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# And the enemy was in us: Vietnam War films and complicating visions of American Masculinity

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# And the enemy was in us: Vietnam War films and complicating visions of American Masculinity

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“You’re not gonna stop me! You’re not gonna shut me up! I’m gonna remind you of this war for the rest of my life so what happened there never happens again! We’re never, never gonna let the people of the United States forget that war, because the moment we do, there’s gonna be another war, and another, and another. That's why we’re gonna be here for the rest of our lives telling you that the war happened - it wasn’t just some nightmare - it happened, and you’re not gonna sweep it under the rug because you didn’t like the ratings, like some television show.”

Vietnam Veteran Ron Kovic

*Born on the Fourth of July,* Oliver Stone (Universal Pictures, 1989)

The United States ended its war in Vietnam in 1973, but the war left a ripple effect across anyone and anything American. For nearly a decade, television and radio programs projected the gritty reality of the U.S. loss into living rooms on a nightly basis. American journalists had full access to the war on the ground and made the grisly conflict a common part of life as nightly news broadcasts provided a running tally of American deaths. Once the U.S.'s war in Vietnam came to an end, Hollywood offered the first representation of American soldiers' experiences and collective trauma upon their return home. The first era of American Vietnam War films stretches from 1976 to 1989 and includes *Taxi Driver* (1976), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Coming Home* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *First Blood* (1982), *Platoon* (1986), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989). These first films project an initial American understanding and examination of its Vietnam War experience in the immediate post-war period. Hollywood's Vietnam depicted soldiers and veterans losing their innocence, experiencing psychotic breaks, and returning home with a wounded mentality. These films and their imagery questioned what the Vietnam War put American soldiers through while validating veterans' difficult experiences. They represented more than just characters in a vulnerable state but became America's first attempts at comprehending the costs of Vietnam.

Popular culture has no obligation to be accurate because it is its own reality, however, it does have the power to persuade. There is a divide between popular culture and actual news. Americans had a difficult time finding closure in the first war that they had actually *lost*. According to historian Andrew Huebner, all major motion pictures about the Vietnam War were produced after the war ended because "most filmmakers believed that the combination of television coverage of the war and its unpopularity by 1968 destined any movie about Vietnam to

fail."[1] It seemed distasteful to make a Hollywood production about a war tearing the country apart. One of the few war films made during the war was 1968's *The Green Berets,* which revealed no truth about the ongoing war and instead attempted to portray it through the overtly patriotic lens of the previous generation of war movies.[2] Soldiers in the film, led by the genre-defining John Wayne, embodied strong, desirable, and victorious qualities every American soldier hoped to achieve in their service. His iconic masculine image became the stereotypical poster boy for what American patriotism *should* be. It is clear this image was critiqued in the Vietnam War because "Wayne's movie seemed more surreal propaganda than an accurate rendering of a complex war."[3] There are many "whys" that surround the U.S.'s war in Vietnam because in many ways it was the first-time modern America failed to do something it set out to do. Historian Michael Anderegg argues that films about the U.S.'s war in Vietnam changed the pace from previous American war movies. Filmmakers strayed away from images that "were meant to boost morale or promote the necessity of sacrifice or bring the nation together or vilify the enemy," but desired "to go beyond the superficialities" and make a statement about the impacts of the war.[4] The majority of movies from this period that display this uncertainty show active soldiers or returning veterans differently than the prior display of brave young men.

Outside of the movies, American men were essentially unable to live up to pre-conceived notions of masculinity promised to them by their parents' generation or shown to them in popular culture. There was a "dynamic recasting of the masculine hero" because of the 1970s "masculinity crisis." The origins of this crisis came from the war itself, and veterans who

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[1] Andrew Huebner, *The Warrior Image: Soldiers in American Culture from the Second World War to the Vietnam Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 241.
[2] John Wayne and Ray Kellog, *The Green Berets* (Warner Bros, 1968).
[3] Gregory Daddis, *Pulp Vietnam: War and Gender in Cold War Men's Adventure Magazines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 138.
[4] Michael Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 3.

transitioned back into society with their memories of war "had a range of models beyond John Wayne to emulate."[5] Historian Gregory Daddis suggests this change in masculinity was because of a new way the military approached the war, noting that "Americans had simply used South Vietnam for sexual gratification, a way to help fulfill the fantasy of war as a man-making experience."[6] The prior image of American soldiers as morally upstanding, desirable, courageous, and strategically unbeatable was skewed because the reality of Vietnam was unfulfilling.

These eight films offer a fresh definition and image of masculinity because the previous notions of bravery and patriotic service did not fit the reality of the U.S.'s war in Vietnam. Historian Amy Rutenberg outlines the shifting role and definition of masculinity from the World War II generation through to Vietnam with the idea of a "breadwinner masculinity."[7] Serving in the Vietnam War was different because American mentality was split between "whether men could better protect their families as breadwinners or as soldiers," which questioned "assumptions about the rights and responsibilities of male citizens."[8] Military manpower was reconstructed in the Cold War, and those who could not meet the newly defined and privileged form of masculine citizenship were more likely to become a soldier. From World War II to the Cold War, the American government defined masculine service differently across socio-economic and intellectual structures. Their differing ideas of what the United States needed to be nationally secure and prepared questioned the preconceived significance and strength of American manpower. Manpower channeling policies prioritized the Cold War economic image of a successful capitalist society in allowing "breadwinner" male heads of house deferments from

[5] Huebner, *The Warrior Image*, 279.
[6] Daddis, *Pulp Vietnam,* 208.
[7] Amy J. Rutenberg, *Rough Draft: Cold War Military Manpower Policy and the Origins of Vietnam-Era Draft Resistance* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2019), 3.
[8] Rutenberg, *Rough Draft,* 8.

service. On the other hand, projects like Project 100,000 or McNamara's Folly (which allowed for a significant loss of life among those drafted into the infantry) clearly defined who the American government deemed expendable in the Vietnam War. These dueling redefinitions of American masculinity and responsibility created a rift between citizenship and service and caused young men to believe it was within their right to protest military service in an increasingly unpopular war.[9] Inequalities from these manpower policies and the shifting domestic policy changed what the ideal soldier represented. Draft policies and service requirements for men enlisting in the United States military were viewed differently in the Vietnam War as American ideals of service and masculinity further diverged from past generations.

America's "loss in Vietnam" ultimately "created a crisis of confidence in the American political and military systems as well as a crisis of masculinity."[10] Popular culture reflected this divide, where war heroes were no longer glorified in films, but America's soldiers and veterans were depicted as losing their innocence, psychotic, and wounded. These three images offer a sense of uncertainty and shame that men had little to no answer about the purpose and consequences of their war. Through an evaluation of each character's mental state, physical impairment, and personal trauma comes an explanation of the three categories. They longed for the normal and innocent lives they had before the war with an outlook on life forever altered. The idea that boys would become real men serving as soldiers in war was not the coming-of-age they had anticipated or were promised. Boys needed to shed their innocent and naive morals before they could be considered masculine military men, but the reality of this ritual left each character disturbed. Serving in Vietnam fundamentally altered their conscience and left them questioning how to adapt back into American society as veterans. These young men lost a sense

[9] Rutenberg, *Rough Draft.*
[10] Rutenberg, *Rough Draft,* 194.

of purity as they adopted the callous soldier mentality necessary to survive their war. The violent "psycho vet" characterization derives from the deep emotional damage that the war inflicted upon these men. Their confusion about America's purpose in Vietnam, sorrow over losing a fellow soldier and part of themselves, and anger that they could not do anything to change their situation, drove many to experience psychotic breaks.[11] Separated from any reality they could connect with, these soldiers are presented as disillusioned and quick to react violently to the world around them. Collectively these characters return home with deep wounds to heal and a general disregard for life. The wounded image incorporates more than the physically injured veterans but encompasses the mental scars and emotional impairment each man experienced. These three categories displayed different components of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) before it became a medical diagnosis in 1980.[12] They present a direct rejection of the traditional image of the tough and unwavering American soldier typified by John Wayne. Instead, these eight films offer a popular reflection on America's immediate post-war consciousness, the increasingly debatable purpose of its war in Vietnam, and most importantly, the deeply troubling impact on the young men asked and forced to fight in it.

This clear projection of damaged young men was paired with a general bewilderment about America's overall experience in Vietnam. The films portrayed a broad understanding of Vietnam veterans at the time and offered insight into the political environment surrounding the war and its fallout. There were "massive emotional, political, and ideological shock waves that Vietnam sent coursing through" the American image.[13] Popular culture commodified this and offered the nation an immediate retrospective on its Vietnam experience and the immediate costs.

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[11] "Understanding Psychosis," National Institute of Mental Health, (nih.gov).
[12] Matthew J. Friedman, "U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs," *PTSD History and Overview*, (January 31, 2007).
[13] Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 33.

The plot of Vietnam War movies showed "reasons the United States entered the war, the response of American soldiers to the war, and the effects of the war on returning veterans."[14] These initial depictions shattered the prior patriotic image of American soldiers with the reality of loss and trauma that defined the Vietnam War. Leading Hollywood directors of the period, like Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, Oliver Stone, and Stanley Kubrick, each took their turn commenting on Vietnam and the disastrous state it left young veterans in.

The first film offering America a look into the mental psyche of a Vietnam veteran was 1976's *Taxi Driver.* Veteran Travis Bickle struggles to adapt back into society because of his obsession with cleaning up the streets of New York City as a nighttime taxi driver. In 1978, *Deer Hunter* displayed the emotional story of a group of friends, three of whom go to Vietnam and three who stay in the United States. The film dives into the lives of these characters to show how different war scars can appear among those who served. Released the same year, *Coming Home* tells the story of two disabled and bitter veterans. They each take a different approach to figure out their post-war lives. Premiering in 1979, *Apocalypse Now* questions a soldier's morality and how far they are willing to go under command. Captain Willard is tasked with assassinating a deranged U.S. Colonel but realizes how similar they are. Audiences meet special forces veteran John Rambo in 1985's *First Blood,* as the distressed veteran tries to acclimate back into a society that wants nothing to do with him or his trauma. The next year, *Platoon* was released and won the 1986 Oscar for Best Picture. Young soldier Chris Taylor enlists in the war so he can have his own combat experience but soon regrets his decision. As he struggles to fit into the mold of a typical American soldier, his world collides with two influential commanders who make him question the good and bad sides of war.[15] *Full Metal Jacket* shares a similar narrative in 1987 as

[14] Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 81.
[15] Aljean Harmetz, "*Platoon* Wins Oscar as the Best Movie of 1986," *The New York Times*, (March 31, 1987).

private J.T. “Joker” Davis comes of age from his gruesome boot camp training to his time in Vietnam. The 1989 film, *Born on the Fourth of July,* is based on the 1976 autobiography of veteran Ron Kovic and the reality he faced coming home from Vietnam.[16] His experience portrays what life was like for a young man who grew up with the desire to defend the country but came back disabled from a war Americans wanted to forget. The war changed United States popular culture through the representation of these soldiers. These initial Vietnam War films convey America’s presence in Vietnam, how it was responded to, and what type of repercussions it left on those who fought.

This project seeks to understand how American popular culture and Hollywood films represented American soldiers and veterans in the immediate aftermath of the U.S. war in Vietnam. These films had a dramatic impact in the crafting of America’s post-Vietnam understanding and opinions while contributing mightily to the stereotypes associated with the Vietnam vet. Each section highlights these films’ characters losing their innocence, experiencing psychotic breaks, and being wounded mentally and/or physically due to their experiences in Vietnam. These observations have been evaluated alongside Michael Anderegg’s *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television,* Gregory Daddis’s *Pulp Vietnam: War and Gender in Cold War Men's Adventure Magazines,* and Andrew Huebner’s *The Warrior Image: Soldiers in American Culture from the Second World War to the Vietnam Era*. Roger Ebert’s movie critic reports have been taken into consideration to understand the contemporary reaction and significance of each film as they were released. This assessment is not meant to excuse or state in what ways these films got it right or wrong, but only to explain Hollywood’s initial characterization of Vietnam soldiers and veterans. They differed from previous war movies

[16] Ron Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976).

because the Vietnam War "transformed soldiers who seemed *better* for their time in the military into ones who seemed *devastated."*[17] These eight films were raw, gritty, and displayed America's immediate and negative reaction to the war and the men who fought in it. The American government and the war effort itself became the enemy as these films focused on the myriad traumas men experienced and brought home with them. It is not that all those who served suffered these experiences, but filmmakers chose to almost universally portray them this way. To them, soldiers and veterans did not have to be the heroes in these movies because heroism was not what happened in the jungles of Vietnam.

Americans saw more of what happened once the wounded left the front lines because films reinforced the war's brutality and debatable purpose. *Taxi Driver* (1976)*, The Deer Hunter* (1978)*, Coming Home* (1978)*, Apocalypse Now* (1979)*, First Blood* (1982)*, Platoon* (1986)*, Full Metal Jacket* (1987)*,* and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) project what American society initially believed about this generation of soldiers and veterans. Masculinity was portrayed differently than in previous wartime films because the U.S.'s war in Vietnam did not fit the simple and patriotic mold of former conflicts. Films highlighted this change with an altered militaristic image of American soldiers and veterans. This "patriarchal authority in America" did not align with "men's combat experience or help them come to terms with the public perception of Vietnam and their roles as warriors." This displacement was heightened "when they looked to the images of war and its attendant male adulthood, the social definitions of masculinity, soldier, breadwinner, and family man" because they "often represented elusive ideals that only contributed to a sense of failure and unattainable manhood."[18] These consequences of war were

[17] Crystal Galyean, Walker Laughlin, Sarah King, April Braden, and Zachary Brown, "'Someday This War's Gonna End,'" *U.S. History Scene,* (December 27, 2020).
[18] Tracy Karner, "Fathers, Sons, and Vietnam: Masculinity and Betrayal in the Life Narratives of Vietnam Veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder," *American Studies* 37, no. 1 (1996): 64.

not previously felt so directly and universally within the United States as a whole, and the portrayed characters exhibit a feeling of misplacement. All their injuries range from internal to external, loss of normalcy to loss of life, desire to kill to the desire to go home. No matter the plot, each film represents how soldiers lost their innocence, suffered grievous wounds of war, and experienced debilitating psychotic breaks. These three categories question what patriotism and loyalty meant for veterans after losing in Vietnam.

**TAXI DRIVER (1976):**

*Taxi Driver* points to the mental madness of veteran Travis Bickle rather than portraying the military ego of an honorable veteran. The film was one of the first major productions focusing on how difficult it was for some Vietnam veterans to fit back into American society. There are no scenes of Bickle fighting in Vietnam or of the battlefield at all. Hollywood "interpreted the war directly" and "addressed veterans' post-traumatic stress" by introducing Travis Bickle after the war with a wounded mentality and a desire to be recognized.[19] It is a disturbing portrayal that relates American culture to the Vietnam War. His hardships after the war are expressed through a compulsion to control the world around him. The dirty streets of New York are the quintessential setting for Post-Vietnam America and its dejected atmosphere. Bickle's "experiences as a Manhattan cab driver replay many of the thematic issues that have become associated with Vietnam."[20] New York City was the symbolic setting of a complex 1970s American society. In the words of director Martin Scorsese, "There was talk of doing it in a different city, but then it wouldn't be the same" because of the gritty environment and significance of taxi drivers in New York City.[21] The filth of the city is omnipresent for Bickle, which emphasizes his disillusionment and disgust. This displacement only increases his desire to do something worthy of recognition.

Bickle surrounds himself with the immorality that disgusts him by requesting to drive his cab at night. In his first voice-over he expresses his longing for rain to "come and wash all this scum off the streets," referring to the pimps, prostitutes, and druggies inhabiting them.[22] He then

[19] Huebner, *The Warrior Image*, 241.
[20] Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 5.
[21] An interview with Martin Scorsese, "Martin Scorsese on *Taxi Driver* Movie (1976) Reveals Behind the Scene Stories," YouTube Interview.
[22] Martin Scorsese, *Taxi Driver* (Columbia Pictures, 1976).

contradicts himself and enters a porno theatre after his twelve-hour shift that occasionally leaves him cleaning "blood and cum" off the backseat.[23] His actions and psyche make him a misfit in a city where individuals "either fit or don't fit into the givens of their status," where "everyone plays this power game but Travis – he can't figure what kind of game he wants to play."[24] Bickle suppresses his loneliness with the medicine bottles and alcohol that surround him. The only time he is sober is when he drives his cab. His job as a cabbie is too stable for him because he is most disgusted with the city when he is sober. Martin Scorsese argues that Bickle's drug and alcohol abuse, combined with his nightly shift, created a "strange subterranean" experience that "opens a strange world" for Bickle's disillusionment.[25] He is willing to drive anyone, anywhere in the city, and despite his interactions with passengers or fellow cabbies, he is in a constant state of loneliness.

He is in a restless cycle until he becomes infatuated with Betsy, a woman who works for presidential candidate Charles Palantine. She embodies the purity Bickle lacks and becomes "the girl of his dreams, a squeaky-clean WASP princess."[26] The first time they meet, he attempts to relate their lives together by claiming she looks lonely and unhappy. He can be honest about his wounded condition but only when he characterizes Betsy in the same way. His desire to control Betsy is evident once he critiques her job, the men she works with, and tries to further their connection by insisting their attraction to each other was impulsive. Their awkward encounter entices Betsy to go out with him a second time, but his wounded psyche takes over. He picks up Betsy and takes her to a dirty movie. His inability to understand the wrongness of the gesture

[23] Ibid.
[24] Manny Farber and Patricia Patterson, "The Power and the Gory: *Taxi Driver*," *Film Comment* 34, no. 3 (1998): 42.
[25] An interview with Martin Scorsese, "Martin Scorsese on *Taxi Driver* Movie (1976) Reveals Behind the Scene Stories," YouTube Interview.
[26] Farber and Patricia Patterson, "The Power and the Gory: *Taxi Driver*," 35.

shows how disconnected he is from society. He regularly goes to porno theaters, so he believes everyone else does too. Betsy is immediately repulsed by the movie and walks away, leaving Bickle questioning what he did wrong. He makes several attempts to reach her after, but with little to no success. In a fit of rage, he storms into the campaign headquarters and shouts that Betsy is in hell surrounded by the busybodies she works with. Bickle is expressing his own hell with his repulsion to a society that he cannot fit into. He desperately needed to gain Betsy's acceptance and, when it did not work out between the two, he spirals into a psychotic break where he expresses his longing for her through his support for presidential candidate Palantine.

Bickle is numbing the rejection by occupying his time and going to work. On one of his nightly shifts, he discovers he is driving Palantine and two of his aides. He gloats about his admiration and support for the man he knows only because of Betsy. Palantine asks, "What is the one thing about this country that bugs you the most?"[27] Travis replies with his disgust of New York and how the president needs to clean up the streets. The sophisticated men look at him with confusion as he represents the very filth he despises. Bickle is a "lonely cabbie" but is "full of energy and verbally exhilarated" to discuss "flushing New York down the toilet."[28] He confides in his fellow cab driver, Wizard, about his depression and aspiration to "really do something."[29] He is "caught in a limbo of unrepresentability" trying to figure out his worth in a city he refers to as worthless.[30] In his Marine mind he sets up assignments to conquer but is so obsessed with correcting the sinful world around him that he cannot get far. Bickle responds to many political, social, and ethical issues with, "I don't know much about...," showing his inability to relate.[31]

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[27] Martin Scorsese, *Taxi Driver* (Columbia Pictures, 1976).
[28] Farber and Patricia Patterson, "The Power and the Gory: *Taxi Driver*," 36.
[29] Martin Scorsese, *Taxi Driver* (Columbia Pictures, 1976).
[30] Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 38.
[31] Martin Scorsese, *Taxi Driver* (Columbia Pictures, 1976).

The people he attempts to "save" in his life represent the innocence he craves to have; but when he tries to play a hero, he behaves psychotically. Bickle is searching for acceptance on the streets of New York but either cannot, or will not, see his own issues. He explains to Wizard, "I got some bad ideas in my head," which illustrates how his past wounds cause him to create his own reality.

Bickle embodies a "Vietnam vet who displays for us all of the classic symptoms of a first-class psychotic" from this point forward.[32] He begins a rigorous training routine of working out, torturing himself, and reenacting fighting scenes in his mirror. He tells himself: "I gotta get in shape. Too much sitting has ruined my body. Too much abuse has gone on for too long. From now on there will be 50 pushups each morning, 50 pullups. There will be no more pills, no more bad food, no more destroyers of my body. From now on will be total organization. Every muscle must be tight."[33] There is a longing for him to have a "redemptive duty" that has been "left over from the marines," because "he needs a mission to make existence tolerable."[34] His admiration for Palantine reaches an all-time high as he idolizes his speech about "true force" and his "We are the People" slogan, and then begins to attend his campaign events. Palantine's slogan represents how the American people have suffered in Vietnam and continue to suffer with unemployment, inflation, crime, and corruption. Although Bickle initially relates to the campaign phrase because he is in a constant state of loneliness and rejection, Palantine begins to represent for him the dishonorable American system. When he sees the suffering of New York City, he aspires to conquer it by destroying Palantine. He has created a war in his head between himself and Palantine, and he believes his "secret job" is to assassinate Palantine as a way to purify New

[32] Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 34.
[33] Martin Scorsese, *Taxi Driver* (Columbia Pictures, 1976).
[34] Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 46.

York. Movie Critic Roger Ebert expresses how the "specifics of Travis's complaint" are never clearly explained, but "in a chilling way we know what we need to know of him." [35] His fixation with New York City is the clear compelling force that pushes him to be the symbolic rain he hoped would come and wash away the filth off the street.

With his plan to kill Palantine underway, he begins to help young prostitute Iris redeem herself. He "could in theory look for fares anywhere in the city, but he is constantly drawn back to 42nd Street, to Times Square and the whores, street freaks, and porno houses," which intensify his frustration and desire to help.[36] Iris's pimp, Sport, has brainwashed her, the same way Travis believes Betsy is brainwashed by working for Palantine. The two women in his life represent the two opposing forces Bickle feels on his own psyche. Betsy is pure and sophisticated, while Iris is a twelve-year-old prostitute who has been polluted by her surroundings. Iris and Bickle develop a non-sexual relationship as he attempts to give her counseling on how to leave the streets behind. This real-world advice is, ironically, something he does not understand himself. She claims that her pimp protects her from herself, which reflects Bickle's internal struggle. Betsy and Iris both embody the innocence Bickle craves but has lost along with the rest of society. His devotion to saving them mirrors his search to save himself. He tries to understand their roles by learning about Palantine's campaign and buying a fifteen-minute session with Iris. In the same way he becomes enticed with Palantine, he studies Sport's agenda as a pimp. There was an "abiding confidence in American institutions before the Vietnam War and deepening cynicism afterwards," alluded to in the corruption and bribery both men symbolize.[37] Politicians and pimps are no different to Bickle, as he believes both only work to serve themselves.

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[35] Roger Ebert, "*Taxi Driver* Movie Review & Film Summary 1976," Roger Ebert Movie Review & Film Summary, (January 1, 1976).
[36] Ibid.
[37] Huebner, *The Warrior Image*, 270.

On his way to assassinate Palantine, he leaves a large sum of money to Iris with the daunting handwritten message, "By the time you read this I will be dead." He is dedicated to win his self-imposed war with Palantine and shows up to his campaign event with a mohawk haircut and cocky grin. He has accepted that his redemptive duty will lead to death and his internal thoughts are represented in his physical appearance. Bickle's "decision to assassinate Palantine is simultaneously his extreme retaliation against Betsy's rejection and the fulfillment of his self-assigned mission to save her."[38] He cannot cope with how people are "used" in the city, whether they are sold or mooched on, and assassinating Palantine is designed to reveal to Betsy how she was being controlled. She expresses no unhappiness with her work, but it was part of the fantasy Bickle made up. He is depressed, therefore the world around him must be, too. His inability to relate to Betsy brings "macho to its logical conclusion," in the words of Scorsese. "The better man is the man who can kill you," and Bickle can demonstrate simple male dominance and control (which he lacks and desperately yearns for) through assassination.[39] When combined with Palantine's campaign slogans about empowering the people, Travis's delusion pushes him into a psychotic break. His odd appearance and actions are suspicious enough to cause security guards to chase him back to his apartment.

Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver*

[38] Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 40.
[39] An interview with Martin Scorsese, "Interview with Martin Scorsese," Roger Ebert Interviews (March 7, 1976).

He does not accept defeat but decides he must complete his plan to kill. After his search to "really do something" is complete, his wounded psyche following his service in Vietnam convinces him that all he is good for is killing.[40] He decides to rescue Iris in hopes that it will validate his training. There is a shootout between Bickle and Iris's pimp, timekeeper, and a random customer who all end up dead. Iris is distraught after seeing the altercation, but Bickle disregards her cries and pulls the trigger on himself. His rehearsed actions of fighting himself in the mirror become reality, but he is unable to kill the real enemy in his life because it was himself all along. This failure represents "his inability to rid himself of the bad ideas in [his] head," as the chamber was empty.[41] He is lying in his own blood after the shootout when the cops arrive on the scene. He motions for them to kill him by raising his blood-soaked fingers in the shape of a gun and pointing it at his head. Just like all his former wishes, his longing to die is unachievable.

Bickle received the attention he aspired to in the most unlikely way. He believed his destiny was to be caught or killed, but the media turned him into a protector who fought off gangsters. Newspapers published multiple articles about his deed while highlighting his service in Vietnam. He is only recognized as a true contributor not for being a veteran, but for killing. Bickle is only perceived as a hero once society takes notice of his actions. It was a constructed "legacy of Vietnam" that altered "his suicidal mission" into a noble one that "can be reclaimed in the media as heroism."[42] It was not the ending he anticipated, but he received the credentials he craved and achieved his goal to cleanse New York City. It is not long before he recovers from his injuries and is back on the streets as a cabbie. Iris is returned to her parents, and Betsy reconnects with Bickle after his recent fame. She can see herself with him now that he has performed

[40] Martin Scorsese, *Taxi Driver* (Columbia Pictures, 1976).
[41] Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 46.
[42] Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 41.

acceptable good for society. Her former fear of being too different from him is calmed by the image of him as a victor.

It was hard to label "Vietnam a 'noble cause,'" then portray "a paranoid insomniac from *Taxi Driver,"* because it was a contradiction to "encourage a national narrative of regeneration and redemption."[43] One of the first Hollywood images of a Vietnam veteran is a lonely lunatic who despises his post-war life. He is a misfit who lacks cultural and social awareness, which deepens his need to "really do something."[44] Bickle constructed his own reality that required him to cleanse New York City by dismantling the corruption and sin it represents. This solidified that "Vietnam veterans returned to a society that had rendered them 'mute and invisible' - silent reminders of what had occurred." Reflected in these narratives "was a loss of power which had been an assumed privilege of white American manhood."[45] He is only recognized and accepted as a man once he kills in a socially accepted manner. If he had killed Palantine, he would have been vilified as a dissident and either killed or removed from society. The mission he trains for is a delusion, but shows he has a desire to take control of his circumstances. He objects to being owned by the enemy, which he first believes is American society, although he is unable to understand or articulate this ownership. Through his psychotic break, he is transformed into the enemy he detested. The more Bickle tries to get away from his fears, the more he becomes them. Michael Clark refines this veteran projection by explaining that:

> Ironically, the psychotic killer thus became one of the few avenues through which the veteran could be readmitted to the social order in the 1970s without denying his past altogether. The instability inherent in this psychic split prevented the veteran's full assimilation into the cultural forms of normalcy.[46]

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[43] Daddis, *Pulp Vietnam,* 224.
[44] Martin Scorsese, *Taxi Driver* (Columbia Pictures, 1976).
[45] Lorrie Smith, "Back Against the Wall: Anti-Feminist Backlash in Vietnam War Literature," Vietnam Generation 1.3-4 (1989), 124, quoted in Tracy Karner "Fathers, Sons, and Vietnam: Masculinity and Betrayal in the Life Narratives of Vietnam Veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder," *American Studies* 37, no. 1 (1996): 65.
[46] Michael Clark, "Remembering Vietnam," *Cultural Critique*, no. 3 (1986): 50.

That instability is reflected in Bickle's character because he acted upon many of the issues he imagined. Once he gives in to his psychopathic tendencies, he is accepted into the community he was once rejected from, like the war and those who fought in it.

Betsy characterizes him as a "walking contradiction," which is evident in his longing to "be a person like other people," but generally disgusted with the society he wants to be a part of again.[47] He believes the city has no value, yet he wants to find a purpose in it. His inability to understand Vietnam or American society "emerges in the film's self-disruptive structure," because Travis does not explain any "wartime memories," so his mission becomes fixated on "the crisis in *the World."*[48] He believes he needs to fulfill a redemptive assignment that will give him the worth his service in Vietnam could not. The personal commitment he made to show Betsy and Iris the deception and manipulation both Sport and Palantine reflected in American society became his duty. His obsession with cleaning the streets stems from his wounded psyche after serving in Vietnam, which eventually causes a psychotic break that drives him to act. Roger Ebert concludes the film "is a hell, from the opening shot of a cab emerging from stygian clouds of steam to the climactic killing scene in which the camera finally looks straight down. Scorsese wanted to look away from Travis's rejection; we almost want to look away from his life. But he's there, all right, and he's suffering."[49] *Taxi Driver* portrayed Vietnam veterans as distraught insomniacs who were psychologically immature, broken, and increasingly disconnected from the society they returned to. Hollywood's Vietnam reflected that veterans had to "be somebody" or "do something" worthy of acknowledgment before they could be accepted. The U.S.'s war in

[47] Martin Scorsese, *Taxi Driver* (Columbia Pictures, 1976).
[48] Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 39.
[49] Roger Ebert, "*Taxi Driver* Movie Review & Film Summary 1976," Roger Ebert Movie Review & Film Summary, (January 1, 1976).

Vietnam did not give this validation to its veterans, so they were compelled to search for a purpose.

**DEER HUNTER (1978):**

Two years after the world met Travis Bickle and ventured into the mind of a deranged veteran came *The Deer Hunter,* where audiences follow a group of friends deeply wounded by their service in Vietnam. The film is split into three main parts: simple life before war, dreadful experiences in Vietnam, and hardship adjusting to post-war life. The childhood group of six is from the small American town of Clairton, Pennsylvania, where they are content working for the steel factory, deer hunting, and drinking at the local bar. Three go off to serve in the Vietnam war (Nick, Mike, Steven) and three stay home (Axel, Stanley, John). There is an appreciation for the simplicity of life that drastically changes once Nick, Mike, and Steven go to Vietnam.

*The Deer Hunter* projects the hope young men had to fulfill a patriotic duty in Vietnam but shows the unfulfilling combat that left "fighters damaged or disillusioned" and revealed war as a "fruitless and wasteful enterprise."[50] Nick, Mike, and Steven believed it was their duty to serve, although they were unable to face the severity of their choice until their lives were drastically altered from the repercussions of their time in Vietnam. It is only after the former masculine men are broken by their experiences that they are forced to cope with their wounds. Roger Ebert states the film "is the record of how the war in Vietnam entered several lives and altered them terribly forever. It is not an anti-war film. It is not a pro-war film. It is one of the most emotionally shattering films ever made."[51] The comparison of their lives before and after service reflects the cruelty of war and damage left on a veteran's mental psyche. They all experience emotional withdrawal because of their inability to control their experience in Vietnam and their lives after.

[50] Huebner, *The Warrior Image*, 271.
[51] Roger Ebert, "*The Deer Hunter* Movie Review & Film Summary 1979," Roger Ebert Movie Review & Film Summary, (March 9, 1979).

The beginning of the film is filled with humor and amusement as Steven gets married days before he goes off to Vietnam. Director Michael Cimino states that, through the preparation and wedding, "slowly their characters are being revealed" so the audience can "get to know" the group before their lives are forever changed by the war.[52] While Steven's wedding is underway, all six men live out their last days of normalcy by driving around the small town, drinking at the local bar, and going on hunting trips. They all idolize Mike's hunting skills as he explains his obsession with "the ritualistic importance of killing a deer with 'one shot.'"[53] He emphasizes to his friends that "two shots is pussy" when killing a deer, and it must be done with one so the hunter can be assertive.[54] His interpretation stresses the absolute responsibility men must take on. Mike represents manhood in Clairton with his deterministic approach and role as protector of the group. He does not believe it is manly to be passive or indifferent, so he is steadfast in all his decisions. This becomes apparent when Mike, Nick, and Steven eagerly discuss their future in Vietnam together at the wedding. A Green Beret walks into the reception and the three men begin to ask him about his time in Vietnam. The soldier disregards the men and has not even an ounce of excitement to talk about his service. There is a dullness to his response that comes off as rude to the men who are enthusiastic about the patriotic duty they get to fulfill. Mike asks, "What's it like over there?" The soldier does not change his blank stare, and only mutters the words "Fuck it" in response.[55] His detached attitude is offensive to the men, but the soldier is envious of their innocence because he has seen the reality of their excitement. The men hold Mike back from assaulting the soldier, which portrays his headstrong confidence to defend his decision to enlist.

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[52] An interview with Michael Cimino, "*The Deer Hunter* Interview with Michael Cimino," Interview by Melvyn Bragg, February 25, 1979, The South Bank Show.
[53] Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 60.
[54] Michael Cimino, *The Deer Hunter* (Universal Pictures, 1978).
[55] Ibid.

The men try to enjoy their last moments together by indulging in what the small town has to offer while also working at the local steel factory. Director Michael Cimino states that the working-class men who go to war view it as an "adventure" because they have a "simple desire to go beyond" the "circumscribed environments."[56] The tightknit childhood group does not understand what life is like beyond Clairton, so they view Vietnam as an opportunity. Joining the military becomes a way to enhance their American lifestyle and masculinity. Tracy Karner describes it as the conventional responsibility "which equates masculinity with productivity, occupation, and breadwinning," that "could also be realized through military service."[57] They chose to enlist because of their preconceived obligation that they had a duty to do so. John even explains his embarrassment to Mike about not being able to serve because of a previous injury that restricts him from enlisting. This responsibility weighed heavily on the men who viewed military service as a way out of Clairton, but also as a national liability. Although they view their service in Vietnam as a patriotic obligation, they still question their choice to enlist. Adolescent moments at the wedding are broken with scenes of suspense. There is a fear of change that Nick and Mike express as they reflect on their anxieties about deployment. Nick is the most levelheaded of the group and expresses how much he loves the town of Clairton. He is afraid to be left in Vietnam, so he makes Mike promise that if anything happens, "don't leave… don't leave me over there," and continuously repeats the word "promise" until Mike responds reassuringly.[58] Mike states that he must be out of his mind about his choice to go to Vietnam. This confession differs from his prior authoritative attitude and manly exterior. The two share a

[56] Michael Cimino interview, "*The Deer Hunter* Interview with Michael Cimino," interview by Melvyn Bragg, February 25, 1979, The South Bank Show.
[57] Fathers and Sons. Arkin and Dobrofsky, "Military Socialization and Masculinity," 70, quoted in Tracy Karner "Fathers, Sons, and Vietnam: Masculinity and Betrayal in the Life Narratives of Vietnam Veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder," *American Studies* 37, 1996, 72.
[58] Michael Cimino, *The Deer Hunter* (Universal Pictures, 1978).

sentimental moment where they emotionally convey their fear of the unknown. Their interaction highlights the innocence the men have before going to Vietnam, completely unaware of what they signed up for.

The sharp transition from the steady landscapes of Pennsylvania to the horrors of Vietnam display extreme violence. Michael Cimino states that the U.S. war in Vietnam became "another fact of life," so the intensity of the scene came from the necessity "to compress the horror of the experience in such a short space of time and shock people into feeling again."[59] The film's only battlefield scene shows American soldiers destroying a Vietnamese village by blowing it up with napalm. Director Cimino states *The Deer Hunter* "ought to be taken as 'surrealistic' rather than realistic" because he "used events from '68 (My Lai) and '75 (the fall of Saigon) as reference points rather than as fact," which is reflected in the violence of this scene.[60] This projection displays the impact of war's trauma on young men, how American soldiers destroyed Vietnamese villages, and how the Viet Cong injured American soldiers. Nick, Mike, and Steven have lost their humanity as the great American call to serve has shifted. Their purpose to rescue South Vietnam has turned into seeking vengeance on the Vietnamese population. They have clearly lost some of their innocence as soldiers are executing Vietnamese families with grenades, flamethrowers, and guns. This intimidating complex does not last long and, soon after they destroy the village, they are captured by the Viet Cong. They are locked away in a prisoner-of-war camp and forced to play the ruthless game of Russian roulette for their captor's entertainment. This shift from conqueror to victim illustrates that "combat wasn't adventurous. It

[59] Michael Cimino interview, "*The Deer Hunter* Interview with Michael Cimino," interview by Melvyn Bragg, February 25, 1979, The South Bank Show.
[60] Leticia Kent, "Ready for Vietnam? A Talk with Michael Cimino," *The New York Times*, December 10, 1978, quoted in, Sylvia Shin Huey Chong, "Restaging the War: *The Deer Hunter* and the Primal Scene of Violence," *Cinema Journal* 44, 2005, 95.

was deadly, impersonal, and corrupting. The warrior hero illusion never emerged as a tangible reality."[61] Nick, Mike, and Steven no longer hold the power of guns and grenades but resemble broken versions of their former selves. How they handle the pains of Vietnam begins to show as the consequences of war take root.

Vietnam has always been serious to them, but their capture heightened this reality. Facing off against each other in Russian roulette forced them all to experience a psychotic break. The one-shot emphasis Mike puts on hunting oddly mirrors the one-shot game of roulette. The "hunter becomes the hunted" as he is stripped of his "one shot of complete control" which leads to "an emblem of self-destruction."[62] He mastered the controlled technique when in charge of the hunt, but roulette is a game of chance that forces him to accept his hopeless state. Sylvia Shin Huey Chong states that, "In contrast to the strong intentionality of the metaphor of the hunt, the Russian roulette game emphasizes the random nature of fate, whereby actions have little effect on outcomes."[63] Mike is forced to play against both of his childhood friends, but his manly exterior will not allow him to back down to the Viet Cong. He instead courageously held the gun to his head. Steven is noticeably distraught as tears stream down his face. Nick is speechless and in a similar state of shock to the horror that surrounds him. Mike takes on the heroic role by rescuing them all from the Viet Cong.

The passion these men once had to fight in the war has left them hollow. There is a split between the three after this where they each attend to their own wounds. Steven has lost his legs to an injury he sustained while escaping from the Viet Cong. Mike and Nick reside in Saigon gambling halls where Russian roulette is played for profit. Nick becomes enticed by the money

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[61] Daddis, *Pulp Vietnam*, 6.
[62] Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 64.
[63] Sylvia Shin Huey Chong, "Restaging the War: *The Deer Hunter* and the Primal Scene of Violence," *Cinema Journal* 44, 2005, 95.

game he was previously forced to participate in. Roger Ebert proclaims: “The game of Russian roulette becomes the organizing symbol of the film: Anything you can believe about the game, about its deliberately random violence, about how it touches the sanity of men forced to play it, will apply to the war as a whole.”[64] Instead of being the hopeless victim, Nick takes control of the game by deciding to stay in Saigon and play competitively. His actions are psychotic as he mocks the severity of the game, but they also reflect his loss of innocence and appreciation for life.

All three men are scared to return to Clairton because they are shocked by the ruthless torture of war and do not know how to fit back into society. They have wounds to heal, but Mike tries to solve and control everyone's post-war experiences. His character takes center stage as he is “desperately trying to save his two buddies, first from the enemy in Vietnam, then from the postwar depression.”[65] He makes it back to Clairton physically healthy but mentally wounded. Mike hides from his coming home party and awkwardly does not know how to accept congratulations from his community. He enjoys being an outcast, but he does not even know how to fit back into his former role in Clairton.

His friends who stayed home from Vietnam plan a hunting trip, but his prior hobbies of drinking and hunting no longer offer him the same satisfaction. The former hunter who was in awe of the “one shot” killing practice purposely misses a deer because his view of violence is reconstructed. He quickly grows irritable with his friends, who do not understand the severity of jokingly pointing guns at each other. Mike is fully prepared to show them the “game” he was forced to play by the Viet Cong. He fills the gun with a single bullet, spins the cylinder, and pulls

[64] Roger Ebert, “*The Deer Hunter* Movie Review & Film Summary 1979,” Roger Ebert Movie Review & Film Summary, (March 9, 1979).
[65] Huebner, *The Warrior Image*, 270.

the trigger on one of his friends. The chamber is empty, but this does not stop all the friends from questioning Mike's sanity for his unfazed ability to stick a pistol between the eyes of his friend. This is where Mike's psychotic actions begin as he is beginning to realize he cannot fit into his pre-war life. The former masculine man who was idolized by his friends can no longer enjoy simple pleasures because his experience in the war fractured his mentality. He is "the hunter who dominates nature (his unconscious) through controlled violence (repression)," but has now discovered "in captivity that he cannot be omnipotent."[66] His inability to control his life and the lives of Nick and Steven have caused him to experience a psychotic break. Vietnam has wounded him from being the man he once was and causes him to have an identity crisis.

Mike tries to bring his friends home but cannot even be home himself. He receives a "hero's welcome but finds it difficult to readjust to civilian life," while Steven is trying to figure out how to "live without his legs," and Nick is "missing somewhere in Vietnam."[67] In order for Mike to live with some type of normalcy, he constructs a redemptive assignment to bring his two childhood friends back to Clairton. Steven is in the United States but reluctant about leaving the Veterans Administration (VA) hospital. He is not able to cope with his injury and is mentally on edge about living life outside the comfort of other injured soldiers. The former newlywed who was off to war is now crushed by the devastation of an unfulfilling service. He does not care to be a husband anymore but resides in a military hospital where he can live out his wounds. Mike attempts to take him home but he fights back by screaming, "I don't wanna go home" and "I don't fit!" Here he refers not only to the inability of his wheelchair to get out of the door frame, but also to his place in American society as a disabled veteran.[68] Steven's wounds are visible

[66] Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 65.
[67] Huebner, *The Warrior Image*, 267.
[68] Michael Cimino, *The Deer Hunter* (Universal Pictures, 1978).

because of his disability but also mental because of his inability to integrate into his former civilian life. He comes back from Vietnam a cautious and timid man, which contradicts his former outgoing character.

Mike goes on a redemptive mission to bring Nick back from the gambling halls of Saigon. The scene is dark as thousands of South Vietnamese citizens struggle to evacuate. He continues his mission amongst the chaotic city to rescue Nick, who is playing roulette for the amusement of Vietnamese gamblers. Nick is not fazed by Mike's arrival but is "a hollow-eyed suicidal shell of his former self" as he is "embroiled in the seedy underworld of the war-torn city."[69] Mike pays to play the game against Nick to try and convince him to come back to Clairton. The two sit across from each other, just like when they first played the game for the amusement of the Viet Cong in captivity. Mike's wounds have pushed him to try to rescue his friends, while Nick's pushed him to act deranged. Nick is so far removed from his former self that he spits in Mike's face and does not comprehend Mike's concern and love for him. Problem-solving Mike is left without a solution on how to save Nick, who "has turned his innocence into the opposite extreme of an obsession with a "one-shot" submission to passivity."[70] His manly exterior is drawn back by the reality of their circumstances. He desperately tries to get Nick out of his unrealistic state, but Nick's mind has been altered to believe all he is good for is the game of roulette.

Nick laughs as he repeats the words "one shot," almost mocking Mike's former interest with deer hunting.[71] His wounds force him to take control of the game, not as an act of

[69] Huebner, *The Warrior Image*, 267.
[70] Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 66.
[71] Michael Cimino, *The Deer Hunter* (Universal Pictures, 1978).

Nick and Mike in *The Deer Hunter*

redemption, but delusion. He does not play for the money, the macho complex, or the entertainment of the gamblers who surround him, but takes death into his own hands because he does not have the same appreciation for life after he served in Vietnam. Chong explains that "the confusion of identities provoked by the Vietnam War cause Nick to commit a solipsistic act of self-violence. He identifies with the whole of the scenario: detached from his own identity, he simultaneously becomes shooter, victim, and watcher."[72] Nick does not last long in the game and soon commits suicide. Mike catches his former childhood friend and screams out in shock. His deterministic attitude and tough masculine personality is deflated as he can no longer hold back his emotions. He failed to be the hero and complete his redemptive assignment. Although he holds true to his promise to bring Nick home from Vietnam, he neglected to cure his own conscience with his inability to bring Nick back from his delusion.

Nick is brought back to Clairton in a casket, surrounded by Steven in a wheelchair and Mike in a daze. They gather in the same bar that was once a place of cheerful drinking to sing an emotional "God Bless America." Mike and Steven are left in a state of shock that does not reflect relief to be alive, but sorrow to have enlisted. The three stories project Vietnam's lasting

[72] Chong, "Restaging the War: *The Deer Hunter* and the Primal Scene of Violence," 99.

influence on veterans. Many who served were incapable of overcoming the damage done by the war, which is clear by Nick's suicide, Steven's disability, and Mike's unfulfilled assignment. The film begins with "classic macho guys" who enjoy "hard drinking and skirt chasing" yet ends with a "shattered group of friends" who all have a low spirit.[73] The group of friends went from a happy wedding celebration, where cheerful songs filled the atmosphere, to the burial of a friend, and the ominous reality that their service was unsuccessful. They lose their innocence immediately when the scene shifts from Clairton to Vietnam, and shortly experience a psychotic break after they are forced to play roulette, which leaves them with wounds that relay the fact that they can no longer return to their pre-war life.

[73] Huebner, *The Warrior Image*, 268-269.

**COMING HOME (1978):**

*Coming Home* was released the same year as *The Deer Hunter* and portrays disabled veterans in one of two ways. Veterans Luke Martin and Bob Hyde are both reeling from their involvement in Vietnam. They comparatively experience a loss of innocence and psychotic break to show how the acceptance of injury can either soften or expand wounds. The film projected the growing unpopularity of the Vietnam War in America and how veterans felt isolated upon their return. The film "displaced the historically grounded image of politicized anti-war veterans with the image of the victim-veteran." In addition, this transformation "functions in the nation's political culture as part of an alibi for why we lost the war, namely, that our warriors were betrayed on the home front."[74] Neither Luke nor Bob achieved the promised masculinity they hoped for while in Vietnam. They were, instead, bombarded by protesters or treated poorly in VA hospitals upon their arrival. Bob's wife, Sally, tries to comfort both men, but the belief that they did not patriotically serve left them hostile. "The characters Sally, Bob, and Luke are all based on real-life people who were interviewed" by screenwriter Waldo Salt "over about a two year period from 1974 and 1976." Participants like director Hal Ashby were involved "in discussions about the script and details of production," but the storyline in the film is true and reflected how bitter veterans felt about their military service.[75] Luke must deal with his paralytic state and Bob must deal with his miserable mindset, and both were unable to validate their war experience.

The film begins by comparing the masculine and healthy Captain Bob with the physically disabled veterans at the VA hospital. The ability for Bob to enjoy his health is

[74] Jerry Lembcke, "From Oral History to Movie Script: The Vietnam Veteran Interviews for *Coming Home,*" *The Oral History Review* 26, no. 2 (1999): 66.
[75] Lembcke, "From Oral History to Movie Script: The Vietnam Veteran Interviews for *Coming Home,*" 67.

contrasted by images of men in the hospital being helped by nurses to complete everyday tasks. He is ready to fulfill his patriotic duty in Vietnam while the veterans are resentful about the reality of theirs. Bob's wife, Sally, is not as excited for her husband to go, but she uses her free time to volunteer at the VA hospital. Luke is introduced as one of the many wounded veterans at the hospital who try to justify their war experience. The veterans cannot characterize the war as a waste, because then what happened to them would be a waste, but they have lost a sense of respect for the patriotic duty they previously longed to fulfill. They lie to themselves about the reality of their service in Vietnam to deal with their lifelong injuries and disabilities.

Luke is a former cocky football star who boldly enlisted to go to Vietnam after high school, but his masculine complex changed when the war left him paralyzed and miserable. The hospital does not have the equipment or staff to make sure he has a wheelchair and is properly cared for. This mistreatment causes him to lash out, but the hospital staff tranquilize him so they do not have to deal with his outbursts. He furthers his sorrow by antagonizing Sally for her choice to volunteer and Bob's choice to go to Vietnam. In a sarcastic fit of rage, he exclaims that she should go do something she is good at instead of "helping out the poor cripples."[76] Luke is aware of his cynical attitude and response, but his paralytic state has driven him to experience a psychotic break where he lashes out at the people around him for his wounds. He sees no reason why all his innocence was wasted in Vietnam just to receive hardly any help when he returned home.

His attitude lightens once he gets a wheelchair and begins to display some pride in his veteran status. Luke was under the belief that he could do no good because of his disability,

[76] Hal Ashby, *Coming Home* (United Artists, 1978).

but he begins to recognize that, if he accepts his wounds, he can assist other veterans. He shares a sentimental moment with a mentally unstable veteran at the VA hospital, which relays "the importance of male empathy and communion" in helping "the veteran's attempts at overcoming his suffering."[77] He has a better grasp on life because he embraces his limitations instead of fighting them. Once he accepts that his masculinity was not lost in his disability, his former need to act out is calmed when he utilizes his wounds instead of letting them control his attitude. He begins to actively protest the war once the same unstable veteran commits suicide in the hospital. This triggers Luke to chain himself to the gates of a military recruitment center. The death has caused some of his previous wounds to resurface, which he expresses through activism.

Luke's recovery is contrasted when Bob quickly learns Vietnam was not the land of opportunity that glorified a sense of accomplishment. He meets Sally on a brief rest-and-recuperation trip, where he is visibly crushed by the reality of war. Bob had the desire to be a hero or find adventure in winning, but his manly exterior is soon questioned when Sally asks him what is bothering him. He tells Sally, "It's all his bullshit about Nam, it's in my head, I can't get it out," but he is not able to explain to her how it is influencing his psyche.[78] His mental wounds are building against him as he loses his innocence in Vietnam. Bob's prior image reflected "an explicit, albeit constructed, vision of how a conquering warrior should behave," before he was deployed.[79] He is unable to let down his guard and confide in Sally because he cannot even understand what he is going through, himself. There was a former emphasis he put on being a Marine, which becomes distorted once he talks about how he has witnessed soldiers chop the

[77] Huebner, *The Warrior Image*, 264.
[78] Hal Ashby, *Coming Home* (United Artists, 1978).
[79] Daddis, *Pulp Vietnam,* 5.

heads off the Viet Cong. The obligation he signed up for is much different than the one he has been assigned. Bob is reeling from his inadequacy in combat and failure to express his troubles.

Once Sally returns to the VA hospital, she begins to show Luke compassion that is not based on his veteran status, while Luke reveals that Sally was not the happy Marine wife she believed herself to be. Her "attraction to Luke takes noticeable leaps whenever he shows sensitivity, vulnerability, or compassion," which is something her husband fails to do.[80] Luke gains enough confidence in himself that he pursues a sexual relationship with her. Roger Ebert states that once he "begins to focus his anger away from himself and toward the war; he grows calmer, regains maturity," so Sally can see herself pursuing a relationship with him. The two "eventually make love, confronting his handicap in a scene of great tenderness, beauty, and tact."[81] The former veteran who previously would not accept help, now allows Sally to pick him up and navigate his wheelchair through the doorway of her home. His ability to be truthful about his disability makes Sally advance a sexual relationship with him. It was not attractive that Luke was a war hero or decorated veteran, but that he was an emotional man who was able to express how the war wounded him. She does not view Luke as a crippled veteran but accepts him for his capability to confront the misconceptions of war and masculinity. Daddis explains "there are costs" when the war is idealized "as *the* essential man-making experience." Redefining the relationship between war, sex, and masculinity influences how young men view "what it means to be a man."[82] Their sexual relationship signifies that "impotent men can still satisfy women sexually and retain a sense of physical attractiveness."[83] Luke proves that a man does not lose his

[80] Huebner, *The Warrior Image*, 264.
[81] Roger Ebert, "*Coming Home* Movie Review & Film Summary 1978," Roger Ebert Movie Review & Film Summary, (January 1, 1978).
[82] Daddis, *Pulp Vietnam,* 237.
[83] Huebner, *The Warrior Image*, 265.

masculinity once he becomes disabled. His manhood was redefined as he proved his sexual capability was not limited.

Bob's mental wounds expand into physical ones. He returns home after accidentally shooting himself in the leg, which causes him to be defensive. His resentment increases when he is greeted by protestors of war at the airport instead of a cheerful welcome home party like he had hoped for. His embarrassment and alcohol abuse cause him to be overwhelmingly bitter because he does not feel he fulfilled his patriotic duty. In screenwriter Waldo Salt's interviews, the veteran who Bob's character is based on emphasized "his reflections on American society, and the difficulty that Vietnam vets have had communicating with a 'society that don't fuckin' listen.' Bob expressed a feeling of misplacement because the "Vietnam experience had taught veterans that this society is a lie and now this society does not want to deal with them."[84] He is in some sort of limbo, feeling like he does not belong at home or in Vietnam, which comes to a head when he learns of Sally's affair. His sorrow merges into "an inglorious wound, a discharge from Vietnam, and a wife who has cheated on him," which makes him feel inadequate as a man.[85] His life before the war is nonexistent, which causes him to experience a psychotic break and confront Sally and Luke. He points a rifle between the two, cursing and condemning their affair.

Bob Hyde, Sally Hyde, and Luke Martin in *Coming Home*

[84] Lembcke, "From Oral History to Movie Script: The Vietnam Veteran Interviews for *Coming Home,*" 68.
[85] Huebner, The Warrior Image, 265.

His actions are met with an overall confusion about his identity as a veteran. Luke understands Bob's anger with his bitter return to the United States and begs him not to kill because he already has "enough ghosts to carry around."[86] Luke had to learn to come to terms with his flaws, which is something Bob refuses to do. The two have a similar bewilderment about what the war put them through, but a different perspective on recovery. Luke had to do serious internal reflecting before he could accept his veteran status. Bob pushes away this ideal because of his difficulty to accept his service ended unsuccessfully. He is unable to let go of the control he wished to have in the Marines and does not allow himself to suffer amongst other soldiers. The former man-making experience that was supposed to be achieved in Vietnam has left him unable to comprehend his role as a veteran. He believes his service is verified by doing something he could claim as his own. His expectations of masculinity fell short, and his failure to believe he completed an honorable service makes him feel "deprived of heroism, the one thing he had grown up believing war could offer. Without that, he is a helpless victim of his experiences in Vietnam."[87] Although he is unsatisfied with his status, he attends a ceremony where he is awarded a purple heart. His respectable jacket, which now holds an assortment of pins, does little to help him build a purpose.

Luke agrees to give a speech about being a Marine to highschoolers but breaks down and expresses his desire to not see any more people experience what he has. He exclaims that the glory associated with service is not achieved in Vietnam, that he "has killed" for his country and he does not "feel good about it."[88] To warn the high schoolers against enlisting, he states:

> You know, you want to be a part of it, patriotic, go out and get your licks in for the U.S. of A. And when you get over there, it's a totally different situation. I mean, you grow up

[86] Hal Ashby, *Coming Home* (United Artists, 1978).
[87] Huebner, *The Warrior Image*, 265.
[88] Hal Ashby, *Coming Home* (United Artists, 1978).

> real quick. Because all you're seeing is, um, a lot of death. And I know some of you guys are going to look at the uniformed man and you're going to remember all the films and you're going to think about the glory of other wars and think about some vague patriotic feeling and go off and fight this turkey too. And I'm telling you it ain't like it's in the movies.[89]

He got caught up in this glorified war experience from a former Marine who spoke about loyal servitude. As he grows more inspirational, the scene flips to Bob, who is headed to the beach. He begins to undress from his uniform and takes his wedding ring off to place beside his belongings. The two relationships that did not work out for him, his service and his marriage, mock him. Without his ability to control either one, he leaves them both behind as he takes his own life by drowning in the sea. He was unable to live with his wounds and mourns the hero he hoped to become.

A veteran could either have self-awareness and accept the war for what it was or be a killer who becomes delusional. Once Luke acknowledges his wrongdoings and his former assumption about America's role in Vietnam, he can live with his disabilities. Luke shows "his sensitivity, vulnerability, and willingness to admit weakness or mistakes," which came at a cost for Bob.[90] Once Luke redefined what the war did to him, it lost the ability to control him. He was able to create a different definition of manhood and servitude by making love with Sally, helping fellow veterans, and persuading others to not enlist. There is a personality shift once he recognizes his influence and purpose as a veteran. He did not emphasize the necessity of military victory but rather projected that men did not get gratification from the Vietnam War. Masculinity was redefined in *Coming Home* when "men in uniform" were seen "crying, comforting other men, refusing to fight, and speaking more freely about their feelings."[91] Instead of letting

[89] Ibid.
[90] Huebner, *The Warrior Image*, 266.
[91] Huebner, *The Warrior Image*, 264.

bitterness consume him, Luke uses his disability to re-man his identity. Bob did not have the same character development, and his motives are portrayed as psychotic. He came home physically healthy but mentally crippled. His inability to be vulnerable about his wounded mentality caused him to give into his suffering and die by suicide. Both men were unfulfilled, but Luke chose to combat his war experience while Bob let his condemn him. These two courses reflected that a veteran had to admit his wrongdoings and turn to activism or be lost and suffer.

**APOCALYPSE NOW (1979):**

*Apocalypse Now* was released in 1979 and is inspired by Joseph Conrad's novel, *Heart of Darkness*.[92] Conrad tells the story of a man named Kurtz who made himself the "god" of a region on the Congo River. There is a "growing repulsion" from civilization "and increasing attraction to Kurtz" as the protagonist seeks to find him.[93] Captain Willard is the protagonist in *Apocalypse Now* as he is introduced as a wounded Vietnam soldier from the film's start. He believes his past sins have led him to his most frightening assignment, assassinating Colonel Kurtz. Roger Ebert states, "The whole movie is a journey toward Willard's understanding of how Kurtz, one of the Army's best soldiers, penetrated the reality of war to such a depth that he could not look any longer without madness and despair."[94] The American military explains to Willard how Kurtz has reached his breaking point and how his wounds have left him questioning the difference between good and evil. Tired and numb Captain Willard goes after crazy and confused Colonel Kurtz to uncover the true intentions of the U.S.'s war in Vietnam. Director Francis Ford Coppola assured *Apocalypse Now* was "honest, mythical, pro-human, and therefore pro-American." He desired for the film to be accurate but received opposition from the Army and Pentagon's Public Affairs Office regarding the indecency of the script. He states: "I'm cauterizing old wounds, trying to let people put the war behind them. You can never do that by forgetting."[95] The authenticity he desired was not met fondly by the American military in many instances. His inhumane projection of America's military displays the cruelty that caused soldiers to go psycho and question their dedication to war.

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[92] Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (London, England: Penguin Classics, 1899).
[93] Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 72.
[94] Roger Ebert, "*Apocalypse Now* Movie Review & Film Summary 1979," Roger Ebert Movie Review & Film Summary, (November 28, 1999).
[95] Lawrence Suid, "*Apocalypse Now*: Francis Ford Coppola Stages His Own Vietnam War," *Cinéaste* 8, no. 3 (1978): 34.

Coppola transformed "the river journey of *Heart of Darkness* into an investigation of both American society (represented by the army) and American idealism (represented by Colonel Kurtz) in Vietnam."[96] His depiction to the heart of darkness starts with a drunk and lonely Captain Willard who is waiting for the U.S. military to give him his next assignment. The narration of his thoughts condemns his past actions. He cannot get out of the headspace in which he will wake up in the jungle of Vietnam. His illusive state causes him to psychotically strut around a room in Saigon crying while also practicing his fighting technique.

Captain Willard in *Apocalypse Now*

He believes that his sins from previous tours are the reason behind his problematic state. Margot Norris explains, "The result is an effect of layered but productive trauma, of Willard, already agonized by pain and guilt, obliged to enact his nightmares over again."[97] Once he is awakened from his deluded and drunken state, he is astonished by his next assignment. His mission involves assassinating Colonel Kurtz, who became unsound after he joined the American special forces. Kurtz is portrayed as a psycho soldier for betraying the military once he reported the failure of the U.S.'s war in Vietnam and disregarded his status to organize operations. Willard does not believe he, himself, is worth redemption as his wounds make him accept the assignment. The U.S. military previously sent Special Forces Captain Richard Colby on the same mission as Willard, but he abandoned the mission and joined Kurtz.

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[96] Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 70.
[97] Margot Norris, "Modernism and Vietnam: Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now,*" *Modern Fiction Studies* 44, no. 3 (1998): 736.

Willard is already disgusted with the war but propels himself to see the dark truth Kurtz has uncovered. Both men have already served time in Vietnam, which is obvious by their mental state and loss of innocence, but Willard's loss grows as he finds Kurtz. Throughout his "investigation of Kurtz," Willard realizes "that this murderer is the embodiment, in a vastly larger scale, of his own inner ideals."[98] He examines Kurtz's military file, which is decked out with achievements. The more Willard understands his prior status in the U.S. military, the more he admires Kurtz for his ability to abandon his former life. Kurtz called out America's failures and escaped the captivity of civilization. Willard signs up to assassinate him, but questions whether he will actually do so. Along the journey to find Kurtz, Willard uncovers some truth about his own conscience, the truth of men, and war. He is ambitious but is stopped numerous times, revealing the troubling aspects of the Vietnam jungle.

Willard is supposed to be escorted by Colonel Kilgore, but Kilgore is busy cleaning up the remnants of a bombed Vietnam village. One of Willard's crew members is a professional surfer who is immediately welcomed by Kilgore because he is obsessed with the sport. As bombs, gunfire, and screams fill the atmosphere, Kilgore greets the surfer with a smile. This type of savagery is Kilgore's normal as he continues to have a conversation amongst the destruction. American soldiers are on microphones repeating, "We are here to help you," as Kilgore puts death cards on Vietnamese bodies that are scattered on the ground.[99] Kilgore becomes consumed with overtaking a part of the beach that is known for its good surfing waves, as Willard discusses his plans to be escorted as soon as possible. The next morning the beach is bombed by Kilgore and his crew. He assumes he will get the opportunity to surf once the village that occupies the beach is obliterated. Kilgore states that he loves "the smell of napalm in the morning" as he

[98] Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 82.
[99] Francis Ford Coppola, *Apocalypse Now* (United Artists, 1979).

murders Vietnamese children and individuals like it is a game and suits up in anticipation to surf.[100] His craze soon ends once Willard and his crew escape to go on their mission. It is apparent that Kilgore is psychotic in his actions to bomb a village for the sole purpose of his hobby, but Willard cannot understand "why Colonel Kurtz is thought mad in the face of psychopaths like Kilgore."[101] It becomes apparent that he was a commendable soldier as Willard flips though his former military file. The military was upset that Kurtz "kept winning it his way," and could track American tactics.[102] He was a decorated American soldier but purposely went against the chain of command. Kurtz identified and killed Vietnamese double agents without permission, so he was accused of murder himself. The allegation caused Kurtz to have a psychotic break and retreat from society because he could no longer live with the guilt and hypocrisy of war.

Once the crew escapes Kilgore and his perplexed instigation of violence on the Vietnamese population, they begin their journey on the Nung River. They make expected stops for supplies and fuel, but some unexpected stops as well, the latter of which expose the crew to the inhumanities of war. The crew quickly lose their innocence to the dangers of the Vietnam jungle that they previously misconceived. They travel down the river with no regard for their reckless behavior and disrespectfully mock the Vietnamese population. Chef and Willard have an interaction that knocks Chef into a psychotic break. The men dock the boat and come face-to-face with a tiger. They are shocked as they shoot their guns and run back to the boat for safety. Everyone echoes "don't get off the boat" as the lesson has become an actuality Chef did not

[100] Ibid.
[101] Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 82.
[102] Francis Ford Coppola, *Apocalypse Now* (United Artists, 1979).

understand.[103] He freaks out when he comes to terms with the fact that there is no safe place in the jungles of Vietnam.

They soon make a safer stop for supplies but are treated with a Playboy show that extends their stay. Women in scandalous outfits perform for several soldiers by groping and shooting off guns in their show. This reflects the dehumanizing influence of war as violence, sexuality, and masculinity are portrayed in their performance and the soldiers' reactions. The crew is infatuated with the show, but Willard reacts vaguely to the women. His only purpose is finding Kurtz, and he loathes the stops the men make along their journey. Once the crew is pulled away from the women, they get back to their journey and soon arrive at the Do Lung Bridge. There are several American soldiers in the river begging the boat to rescue them because it is the last military outpost on the Nung River. The scene gets more intense when Willard and Lance get off for fuel and information. There appears to be no commanding officer as the Viet Cong attack the bridge daily. The U.S. continues to build up the bridge to claim that the river is open, but realistically, there is no control. Chief questions Willard's advances to keep going, but Willard is dedicated to his mission. They press forward, leaving the soldiers behind to defend the bridge as one of the last pieces of U.S. honor.

Willard is sick of having to explain or repeat his instructions to the crew. His psychotic break comes out of frustration with the crew for their inability to follow his orders. They repeatedly express their annoyance towards Willard's attitude and inability to reveal to them the classified mission he is on. Willard is wounded from the beginning of the film, but his scars grow more intense as he travels up the river. He completely disregards his crew because his only focus is finding Kurtz. The ego he has built up from his former tours in Vietnam made him believe that

[103] Ibid.

he is equipped to handle whatever their journey involves. He becomes angry with the crew once they stop a Vietnamese boat on the river to search it. It had nothing on it but food, animals, and Vietnamese individuals, but it is thrown around by the American soldiers. Willard advised Chief not to stop for the sake of his mission, but Chief insisted because he operates according to Standard Operating Procedure (SOP). There is a commotion during the search that causes the crew to open fire on the boat. Their wounds and loss of innocence caused them all to be on edge as they do not regard the Vietnamese population with decency. Every Vietnamese member on the boat ends up dead except for a young girl, who is about to be treated when she is shot and killed by Willard. He responds to Chief, "I told you not to stop. Now let's go."[104] Chief's dedication to policy is different than Willard's operation according to the true rule of war. The crew views Willard as a psycho for executing the woman, but Chief insists that the men follow proper procedure, which does not work. The SOP Chief lives by is a deception in the jungles of Vietnam, and Willard's focus on the mission has overcome any sympathy he may have for the crew or Vietnamese population. He knows they would not look at him the same after the murder, but he was not looking for pity, only to get to Kurtz.

The mission was always dangerous but Mr. Clean and Chief die on the river before they can all reach Colonel Kurtz. Lance lights a grenade and the crew is attacked by hidden North Vietnamese Army (NVA) soldiers. Mr. Clean is shot as he listens to a tape made by his mother. She emphasizes her excitement for him to return home to a normal teenage life where he will possibly get a car and give her grandchildren. Her direction to "stay out of the way of the bullets" sets an eerie scene as Mr. Clean lies in a puddle of his own blood.[105] The youngest and most innocent of the crew is the first to be killed. Willard can tell he is almost to Kurtz when the

[104] Francis Ford Coppola, *Apocalypse Now* (United Artists, 1979).
[105] Ibid.

boat gets pelted by small wooden arrows from an indigenous community on the riverside. They do not do any damage but are only intended to scare the crew. The men disregard Willard's command to cease fire and all shoot at the community. They take defensive action and Chief is struck in the back with a spear. He attempts to impale Willard with the blade of the spear that has broken through his chest but does not have the strength. Willard's mission has now caused him to lose two of his crew members before he reached his destination. Chief constantly questioned Willard's motives and warned of their unruly fate if they continued but died to do so. Chef is next in line to take Willard upriver, so Willard reveals his mission to assassinate Kurtz. His disclosure is met with a fit of rage because Chef's purpose in the U.S. military was not to kill a Green Beret. Despite the disagreement, the men press on.

They finally find Kurtz's hiding spot amongst an indigenous community which is built up of Montagnard tribesmen who worship him as a god. In a state of confusion, the crew is met by an American photojournalist who idolizes Kurtz. He claims that "we're all his children" referring to himself and the population that follow under Kurtz's rule.[106] There is no question of Kurtz's madness once the boat stops on the shore that displays a dead body hanging from the tree in front of an abandoned temple. Chef and Lance are shocked by the community as they have reached the end of the river, and the heart of darkness, losing all their innocence. Willard gets the chance to speak with the Colonel about his motives, but Kurtz is more interested in asking Willard about his mission. He is fully aware that the U.S. military has preached about his insanity. The war drove him to question his status, so he built a community around a new one. Kurtz gives little credit to Willard's mission but calls him an "errand boy" then locks him away in a bamboo crate.[107] He does not kill Willard but tortures him in captivity by placing the severed head of

[106] Ibid.
[107] Francis Ford Coppola, *Apocalypse Now* (United Artists, 1979).

Chef in his lap before he is locked in an underground cave. Kurtz has lost all his morality as he pushes his wounded mentality and psychotic actions onto the community he rules.

Willard is released from his underground cave and spends time in Kurtz's presence without any guards or crates holding him back. They know the Vietnam War has changed their concept of honorable servitude and made them question their allegiance to the U.S. military. Willard admires how Kurtz subverted from the military but once he arrived at the heart of darkness, which is Kurtz in his Montagnard community, he realized how truly insane he was. Along the river journey, Willard questioned if he would join him, but now he sees that Kurtz's humanity is nonexistent. Kurtz lost all sense of control when he did not have anyone to report to and began to represent the horrors of the Vietnam War he despised. These same horrors threaten to envelop Willard, as Kurtz exclaims that Willard has the right to kill him, but not to judge him. Kurtz's ideology to embrace the horror is displayed in his actions, but also reflects how soldiers viewed injustices and cruelties in the Vietnam War. Willard must confront his own role in the heart of darkness that was his journey up the Nung River. Both men see the veracity of war, but Kurtz wants Willard "to take the pain away" with death.[108] Willard decides it is time to act and enters Kurtz's temple with a machete to complete his mission. His actions no longer need justification because he found his own reason to want Kurtz dead.

As Willard emerges from the temple with a handful of Kurtz's writings the indigenous community bows down to him. He was able to kill the former respected Colonel who embodied the darkest parts of war. His reason for killing Kurtz went beyond the promise he made to the military, and he was tired of living in his own perverse subconscious. Willard was once a victor who displayed "the national archetype thus embodying the essential longings and anxieties of the

[108] Francis Ford Coppola, *Apocalypse Now* (United Artists, 1979).

American psyche," who was sent on a journey to uncover "the aberrant, fragmented, hallucinatory Vietnam experience."[109] Along the way, he loses more than half his crew and regard for his status in the military. Willard was not seeking validation for the kill because he found his own reason to want Kurtz dead. "His encounter with Kurtz has allowed him to see what he [Willard] is," so he could "confront his acts and guilts." [110] The killing frees Willard from the darkest parts of himself, but took the pain away from Kurtz, who offered himself to Willard. He is able to confront and kill his perverse identity that is reflected in Kurtz's psychotic behavior. Willard leaves the Montagnard community after he completes his mission, but realizes his purpose will never be found in killing because the moment it does, he will be just like Kurtz. The journey to Kurtz reflected the damaging parts of his own soul as he uncovered the hypocrisy behind the U.S.'s war in Vietnam.

[109] Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 78.
[110] Norris, "Modernism and Vietnam: Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now,*" 736.

**FIRST BLOOD (1982):**

*First Blood* premiered in 1982 and portrayed disoriented veteran John Rambo as a rejection of American society. Rambo offers flashbacks of his time in Vietnam, but his character development happens in a small Pacific Northwest town. His figure "reinforced the powerful 1980s idea that the Vietnam War was an American tragedy that victimized our troops, our pride, and our national identity."[111] Rambo struggles to overcome his mental wounds from his time in Vietnam and is pushed into a psychotic break by a society that does not respect him or his service. He was part of a Special Forces team that equipped him with skills and training, but also stripped him of his innocence. The former warrior he was in Vietnam who escaped captivity and received a Congressional Medal of Honor is not recognized in small town America. When asked about the sadness of John Rambo, director Ted Kotcheff responds:

> What epitomized that picture was how badly the Vietnam veterans were treated when they came back home. The right-wingers thought they were a bunch of losers, and the left-wingers thought they were a bunch of baby-killers. I remember hearing horrible stories from the veterans about how they were treated when they returned.[112]

Rambo combats the hypocrisy and creates a self-imposed war against the small town of Hope, Washington, so he can get the respect he deserves as a Vietnam veteran. He conquers the town, which displays his strength and skill but does not change the fact that Vietnam was "terribly unfulfilling" and insinuated that "heroic masculinity seemed farther out of reach thanks to the war," which was "not the principal reward for a job well done."[113] His aggression and

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[111] Christian G. Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity* (New York: Viking, 2015), 249.
[112] An interview with Ted Kotcheff, "Money into Light," Interview by Paul Rowlands, Film Interviews, Essays, and Articles by Paul Rowland.
[113] Daddis, *Pulp Vietnam,* 223.

dedication to conquer reflect a psychotic veteran who is so displeased with America's loss in Vietnam that he had to wage a war he could win.

He attempts to track down the only other survivor from his Special Forces team, Delmar Berry, in hopes that the two can reunite. He approaches a small mountainside community with an optimistic attitude and prideful smile. His entire demeanor changes once he is told Berry died of cancer, which Berry's mother believes was caused by the Agent Orange used in Vietnam. Even if a Vietnam soldier was able to make it back to the United States and became a veteran, he would not be able to escape the damaging effects of Vietnam. Berry's death reflects this physically, but Rambo's delusion will reflect this mentally. One of his last attachments to Vietnam has died and so did his care to adapt back into society. Berry represented Rambo's last ounce of hope and innocence before his psychotic break. No matter the veteran status he carried, he would never be able to save what Vietnam took from him.

Rambo walks to the nearest town with a single bag over his shoulder, which signifies abandonment. As he enters the town of Hope, Washington, he is abruptly stopped by Sheriff Teasle who wants to run him out of town. Sheriff Teasle profiles him as a drifter who's "asking for trouble" based on his appearance and the American flag he displays on his jacket.[114] Rambo does not correct the officer but accepts a ride from him. He "could have informed him that the flag is a sign of patriotism, that he is a Vietnam veteran, indeed that he is a former Green Beret and a winner of the Congressional Medal of Honor," but he chooses to keep his mouth shut.[115] Rambo is depressed over the loss of his friend but used to society rejecting him and running him out of town. His failure to rebuild his post-war life and the feeling of neglect gives him courage to confront the officer after he drops him off outside the town. Rambo turns right back into the

[114] Ted Kotcheff, *First Blood* (Columbia Pictures, 1982).
[115] Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 145.

town of Hope because he will no longer allow himself to be the outcast. He wants to prove that he can fit into society and does not deserve a negative label because of his appearance. It is not long before he is arrested and booked with a list of unjustifiable charges.

The cops torture Rambo with slurs and threats. They beat, kick, and hose Rambo down to "clean him up" for his courtroom appearance.[116] His wounded psyche begins to emerge once his arrest reminds him of his capture in Vietnam. As one of the officers approaches him with a blade to shave his beard, Rambo flashes back to his former imprisonment where a Vietnamese torturer scarred his body. He has a psychotic break and creates the delusion that the town of Hope has declared war on him. Rambo snaps on all the men in the police station and manages to successfully escape. Roger Ebert states that when Rambo "explodes near the beginning of *First Blood,* hurling cops aside and breaking out of a jail with his fists and speed, it's such a convincing demonstration of physical strength and agility that we never question the scene's implausibility."[117] He quickly reveals why he was on a Special Forces team in Vietnam with his ability to get past every officer with ease. His freedom from the police station does not fulfill any promise of overall exemption from trouble. The former veteran identity he tried to conform to has left him fighting another war he made up in his head. The disrespect and mistreatment he receives from the police uncovers his mental delusion but forces him to declare war and show off his skill to American society that he can win. He runs to the mountains where he once again must fight for his freedom.

Some of the opinions of the police force change when they learn about Rambo's identity as a Green Beret, but Sheriff Teasle refuses to give up the hunt. Officers run to the mountains

[116] Ted Kotcheff, *First Blood* (Columbia Pictures, 1982).
[117] Roger Ebert, "*First Blood* Movie Review & Film Summary 1982," Roger Ebert Movie Review & Film Summary, (January 1, 1982).

with several dogs, guns, and helicopters flying overhead but cannot beat Rambo's skill. The officers and guardsmen quickly learn of Rambo's ability once they all get detained by his boobytraps and are left to sulk in their injuries. Christian G. Appy describes it best when he states Rambo successfully "lures a huge force of National Guardsmen out into the wilderness. They are noisy, overarmed, inept, and undisciplined; he is stealthy, surgical, and relentless," proven by his ability to take them all out.[118] He does not desire for anyone to die in the chase, he just wants respect and to be treated fairly. His goal is not to kill the men but to display his defensive skill. This is not well received by the police force who believe Rambo murdered a fellow officer who accidently fell from a helicopter while searching for him. Teasle calls Rambo a psycho for what he is convinced happened to his fellow officer and wants revenge. Once they all shoot and continue to hunt for him, Rambo's mindset changes and he develops a war strategy against the cops.

Rambo understands the men want him dead but the wounds from his smalltown imprisonment stem from his previous military service. Director Kotcheff states, "The little town in the movie was a microcosm of how America treated its veterans." Young men "didn't ask to go to Vietnam. They risked their lives over there and they came back and they were absolutely rejected and vilified."[119] This is reflected in Rambo's acceptance of the wilderness over the society that so quickly rejected him. He naturally adapts to the environment, and the more he fights off local law enforcement, the more he transforms back to the prior warrior soldier he was in Vietnam. The media reports that Rambo is a savage who has killed one officer and wounded many more. He is projected as a "muscle-bound warrior who seemed more suited to war than

[118] Appy, *American Reckoning,* 248.
[119] An interview with Ted Kotcheff, "Money into Light," Interview by Paul Rowlands, Film interviews, Essays, and Articles by Paul Rowland.

peace" for his inability to surrender.[120] Several ambulances and city police crowd around the mountains as he completely transforms back to the masculine man he had to be in Vietnam. The pressure he felt to save his life and be a hero in Vietnam has carried over to the mountains of Washington. Rambo's old Colonel shows up to retrieve him from the mountains and instructs Sheriff Teasle that he did not come to rescue Rambo, but to rescue his police force from Rambo. Colonel Trautman discusses Rambo's skill in guerrilla warfare, as well as his deteriorated mental state that pushes him to defend himself. The former sheriff who wanted to run Rambo out of town refuses to accept that he is "the best with guns, with knives, with his bare hands" and has "been trained to ignore pain, ignore weather, to live off the land."[121] The Hope police force could not beat his military training, so Teasle is defensive against Trautman's accusations. Rambo soon proves his knowledge and uses his skill to interrogate anyone who tries to kill him in the mountain.

Rambo sets up camp at the entrance of an abandoned mine where he can live in peace. He does not mind using his abilities to hunt and gather supplies but finds it rather normal. Most of the supplies he has taken from local law enforcement have given him the ability to collect weapons, get clothing, and retain a radio. The police try and contact Rambo once they learn he can be reached, but only Colonel Trautman can get Rambo to talk. He has no desire to surrender and believes Sheriff Teasle instigated the fight. Once he felt betrayed, he had a psychotic break that caused him to protect his honor. Rambo insists that Sheriff Teasle "drew first blood" and he cannot excuse his behavior.[122] His ability to obsess over the sheriff as the enemy carries over from the real enemy he faced in Vietnam. The National Guardsmen go to his tracked radio

[120]Daddis, *Pulp Vietnam,* 83.
[121] Ted Kotcheff, *First Blood* (Columbia Pictures, 1982).
[122] Ibid.

location and shoot a rocket launcher at the mine. Sheriff Teasle concludes they finally killed Rambo, but Colonel Trautman knows better. Rambo found a way to escape through the mine and hijacks a military truck heading into town. One of the officers alerts Sheriff Teasle, who jumps at the chance to kill Rambo because of his personal vendetta against him. Rambo does not fear going back into town but busts through a row of police officers to return to Hope. His goal is to show off his strength and conquer the town that ungratefully rejected him. Rambo's acts of vengeance in blowing up a gas station, the local sports store, and cutting the power in parts of the town confirm his psychotic break. The small town he promised to wage war on has finally been seized when he goes to confront Teasle at the police station. Colonel Trautman interjects himself in the altercation and tells Rambo he "did everything to make this private war happen" and he has "done enough damage," so to surrender before he is killed.[123] Rambo's efforts to wage war complete the former threat he made to Sheriff Teasle but also expands on his internal wounds. He proves that he is a masculine war hero but also a victim of the American military.

He questions Trautman's orders to give up and breaks down in front of his former Colonel. Trautman tells him that the U.S.'s war in Vietnam is over, but Rambo speaks on the struggles of his post-war life.

> Rambo: Nothing is over! Nothing! You just don't turn it off! It wasn't my war! You asked me, I didn't ask you! And I did what I had to do to win, for somebody who wouldn't let us win! Then I come back to the world, and I see all those maggots at the airport, protestin' me, spittin', callin' me a baby killer and all kinds of vile crap! Who are they to protest me?! Huh?! Who are they?! Unless they been me and been there and know what the hell they yellin' about!
>
> Colonel Trautman: It was a bad time for everyone Rambo. It's all in the past now.
>
> Rambo: For you! For me civilian life is nothin'! In the field without a code of honor. You watch my back I watch yours. Back here there's nothin.'[124]

[123] Ted Kotcheff, *First Blood* (Columbia Pictures, 1982).
[124] Ibid.

The validation he seeks could only be fulfilled if the war had gone differently and he was welcomed home. His confession exposes his wounded mindset and emotional ties to Vietnam that represent appreciation yet disgust. He values the status Vietnam gave him because, in the words of Rambo, "I could fly a gunship, I could drive a tank, I was in charge of million-dollar equipment," but in America he "can't even hold a job parking cars!"[125] But in Vietnam, he was dreaming of escape with a friend who was blown to pieces in Saigon because of a boxed boobytrap that Rambo states: "blew his body all over the place. And he's layin' there and he's fuckin' screamin', there's pieces of him all over me, just like-like this. And I'm tryin' to pull em off you know? And my friend it's all over me!"[126] He finds himself stuck in a limbo of inadaptability where he cannot find safety in Vietnam as a soldier or acceptance in America as a veteran. To combat this strife, he waged a war he could win against the town of Hope. War is what Rambo knows, so when he came back home to no war, he decided to create one for himself.

Rambo and Colonel Trautman in *First Blood*

It did not matter that Rambo was a decorated war hero, he was still disrespected and unappreciated. Rambo's vengeance emphasizes the need to recognize Vietnam veterans for their service instead of treating them as outcasts. He spiraled into the complexity of his role within America and "underneath the gaudy displays of pumped-up power," he is left "vulnerable, bitter

[125] Ted Kotcheff, *First Blood* (Columbia Pictures, 1982).
[126] Ibid.

and psychologically brittle" from his service."[127] Rambo turned psychotic, having no place to go, being the legacy of his special team unit, and being excluded from the America he fought to preserve, but overall, his character emphasizes the loss of Vietnam. He represents what America needed to win the war. Rambo was wounded but did not let fear stop him from being a military genius who took over a town and overthrew hundreds of soldiers and officers. His skill reflects that the U.S. *could* have won if soldiers were brave and bold enough, which increases the facade that to be a hero, a soldier must win. After he voices his trauma to Colonel Trautman, which exposes his inability to get the agony of war out of his head, he accepts defeat and walks out of the police station in handcuffs. This was not the ending he hoped for, similar to his feelings about Vietnam, but he is withdrawn from all the damage he caused.

[127] Appy, *American Reckoning,* 249.

**PLATOON (1986):**

There was a change in how the U.S.'s war in Vietnam was portrayed in 1986 with the release of *Platoon.* The film projected the confusion and heartache associated with wartime, while also displaying the gruesome experiences of a soldier's time in Vietnam. Roger Ebert describes it as a desire to "make a movie about the war that is not fantasy, not legend, not metaphor, not message" but represents a "memory of what it seemed like at the time."[128] For *Platoon,* this realism was projected through the narration of young soldier Chris Taylor. He talks throughout the film about his hardships, but his sharing of fear connects the soldiers' point of view to the overall fear of America's involvement in the war. To add to the authenticity of the film, *Platoon* was "the first Vietnam War film written and directed by an actual participant, a true veteran auteur."[129] Director Oliver Stone added originality to the film by creating a story that was not about the inconsistencies of the war, but the experiences of men. Soldiers in the film are constantly on their toes, unaware of what could happen next and subject to the harsh environment of the jungle. To blow off steam they smoke and drink, to channel their anger they abuse the Vietnamese population, and to survive they turn on each other. American standards were skewed as a result of combat, and they were enticed by killing and conquering that which they could control.

The film displays a scripture out of the book of Ecclesiastes that reads, "Rejoice O young man in thy youth…," which contradicts the first scene of the film. Body bags are laid across the ground as a group of young soldiers gets off a plane somewhere near the Cambodian border. It is not long before main character, Chris Taylor, is displayed throwing up in the Vietnam jungle

[128] Roger Ebert, "*Platoon* Movie Review & Film Summary 1968," Roger Ebert Movie Review & Film Summary, (December 30, 1968).
[129] Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 252.

from the sight of dead bodies, heat stroke, and irritation of being eaten alive by bugs. He is young and will soon realize that "innocence was clearly a victim of the war," so he does not belong.[130] Taylor describes these experiences in personalized letters to his grandmother, which he reads aloud throughout the film. The fluidity of these voice-overs expresses the changes Taylor experiences but from the point of view of a white, educated kid who dropped out of college to join the fight. In his first letter to his grandmother, he expresses his loneliness as "nobody cares about the new guys" because "a new guy's life isn't worth as much 'cause he hasn't put his time in yet."[131] He wanted to be different from the educated, white man in America in the 60s who traditionally received exemptions from serving. Taylor dropped out of college because he had the goal of living up to what his "grandpa did in the first war, and dad did in the second," referring to the prior WWI and WWII masculinity image.[132] His experience contradicts what he learned and viewed from his elders. The Vietnam War is not built upon victories and bravery, but survival. He quickly speaks about regret as his search to be a man has landed him in the Vietnam jungle surrounded by men who came from small towns, received little education, and do not have much to look forward to. This created "a sense of helplessness, not heroism" because the "working-class boys – for the most part" who were called upon to serve in Vietnam, "came home from the war without having their manhood validated, rather being judged by sympathetic commentators" for their inability to accomplish a victory.[133] Taylor's decision to volunteer for the war comes as a surprise as the men he describes are the poor and unwanted members of society, sent off to Vietnam to fight for American freedom. This heightens his

[130] Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 233.
[131] Oliver Stone, *Platoon* (Orion Pictures/ Hemdale, 1986).
[132] Ibid.
[133] Daddis, *Pulp Vietnam,* 172.

innocence to war because Taylor is sheltered, so he looks to these men to show him how to conduct himself in Vietnam.

There is a clear rift between Sergeant Elias and Sergeant Barnes who run Taylor's platoon. Elias is considerate and shows compassion towards his men while Barnes's tough demeanor is portrayed as dark and heartless. This split reflects the two aspects of the U.S.'s war in Vietnam. On one hand, there is the good faith that soldiers are humane, which is embodied in Elias. On the other, is the American grit that wants to destroy Vietnam, which is Barnes. By creating a good and evil path, director "Stone has created two contemporary movie-warrior types" and "pitted them against one another in a contest for the soul of the innocent hero, Chris."[134] They show how split the effort had become and differ in their attempts to achieve Taylor's allegiance. Elias's wounds have caused him to lose faith in America's fight. He believes America will lose because they have "been kicking other people's asses for so long," it is about time they get theirs kicked.[135] Barnes wants to control and dominate the war his way, and Taylor believes he is in Vietnam to waste bodies. Neither Sergeant is cynical about their role in the war but is interested in showing Taylor their "path" of war. Elias is a part of the hippie crowd who smoke weed, talk politics, and

Chris Taylor with Sergeant Elias (to his right) & Sergeant Barnes (to his left) in *Platoon*

[134] Robert Sklar, Pat Aufderheide, Larry Ceplair, Leonard Quart, Clyde Taylor, and Bruce Weigl, "*Platoon* on Inspection: A Critical Symposium," *Cinéaste* 15, no. 4 (1987): 6.
[135] Oliver Stone, *Platoon* (Orion Pictures/ Hemdale, 1986).

are racially mixed. Taylor does not choose Elias's side because he believes it will bring America victory in the war, but he gives Taylor a purpose in the fight.

This group becomes Taylor's crowd once he comes back from an ambush that left him injured. He is an inexperienced rookie who was shot by the NVA the first time he was on watch. As he spots the soldiers in the dead of night, he is frozen in fear and unable to pick up a gun. Director Stone reflected this realism from his own experience in combat, stating he viewed "the North Vietnamese troops as shadows moving in the jungle. Sixty to seventy percent of our actions came at night, and they were very hard to see, very hard to catch."[136] Taylor is jolted back into reality as gunfire rings out and he has been hit. This is the beginning of him losing his innocence as he is shedding out of the secluded new guy and becoming a wounded soldier himself.

Now that Taylor has experienced some combat, his helmet reads, "When I die bury me upside down so the world can kiss my ass," proving that he is beginning to get a sense of the confusion that surrounds the war.[137] This hostility is heightened when some of his squad is blown away by boobytraps and killed by the Viet Cong. The squad is ready for revenge as they enter a nearby village that is believed to be harboring enemy forces. They followed Barnes in destroying the civilization because they knew he would make the wrongs right. Taylor experiences a psychotic break while terrorizing the civilians that causes him to question his psyche. He shoots at a young Vietnamese man, making him "dance," or dodge the bullets Taylor penetrates into the ground below him. His innocence is gone once his reasoning for going to Vietnam is reconstructed into viewing the Vietnamese population as the enemy. The shooting stops as he

[136] Gary Crowdus and Oliver Stone, "Personal Struggles and Political Issues: An Interview with Oliver Stone," *Cinéaste* 16, no. 3 (1988): 20.
[137] Oliver Stone, *Platoon* (Orion Pictures/ Hemdale, 1986).

begins to cry over the emotional wounds of losing his sanity. He has turned into the psycho soldier by following in the footsteps of Barnes, who has taken it upon himself to interrogate the village and shoot some of their civilians. Elias emerges to confront Barnes, and the two Sergeants fight until all the men are instructed to torch the village. The destruction is unnerving as the "frazzled and vengeful" crew "begin a series of depredations that fall just short of a My Lai massacre."[138] American soldiers rope up Vietnamese civilians, light their houses on fire, and blow up their livelihood. This tragedy reflects "war's everyday agony" because "Stone also understands the way fear, fatigue, and rage could move some GIs to lose all sense of control and moral balance, and begin to massacre civilians and torch a village."[139] This was a direct reflection how American soldiers treated the Vietnamese population. Each soldier's wounds causes him to lash out and the Vietnamese are the target of the blame. As they leave the village, Taylor attends to the screams of young girls being raped by American soldiers. He rips the girls away as the men question his sexuality, manhood, and reasoning. Violence was not only necessary but acceptable as soldiers took over anything they could in Vietnam. These soldiers were "frustrated that combat in Vietnam had left them few opportunities to 'prove' their manhood" so they would dehumanize the Vietnamese "via sexual conquest or violence."[140] They were frustrated with the little validation the war brought them and believed they could do as they pleased with the civilians. Taylor puts them in their place by referring to the girls as human beings and the men as animals. This scene captures Taylor in all three categories, from losing his innocence from the loss of his fellow soldiers to a psychotic break that made him crave revenge that quickly turned into being brought back down to earth by his wounded mentality. The panic

[138] Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 254.
[139] Sklar, Pat Aufderheide, Larry Ceplair, Leonard Quart, Clyde Taylor, and Bruce Weigl, "*Platoon* on Inspection: A Critical Symposium," 6.
[140] Daddis, *Pulp Vietnam,* 8.

is evident as all the men are scared an investigation may take place and begin to question their actions in torching the village, raping the girls, and killing the innocent.

Taylor broke down after the realization that he was becoming a cold-blooded killer of the Vietnamese like Barnes, but his wounds have pushed him to choose Elias's path of war. The former rookie who could hardly walk in the jungles of Vietnam now runs to men who are injured and saves them from the front lines of ambushes. Taylor channels all the bad he has experienced thus far into some sort of courage that assists his crew and Elias. He writes in one of his final letters to his grandmother, "The morale of the men is low. A civil war in the platoon. Half the men with Elias, half with Barnes. There's a lot of suspicion and hate. I can't believe we're fighting each other when we should be fighting them."[141] The crew disagrees amongst themselves and "the Vietnam presented here is a frightening, bleak world where GIs face both an almost-invisible, ubiquitous, formidable enemy, and the fragmentation, and divisiveness of their own unit."[142] These disagreements come to a head when Elias separates himself from the crew. Barnes ensures Elias is alone by pulling the rest of the men back from the ambush as he ventures to find him alone. He confronts Elias by shooting him in cold blood. His psychotic behavior can only be attributed to his desire for complete control. This delusion has pushed him over the edge and caused him to turn against his own crew. His plan is not successful as Elias emerges out of the jungle being chased by the NVA. He is helpless and wounded as helicopters fly the rest of the crew away from the area. Michael Anderegg explains, "The death scene, agonizing and prolonged through slow motion, culminates as Elias spreads his arms in the gesture of Christ crucified."[143] The platoon shockingly looks at Barnes, who claimed that Elias was dead moments

[141] Oliver Stone, *Platoon* (Orion Pictures/ Hemdale, 1986).
[142] Sklar, Pat Aufderheide, Larry Ceplair, Leonard Quart, Clyde Taylor, and Bruce Weigl, "*Platoon* on Inspection: A Critical Symposium," 6.
[143]Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 161.

earlier. Barnes killing Elias represents the evil course of war taking over the good. Taylor knew Barnes shot Elias because of the look on Barnes's face when he emerged from the jungle. He attempts to get others on board with fragging him, but the majority of the crew thinks, "Barnes ain't meant to die," because of his ability to stay alive in Vietnam.[144] Barnes will not change because he will not allow the military to break down and be filled with men like Elias. Taylor idolized Elias and when he loses the only good thing he found in the Vietnam War, he lost some of his purpose in the fight.

The men prepare for an NVA ambush soon after they get back to camp, but the confidence is low amongst the dwindled numbers of the crew. Hundreds of NVA soldiers successfully penetrate the camp, but Taylor finds Barnes amongst the chaos. The two begin to fight and Taylor gets thrown to the ground as Barnes plans to kill another one of his fellow soldiers. He is still unable to accept those who disagree with him and will kill to be in full control. The smoke clears the following morning to show an alive, but injured Taylor, who picks up a gun amongst a pile of dead bodies. Barnes is physically wounded and crawling away when he turns around and tempts Taylor to kill him. Taylor does not hold back, but murders Barnes before he walks out of the jungle as one of the only survivors of the ambush. Taylor is taken by helicopter away from the scene with a tearful smile on the way to treat his injuries. His goal of finding some sort of identity in the war was solidified through his final act of killing Barnes. Taylor had to kill to avenge Elias, but also to demonstrate his personal masculinity and strength.

Stone states that he "wanted to tell the story of a small microcosm of an infantry unit and the struggles of a young boy," instead of flooding the film with unnecessary detail.[145] He followed a one-person perspective to project how inhumane the U.S's war in Vietnam was and

[144] Oliver Stone, *Platoon* (Orion Pictures/ Hemdale, 1986).
[145] Crowdus and Oliver Stone, "Personal Struggles and Political Issues: An Interview with Oliver Stone," 20.

the effects it left on a young, innocent soldier. In his final voice-over, Taylor discusses the real tragedy that the men fought themselves instead of the enemy which reflected the truth that the enemy was in them all along.

> Chris Taylor: I think now, looking back, we did not fight the enemy; we fought ourselves. And the enemy was in us. The war is over for me now, but it will always be there, the rest of my days as I'm sure Elias will be, fighting with Barnes for what Rhah called possession of my soul. There are times since, I've felt like the child born of those two fathers. But be that as it may, those of us who did make it have an obligation to build again, to teach to others what we know, and to try with what's left of our lives to find a goodness and a meaning to this life.[146]

He recognizes his tendencies to be like both Elias and Barnes and states that they showed him what it was like to be both good and evil. Taylor speaks on the responsibility of those who survived to teach others the real Vietnam, which is what Stone reflected. "Rather than fall prey to the imitative fallacy and make a confused film about a confusing war, Stone works within the conventions of the Hollywood combat film to anchor a recollected experience that is by definition disorienting."[147] He adds a persuasive, yet interesting perspective by making the main character a young man who volunteered to fight. Taylor was concerned with achieving the promised masculinity that came with the war but his purpose changes once the truth of the American military surfaced. Once he loses his innocence, he goes back and forth between his wounds and psycho behavior as he questions if there is any good in the U.S. war in Vietnam. Roger Ebert argues that *Platoon* "should have been made before any of the others," referencing other Vietnam films, because it gets to "the bottom line, which is that a lot of people went over there and got killed, dead, and that is what the war meant for them."[148] The film projects how

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[146] Oliver Stone, *Platoon* (Orion Pictures/ Hemdale, 1986).
[147] Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 253.
[148] Roger Ebert, "*Platoon* Movie Review & Film Summary 1968," Roger Ebert Movie Review & Film Summary, (December 30, 1968).

innocent young men became dehumanized by the U.S.'s war in Vietnam. The cruelty and brutality of war forced them to experience a psychotic break, leaving them with many wounds to care for.

**FULL METAL JACKET (1987):**

After the eerie idolization of Rambo came the perplexity of Marine J.T. Davis in *Full Metal Jacket.* The film is split into two major components with the first scene taking place at a Parris Island boot camp, and the second following the battle in Da Nang and Hue City. Director Stanley Kubrick states the film "tries to give a sense of the war and the people, and how it affected them." He bases the storyline on the 1979 book "*The Short-Timers,* in which young Marines are molded by boot camp and then twisted by war – and [Kubrick] was immediately enthralled."[149] He focuses "attention primarily on the cultural conditioning of the men who fought in the war. Kubrick projects the story of main character J.T. Davis, who is nicknamed Joker by his Head Sergeant. Joker is stripped of his innocence in boot camp and built up into a masculine Marine who has been "born again hard."[150] His killer instincts are juxtaposed with his desire for peace and restoration amongst the Vietnamese. Once Joker is exposed to the pressure men are under in boot camp, the injustices of war, the inhumane treatment American men force upon the Vietnamese, and the loss of fellow soldiers, he has a psychotic break.

All the men experience the hell of boot camp, but Hartman's job is to strip them of their innocence in preparation for Vietnam. Joker gets his nickname the first day of boot camp for his amusing sense of humor and John Wayne impersonations. Head Sergeant Hartman quickly humbles his actions and punches Joker in the stomach while asking him why he joined the Marine Corps. Joker's answer comes as a bit of a surprise from his former light-hearted personality as he screams "Sir, to kill, sir."[151] The innocent young rookie is quick to put on a war face after the Sergeant promises that, if the men survive training, they will be "a minister of

[149] An interview with Stanley Kubrick, "Stanley Kubrick, at a Distance," Interview by Lloyd Rose, *Washington Post* Staff Writer, (June 28, 1987).
[150] Stanley Kubrick, *Full Metal Jacket* (Warner Bros, 1987).
[151] Ibid.

death praying for war."[152] He puts a significant interest on each man's rifle, making them assign a lady's name to the weapon they sleep and pray with. Roger Ebert states that "all situations in the Marines and in war seem to suggest sexual parallels for" Sergeant Hartman. "One of the film's best moments has the recruits going to bed with their rifles and reciting a poem of love to them." Hartman projects the toughness of the Marine Corp, which shows "how man has produced himself as inextricably technologized and violent."[153] His foul mouth and demeaning actions are utilized to break the men down so they can be "born again hard" into the likeness of Marines.[154] Hartman ensures they each get a taste of hell as he condemns them with slurs and violence.

This introduction to boot camp is a rude awakening for the men, but Sergeant Hartman chooses to pick on Private Lawrence, whom he nicknames Private Pyle for his unmasculine personality and appearance. Pyle becomes the center of Sergeant Hartman's rage as he bullies him into humiliation. Kubrick concedes that "I just think the dialogue is so good it goes beyond the question of 'should he be saying this? Is it right or wrong?' The most important thing is that it's dramatically effective and interesting and it's true."[155] Hartman's behavior reflects the harsh treatment young rookies are forced to endure before they can become men. Joker reluctantly takes on the leadership role that comes with taking care of Private Pyle. The two get along at first as Pyle progresses with Joker's patient instruction. Joker does not seem to be the "killer" he claimed to be in his arrogant remarks to Hartman but shows compassion to Pyle by taking him under his wing. This all changes once Pyle makes a mistake and Hartman punishes the platoon

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[152] Stanley Kubrick, *Full Metal Jacket* (Warner Bros, 1987).
[153] Roger Ebert, "*Full Metal Jacket* Movie Review & Film Summary 1987," Roger Ebert Movie Review & Film Summary, (June 26, 1987).
[154] Stanley Kubrick, *Full Metal Jacket* (Warner Bros, 1987).
[155] An interview with Stanley Kubrick, "Stanley Kubrick, at a Distance," Interview by Lloyd Rose, *Washington Post* Staff Writer, (June 28, 1987).

while Pyle is ordered to stand and watch. The platoon turns on Pyle, and he cries out to Joker for help because everyone hates him, but Joker turns on his former friend for the sake of the Corps. All the men are fed up paying for Pyle's mistakes and beat him during the night. Joker holds back at first, refusing to hit the man that he has nurtured, but beats him with enough pressure from the crew. Their friendship is clearly over as Joker turned on a fellow soldier for his disappointments and loses some of his innocence. Pyle's wounds increase along with his inability to achieve perfection. He was not able to live up to the masculine expectations that were associated with the American Marine Corps. The pressure to perform in boot camp causes him to experience a psychotic break. Pyle's inadequacy combined with his mentally straining environment deepened his desire for acceptance.

He is physically wounded by the beatings of the crew and unable to cope with his misery. He begins to treat his rifle with respect because it is the only thing he can turn to in the world of rejection around him. Hartman repeatedly asks the platoon, "What do we do for a living, ladies?" to which all reply, "Kill, Kill, Kill!"[156] He becomes infatuated with his weapon as Hartman trains him to understand "what one motivated Marine and his rifle can do."[157] Pyle applies what Hartman has preached from the beginning of boot camp and appreciates his rifle by mastering it and talking to it as if it were alive. He finally understands what it means to be a part of the Corps as he succeeds in shooting practice and drills. Pyle begins to lose touch with reality and the more he hears his purpose is to kill, the more eager he becomes to do so. Hartman congratulates him for being "born again hard," but Joker realizes Pyle is no longer mentally stable. Once he experiences a psychotic break, "Pyle is himself transformed into a monster by this victimization"

[156] Stanley Kubrick, *Full Metal Jacket* (Warner Bros, 1987).
[157] Ibid.

because "it is only when he is clearly insane that Pyle begins to 'fit in' to the Corps."[158] He had to perform to be accepted into the platoon, but this acceptance does not do much to patch his wounded psyche. Joker discovers Pyle cradling his rifle in the restroom their final night on the island. He tries to calm him down, but without missing a beat, Pyle assembles his rifle and loads it with a full magazine which he refers to as a "full metal jacket."[159] Hartman comes in and orders Pyle to put his weapon down, but Pyle's psychotic break pushes him to kill Hartman, then take his own life. Joker stands in a state of shock yet relief to be alive. The murder scene he witnessed has caused him to lose more of his innocence. Boot camp is meant to break the weak parts of a man so he can be rebuilt into a masculine Marine, but instead of building a tough soldier, Pyle disintegrated mentally. He was not able to leave the island and go to Vietnam with the wounds he developed in boot camp, so he had to kill Hartman for causing his inadequacy, then himself for being "in a world of shit."[160]

Joker is deployed following the incident and is in action as a reporter for *Stars and Stripes,* an Army newspaper, in Da Nang. He enjoys his role in the city where he bids on "gook whores" with a grin, and in the newsroom where his humor is recognized.[161] Joker wishes to write on the reality of war, but the lieutenant is quick to remind him that they "run two basic stories," which include "winning of hearts and minds" or "winning the war."[162] He has little experience on the battlefield and the killer he trained to be in boot camp has not yet killed in Vietnam. Joker sits around camp and discusses his boredom with fellow Marines when explosions break out. The NVA begin to attack on Tet, and he arms himself behind a machine

[158] Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 209.
[159] Stanley Kubrick, *Full Metal Jacket* (Warner Bros, 1987).
[160] Ibid.
[161] Ibid.
[162] Ibid.

gun as his instinct to "Kill, Kill, Kill!" has kicked in. He shoots at several NVA soldiers without any knowledge whether he got a confirmed kill.[163]

The lieutenant gives Joker and his co-worker Rafterman the job of going to Phu Bai after the attack. They are supposed to get a report that gives the American people some hope, but the lieutenant is more concerned with the bad reports that were just delivered to the newsroom. He states that, "The civilian press are about to wet their pants, and we've heard that even Cronkite is about to say the war is now unwinnable."[164] The lieutenant is speaking on the attack the men were involved in the previous night, but director Kubrick reflects the destruction of the Tet Offensive, which "represents a turning point in the way Americans in Vietnam and at home viewed the war. For the first time, serious doubts about the United States's ability to win the war were raised."[165] This uncertainty is further displayed with Joker's appearance in the newsroom. He has a peace symbol on his body armor, which he is instructed to take off by his lieutenant before he leaves, but refuses. After his first combat interaction, he displays the symbol pridefully but wears his helmet that reads "Born to kill." This reflects the confusion young men felt about fighting in the war. Boot camp taught him to kill, but he internally struggles to understand the violence. The confusion heightens when Joker and Rafterman fly by helicopter with an American soldier who spews bullets out at Vietnamese civilians. He jokes about killing women and children with a smile. The closer Joker moves to battle, the more he questions America's duty to rescue the Vietnamese people.

Once the two reporters land, they begin to interview soldiers about twenty Vietnamese civilian deaths. A Colonel questions Joker about the peace symbol he has on his chest versus the

[163] Ibid.
[164] Ibid.
[165] Paula Willoquet-Maricondi. "Full-Metal-Jacketing, or Masculinity in the Making," *Cinema Journal* 33, no. 2 (1994): 7.

saying on his helmet. He asks Joker, "What is it supposed to mean?" to which Joker replies, "I don't know, sir!"[166] The Colonel is quick to call out Joker on his opposing messages, but his image reflects that it was okay to question the purpose of war. Director "Kubrick collapses the boundaries around particular events to show that they are parts of a broader comprehensive cultural agenda," and Joker later explains that he was trying to suggest something about the duality of man.[167] His innocence is represented in the peace symbol, but his wounded mentality is displayed on his helmet. The peace symbol projects his dislike for the inhumanity of war, but it is contradicted with what he was taught about being a Marine and a killer. The opposing personas reflect his opinions of war as he has a personal desire for peace, yet collective inclination for war.

Joker in *Full Metal Jacket*

Joker's experience up-country projects that every American soldier has lost his purpose for being in Vietnam. He finds his old buddy from boot camp, Cowboy, and his squad who act disturbed and psychotic. The squad has a dead NVA soldier as their "mascot" that they pridefully acknowledge, take advantage of the land, and disrespect the Vietnamese population. They do not see a problem with their destruction because they viewed themselves as American conquerors who could do as they pleased. The crew is soon headed to the remnants of Hue City where Joker

[166] Stanley Kubrick, *Full Metal Jacket* (Warner Bros, 1987).
[167] Willoquet-Maricondi, "Full-Metal-Jacketing, or Masculinity in the Making," 10.

witnesses his first up-close American killing. He becomes more accustomed to the violence that surrounds him as they progress through the city. The squad is under fire and is hiding amongst the destruction of the city when a small TV crew runs past them filming. The crew's actions are seen as deranged but there was hardly "official control of the media" because "military officials simply could not imagine censoring the news."[168] This projected the role media played in the Vietnam War and how eager journalists were to document the conflict. The cameramen are waiting for the soldiers to penetrate the city so they could precede with "Hue City Interviews." The men who are interviewed are able to speak directly about their opinions on America's involvement in Vietnam. Anderegg explains, "The footage from Vietnam, whether on film or videotape, was produced by generation of filmmakers imbued with the style and technique of cinema verité and direct cinema."[169] Because of this footage, there was a report of what young American men in South Vietnam believed about the war. This was reflected in *Full Metal Jacket* as Cowboy yells, "This is Vietnam – the movie," while Joker happily states, "I wanted to be the first kid on my block to get a confirmed kill."[170] Joker's words and actions are displayed as psychotic. He is reflecting what he learned in boot camp, that Marines "will be a weapon" and "a minister of death praying for war," in the words of Sergeant Hartman, but he is still in search of a kill to validate his service. [171] Joker continues to search for a purpose amongst his desire for peace, yet training to be a tough Marine, but attempts to affirm himself another way. Once the interviews conclude, Joker and the rest of the Marines bid on a Vietnamese prostitute brought into town. She is bought by the men after agreeing to have sex with them for $5 each. Her purchase "suggested that Americans had simply used South Vietnam for sexual gratification, a

[168] Huebner, *The Warrior Image*, 174.
[169] Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 2.
[170] Stanley Kubrick, *Full Metal Jacket* (Warner Bros, 1987).
[171] Ibid.

way to help fulfill the fantasy of war as a man-making experience" because they could not win elsewhere.[172] This reflected that buying sex would turn boys into men and give them a release from the anguish that surrounded them. Joker plays along with the catcalls and disrespectful comments but projects that boys developed impulsive behaviors because they were looking for a way to validate their manhood.

Cowboy soon learns he is squad leader on their journey in Hue. He attempts to give instruction to the squad as they go through an unsafe position but is quickly killed by a Viet Cong sniper. Joker holds his friend as he dies in his arms, which causes him to have a psychotic break. He embraces his masculine Marine persona and training to kill once he has a personal reason to seek revenge. This connection between manhood and the Marines emphasized that "when a recruit completed his training, he knows he's proved himself a first-rate fighting man."[173] Joker excelled in boot camp, where he was taught to be heartless but was able to suppress this disposition until his wounded mentality pushes him to seek vengeance. Now that Joker turns "manly" because of his desire to kill, director Kubrick reflects "the profound analogies between the making of the Marine and the making of masculinity in general" and "unmasks the true meaning of patriarchy and its motivation."[174] The desire to kill has now consumed Joker but his beloved rifle gets jammed once he meets the Viet Cong female sniper that killed Cowboy. He has been taught to love his rifle for its abilities, but it does not work when he needs it most. The female is already spewing bullets when Joker throws his rifle away and reaches for another weapon. He hopes to avenge his friend but is now fearful for his own life. Rafterman shows up in time to injure the female but not kill her. In his excitement he asks,

[172] Daddis, *Pulp Vietnam,* 208.
[173] Daddis, *Pulp Vietnam,* 20.
[174] Willoquet-Maricondi, "Full-Metal-Jacketing, or Masculinity in the Making," 5.

"Am I a life-taker? Am I a heart-breaker?"[175] The squad stands over the injured female in a state of wonder. Some want to leave her to suffer, but there is something about her young femaleness that causes the men to hold back on their threats. Joker kills her with his pistol in "an act of mercy," but only "as a gesture of scapegoating, one for which he must now take personal responsibility."[176] Joker has executed his final ounce of innocence once he shoots the woman. He becomes a Marine, and hence a man, once he has a confirmed kill. With his manhood validated, Joker joins the rest of the squad as they complete their mission in Hue. They grin and eerily sing "The Mickey Mouse March" as the war-torn city around them goes up in flames. Kubrick criticizes military manhood and American idealism from the suicide on Parris Island to the murder at Hue. The U.S.'s war in Vietnam has become a repetitive violent cycle for American boys to turn into men by proving they can kill.

[175] Stanley Kubrick, *Full Metal Jacket* (Warner Bros, 1987).
[176] Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 212.

**BORN ON THE FOURTH OF JULY (1989):**

In 1989, three years after Oliver Stone's *Platoon,* came the true story of Marine Ron Kovic in *Born on the Fourth of July.* Kovic grew up dreaming that his purpose was to bring honor to his country, but the reality of his idolization is bleak. He enlisted in the Marines right after high school, where he served two tours in Vietnam. On his second tour he was left paralyzed from the waist down and returned to a society that did not understand all he had given up in service. Stone again reflected the authenticity of a Vietnam soldier's experience and his "two Vietnam films – one about frontline combat, the other about home-front rehabilitation," project an authentic image of young men fighting an inhumane war. The film's combination of "veteran/director Stone in *Platoon*" and "activist/ autobiographer Ron Kovic in *Born on the Fourth of July,"* emphasizes the corruption and torment men faced in the Vietnam.[177] His pre-war and post-war life project the mental and emotional damage of war for paralyzed Vietnam veterans.

The portrayal of Kovic's life begins as a kid in Massapequa, New York, who quickly learns to appreciate America's perfect war record. Ten-year old Kovic is seen attending an Independence Day celebration where veterans are being saluted and everyone has a sense of American pride. He grows up in a traditional American household with parents who idolize his successes. Teenage Kovic continues to notice the respect and honor associated with service in his small town. All the milestones in his life center around his desire to validate his manhood. Movie reviewer Christopher Sharrett states that, "Kovic's Massapequa upbringing makes the repression of sexuality and its transformation into competition and violence central to the film's argument. The American obsession with winning is nicely drawn in a series of vignettes dealing with

[177] Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 252.

Kovic's high school years."[54] Kovic strives to win the heart of his high school crush, advance in wrestling competitions, and impress his parents.

He enlists in the Marines before he even graduates to affirm his manhood. Kovic is convinced after two Marine recruiters stop by his high school and emphasize the patriotic duty associated with service. One of the recruiters claims that the Marines are the "first to fight" and they "have never lost a war," which only affirms Kovic's hope to be a champion.[178] Kovic's dad is not pleased with his son's choice to go to Vietnam, but he gains full support from his mother who believes "communism has to be stopped."[179] His enthusiasm to serve takes over his youth as he obsesses about being deployed. Part of his innocence is lost after he tries to convince his friends to enlist as well. He references what all their dads did in WWII and preaches this is their "chance to do something" and "be part of history."[180] The teenagers sit around and mock those that do not want to serve their country as a sign of selfishness. The devotion he has to Vietnam increases with the promise of American victory from the news channels, Presidential speeches, and recruiters buzzing in his ear.

Kovic grows up fast and the screen quickly shifts to display the trusted Marine Sergeant on his second tour in Vietnam. Two mistakes he makes in Vietnam haunt him upon his return to the United States. He and his crew mistake a peaceful Vietnamese village for the enemy. They enter the village after firing multiple shots and witness the damage. Several civilians are dead or suffer debilitating injuries. Kovic and his men attempt to help but evacuate after the NVA begin to infiltrate. He pieces together their severed body parts as best he can and tries to rescue a crying baby but must be dragged out by his lieutenant. As the men run from the village, Kovic is

[178] Oliver Stone, *Born on the Fourth of July* (Universal, 1989).
[179] Ibid.
[180] Ibid.

in a haze and mistakes a rookie in his platoon for the enemy. He mistakenly shoots and kills an innocent American soldier, not realizing he was running to seek shelter with Kovic. His first two mental wounds in Vietnam come from his personal or crew-made mistakes. The order to destroy a harmless village, his inability to save those who were hurt, and the slaying of an innocent young man begin to disassemble the belief he had about the war being a man-making experience. The day concludes and Kovic attempts to talk to his supervisor about the injustices. His supervisor is not concerned with the issue and tells Kovic to drop the situation. The previous loyalty he worshipped in the Marines becomes questionable. He not only mourns his innocence but the belief that he would be a conqueror. Kovic grew up wanting to be a part of a righteous military but has not found much honor in killing innocent people and being told to keep quiet. He does not receive recognition for admitting his faults and begins to question his loyalty because of the guilt he experiences with the inconsistencies of war.

His mental wounds expand into physical ones and later he becomes critically injured during a shootout with the NVA. He is taken away by helicopter to a doctor's tent filled with men fighting for their lives. The injuries he sustained have paralyzed him from the chest down, but unaware of the damage, he believes he needs to be operated on. Before long he miserably resides at a rundown VA hospital, which has aged and weakened him significantly. The former full-of-life soldier is defeated as he sulks away in a hospital where no one cares about his service or recovery. Patients are ignored because the hospital staff is too busy abusing drugs or playing cards. Kovic's previous desire to find validation as a hero has left him confined to a wheelchair. He wanted to feel respected but is instead infuriated with the protesting and burning of the American flag displayed on the hospital television.

His hostility continues when the doctor advises him that he will never be able to have children and will likely spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair. Kovic is dedicated to proving him wrong and waddles around the hospital on crutches that are braced to his wrist. His only escape is confiding in nurse Willie, who is the only nurse not addicted to drugs, rude towards the patients, or dealing with some type of mentally deranged attitude in the hospital. Willie is the only man who encourages Kovic's ambition to walk again. Kovic dreams of being a fully-abled man again and does everything he can to try and walk again until he falls and breaks his leg. The more he struggles to find his new identity as a wounded veteran, the greater he fails. He does not get the proper treatment after breaking his leg, which almost causes it to be amputated. The nurses taunt him by asking, "What's eating you now, Kovic? You going off the deep end?"[181] Kovic is now restrained to his bed, which pushes him into a psychotic break. Nurses cannot understand why he wants to keep his broken leg if he is unable to use it and mock him for losing it in Vietnam.

> Kovic: It's my leg! I want my leg, you understand? Can't you understand that? All I'm saying is that I want to be treated like a human being! I fought for my country! I am a Vietnam veteran! I fought for my country! And I think that I deserve to be treated decent!
>
> Nurse: Vietnam? Vietnam don't mean nothing to me, man, or any of these other people. You can take your Vietnam and shove it up your ass.[182]

This interaction only escalates Kovic's search for his post-war identity. His feelings of underappreciation grow once the pump that is keeping his leg from amputation breaks down and the doctor advises Kovic the hospital is not getting the proper funds to take care of veterans. Kovic has been strapped to his bed for months in hopes that he can keep his leg. All the abuse he endures "leaves a dejected Kovic wondering what he had lost his legs for and why he and others

[181] Oliver Stone, *Born on the Fourth of July* (Universal, 1989).
[182] Ibid.

had gone to Vietnam at all."[183] His psychotic outburst comes from a place of mistreatment and rage that he gained little recognition from a war that took his livelihood. He is deeply offended that the people caring for him do not appreciate his service, and the insensitivity he is greeted with only makes him question his sacrifice.

Kovic still searches for his purpose once he returns to his parents' home in Massapequa. The attention he craved in the hospital is met in a peculiar way when the neighbors come outside to gawk at his new appearance. He is surprisingly optimistic when he greets the family and friends that visit him and joke about his paralysis. His old high school room is full of memorabilia of his innocence before Vietnam. The former young man who was eager to serve his country now sits in his wheelchair and admires his old wrestling photos where he was active and healthy.

He attempts to rebuild his life as a disabled veteran but is met with hostility and misunderstanding from his friends, family, and former love interest. The attention he receives as a veteran is not what he previously idolized, but he is labeled an outcast. Kovic is belittled by a former friend who went to college instead of Vietnam. He built a successful local business and offers Kovic a job as a cashier. When Kovic declines the offer because of his disability check from the government, his friend describes the money as "charity." He insulted the "communist bullshit" Kovic believed that left him in a wheelchair.[184] Skepticism of the war continues when Kovic's brother reveals he does not agree with the war effort. His brother views Kovic as a psycho who overly obsesses about justifying the war. He constantly brings up the anti-war protests and explains how the American people, "burned the flag and they demonstrated against us; it's on the cover of the paper today. They have no respect. They have no idea what's going on

[183] Daddis, *Pulp Vietnam,* 168.
[184] Oliver Stone, *Born on the Fourth of July* (Universal, 1989).

over there, Mom, the men that are sacrificing their lives, people are dying every day over there, and nobody back here even seems to care."[185] His brother is tired of his patriotic outburst and begins to walk away when Kovic rambles about those who oppose the war. Kovic is hurt when he realizes his brother does not appreciate the fight the same way he does. He is convinced that he must believe in the fight and spread that belief amongst others or his service meant nothing. He meets up with former high school love interest Donna in Syracuse, where she is a popular anti-war activist. She expresses her sorrows for Kovic's injuries and ambition to do something about those "who've sacrificed their bodies and their minds" in Vietnam.[186] Kovic smiles at her hippie appearance and attitude but refuses to answer her invitation to tell people what the war was really like. He wishes to talk about their love connection, but she is caught up planning a protest. The couple is separated at a rally when protestors are arrested and beaten by police. His love affair abruptly ends and every failure in his life comes to a head. He is learning what he fought for does not matter at home either. His obsessive mindset about the war has made him a loner. If he is not constantly defending his honor, then he is sulking about the loss of his livelihood.

Kovic finally expects to get the honor he deserves for his service and attends the Fourth of July parade. He gains a short-lived sense of pride as he waves amongst the crowd dressed in uniform but pays more attention to the protestors and firecrackers that provoke him. The town does not know how to treat him and can only view his disabled body with wonder. His wounds from service heavily kick in once he gets on stage to give a speech about loyalty. The promise he gives that America will win the war is overcome with the commotion of the crowd, and he

[185] Ibid.
[186] Ibid.

freezes mid-sentence. He flashes back to his final days in Vietnam where he killed Vietnamese civilians and his fellow soldier.

His family wheels him off stage where he meets up with an old war buddy. Kovic is finally able to relate to someone about getting shot, the horrors of the VA hospital, and the authenticity of war they were not prepared for. He only "found misunderstanding, apathy, and hostility on the homefront," but is able to be honest with a fellow veteran.[187] Kovic excuses his injuries as something he deserved for the mistakes he made in Vietnam. The two discuss their wounds, but Kovic expands on his desire to go back and change the past. The belief he deserves to be paralyzed because of the sin he committed in Vietnam stems from his wounded understanding of his patriotic call. If he had not tried to be a hero, he would not be stuck in a wheelchair for the rest of his life. They both express their inability to feel like themselves anymore and teary-eyed Kovic expresses his desire "to be whole again."[188] He does not view himself as a victim of war but has lost the capability to feel like a man because of his current disability. Kovic constantly struggles "with the triple burden of the accidental murder (coupled in his mind with all the murders in Vietnam), his own paralysis, and his growing doubts about his politics and his ability to reenter American life."[189] Kovic wishes he had not tried so hard to be like John Wayne, but his former masculine complex pushed him to fight until he was wounded. His conscience tells him that he was not victorious so he must be impaired.

Kovic begins to abuse alcohol at the local Massapequa bar, where he is judged for his behavior and constant talk about his service. Men at the bar tell him to live with the fact he served and lost, but he refuses to give up the fight and stays in the bar until he falls out of his

[187] Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 265.
[188] Oliver Stone, *Born on the Fourth of July* (Universal, 1989).
[189] Christopher Sharrett, "Reviewed Work: *Born on the Fourth of July*," *Cinéaste* 17, no. 4 (1990): 49.

wheelchair from his intoxicated state. His friends take him home, where he gets in an argument with his mother because of his distressed attitude. He has a psychotic break under his drunken state that causes him to confess some of the mistakes he made in Vietnam. Everything he believed about fighting communism was a lie, and he does not feel like he accomplished any sort of patriotic duty in Vietnam. His wounded mentality has reconstructed the former man he was and aspired to be. He is now cynical and unable to understand why he ended up paralyzed for a cause that does not matter to his family, friends, or community. Kovic yells about his frustrations and inability to be sexually active because of his paralyzed body. He feels cheated out of the manhood he lost in Vietnam, when the reason he went was to validate it. His outburst "offers a prime example of how wounded veterans struggled to maintain their sense of dignity after serious injury."[190] He is overcome by the disappointment he has caused his family but cannot channel his aggression. The love of a woman he craves is unachievable because he feels unworthy without an able body. He wakes up everyone in the neighborhood with his outburst then lays in bed tearfully telling his father, "I want to be a man again. Who's going to love me, Dad? Who's ever going to love me?"[191] He is embarrassed by the weight of his wounds that cause him to lash out against caregivers who do not sympathize with him, his friends and brother for not believing in the war, his mother for misunderstanding his manhood, other soldiers for belittling his sacrifice in Vietnam, and women for rejecting him. Anderegg argues:

> *Born on the Fourth of July* is a personal rite-of-passage story" that "traces a familiar, albeit nonchronological course from innocence (induction) through experience (combat) to knowledge (disillusionment). But just as Vietnam broke up America's perfect war record, the Vietnam combat memoir contributes its own permutations to a venerable literary tradition.[192]

[190] Daddis, *Pulp Vietnam,* 168.
[191] Oliver Stone, *Born on the Fourth of July* (Universal, 1989).
[192] Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 255.

Physically he is constrained, and mentally he is judged for his continual belief in the war effort. His psychotic devotion to proving his service projects him as an outcast from a society that does not appreciate what he gave up fighting in Vietnam.

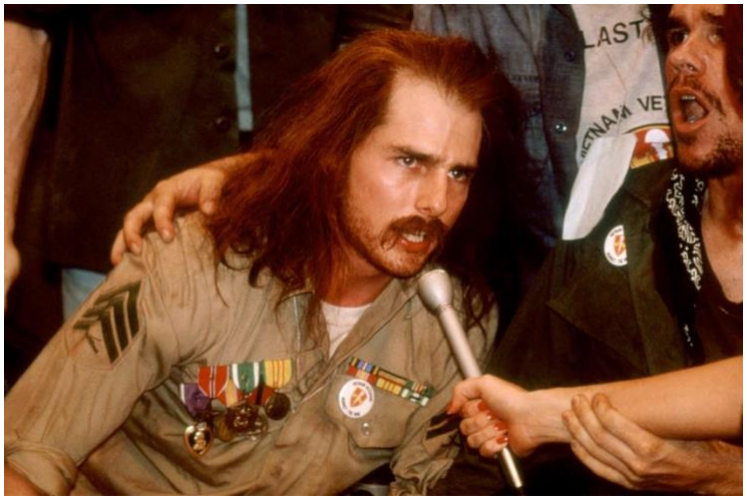
His father sends him to a town in Mexico full of paralyzed Vietnam veterans who get high, play cards, and pay prostitutes to love them. Unable to conquer his demons at home, he goes to a town full of men who share them. The paralyzed group persuades him that women will love him despite his disabilities, so he pays a prostitute for his first sexual encounter but does not comprehend the infatuation correctly. Roger Ebert describes this as his rock-bottom by stating that "Kovic came back from the war with a shattered body, but it took a couple of years for the damage to spread to his mind and spirit. By the time he hit bottom he was a demoralized, spiteful man who sought escape in booze and drugs and Mexican whorehouses."[193] This was supposed to be his paradise, but he is still filled with guilt and resentment. The drinking and chasing women catch up to him, and he and another paralyzed veteran are eventually kicked out of the town and stranded in Mexico. The men are repeatedly neglected by a society they try so hard to fit into. They want to be treated like respected veterans, but their wounds cause them to act out. Kovic is surrounded by veterans who have a bitter outlook on their service which causes him to reflect on how resentful he is towards his. He realizes that he can no longer run from his wounds and must correct the mistakes he made in Vietnam.

Kovic returns to the United States and travels to the grave of the young solider he shot and killed while in Vietnam. He visits the soldier's family and holds back tears as he admits that he killed their son. Kovic believes the testimony will cure his emotional distress because he put all the blood on his hands and took responsibility for the murder. He attempted to come clean the

[193] Roger Ebert, "*Born on the Fourth of July* Movie Review & Film Summary 1989," Roger Ebert Movie Review & Film Summary, (December 20, 1989).

day he accidentally killed Wilson but was told to forget the situation by his supervisor. It has haunted him for so long that once he finally confronts his actions, he comes clean about all the injustices of war.

Once he confronted one wrongdoing, he is liberated to uncover more injustices that occurred while he served in Vietnam. His purpose in life shifts once he joins Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW). Kovic reflects that "to be fully rehabilitated in post-Vietnam Hollywood cinema, the warrior must repent his past misguided patriotism."[194] Nothing can stop his activism as he expresses his animosity towards Vietnam in a broadcasted interview by stating that "this war is wrong, this society lied to me, lied to my brothers."[195] He accepts his disbelief in war and becomes a part of the anti-war movement that he rejected for so long. Instead of letting the unfulfilling war brand him a disabled veteran, he exposes its misconceptions to the public. Director Stone made a similar disclosure when he came home from the war and claims, "When I talk about the lie, I say it with a capital 'L' because that's what it is. It's the lie we told ourselves to go over there, the lie that we were winning the war, and I was in the front line. And we saw a lot of combat, but it was clear that we were not winning."[196] Both men state that the war cannot be justified and there was no reason for young men to risk their lives over a lie.



Ron Kovic in *Born on the Fourth of July*

[194] Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 264.
[195] Oliver Stone, *Born on the Fourth of July* (Universal, 1989).
[196]An interview with Oliver Stone, "Transcript: A Conversation with Oliver Stone," Interview by Ann Hornaday, *Washington Post* Live, (May 12, 2021).

Supporters and police try to shove Kovic out of the crowd by spitting or calling him a communist. He is beaten and thrown from his chair in an attempted arrest, but other veterans come to his rescue. The mistreatment does not bother him because he only cares about calling out the injustices of war. What he lost in Vietnam did not consume him anymore once he channeled his aggression into awareness. Kovic finally validated his service once he acknowledged his wounds. His "experience of the war and its aftermath changed him from a naive, all-American product of 1950s culture to an outspoken radical who became prominent in Vietnam Veterans Against the War in the early Seventies."[197] He embraced his activism as a coping mechanism, but director Stone was also able to show his humanity outside of a political agenda.

Kovic comes home mentally wounded because of the mistakes he made in combat and physically wounded because of his disability. He attempted to conform to his new livelihood but is pushed into a psychotic break by a community that belittles his service and does not understand his sacrifice. Kovic expected to be celebrated and compared himself to the prior patriotic WWII veterans, but his misconceptions about war left him with an unfulfilled masculinity. His isolation projects how secluded Vietnam veterans felt from an American society that wanted to forget them. Director Stone and Ron Kovic display "the simple and undeniable integrity of Whitman's declaration: 'I was the man, I suffered, I was there,'" and were able to reflect this in film by separating soldiers from the war effort to show how they dealt with their circumstances.[198] His transition to anti-war activism reflects a self-awareness that, to understand the U.S.'s war in Vietnam, a veteran must uncover the lie they bought into.

[197] Christopher Sharrett, "Reviewed Work: *Born on the Fourth of July,*" *Cinéaste* 17, no. 4 (1990): 48.
[198] Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 251.

## Conclusion:

The events leading up to each soldier's wounds, loss of innocence, and psychotic break occur uniquely in each film, but all reflect that the Vietnam War left soldiers broken and with an unfulfilled masculinity. These eight films reflect how those who served in Vietnam did not meet America's societal expectation. American popular culture portrayed this unmet expectation by reconstructing the patriotic John Wayne image into a broken and lost veteran. Huebner states that "Vietnam War movies and literature did present American audiences with more disturbing imagery about their culture, soldiers, and institutions of authority than ever before."[199] Men were unable to validate their war experience, but these films lessened the pressure to be okay after Vietnam while emphasizing the stereotype of the psychotic Vietnam veteran.

These eight films depict injury and loss but there was still a cultural reality to overcome. The application of realism was shown through violence, anti-war sentiment, and bloodshed. There was a progression from crazy to victim, from the fictional Travis Bickle to veteran Ron Kovic. In between there was a development of empathy for the characters because of their exposure to military brutality and psychological trauma. In search of what happened to American soldiers in Vietnam, their true emotional damage projected the painfully sick parts of war. The definition of honorable service changed with Vietnam, which further impacted this generation of veterans' abilities to accept and deal with their experiences. Hollywood's Vietnam differs from previous war depictions because films no longer celebrated heroes and a triumphant America and instead focused on the trauma of war. Anderegg states that past victories "no longer offered assurance" because "the Vietnam War shrouded every turn of events in U.S. foreign policy to the

[199] Huebner, *The Warrior Image*, 243.

present day."[200] Films reflected soldiers' destructive behavior and mental insanity, which rewrote the script on traditional American manhood. Each character experienced some version of "Vietnam syndrome," which was later diagnosed in 1980 as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.[201] This illness uncovered how the war never left soldiers and affected their ability to adapt to life back home.

There are many similar experiences these movies show that are outside the scope of this project but are worth mentioning for their repetitive theme. Americans treated the Vietnamese population poorly, harassed women, lost appreciation for commodities, mentioned the unconstitutionality of the draft, acquired full access to Vietnam through journalists, exploited the unfairness between the different racial groups in the military, and were seen as ignorant in how they fought the war. There are recuring actions that held truth to what the Vietnamese were exposed to as well. America's call to "help" South Vietnam was directly questioned in these films, with a clear presentation of the physical, emotional, and psychological damage caused by American soldiers. Gregory Daddis examines this behavior by questioning "how GIs who committed evil deeds may have judged them normal given the wartime setting." He further explains that "when combat failed to deliver ways of realizing" power in Vietnam "against an elusive enemy," soldiers may "find meaning by exercising dominance over a frightened population."[202] These negative connotations were a product of a soldier's altered mentality about Vietnam that made their actions acceptable. This tyrant image portrayed soldiers as the enemy instead of the protector. The films observe how the call to serve was misinterpreted to salvage American manhood by taking pride in these injustices.

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[200] Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 231.
[201] Matthew J. Friedman, "U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs," *PTSD History and Overview*, January 31, 2007.
[202] Daddis, *Pulp Vietnam,* 188.

These eight films showed America the toll of its war in Vietnam, the devastating impact on the soldiers who fought, and explained why veterans came home resentful. Unlike the wars of their fathers, Vietnam offered no heroic ending or triumphant return home for these young men. There was a lack of people who "thought to thank veterans for their service to their country, because most Americans did not believe their country had been well served in Vietnam," which only further questioned a veteran's identity within society.[203] America's failure was thoroughly reinforced through the mental and physical repercussions imparted upon its soldiers. From the moment these soldiers recognize their wounds and experience psychotic breaks, their pre-war life and innocence is long gone. *Taxi Driver* (1976), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Coming Home* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *First Blood* (1982), *Platoon* (1986), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) projected this struggle by expressing America's confusion in facing the failures of their war in Vietnam. This portrayed the difficulties of war instead of enforcing a cultural pressure to recover. These films focus on the reality of defeat, which altered masculinity by changing the brave image into an unstable one.

[203] Appy, *American Reckoning*, 237.

## Epilogue:

This project examined how soldiers and veterans were projected in Hollywood's Vietnam from 1976 to 1989. These first films critique the U.S.'s war in Vietnam by reflecting the treatment of its soldiers and the isolation forced upon its veterans. They all experienced a loss of innocence, suffered a psychotic break, and were left to deal with their tremendous wounds. Hollywood's Vietnam transformed a previously known male dominance associated with military service. Former masculine qualities associated with WWII veterans changed in these films because men could have emotions, turn to activism, and question the war they were involved in. This change is attributed to an overall sympathy towards Vietnam veterans in the 1980s. American society became more aware of the rejection veterans faced on the home front because of the medical diagnosis and awareness of PTSD. Susan Jeffords explains that the veteran was "for many the most visible sign of the victimization of American males in the U.S.," because they "suffered loss of employment and education, physical handicaps, dissolution of families, and varying degrees of psychological and emotional stress as a consequence of their participation in the Vietnam War," especially for prisoners of war (POWs).[204] There was a desire for a unifying perspective of the U.S.'s war in Vietnam as it was being transfigured into a noble cause. Christian G. Appy explains this change in film was a way to offer "a partial redemption of the Vietnam War – a chance to refight it with a clear objective, a just cause, and a triumphant ending."[205] This change is credited to a change in fault over who was responsible for America's loss. This was reflected in Hollywood's Vietnam "where loss of the war is identified not with individual veterans or any aspect of Vietnam, but with the U.S. government and with senators,

[204] Susan Jeffords, "Debriding Vietnam: The Resurrection of the White American Male." *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 534
[205] Appy, *American Reckoning,* 246.

Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) agents, and bureaucrats who assisted in its negotiations and public relations."[206] The attempts at representing veterans in Hollywood's Vietnam went from isolated, to a heterogeneous group, then to an idealistic avenger which is most evident with the change of Rambo from *First Blood* (1982) to *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985). The three categories were altered as Hollywood reflected *who* was responsible for the U.S.'s war in Vietnam.

Rambo was projected as a wounded veteran who turned psycho because he was an outcast in American society at the conclusion of *First Blood*. He was unable to accept that America lost in Vietnam, so he created a self-imposed war with the small town of Hope, Washington. His military skill and strength were displayed but conquering the town did not heal the wounds left from his loss in Vietnam. He accepted defeat and was taken to prison due to his destruction. In the sequel, Rambo returns to Vietnam to rescue POWs and receives the recognition he previously craved. He gets the opportunity to avenge his enemies, is labeled a hero for his courageous bravery, and does not listen when told to submit to authority. Michael Anderegg describes "The Rambo films" as "indisputably revenge fantasies, and both the superhuman masculine power conferred upon Rambo and the cathartic violence characterizing his responses to wrongs are a transparent, and disturbing, strategy of compensation for post defeat feelings of frustration and inadequacy."[207] His character projected that America *needed* men like Rambo in Vietnam if they expected to win.

Rambo is determined to win his way in *Rambo: First Blood Part II* when he is sent back to Vietnam. Colonel Trautman approaches Rambo with an opportunity that could grant him a

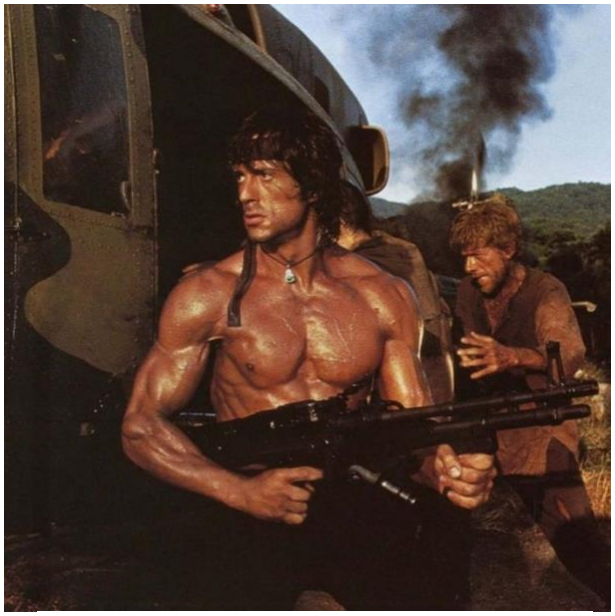
[206] Susan Jeffords, "Debriding Vietnam: The Resurrection of the White American Male." *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 526.
[207] Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 140.

presidential pardon. Rambo is released from prison work camp and accepts his special operations mission of finding POWs in Vietnam. He asks Trautman, "Do we get to win this time?" This references his former defeat in Hope, but his overall defeat in the Vietnam War. Rambo was a former POW during his service, so he is eager to rescue men and is reluctant to follow his specific instruction to only "take photographs" of the POWs.[208] Bureaucrat Marshall Murdock oversees the operation and emphasizes that an extraction team will rescue the men. Rambo's only responsibility is to report if there are any live Vietnam veterans at a suspected POW camp. His desire to combat the enemy overtakes his inclination to follow orders, and he frees one of the first POWs he sees at the camp. The operation team overseeing the rescue mission leaves Rambo to rely on his own skills and save himself. Trautman calls Murdock out on his scheme to have Rambo captured by the North Vietnamese. Murdock confesses that the camp was supposed to be empty and Congress was inclined to close the case, but even if Rambo found any men, Murdock would not have rescued them. He bitterly questions Trautman by asking: "Do you honestly think somebody's gonna get up on the floor of the United States Senate and ask for billions of dollars for a couple of forgotten ghosts?"[209] Murdock believes he is untouchable and surrounds himself with the power, equipment, and technology provided by the American military. He has the tools to rescue the POWs, but his self-centered ego is reluctant to do so. Trautman is disgusted with Murdock's plot against Vietnam veterans, but Rambo is not going to surrender again.

In his captivity, Rambo has discovered that the Soviets are assisting the Vietnamese. He is being tortured and electrocuted by North Vietnamese and Russian soldiers who instruct him to broadcast to the operation team there are no American POWs. He instead declares another self-

[208] George Cosmatos, *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (TriStar Pictures, 1985).
[209] Ibid.

imposed war by stating, “Murdock, I’m coming to get you,” and breaking free from captivity.[210] Rambo has limited weaponry, relying on his pure skill to acquire artillery, but manages to slaughter every Soviet and Vietnamese soldier sent after him. The film is full of the customary superhuman violence and havoc Rambo is notorious for causing. He is able to survive a barrel bomb, hijack a gunship, and shoot down a helicopter, all while rescuing every American POW left at the camp. He delivers them all safely to a military base where he confronts Murdock, but spares him his life. Rambo finally “satisfies his vengeance upon the faithless technocracy represented by Murdock when he destroys his computers. Technocracy and bureaucracy - and above all the faithless greed they are seen as serving - are figured as the pervading aspects of contemporary America that in Vietnam stabbed the aspiring heroes” and veterans in the back upon their return to the United States.[211] Rambo again feels betrayed by his country and does not accept a pardon or medal of honor. He does not go back to America, but chooses to stay in Vietnam where he feels accepted. When Trautman asks what Rambo wants, he passionately responds:



Rambo in *Rambo: First Blood Part II*

> I want what they want [referring to the POWs he just rescued] and every other guy who came over here and spilled his guts and gave everything he had, wants. For our country to love us as much as we love it! That's what I want![212]

[210] George Cosmatos, *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (TriStar Pictures, 1985).
[211] Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 150.
[212] George Cosmatos, *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (TriStar Pictures, 1985).

When *First Blood* concludes, Rambo is broken and lonely, which contrasts his projected assurance in *Rambo: First Blood Part II.* His character reflects that the United States did not give their war in Vietnam the chance it deserved and questions what could have been different to secure a victory. Vietnam veterans were projected differently in films because of their treatment while in service, but *Rambo: First Blood Part II* displays that America could have won the war if there had been enough support on the home front and if there were men like Rambo who fought. The language used constantly condemns American military superiority for their loss in Vietnam. Murdock and his operation team project a reluctance to rescue POWs in Vietnam although they have the equipment to do so. Rambo, inversely, is a one-man army who heroically rescues the men because he has the desire. Trautman reminds Rambo that "the old Vietnam is dead," but voices to everyone on the operation team that Rambo's only desire is to win a war that somebody else lost.[213] Gregory Daddis explains that Rambo reflected the "hypermasculine heroes, with excessively muscular bodies" that "landed on the big screen with a vengeance." He "not only returned to Vietnam to rescue American POWs and finally defeat the Vietnamese communists, but also uncovered the deceit of government bureaucrats who had helped lose the war in the first place."[214] Rambo demonstrates control, confidence in his abilities, and shows America how to win a war the "right" way. He does not give up on seeking revenge and is no longer concerned with being accepted into American society. His motivation changed when he found somebody to blame for America's loss instead of condemning his own efforts in the war. This reflects the reformative and redemptive outlook on the Vietnam War in film. The former loss of innocence, psychotic break, and wounds a soldier and veteran experienced in Hollywood's Vietnam was altered by the application of a moral corrective.

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[213] George Cosmatos, *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (TriStar Pictures, 1985).
[214] Daddis, *Pulp Vietnam,* 224.

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