate,” reflecting upon how an incident of “retribution”—the laying waste of a village that foreshadows his own descent into murder—not only demonstrates how the clarity and resoluteness described above are rendered impossible in this setting, but also how “the linear narrative structure of consciousness informing this clear vision and decisive practice, European in origins, whose end, in privileging visual perception, is in its beginning” (Ibid.). This is also the place in Caputo’s narrative wherein he introduces the phrase “Indian Country” to describe the Vietnamese wilderness and, as Spanos makes clear, this “ironic reference” comes to haunt the pages that follow (see Caputo 102, 104, 126; quoted in Spanos, 43); likewise, and not incidentally, it is precisely the point in the narrative when Caputo explicitly states that “we [were now] starring in our very own war movie” (106).

The frustration precipitated by the inability to narrativize this anxiety-provoking ordeal makes Caputo yearn for “contact,” as well as for a conclusive, “set-piece battle” (Caputo 272-273; quoted in Spanos, 47), but also, and perhaps more fatefully, it serves to “transform[...] the victim of American aggression into the victimizer,” rendering the Vietnamese land and people “practically assailable” (to use Melville’s language), and, therefore, available as ready targets of revenge or retribution. This is given a deadly, if not genocidal, twist by the architects of the war (in the Pentagon), who measured this war of attrition’s “success” by the “performance” of US troops measured by the so-called “Kill ratio”—a ghastly benchmark that consisted of the proportion of the number of

Vietcong killed to the number of American troops killed (bearing in mind how “Vietcong” came to be roughly defined along the lines of “if it’s dead and it’s Vietnamese, it’s VC” [xx; repeated on 229])—and Spanos points out how Caputo’s next assignment, as “keeper of Colonel Wheeler’s [body count] scoreboard,” in this war now reduced to “a matter of arithmetic” (xix), is entirely in keeping with this logic.

Caputo alternately describes himself as “death’s bookkeeper” (159-160; quoted in Spanos, 49), and we should view what happens next as the second threshold moment in the narrative, when this new assignment leads to an “ill-defined and ominous sense of uncontrollable rage without outlet” (Ibid.). This happens when Caputo is forced to witness not only the escalating human cost of this once seemingly “splendid little war” but, most painfully and personally, when he learns of the death of his friend, First Lieutenant Levy (one of the men to whom Caputo dedicated the book), and is forced to “transmute [him] into [a] number” in this “random arithmetic of war.” It is at this point, this threshold moment, where Caputo begins to address Levy directly (223-224) in a desperate and poignant effort to “make sense” of his death: “I want to remember now, to remember what you said, you, Walter Neville Levy, whose ghost haunts me still[...]you were faithful. Your country is not[...]. We loved you for what you were and what you stood for.”

This is immediately followed by the now-familiar refrain that such a price might possibly be “tolerable[...] if the [various] operation[s] [and by association, the war itself] *had accomplished something*”, but they obviously, maddeningly, “had not” (Ibid., emphasis added). Caputo continues in this vein, describing “another side to the war, about which no songs were sung, no jokes made” (228), about how this particular type of combat, marked as it was by atrocity, cannot be captured in words, or rendered intelligible. The loss of Levy, which “personalizes” and “humanizes” the cost of war, throwing the “inhumanity” of Col. Wheeler’s obscene “scoreboard” into sharp relief, provokes a meditation in which Caputo attempts to rationalize his later murderous order

by distancing himself from the events and sequence of the actual narrative and providing a commentary on the conduct of the war in general:

“It was no orderly campaign, as in Europe, but a war for survival waged in a wilderness without rules or laws; a war in which each soldier fought for his own life and the lives of the men beside him, *not caring who he killed in that personal cause or how many or in what manner* and feeling only contempt for those who sought to impose on his savage struggle the mincing distinctions of civilized warfare—that code of battlefield ethics that attempted to humanize an essentially inhuman war[...]. In the patriotic fervor of the Kennedy years, we had asked, ‘What can we do for our country?’ and our country answered, ‘Kill VC.’ That was the strategy, the best our military minds could come up with: organized butchery. But organized or not, butchery was butchery, so who was to speak of rules and ethics in a war that had none?” (229-230; emphasis added).

Now that this second threshold moment in his text has therefore “personalized” the war, making it a personal matter of vengeance and retribution—words he repeats throughout the remainder of the text—Caputo is reassigned to a line company in what seems to him to be “a different war,” no longer “splendid,” but more ferocious, more cruel and—crucially—more absurd, if not absolutely futile, without any hope of tangible results. Caputo now feels an implacable need “to do something” as he speeds toward the third threshold moment in the narrative, which I locate in “[t]hat month that followed the attack on the Vu Gia valley” (312), itself “a bad dream” in this waking nightmare. Once again, and crucially, Caputo reverts to cinematic prose and metaphors, as he grapples with the “fragmentary scenes that flicker on [his] mental screen like excerpts from a film” in a similar fashion to how he attempted to order and narrate the course of events following his initial encounter with the Uncanny and anxiety-provoking *terra incognita* of the Vietnamese jungle—in other words, he struggles to take up a Panoptic perspective on the all-too-immediate, “personal” and proximate events that are assaulting and overwhelming his conceptual framework. As Caputo describes it:

“I can recall only snatches of that time[...] There is a shot of the company marching[...] Click. The next scene. A crazy, running fire-fight[...] Click. The next scenes take place[...] near Danang[...] shots of patrols[...] The soundtrack is monotonous[...] Click. There is one piece of time-lapse footage, but instead of showing flowers blooming, it shows our company slowly dissolving[...] with each frame[...] Click. [Another] shot of my platoon[...] Click. There is a scene of PFC Arnett, who has been hit by a mine[...] Other episodes reflect *what the war has done to us*” (312-313; emphasis added).

This leads, as the last sentence quoted above bears witness, to a sense of victimization, *Angst*, “psychic doubling” or “splitting of the Self,” and a fear for his

sanity in all of this—as he puts it, “a feeling of being afraid when there was no reason to be. And this unreasoning fear,” what Spanos locates in the anxiety-provoking Absence, Specter or No-thing that haunts Caputo’s deeply inscribed conceptual and ontological framework, “quickly produced the sensation that I had often had in action: of watching myself in a movie[...] I could not shake that weird sensation of being split in two” (314). This third threshold moment, then, producing not only a doubling or splitting of the Self as well as a cinematic framework within which to “view” this dreadful spectacle, also provokes a vague, generalized “hatred” that “well[s] up” in Caputo as he “stare[s] at the jungle and at the ruined temple[...] a hatred for this green, moldy, alien world in which we fought and died” and this, I contend, prepares the way for the fourth threshold, marked by the sense of being “seized by an irresistible compulsion *to do something*” (315; emphasis added), which rapidly brings him to the awful climax of his narrative—at the same time that it allows him to view “the war” in terms of both personal or individual agency, as well as a vague or generalized sense of victimization, thus obscuring the true agency and victimizer.

“Something’s got to be done,” Caputo explains, “was about the clearest thought that passed through my brain[...]. *Retaliate*. The word rang in my head. *I will retaliate*. It was then that my chaotic thoughts began to focus on the two men whom Le Dung, Crowe’s informant, had identified as Viet Cong[...]. My mind[...] fixed on them like a heat-seeking missile fixing on the tailpipe of a jet” (Ibid.). Here, as Spanos convincingly argues, is the what he terms the Ahabian “concentering” of:

“the dislocating and disabling conditions of combat in the Vietnam wilderness—its nothingness—that moves through two phases of objectification intended to make them more intelligible and manageable: take-holdable, as it were. [Caputo] first identifies these uncannily undecidable conditions with Vietnam [itself], then, since this[...] is still too large, amorphous and unwieldy[...] he reduce[s] [it, and] incorporate[s] [it] in [a] concentered synecdochic personification.” (Spanos 53)

In other words, he takes aim at the two Vietnamese boys, who he then orders, however implicitly, to be executed. As Spanos argues, “it is this progressive reduction of

an invisible and intangible nothing to something seeable and tangible that enables him to 'do something' about it" (Ibid.), and with tragic results.

For Spanos, this rapid sequence of events merits special attention not only because it is the climax of Caputo's personal narrative, "but also because it, like the Vietnam War itself, has been insistently read as the denouement of an 'American tragedy,' which means, of course, a story that ends in national catharsis, the purgation of the political history[...] of the Vietnam War from the collective American cultural memory" (52) and what Caputo bears witness to, "symptomatically—that is, what he is trying to repress by rigorously restricting the point of view to the personal register—is that the gratuitous violence he committed against innocent Vietnamese civilians was the (self-destructive) culmination of a personal narrative that necessarily reenacted the (self-destructive) collective American narrative in Vietnam" (53).

However, "[d]espite Caputo's effort to resist by personalizing it, the continuity between this private act of an American soldier and the public act of the nation of which he is a member is what emerges spectrally to haunt his account of the court-martial trial, which brings the narrative to its troubling 'end'" (58). "But," as Spanos suggests, "Caputo's symptomatic witness cannot be silenced by [any] official rationalizations of mass murder (nor by his personification of the war). Its silence speaks a ghostly—genealogical [in Michel Foucault's sense]—language. It is the language of the 'Other' of [Caputo's] American self" (59), indissolubly linked to the clarity and resoluteness of his deeply inscribed, metaphysical and imperial orientation.

Spanos concludes his essay, and I will follow him as I have doing been doing throughout my own, by reconstellating this symptomatic reading of Caputo's narrative (and, by association, that of the United States' brutal war in Vietnam) into the present-day context of "9/11" and the "War on Terror," pointing out how "the specter of this witness [meaning Caputo's memoir, among myriad others] to the visible contradiction between America's ontological justification of the Vietnam War and its Ahabian practice" has

“haunted American foreign policy since the fall of Saigon in 1975 and explains the dominant culture’s amnesiac process apparently culminating in the Gulf War and a triumphant ‘end-of-history’ discourse—and its studied avoidance [here I would argue, its violently ambivalent and torturous relation] to the [memory of the] Vietnam War in its effort to justify to the American people and the world at large its ferocious retaliatory attack on Afghanistan” (62) and, more recently, on Iraq.

In fact, as we examine the ongoing, bloody stalemate in Iraq, we can hear repeated echoes of Vietnam in articles appearing in the popular press, in speeches by political pundits and policy makers, and in the harrowing reports emanating from US forces who have been in the warzone. In *Generation Kill: Devil Dogs, Iceman, Captain America and the New Face of American War*, journalist Evan Wright, who accompanied a Marine Corps Reconnaissance platoon that “spearheaded the blitzkrieg on Iraq” (as the book’s dustcover gushingly describes it), describes various expeditions into Iraqi “hamlets” that bear a striking, and disquieting, similarity to testimony by Vietnam war veterans, such as Kovic and Caputo, as in the following:

“In about five minutes the battalion is going to head back up in the bend in the canal, push beyond the mosque, drive through a few kilometers of densely concentrated hamlets, then approach the western edge of Al Hayy. The trickiest part will be entering the town[...]. After briefing the men, [Lieutenant] Fick says privately to me, ‘This is *Black Hawk Down* [referring to the 2001 film by Ridley Scott] shit we are doing.’ He adds, ‘The fact that we never initiate contact with the enemy—it’s always them on us—is wearing on these guys. In their training as Recon Marines, it’s a failure every time they get shot at first. It doesn’t matter that we’ve done well shooting our way out of these engagements. They’re supposed to be the ones initiating the contact, not the enemy” (211).

This fatigue or “wearing” manifests itself in various ways throughout the text—perhaps most explicitly at the end of the narrative, in which Sergeant Espera, who shot three unarmed Iraqis who had fled a checkpoint at Al Hayy, confesses to Lt. Fick, “I wish I could go back in time and see if they were enemy, or just confused civilians.” Fick attempts to reassure him by stating that “It could have been a truckful of babies, [but] with our Rules of Engagement you did the right thing.” Espera’s shocking response, which appears, at least on the surface, to be a hyper-masculine, affected machismo that attempts to cover his deeper ethical dilemma, is perhaps even more disturbing: “I’m not

saying I care. I don't give a fuck. But I keep thinking about what the priest said. It's not a sin to kill with a purpose, as long as you don't enjoy it. My question is, is indifference the same as enjoyment?" (348-349).

In a recent article by Benedict Carey³, which directly addresses just this type of fatigue exhibited by soldiers returning from the battlefield, one of the interviewees—Captain William Nash, a Navy psychiatrist—explains how he deals with such moral quandaries among the foot soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. As he describes it, he tries “to help them tell a coherent story about what is happening, to make sense of it[...] to help them reconstruct the things they used to believe in that don't make sense any more:” in other words, to *re-narrativize* their dislocating and de-centering experiences.

As Carey notes, what “doesn't make sense any more” to the soldiers is precisely the clarity and resoluteness of the mission in which “unknown and often unseen enemies, suicide bombers, a hostile land with virtually no safe zone, no real front or rear” strike terror—as an object-less, generalized *Angst* to which Espera testifies—in the men and women armed with a great deal of technologically advanced weaponry and materiel, but, more crucially, with Rules of Engagement that prove just as frustratingly inadequate to the reality of urban, guerilla warfare, as they did to the conditions of Vietnam. Carey acknowledges that some soldiers are calling this a “360-degree war” (with no recognizable “front”) and that some officers and Pentagon officials are slowly recognizing that this “asymmetrical battle space[...] threatens to injure troops' minds as well as their bodies,” which is a situation that Nash himself admits “echo[es] Vietnam.”

Carey goes on to describe how military psychologists and psychiatrists have noted that this situation has produced in the soldiers a “profound, unreleased anger” that is amplified by the personalized nature of the losses that they are sustaining. “[U]nlike in Vietnam,” he claims, “where service members served shorter tours and were rotated in

³ *New York Times*, “The Struggle to Gauge a War's Psychological Cost,” November 26, 2005.

and out of the country individually, troops in Iraq have developed as units and tend to have trained together as full-time military or in the Reserves or National Guard. Group cohesion is strong, and the bonds only deepen in the hostile terrain of Iraq. For these tight-knit groups, certain kinds of ambushes—roadside bombs, for instance—can be mentally devastating, for a variety of reasons.” Caputo, for his part, described his platoon’s reaction to losing one of their own to landmines or snipers in much the same terms and intensity—and so we can imagine this anger only amplified in the case of Iraq.

Be that as it may, Carey goes on to explore a typical scenario, as recounted by a military psychologist, in which the troops “go out in convoys, and boom: the first vehicle gets hit, their best friend dies, and now they’re seeing life flash before them and get a surge of adrenaline and want to do something[...]. But often there’s nothing they can do. There’s no enemy there.” Many become deeply frustrated because “they wish they could act out on this adrenaline rush and do what they were trained to do but can’t.” The similarity between this and the Vietnam war as described by veterans like Caputo, despite the difference in setting, apparently has eluded Carey, as well as the military personnel he interviews, each of whom desperately tries to distinguish and differentiate between the experience that is “peculiar to this war” and that of Vietnam. But after revisiting Caputo’s (or Kovic’s, et al) memoir, we can easily see the parallels.

Another troubling similarity is the “evanescence” of the enemy, in which “gunmen so often disappear into crowds that many [US troops] have the feeling that they are fighting ghosts,” as recounted by a soldier in the following terms: “It was a kind of joke: if you got to shoot back at the enemy, people were jealous. It was a stress release, because usually these guys [the enemy] disappear.” On a Sunday in April 2004, some of the military psychiatrists visited a unit of Marines who had been trapped in a firefight in a town near the Syrian border—ironically, a town in which, only the day before, they had been handing out candy—and were now “coursing with rage,” asking “What are we doing here?” and demanding permission to fire upon “mosques and other off-limit targets where

insurgents were suspected of hiding.” In group therapy sessions, the psychologist tried to emphasize to the soldiers how “they could not know for sure whether the civilians[...] had supported the insurgents” and that “following the rules of engagement” was “crucial to setting an example.” But the doctors admit to the deep-seated ambivalence of the whole experience—the “ambiguity about the purpose of the [American] mission,” as one interviewee phrases it—by contrasting it (as was the case with Vietnam) with the now-paradigmatic example of World War II: “Having someone killed in World War II, you could say, ‘Well, we won the battle to save the world’ [but i]n this terrorist war, it is much less tangible how to anchor your losses.”

As the soldiers’ symptomatic employment of terms such as “tangible” or “contact” bear witness, this “peculiar” war on “terror” is not nearly as unique as its architects in the Pentagon and the White House would have us believe, and it is time for an unflinching appraisal of the true “lessons” of the Vietnam tragedy. For, as one soldier attests, to conclude Wright’s deeply disturbing *Generation Kill*, “The fucked thing[...] is [that] the men we’ve been fighting probably came here for the same reasons we did, to test themselves, to feel what war is like. In my view it doesn’t matter if you oppose or support war. The machine goes on” (349). However, the point of what Said called “critical consciousness”—and the task of oppositional intellectuals and scholars—is precisely this: to stop the “machine” from “go[ing] on,” before it is too late.

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