

A TROUBLED REDEMPTION: THE VIETNAM WAR AND RONALD REAGAN

by

Kevin J. Mitchell, B.A.

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Committee Members:

Mary Brennan, Chair

Nancy Berlage

Ellen Tillman

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to all those who served and suffered in that arduous struggle in Vietnam as well as those who continue to serve in today's military and who live with the memory of their generation's own conflict on a daily basis. May history keep your memory and sacrifices alive and your nation's leaders forever accountable and aware of their implication in your stories and struggles.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Description
AOVI	Agent Orange Victims International
AOWG	Agent Orange Working Group
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
AVNV	Americans for Vietnam Veterans
CBI	Caribbean Basin Initiative
CDC	Centers for Disease Control
HICCASP	Hollywood Independent Citizens Committee of the Arts, Sciences, and Professions
M.IA.	Missing in Action
P.O.W.	Prisoner of War
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
SAG	Screen Actors Guild
VA	Veteran's Administration
VFW	Veterans of Foreign Wars
VN	Vietnamese
VVA	Vietnam Veterans of America
VVAW	Vietnam Veterans Against the War
VVC	Vietnam Veterans in Congress
VVLP	Vietnam Veteran's Leadership Program

VVM

Vietnam Veterans Memorial

VVMF

Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund

WPA/WPR

War Powers Act/War Powers Resolution

I. INTRODUCTION

“Who controls the past, controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.”

-George Orwell (1984)

On the evening of May 15, 1967, California Governor Ronald W. Reagan and New York Senator Robert F. Kennedy participated in a town hall that showcased their views on the ongoing conflict in Vietnam. The CBS television network designed the live town hall to allow students from around the world to speak via satellite with the two presidential hopefuls and ask questions as they saw fit. Although the intention of this political gathering was not necessarily to debate the ongoing conflict in Southeast Asia, the Vietnam War inevitably stole the show. English student Stephen Marks asked the first question. He wanted to know how the candidates felt about anti-Vietnam War demonstrations taking place across the United States. Kennedy responded with an abstract support for these protestors, claiming that the war was being driven by America's adversaries overseas. He argued that regardless of protests the war would still continue being fought as it had up to that point. Reagan, however, professed a different view. He claimed that protests were not only damaging morale and preventing troops from winning the war but, in doing so, they were actually aiding the North Vietnamese and “giving him encouragement to continue.”¹

¹ ““The Image of America and the Youth of the World,” with Gov. Ronald Reagan, CBS Television and Radio, May 15, 1967.” [www.jfklibrary.org](https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/the-kennedy-family/robert-f-kennedy/robert-f-kennedy-speeches/the-image-of-america-and-the-youth-of-the-world-with-gov-ronald-reagan-cbs-television-and-radio-may). John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. Accessed September 9, 2019. <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/the-kennedy-family/robert-f-kennedy/robert-f-kennedy-speeches/the-image-of-america-and-the-youth-of-the-world-with-gov-ronald-reagan-cbs-television-and-radio-may>.

Their statements on the war revealed the completion of the political transformation both men had experienced. Reagan's devotion to anticommunism necessitated a transition from Democrat to Republican during the 1950's and 1960's and led him to support the war in Vietnam even as it became increasingly costly. For his part, Robert F. Kennedy shifted from his initial support for his brother and former president John F. Kennedy's willingness to go into Vietnam to ultimately disapproving of the war as it continued. Their transitions mirrored many others taking place around the country.

The conflict in Southeast Asia, commonly called the Vietnam War, dominated American life for the second half of the 20th century. Arising out of a Cold War perspective that equated nationalist challenges with communist threats, American involvement in Vietnam transitioned over the years from foreign aid to the South Vietnamese, pro-American government to combat military advisors to combat troops. Presidents Dwight Eisenhower, John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and Richard Nixon continued to increase American involvement in the Vietnamese civil war even as they grew frustrated with the situation. As the number of American casualties increased and students, politicians, and the public questioned the war, the administrations struggled to escape from the situation. When the last troops left Vietnam in 1975, the U.S. faced an overheated economy, a divided body politic and over 58,000 American dead.

Although some Americans tried to forget, the war would not go away. It continued to lurk beneath every foreign policy decision, every political decision, and every gathering of Americans. Depending on the political perspective of those telling the story, Vietnam was either a tale of Americans sticking their nose in places they did not

belong and getting smacked in the face for it or, the tale of valiant soldiers restricted from achieving their virtuous goals by weak and foolish politicians.

It is safe to say that this “Youth of the World” broadcast and the amount of time that the Vietnam War consumed during its airing only foreshadowed what was to come for Ronald Reagan. He hated the war’s execution and portrayal to the American public in a multi-faceted way. Militarily, he believed that the United States had fought with one hand tied behind its back by never officially declaring war on the North Vietnamese; domestically, he believed that lack of public support for the war, largely due to its presentation on television, had cost the U.S. victories; and morally he believed that the U.S. had helped to spread its noble vision of democracy despite disillusion that appeared as a result of what he saw as deception by Lyndon Johnson’s left-wing administration during the war’s worst years. The 1960s birthed Reagan politically and opened the door for a conservative revolution in America. So much so that by 1980 Reagan vowed to renew the country after the “sins of a decade” in which government and liberal leaders had cost it a win in Southeast Asia.²

This thesis argues that Ronald Reagan’s personal beliefs about anticommunism and American values affected his outlook on the Vietnam War both privately and professionally in a manner left untapped by many historians. More controversially, the point of this essay is to prove that Ronald Reagan was not simply a man who spoke positively about the Vietnam War to appease his conservative base. He, in fact, did so many times at the risk of popular opinion. The larger point I make is that Reagan was so inherently driven by his beliefs that he rarely deviated from them throughout his

² Bernard von Bothmer, *Framing the Sixties: The Use and Abuse of a Decade from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010) 28.

professional career and, for better or worse, the Vietnam War and its legacy were largely reconstructed as a result.

My research has led me to believe that Reagan's personal relationship with the Vietnam War is best exemplified in the arenas of his core beliefs, his foreign policy, and his troubled relationship with the Vietnam veteran. This work also attempts to highlight the importance of post-Vietnam history as much as the war itself. Many works have discussed the Vietnam War and its restructuring from a negative war into a "noble" one during the Reagan era of the eighties more generally, yet surprisingly few have made a direct and personal connection between the war itself and Reagan the individual. How did Reagan accumulate his core beliefs on the war and how did his optimistic rhetoric direct his foreign policy and relationship with that war's participants? These are the questions that I seek to answer.

Scholars and journalists began analyzing the Vietnam war even before American participation in the conflict ended. Much of the earliest scholarship on the war came via the orthodox school of thought. This idea emphasized "heavy hitter" politicians such as John F. Kennedy, Robert McNamara, Lyndon Johnson, and Richard Nixon and maintained that the war was fueled and prolonged by a blind anticommunist agenda with a complete disregard for Vietnam's people, culture, or history. A couple of works from this period include David Halberstam's *The Making of a Quagmire: America and the Vietnam War During the Kennedy Era* and Arthur M. Schlesinger jr.'s *The Bitter Heritage: Vietnam and American Democracy*.³

³ David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire: America and Vietnam During the Kennedy Era* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008) Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Bitter Heritage: Vietnam and American Democracy 1941-1968* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett, 1970).

Two major events in the seventies affected Vietnam literature on the American side. One was the release of what came to be known as the Pentagon Papers. This shocking collection harbored practically every governmental decision made by the United States in regard to the war since 1946. Many in America for the first time viewed the doubt of their leaders early on in vivid detail and became ever more disillusioned with the war's root causes and justifications. The official accumulation of more than twenty years of private decision-making and documentation caused many historians and the like to flock to a more revisionist view of the war, focusing not on naivete or mindless imperialism but on strategic blunders with decent intentions. Political Scientist Guenter Lewy's *America in Vietnam* is an excellent example of this school of thought.⁴ The second major occurrence during the seventies which provided for more complex views of the war was the emergence of the Vietnam memoir. Works by now famed Vietnam authors such as Philip Caputo (*A Rumor of War*), Tim O' Brien (*If I Die in a Combat Zone Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*), and W.D. Ehrhart (*Vietnam-Perkasie, Passing Time*) put faces and feelings to the struggles of individuals serving during the war.⁵ These memoirs included everything from contemplations of draft evasion to justified beliefs in defending a helpless and overrun South Vietnamese population.

With the emergence of the eighties, the academic realm of post-Vietnam history and the impact of that war on the decades following its conclusion emerged. Historians such as Gary R. Hess (*Vietnam and the United States*), and Fred A. Wilcox (*Waiting for*

⁴ Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978).

⁵ Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York, NY: Picador, 2017); Tim O'Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (Norwalk, CT: Easton Press, 2008); W.D. Ehrhart, *Vietnam-Perkasie: A Combat Marine Memoir* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), *Passing Time: Memoir of a Vietnam Veteran Against the War* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995).

an Army to Die: The Tragedy of Agent Orange) provided renewed insight into both the relationship between Vietnam and the United States before, during, and after the war.⁶ They also analyzed newly emerging issues between the Reagan administration and veterans due to cases of exposure to Agent Orange and widespread acknowledgment of mental disorders from service in the war.

Even as Reagan worked to transform the Vietnam War from an unspoken tragedy to a “good war,” scholars shifted the focus of their studies. During the last two decades of the twentieth century, historians such as Keith Beattie (*The Scar That Binds: American Culture and the Vietnam War*) Cynthia J Fuchs, Daniel Miller, and Thomas Doherty began to focus on the cultural history of the war, examining post-Vietnam America via films and television (*Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television*).⁷ What they found was a definite transformation of the war during the era of Reagan and even a modification of Vietnam veterans themselves from stereotyped “psychos” to valiant warriors struggling to adapt to the memory of their war.

The construction of the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial coincided with a flurry of books analyzing the role of memory and the war. Given the war’s troubling conclusion and reputation, newfound emphasis was placed on the Vietnam War and its memory on the American psyche, particularly in the realm of public sites. Patrick Hagopian’s *The Vietnam War in American Memory: Veterans, Memorials, and the Politics of Healing*, David Kieran’s *Forever Vietnam: How A Divisive War Changed American Public*

⁶ Gary R. Hess, *Vietnam and the United States: Origins and Legacy of War* (New York, NY: Twayne, 1998); Fred A. Wilcox, *Waiting for an Army to Die: The Tragedy of Agent Orange* (New York, NY: Seven Stories Press, 2011).

⁷ Keith Beattie, *The Scar That Binds: American Culture and the Vietnam War* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2000); Cynthia J Fuchs, Daniel Miller, and Thomas Doherty, *Inventing Vietnam the War in Film and Television* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2009).

Memory, and Wilber J. Scott's *Vietnam Veterans Since the War: The Politics of PTSD, Agent Orange, and the National Memorial* all contributed to the growing list of post-Vietnam literature in this way, emphasizing memorials as places of power to dictate specific narratives of events and the Vietnam War in particular.⁸ Recent studies on the Vietnam War and the Reagan era have produced fascinating insight thanks to works such as Christian G. Appy's phenomenal *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity* and Toby Glenn Bates' *The Reagan Rhetoric: History and Memory in 1980's America*.⁹

Historians have increasingly turned their attention to Reagan the individual. In the realm of Reagan historiography, Lou Cannon quickly emerged as the seminal individual for Reagan biographies early on. He penned three groundbreaking biographies in 1982's *Reagan*, 1992's *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime*, and 2005's *Governor Reagan: His Rise to Power*.¹⁰ These works were, and still are, considered quintessential Reagan biographical canon. Other Reagan biographers include Peggy Noonan, a speechwriter of Reagan's, who published her sympathetic character study *When Character Was King: A Story of Ronald Reagan* in 2001.¹¹ Even more recent biographies have emerged on Reagan which include H.W. Brands' *Reagan: The Life* (2015), Iwan Morgan's *Reagan:*

⁸ Patrick Hagopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory: Veterans, Memorials, and the Politics of Healing* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012); David Kieran, *Forever Vietnam: How a Divisive War Changed American Public Memory* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014); Wilbur J. Scott, *Vietnam Veterans Since the War: the Politics of PTSD, Agent Orange, and the National Memorial* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004).

⁹ Christian G. Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2016); Toby Glenn Bates, *The Reagan Rhetoric: History and Memory in 1980s America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021).

¹⁰ Lou Cannon, *Reagan* (New York, NY: Putnam, 1982); Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 1992); Lou Cannon, *Governor Reagan: His Rise to Power* (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2005).

¹¹ Peggy Noonan, *"The Ranch": When Character Was King: A Story of Ronald Reagan* (Herndon, VA: Young America's Foundation, 2001).

American Icon (2016), and Bob Spitz's acclaimed *Reagan: An American Journey* (2018).¹² Cannon's works follow the basic biographical formula and Noonan's work heavily commiserates. Morgan is a bit detached from the American perspective given that he is an English historian and Spitz does not follow traditional historical practices and has been characterized as more of a popular reporter and journalist than a subject matter expert.

Three recent primary collections about Ronald Reagan, in addition to his autobiography, *Ronald Reagan: An American Life*, have created a renewed interest in Reagan and Vietnam.¹³ *The Reagan Diaries*, *Reagan: A Life in Letters*, and *Reagan: In His Own Hand* have published previously private documents, allowing historians to dissect the Vietnam War's impact on this post-Vietnam president. In this way, this essay is able to compare and contrast Reagan's private writings and thoughts with public reaction to his beliefs, producing a work which utilizes military, political, social, and cultural history in a relevant and concise way.¹⁴

I wish to add to this historiography by focusing primarily on Reagan and his administration's personal relationships and troubles with the Vietnam War and less about the myriad of ways in which his administration impacted the perception of the war during the eighties era in America in far reaching cultural aspects such as film, magazines, and other pop culture. I speak less about the Reagan era itself and provide more emphasis on Reagan the individual and his relationship with the Vietnam War on a personal level by

¹² H. W. Brands, *Reagan: The Life* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 2016); Iwan W. Morgan, *Reagan: American Icon* (London, UK: I.B. Tauris, 2016); Bob Spitz, *Reagan: An American Journey* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2018).

¹³ Ronald Reagan, *Ronald Reagan: An American Life* (New York, NY: Pocket Books, 1999).

¹⁴ Ronald Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2009); Ronald Reagan et al., *Reagan: A Life in Letters* (London, UK: Simon & Schuster, 2005); Ronald Reagan et al., *Reagan: In His Own Hand* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 2002).

studying him before, during *and* after its occurrence, providing a bold and rejuvenating type of biographical framework with Vietnam at its center.

The past five to six years in particular have displayed a desire by authors like Craig Shirley (*Last Act: The Final Years and Emerging Legacy of Ronald Reagan* (2015), *Reagan Rising: The Decisive Years, 1976-1980* (2017)) to dive into Reagan's pre and post presidential history as well as discover new arenas of study for Reagan's life aside from his political success and life story.¹⁵ In this way, I toe the line between biography and war history and present new evidence for Reagan biographers and post-Vietnam historians by describing the impact of Vietnam on Reagan personally.

I begin analyzing Reagan's relationship with the Vietnam War in chapter one by dissecting his emphasis on the "noble cause" narrative of the war. I give context as to how this term came about given Reagan's past and how he utilized both belief and revision in order to produce his own version of the war, leading to both backlash and agreement. I then focus on the impact of the war on Reagan's presidential foreign policy via two contrasting events: the invasion of the island of Grenada and Reagan's ambitions in Central America which culminated in the Iran-Contra scandal. The Vietnam War's role in these two events has been highly neglected. Finally, I shift the focus away from Reagan personally and his policy more generally by providing renewed emphasis on Reagan's complex relationship with the Vietnam veteran population. In order to accomplish this, I utilize oral histories and archival sources. As with many of his predecessors, Reagan believed that he could shape the Vietnam conflict so that he could

¹⁵ Craig Shirley, *Last Act: The Final Years and Emerging Legacy of Ronald Reagan* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2015); *Reagan Rising: The Decisive Years, 1976-1980* (New York, NY: Broadside Books, 2017).

control it for his ends yet did so in such a genuine and unique way that it will no doubt be analyzed far into the future. Although he succeeded in adding to the existing narrative, Vietnam remained as elusive as ever.¹⁶

Another important aspect of this essay is the idea of change over time. The complex combination of the timing of Reagan's presidency and the absorption of his new, Reaganite, conservatism made for an easier reevaluation of the war as time went on. Reagan consistently spoke about Vietnam in a positive and justifiable sense long before he became president, before he became governor even. By the time he ascended to the presidency in the late seventies, this consistency aided him immensely in being able to speak about the war in a highly influential way that much of the public could absorb. It wasn't just that the American public became used to what Reagan was saying and mindlessly bought in either. The shifting political and ideological landscape that I describe in the first chapter meant that the public was naturally more open to Reagan's substance *as well as* his style when he became president and practically met him halfway in rethinking the war. By the time of his second inauguration, his presidential legacy and influence had been so firmly cemented that it essentially gave him free reign to say whatever he wanted about Vietnam with minimal interference, forever changing the legacy of the war in the ensuing decades.

¹⁶ The term Vietnam syndrome appears in some primary documents throughout this essay. Essentially, this term is used to describe American fears of prolonged military conflicts and their effect on governmental decision making due to the Vietnam War and its lengthy struggle. Also, in chapter two I sometimes use the term Central America more generally as opposed to Nicaragua due to the fact that American funding to the Contras in that country impacted the entire region in multifarious ways.

II. BOLSTERING THE NOBLE CAUSE: REAGAN CHANGES THE NARRATIVE

In August of 1980, Ronald Reagan, firmly in the throes of his presidential campaign against President Jimmy Carter, introduced his interpretation of the Vietnam War at a Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) convention in Chicago. Although his advisers planned a typical campaign address, Reagan used his appearance on the night of August 19th to introduce his controversial ideas about the Vietnam War. Consistent with his past beliefs about the conflict and foreshadowing actions he would take during his presidency, Reagan launched a crusade to redeem the memory and legacy of the Vietnam conflict in the American consciousness. He began by stating that “It’s time we recognized that ours [Vietnam] was, in truth, a noble cause.”¹⁷ He continued by asserting that “there is a lesson for all of us in Vietnam. If we are forced to fight, we must have the means and the determination to prevail or we will not have what it takes to secure peace.”¹⁸ For better or worse Reagan had, on this night, put his personal convictions about the Vietnam War on full display.¹⁹

This chapter outlines the genesis and evolution of Reagan’s “noble cause” narrative about the Vietnam War. Reagan worked to change the narrative of the Vietnam War from one of division and failure to one of nobility and righteousness. Evolving from

¹⁷ Ronald Reagan, “Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention, Chicago, Illinois: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library - National Archives and Records Administration.” www.reaganlibrary.gov. Ronald Reagan: Presidential Library and Museum. Accessed September 12, 2019. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/8-18-80>.

¹⁸ Reagan, “Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention,” 18-80.

¹⁹ Famed Reagan biographer Lou Cannon, in his seminal work *Reagan* (NY: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1982) 272, alluded to the fact that this simple “noble cause” line brought Reagan much attention and even grief from his own team. Cannon stated that campaign pollster Richard Wirthlin told Reagan that his comment on Vietnam being a “noble crusade” was the biggest mistake of his presidential run. However, Reagan’s personal conviction about the war caused him to double down on his rhetoric rather than tread lightly.

his passionate anticommunism and his nostalgia for his vision of post-World War II America, “the noble cause” permeated Reagan’s political career.

Much of the argument here is that Reagan was at the forefront of his own twenty-year rhetoric on Vietnam by the time he ascended to his presidential years. His views were *not* political pandering. Thus, the “noble cause” line was hardly a spur of the moment attempt at garnering votes from the VFW. It was, in fact, the product of Reagan’s nostalgic and patriotic ideas from throughout his adult life.

I begin this chapter in the immediate post-World War Two era by dissecting Reagan’s longstanding and deeply rooted anti-Communist beliefs during his time in Hollywood, which set the stage for how he reacted to America’s involvement in Vietnam. I dive into the fact that these pre-Vietnam War beliefs, in a sense, made him the perfect vehicle for the rehabilitation of the war. Because he had maintained such strongly held and consistent beliefs about Communism and American values across the better part of six decades of a public career, Reagan appeared to some Americans to have a legitimacy to comment on the war that other politicians lacked.

I then discuss how Reagan shifted from belief to action by presenting false information about the war to the American public through his use of pseudohistory. Reagan’s espousal of the “noble cause of Vietnam” perhaps made it easier for some Americans, especially those of his generation, to follow his lead and accept his version of events in Vietnam.

I then briefly observe how Reagan’s conservatism and patriotism impacted the national consensus on the war by the time of his presidency before finally examining positive and negative reactions to President Reagan’s ideas regarding the war. All of

these factors help to explain why Reagan succeeded in molding America's most divisive modern conflict into an increasingly palatable affair. The "noble cause" scenario was not speedily produced on that night in 1980; Reagan shaped and molded his vision of Vietnam throughout his professional career. That night at the VFW was simply the culmination.

Reagan's Early Experiences Set the Stage

Much of Reagan's worldview resulted from his experiences during and immediately following the Second World War. The actions of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan and the resulting devastation seared into his brain. In his published memoir, Reagan mentioned that "throughout my life...there's been one thing that's troubled me more than any other: the abuse of people and the theft of their democratic rights, whether by a totalitarian government, or anyone else."²⁰ This underlying belief about strong-armed governments played heavily into his statements regarding the Vietnam War. Reagan, like many Americans, understood the Vietnam conflict to be a battle between a tyrannical communist North Vietnamese government and a peaceful and democratic South.

At the conclusion of World War II, Reagan, like many in America, began to equate Communism with Fascism, which the U.S. had helped to eradicate in Germany. After becoming a member of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) in the late 1940s, he made a speech which demonstrates this notion:

I've talked about the continuing threat of fascism in the postwar world, but there's another 'ism,' Communism, and if I ever find evidence that Communism represents a

²⁰ Ronald Reagan, *Ronald Reagan: An American Life* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1990) 91.

threat to all that we believe in and stand for, I'll speak out just as harshly against Communism as I have Fascism.²¹

Reagan was not alone in this thinking. Papers from all across the country began to run stories comparing the victory against Hitler with the new struggle against communist governments and their ideas. In 1947, *The Chicago Tribune*, from Reagan's home state of Illinois, published an article by Willard Edwards giving credence to the idea that "millions of Americans...gave up a job to fight fascism before and...[were] ready to give it up again to fight communism."²² United States Senator and Republican presidential nominee Albert Levitt lumped both terms together and went on record as stating that two of the three "biggest enemies of our country [were] Communism [and] Fascism."²³

Reagan's views on communism solidified during his tenure as president of the Screen Actors' Guild from 1959 to 1960. He was not even present to accept his nomination and selection as SAG president until halfway through the meeting because he was attending an American Veterans' Committee meeting at the time.²⁴ During this time in Hollywood, Reagan was known as the go-to man for anti-Communist affairs. He claimed that FBI agents personally met with him and asked for his assistance by stating "anybody that the Communists hate as much as they do you must know something that can help us."²⁵ Though this encounter may be apocryphal, evidence supports his assertion that he was recognized as an ally against communist activity. For example, Reagan

²¹ Reagan, *An American Life*, 106.

²² Willard Edwards, "'Actor Shocked by Red Propaganda, 24 Oct 1947, 12,'" *The Chicago Tribune*, accessed February 11, 2021, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/370347529>.

²³ Harold Reddoch, "Levitt Explains Vatican Charge in Visit Here, 27 Apr 1950, 5," *The Selma Enterprise*, accessed February 11, 2021, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/630452728/?terms=communism%3B+fascism%3B&match=1>.

²⁴ "Ronald Reagan 1947-1952, 1959-1960," SAG (SAG-AFTRA), accessed February 23, 2021, <https://www.sagaftra.org/ronald-reagan>.

²⁵ Reagan, *An American Life*, 111.

publicly contributed to a Congressional committee hearing on un-American activities in relation to the communist influence in Hollywood along with George Murphy, his co-star in *This Is The Army*. Dewey Martin of Louisiana's *Monroe Morning World* described Reagan as "Hollywood's 'one man battalion' in the fight against Communism."²⁶ Additionally, the House of Representatives published a memo on Reagan describing him as both "a nice talker" and a "splendid witness" against Hollywood Communists. The memo also declared him to be fully willing to "go to Washington if...[requested] to do so."²⁷ Reagan wrote a declaration of principles on behalf of the Hollywood Independent Citizens Committee of the Arts, Sciences, and Professions (HICCASP), where he reaffirmed that group's "belief in free enterprise and the Democratic system and [repudiated] Communism as desirable for the United States."²⁸ In a letter to the *National Review*, Reagan even touted SAG during this time as being "a primary force against the Communist attempt at take-over in Hollywood."²⁹

Some thirty years later, Reagan emphasized in his memoir the importance of this period to the development of his political ideology. He recollected that "more than anything else, it was the Communists' attempted takeover of Hollywood...that...set me on the road that would lead me into politics."³⁰ He explained that "these were eye opening years for me." Considering himself a Roosevelt liberal, Reagan had "shared the orthodox liberal view that Communists—if there really *were* any—were liberals who

²⁶ Dewey Martin, "'Ronald Reagan's Hate For Communism, 2 May 1954, Page 36,'" *Monroe Morning World*, accessed February 11, 2021,

<https://www.newspapers.com/image/86333883/?terms=ronald+reagan%3B+communism&match=1>.

²⁷ Report on Ronald Reagan, September 2, 1947, US House of Representatives: History, Art & Archives, accessed February 11, 2021, https://history.house.gov/Records-and-Research/Listing/hi_005/.

²⁸ Reagan, *An American Life*, 113.

²⁹ Ronald Reagan, *Reagan: A Life in Letters*. (New York, NY: Free Press, 2003) 141.

³⁰ Reagan, *An American Life*, 114.

were temporarily off track.”³¹ His time with SAG, working with other unions and talking with politicians, had opened his eyes to the evils of communism.

Reagan’s anti-communist ideas during this time fit well with that of the United States’ views in general as America’s Cold War with communism turned hot in Asia by 1950.³² After witnessing the Communist Chinese force the Nationalist Chinese into exile on Taiwan, Americans felt compelled to act when communist North Korea invaded South Korea in June of that year. General Douglas MacArthur, well known from his exploits during World War II, had led the coalition forces tasked by the United Nations with aiding the South Koreans. MacArthur viewed his responsibility as part of a larger struggle against communism. He was not the only one. From politicians to journalists at *The Bradenton [Florida] Herald*, individuals connected what was happening in Korea to a pattern of communist takeover. Peter Edmondson of *The Herald* summed up the views of many when he wrote that “fear has been expressed that Vietnam would be the next point of communist advance in Asia...conclusions have been drawn that the United States...would have to intervene here to...stop the Red march down the Malayan peninsula.”³³

Growing tension in Asia and America’s desire to prevent the communist threat there noticeably foreshadowed what was to come in Vietnam years later. Reagan made a direct connection between the goals of American military leaders in Korea, such as MacArthur, and Reagan’s own views on the Vietnam War in his memoir. Though he, like

³¹ Reagan, *An American Life*, 115.

³² For more information regarding communism and Asia during this period, reference Shen Zhihua’s *Mao, Stalin and the Korean War: Trilateral Communist Relations in the 1950s* (London, UK: Routledge, 2013).

³³ Peter Edson, “American Aid to Indochina Limited 8 Nov 1950, 4,” *The Bradenton Herald*, accessed February 11, 2021, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/682901180/?terms=douglas+macarthur%3B+vietnam%3B&match=1>.

most of the country, appeared generally unaware of the growing unrest in Vietnam during the 1950s, while reminiscing about this chapter of his life he mentioned:

I think, as MacArthur did, that if we as a nation send our soldiers abroad to get shot at, we have a moral responsibility to do *everything* we can to win the war we put them in. I'll never forget one prophetic remark by MacArthur: 'If we don't win this war in Korea, we'll have to fight another war-this time in a place called Vietnam.' Until then, I had never heard of Vietnam. I only knew about a place called French Indochina. How right he was.³⁴

That Reagan made a direct connection between a bastion of his own generation and the future quagmire of Vietnam highlights the significance of that war on him personally.

None of these connections between WWII and Vietnam were coincidence for Reagan either. He emphasized a WWII-era nostalgia throughout his life, continuously referencing that generation. This produced a unique, Reagan-esque, form of conservatism that reflected, in the words of one historian, the post-WWII "international ascendancy" and "domestic social stability of the late forties and fifties."³⁵ A contemporary journalist described him as a small town, "main street U.S.A" American that "lives in the past" both emotionally and intellectually and whose "past is his future."³⁶ This important factor had dramatic implications on Reagan's redemption of Vietnam. Throughout his career, he both directly and indirectly projected the idea that the U.S. was still as much of a vision of democracy and godliness as he perceived it to be during his own beloved World War II era and continuously harkened back to that time in American history, believing it a model example for what he had always envisioned the country to be.

³⁴ Reagan, *An American Life*, 133.

³⁵ Marcus, *Happy Days and Wonder Years*, 60.

³⁶ Roger Rosenblatt, with Laurence I. Barrett, "Man of the Year: Out of the Past, Fresh Choices for the Future: Invoking Old Values, Ronald Reagan Must Make Them Work for the '80s," *Time*, 5 January 1981, 10-23.

Reagan maintained this vision of America even as the U.S. became involved in Vietnam and his own career took a new turn. American troop deployment to the country of Vietnam did not officially begin until 1965, yet the United States had sent special forces personnel, military advisors, and millions of dollars in military equipment to assist the South Vietnamese starting in the late 1950s.³⁷ Many South Vietnamese soldiers had died fighting the communist north and even American advisors and special forces troops had been killed up to that point. It was during this time that Reagan once again maintained a direct connection between his views on the growing tension in Vietnam and his own anti-communist beliefs. In October 1964, when America's full participation in the Vietnam conflict was only beginning to heat up, Reagan burst onto the national political scene during an impromptu speech for Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater. Active in Goldwater's campaign, Reagan stepped in when the candidate was unable to make an appearance at a Los Angeles fundraiser. Reagan's speech, entitled "A Time for Choosing," left the group of big Republican donors awestruck by the man's ability to both deliver a message and hold a crowd's attention. In the speech, Reagan aligned the stand against Vietnamese communists with a stand against communists at America's back door in Cuba. After alluding to the principle that those Americans who had perished in Vietnam up to that point should not have died in vain, he told the story of two Cuban refugees who told him that America was "the last stand on earth" against oppressive communism.³⁸

³⁷ Fredrik Logevall's seminal *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York, NY: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2014), is a fantastic resource on this.

³⁸ Ronald Reagan, "A Time for Choosing Speech, October 27, 1964," Ronald Reagan Presidential Library - National Archives and Records Administration (Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute), accessed March 16, 2020, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/reagans/ronald-reagan/time-choosing-speech-october-27-1964>

Reagan's nostalgia for his World War II-world view and vehemently anti-Communist beliefs remained consistent even as the world around him changed into the 1960s. From civil rights demonstrations to student protests, Americans, especially younger Americans, increasingly questioned the actions of their government. When President Lyndon Johnson escalated American involvement in the Vietnamese civil war, antiwar protestors took to the street to register their opposition to the war. Reagan, along with his fellow Americans, watched the nightly news where reports of increased numbers of American casualties in Vietnam joined stories of demonstrating students and other young people.³⁹ Whatever unity existed both abroad and on the home front that helped to repel the Axis powers in the Second World War became unraveled as Reagan's generation rejected the actions and ideas of the groups protesting the war. Ironically, the divisiveness of these years only appeared to make Reagan long for a time when the nation fought clearer evils and thus he consistently referred back to that "rosier" aforementioned WWII era.

In reverting back to an image of what he believed America once was, he ignored what America became once the Vietnam conflict escalated into the sixties and seventies. The United States was a nation publicly divided over its first perceivably "bad" war. To Reagan, though, it never truly was a bad war at all; he thought that the American public had lost sight of its cause or had simply been misled. After the trauma of Vietnam, Reagan was seen by many as the embodiment of a bygone era, a man who could comfort the nation.⁴⁰

³⁹ Bernard von Bothmer. *Framing the Sixties: The Use and Abuse of a Decade from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010) 8.

⁴⁰ Reagan Library. "Ronald Reagan's Election Eve Address: A Vision for America," Filmed November 3, 1980. YouTube video, 11:04-11:10, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fMx3KsU-Rcg>.

Reagan used his newfound political capital to seek and win election as governor of California in 1966, and he used the campaign as a platform to comment upon the Vietnam situation. During his campaign the war with Vietnam had escalated significantly, as had protests against it after troops were fully deployed in March of 1965. These protests and backlash against the war remained a source of concern to many Americans. Yet during his campaign, Reagan frequently held prayer breakfasts over the war, spoke out on behalf of returning vets, received battlefield trinkets from veterans who appreciated his support, and even gave flowers to military spouses as a gesture of solidarity. Considering that California was a hotbed of protest and dissent against the war, remaining neutral would have been a safer political move. If nothing else, this at least shows a level of personal conviction about the war on behalf of Reagan that travels far beyond simply campaigning for votes or pandering to a constituency.⁴¹

He subsequently did not deviate from his views, and this assisted him immensely throughout his life when speaking about the war in Vietnam. In writing to one of his speech writers, Jeffrey Hart, in 1967, Reagan even described himself as being “unchanged philosophically” with regard to his beliefs. A devoted advocate of America’s perceived moral crusade to rid the world of the evils of communism, he remained steadfast throughout the sixties and seventies about the purpose of that war, many times even at the expense of popular opinion.

During his years in office (1967-1975), Governor Reagan displayed his beliefs about the situation in Vietnam most forcefully through his encounters with antiwar protestors. Reagan held nothing back regarding his views on the status of the war and the

⁴¹ Bates, *The Reagan Rhetoric*, 46.

protestors. He faulted the Johnson administration for failing to ask for a formal declaration of war against the North Vietnamese and for refusing to take necessary steps to quell the antiwar demonstrations. In Reagan's mind, LBJ should have dealt "with protest demonstrations under laws applying to treason, insurrection and giving aid and comfort to the enemy." He complained that "there is central direction of the protest movement while the government is bound by the technicality of whether a war exists or not."⁴² Further writings of Reagan's gubernatorial career, when the fighting in Vietnam had peaked, showed that he consistently rebuked those who he believed were undermining the fight against the North Vietnamese by protesting.⁴³ He despised the fact that these dissenters openly, and often violently, demonstrated against what they perceived to be the injustices of the war.

The fact that Reagan was out of touch with the Vietnam generation in many aspects played an important role in his perception of the war throughout his life. In describing a visit as governor with a group of student protestors, Reagan was quick to dismiss these students' issues as folly compared to his own era. One student mentioned that "it's sad, but it's impossible for the members of your generation to understand your own children...you weren't raised in a time of instant communications...and computers solving problems," to which Reagan nostalgically replied, "you're absolutely right. We didn't have those things when we were your age. We invented them."⁴⁴ Such an

⁴² "GOP Bound to Viet Victory: Reagan 26 Oct 1967, 14," *The Spokesman-Review*, accessed February 11, 2021,

<https://www.newspapers.com/image/570595916/?terms=ronald+reagan%3B+vietnam+protestors&match=1>

⁴³ *The Spokesman-Review* alluded to the idea that Reagan's aggressive stance toward the war all but cost him a any chance at the Republican nomination by 1967. In believing in "no alternative but victory" in Vietnam and that "escalation should have taken place earlier," Reagan appeared to aggressive for the GOP at the time. He was consistent as ever with beliefs, however, and though he was seen as perhaps overtly militaristic for a wartime administration, he was welcomed during an age of war recovery.

⁴⁴ Reagan, *An American Life*, 179.

encounter highlighted the growing chasm between Reagan and the younger Vietnam generation. Moreover, this gap was a factor that played an important role by the time of Reagan's presidency when many of these students penned articles on his rhetoric toward the war. He went on to further describe why he harbored animosity toward these anti-war protestors, mentioning that "there was nothing noble about those who under the anonymity of a mob injured others, burned, destroyed, and acted like storm troopers on the streets of Berkeley and other college towns."⁴⁵ Reagan went so far as to issue a stern warning to those planning to attend an antidraft Vietnam commencement ceremony in 1968. Urging a total ban of the meeting, he described it as being "so indecent it would border on the obscene...such an affront to every decent citizen that I have a hard time holding my temper...there is absolutely no justification for holding it."⁴⁶ That these same themes of nobility reappeared nearly thirteen years later at the Chicago VFW further highlights his consistency toward Vietnam.

Though Reagan supported America's role in Southeast Asia and spoke of it nobly, his feelings toward the country of Vietnam as a whole, like other Americans, were much less rosy. Journalist Haynes Johnson interviewed Reagan during his years as governor and captured his view of and feelings toward the country. "Our young men are dying in a war with a country whose whole gross national product is less than the industrial output of Cleveland, Ohio...level Vietnam, pave it, paint stripes on it, and make a parking lot out of it."⁴⁷ These more private interview sessions show a conflicted Reagan. On the one

⁴⁵ Reagan, *An American Life*, 181.

⁴⁶ Robert Strand, "Students Dare Reagan's Wrath By Attending, 18 May 1968, 11," *Latrobe Bulletin*, accessed February 11, 2021, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/447552159/?terms=ronald+reagan%3B+vietnam+protestors&match=1>.

⁴⁷ Haynes Johnson, *Sleepwalking Through History: America In The Reagan Years* (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1991) 79.

hand, it is evident that he felt the war to be both justified and necessary to his own nostalgic vision of America. Yet, on the other hand, he described Vietnam as being so inferior to the U.S. that it was hardly worth risking more American lives. Reagan appeared careful to speak of Vietnam in a wholly noble way in public while occasionally displaying moments of weakness, however rare, about its troubling legacy on American history behind closed doors.

Reagan's two terms as governor coincided with the most intense years of America's involvement in Vietnam and then with the withdrawal of US troops and support. The Tet Offensive, in January 1968, came to symbolize the frustrations of the war. American and the South Vietnamese forces suffered massive military attacks before pushing back the North Vietnamese. Despite a military victory for the U.S. and ARVN (South Vietnamese) forces during Tet, that their enemies launched such a large-scale offensive at this point largely crippled American confidence in the war's efficiency back home. Many people believed the war had been nearing an end yet the offensive had shown otherwise. By the end of Reagan's first term as governor in 1970, at least 46,000 additional American military deaths had been reported.⁴⁸ The 1973 Paris Peace Accords saw plans for American military withdrawal in the country with the hopes of a complete exit by 1975. Unfortunately, the damaging effects of the war on America's military and democratic legacy had already been done.

Restructuring the narrative of Vietnam required a complete reinterpretation of its outcome from negative to positive. Reagan emphasized this reevaluation in his rhetoric

⁴⁸ "Vietnam War U.S. Military Fatal Casualty Statistics," National Archives and Records Administration (National Archives and Records Administration), accessed February 23, 2021, <https://www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics#category>.

throughout the 1970s. This interpretation was no doubt influenced by his nostalgia for his own “greatest” generation and its solid victory over the obviously “evil” Nazis. This view of the past and WWII meant that many could not and would not accept that America had failed in Southeast Asia. Reagan, like many in the country still coming to grips with America’s mistake in Vietnam, made excuses for its failures. A “stab-in-the-back” legend concerning the outcome of the war developed even before the war ended. This legend ranged from theories perpetuated by President Nixon that certain groups at home turned the United States into a “helpless giant” in Southeast Asia to General William Westmoreland’s maintaining of a “minority opposition...by Hanoi and Moscow” that had caused America to be defeated. Reagan was not far removed from this group of justifiers seeking explanations for the tragedy in Vietnam.⁴⁹ He openly theorized that the North Vietnamese “had a plan...to win on the field of propaganda here in America what they could not win on the field of...Vietnam” by describing Americans as aggressive invaders who had brought destruction to their country, helping to energize the antiwar protest movement.⁵⁰

For Reagan, validating the war was a way of reinforcing his belief that America was truly a God-ordained nation of peace and liberty, destined to bring democracy to the rest of the world. In a 1976 public service announcement, Reagan directly addressed public discontent only a year after the fall of Saigon, criticizing those who believed that the nation was “over the hill and [now] headed for the dustbin of history.”⁵¹ In replying to a letter from Lenore Hershey in the late seventies, he mentioned that “all we need is to

⁴⁹ Keith Beattie, *The Scar That Binds: American Culture and the Vietnam War*. (New York: New York University Press, 1998) 21.

⁵⁰ Reagan, “Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention,” 20.

⁵¹ Ronald Reagan, *Reagan: In His Own Hand* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2001) 13.

be reminded of our destiny...to be the golden hope of all mankind.”⁵² He also went on to mention that, as a nation:

We had to recapture our dreams, our pride in ourselves and our country, and regain that unique sense of destiny and optimism that had always made America different...we had to decide what had gone wrong, and then put it back on course.⁵³

He criticized the state of the nation as a whole during this time as well, stating “during the late seventies, I felt our country had begun to abdicate its historical role as the spiritual leader of the Free World...I’m not sure what was at the root...perhaps it was...the Vietnam War.”⁵⁴

In 1976, as Reagan campaigned for the Republican nomination for president, the war continued to play an important role in his career. In a campaign address, he described the Soviet Union as “Hanoi’s patron saint,” highlighting his worry of America’s world military status moving forward after the war. He characterized America as being “viewed by the world as weak and unsure” before encouraging the public to vote for him in order to realize the country’s preordained “rendezvous with destiny.”⁵⁵ Despite his continuing rhetoric supporting the war effort, Reagan allowed advisors to convince him to select an openly anti-war running mate in Pennsylvania Senator Richard Schweiker. This obvious attempt to gain the support of Republican moderates who feared his war-hawk persona turned out to be a rather giant blunder, however. Reagan made the selection before he had even acquired the nomination and many in Pennsylvania despised Schweiker’s

⁵² Reagan, *A Life in Letters*. 259.

⁵³ Reagan, *An American Life*, 219.

⁵⁴ Reagan, *An American Life*, 267.

⁵⁵ Ronald Reagan, “To Restore America,” Ronald Reagan (Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, March 3, 1976), <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/restore-america>.

willingness to align with someone who had “supported the Vietnam War as fervently as Schweiker opposed it.”⁵⁶ Reagan lost the nomination.

Reagan appeared to learn his lesson from the Schweiker fiasco: he spent the following years reverting to his earlier stances on the war. At a POW rally in Los Angeles in 1978, Reagan mocked those who seemingly wanted to never again repeat the errors of Vietnam. He began by chastising “people in high places” such as academics and politicians for having “learned the wrong lessons from Vietnam.”⁵⁷ He went on to mention that “When they say ‘never again,’ they mean we should never again oppose Communist aggression,” to many cheers.⁵⁸

In his 1980 presidential campaign, Reagan refused to ignore the Vietnam legacy even as his opponents Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford opted not to speak about the war. Reagan made it his mission to redeem it, posing a direct question to the public during a debate that same year by asking “is America as respected throughout the world as it was?”⁵⁹ A mere five years after an embarrassing and publicly broadcast exodus from Saigon, this quest for renewed respect for the United States was an obvious aspect of Reagan’s platform and paired nicely with the nobility theme of his VFW speech that

⁵⁶ Steven E. Barkan, “He Sold Out, 6 Aug 1976, page 6,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, accessed February 11, 2021, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/173020023/?terms=Ronald+Reagan%3B+Vietnam+War%3B&match=1>.

⁵⁷ “Reagan Tells POW's Never Again 29 May 1978, 5,” *The Press Democrat* (Santa Rosa, California), accessed February 23, 2021, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/295254163/?terms=Ronald+Reagan+and+the+Vietnam+War%3B&match=1>.

⁵⁸ “Reagan Is Speaker at POW Rally 29 May 1978, 28,” *The Daily News* (Lebanon, Pennsylvania), accessed February 11, 2021, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/518567347/?terms=ronald+reagan+and+the+Vietnam+War%3B&match=1>.

⁵⁹ “October 28, 1980 Debate Transcript.” CPD: October 28, 1980 Debate Transcript. The Commission On Presidential Debates. Accessed September 9, 2019. <https://www.debates.org/voter-education/debate-transcripts/october-28-1980-debate-transcript/>.

same year. Furthermore, terms such as “over the hill” and “reminded” may not have been necessary within Reagan’s rhetoric either had the Vietnam War not occurred. Yet, the ugliness of that conflict profoundly affected the way in which Reagan spoke about it publicly and worked it into his “golden” and “nostalgic” vision for the country moving forward.

Reagan continually tied the war to his long-held anticommunist beliefs and his vision of the good old days of World War II. In his 1980 “noble cause” VFW speech, he stated his desire to “tell those who fought in that war that we will never again ask young men to fight and possibly die in a war our government is afraid to let them win,” mimicking MacArthur’s words from two decades prior.⁶⁰ With these remarks, Reagan both restructured the narrative on Vietnam by asserting it as a noble cause and created a type of scapegoat for its result. He also emphasized the shortcomings of the North Vietnamese and their communist system. He maintained that a defeat at the hands of this same type of government only exacerbated the need to justify America’s morality during the war, stating that “for too long, we have lived with the Vietnam Syndrome. Much of that syndrome has been created by the North Vietnamese aggressors.”⁶¹ The type of *us* and *them* mentality that Reagan projected became an integral part of his redemption of Vietnam.

These remarks did not appear to damage Reagan’s standings in the polls either. His 50.8% to 41.0% margin of victory over Carter signaled to historians like Robert

⁶⁰ Reagan, “Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention” 1980.

⁶¹ Reagan, “Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention,” 20.

Mason the fact that 1980, specifically, marked a noticeable turn to conservatism in response to what was seen as American decline.⁶²

This “noble” rhetoric was not relegated simply to his public speeches either. In a 1982 private letter to Master Sergeant Michael T. Henry, Reagan reconstructed the term “Vietnam syndrome” altogether. “I’m convinced,” he wrote, that “our fellow Americans have left or are leaving behind the tragic Vietnam syndrome that haunted our land for so long. They are at last aware of your sacrifice and are beginning to realize how worthwhile the cause truly was.”⁶³ In this private statement, Reagan appears to not only defend his “noble” narrative of Vietnam but to take sole responsibility for its defense in the first place.

Reagan was also quite masterful in his ability to redeem the war at the expense of other population groups. In a 1982 speech at the Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial, he famously mentioned “we’re beginning to understand how much that we were led astray.”⁶⁴ This type of rhetoric created a vague group of various enemies who cost America the victory in Vietnam without specifically mentioning anyone. While American communists, Vietnamese immigrants, and others could have and most likely did feel singled out during Reagan’s presidency, statements like this allowed Reagan to present his own image of the proper America in the post-Vietnam era without technically isolating any one specific group. By doing this, Reagan better healed the wounds of division that appeared after the failures of Vietnam and made others feel more favorable

⁶² Robert Mason, “The Domestic Politics of War and Peace: Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and the Election of 1980.” In *US Presidential Elections and Foreign Policy: Candidates, Campaigns, and Global Politics from FDR to Bill Clinton* (KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2017) 251.

⁶³ Reagan, *A Life in Letters*, 390.

⁶⁴ Quoted in Keith Beattie, *The Scar That Binds*, 24-25.

about that war. Using nostalgia and a redeeming rhetoric toward Vietnam was part of a personal belief in the war's nobility by Reagan, no matter who this approach alienated. When that was not sufficient to convince voters, he actively utilized misinformation and contorted history to convert other Americans to his side of the Vietnam War.

A Heightened Exceptionalism: Reagan Rewrites the War

Given his beliefs on the Vietnam war, which stemmed from his own experience, Reagan rewrote the more negative aspects of Vietnam at several intervals during his political career, both before and *during* his presidency. He constantly created his own pseudo histories of the war, the nation of Vietnam itself, and America's involvement in the conflict. In the mid-1960s, as the U.S. entered the peak of its worst years in Southeast Asia, Reagan described the war in historical context, saying that

There can be no real peace while one American is dying some place in the world for the rest of us...if we lose this war, and in so doing lose this way of freedom of ours, history will record with the greatest astonishment that those who had the most to lose did the least to prevent its happening.⁶⁵

He also claimed that both North and South Vietnam had been two separate countries during meetings in Geneva just prior to U.S. arrival in the early sixties. He stated that North Vietnamese figurehead Ho Chi Min had refused to participate in an election which would unite the two nations, forcing America, being a pillar of peace and liberty, to bring "democracy" to the nation and attempt to unite it against an evil communist dictatorship.⁶⁶ In an obvious victimization of U.S. involvement, Reagan then claimed that

⁶⁵ Ronald Reagan, "A Time For Choosing."

⁶⁶ Ronald Reagan, "The President's News Conference: February 18, 1982," Ronald Reagan Presidential Library - National Archives and Records Administration (Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute), accessed March 16, 2020, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/21882b>.

America only became involved when provoked, when U.S. military advisers “began being blown up where they lived and walking down the street by people...throwing pipe-bombs at them.”⁶⁷ Such an oversimplification of military involvement in Southeast Asia both misled the public and bolstered Reagan’s narrative about the war. Historian H. Bruce Franklin, among others, proved that Vietnam had, in fact, been a single nation prior to that Geneva conference and the internal divisions of the country were far more complex than Reagan had depicted or would ever admit.⁶⁸ Reagan’s version of a peaceful and democratic South Vietnam being increasingly and violently invaded by a hostile and communist north allowed him to portray America as “the good guys” coming to the rescue of an ally. This redemption played a huge role in Reagan’s use of the war as a way to bring confidence back to the nation, however false.

By misconstruing historical fact, Reagan provided false narratives to the American public as to their nation’s involvement in Southeast Asia. In this regard, one particular allegory is of note here. In 1975, when the North Vietnamese had begun overrunning the southern half of Vietnam, the United States had been forced to harbor Vietnamese refugees in places like Elgin Air Force Base, Florida. Though journalists reported the ill treatment, aggression, and opposition to housing such individuals experienced, Reagan painted an entirely different picture of the treatment of these refugees.⁶⁹ In quintessential Reagan fashion, he immediately provided a rosier version of what had been occurring onboard ships as refugees were picked up. In a public service

⁶⁷ Reagan, “The President’s News Conference: February 18, 1982.”

⁶⁸ Bruce H. Franklin, *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 28-29.

⁶⁹ Rick Perlstein, “Ronald Reagan’s Allegories of History.” In *Historian and Chief: How Presidents Interpret the Past to Shape the Future* (VA: University of Virginia Press), 2019.

announcement that same year, Reagan began by describing a letter which had come to him from a South Vietnamese refugee. In the letter, the refugee described to Reagan an incident in the Gulf of Thailand onboard the U.S.S. *Midway* (a former WWII ship nonetheless) where several civilians were stranded in the water. Before the *Midway* rolled in, these refugees were near death on a lowly “20 ft. craft” that was “barely afloat and sinking.” Though not required to stop, the *Midway* not only diverted its course to rescue those in need, but American sailors created makeshift signs that read “Welcome Refugees.” Once on board, an American officer exclaimed, “our job is to make you as comfortable as possible, heal the sick and feed you to your hearts content.” Reagan then mentioned, “that was the official policy of our [nation] and therefore of the *Midway*.” The sailors distributed clothes, tended to a sick baby, and provided piggyback rides to “homeless children...[wearing] Navy T-Shirts bearing the *Midway* decal.”⁷⁰ That moments of compassion occurred throughout the war’s duration is undeniable. What Reagan failed to mention was that, aside from the U.S. largely causing the refugee crisis, the *Midway* had been in Southeast Asia for nearly eight years and had dealt death to thousands of civilians. Reagan ignored those facts and described the *Midway* as merely being a savior for orphans and widows.⁷¹

Reagan blatantly reconstructed history when discussing America’s responsibility for the situations in Laos and Cambodia as well, penning three separate commentaries on events in the region. These comments were only in the context of human suffering as a result of Communism and America’s exit, however. He ignored the implication that the United States was in any way responsible for the suffering in these countries. When

⁷⁰ Reagan, *Reagan: In His Own Hand*, 15-16.

⁷¹ Perlstein, “Ronald Reagan’s Allegories of History,” 231.

speaking about the Cambodians, Reagan mentioned that “they...had actually *welcomed* the Communist conquest because they thought it would bring peace and end long years of fighting.” He went on to say that “they are indoctrinated with hatred for anything foreign-especially American.”⁷² Reagan’s insensitive words both blamed those affected by the long war in Southeast Asia for their own plight and also absolved America of any guilt in the wake of its aftermath. In response to a letter from a Cambodian refugee, Reagan acknowledged the individual’s suffering yet refused to accept any responsibility for it. “I hope...that your homeland will one day be free of...cruel conquerors. Many of us are doing our best to see that Cambodia is not forgotten.”⁷³ Here, Reagan appears to insinuate that had his utopian vision of democracy prevailed during Vietnam, such suffering and Communist “evil” would never have taken place. This notion is bolstered by the fact that Reagan consistently put a considerable amount of blame on South Vietnam. “The South Vietnamese army retreated, abandoning the things we’d left for them and today the Communist forces of North Vietnam have taken not only South Vietnam but Cambodia and Laos as well.”⁷⁴

In one tribute to Vietnam veterans, Reagan publicly used Cambodian and Laotian suffering for his own narrative benefit. He opened with “not speaking provocatively here,” before hinting at a sort of counterfactual paradise if America had claimed victory. He went on to use the mass killings in Southeast Asia as evidence of the justness of American actions: “who can doubt that the cause for which our men fought was just? It

⁷² Reagan, *In His Own Hand*, 36-40.

⁷³ Reagan, *A Life in Letters*, 524.

⁷⁴ Reagan, *A Life in Letters*, 535.

was, after all, however imperfectly pursued, the cause of freedom.”⁷⁵ Reagan was quick to paint the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN-South Vietnamese) as incompetent allies who needed permanent parental guidance in order to succeed. The fact of the matter is that most ARVN ground troops were fully capable soldiers who took pride in victory against their enemy as much as anyone. The American public rarely heard anything about this more capable image of South Vietnamese soldiers, at least not via Reagan’s speeches and writings.

Reagan continued to utilize history to redeem the Vietnam narrative in 1981 when he pardoned two FBI officials accused of wiretapping anti-war groups during the war. He justified his action by stating that “four years ago, thousands of draft evaders...were pardoned by my predecessor. America was generous to those who refused to serve...in...Vietnam...We can be no less generous to...men who acted...to bring an end to...terrorism.”⁷⁶ Here, Reagan simultaneously redeemed those who participated, even questionably, in wartime activities and admonished those who opposed it as unpatriotic.

As scholar Rick Perlstein argues, Reagan always had a moral purpose for changing the war’s narrative and thus its history. He always seemed honest about what he said. Reagan believed Vietnam had been an attack on the very foundations of America’s fabricated sense of virtue and uplift throughout the world, particularly after World War II, which purposely and accidentally assisted him politically.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ President Hails Vietnam Vets As U.S. Heroes - Los Angeles Times, Newspaper Article - re: President Reagan, 12 November 1983, Box 37, Folder 07, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03 - Veterans, Vietnam Center at Texas Tech University <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2283707019>, Accessed 15 Jan 2020.

⁷⁶ Special to the New York Times, “Reagan Statement About the Pardons.” *The New York Times*, April 16, 1981.

⁷⁷ Perlstein, “Ronald Reagan’s Allegories of History,” 234.

Somewhere between Reagan's belief in the war's nobility and his active revision of its history, however, he embodied a rejuvenated form of patriotism which deserves special attention here. Utilizing fantastical ideas about America's destiny as well as an optimistic world view, Reagan quite publicly ushered in a new conservative age with the Vietnam War as arguably its greatest victim.

Memory and the Myth of the American Dream: Reagan's New Conservatism

Historians have argued that Reagan's opinions about Vietnam meshed perfectly with the shifting views of the American public. For example, historian Bernard von Bothmer argued that the Vietnam War set the stage for a conservative uprising by the late 1970s. By the time Reagan became president, von Bothmer states, the conservative surge had fostered heavily moralistic debates as to the war's causes and failures, with various sides having adopted their differing perspectives. The left contended that the government had pursued a nasty and immoral conflict beyond the point of redemption. The right claimed that governmental leaders were simply too weak and easily manipulated to effectively win a war in Vietnam. Behind this perfect storm of mistrust and upheaval, Reagan ascended to the presidency as the candidate most likely to restore optimism about America's place in the world and the nobility of the war from which it had just emerged.⁷⁸

Additional research from memory scholars further explains the success of Reagan's approach to the war. For example, historian Daniel Marcus argues that "recollections of the past take shape out of current pressures" and thus "nostalgia thrives

⁷⁸ von Bothmer. *Framing the Sixties*, 8.

when identity is challenged by rapid social change, discontinuity, and dislocation.”⁷⁹ The Vietnam and post-Vietnam eras under which Reagan ascended to political power completely embody this notion. The war exposed previously hidden divisions in society and presented new questions about America’s justification for involvement in Southeast Asia. Moreover, Reagan continuously referred back to the nostalgic, anti-Communist ideals of his own experiences during and after World War II and worked this perspective into his rhetoric in order to shape the narrative of Vietnam.

Famed French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, in his description of collective memory, once asserted that individuals project their past via diverse and discriminate imagery, often with a heavily nostalgic and positive twist. In this way, Reagan was incredibly influential in shaping American memories of the past in the context of the present. For better or worse, he consistently blurred the line between history and memory and many in the American public lauded his more positive spin on previously unpalatable events like Vietnam.⁸⁰ Never shying away from a chance to align a questionable conflict with the great ideals and visions of America’s most iconic figures, Reagan ensured that the Vietnam War would become his personal redemption project.

Optimism about America’s role in the Vietnam War was not solely Reagan’s doing either. Some Americans welcomed an avoidance of guilt even prior to his presidency. In 1977, with Jimmy Carter still in office, a *New York Times* poll presented information which reflected the reluctance of the American public to provide little more than the bare minimum in aid to the war-ravaged nation of Vietnam. It mentioned that

⁷⁹ Daniel Marcus, *Happy Days and Wonder Years: The Fifties and the Sixties in Contemporary Cultural Politics* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2004) 67.

⁸⁰ Toby Glenn Bates, *The Reagan Rhetoric: History and Memory in 1980’s America* (DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 2011) 6.

while 60% of the American population supported giving food and water of some kind to the Vietnamese, fully 78% opposed financial aid of any kind for the rebuilding of infrastructure and only 49% were in favor of giving industrial or farm equipment.⁸¹ Even Jimmy Carter himself, the apparent antithesis of Reaganite conservatism, mentioned that the U.S. owed no obligation to the bomb-ravaged nation of Vietnam because “the destruction was mutual.”⁸²

Other scholars agree Reagan was the right man in the right place at the right time. Pollsters Daniel Yankelovich and Larry Kaagan argued that during this time voters were eager to replace the ghost of the Vietnam War with a new posture of American assertiveness as well.⁸³ Defeat in Vietnam coupled with high unemployment, inflation, and economic challenges set the stage not only for a conservative revolution but for a reevaluation of the Vietnam War as a result. Historian David Farber described this new type of modern conservatism as “forward-looking, optimistic, sunny” and unlike any other form of right-wing politics before or since.⁸⁴ Before Reagan, the greatest champions of American conservatism were naysayers who proffered fear and even doom,” but this was not him.⁸⁵ His type of conservatism was complete with positive statements about “a new feeling of patriotism in our land,” after what he saw as anti-patriotic stances during Vietnam.⁸⁶ Scholar Christian Appy agrees with Farber’s

⁸¹ “Public Likes Carter, Survey Finds, More for His Style Than Programs,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, July 29, 1977), <https://www.nytimes.com/1977/07/29/archives/public-likes-carter-survey-finds-more-for-his-style-than-programs.html>

⁸² Quoted in Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States: 1492-Present*. (NY: New York: Harper Perennial, 2001) 567.

⁸³ Daniel Yankelovich, and Richard Smoke. “America’s “New Thinking.” *Foreign Affairs* 67, no. 1 (1988): 3. Accessed March 4, 2020. doi:10.2307/20043671.

⁸⁴ David Farber, *The Rise and Fall of Modern American Conservatism: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010) 160.

⁸⁵ Farber, *The Rise and Fall of Modern American Conservatism*, 159.

⁸⁶ Quoted in Farber, *The Rise and Fall of Modern American Conservatism*, 252.

characterization, describing Reagan's presidential rise as "a new nationalism...defensive, in-ward looking, and resentful."⁸⁷

Regardless, Reagan's obsessive, almost mythical idea of America manifested itself regularly via his rhetoric on the Vietnam War. He used patriotic, mythical verbiage when accepting the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial Statue in November 1984, mentioning that as you touch the reflection of the Vietnam Monument, "you're touching...the reflection of the Washington Monument or the chair in which great Abe Lincoln sits."⁸⁸ Using this patriotic rhetoric, he went on to mention that "some of your countrymen were unable to distinguish between their native dislike for war and the stainless patriotism of those who suffered its scars...But there has been a rethinking there."⁸⁹

Reagan alluded to his idea of the American dream at a 1985 State of the Union Address when making a connection between South Vietnamese refugees and American heroism. He told the story of a young girl who fled to the United States as part of the exodus of Saigon. Avoiding any guilt on behalf of Americans whatsoever in the questionable evacuation of that city, Reagan described how this refugee "studied hard, learned English, and finished high school in the top of her class" and "[now] ten years from the time she left Vietnam, she will graduate from the United States Military Academy at West Point." He then described the individual as "an American hero named Jean Nguyen."⁹⁰ Not only is American implication in Nguyen's plight avoided here,

⁸⁷ Christian G. Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016) xvi.

⁸⁸ Ronald Reagan, "Remarks At Dedication Ceremonies for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Statue," November 11, 1984 | Ronald Reagan Presidential Library - National Archives and Records Administration (Ronald Reagan Presidential Library - National Archives and Records Administration), accessed April 22, 2020, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/111184a>.

⁸⁹ Ben A. Franklin, "President Accepts Vietnam Memorial." *The New York Times*, November 12, 1984.

⁹⁰ "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union." www.presidency.ucsb.edu February 6, 1985.

America is projected as being the shining beacon of light and freedom for all who simply have the grit and determination to stay optimistic and work hard. This type of language oversimplified an increasingly complex predicament for many helpless Vietnamese civilians. Using his own experiences and personal opinions, Reagan both intensified divisions and provided a simple, familiar, explanation for the upheaval in Southeast Asia.

Reagan's new conservatism also came at the expense of tough conversations as to America's legacy in Vietnam. Countless attempts to uplift that war in the American consciousness sadly relegated the more troubling aspects of the war's effect on Southeast Asia to the backburner. Chief among the issues some Americans wanted to forget was the suffering endured by the Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians both directly and indirectly as a result of U.S. involvement. Avoiding the impact of American actions on the Vietnamese people, including some three million Vietnamese dead, became a recurring theme for a man who sought to both move on from the war as well as re-establish American moral superiority and legitimacy again, especially domestically.

The public was not entirely naïve about Reagan's questionable use of myth and fantasy when discussing Vietnam either. A *Time* magazine article from July 7, 1986 exemplified the type of influence that the president had on the restructuring of the past. Lance Morrow wrote in his "Yankee Doodle Magic" cover story on Reagan that the man was "a Prospero of American memories, a magician who carries a bright, ideal America like a holograph in his mind." Calling Reagan a man who "possesses a sort of genius for the styles of American memory, for the layerings of the American past," Morrow practically celebrated Reagan's inability to see complexity and to instead celebrate "the

<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-the-congress-the-state-the-union-5>.

illusion of a long summer celebration of the past.”⁹¹ Many took notice and had strong opinions about Reagan’s ignorance on the war’s worst aspects, however, and were ready to question the President’s narrative and beliefs.

Fighting the Current: Negative Views

No amount of redemption or historical fabrication could quell the tide of criticism associated with Reagan’s more positive depiction of the war. Reagan’s decades-long remarks and views regarding Vietnam invited immense public backlash and led many to harbor immediately negative views about his rhetoric regarding Vietnam as a noble cause and reject his version of the war. Rumor has it that Reagan had actually reworked the “noble cause” line back into his 1980 VFW speech after having it omitted by his staff. The *Washington Post* took notice, commenting “for many...the reversion to Vietnam reopens old wounds beginning to heal.” The paper would go on to report that “he deliberately stirred the fires with the old trigger words,” even calling Reagan needlessly “defiant.”⁹² Reagan remained unwilling to allow the controversy surrounding his remarks on Vietnam to tone down his own personal narrative on the war. The *Miami Herald* cited Reagan’s redemptive remarks on Vietnam as “regrettably divisive...and wrong.” The *Chicago Sun-Times* mentioned “who could forget...the falsified bombing records, the...weapons against civilian targets?...defoliants? My Lai? The lies to the American Congress and the American people about the scope of the war and prospects for peace?

⁹¹ Lance Morrow, “Yankee Doodle Magic,” *Time*, 5 January 1981, 12-58.

⁹² Quoted in Toby Glenn Bates, *The Reagan Rhetoric: History and Memory in 1980’s America* (DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 2011) 49.

Noble?”⁹³ Roper and Gallup polls from throughout the era also supported the fact that during Reagan’s tenure the American public felt the Vietnam War’s causes and aims were highly questionable at best. Throughout Reagan’s presidency, nearly 66% of those polled felt the war unjustified while 72% found it fundamentally wrong and immoral. Those numbers did not waver much by the end of Reagan’s presidency, remaining at around 65% and 66% respectively.

Further, not everyone reacted favorably to Reagan’s “noble cause” speech. Frank McAdams, a former Marine captain, spoke for many Vietnam veterans in an op-ed piece for the *Los Angeles Times*. Arguing that Reagan’s idea of a “noble cause” was far removed from a battle at Cam Le that he had experienced in 1964, McAdams replied “a noble cause, Mr. Reagan? I would call it a horrible experience.”⁹⁴ McAdams penned another blistering article for *The Times* only a year later where he specifically attacked Reagan and the government’s “epidemic World War II-vintage ignorance.”⁹⁵ One former Marine protested that he and his comrades had killed, bled, and “died for worse than nothing.”⁹⁶ Though history suggests otherwise, Reagan biographer Lou Cannon has re-emphasized the fact that many believed Reagan’s “noble cause” comment to have hurt his reputation among voters more than any of his mistakes at the time. That pollsters lent

⁹³ Quoted in Patrick Hagopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009) 13.

⁹⁴ McAdams, Frank, “What Glory, Captain Reagan?” *The Los Angeles Times*, August 27, 1980.

⁹⁵ McAdams, Frank, “Crybabies' No More -- Except in Mourning,” 7 June 1981, Box 01, Folder 16, Paul Cecil Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2520116010>, Accessed 15 Jan 2020.

⁹⁶ Philip M. Boffey, “Vietnam Veterans' Parade A Belated Welcome Home,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, November 14, 1982), <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/11/14/us/vietnam-veterans-parade-a-belated-welcome-home.html>.

this much credence to Reagan's outlook on the war emphasizes its often-overlooked effect on Reagan's optimistic narrative and thus his presidency.⁹⁷

Table 1. U.S. Public Opinion on the Ethics and Morality of the Vietnam War, 1975–1990

Polling organization	Month/ year	Word or phrase describing American action in the Vietnam War	Percentage agreeing
Roper ¹	6/75	The wrong thing	66
Gallup ²	11/78	More than a mistake, fundamentally wrong and immoral ³	72
Research and Forecasts ⁴	11/80	Unjustified	66
Gallup	11/82	More than a mistake, fundamentally wrong and immoral	72
Roper	8/84	The wrong thing	65
Gallup	11/86	More than a mistake, fundamentally wrong and immoral	66
Gallup ⁵	3/90	A mistake	74
Gallup	3/90	Not a just war	68

Source: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut, Storrs (RC).

Note: All the polls were of national adult samples.

1. Roper Organization polls, June 14–21, 1975, and August 11–18, 1984.

2. Gallup Organization polls for the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, November 17–26, 1978, October 29–November 6, 1982, October 30–November 12, 1986.

3. In the Gallup poll questions with this phrasing, the positive results shown are the aggregate of those who "agreed somewhat" and "agreed strongly" with the proposition.

4. Research and Forecasts poll sponsored by Connecticut Mutual Life Insurance, September 1–November 15, 1980.

5. Gallup Organization poll, March 12–15, 1990.

Figure 1. Roper and Gallup polls on the morality of Vietnam. Courtesy of Patrick Hagopian's *The Vietnam War in American Memory*.⁹⁸

Others disagreed with Reagan's more positive spin on the state of the country as a whole after Vietnam; chief among these critics was Bruce Springsteen. This led to one of the more interesting pop culture occurrences of the era. In 1982, Springsteen released what many regard as his bleakest album, titled *Nebraska*. It was a dark and grisly portrait

⁹⁷ Cannon, *Reagan*, 272.

⁹⁸ Hagopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory*, 13.

of post-Vietnam America and perhaps the converse of Reagan's more nostalgic and positive tone. In one song specifically, "Atlantic City," Springsteen painted a picture of shut down factories and out of work auto mechanics. An America where clear "winners and losers" existed in the midst of fallout from a failed war in which the "lost souls" of everyday Americans bore a burden for a few bureaucratic elites that "no honest man can pay."⁹⁹

During his 1984 re-election bid, Reagan's team opted to use Springsteen's "Born in the U.S.A." as a unifying rallying cry at public appearances where true Americans "didn't come asking for welfare or special treatment."¹⁰⁰ Either not understanding or perhaps disregarding its purposely unpatriotic message about a man being called to serve in a conflict for which he saw no real purpose, where the main character "had a brother at Khe Sanh fighting off the Viet Cong" who's "all gone" now, Reagan's supporters chanted "Born in the U.S.A!" at numerous rallies.¹⁰¹ This happened so often that Springsteen felt compelled to respond at a Pittsburgh concert in 1984. He retorted that "the president was mentioning my name the other day, and I kinda got to wondering what his favorite album must of been. I don't think it was the 'Nebraska' album. I don't think he's been listening to this one."¹⁰² That Reagan's positivity and naivete toward Vietnam garnered so much backlash and attention highlights both the relevance of that war's

⁹⁹ Bruce Springsteen, *Nebraska* (Columbia Records, 1982).

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in Christian G. Appy's *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016) 252-253.

¹⁰¹ Bruce Springsteen, *Born in the U.S.A* (Columbia Records, 1984).

¹⁰² Scott Mervis, "Music Preview: Springsteen's 10 Most Memorable Moments in Pittsburgh," Post-Gazette.com (Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, September 8, 2016), <https://www.post-gazette.com/ae/music/2016/09/08/Music-preview-Bruce-Springsteen-s-10-most-memorable-moments-in-Pittsburgh/stories/201609080112>.

memory throughout Reagan's political career as well as his incessant need to redeem its narrative due to his previous beliefs on anti-Communism and American nobility.

To historian Patrick Hagopian, Reagan's rhetoric on forgiveness and his eagerness to ensure Americans transcended their moral, ideological, and political differences toward Vietnam, while perhaps admirable and genuine, was both self-serving and problematic. Without acknowledging the war's shortcomings in the first place, true healing could never be had. "Healing gave a new and superficially attractive cast to the consistent policy of America's postwar leaders, which was to refuse to consider anything to do with U.S. culpability."¹⁰³ Rampant as these criticisms were, history also shows that for every naysayer among the public there was also a supporter.

Buying In: Positive Views

Despite critics, many appeared ready to fall in line with Reagan's more positive spin on the Vietnam War from the very beginning. Public figures such as South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu felt the need to personally visit Reagan in Los Angeles in 1971 in response to his unbridled support for the cause. The Coronado Republican Women, a group out of California, called the war a "noble cause of freedom" and Roy Adams, a staff member for "New Right" Republican Senator Jeremiah Denton, mentioned that "the cause we were fighting for was just."¹⁰⁴ Denton, himself a Vietnam P.O.W., told a reporter for *The Chicago Sun Times* that he agreed with Reagan that the war had been "just." Denton went on to state that "I believe subsequent events have removed any doubts about that...I don't believe the truth has been clarified for the

¹⁰³ Hagopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory*, 402.

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in Hagopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory*, 123.

American people.”¹⁰⁵ In contrast to Reagan’s advisors, *The Chicago Tribune* reported Reagan’s “noble cause” line as receiving “his longest and loudest accolades for a standard speech line,” and *The New York Times* called the line “a strong tribute to Vietnam veterans.”¹⁰⁶ Reagan recorded further proof of support in a 1982 diary entry. Author Norman Podhoretz sent Reagan a copy of his book, *Why We Were In Vietnam*, inscribed “to Pres. RR-Who always knew and still knows why we were in Vietnam and why it was indeed ‘a noble cause.’”¹⁰⁷

Additionally, though Reagan more obviously had celebrity detractors like Bruce Springsteen, he also garnered *supporters* in pop culture, including wealthy American businessmen who basked in Reagan’s optimism like Chrysler CEO Lee Iacocca. Chrysler ads throughout the era and specifically during Reagan’s reelection in 1984 projected a sense of positivity about the war and emphasized the commonality between Reagan and Iacocca. In *The Unknown Iacocca: Unauthorized Biography*, Peter Wyden described Reagan and Iacocca as each being pillars of positivity and uplift for post-Vietnam America. “The two men epitomize the rebirth of patriotism and pride.”¹⁰⁸ Though commercialization of patriotism was not new, it was far more prevalent during the Reagan years than it had been before or during the Vietnam era.

More privately, Reagan received support for his Vietnam narrative from all over the country via written correspondence. Ex-Marine Dennis Puleo wrote to Reagan in 1985, explaining that Reagan helped Puleo regain his confidence in government again.

¹⁰⁵ “Ex-POW senator says Vietnam was justified,” *The Chicago Sun-Times*, 31 May 1981, Box 01, Folder 24, Charles Anderson Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=13380124048>, Accessed 15 Jan 2020.

¹⁰⁶ Quoted in Bates, *The Reagan Rhetoric*, 48.

¹⁰⁷ Ronald Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries* (NY: New York Harper Perennial, 2009) 74.

¹⁰⁸ Peter Wyden, *The Unknown Iacocca: An Unauthorized Biography* (NY: William Morrow and Company, Inc, 1987) 180.

Reagan replied that he was “most grateful.”¹⁰⁹ Another Vietnam Veteran, Mark Smith, wrote to Reagan to tell him “thank you for the revitalization of the American soldier’s image under [your] administration.” Despite being unemployed, Smith still felt compelled to mention his confidence “in a nation as great as this.” Reagan replied,

I share your joy at the turnaround we’ve made...I have always believed that you who served in Vietnam fought as bravely and as well as any Americans ever have in any war. And your cause was a just and noble one. Yours was not a failure, the failure was in a government that asked men to die for a cause the government was afraid to let them win.

Only briefly does Reagan acknowledge Smith’s economic plight, stating “I hope...your employment problem has been solved.”¹¹⁰

In an article for *The New Republic* that same year, Fred Barnes wrote a lengthy soliloquy entitled “My Change of Heart: Coming Around to the Noble Cause.” Among other things, Barnes spoke to how he had been changed ideologically on the war during the Reagan administration. Barnes echoed Reagan’s chastisement of the press for their negative coverage of the war throughout its duration, especially in regard to the Tet Offensive, just as Reagan had in the sixties. “The press’s most egregious error was the miscoverage of the 1968...offensive. It was treated as a breathtaking defeat...This, we now know, was not the real story. In truth, the Vietcong suffered a disastrous defeat...You don’t hear many apologies though. Certainly not from Walter Cronkite.”¹¹¹ More surprising takes on the war like this should not be mistaken as trivial, either. Barnes alluded to the fact that he was not even necessarily a Reagan supporter yet he became

¹⁰⁹ Reagan, *A Life in Letters*, 215.

¹¹⁰ Reagan, *A Life in Letters*, 265.

¹¹¹ Fred Barnes, “My Change of Heart: Coming Around to the Noble Cause,” 29 April 1985, Box 12, Folder 10, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03 - Antiwar Activities, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2151210026>, Accessed 15 Jan 2020.

convinced of the war's nobility during Reagan's tenure. Barnes wrote, "you know you're a repentant dove when you start agreeing with Ronald Reagan on Vietnam." He then responded directly to Reagan's "noble cause" line from five years prior, referencing the president's consistent anti-Communist rhetoric toward the war:

Naturally, this prompted reporters covering Reagan to write that he had committed a gaffe. I didn't quite see it that way. If Reagan meant that the United States intervened despite having little to gain except the containment of communist expansion and the protection of countries that might evolve into democracies someday, I'd say he was just about right.¹¹²

Barnes was not alone in coming around to Reagan's way of thinking. A staff reporter for *The Wall Street Journal*, David Ignatius, credited Reagan with having "eased the residual pain of Vietnam, with his patriotic talk." Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger wrote that "one of Mr. Reagan's [greatest] achievements is that he has undone much of the damage we have suffered" in regard to Vietnam.¹¹³

In Reagan's post-Vietnam eighties the attempt to redeem the negativity of that war could be found seemingly everywhere. Yet as with almost everything in the country during that decade, this new narrative of Vietnam as a noble and valorous cause began and ended with the president himself. To some, Reagan merely inspired a type of blind patriotism which was at times hostile. The country seemingly became defensive during this time. Historian Christian Appy argues that "the rebirth of America and Americanism is so overwrought it sounds defensive, so insecure it's in need of constant reassurance."¹¹⁴ In this way, an overflow of positivity in response to Reagan's optimism

¹¹² Barnes, "My Change of Heart," 12.

¹¹³ David Ignatius, "A Decade After War, U.S. Leaders Still Feel Effects of the Defeat," *Wall Street Journal*, 14 February 1985, Box 33, Folder 19, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 01 - Assessment and Strategy, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2123319007>, Accessed 15 Jan 2020.

¹¹⁴ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 260.

dealt a serious blow to a more truthful, albeit tragic, narrative on what took place in Vietnam. To better fit Reagan-era conservatism and immediately change the narrative on the war, some have argued that Reagan simply disingenuously attached the word “noble” to a basic and fundamental American story of patriotism and valor. It was as if the everyday meaning of the word “Vietnam” itself needed to be changed under Reagan in order to promote a sense of optimism and redemption.¹¹⁵

History assisted Reagan’s more positive outlook on the war as well. The natural passage of time, however brief since 1975, allowed for a public reassessment of American involvement. Coupled with Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia in 1979, distance from the events of the war furthered arguments in regard to the Domino Theory which described Vietnam as one of a larger puzzle piece vital to preventing an infectious communist threat.¹¹⁶ Even popular television and film began to display more sympathy for groups like Vietnam veterans. Replacing anger with pity further assisted Reagan in changing the narrative of the war.

The emendation of the war that took place during the eighties was a complex combination of both Reagan’s beliefs by the time he obtained his stance as a global figure *and* the public’s willingness to indulge him. Though he no doubt spearheaded a revision of the war’s legacy and purpose and was perhaps the principle figure in its revision, amiable outlooks toward the war were as much a result of the public being primed, ready, willing, and able to get into lockstep with a new Vietnam attitude as they were a product of Reagan’s influence. Assumptions that Reagan simply observed this change in attitude toward Vietnam and hopped onboard to popularity among veterans and the public

¹¹⁵ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 255.

¹¹⁶ Bates, *The Reagan Rhetoric*, 51.

undermine his anti-Communist consistency on the conflict from the beginning, however flawed or at times even blatantly incorrect.

There is no doubt that Reagan's consistent rhetoric on Vietnam influenced how millions of Americans viewed the past. Even by the time of his death in 2004 press coverage revealed that a firm reevaluation of the Vietnam War had been established beginning with Reagan's tenure and, despite occasional dissention in the public, no truly objectionable voices arose to dispute this claim. The positivity came in droves and the conflict was hurt historically because of it.

Conclusion: And the War Suffers

Vietnam continues to occupy a dichotomic space in American culture as a cautionary tale in relation to the failures of political leaders who wage wars as well as the power of the public to influence a war's outcome. It is often seen as the conflict that the public needs to be aware of only so that its remnants never divide the nation so much again, an example of what not to do in a "united" nation. In this regard, Reagan was perhaps the most integral figure in the post-Vietnam era due to his vocally negative ideas about how the war was presented to Americans back home in the sixties and the fact that he was the most conservative and perhaps overly optimistic American leader since the war's conclusion, maybe ever. Things came full circle in 1988 when Reagan spoke at the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial on Veteran's Day. Among other subjects of his speech, he asked those in attendance to "remember the devotion and gallantry with which all [Vietnam veterans] ennobled their nation as they became champions of a noble cause."¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the Veterans Day Ceremony at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library - National Archives and Records Administration." Remarks at the Veterans

Reagan's redemptive narrative combined with Americans' need to heal vastly sanitized the legacy of Vietnam in favor of pushing it into the background of the American consciousness. From Reagan's inaugural address in 1981 in which he suggested the nation "[go] forward" after Vietnam to his farewell address in 1989 in which he maintained that the country had rediscovered its stance "for freedom," Reagan pushed an incredibly divisive experience into the dust bin of history himself and thus relegated it to little more than an object to overcome.¹¹⁸

Perhaps no one in the modern sense has more historical material for which to dive into than Reagan. To those who simply cast off Reagan's noble cause narrative about Vietnam as little more than winning hearts and minds for votes, history is beginning to disagree. Hugh Heclo has written extensively on the complex legacies of presidents. He mentioned that, above all else, "what Reagan communicated...was that he believed what he said. And what he believed was hopeful." It is true that "Reagan made America feel good about itself...but it would be wrong to characterize this as simply feel-good rhetoric void of substance."¹¹⁹ Given Reagan's language both publicly and privately throughout his adult life, there is little doubt that his attempts at redeeming the Vietnam War were core beliefs that he held near and dear. This did not dissuade him from utilizing

Day Ceremony at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial | Ronald Reagan Presidential Library – National Archives and Records Administration. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum. Accessed May 6, 2020. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/111188b>.

¹¹⁸ "Inaugural Address | The Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Institute."

www.reaganfoundation.org. Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute. Accessed September 12, 2019.

<https://www.reaganfoundation.org/ronald/reagan-quotes-speeches/inaugural-address-1/>; Ronald Reagan, "January 11, 1989," Farewell Address to the Nation | The Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Institute, accessed February 12, 2020, <https://www.reaganfoundation.org/ronald-reagan/reagan-quotes-speeches/farewell-address-to-the-nation-2/>; Beattie, *The Scar That Binds*, 1.

¹¹⁹ Hugh Heclo, "The Mixed Legacies of Ronald Reagan." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (2008): 555-74. Accessed February 5, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/41219701.

misinformation when rewriting his version of the war. Practically every career move he made, from his conservative rise in the 1950s to his last day in office can attest to this in some way. The problem, then, could be that speaking about Vietnam while grasping at nostalgia so soon after the war's conclusion was like navigating a mine field. What would make one individual feel a sense of pride or hope again would seem largely useless to a gold star mother who had seen, felt, and experienced loss. Redeeming the war was arguably not what America needed. Perhaps stories of the heroism of its participants *combined* with an intricate study of its root causes and a promise to never again repeat its errors is what the nation needed most and it is in this regard that Reagan, and subsequent presidents, have failed.

Popularity allowed Reagan and his staff to dictate the narrative on Vietnam for the better part of eight years. Former Speaker of the House Tip O' Neill put it rather plainly when he stated "we can't argue with a man as popular as he is."¹²⁰ Though Reagan never statistically ascended to the heights of popularity that many conservatives have claimed, it was his ability to create a myth for himself which he projected onto the nation that made him so revered. Reagan was an optimist who told Americans what they wanted to hear. In this way, Vietnam was perhaps the greatest victim of all. Myth replaced fact and potential lessons about the war's causes, shortcomings, and consequences were exchanged for rose colored glasses. At a dedication to an unknown Vietnam casualty in 1984, Reagan openly discouraged discourse on the war, solidifying

¹²⁰ Quoted in Will Bunch, *Tear Down This Myth: The Right-Wing Distortion of the Reagan Legacy* (NY: Free Press Publishing, 2009) 56.

that the legacy of Vietnam for future presidents would not be hard discussions and prevention but avoidance and even silence as to its many failures and consequences.¹²¹

Though I have highlighted several ways in which Reagan personally worked to change the narrative of Vietnam, perhaps no other aspect of Reagan's approach to that war was more widely noticeable than in the arena of his foreign policy. As the next chapter demonstrates, if Reagan displayed a particular form of nostalgic rhetoric and revision in regard to the war's narrative on a personal level, on a professional level he and his administration spent years attempting to repair the damage of Vietnam's effect on their foreign policy ambitions in America's backyard, the Caribbean and Central America.

¹²¹ Article from New York Times Titled Viet 'Unknown' Entombed, President Presents Top Medal, 29 May 1984, Box 36, Folder 20, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03 - Veterans, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2283620041>, Accessed 15 Jan 2020.

III. NIPPING AT HIS HEELS: THE VIETNAM WAR AND REAGAN'S FOREIGN POLICY IN GRENADA AND NICARAGUA

Reagan's rewriting of the Vietnam narrative necessarily affected his foreign policy as president. Although Reagan argued during one of the 1980 presidential debates that the "use of force is always...a last resort when everything else has failed, and then only with regard to our national security," he had frequently stated his willingness to act aggressively when the situation demanded it.¹²² When Reagan won a sound presidential election victory over Jimmy Carter, he harbored the goal of cementing American legitimacy abroad with a military victory. This opportunity did not present itself quickly, however, and it was not until 1983 that Reagan would truly have his chance.

Reagan's opening to implement his brand of foreign policy resulted from the convergence of events in two far-flung regions. On October 23, 1983, an terrorist drove a truck outfitted with explosives into an American Marine barracks in Beirut, Lebanon, killing 241 servicemembers. At the same time, a communist government gained control of Grenada, a tiny island off of the coast of the United States. Backed by Fidel Castro's communist Cuban government, the Grenadian rebels became a focal point for America's anti-communist commander-in-chief. Reagan's attention to the growing communist threat at America's backdoor had been focused on Central America since 1981 due to consistent unrest in the region, particularly in Nicaragua. And so, with two decisions laid out before him, Reagan weighed the options: get mired into another potentially lengthy and difficult conflict like Vietnam in the Middle East or boost American confidence in the Caribbean

¹²² "October 28, 1980 Debate Transcript." CPD: October 28, 1980 Debate Transcript. The Commission on Presidential Debates. Accessed September 9, 2019.
<https://www.debates.org/voter-education/debate-transcripts/october-28-1980-debate-transcript/>.

and Central America by continuing to focus on an enemy closer to home and to his heart: communism. What transpired was both fascinating and timely and, above all, was largely directed by the ghost of Vietnam.

This chapter argues the often-neglected impact of the Vietnam War on President Reagan's foreign policy in two distinct facets: Grenada and Nicaragua. Reagan's response to the situations in Grenada and Nicaragua exemplified the challenges Reagan faced in implementing his post-Vietnam foreign policy. Reagan spent years condemning Lyndon Johnson's handling of the Vietnam situation. Ironically, Reagan's responses to these crises during his presidency ended up mirroring Johnson's actions to a surprising degree. For example, while the Reagan administration intended for the Grenada invasion to replay Vietnam but with a quick and decisive victory, events in Nicaragua occurred with a level of secrecy and deception not far removed from the many policy failures of the Vietnam War for nearly two decades. In this chapter, I also argue that in attempting to become the anti-LBJ, Reagan became a contemporary version of his predecessor in many ways and repeated many of Johnson's failures during the Vietnam era.

An Alternate Vietnam: Quick and Easy in Grenada

Reagan's decision to invade Grenada in 1983 unfolded rather quickly. He was awoken shortly after four a.m. on October 21st by national security advisor Robert "Bud" McFarlane with news that the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States had asked for a military intervention on the island.¹²³ Maurice Bishop, who had been the island's prime

¹²³ The Organization of Eastern Caribbean States is a governing body which helps to provide centralized governmental support and leadership to the largely dispersed region of the eastern archipelago and its smaller islands.

minister and a leader of the New Joint Effort for Welfare, Education, and Liberation Movement, better known as the New JEWEL party, and who had come to power as the result of a leftist coup in 1979, had been overthrown and assassinated. As a result, the People's Revolutionary Government that took control had shut down the island and instituted a curfew.¹²⁴ There were over a thousand Americans on the island at the time, mostly medical students who had been studying abroad. Because these students could potentially become American hostages, Reagan could use his executive power to invade the island and use military action to rescue them. This made an invasion quite justifiable.

Though the decision to invade the island came quickly on one fateful night in October of 1983, Reagan was aware of potential issues in the region long before then. Grenada had received economic and military support from Communist Cuba for some time and this, more than anything, is what fueled Reagan's suspicion of the island. In his memoirs, Reagan mentioned that he noticed early on that the island was beginning construction on a "suspiciously huge new airport" by the country's leftists and that Grenada's neighbors in Jamaica, Barbados, St. Vincent, St. Lucia, Dominica, and Antigua had cited worry under Maurice Bishop's regime as to "a large Cuban-sponsored military buildup...vastly disproportionate to [Grenada's] needs." Reagan further claimed that the leaders of these neighboring islands told him, somewhat desperately, that "it was just a matter of time before the Grenadians and Castro moved on *their* countries" and that they needed military support in "ousting the Cubans."¹²⁵ Given his anti-communist stance, Reagan held obvious anti-Cuban views and intended to keep the Caribbean and Central America together, as outlined in an address on his Caribbean Basin Initiative

¹²⁴ Raines Jr., "Grenada Revisited," 7.

¹²⁵ Ronald Reagan, *Ronald Reagan: An American Life* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1990) 450.

(CBI) from February 24, 1982.¹²⁶ In it, Reagan mentioned a fear of communist and totalitarian uprisings in the region, encouraged by Cuba and its allies, including Grenada. He alluded to a “dark future” being “foreshadowed by the poverty and repression of Castro’s Cuba,” along with the “tightening grip of the...left in Grenada and Nicaragua.” He declared:

The record is clear. Nowhere in its whole sordid history have the promises of communism been redeemed. Everywhere it has exploited and aggravated temporary economic suffering to seize power and then to institutionalize economic deprivation and suppress human rights.

Without mentioning Vietnam directly, part of the CBI was directed at preventing falling communist dominoes much closer to home that were not prevented from falling in Southeast Asia years prior. In comparing Grenada and Central America’s geography to the United States and thus the potential danger involved with communism there, he also mentioned that countries in the region like El Salvador were “nearer to Texas than Texas is to Massachusetts.”¹²⁷

As worry about Grenada’s communist buildup grew and gave the President hope for his militaristic foreign policy agenda, Reagan’s response to the evolving situation in the Middle East indicated the limits of his post-Vietnam policy. Just two days prior to the situation in Grenada, the terrorist bombing in Lebanon had occurred. Reagan did not retaliate against this attack and it is probable that he feared the region could become another Vietnam. Despite his boasting of American omnipotence and superiority, the Middle East was a far messier and more dangerous endeavor than Reagan was willing to

¹²⁶ Anthony T. Bryan, “Cuba’s Impact in the Caribbean,” *International Journal*, 40:2 (1985), 331-347.

¹²⁷ Ronald Reagan, “Remarks to the Permanent Council of the Organization of American States on the Caribbean Basin Initiative,” www.ronaldreaganlibrary.gov (Ronald Reagan: Presidential Library and Museum, February 24, 1982), <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-permanent-council-organization-american-states-caribbean-basin-initiative>.

get into at the time.¹²⁸ In another era, perhaps, Reagan may have sent troops into both Lebanon *and* Grenada. This was a post-Vietnam era, however, and Reagan was forced to be strategic about when and where to use force and when to disengage. Reagan opted not to use military force in the Middle East. Instead, he doubled down on an intervention of the tiny Caribbean island. As one author put it, in Lebanon, he “punted” away; in Grenada, he fulfilled his nostalgic vision and projected a sound victory to the public.¹²⁹ Tension on the tiny island became the perfect quick conflict with which Reagan could claim a speedy and decisive victory using military force and avert eyes away from the tragedy in Lebanon.

Reagan understood his choices in the two crises and moved quickly in Grenada. In his memoirs, Reagan remembered that he “asked [Bud] McFarlane how long the Pentagon thought it would need to prepare a rescue mission...he said forty-eight hours. I said do it.”¹³⁰ However, in a post-Vietnam era of constant worry about prolonged conflict and military aggression, Reagan opted to conduct the beginning of the operation in a Vietnam-era like manner of total secrecy before the American public could react negatively. The only way to justify military action was in an overpoweringly swift and decisive manner as the “gradualist” approach in Vietnam had, to many, been a complete and utter failure.¹³¹

¹²⁸ Marvin & Deborah Kalb, *Haunting Legacy: Vietnam and the American Presidency from Ford to Obama* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2012) 5.

¹²⁹ Marvin and Deborah Kalb, *Haunting Legacy*, 103.

¹³⁰ Reagan, *An American Life*, 450.

¹³¹ The United States spent more than a decade, beginning around 1946, indecisively debating about how best to approach the growing threat of communism in Vietnam after the failures of French occupation to maintain authority in the country. For more information as to decision making and gradual escalation beginning with John F. Kennedy, see both George C. Herring’s edited version of *The Pentagon Papers* and Tom Wells’ *The War Within: America’s Battle Over Vietnam* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2016) 580.

Reagan's advisors, especially McFarlane, reinforced the president's willingness to view Grenada through a Vietnam lens. McFarlane clearly echoed Reagan's desire to learn from the failures of Vietnam in order to redeem American foreign policy. The National Security Advisor stated that "the United States is seen as responsible for providing leadership...to refuse would have a very damaging effect on the credibility of the United States...[and] the defense of freedom and democracy."¹³²

With support from his staff, Reagan agreed and sent troops to Grenada void of either congressional approval or public knowledge. Privately, he hinted at a fear of comparisons between Grenada and Vietnam, mentioning that "I understood what Vietnam had meant for the country...but couldn't remain spooked forever by this experience." He "suspected" that informing Congress would lead to unwanted press speculation "that Grenada was going to become another Vietnam."¹³³ The Reagan administration was willing to take heat from congress after the fact rather than risk a media leak and resulting casualties due to the Grenadian rebels being tipped off. Since the entire operation lasted only three days Reagan succeeded in controlling the narrative, resulting initially in a resounding PR victory for Reagan, a sort of miracle for the administration. It was not until much later that backlash and controversy emerged and the effects of the Vietnam War were fully realized.

Perhaps nowhere was Vietnam more heavily influential during Grenada than in regard to the press. Reagan became president during a time when the press wanted to be on the commander-in-chief's side. Journalists like Mark Hertsgaard have alluded to the fact *they* (the press) were fatigued after Vietnam as well and were looking for a feel-good

¹³² Quoted in Marvin & Deborah Kalb's *Haunting Legacy*, 93.

¹³³ Reagan, *An American Life*, 451.

leader after the Nixon years and the Iran-Hostage debacle of Jimmy Carter.¹³⁴ They wanted to love the president again after so much controversy had surrounded the White House during Vietnam and both the Johnson and Nixon administrations. Because of this important element, Reagan and his administration successfully turned this group into a mouthpiece for the administration's own agenda during Grenada invasion. Many journalists wanted to believe that the invasion was a sincere rescue effort to help endangered Americans.

The Vietnam War was the first American conflict in which families back home received casualty reports and battlefield footage in real time from news stations directly onto their home televisions sets. Many believed that this crucial aspect of the war highly influenced negative public reaction to it for at least its last ten years. Thus, Vietnam had brought to Reagan's attention the overwhelmingly negative impact that the media could have on American leadership and foreign policy decision making. Learning this lesson, Reagan tightly censored the media during the Grenada invasion. Despite his charm and ability to converse with reporters, Reagan despised the press in practically every facet. He felt as though the press was largely responsible for having lost the war in Southeast Asia and presenting what were in his eyes sweeping military victories for the United States, like the Tet Offensive, as complete disasters.

Taking lessons from negative press interactions during Vietnam, Reagan's people felt the need to essentially fabricate better than government officials did during that war. Bud McFarlane's comments in a 1986 interview exemplified this sentiment: "Vietnam was a PR, not a policy, failure...it was this incompetence at communications basically

¹³⁴ Mark Hertsgaard, *On Bended Knee: The Press and the Reagan Presidency* (New York, NY: Schocken, 1989) 3.

which has led today to a climate in which no administration can expect to sustain a policy unless it can evoke popular support for it.”¹³⁵ Some, such as Vietnam veteran Alan Vanneman, attacked the administration’s notion that the press was largely an enemy who actively hampered public support for U.S. military operations. “The media were set up as the fall guys in [Vietnam]...it was the bodies coming back, not the stories, that did the job.”¹³⁶ Regardless, though Reagan did not accumulate popular support for an invasion initially, he ensured that by the time the press got wind of it, his administration presented Grenada as the anti-Vietnam: quick, clean, and properly led from the top.

Coverage of Grenada was chaotic at best, especially in the beginning. The military prevented reporters from stepping foot on the island. Eventually, they were only allowed to do so at their own risk and expense. Reagan ensured that he would not make the same mistakes as LBJ, even if it meant misinformation or complete censoring, and so he kept the press completely uninvolved during the critical first days of the invasion. In the end, reporters only showed the American public what Reagan wanted them to.¹³⁷ Though Reagan provided the illusion of a humanitarian mission, in reality, the invasion was a more aggressive display of military prowess than anyone had initially realized. “The press is trying to give this the Vietnam treatment,” Reagan mentioned in his diary

¹³⁵ Quoted in Hertsgaard, *On Bended Knee*, 185.

¹³⁶ They Never Called Us Heroes, We Vietnam Vets Were Always Someone Else's Moral, 22 January 1984, Box 36, Folder 20, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03 - Veterans, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2283620007>, Accessed 15 Jan 2020.

¹³⁷ Newspapers such as *The Washington Post* and *The San Diego Tribune* highlighted this confusion. They mentioned that practically everything they were forced to report was through the mouth of Reagan himself. One headline mentions the fact that due to the president’s claims that the invasion was such a quick and resounding victory from start to finish that no congressional permission or notification was needed at all. These reporters were even quick to mention that such a justification could, in theory, be utilized to start a nuclear war if a president so chose. Michael Kernan, “Grenada: The Reaction to the Action,” *The Washington Post* (WP Company, October 26, 1983); George E. Condon, “October 26, 1983: U.S. Invades Grenada,” *The San Diego Tribune*, October 26, 1983.

on October 30, 1983, “but I don’t think the people will buy it.”¹³⁸ Vietnam had provided a warning to Reagan to censor the press and impose greater government secrecy than any leader since Watergate.

These attempts at press censorship also meant that the rest of the world was out of the loop during the invasion. When reports did start flowing, other nations were less than impressed by America’s “return to dominance” in Grenada. The United Kingdom’s Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, a longtime conservative ally of Reagan, was particularly upset at her lack of information about the situation. Reagan addressed these sentiments in his memoirs:

I was called out of the briefing to take a call from Margaret Thatcher...I knew she was very angry. She said she had just learned about the...operation...I had believed we had to act quickly and covertly because...communication could result in a leak. She was very adamant and continued to insist that we cancel our landing on Grenada. I couldn’t tell her that it had already begun. This troubled me because of our close relationship.¹³⁹

Personal feelings aside, her lack of knowledge about the situation violated the United Nations Charter, which reaffirmed the Charter of the Organization of American States that no group had the right to intervene directly or indirectly, for any reason whatsoever, in the internal or external affairs of any other state.

The swiftness and autonomy with which Reagan executed the invasion even worried some within his own administration. Reagan’s Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger eventually drafted and presented his own public doctrine on November 28, 1984. Known simply as the Weinberger doctrine, this document essentially had six core tenets for presidential foreign policy. Tenet two mentioned that military policy had to be reliant upon assured military victory. It also encouraged military conflict only in the case

¹³⁸ Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, 192.

¹³⁹ Reagan, *An American Life*, 454-455.

of vital national interests, fought clearly with the national intention of winning, with political and military goals clearly outlined, and “reasonable assurance” of public backing and military force used only as a last resort.¹⁴⁰ It is probable that the doctrine was at least partially formulated in response to Reagan’s aggression in Grenada yet also as an answer to poor leadership and public opinion during the Vietnam years.

At the time, however, and for the better part of the last three decades, many saw the invasion as an overwhelming success. It is generally understood that the weaker the opponent the more decisive the victory must be, making the speedy and inexpensive Grenada invasion against a much weaker opponent a resounding political victory for the Reagan administration.¹⁴¹ It did not matter how small the island or how weak the enemy; comments insinuated that Grenada was, to several within the administration, a chance at redemption. Perhaps nowhere was the feeling of victory in the Caribbean more bluntly articulated than in an interview with Reagan’s White House Deputy Chief of Staff Michael Keith Dever, who exclaimed, “I think this country was so hungry for a victory, I don’t care what the size of it was, we were going to beat the shit out of it.”¹⁴² At the conclusion of the invasion, the image of a handful of returned medical students kissing the tarmac at Pope Airfield in North Carolina and embracing their soldier rescuers upon their return from the island provided brilliant imagery for the President. As he put it, “it was quite a site for a former governor who had once seen college students spit on anyone wearing a military uniform.”¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ Bernard von Bothmer, *Framing the Sixties: The Use and Abuse of a Decade from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010) 72.

¹⁴¹ Wells, *The War Within*, 581.

¹⁴² Quoted in Hertsgaard, *On Bended Knee*, 211.

¹⁴³ Reagan, *An American Life*, 77.



Figure 2. A student kisses the tarmac at Charleston AFB, South Carolina after being evacuated from Grenada. Courtesy of the U.S. National Archives.¹⁴⁴

Reagan's attempt to establish American credibility abroad after the Vietnam War with a swift and "noble" military operation in the Caribbean, succeeded in the minds many of Americans. This is evidenced by the fact that Reagan's popularity skyrocketed just in time for reelection in 1984. Conveniently, action on the island overshadowed, perhaps purposely, the lack of action in the Middle East and Beirut in retaliation for the terrorist bombings. While Reagan was "mopping up" in the Caribbean to present his own success to the public after Vietnam, the Middle East was growing ever more dangerous.¹⁴⁵ Still, with the quick and overwhelming success of Grenada, Reagan moved one step closer to both purging the American psyche of the failures of Vietnam and upending communism in a way that the war was meant to, this time closer to home. One

¹⁴⁴ "Student Returns from St. George's University," U.S. National Archives (U.S. National Archives, February 15, 2020), <https://nara.getarchive.net/media/a-student-from-the-saint-georges-university-school-of-medicine-in-grenada-demonstrates-bf70f7>.

¹⁴⁵ Reagan, *An American Life*, 191.

veteran, Frank Stone III, praised Reagan's ability to give clear direction and allow the military to proceed unhinged unlike in Vietnam:

One of the things...that I think most leaders in Washington should acknowledge, is that you cannot [win a] war such as that with a fifteen-thousand-mile screwdriver. President Reagan...did the right thing at Grenada...[he] said 'General, go do your thing,' and the generals went and did their thing with very little oval office interference.¹⁴⁶

Negative feelings about the operation still abounded, however, and the operation was questioned and criticized well into 1984. An official post briefing assessment of the Grenada operation, codenamed Urgent Fury, criticized the whole operation. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General John Vessey stated during a *Meet the Press* interview that "due to the unexpected intensity of Cuban resistance and the needs of operation security, military leaders denied reporters access to Grenada." More significantly, he admitted that because they "planned the operation in a very short period of time...[and] with insufficient intelligence," the military "probably used more force than we needed to do the job."¹⁴⁷ An article intended for the *Washington Post* cited worry as to Grenada's "success" when compared to Vietnam's failure and what it would mean for the legacy of the two events when or if comparing them:

Despite the deaths of more than 250 Marines in Lebanon without tangible results, the president clings to his argument that if Americans have the courage to fight wars, Americans will win them. I fear that we are going to be told that Vietnam should have been just like Grenada, complete with brave Americans, liberated peasants, and cowardly communists.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ Interview with Frank Stone, III, 21 March 2001, Frank Stone III Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0150>, Accessed 29 Dec 2020.

¹⁴⁷ Ronal H. Cole, "Operation Urgent Fury: Grenada." www.jcs.mil. Joint History Office: Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1997. https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/History/Monographs/Urgent_Fury.pdf

¹⁴⁸ "They Never Called Us Heroes," 22 January 1984, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2283620007>, Accessed 15 Jan 2020.

Historians like Eldon Kenworthy have contested that Grenada did nothing more than play on American fears and failures in the developing world, namely Vietnam, and used a sort of docudrama theatricality to give the impression that America was back and as militarily strong as ever. In what could be seen as an obvious connection with servicemen in Grenada, Reagan mentioned in a speech at the Vietnam Memorial in 1984 that “unlike those who served in Vietnam, servicemen today “do not bear the burden of wondering whether the American people understood or appreciate their tremendous sacrifice.”¹⁴⁹ Reagan largely pinned the Vietnam failure on public reaction and not common sense issues in the region, such as lack of a military strategy, incompetence, and cultural misunderstanding. Had Grenada reasonably undone this notion?

As time went by, additional information about the invasion raised further questions about the “success” of the operation. Eighteen Americans died as a result of the invasion along with 116 wounded. Grenadian casualties tripled that total.¹⁵⁰ Additionally, Reagan maintained that the more than one thousand American “hostages” on the island were not in imminent danger at the time of the attack. Also, while many saw the regime that replaced Maurice Bishop in Grenada as “thugs” and “revolutionaries,” some have argued that the taking of Americans as hostages would have been economically disastrous for the island and so no serious problem existed.¹⁵¹ The White House also came under fire for claiming that it had found weapons, evidence of espionage, and even a training ground for terrorists, yet no evidence supports this claim.

¹⁴⁹ Ben A. Franklin, “President Accepts Vietnam Memorial.” *The New York Times*, November 12, 1984.

¹⁵⁰ Eldon Kenworthy, “Grenada as Theater,” *World Policy Journal* 1, no. 3 (1984): pp. 635-651, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40208958>.

¹⁵¹ Kenworthy, “Grenada As Theatre,” 638.

It can be implied that the fact that Reagan eventually decided to completely withdraw from Beirut in February of 1984, in hindsight, meant that there was much American confidence at stake in Grenada, regardless of how small of an operation it seemed to the rest of the world. However the situation in the Caribbean began, it became doubly important to the president's post-Vietnam, American resurgence, rhetoric after the attacks in Lebanon. A failure in Grenada may have sunk the administration into a Vietnam hole from which it never could have recovered, meaning that the invasion required more attention than many Americans devoted to it.

Reagan's sweeping reelection in 1984 perhaps signaled to the rest of the country that he might not have been the president who led them out of Vietnam, but he planned to at least lead them away from its negative legacy. For the time being, Reagan had skillfully avoided running headlong into "another Vietnam" in part because he was so sensitive to its memory and its potential damage to his position. Taking lessons from LBJ's "mistakes," Reagan had acted both against congressional approval and largely without regard for public opinion in Grenada.¹⁵² He would not have another opportunity to act so unilaterally.

Another LBJ: Reagan and Nicaragua

If the situation in Grenada served as a blessing for Reagan's post-Vietnam foreign policy, it would not be a stretch to describe the situation in Nicaragua as a bit of a plague. Encompassing Reagan's entire tenure, from 1981 to 1989, Reagan's ambitions to support a revolutionary force of Nicaraguan rebels, known as the Contras, against their own

¹⁵² Stephen M. Griffin, "The Constitutional Order in the Post-Vietnam Era." In *Long Wars and the Constitution*, 153–93. Harvard University Press, 2013.
<http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.txstate.edu/stable/j.ctt32b6bc.9>.

government, which was led by a communist group known as the Sandinistas, caused him more grief than perhaps any other arena of his foreign policy. His determination to act against the communist forces led him to work against an official governmental doctrine designed to keep his executive powers in check. It caused him to reluctantly work with a Democrat-led Congress to receive any modicum of support. And, ultimately, it led to the great public blight of his administration: the Iran-contra scandal. Unbeknownst to many, all of these factors were heavily influenced by the Vietnam War's legacy. In the end, Reagan repeated many of the same failures of the Vietnam War's administrations, making Reagan a type of modern day Lyndon Johnson. A man who, in trying to avoid his predecessors' pitfalls, ended up paralleling them..

The War Powers Act of 1973 stymied Reagan's goals in Central America early on. Still in place today, this act requires that the president give Congress notice within forty-eight hours of committing troops to a region, minus a declaration of war. If Congress does not then declare war in said region within sixty days, then the president must terminate the operation and withdraw American forces, unless he or she is granted any kind of extension. Created largely in response to the war in Vietnam and the prolonged and unpopular mess that it became to the American public, this act essentially meant that Reagan had to win popular or congressional support for military action in Central America or he would never be allowed to commit troops to the region or provide direct military aid of any kind to assist in the overthrow of communist governments there. Secretary of State George Schultz mentioned that the War Powers Resolution Act, as a result of Vietnam, had the Reagan administration "tied in knots" with what it could do in

Nicaragua.¹⁵³ However, since its inception in 1973, presidents have always found nifty ways of working around the limitations of its power.

Much like LBJ during Vietnam, Reagan felt that bolstering American legitimacy abroad against communist uprisings meant displaying sustainable loyalty to those deemed America's allies, something that the U.S. had failed to do in Southeast Asia. The Vietnam war had caused America to question both its government and its citizens and Reagan attempted to re-strengthen American military defense and show the superiority of American force. Reagan and other conservatives believed that American withdrawal from Vietnam allowed communism to engulf the rest of the world, now even as close as Nicaragua. Reagan's administration continually downplayed the negative effect of the Vietnam War on defense budgets and, more specifically, military support for overthrowing communism in Central America. However, it was readily apparent that Reagan had been forced to encourage the rebel Contras to overthrow the communist Sandinista government in Nicaragua from afar from the moment that he took office because Vietnam's legacy would not allow for immediate military support. Unlike the straightforward military response of Grenada, he had to do so indirectly due to the specifics of the WPA.

Aside from that doctrine, two additional issues hampered Reagan's military desires in Central America, mimicking President Johnson's own struggles during Vietnam. First, was the fact that Reagan had to battle Congress throughout his presidency, meaning that he was forced to negotiate and campaign for votes in order to secure any amount of aid for the Contras and fight endlessly within his own government

¹⁵³ George Pratt Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York, NY: Scribner Publishing) 294.

and administration. Second was that, in the end, he never obtained much, if any, public support for the cause. Reagan instead relied entirely on the Nicaraguans to do his bidding. Simply put, after Vietnam the American public never seemed to fully care about who was running what in Central America in the eighties.

Complicated and lengthy battles between Reagan and Congress were exemplified by three groups in government which comprised the decision making during Reagan's years fighting against communist Sandinista-led Nicaragua. There were hard-liners, who believed emphatically that the Sandinista leadership in Nicaragua was working hand in hand with communist allies and could never be fully trusted to promote fair and stable principles within their government. There were also the moderates, who believed that despite questionable domestic political practices, the Sandinistas were not a serious threat to the U.S. and the Contras could be useful in getting them to bend their policies slightly. Then there were liberals, who believed that the Sandinistas were far less of a threat than presented and that instability in the region was inevitable and in picking sides the U.S. would simply alienate one group and drive them into the arms of the Cubans or Soviets.¹⁵⁴ This was the post-Vietnam climate under which a conservative Reagan was forced to conduct his executive business. Reagan dodged accusations and worry in front of this group about plans to send troops to Central America throughout his presidency. In his address before a joint session of Congress in 1983, he mentioned "to those who invoke the memory of Vietnam: There is no thought of sending American combat troops

¹⁵⁴ Thomas Carothers, *In the Name of Democracy: U.S. Policy Toward Latin America in the Reagan Years* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993) 79-80.

to Central America. They are not needed – indeed, they have not been requested there.”¹⁵⁵

Officials within the Reagan administration refused to let the War Powers Act or congressional opposition deter their determination to support the Contras or any anti-communist groups. Instead, they decided to get creative. Because it was not technically direct military support, CIA director William Casey oversaw funding and training for the American-backed Contras in Central America within the first year of Reagan’s inauguration. Because there was no justifiable reason to send American forces into Nicaragua like in Grenada, Reagan was restricted in his ability to project military force. Reagan and others within his administration alluded to the fact that, due to Vietnam, acting against communism in Nicaragua required swift and aggressive action, yet Reagan likely knew that “it was realistically impossible for any president to commit U.S. troops to a protracted war that both lacked the support of the American people” and ignored the War Powers Act.¹⁵⁶ Void of the military firepower and the American naivete that had assisted Johnson during Vietnam, Reagan instead turned to small-scale executive responses and financial aid in order to support the Contras.

To achieve his goals, Reagan battled Congress throughout the decade. Congress continually blocked Reagan’s requests for excessive funding for the war in the region and generally turned to more bureaucratic alternatives, such as significantly less money. In late 1982, congress passed the first Boland amendment. This amendment restricted aid to the Contras for the purposes of overthrowing the Nicaraguan government. That same

¹⁵⁵ “President Reagan's Address On Central America to Joint Session of Congress .” *The New York Times*, April 28, 1983. <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/04/28/world/president-reagan-s-address-on-central-america-to-joint-session-of-congress.html>.

¹⁵⁶ von Bothmer, *Framing the Sixties*, 72.

year, the U.S. even added a stipulation to the ongoing negotiations with Nicaragua which required the country be forced to accept democracy. In 1983, a Congressional compromise was reached and 24 million dollars in aid was given to the Contra cause. In 1984, moderates in Congress attempted to bring a democratic election to the country yet failed. Due to lack of public support, congress eventually approved 27 million dollars in *non-lethal* aid for the Contras in 1985. In 1986, hard-liners in Congress won their greatest victory in the form of 70 million dollars in military aid and 30 million dollars in non-lethal aid to the Contras. This support allowed the Contras, at a minimum, to grow from a rebel group into a formidable army of around 15 thousand troops by 1986, the height of their war with the Sandinistas.¹⁵⁷ It can also be argued that the invasion of Grenada assisted Reagan in gaining more support in funding the Contras during this time, given the operation's perceived success.

Despite these victories, Reagan and his supporters remained frustrated by the lack of support or interest from the American public. Reagan tried to remind Americans that communism was a threat. As late as his 1985 State of the Union Address, Reagan remained devoted to the region, stating that “the Sandinista dictatorship of Nicaragua, with full Cuban-Soviet bloc support, not only persecutes its people, the church, and denies a free press, but [denies] arms (weapons)” for its people to defend themselves or fight back. Tying the Contra's efforts to broader anticommunism he preached, Reagan insisted that “support for freedom fighters is self-defense.” He concluded, “I want to work with you to support the democratic forces whose struggle is tied to our own

¹⁵⁷ Richard Sobel, *The Impact of Public Opinion on U.S. Foreign Policy Since Vietnam: Constraining the Colossus* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001) 101.

security.”¹⁵⁸ Despite his pleas, the American public remained uninterested in the topic. Reagan blamed the media for the situation. In his mind, he was consistently hamstrung in Central America because the press had “cast Uncle Sam in the role of the villain, they didn’t want to put white hats on the Contra freedom fighters because the U.S. government was supporting them.”¹⁵⁹ Reagan also lambasted congressional critics who did not throw full support behind force in Central America. He thought their reluctance resulted from what he labeled, “the post-Vietnam syndrome.” He argued that “there was a depth of isolationism in the country that I had not seen since the Great Depression.” Secretary of State Shultz also mentioned that “the Vietnam War had left one indisputable legacy: massive press, public, and congressional anxiety that the United States-at all costs-avoid getting mired in ‘another Vietnam.’”¹⁶⁰

Even some of those closest to Reagan disapproved of getting too heavily involved in Central American affairs. Chief among them was Caspar Weinberger. Repeating many of the same debates between LBJ and insiders such as Robert McNamara, the man behind the doctrine which all but directly responded to Reagan’s actions in Grenada was chastised by many Reagan supporters. For Weinberger, keeping America out of another Vietnam was one of his primary objectives. In fact, Weinberger viewed his success in getting the American people over the memory of that war and providing “renewed respect for the United States throughout the world” during the Reagan years as one of his best achievements.¹⁶¹ In this way, Vietnam both exemplified Weinberger’s Secretary of

¹⁵⁸ “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union www.presidency.ucsb.edu February 6, 1985 <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-the-congress-the-state-the-union-5>.

¹⁵⁹ Reagan, *An American Life*, 480.

¹⁶⁰ Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 294.

¹⁶¹ Quoted in Sobel, *The Impact of Public Opinion on U.S. Foreign Policy Since Vietnam*, 126.

Defense tenure as well as his policy in regard to Contra funding during the Reagan administration.¹⁶²

Weinberger was not the only member of the Reagan administration to impede military desires in the region either. Some government officials saw involvement in Nicaragua as a stepping stone to longer American military engagements across Central America, in places like El Salvador. Army Chief of Staff General Edward C. Meyer stated in a *New York Times* interview that “Americans would not support the intervention of American combat troops and that Salvadorans were not fully committed to defeating leftist insurgents.”¹⁶³ Additionally, Kansas Senator Nancy L. Kassebaum mentioned “real risk that war could engulf other countries in Central America,” and that “the comparison to Vietnam has been used many times, and I have never felt comfortable with it, but the parallels seem to grow more striking as times goes on...we are right now – attempting to muddle through in El Salvador [Central America] much as we attempted to muddle through in Vietnam.”¹⁶⁴

The most consistent Reagan supporter through it all, however, was Shultz. He too publicly compared what Reagan attempted to do in Central America to the Vietnam War, yet in a preventative and redeeming sense, rather than a cautionary one. In a *New York Times* interview in 1985 he drew “a parallel between Indochina and Central America,” and said:

The United States had to help the Nicaraguan rebels to prevent repeating the horror that resulted from the communist takeover in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia...the

¹⁶² Sobel, *The Impact of Public Opinion on U.S. Foreign Policy Since Vietnam*, 126.

¹⁶³ “News Summary; Friday June 10, 1983.” *The New York Times*, June 10, 1983, sec. B.
<https://www.nytimes.com/1983/06/10/nyregion/news-summary-friday-june-10-1983.html>

¹⁶⁴ “Senator Warns of Risk of a Wider Latin War.” *The New York Times*, June 8, 1983, sec. A.
<https://www.nytimes.com/1983/06/08/world/senator-warns-of-risk-of-a-wider-latin-war.html>.

brave Nicaraguans are struggling to save the people of Nicaragua from the fate of the people of Cuba, of South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.¹⁶⁵

Like Reagan, Shultz displayed a distinct desire to oust any communist threat so close to home, mentioning “Broken promises. Communist dictatorship. Refugees. Widened Soviet influence, this time near our very borders. Here is your parallel between Vietnam and Central America.”¹⁶⁶

Reagan himself persistently *avoided* comparisons with Central America and Vietnam, neither confirming nor denying them. In a 1983 press conference concerning events taking place in Nicaragua, a reporter asked if Vietnam played a part in his decision making. Reagan replied, “there is no comparison with Vietnam,”¹⁶⁷ consistently deflecting the memory of that war yet never able to be rid of its shadow. Instead, Reagan equated a lack of military intervention in Nicaragua with a failure to safeguard American national security interests. “Our forbearance should never be misunderstood,” he maintained, and “our reluctance for conflict should not be misjudged as a failure of will. When action is required to preserve our national security, we will act.”¹⁶⁸ The public seemingly never shared the president’s sentiment, however, as Reagan was neither able to inspire sympathy for the Contra “freedom fighters” nor provide the consistently strong aid for which he fought. He also displayed consistent frustration with the necessity of gaining the cooperation of 535 congressmen in order to produce results.

¹⁶⁵ Bernard Gwertzman. “Shultz Likens Latin Left to Indochina Communists.” *The New York Times* April 26, 1985.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1985/04/26/world/shultz-likens-latin-left-to-indochina-communists.html>.

¹⁶⁶ Gwertzman. “Shultz Likens Latin Left to Indochina Communists.” 8.

¹⁶⁷ Quoted in Sobel, *The Impact of Public Opinion on U.S. Foreign Policy Since Vietnam*, 114.

¹⁶⁸ Reagan, “Inaugural Address – January 20, 1981,” 26.

Frustrated by a continuous lack of support by the public and Congress, the administration resorted to more drastic measures in order to fully support the Contras.¹⁶⁹ A secret supply network, run primarily by Vietnam veteran Oliver North, who was a National Security Council Staff member described as both unstable and a bit of a fanatic, took shape with assistance from the CIA. This supply network was a result of back-and-forth struggles from 1983-1984 to fund the Contras. Even top men such as CIA director William Casey directed other officials within the administration to acquire funds from nations like Saudi Arabia, who at one point came through with approximately 1 million dollars a month in aid to both the Contras and Israel. As time went on, this network grew ever more complex and eventually an Arms-for-Cash deal took place between Iran and the United States in order to further assist the Contras. This deal actually provided the Contras with the backing necessary to keep fighting in an interim period between 1984 when Congressional aid ran out and 1986 when aid resumed with 70 million dollars. Lack of direct military support remained disappointing for Reagan, however.

Though the situation on the American side was frustrating, the situation on the Nicaraguan side was devastating. During the Reagan era, more Nicaraguans died per capita, including military and non-military fatalities, than American service members in almost all American wars combined; at least thirty thousand dead for a country the size of Tennessee with a fraction of the population.¹⁷⁰ Death tolls in countries like El Salvador and Guatemala, both political or otherwise, as a result of direct and indirect funding and influence from Reagan totaled at least 170,000. Further, the economic devastation was

¹⁶⁹ Carothers, *In the Name of Democracy*, 89.

¹⁷⁰ John M Goshko, "U.S. War By Proxy at an End," *The Washington Post* (February 27, 1990), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1990/02/27/us-war-by-proxy-at-an-end/770483d0-c355-4288-8819-9b0dcc928aee/>.

unlike anything ever experienced before or since in the region. It is estimated that as a result of the condemnation of U.S. involvement in Central America during the Reagan years by the world court that America still owes between 20 and 30 million dollars in reparations to Nicaragua alone.¹⁷¹ Not only had Reagan struggled to erase the memory of Vietnam then, but similarities in terms of the cost were in fact eerily similar.

Though often overlooked, this debacle was largely influenced by the legacy of the Vietnam War and the peculiar way in which it restricted Reagan's power and maneuverability. Simply put, like Johnson and Nixon's own struggles to acquire public support during Vietnam, "the Reagan administration's policy was haunted from start to finish by the inescapable fact that it was not widely supported by the U.S. public."¹⁷² The public was not supportive at least partly because of the exhaustion of Vietnam and the negative sentiment that it had imparted onto a war weary population.

Theories abound as to how much knowledge Reagan actually had about the occurrence of the illegal trade of arms to Iran or the dealings with other nations for funding. It is hard to believe that the man himself was not at least semi-aware of what was happening. Others have argued that Reagan's anti-communist policy in Central America was as short-sighted as America's policy during Vietnam. It can be debated that the United States feared that North Vietnamese figureheads Ho Chi Min or Lê Duan would have won in a legitimate election and instead chose to support a corrupt puppet regime in South Vietnam under the guise of democratic freedom. This same notion can be applied to Central America, where U.S. officials felt that communists were likely to

¹⁷¹ Miguel D'Escoto, "“Reagan Was the Butcher of My People:” Fr. Miguel D'Escoto Speaks From Nicaragua,” *Democracy Now!*, June 8, 2004.

¹⁷² Carothers, *In the Name of Democracy*, 95.

win elections legitimately as well and thus chose a hardline strategy of toppling leftist governments in order to impose democracy.

By the time that these previously covert events came to light in late 1986 Reagan was forced to acknowledge his administration's complete contempt for Congress and defend himself against a perceivably strong-armed and undemocratic image. Oliver North willingly became the fall guy for the entire affair, always believing he was doing what was in the best interest of his country. He was subsequently discharged from his position but the damage had been done to the Reagan administration. No matter how little informed the president was about the situation, his attempts to impose his agenda in Central America were delivered a metaphorical death knell. Academics continue to debate the idea that Reagan was aloof and unaware of the goings on in his administration like many believed for some time during and after his years in office. Reagan himself fed into this notion by stating in his 1987 address to the nation about Iran-Contra specifically that "I didn't know about any diversion of funds to the contras" and that he was "angry...about activities undertaken without [his] knowledge." Going so far as to address the fact that he was ever the "optimist," he concluded with his desire to "take [his] knocks" and "move on" from the entire debacle.¹⁷³

Though several in Reagan's administration bore the brunt of criticism for what had happened in Central America, many maintained their support for him and his agenda in the region. Secretary of State Alexander Haig believed it best to show swift, decisive, and powerful military action in Nicaragua in order to avoid the slow build up that had

¹⁷³ Ronald Reagan, "Transcript of Reagan's Speech: 'I Take Full Responsibility For My Actions,'" *The New York Times*, March 5, 1987, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/03/05/us/reagan-white-house-transcript-reagan-s-speech-take-full-responsibility-for-my.html>.

occurred in Vietnam, which he believed allowed the enemy more time to adapt.¹⁷⁴ Shultz, ever the Reagan supporter, again lamented the lack of public support, saying “only if...the population...agreed in advance would American armed forces be employed...only if we were assured of winning swiftly...This was the Vietnam syndrome in spades, carried to an absurd level, and a complete abdication of the duties of leadership.”¹⁷⁵

Not everyone was so supportive, however, and Bud McFarlane was perhaps the most fascinating of this group. Like many government officials during the Vietnam War, such as General William Westmoreland, McFarlane had regrets about the operation and his involvement in it. He mentioned during the Senate hearings on the Iran-Contra scandal that “he thought the Iran initiative was folly from the start and that the Administration ought to have declared openly its policy toward Nicaragua.”¹⁷⁶ McFarlane was personally involved in dealings around the world in order to fund the Contras, largely at the behest of Oliver North. It even came to light that McFarlane had prepared to commit suicide if a deal he was tasked with in Tehran had gone badly. A Vietnam veteran, McFarlane was in country for the war’s entire duration. He mentioned, “to have landed with the first and been responsible for the ignominious pull-out [of Vietnam] of the last was a very ironic occurrence.”¹⁷⁷ A skeptic of aggressive foreign policy since that war, McFarlane served his country across more than his share of administrations yet was quick to publicly criticize Reagan’s staff after the dealings with Iran came to light. Though McFarlane disagreed with much of Reagan’s foreign policy,

¹⁷⁴ Patrick Hagopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory: Veterans, Memorials, and the Politics of Healing* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012) 42.

¹⁷⁵ Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 650.

¹⁷⁶ Linda R. Robertson, "After Such Knowledge: The Rhetoric of the Iran-Contra Fiasco." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 19, no. 1 (1989): 3-14. <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.txstate.edu/stable/3885219>.

¹⁷⁷ Robertson, "After Such Knowledge," 9.

ever the good soldier, he performed his duty when asked, much to the suffering of those across Central America.

Though McFarlane likely knew that the fiasco with Iran and Nicaragua was wrong the issue is a dual-sided one. When presidents engage in covert foreign policy and that policy succeeds, such as in Grenada, it is praised. The problem is that even Reagan himself spoke about his foreign policy in Nicaragua as being mostly a failure. It had largely failed in Congress and, statistically, it failed to make the Vietnam-weary American public care about it. In this way, Reagan mirrored LBJ remarkably in both recalling his own shortcomings and lacking the public reinforcement necessary to impose his will. Iran-Contra was arguably Reagan's level of ability when there were no hostages to justify an invasion and there was no easily driven over enemy to squash.¹⁷⁸

Disapproval in the American polls in regard to Central America continuously prevented Reagan from fully executing his strategy there and Vietnam forever lurked in the corners of his White House. Though Reagan wanted to avoid the defeated rhetoric of that war it was simply impossible, "it nipped at his heels."¹⁷⁹

The president acknowledged his own failure in Central America in his memoir, stating that "my battles with Congress over Central America went on for almost the entire eight years I was in the White House, and made good grist for the journalistic mill...I believe the issues involved in our tug-of-war transcended those of many Washington political battles."¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁸ Robertson, "After Such Knowledge," 6.

¹⁷⁹ Marvin & Deborah Kalb, *Haunting Legacy*, 87.

¹⁸⁰ Reagan, *An American Life*, 482.

From 1981 to 1986, like Johnson before him, Reagan wheeled, dealt, and used practically every ounce of his executive power in order to arouse support for the Nicaraguan cause. It was not entirely a failure, as the periodic funding from Congress demonstrates, but for a man so prideful, so longing to return America to a level of legitimacy and power around the world, it was clearly not enough. “For eight years the press called me the ‘Great Communicator,’” he reflected, “well, one of my greatest frustrations during those eight years was my inability to communicate to the American people and to Congress the seriousness of the threat we faced in Central America.”¹⁸¹ Perhaps it was not that the American people did not understand the seriousness of the situation in Nicaragua, it was that post-Vietnam America was not the same country in which Reagan had acted or rose to political power in. This was not the post-World War II fifties of consumerism and prosperity. America during the Reagan administration was something altogether different.

Conclusion: A Contrast of Events, A Foreshadowing of the Future

Regardless, both Grenada and Nicaragua were fundamentally important to the Reagan administration and the legacy of the conflict in Southeast Asia, though often unnoticed. Each of these events worked as a type of reincarnation of the Vietnam War in unique and different ways. Both events were informed by Vietnam and governmental decisions made during its roughly decade and a half struggle. Whereas Grenada worked as a counterfactual of what could have and should have been in Southeast Asia,

¹⁸¹ Reagan, *An American Life*, 471.

Nicaragua brought forth the ghost of Lyndon Johnson and the memory of why Vietnam had been so unpopular in the first place with its lies, deception, and corruption.

Many of Reagan and his administration's actions continue to worry academics and politicians alike as to the extent of executive power. Historians like Stephen M. Griffin have even brought to light arguments showcasing Reagan's desire to create the mystique of a hardline president.¹⁸² In doing so, he pushed the boundary of executive power after Vietnam and set the stage accordingly for every president after him. The very fact that Iran-Contra was furthered and defended by knowledgeable lawyers is clear evidence of a "constitutional crisis" to many.¹⁸³ Some have criticized Reagan's wanton disregard for public opinion as having helped to set the stage for American leadership in the future as well. Historians have even mentioned the "unitary executive" theory when describing Reagan, which essentially argues for the president to have sole control over the entire executive branch and its agencies. Other historians have criticized Reagan's optimism and his defense of American exceptionalism as being the driving force behind his desire for aggressive foreign policy.¹⁸⁴ Some have even described Reagan as having an incredibly short attention span.¹⁸⁵ Could it be that he simply understood public impatience after Vietnam and was determined to fix American ailments via his foreign policy in the Caribbean and Central America?

If Reagan was plagued by the ghost of Vietnam via his foreign policy, an additionally peculiar roadblock further pushed him and his administration to cement the

¹⁸² Griffin, "The Constitutional Order in the Post-Vietnam Era," 154.

¹⁸³ Griffin, "The Constitutional Order in the Post-Vietnam Era," 188-189.

¹⁸⁴ David Ryan, "1984, Regional Crises, and Morning in America: The Predawn of the Reagan Era." In *Candidates, Campaigns, and Global Politics from FDR to Bill Clinton* 271-292. University Press of Kentucky, 2017. <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.txstate.edu/stable/j.ctt1mmft1g.15>.

¹⁸⁵ Gary Wills, *Reagan's America: Innocents at Home*, 1st ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company Inc., 1987) 352.

war as a noble cause once and for all, this time at home. Though traditionally seen as a champion of the American military and the quintessential patriot, Reagan battled both publicly and privately throughout his presidency both for and against the opinions of the Vietnam veteran population. Many hopped on board Reagan's train of redemption and amelioration of Vietnam. Others, including those veterans struggling to adapt to life in Reagan's America in various forms, chastised the White House's treatment of their issues. All of this culminated in several metaphorical minefields that Reagan navigated in order to place the Vietnam veteran into his national narrative of nobility and healing, which is the subject of the final chapter

IV. PATRIOT OR PARIAH? REAGAN AND THE VIETNAM VETERAN

John Fulton first encountered Ronald Reagan in the Fall of 1967 as he recovered from a gunshot wound to the wrist that he received in Vietnam. The middle-class son of a World War II pilot, Fulton followed in the footsteps of his father and, after completing his officer training, had volunteered to go to Southeast Asia. While recovering on the west coast, Fulton and his buddies were attending a football game between the University of California and Oregon when they noticed a politician making the rounds and shaking hands with the crowd, “pressing the flesh,” as Fulton put it. This was the first time that Fulton had met Governor Ronald Reagan of California. Reagan was at the beginning of his gubernatorial career at that point, having just recently won the election. After the game, Fulton and his injured comrades attended a local Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) gathering, where Reagan, as Fulton recalls, “made a special point of going over to our table and...talking to us.” In that moment, Fulton remembered years later, “I don’t know what his stance on Vietnam was,” but “it was impossible” not to feel like Reagan cared about veterans and the military. “That certainly has a huge impact on you. You kind of remember the guy.”¹⁸⁶

Throughout his political career, Reagan consistently appealed to veterans and veterans’ groups for support. Speaking publicly in 1980 while campaigning for the presidency, Reagan critiqued Carter’s failures on behalf of America’s war heroes, attacking him for the “gratuitous representation of veterans” by the Veteran Administration (VA) office. Reagan went so far as to call Carter the head of an “anti-

¹⁸⁶ Interview conducted by author on 18 March 2020.

veteran administration” which had “stacked the deck against” Vietnam veterans by cutting back on VA funding. Reagan pledged to Vietnam veterans that, as part of his presidential agenda, he would “personally...uphold veterans preferences in Federal employment and...see it...strictly enforced in all federally funded programs.”¹⁸⁷ Veteran Norm Gardner welcomed Reagan’s no nonsense style after what he perceived to be Carter’s failure to confront communism or build up the military.¹⁸⁸ Reagan rejected those Americans who viewed Vietnam veterans in a negative light and associated the participant with the war’s fundamental causes, declaring that “those shrill voices that would have us believe the defenders of our nation are somehow the enemies of peace are as false as they are shrill.” He alluded to a type of recovery for the image of Vietnam veterans by mentioning “I’m happy to tell you that the people of America have recovered from what can only be called a temporary aberration.”¹⁸⁹ The “aberration,” in Reagan’s view, was the maltreatment of those who returned home to an America which had perceivably turned its back on its veterans by criticizing the country’s most unpopular war.

Within the confines of Reagan’s revisionist rhetoric, narrative redemption, and foreign policy, Vietnam veterans themselves were caught between the White House and their own personal war experience and recovery. Different population groups harbored

¹⁸⁷ Ronald Reagan, “Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention, Chicago, Illinois: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library - National Archives and Records Administration,” www.reaganlibrary.gov. Ronald Reagan: Presidential Library and Museum. Accessed September 12, 2019. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/8-18-80>.

¹⁸⁸ Interview with Norman Gardner, 14 March 2001, Norman Gardner Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0028>, Accessed 25 Nov 2019.

¹⁸⁹ Ronald Reagan, “Address at Commencement Exercises at the United States Military Academy: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library - National Archives and Records Administration,” Address at Commencement Exercises at the United States Military Academy | Ronald Reagan Presidential Library - National Archives and Records Administration, accessed February 12, 2020, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/52781c>.

oftentimes conflicting reactions to Reagan's attempts at redeeming their image and that of their war. David Kiernan has mentioned the fact that veterans themselves as well as Reagan era interventionist conservatives had different meanings for Vietnam's noble cause. On the one hand, hawks within Reagan's administration sought to justify the war's military righteousness. On the other, veterans' solidarity triumphed over perceived failure in a meaningless and unwinnable war.¹⁹⁰ The emergence of groups such as Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) and others displayed, for the first time, a successful group of decorated veterans protesting and making anti-war demonstrations at the national level. This group was difficult for Reagan to criticize because they were not seen as the draft dodgers or student protestors mentioned previously who escaped the war. They were, as Patrick Hagopian puts it, "anti-war warriors."¹⁹¹ By the time of Reagan's inauguration, Vietnam veterans increasingly regarded themselves as genuine witnesses whose right to testify publicly against the government was seen as a worthwhile calling."¹⁹² For every John Fulton who respected Reagan, there were countless other Vietnam veterans and veterans' groups that viewed Reagan in increasingly sophisticated ways.

This chapter sets out to describe the relationship between the Reagan administration and a group which had the potential to either further Reagan's redemptive Vietnam rhetoric or combat it with unbridled leverage: the Vietnam veteran. I break this multifaceted relationship up into three distinct areas related to themes previously spoken

¹⁹⁰ David Kieran, *Forever Vietnam: How a Divisive War Changed American Public Memory* (MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014) 92.

¹⁹¹ Patrick Hagopian, *The Vietnam War In American Memory* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009) 53.

¹⁹² Kieran, *Forever Vietnam*, 54.

about in this essay after first devoting time to a description of Vietnam veterans and the uniqueness of their issues. The first category which I then analyze is Reagan and his administration's approach to the Prisoner of War/Missing in Action(POW/MIA) issue, a hot button topic which was important to both veteran's groups and their families.

Secondly, I describe the emergence of one of the more negative aspects of Reagan's presidency in regard to Vietnam veterans by highlighting the issue of Agent Orange cases and, specifically, Reagan's failure to act on this issue. Finally, I delve into Reagan's utilization of Vietnam memorials as sites of power to publicly redeem Vietnam veterans and their war. I specifically expose the dichotomy of the Wall and Reagan's reluctant relationship with that monument as opposed to other, more "patriotic" Vietnam sites. For President Reagan, though America's relationship with what he once described generically as "a place called Vietnam" seemingly ended in 1975, Vietnam veterans represented a constant reminder of its occurrence and thus the final obstacle to its closure.

One of the primary goals of this chapter is to exemplify via Vietnam veterans just how personal of an issue that the Vietnam War really was to Reagan, perhaps more so than anywhere else in this essay. By aligning this group's issues with Reagan's responses, I set out to display the complex dichotomy of Reagan the "noble cause," mythological patriot of legend and the flawed President who ultimately failed to uplift and redeem a population who many viewed as a champion of their cause.

A Different Kind of Veteran

The public perception of the Vietnam veteran differed from that of veterans of any war in U.S. history. Images of Vietnam veterans as conductors of torture, death, and cruelty were largely reinforced by atrocities such as the 1968 My Lai massacre. Unlike

Reagan's World War II veteran, the Vietnam veteran had been exposed to unconventional combat, frequent social negativity upon their return, and a president who understood little about the peculiarities of their war. Historians have recently brought to light the fact that World War II veterans and Vietnam Veterans actually suffered quite similar mental struggles yet Vietnam was, at its root, an altogether different war.¹⁹³

Because of their different experiences, many Vietnam veterans in the early days of post-Vietnam America had only discovered the ability to find solace with each other, via informal gatherings and local "rap groups." Over 2 million men and women served over the course of the war from 1959 to 1975 and many struggled to adjust to public scrutiny or alienation. Triple amputee Vietnam veteran Max Cleland, appointed by Carter to head the Veterans' Administration (VA), summed up the needs of the Vietnam veteran: "We needed the support of psychological counseling in the Veterans Administration which had never been done before unless you're a psycho."¹⁹⁴ Indeed, prior to Vietnam, public assistance for veteran's mental health issues at VA centers was seldom utilized or discussed. Those who did seek counseling for psychological difficulties were often chastised or stereotyped.

Acknowledging the needs of this new breed of veteran, Carter moved to update the Veteran's Affairs office. He supported the passage of Public Law 96-22 in 1979, which included a special subsection for "Veterans of the Vietnam Era" and ensured some ten million dollars and three hundred counselors would be funded for the treatment of

¹⁹³ David Kiernan's *Forever Vietnam* provides fascinating insight as to the similarities between the greatest generation and its sons. VA centers and thus diagnoses of previously taboo ailments such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) were much better during the latter's era, however.

¹⁹⁴ Quoted in Reston, *A Rift in the Earth*, 10. (Interview conducted by author)

Vietnam veterans.¹⁹⁵ This was in stark contrast to Reagan's World War II generation, when psychological treatment was rarely available, the VA was little known and rarely funded, and veterans stayed largely silent with regard to their suffering, holding fast to public parades celebrating their victory, service, and the nobility of their conflict.

Even when attempting to keep the peace or ease tension, post-Vietnam presidents were in a lose-lose situation with veterans at many intervals given the peculiarity of the war itself. One example of this was Jimmy Carter's acceptance of draft evaders. Carter's pardon for upwards of twelve thousand evaders living in exile after the war complicated readjustment for some vets. War hawks, largely allies of Reagan, opposed such quick and speedy forgiveness, feeling that it would insult those who served.¹⁹⁶ Raymond Coffey of *The Chicago Tribune* chastised both Carter and Reagan's handling of veteran's issues, stating bluntly that "neither of them has shown much concern or compassion for the country's Vietnam War veterans and the 58,692 who died there."¹⁹⁷

After Reagan took office, the VA continued to undergo more of a professionalization. The more informal rap groups of the seventies were replaced by widespread medical treatment. Employment of Vietnam veterans (including several former VVAW members) to run VA facilities helped to bring about important changes as well. There was a sense that somehow the health of veterans and the health of the nation

¹⁹⁵ 96th Congress, "Public Law 96-22-June 13 1979," <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/Statute-93/pdf/Statute-93-Pg47.pdf>, accessed November 4, 2020, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/Statute-93/pdf/Statute-93-Pg47.pdf>.

¹⁹⁶ James Reston, Jr., *A Rift in the Earth: Art, Memory, and the Fight for a Vietnam War Memorial*. (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2017) 4.

¹⁹⁷ Article from the Chicago Tribune - America's neglected war vets, 21 May 1981, Box 01, Folder 24, Charles Anderson Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=13380124051>, Accessed 15 Jan 2020.

itself were immediately related and even dependent upon each other during Reagan's presidency.

Additionally, by the time Reagan took office Vietnam veterans had firmly begun seeking help for their suffering as recognition of PTSD was increasingly discussed and debated. In fact, Reagan's presidential tenure witnessed the official recognition of PTSD for the first time in the nation's history. In this regard, Reagan faced a massive uphill battle when taking care of the Vietnam veteran as VA centers and public access to mental health institutions and experts made the Vietnam generation's struggle with their war the most public post-war struggle in history. *The Herald* reported that by the time Reagan took office nearly one fourth of all men who saw heavy combat in Vietnam had been arrested at some point.¹⁹⁸ By the time of Reagan's departure from the White House *The Fayetteville Observer* reported, at least one in seven Vietnam veterans were suffering from PTSD, nearly 15% of those who served, or around 470,000 cases.¹⁹⁹ The divorce rate among Vietnam veterans was nearly twice the national average and between fifty and seventy thousand had committed suicide.²⁰⁰ Reagan's administration had to confront veterans' issues as no other president in history had done.

¹⁹⁸ Article from *The Herald* - Criminal Charges: 25 % of combat vets arrested, 23 March 1981, Box 01, Folder 24, Charles Anderson Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=13380124055>, Accessed 15 Jan 2020.

¹⁹⁹ Stress Disorder is High Among Vietnam Veterans - *The Fayetteville Observer-Times* article, 14 August 1988, Box 04, Folder 08, Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr. Collection: Agent Orange Subject Files, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=6180408022>, Accessed 16 Jan 2020.

²⁰⁰ Real Veterans --- A Challenge, 11 November 1981, Box 36, Folder 11, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03 - Veterans, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2283611044>, Accessed 15 Jan 2020.

One of Reagan's chief goals while in office was, as he put it, to "restore [the military] to its proud place" in the post-Vietnam era.²⁰¹ To Reagan, his WWII generation had grown up "supporting" the military no matter the endeavor and his words included much criticism of the Vietnam generation itself and its treatment of the military during that time. He argued that the respect for the military that characterized his era was lacking in the current generation, penning it on "what has been called the Vietnam syndrome."²⁰² Reagan even touted himself as having produced "an esprit de corps-a spirit in the military we haven't had in years past."²⁰³ He publicly demanded that the Joint Chiefs of Staff "do whatever it could to make our men and women proud to wear their uniforms again."²⁰⁴ As famed Vietnam author Philip Caputo once reminisced, under Carter "there were no monuments or memorials, no statues...because such symbols would make Vietnam harder to forget."²⁰⁵ Under Reagan, however, Vietnam memorials were erected and attempts at a return to patriotism and nationalism began and ended at the White House.

Aside from making Vietnam veterans proud of their uniforms again, Reagan also attempted to assist them in other ways. One of the most overlooked attempts at providing agency to Vietnam veterans under Reagan was the creation of the Vietnam Veteran's Leadership Program (VVLVP). Officially recognized by Reagan on November 10, 1981, it was created with the goal of encouraging "successful Vietnam veterans nationwide to volunteer their time, effort and creative leadership to help solve the problems still faced

²⁰¹ Ronald Reagan, *Reagan: A Life in Letters*. (New York, NY: Free Press, 2003) 252.

²⁰² Ronald Reagan, "Address at Commencement Exercises at the United States Military Academy: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library - National Archives and Records Administration," Address at Commencement Exercises at the United States Military Academy | Ronald Reagan Presidential Library - National Archives and Records Administration, accessed February 12, 2020, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/52781c>.

²⁰³ Reagan, *A Life in Letters*, 331.

²⁰⁴ Ronald Reagan, *Ronald Reagan: An American Life* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1990) 219.

²⁰⁵ Quoted in Reston, *A Rift in the Earth*, 26-27. (Interview conducted by author)

by some of their fellow veterans.”²⁰⁶ Reagan mentioned in his opening remarks at the christening for the organization at the White House garden that “a long, dragged-out tragedy, Vietnam, divided our nation and damaged America’s self-image” and that its soldiers “were not allowed to win.” Because of this, the VVLP was aimed at “helping a group of Veterans who have never received the thanks they deserved.” After alluding to the “unjust stereotype” of the Vietnam veteran, Reagan provided a connecting statement to both the past as well as his present goal of halting Communism around Southeast Asia and, more specifically, close to America’s borders, by stating “this program is one way of expressing our commitment not only to Vietnam veterans but to all those who now serve our country in the military.”²⁰⁷ Ensuring a halting of Communism and preventing falling dominoes in the Caribbean and Central America required a renewed confidence after Vietnam that would in turn provide confidence to the military moving forward for future military efforts.

Through the VVLP, the President found a strategic way to produce his own vision of the Vietnam veteran as grateful, mentally stable, and proud of one’s service.²⁰⁸ The goal was to not only rehabilitate these “unstable” veterans but the Vietnam War more generally. Though some appreciated the gesture of the VVLP, such as the Commander of the Disabled American Veteran, who stated that the program “has shown the

²⁰⁶ Vietnam Veterans Leadership Program, 1982, Box 36, Folder 12, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03 - Veterans, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2283612005>, Accessed 04 Nov 2020.

²⁰⁷ Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at a Ceremony Commemorating the Initiation of the Vietnam Veterans Leadership Program: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library - National Archives and Records Administration,” Remarks at a Ceremony Commemorating the Initiation of the Vietnam Veterans Leadership Program | Ronald Reagan Presidential Library - National Archives and Records Administration (Ronald Reagan: Presidential Library and Museum), accessed September 15, 2020, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/111081a>.

²⁰⁸ Vietnam Veterans Leadership Program, 1982, Box 36, Folder 12, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03 - Veterans, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

veterans...that they have earned the right to hold their heads high,” many viewed it as nothing more than a hollow gesture as well as a piece of propaganda for Reagan.²⁰⁹ The VVLP had an indirect system of funding, being set up through local chapters headed by Vietnam veterans themselves, and was supported by a web of financial agencies. This equated to the VVLP being plagued by underfunding throughout its existence, leading to a short life span.²¹⁰ Also, by categorizing and separating “successful” veterans from “unsuccessful” ones, the President appeared to favor the stable Vietnam veteran with the typical nuclear family, a nostalgic representation of his own past and not indicative of the new veteran generation. Additionally, most VVLP leaders were Republicans, leading some to criticize it as nothing more than a conservative club with a political agenda.

Despite efforts from Reagan to “redeem” the veteran via programs like the VVLP, the Vietnam veteran was simply more complex, outspoken, and increasingly critical of the war in which he or she had participated than any other generation before, creating conflicting opinions toward Reagan by the veterans’ community and the public as a result. The generational separation of Reagan from this collection of veterans combined with his grandiose and nostalgic narrative of American involvement in Vietnam meant that he and his administration maintained a complex relationship with Vietnam veterans.

²⁰⁹ Congressional Viet Vets Aid VVLP - National Vietnam Veterans Review, Article - re: funding request for Vietnam Veterans Leadership Program, March 1984, Box 36, Folder 19, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03 - Veterans, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2283619018>, Accessed 15 Jan 2020.

²¹⁰ The VVLP was phased out completely by September of 1984. Though its goal was always to be a short term program, the rehabilitation of the Vietnam veteran was undoubtedly a long term problem. Thus, the complexities of recovery were always bound to outlast the shortsightedness of Reagan’s vision for the VVLP. The program only managed to place a paltry 1,010 veterans into jobs by 1983 and did little to provide the professed assistance in several areas of life to Vietnam veterans, such as counseling and financial assistance. Yet, the press often focused on the miniscule number of veterans who *did* manage to find jobs through the program, leading to positive press coverage for Reagan. It is apparent that a repairing of the veteran’s image did take place via the VVLP in some ways, however, and its influence, at least from a PR perspective, should not be overlooked in a historiographical context.

Many did not want saving. Some found themselves somewhere between agreement and criticism of the president, finding Vietnam to be the “war the nation wanted to forget,” wanting to get over it, or move forward yet living during one of the most overtly patriotic and narratively skewed administrations in U.S. history.²¹¹ Dr. Ron Milam, a Vietnam scholar and former Army lieutenant who served in Vietnam, alluded to a desire to want to abandon the war altogether under Reagan. “I really ignored that whole period of time...I was a Vietnam veteran who stuck my head in the sand.”²¹²

Many did in, in fact, take hard line stances either for or against Reagan’s rhetoric, however, and arguments over where the sincerity began and ended became a consistent issue for Reagan and led to much criticism from both veterans and the public. Veterans like Timothy Lockley said in response to Reagan’s “noble cause” outlook that it was nothing more than “a political speech” and that he was “another draft dodger” that “had to stay in Hollywood and make movies.”²¹³ Retired Navy enlistee Robert Rankin remembered that during his time at the VA he and other veterans felt as though they “got absolutely nothing from Reagan and the White House.” At the same time, Rankin could not help but mention that there was a “change of attitude under President Reagan,” or at least an apparent one.²¹⁴ Veteran John Wear mentioned that Reagan marked the beginning of when he “felt duped by the United States,” and that he kept his anger

²¹¹ Newsweek Magazine - November 22, 1982 - 'The New Boss' - Pages 1-2, 79-87, 22 November 1982, Box 01, Folder 18, Charles Anderson Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=13380118003>, Accessed 16 Jan 2020.

²¹² Interview conducted by the author on 25 January 2020.

²¹³ Interview with Timothy Lockley, 11 February 2003, Mr. Timothy C. Lockley Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0267>, Accessed 25 Nov 2019.

²¹⁴ Interview with Robert M. Rankin, 04 May 2004, Dr. Robert Rankin Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0370>, Accessed 09 Jan 2020.

suppressed until hostages returning home from Iran “got a ticker tape parade” shortly after Reagan’s inauguration.²¹⁵ One *New York Times* article by Marine veteran Michael Norman highlighted the fact that “none of us [veterans], at least among those I served with, believed the official eyewash that Vietnam was a noble and democratic exercise...none of us wasted time mourning the loss of national virtue.”²¹⁶

Veteran’s criticisms of the President were justified at many intervals. Reagan’s support for these veterans for the most part did not include financial backing. Ironically, it was the fiscally conservative Reagan who opted to gut funding for the VA office, recommending a drawback of around \$328 million dollars in funding and care for thousands of Vietnam veterans.²¹⁷ This resulted in approximately 91 veterans’ organizations with noticeably decreased funding. Not surprisingly, this led to widespread backlash, culminating in a sit in at Wadsworth Hospital to protest the decision, with veterans displaying phrases like “help me or kill me.”²¹⁸ A scathing article by *The Daily Californian* mentioned that “Ronald Reagan was not at Khe Sanh...All the more reason why this administration, with all its florid patriotic rhetoric should be doing everything possible for the men who are living in the long twilight of that war. Instead, they treat

²¹⁵ Interview with John Wear, 29 October 2002, Mr. John F Wear II Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0232>, Accessed 09 Jan 2020.

²¹⁶ Michael Norman, “A Wound That; Will Not Heal,” www.thenytimes.com *The New York Times*, accessed June 1, 2020, <http://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/interactive/2012/11/11/magazine/diagnosis-wound-that-wont-heal.html>.

²¹⁷ A Homecoming at Last, Viet Nam Veterans Converge on Washington in Quest of Catharsis and Respect, 22 November 1982, Box 36, Folder 15, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03 – Veterans, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2283615025>, Accessed 15 Jan 2020.

²¹⁸ Vietnam Veterans Are Hungry for a Fight, 7 June 1981, Box 01, Folder 11, Paul Cecil Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2520111048>, Accessed 16 Jan 2020.

those damaged men as if they were lines in a budget.”²¹⁹ The National Vietnam Veterans Review described Reagan’s attempts at cutting VA funding as evidence of “a total misunderstanding about the nature of veterans rights and benefits.”²²⁰ Simply put, Reagan’s attempts at redemption were not enough to get many veterans to care.

Reagan did, however, find supporters among the veterans’ ranks. Many Vietnam veterans did, in fact, feel a greater sense of pride under Reagan due to his efforts and optimism via programs like the VVLP. Ed George, a participant in USO tours in the seventies and eighties, mentioned that vets felt like “second class citizens” during the Carter years. George argued that Reagan changed all of that. During his USO tours, “I could tell a vast difference in the attitude of the militaries to how they perceived themselves because of how they were treated.”²²¹ Vietnam veteran Ted Cook described the rejuvenation of the military under Reagan as a resurgence of confidence due to giving up the Vietnam ghost. “Boy I tell you, you could really feel it.” Cook even went so far as to align his own beliefs about the unceremonious end of the war with Reagan’s own rhetoric on not being allowed to win. “Lessons of [the] war in Vietnam is that we have to be ready to make the commitment or don’t make it.”²²² Veterans praised Reagan for ensuring everything from more “highly qualified” training for soldiers to “nice barracks”

²¹⁹ Real Veterans --- A Challenge, 11 November 1981, Box 36, Folder 11, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03 - Veterans, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University.

²²⁰ Article from National Vietnam Veterans Review Titled The Vietnam Experience Art Exhibit, November 1981, Box 36, Folder 10, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03 - Veterans, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2283610069>, Accessed 16 Jan 2020.

²²¹ Interview with Ed George, 08 January 2001, Ed George Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0020>, Accessed 16 Dec 2019.

²²² Interview with Ted Cook by Stephen Maxner, 2 October 1999, Ted Cook Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0098>, Accessed 16 Dec 2019.

and the “best equipment” that the military had seen in years, especially at American bases in Germany. Yet it can be inferred that Reagan was not so much uplifting the Vietnam veteran as he was trying to provide the country a clean slate to ensure a military buildup near the Soviet-led East bloc of Europe to fulfill his anticommunist agenda.

Arguably Reagan’s greatest veteran ally came in the form of Retired Naval Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt. A professed Democrat, Zumwalt had served extensively in Vietnam and had maligned the failures of the Carter administration, specifically its foreign policy in regard to Iran and the Soviet Union. Zumwalt described Carter’s diplomacy as “a blunder wrapped in a misjudgment inside an illusion.” Zumwalt went as far as to launch an organization known as Democrats and Independents for Reagan. Their agenda and reasoning for supporting Reagan was noted in a 1980 memo:

We take encouragement from the emergence of Ronald Reagan into preeminence among those aspiring to displace and succeed the Carter presidency....We believe it is important to make the prospects for his success evident as early and as convincingly as possible so that a sense of impending change for the better in the United States can be reflected to the world. We have organized to do what we can to forward the Reagan candidacy – in confidence that he represents the prudent thinking necessary for the recovery of soundness of national policies. We urge other Democrats and those who share our misgivings and our hopes to joining with us in declaring support of Ronald Reagan for President.²²³

To Zumwalt, Reagan was a man who understood “the problems of the 1980’s, [that we] are no longer living in the world of the Vietnam war, campus radicalism and race riots of the 1960’s and 1970s.”²²⁴ Zumwalt, like many veterans, saw Reagan as an alternative to a perceivably weaker administration, still reeling from the guilt and failures of Vietnam.

²²³ Independents and Democrats for Ronald Reagan - For Country Above Party, Additional Documents and Drafts for Democrats and Independents for Reagan, 08 April 1980, Box 08, Folder 18, Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr. Collection: General Correspondence, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=6210818101>, Accessed 12 Dec 2019.

²²⁴ Independents and Democrats for Ronald Reagan - 08 April 1980, Box 08, Folder 18, Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr. Collection: General Correspondence, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University,

That Reagan provided pride and hope to many should not be cast off as mere chauvinism either. Even David Berger, founder of Americans for Vietnam Veterans (AVNV), saw enough change under Reagan in regard to Vietnam veterans' issues to present him with an award for positive recognition and awareness of the Vietnam Veteran.



Figure 3. Reagan meets with AVNV founder David Berger to accept the award for positive recognition and awareness of the Vietnam Veteran. Courtesy of the Vietnam Center and Archive at Texas Tech University.

Under Reagan, a revision of the Vietnam veteran could be found in everything from comic books and novels to television and the big screen. The psychologically-damaged veteran of *Taxi Driver* and the *Deer Hunter* gave way to strong men like *Rambo*. Director David Morrell commented that the movie “came in just as the 80’s and Reagan were about to go into full bloom,” even describing it as a “Ronald Reagan kind of movie about healing the wounds of the past and teaching pride and patriotism.”²²⁵ In this way, Reagan influenced 1980s Hollywood as much as he did during his SAG years

²²⁵ David Morrell Audio Commentary, *First Blood*, Artisan, 2002.

decades prior. The previous depiction of Vietnam veterans as baby killers took a backseat to more favorable depictions. Reagan's words could be heard via speeches and yet his messages could also be indirectly absorbed on the big screen only moments later. All of this resulted, however disingenuously, in what *Newsweek* described as "the Return of the American Hero."²²⁶ Alongside shifting cultural perceptions there were many other avenues by which to reach the Vietnam veteran for Reagan, not the least of which were those still thought be "trapped" in Southeast Asia.

Reagan's handling of those thought to still be missing in Vietnam was highly complex and put him under immense pressure. As we will see, Reagan deserves credit for at least appearing more proactive than his predecessor in this area and it is believed that he was borderline obsessed with the idea of rescuing "trapped" Americans. However, much of his performance here was also due to immense demand by the families of the missing to ensure that their "patriotic" president never left his warrior veterans behind, leading to rushed decision making, poor information, and less than stellar results. It is difficult to say definitely whether or not Reagan cared or tried hard enough with P.O.W./M.I.A, yet evidence makes for some fascinating insight if nothing else.

The Great Red Herring: Reagan Handles the P.O.W./M.I.A. Issue

The issue of Vietnam Prisoners of War (P.O.W) and Missing In Action (M.I.A) had its roots in a long history dating back to the Nixon administration. Rather than rebuild Vietnam, as the 1973 treaty had pledged to do, every president beginning with Nixon waged a propaganda-based war against the country by claiming that the North

²²⁶ Newsweek Magazine - November 22, 1982 - 'Showing the Flag: Rocky, Rambo and the Return of the American Hero' 23 December 1985.

Vietnamese were holding P.O.W/M.I.A's captive. Prior to Nixon, the terms P.O.W and M.I.A were separate entities. Prisoner of war was used to classify individuals either known or reasonably known to be prisoners. Missing in action was a separate category in both World War II and Korea because there were individuals, mostly Airmen, whose remains could never be recovered or who were known to have died. By merging these two terms, however, M.I.A's could now be P.O.W's and vice versa and thus families could forever "fantasize" that their loved ones still lived.²²⁷ Predictably, this resulted in a fervor and aggressive demand of government not previously seen. More importantly, it also allowed Nixon to continue a prolonged war against the Communists in Vietnam with greater public support. Figures like Vietnam veteran turned Texas billionaire Ross Perot and a new organization of mostly military wives that emerged under Nixon called the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia only grew more passionate about the fantasy of trapped G.I.'s in Vietnam by the time Reagan became president. Conservative war activists like Perot and the military wives of the League, headed in the beginning by a powerful woman named Sybil Stockdale, helped thrust Reagan into governorship in 1968 and came back to offer up their opinion on the P.O.W/M.I.A issue when he moved into the White House.²²⁸

Reagan's involvement with this movement began during the 1970s. Even as his political star continued to rise, Reagan vowed to ensure a full accounting of all the Americans missing or lost in Vietnam. As early as 1972, he began receiving letters from women like Kim Schmillen begging him to not forget those like her husband who were

²²⁷ H. Bruce Franklin, *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000) 174-175.

²²⁸ Michael J. Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home: POW's, MIA's, and the Unending Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 2009) 29.

still missing or “left behind.” Reagan responded by mentioning that “the P.O.W.-M.I.A. cause is one in which...I have been very active” and that he even wore a “P.O.W.-M.I.A. bracelet” (a nifty piece of propagandistic merchandise from Nixon and Perot to keep the war going) as “a constant reminder to myself and to all those who see it of the plight of our brave men who are prisoners of war or missing in action.”²²⁹ A 1976 memo from Reagan to the League itself directly chastised Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and the handling of P.O.W./M.I.A.’s. Reagan mentioned that “the first week that I am president, a new Secretary of State will begin immediately taking every reasonable and proper step to return any live Americans still being held in Southeast Asia: to secure an accounting of Americans still listed as missing in action and to repatriate the remains of the American dead. You have had to wait too long for action.”²³⁰ In a 1976 public service announcement, Reagan gave a particularly scathing review of the handling of peace negotiations between the North Vietnamese and the U.S., primarily at what he perceived as the North’s failure to play by the rules and hold M.I.A.’s hostage as a result. “The negotiations for the VN in Paris were demanding full reparations before they would even discuss the MIA’s....Our MIA’s shouldn’t determine either the VN’s membership in the U.N. or the establishment of bilateral relations.”²³¹ In what could be seen as an unnecessary reference to his anti-communist ideas, Reagan appeared to be both chastising the “barbarity” of Communism while still inspiring sympathy from the American public

²²⁹ Letter from Governor of California, Ronald Reagan, to Miss Kim Schmiller; Concerning Prisoners of Vietnam War, 21 March 1972, Box 01, Folder 01, Kimberly J. Schmiller Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=14340101001>, Accessed 25 Nov 2019.

²³⁰ Letter from Governor of California, Ronald Reagan, to Miss Kim Schmiller; Concerning Prisoners of Vietnam War, 21 March 1972, Box 01, Folder 01, Kimberly J. Schmiller Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=14340101001>, Accessed 25 Nov 2019.

²³¹ Ronald Reagan, *Reagan: In His Own Hand* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2001) 50.

in regard to the myth of the missing American more than a year after the war had officially concluded. As I argue, no such evidence ever truly backed up Reagan's beliefs of MIAs being held in North Vietnam.

Reagan's response to the P.O.W./M.I.A. issue was partly an obsession with Americans being held hostage but also heavily influenced by the demands of outside organizations for him to produce results, making P.O.W./M.I.A. a very public problem for him. The *Asian Wall Street Journal* highlighted a tense conversation between Reagan and one John Cardinal O' Connor, who "urged Ronald Reagan to remind the world of his continuing commitment to set them [POW/MIAs] free." The article went on to highlight a private conversation between Reagan and H. Ross Perot where Perot attempted to "get to the bottom of the issue" and detailed the actions of some family members of veterans who even "caged themselves on the front lawn of White House Chief of Staff Donald Regan." Many even tried to convince the media of a cover up of P.O.W./M.I.A. evidence by the White House, "lest a public outcry over abandoned soldiers undermine military morale and prove politically embarrassing."²³²

Lost in the fervor of both a lost war and public backlash over a largely unfounded myth of missing servicemembers being held captive was the fact that Reagan did, in fact, try to send covert teams into Laos and Cambodia early on in his presidency. Beginning in 1981, he had received evidence of M.I.A.s via grainy and poor quality photos which appeared to show shadowy figures, assumed to be Americans, being held in prison. Though nothing much came of these covert operations, this should not be misconstrued

²³² Newspaper Article from *The Asian Wall Street Journal* - Bids to Free POWs Stir Hopes and Doubts, no date, Box 19, Folder 23, Garnett Bell Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas TechUniversity, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=11271923111>, Accessed 15 Jan 2020.

as naivete or a foolhardy endeavor. In a memo, Ross Perot claimed that there was “substantial” evidence that at least “343 MIAs” were being held in Laos. He also claimed that the official declaration of there being no more living Americans being held in Southeast Asia in 1973 by the U.S. was “the most significant mistake made by our government on the POW/MIA issue.” Perot attributed the failure to gain freedom for these men to “a lack of diligence and follow-through by our government,” which Reagan had a duty to remedy.²³³ Perot, who had lost a friend in the Tet Offensive, put up his own money to fund trips to the region, and had serious talks with both Laotian and Vietnamese officials. Although he was an obvious political ally of Reagan, his passion for the P.O.W./M.I.A. issue was more apolitical than many might be willing to admit.

Reagan both knew about and supported the indirect funneling of hundreds of thousands of dollars to covert operations in the region to obtain and follow up on possible M.I.A.s as a result of pressure from men like Perot and his reports. Many of these operations were supported by M.I.A. activists in Congress such as New York’s John LeBoutillier and North Carolina’s Billy Hendon, reemphasizing the fact that Reagan was increasingly pressured by government officials and families to produce results.²³⁴ This covert and indirect form of support paralleled much of the same espionage-like occurrences of the Iran-Contra scandal. Evidence suggests, however, that Reagan was less knowledgeable about the Central American affair than the P.O.W./M.I.A. issue due to the less controversial symbolism of attempting to rescue captured Americans. Regardless, false information, fake or misleading reports, and corruption plagued the

²³³ Memo from Ross Perot to President Ronald Reagan - re: Findings on POW/MIA Study, 8 April 1987, Box 15, Folder 21, Sedgwick Tourison Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2861521035>, Accessed 25 Nov 2019.

²³⁴ Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 225.

Reagan M.I.A. effort in the region, where any war object could be presented as proof of a missing person for a price in an economically ravaged part of the world.

Admittedly, Reagan's efforts to return P.O.W./M.I.A.s were met with *some* success and there were those who praised his work, however futile. Barbara Lewis, a League member and wife of a pilot unaccounted for since 1965 "praised the actions of the Reagan administration in trying to get them [POW/MIAs] accounted for, which she said had brought good results."²³⁵ Congressman Gerald Solomon of New York, who himself was a senior ranking member on the House Veterans Affairs' Committee, published a piece in which he professed that "President Reagan stands alone in deserving the thanks of veterans for bringing our missing men back to the forefront of our nation's attention and for making a full accounting of the fate of these vets a matter of top national priority."²³⁶ The article, not surprisingly, avoids statistics. Not much would have been presented. Yet by ambiguously crediting Reagan with at least bringing "attention" to the P.O.W./M.I.A. issue, it was hoped that perhaps some could be satisfied. Arguably Reagan's greatest success regarding at least the M.I.A. issue came via the Pakse evacuation. A crew of thirteen men were shot down in an AC 130 near Pakse, Laos in 1972. The Reagan administration exchanged five thousand tons of rice and five thousand dollars in medicine in exchange for 50,000 bone fragments. Other excavations like this, however, proved far less successful.²³⁷

²³⁵ Newspaper Article - *Arkansas Gazette*, Little Rock - Vietnam veterans gather at NLR, told VA 'has gone kaput', 11 January 1987, Box 01, Folder 12, Penni Evans Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=19620112028>, Accessed 16 Jan 2020.

²³⁶ POW/MIA Seven Years Of Hard Work: VFW, 01 June 1988, Box 25, Folder 06, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03 - POW/MIA Issues, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2202506053>, Accessed 15 Jan 2020.

²³⁷ Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 240.

Reagan's performance on the P.O.W./M.I.A. issue did have detractors. The League of Families, perhaps more than any other organization, became Reagan's staunchest critic in regard to P.O.W./M.I.A. as time progressed. Though Reagan swore early on that the League's "long vigil was over" and that he would take "decisive action on any verifiable reports" of the missing, it was arguably an impossible task to take on.²³⁸ The League sent out memorandums to thousands of homes across the country, begging for "patriotic, God-fearing" Americans to pressure both the media and President Reagan to secure the release of at least "2,500 POW-MIAs from the hands of the Southeast Asian Communists."²³⁹ Any family member who did not witness results maintained the ability to criticize Reagan's efforts. The P.O.W./M.I.A. issue became a grassroots battle between families and their government and the Reagan administration held the daunting task to deliver. Disillusionment set in for the League toward Reagan, resulting in oftentimes scathing reports. "When President Reagan spoke before the families of the missing and promised a rescue operation if proof was obtained," one report stated, "he was apparently politically motivated to obtain sympathetic votes, and actually uncommitted to rescuing live American POWs."²⁴⁰ Even Caspar Weinberger found the reports of Americans being held in Vietnam rather shaky, reaffirming that "there currently is no evidence to prove

²³⁸ Chip Brown, "Reagan Pledges Search for Men Missing in Vietnam," *The Washington Post* (WP Company, January 29, 1983), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1983/01/29/reagan-pledges-search-for-men-missing-in-vietnam/e0d739ec-35f6-442b-99c8-14ad9ae77a27/>.

²³⁹ Letter From John W. Parsels Requesting donations From Fellow Americans, 01 January 1982, Box 24, Folder 06, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03 - POW/MIA Issues, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2202406049>, Accessed 12 Dec 2019.

²⁴⁰ Report Concerning Misinformation on the Issue of American Prisoners of War and Missing in Action in Southeast Asia - National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia, No Date, Box 19, Folder 02, Sedgwick Tourison Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University,

that Americans are being held against their will.”²⁴¹ Author and Vietnam veteran Tim O’ Brien, who was gracious enough to grant his perspective for this essay, was fresh off of publishing several best-selling Vietnam novels at the time and had been working on a piece for *The New York Times* in Vietnam. He witnessed firsthand the shortcomings of Reagan-era protocols in searching for P.O.W.-M.I.A.s, calling the search “a bunch of red herring bullshit.” He encountered a team working to excavate and discover the remains of servicemembers “trapped” in country and mentioned that they relayed to him “how difficult the process” was and how they were essentially “taking a guess” as to where evidence could be found, with little to no proof.²⁴² During a 1988 speech in which Reagan hailed Vietnam veterans, some unimpressed members of the crowd “punctuated” his words with shouts of “free American POWs” and “no more lies!” Demonstrating that no matter how far Reagan believed the nation had come with regard to “healing” and putting the P.O.W./M.I.A. issue to rest, much still remained to be accomplished for families and comrades of the missing.²⁴³

The P.O.W/M.I.A issue and Reagan’s role in it, given his position of power, also created dangerous arenas of debate throughout the country. The potential for some to single out those who served and those who did not created tension. To ability to try to inspire support for current and future foreign policy military efforts on behalf of the

²⁴¹ Guest Columnist: Vietnam War MIAs- US Today Opinion, 04 February 1983, Box 24, Folder 09, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03 - POW/MIA Issues, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2202409010>, Accessed 16 Jan 2020.

²⁴² Interview with the author on February 15, 2020.

²⁴³ President Hails Vietnam Vets As U.S. Heroes - Los Angeles Times, Newspaper Article – re :President Reagan, 12 November 1983, Box 37, Folder 07, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03 –Veterans, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2283707019>, Accessed 15 Jan 2020.

missing so as not to have wasted their sacrifice in the defense of freedom remained a distasteful issue as well. When speaking to the League in 1988, Reagan made a direct connection between P.O.W./M.I.A.'s and his 1981 "noble cause" line when he stated "who can still question that America's youth fought a noble battle for freedom," after witnessing the League's own battle for progress in returning their loved ones.²⁴⁴ The P.O.W./M.I.A. problem turned distastefully political at certain points. Conservatives attacked liberal politicians for having lost the war and liberals attacked conservatives for romanticizing it, thus creating arguments or disingenuous feelings over P.O.W./M.I.A. as well.²⁴⁵

Final reports on the P.O.W./M.I.A. issue as Reagan left office reflected a sense of worry by even his own Chief of Staff Michael Deaver that efforts had "stymied" and that many had forgotten about it.²⁴⁶ It was later reported that even Ross Perot had advised Reagan to soften his hard line, anti-Communist policies toward Hanoi in the vain attempt to "win repatriation of any American servicemen still held in Southeast Asia."²⁴⁷ Reagan assisted in ordering a "shutdown" policy of the P.O.W./M.I.A. issue in 1988, resulting in a complete rejection of his "progress" by the National Forget Me Not Association for POW-MIAs:

²⁴⁴ Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the Annual Meeting of the National League of POW/MIA Families: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library - National Archives and Records Administration," Remarks at the Annual Meeting of the National League of POW/MIA Families | Ronald Reagan Presidential Library - National Archives and Records Administration, accessed September 30, 2020, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/072988a>.

²⁴⁵ Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 7.

²⁴⁶ Letter from Michael K. Deaver to Howard H. Baker, Jr. - re: Concerns About Progress of the Release of Suspected POWs in Laos and Vietnam, 18 March 1987, Box 15, Folder 21, Sedgwick Tourison Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2861521027>, Accessed 12 Dec 2019.

²⁴⁷ Perot 'asked Reagan to soften policy towards Hanoi' - The Straits Times, 06 July 1992, Box 13, Folder 08, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 08 - Biography, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2361308112>, Accessed 15 Jan 2020.

In 1976, Ronald Reagan sent a telegram...stating that, on the first day he took office...he would make the return of the remaining prisoners of the Vietnam War his “highest national priority.” Like many other things that have come out of the mouth of “the great communicator,” it was all form and no substance. They have buried the POW issue along with the bodies of our men who are still dying in captivity.²⁴⁸

A national “jump back” report entitled “Reagan’s failure,” further soured the legacy of the President and his attempts at remedying the P.O.W./M.I.A. issue. P.O.W. activists described the administration’s rescue efforts as resulting in “limited progress” along with “deliberate misstatements” and an “omission of facts.”²⁴⁹

Reagan’s attempts to uncover either remains or prisoners themselves were fraught with inconsistency, poor management, and questionable funding practices. This was partially due to his own beliefs in Americans being held hostage at the hands of a Communist enemy and also largely due to pressure from outside forces. Could Reagan ever seriously deliver on such a promise? That he made more ambitious attempts than any other president before or since to account for the missing deserves some credit. And yet, that is hardly comfort to the families of Vietnam veterans who have yet to receive answers.

When handling P.O.W/M.I.A. criticism, the lost men and women of the war were silent and could not speak against Reagan. When dealing with the next issue, however, the President discovered that Vietnam veterans were most certainly alive, though not exactly well.

²⁴⁸ Newsletter & Article: National Forget Me Not Association - There Are No More MIAs Or POWs, 26 January 1989, Box 25, Folder 07, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03 – POW/MIA Issues, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2202507001>, Accessed 09 Jan 2020.

²⁴⁹ Report: The 1989 Jump Back Report (Reagan's Failure): Issue #2, 01 March 1989, Box 25, Folder 07, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03 - POW/MIA Issues, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2202507014>, Accessed 09 Jan 2020.

The Last of a Dying Army: The Issue of Agent Orange

In the late 1970s, the effects of the chemical defoliant Agent Orange, a carcinogenic substance sprayed over the jungle canopies of Vietnam from 1965 until 1970, began to appear regularly as Vietnam veterans sought assistance for cancerous side effects that they did not even know had been caused by the toxin during their tour of duty in Vietnam years prior.²⁵⁰ Agent Orange claims and cases became more apparent throughout the seventies, with the first claims filed starting in 1977. On the eve of Reagan's presidency, the number of medical claims by Vietnam veterans had risen exponentially. By 1983, more than one hundred thousand veterans filed requests related to the defoliant. The timing of the issue can be attributed to the fact that Agent Orange exposure was discovered to be a latent disorder, meaning that the time between exposure and "consequence" was substantial.²⁵¹

As a result of this pathology, activism around Agent Orange coincided with Reagan's election. Organizations like Agent Orange Victims International (AOVI) emerged to shed light on the issue and demand a government response to veterans' needs. By the early years of Reagan's presidency, several major veterans' organizations allied with each other to bring Agent Orange claims to the national level, including Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA), Vietnam Veterans in Congress (VVC), Citizen Soldier, and VVAW. Documentaries, media coverage, and congressional disputes abounded. All of these grievances eventually culminated in a four-billion-dollar class action lawsuit

²⁵⁰ Fred A. Wilcox, *Waiting for an Army to Die: The Tragedy of Agent Orange* (NY: Seven Stories Press, 1989) xi-xii.

²⁵¹ Wilbur J. Scott, "Competing Paradigms in the Assessment of Latent Disorders: The Case of Agent Orange," *Social Problems* 35, no. 2 (1988): pp. 145-161, <https://doi.org/10.2307/800737>.

against the government during Reagan's presidency, creating a very negative impact on the President's attempts at reconstructing the image of the Vietnam veteran.

Reagan was aware of Agent Orange claims by the time of his inauguration in 1981. Along with Jimmy Carter, Reagan helped to establish the Agent Orange Working Group (AOWG), meant to oversee federal activity of the Agent Orange issue.²⁵² This organization has historically garnered much criticism for the way it was structured and the way it performed. However, it is important to first understand that before veterans lashed out at Reagan's response to their grievances related to Agent Orange, Reagan had in fact attempted to remedy the situation before it got out of hand.

Reagan began his term determined to deal with the Agent Orange issue. The Reagan administration initially awarded a contract in May of 1981 in the sum of \$114,288 to assist in Agent Orange research at UCLA. Reagan even went so far as to reorganize the AOWG to "Cabinet-level status," something his predecessor did not do. Although many veterans initially praised Reagan's moves, the long lags in studies and the failure of the VA to investigate claims even when mandated by the White House made veterans noticeably "angry again." Many chastised Reagan's inability to handle Veterans Administration Chief Robert Nimmo, who claimed that Vietnam veterans were demanding "preferential coddling" in regard to their claims.²⁵³ Only after much criticism did Reagan replace the disgraced Nimmo, and even then he opted for a personal political ally, Harry Walters. Many believed the replacement should have been a Vietnam veteran

²⁵² Wilbur J. Scott. *Vietnam Veterans Since the War: The Politics of PTSD, Agent Orange, and the National Memorial* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004) xx.

²⁵³ Delay on VA study of Agent Orange may be extended, 8 August 1982, Box 01, Folder 01, Paul Cecil Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2520101063>, Accessed 16 Jan 2020.

during a time of such obvious crisis for their well-being.²⁵⁴ Yet another questionable hiring decision by Reagan came in late 1981 in the form of his appointment of UCLA's Dr. Gary H. Spivey as an independent researcher to take over the Agent Orange problem on the VA's dime. Spivey had a reputation for being cold and crass toward veterans, leading *The Daily Californian's* Pete Hammill to mention that "under Reagan, the VA has compounded its insensitivity by appointing Dr. Gary H. Spivey...to study the Agent Orange problem" due to his belief in Agent Orange cases being misleading and overblown.²⁵⁵

Alongside his questionable appointments of Nimmo and Spivey, Reagan's fiscal conservatism and budget cuts were undoubtedly his biggest blunders related to Agent Orange. In 1981, the Reagan administration placed a hiring freeze on the readjustment counseling program, established in 1979 as a way to help Vietnam veterans. This freeze threatened to damage Congressional initiatives for Vietnam veterans everywhere.²⁵⁶ The VVA and VVC filed lawsuits to overturn the freeze and Congress overrode Reagan's budget proposals largely because of the negative effects they would have on treatment for Vietnam Veterans. Moreover, in a not-so-subtle rebuke, Congress actually established P.I. 97-72, which guaranteed funding for treatment of these veterans. Reagan only reluctantly signed it into law after being pressured from officials. In a feeble attempt to quell these mounting tides of controversy over Agent Orange and provide at least *some* funding to those believed to be suffering, Reagan assisted in passing the Veterans' Health Care, Training and Small Business Act of 1981. *The Pensacola Journal* critically

²⁵⁴ Scott. *Vietnam Veterans Since the War*, 175.

²⁵⁵ Real Veterans --- A Challenge, 11 November 1981, Box 36, Folder 11, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03 Veterans, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University.

²⁵⁶ Scott, "Competing Paradigms in the Assessment of Latent Disorders," 154.

described the Act's language as being "very general" in providing "certain health care benefits to Vietnam veterans who may have been exposed."²⁵⁷

Reagan's early errors with regard to poor leadership appointments at the VA and lack of research funding, combined with the unification of Vietnam veterans beginning in the seventies, gave these veterans the confidence needed to combat Reagan's decision making at every turn. The *Los Angeles Times* took notice of how vocal Vietnam veterans claiming Agent Orange toxicity were, mentioning that they "are on more solid ground in their demands about Agent Orange." In a scathing report entitled "Are They Listening?" the *Los Angeles Times* reported that "President Reagan once called the Vietnam War a noble cause, his administration, however, is not being particularly noble to the veterans who served that cause. They want more research into the health effects of Agent Orange." Reagan had initially opted for a hands-off approach to VA management, letting local officials handle all inquiries and issues at their own respective levels with little to no federal interference. As the number of Agent Orange claims increased, veterans became increasingly unhappy with this lack of oversight and even camped out in Lafayette Park demanding more strict federal regulation of VA centers. Within the first six months of Reagan's presidency, the public began noticing that Agent Orange had presented "Reagan with a dilemma" that was obvious.²⁵⁸

Reagan's aforementioned budget cutting of the VA arguably gave the Vietnam veteran the easiest path to criticizing him as the Agent Orange issue grew. A news

²⁵⁷ Not all fear Agent Orange's effects, 4 December 1981, Box 01, Folder 12, Paul Cecil Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2520112015>, Accessed 16 Jan 2020.

²⁵⁸ Are They Listening?, 26 June 1981, Box 01, Folder 15, Paul Cecil Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2520115033>, Accessed 16 Jan 2020.

chronicle reported that the House Veterans Affairs Committee approved a bill “directing the Veterans Administration to give priority medical treatment to veterans who believe their ailments spring from...Agent Orange,” but that Reagan’s VA closure, with the goal of saving “\$31 million a year,...opposes the legislation.”²⁵⁹ Some veterans demanded “a personal meeting with President Reagan.” One veteran, James Roger Hopkins, went so far as to drive his truck into the lobby of Wadsworth Hospital and fire several shots into the roof. He committed suicide shortly after, complaining of the effects from Agent Orange. More specifically, his family believed that his “problems in dealing with the VA bureaucracy” as he tried to receive treatment drove him to take his life.²⁶⁰

At certain points, even the most celebrated and loyal of patriots found the battle for veterans’ agency during the Agent Orange dispute to be less than successful. Before passing away, Lt. Colonel Richard Christian, one of the most high-profile advocates for servicemembers, seen as a “champion of Vietnam veterans in the battle for Agent Orange,” was known to have encountered “intense criticism from [Reagan] administration officials who wanted to derail Agent Orange exposure studies.”²⁶¹

Some accused Reagan and his administration of regular corruption and cover-ups in response to Agent Orange cases. A house committee report alleged that the Reagan

²⁵⁹Vietnam vets vow to continue sit-in until demands met, 30 May 1981, Box 01, Folder 15, Paul Cecil Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2520115024>, Accessed 15 Jan 2020.

²⁶⁰Vietnam Vet Who Raided Hospital Is Found Dead, 18 May 1981, Box 01, Folder 15, Paul Cecil Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2520115015>, Accessed 16 Jan 2020.

²⁶¹Article in The American Legion Magazine - Never one to back down - re: Richard Christian Jr., champion for Agent Orange benefits, April 2012, Box 05, Folder 07, Gary Jestes Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=1160507002>, Accessed 16 Jan 2020.

administration prevented funding for Agent Orange due to the potentially high cost of disability payments. It blatantly stated that the Reagan administration had willfully “obstructed a Centers for Disease Control (CDC) study of veterans exposed to...Agent Orange” in order to “deny government liability.”²⁶² Both the American Legion and VVA supported these claims and, after a fourteen-month investigation in 1989, concluded that “the Reagan Administration had obstructed a forty three million dollar Federal health study,” creating “furor and division over questions of science and politics.” Republicans described it as nothing more than an “ideological assault on a Republican White House.”²⁶³ Still, that progress was impeded at all while many died of Agent Orange-esque side effects is a blight on Reagan’s performance in this area.

One of the more fascinating aspects of the Agent Orange dilemma for Reagan, however, came via ally and Democrats and Independents for Reagan founder Admiral Elmo Zumwalt. Though he supported Reagan’s nomination and even commended his performance at certain points, the Vietnam veteran seemed regularly unimpressed by the administration’s performance in regard to its care for veterans claiming Agent Orange exposure.²⁶⁴ He accused Reagan-appointed VA officials of “demonstrating a disturbing bias” and maintained that Reagan’s government should have owned “up to its

²⁶²Agent Orange Cover-Up - American Legion magazine article, December 1990, Box 02, Folder 05, Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr. Collection: Agent Orange Subject Files, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=6180205036>, Accessed 16 Jan 2020.

²⁶³Newspaper Articles Sent by Dave Bergh, 01 May 1989, Box 01, Folder 01, Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr. Collection: Agent Orange Hearings, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=6140101071>, Accessed 16 Jan 2020.

²⁶⁴Clockwork Orange- Newspaper Article, May 1988, Box 08, Folder 05, Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr. Collection: General Subject Files, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=6230805067>, Accessed 16 Jan 2020.

responsibility” in conducting “a valid study that examines the health effects of Agent Orange exposure.”²⁶⁵ VA official Daniel V. Flanagan, Jr. penned a giddy memo to Zumwalt exalting him for his role in helping both the American Legion and the VVA to join forces in filing a joint lawsuit on behalf of Agent Orange victims, mentioning that “it’s amazing after all these years, to see the American Legion and the Vietnam Veterans of America join forces to support a mutual cause of such importance.”²⁶⁶

Zumwalt’s experience during the war explains his somewhat surprising rejection of Reagan’s policies regarding Agent Orange. In a cruel twist of irony, during his tour in Vietnam, Admiral Zumwalt dumped Agent Orange while his son commanded a swift boat where the toxin was released. Years later, his grandson was born with a severe learning defect and both Zumwalts died of grueling cancers after battling Reagan-era VA budget constraints. The elder Zumwalt never fundamentally wavered in his support of Reagan, but one would be hard pressed to believe that he did not at least have his own criticisms of VA funding and treatment on Reagan’s watch. The tragic story of Zumwalt and Reagan is largely untold amid revisionist fantasies of the uplifted veteran due to the President. Zumwalt did not release his classified critique of the government’s response to Agent Orange until 1990 either, one year after Reagan left office. It is almost impossible to know whether or not a man so loyal to Reagan waited until the President left office to publicly voice his criticism so that a perceivably patriotic president would not absorb

²⁶⁵Agent Orange Cover-Up - American Legion magazine article, December 1990, Box 02, Folder 05, Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr. Collection: Agent Orange Subject Files, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University.

²⁶⁶Correspondence from Daniel V. Flanagan, Jr. with Washington Post article - Veteran's Groups Lawsuit to Complete Agent Orange study, 03 August 1990, Box 05, Folder 03, Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr. Collection: Agent Orange Studies, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=6170503026>, Accessed 16 Jan 2020.

such harsh sentiment from a decorated war hero, yet such theories do not seem very far-fetched.²⁶⁷

It was not until the end of Reagan's first presidential term that he formally recognized the plight of Agent Orange victims and signed a bill to compensate them. Even then, the bill was hamstrung by its own specificity and compensation of only "certain" Vietnam veterans. *The Salt Lake Tribune* publicly bemoaned the fact that it still left "unresolved thousands of cases involving a wide array of afflictions Vietnam veterans claim were caused by Agent Orange."²⁶⁸

By the end of his terms in office, Reagan and his administration had failed to adequately address the Agent Orange issue. *The Washington Times* summed up the feelings of many in 1989 when it reported its feelings that the country was "throwing in the towel on Agent Orange." The article mentioned that, while sympathetic, "Reagan[s administration]...did not believe it could dole out millions of dollars just because veterans who had come down with a wide variety of illnesses claimed their troubles were caused by Agent Orange."²⁶⁹ While it is true that the ability to definitively prove a veteran's sickness as an immediate result of Agent Orange exposure was difficult, many believe that the administration's entire approach was wrong to begin with. Historian Edwin Martini highlighted the fact that in the end, given all the accusations of corruption, cover ups, the refusal to compensate vets, and lengthy litigation disputes in regard to

²⁶⁷ Wilcox, *Waiting for an Army to Die*, xviii.

²⁶⁸ Agent Orange Bill Signed, 25 October 1984, Box 01, Folder 02, Paul Cecil Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2520102008>, Accessed 16 Jan 2020.

²⁶⁹ Throwing in the Towel on Agent Orange - Washington Times article by Reed Irvine, 18 May 1989, Box 04, Folder 01, Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr. Collection: Agent Orange Subject Files, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=6180401044>, Accessed 16 Jan 2020.

Agent Orange, the onus should have been on the government to bear the burden of proof regarding veteran's exposure, not the veterans themselves.²⁷⁰ Here, Reagan could have made a difference in veterans' lives yet made unwise decisions or stayed silent on an incredibly divisive and messy veterans' issue. The conservative right and Reagan die-hards most likely turn away from Reagan's approach to the Agent Orange problem and instead favor a largely idealistic and positive story of the President's redemption of the Vietnam veteran. Generations of Americans have seemingly bought into this theory as well, as evidenced by Reagan's generally beloved reputation. This is a testament to the power of collective memory and the ability of those in power to ensure the presentation of a specific legacy. Yet as this chapter has shown, the "dying army" most certainly had something to say about it. If Reagan's more complex legacy regarding Agent Orange has been generally neglected, however, his remarks at Vietnam sites have been immortalized, cementing his reputation as a "veteran's" president and culminating in a fitting final arena of study here.

Etched in Stone: Reagan and the Vietnam Veteran at Sites of Memory

Most stay silent at memorials, often to the benefit of those ordered to speak. Here, the great communicator himself could profess his success at redeeming Vietnam veterans and their war without much interference. In this way, the widespread memorialization of Vietnam that took place on Reagan's watch was perhaps his most powerful weapon.

The first and largest issue which emerged with President Reagan during his presidency in regard to Vietnam memorialization was the construction of the Vietnam

²⁷⁰ Edwin A. Martini, "Science, Policy, and the State" (University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), pp. 146-196, <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.txstate.edu/stable/j.ctt5vk4s2.9>, 194.

Veterans Memorial (VVM), also known as the Wall. Throughout the 1970s, Vietnam vets and their supporters struggled over how to properly commemorate the Vietnam War, at least at the national level. It was not until 1979, when one former army corporal named Jan Scruggs began to raise money for an official monument, that it became a serious possibility. Many rallied for a traditional marble and stone monument; others argued that a unique war should have a unique memorial. In the end, ideas about a Vietnam memorial carried with them the question of how societies incorporate controversial historical events that are perhaps non-glorious in nature, like Vietnam.

The final design sparked controversy. The final product was to be a black granite wall which formed a V shaped center descending ten feet into the ground on the Mall in Washington. It would hold the names of 57, 692 war dead and, perhaps more importantly for Reagan, 2,500 still listed as missing in action. Famed historian Emilie Durkheim once argued that commemoration is ultimately a reflection of moral unity. Reagan obviously bought into this theory and attempted to utilize it at Vietnam sites. Yet, contemporary historians such as Robin Wagner-Pacifici and Barry Schwartz argue that the Wall in particular represented a nation's conflicting representation of itself and the past, something that made projecting patriotism, nationalism, or unity particularly difficult for Reagan when at the VVM.²⁷¹

To lessen the impact of continuing debates surrounding the Vietnam War itself, Scruggs attempted to make the Wall apolitical. In this way, Scruggs' vision avoided a type of "commemorative genre" problem plagued by previous ideas in that his monument

²⁷¹ Robin Wagner-Pacifici and Barry Schwartz, "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial: Commemorating a Difficult Past," *American Journal of Sociology* 97, no. 2 (1991): 376-420, Accessed March 24, 2020 www.jstor.org/stable/2781381.

would be a traditional one made of stone and granite yet unique in its avoidance of nationalist themes like honor or glory. There would be no reference to right or wrong, just or unjust, it would merely reflect the individual heroism of those who served. On the surface, a war monument void of narrative meaning might seem logical and even pleasant. Patrick Hagopian, however, has argued that in seeking to construct a non-controversial and apolitical monument, the Wall only became more divisive in nature.²⁷²

For all Scruggs' good intentions, the memorial fostered intense feelings. It garnered much backlash from Reagan's political right, and Reagan was saddled with endless complaints from those hoping that one so optimistic about the war and its intentions could ensure a more patriotic monument. Ross Perot, in particular, initially supported Scruggs and his Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF) until he saw the design. In a scathing report, Perot called the design a "tombstone" and said that "people feel like it's a slap in the face." Perot had wide support from Vietnam P.O.W.s and even brought some with him to protest against Scruggs and the design privately in 1982. Thirty-two congressmen "denounced the design" and sent a letter to Reagan telling him that the wall was both "a shame and a dishonor." Twenty-seven Republican congressmen sent a letter to Reagan asking him to choose a different design, calling it, ironically enough for Scruggs' apolitical goals, "a political statement of shame and dishonor." One Vietnam veteran, Thomas Carhart, filed a suit against the VVM, contending that the design "violated provisions of the congressional resolution that authorized the VVM."²⁷³

²⁷² Hagopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory*.

²⁷³ Vietnam Veterans Protest Memorial Design, February 1982, Box 36, Folder 12, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03 - Veterans, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2283612022>, Accessed 15 Jan 2020.

Congressman John Ashbrook equated a rebuke of the Wall with a rebuke of Communism itself, claiming that Vietnam was both “noble” and fought to “save people from the slavery that is Communism” and that Reagan should choose a different design based on that belief.²⁷⁴ Reagan was aware of the potential backlash if he chose sides between those who favored the Wall and those who opposed it and thus was advised to remain neutral. Despite this input from his aides, he made several controversial decisions in regard to the memorial’s handling behind the scenes. One such decision was the appointment of Secretary of the Interior James Watt, a conservative ally of Reagan. Watt had powerful authority over what could and could not be placed on the National Mall and frequently held up the Wall’s approval, sometimes by several weeks. After much debate, officials reached a compromise to construct the Wall *only* if a traditional stone monument was eventually added nearby.

Reagan’s decision to watch the Wall debate from the sidelines drew heavy backlash, especially given his administration’s perceivably military-friendly reputation. For example, *Washington Post* correspondent Colman McCarthy connected Reagan’s inability to assist on the memorial issue with his criticism of Reagan’s handling of veteran’s issues more generally. “The same administration that supported the criticism of the memorial, through the art critic James Watt, chose not to implement a \$142 million job-training program that passed Congress last year...[and] It refuses to carry out a \$25 million small-business loan program for Vietnam veterans.” He went on to criticize Reagan of being all talk and no action with Vietnam veterans, mentioning that “Ronald

²⁷⁴ Rep. John M. Ashbrook to Ronald W. Reagan, January 27, 1982, casefile 057761, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum.

Reagan had called the Vietnam war ‘a noble cause,’ and then let his appointees go about treating the veteran ignobly.”²⁷⁵

Despite Reagan’s calculated inability to get the ball rolling on the Wall’s completion, the VVM was officially commemorated as part of a week-long National Salute to Vietnam Veteran’s celebration in November of 1982. The VVMF and several members of congress asked President Reagan and his wife Nancy not only to attend the unveiling but also to be honorary chairmen of the National Salute itself. Reagan’s advisors took considerable time to respond to any request to attend the Wall’s unveiling. One issue for Reagan was that the Wall had caused much backlash from prowar groups that supported Reagan. Another potential problem was the fact that *antiwar* groups like VVAW could publicly speak out against Reagan and the more patriotic and sympathetic way in which he spoke about their war at the celebration itself. White House Deputy Chief of Staff Michael Deaver persuaded Reagan to avoid the ceremony. Hardly any Reagan officials were in attendance either. Ultimately, the “noble cause” President was surprisingly absent from arguably the most significant day of healing and remembrance in the post-Vietnam era largely because of Vietnam veterans themselves.

The complexities and divisiveness that Reagan’s administration had feared did prove to have validity, however. At the unveiling, one veteran held a sign that urged “No More Wars, No More Lies, No More Stone Memorials.” In contrast, Donald Sherman, a paralyzed veteran mentioned that “we want a statue and a flagpole, too.” Others praised the general atmosphere toward Vietnam veterans that was taking place under Reagan. An

²⁷⁵ Article from the Washington Post - Viet vets: The debt still goes unpaid, 21 July 1982, Box 01, Folder 24, Charles Anderson Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=13380124006>, Accessed 15 Jan 2020.

American Gold Star Mother named Helen J. Stuber commented that “after all these years, our country is pausing to honor the Vietnam veterans.”²⁷⁶

Reagan made an unannounced visit to the National Cathedral in response to bad publicity for not attending the memorial’s unveiling. In his diary, he described it as “a moving experience.”²⁷⁷ In reality, all the names of those who perished in Vietnam and were present on the Wall were read over the course of fifty-six hours. Of those fifty-six hours, Reagan was present for around five minutes.²⁷⁸ Reagan did not officially visit the Vietnam Memorial until May 2, 1983, making no public comments and remaining silent yet speaking with a man in military fatigues and placing a bouquet between the granite walls. Assistant White House press secretary Mark Weinberg maintained to the *Associate Press* that Reagan had “wanted to go for a long time. This was the first opportunity he had.”²⁷⁹ Much evidence, as mentioned, has arisen to dispute this claim.

When Reagan did eventually begin speaking at the Wall, he avoided a reemphasis of his adjective “noble.” Instead, he characterized the war using terms like just. His previous rhetoric that blamed the “government that was afraid to let them win” rather than the veterans served him especially well after the wall’s dedication. This projected him as more of a friend of Vietnam veterans than perhaps he had anticipated and allowed him to avoid sweeping controversy in regard to his words and beliefs toward the war.

²⁷⁶ Philip M. Boffey, “Vietnam Veterans' Parade A Belated Welcome Home,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, November 14, 1982), <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/11/14/us/vietnam-veterans-parade-a-belated-welcome-home.html>

²⁷⁷ Ronald Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries* (NY: New York Harper Perennial, 2009) 111.

²⁷⁸ Reston, *A Rift in the Earth*, 137.

²⁷⁹ Reagan's First Trip To Vietnam Memorial, 02 May 1983, Box 36, Folder 18, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03 - Veterans, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2283618006>, Accessed 15 Jan 2020.

He frequently used the P.O.W./M.I.A issue at the Wall as well. When speaking at the memorial in 1984, he mentioned in reference to the 2,500 still listed as missing in Vietnam that “some may still be saved.” In a memorial dedication in 1988 he also maintained that the search was still continuing and, in reference to his own successes in closing the more controversial doors of the war as a nation, mentioned that “it appears to me that we have healed.”²⁸⁰ In closing, Reagan stated that he was proud that he was able to see Vietnam veterans “take their rightful place among America’s heroes.” The *Los Angeles Times* praised Reagan’s assistance in America’s healing over Vietnam, mentioning that the nation was “once divided but now healed.”²⁸¹ Reagan also touted the nation as having “grown and transcended the tragedies of the past” by erecting the memorial, insinuating a closing of the book on the messier aspects the war on behalf of the American public.²⁸²

Frederick Hart’s “Three Soldiers” Vietnam statue was eventually constructed within eyesight of the Wall and became the patriotic and nationalistic alternative for Reagan era conservatives. Ironically, Frederick Hart was himself a Vietnam War protestor and the recipient of a 4H draft deferment from military service. Veteran

²⁸⁰ Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at the Veterans Day Ceremony at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library - National Archives and Records Administration.” Remarks at the Veterans Day Ceremony at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial | Ronald Reagan Presidential Library - National Archives and Records Administration. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum. Accessed May 6, 2020.

<https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/111188b>.

²⁸¹ President Hails Vietnam Vets As U.S. Heroes - *Los Angeles Times* – re :President Reagan, 12 November 1983, Box 37, Folder 07, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03 –Veterans, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University.

²⁸² Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at the Conservative Political Action Conference Dinner: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library - National Archives and Records Administration,” Remarks at the Conservative Political Action Conference Dinner | Ronald Reagan Presidential Library - National Archives and Records Administration (Ronald Reagan: Presidential Library and Museum), accessed September 15, 2020, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/21883e>.

Timothy Lockley and others went so far as crown the statue as Reagan's. "I don't like Reagan's memorial...Reagan's memorial I just don't like."²⁸³ Reagan spoke more favorably when describing the statue than the Wall. As if inspiring the next generation of soldiers to carry the Vietnam veteran's mantle into future wars, Reagan described the "Three Infantrymen" more heroically as "fighting men" with expressions of "profound love and a fierce determination."²⁸⁴ Overlooked is the fact that Reagan signed off equally on paperwork for both memorials yet, as I have demonstrated, he recognized them in contrasting ways and one is immediately associated with him due to his overt patriotism and words of valor and nobility regarding the conflict.

Reagan's oratory power also carried over to other Vietnam sites, such as the Tomb of the Vietnam Unknown soldier, dedicated and officially entombed in May of 1984. It was meant to be a non-controversial way of recognizing those still missing from the war or unidentified. CBS' Dan Rather praised the general attitude shift on Reagan's watch during a live broadcast from the site, exulting that "there seems to have been a real effort...to heal as best we can all those bitter divisions that came up in our experiment [Vietnam]."²⁸⁵ As a place of silence from which Reagan could inform the P.O.W./M.I.A issue and win the hearts and minds of veterans, the site was quite powerful. One attendee displayed his concern by saying "I hope the government is not going to use this as a- just close the case on Vietnam." From the tomb, Reagan urged "Members of

²⁸³ Interview with Timothy Lockley, 11 February 2003, Mr. Timothy C. Lockley Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University.

²⁸⁴ Ronald Reagan, "Remarks At Dedication Ceremonies for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Statue," 111184a | Ronald Reagan Presidential Library - National Archives and Records Administration (Ronald Reagan: Presidential Library and Museum), accessed September 15, 2020, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/111184a>.

²⁸⁵ "Requiem For The Vietnam Unknown," Transcript | Dan Rather (CBS News), accessed November 25, 2020, <https://danratherjournalist.org/interviewer/political-and-civic-leaders/max-cleland/document-requiem-vietnam-unknown-transcript>.

Congress...leaders of veterans groups, and the citizens of an entire nation...to give these families your help and support.” He further assured Americans that “we close no books. We put away no final memories...before we’ve achieved the fullest possible account of those missing in action.” In less tactful fashion, Reagan also used the occasion to baselessly attack the Communist Hanoi government, urging them quite sympathetically to “return our sons to America.”²⁸⁶ Actively silencing any controversy over either the war or his performance in the Veterans’ community, he closed with “let us, if we must, debate the lessons learned at some other time.”²⁸⁷

As with most Vietnam issues, even the Tomb of the Unknown Vietnam Soldier ended in controversy. At the dedication, Colonel Rob Radasky orated that “this grave is being sealed until the second coming of Christ,” mentioning that the unidentified body was now “known but to god.” As the *New York Times* later reported, this statement only lasted for fourteen years.²⁸⁸ The body was ultimately exhumed in 1998 after much speculation that the remains belonged to one Michael J. Blassie, an Air Force Lieutenant shot down over Vietnam. Reagan’s legacy among veterans immediately came under fire as several M.I.A. radicals and other Vietnam veterans claimed that the administration had known the identity all along and that the entombment was nothing more than an attempt to silence veterans and war critics in an election year. Technology at the time of Reagan

²⁸⁶ Article from New York Times Titled Viet 'Unknown' Entombed, President Presents Top Medal, 29 May 1984, Box 36, Folder 20, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03 - Veterans, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2283620041>, Accessed 15 Jan 2020.

²⁸⁷ Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at Memorial Day Ceremonies Honoring an Unknown Serviceman of the Vietnam Conflict,” Ronald Reagan, accessed November 25, 2020, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-memorial-day-ceremonies-honoring-unknown-serviceman-vietnam-conflict>.

²⁸⁸ Viet 'Unknown' Entombed, President Presents Top Medal, 29 May 1984, *The New York Times* Box 36, Folder 20, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03 - Veterans, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University.

would have allowed for a chance at such knowledge, making the internment a perceivably hollow gesture on behalf of an administration plagued by the Vietnam War for eight years. Additionally, much evidence in the Blassie investigation was either lost or destroyed and historian Michael J. Allen argued that the identification of the Vietnam Unknown was too easily explained away as a scientific success and a technological breakthrough. This allowed for the more dissenting criticisms on the existence of the unknown and the way in which Reagan benefitted from its ambiguity, even while possibly having the ability to know Blassie's identity all along, to become silenced historically.²⁸⁹ Many M.I.A. families simply rejected the Tomb and its representation of Reagan's attempts to quell any divisive memories that the war still presented to the public. In a strange way, the Tomb represented a contradiction to Reagan's pledge to account for all of the missing. Blassie's body was immediately returned upon request from his family, overshadowing whatever "healing" attempted to be enacted by Reagan at the Tomb's dedication years earlier.

One of the less controversial aspects of Reagan's tenure in regard to Vietnam memorialization is the fact that he passed both National Women Veterans Recognition Week and the approval of a Vietnam Women's Memorial into action during this time via a Congressional resolution. The goal was to "honor the women of the Armed Forces of the United States who served in the Republic of Vietnam during the Vietnam era."²⁹⁰

Eight nurses perished during Vietnam and this at least showed an awareness by Reagan to

²⁸⁹ Michael J. Allen, "“Sacilege of a Strange, Contemporary Kind”": The Unknown Soldier and the Imagined Community after the Vietnam War," *History and Memory* 23, no. 2 (2011): pp. 90-131, <https://doi.org/10.2979/histmemo.23.2.90>.

²⁹⁰ U.S. Congressional Act, S. 2042 - One Hundredth Congress authorizes establishment of the Vietnam Women's Memorial, 15 November 1988, Box 01, Folder 16, Penni Evans Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=19620116034>, Accessed 09 Jan 2020.

recognize female veterans as well. As Reagan never truly polled well with women, though, it is possible that this was a halfhearted attempt to garner some support from the demographic.

Conclusion: On the Perplexities of Healing

Reagan's rhetoric and beliefs on the Vietnam War throughout his life equated to an incredibly complex and interesting relationship between him and the Vietnam veteran by the time of his presidency. Many of Reagan's issues with veterans were instigated by his own nostalgic and oftentimes fantastical views of them and their war as it related to the myth of American upliftment and democratic values more generally. Another aspect of Reagan's relationship with Vietnam veterans was the peculiar timing of his presidency, close enough to the war's conclusion to deal with American backlash on its faults and failures yet far enough away to at least attempt to heal as a nation and recognize those who served. In the end, many Vietnam veterans found meaning only after asserting the meaninglessness of their war. Implicating that the most gratifying road to healing for many was to openly criticize not only the ill-fated efforts of their sacrifice in a troubling conflict but the sanitized and somewhat expurgated manner in which it was being presented to the public by the White House for eight years. In this way, depending on whether or not these veterans agreed with what Reagan personified, they could either be an angel or a devil in the eyes of the President, a patriot or a pariah, humping up and down "Mainstreet U.S.A." looking for answers from 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

V. AFTERWORD: A TROUBLED REDEMPTION

The goal of this thesis has been to provide a contemporary perspective on Reagan's personal relationship with the Vietnam War, how he affected the war's legacy and, in turn, how that legacy affected his presidency. It is essentially a case study in how leaders maintain the ability to spearhead cultural shifts on said events, even promoting a basic idea of a war being just when it was perceivably unjust, if provided specific levels of power, such as the presidency. Reagan wanted to rewrite the narrative of America's involvement in Vietnam, but so had others before him. Reagan, however, was the right person in the right place at the right time to achieve this goal. The turbulent and tired post-Vietnam era in which he ascended to national power *combined* with his consistently anti-Communist and thus pro-Vietnam War views, manifested itself so readily in the minds of the American public and gave many an avenue from which to follow him in feeling better about the war's legacy or reject his rhetoric tenfold. Although Reagan did not adopt this vision of the war to gain office, he undoubtedly gained politically from his words and deeds by default. The war's legacy was forever changed as a result.

Chapter one of this essay is, at its root, the "why" of this argument. I set out to understand *why* Reagan believed the Vietnam War to be moral by getting into his head a bit and unveiling his beliefs as best I could, given what evidence I discovered. I opted to largely avoid the public aftermath of Reagan's often cited "noble cause" line in favor of displaying how, in fact, Reagan arrived at his noble cause narrative of the war. By emphasizing just how much influence his background provided on his beliefs concerning the righteousness of the war I provided evidence of the consistency and continuity of his

views. These beliefs, in turn, resulted in the pseudohistory's he constructed concerning the war. As he became more politically powerful and ushered in a new era of "feel good" conservatism on the eve of and during his presidency, his reconstructions of the history of Vietnam became gospel for his followers. Rather than the characterization of the war as a "noble cause" being an improvised indulgence for a group of war veterans, I found it to be the culmination of practically Reagan's entire adult life: his hatred of anything anti-Capitalist and his borderline fanatical obsession with America's destiny to wear white hats around the world and bring peace and freedom to everything it so chose.

In chapter two, I set out to present how, just *how* Reagan's beliefs and rhetoric toward Vietnam came back to haunt him via that war's ghost and *how* it evinced itself by immediately directing what he could and could not do in the arena of his foreign policy in Grenada and Nicaragua. The war largely controlled Reagan's view of the press, his administration's Congressional battles, and even the extent to which he could provide aid to anti-Communist groups. In a strange way, Reagan's "upstanding" Vietnam War returned to his own White House to transform him into another LBJ by causing him to opt for covert corruption over honesty and restraint.

In the third chapter, I wanted to present a type of personal conversation between President Reagan and arguably his most polarizing citizenry, Vietnam veterans. In reality, this chapter ended up displaying that try as he might, Reagan was ultimately unable to fully control the narrative of Vietnam. It could never really be managed, even when many were on Reagan's side, because too many spoke against his view. The narrative, in a sense, refused to be controlled. Given this, I felt that I had no choice but to give this group the last word here. This chapter works as the "what" section of this reading. *What*

exactly did this most critical of groups actually have to say about what Reagan believed and expressed about their war? I found the answer to be as difficult as anything that I researched in this essay. Through archival sources and interviews, what I discovered was that the spectrum of blatant agreement or disagreement with Reagan was separated by a large chasm of veterans who simply attempted to return to normal life and cope with their own memories during an era of profound positivity, optimism, and censorship of the war. It is undeniable to me, however, that Reagan's words and deeds had enough of an impact on Vietnam veterans to unearth several facets in which he was involved in their lives, such as P.O.W./M.I.A., Agent Orange, and memorialization.

Given Reagan's popularity, I believe that it is vitally important to understand the influence of that most unpopular of wars on these aforementioned aspects of his life and presidency. The war touched all corners of his life and White House because so many of the men with whom Reagan surrounded himself were products of the war itself: veterans, politicians, and even protestors. Reagan harkened back to the conflict repeatedly, stating "the war in Vietnam threatened to tear our society apart, and the political and philosophical disagreements that separated each side continue, to some extent."²⁹¹ He seemingly wanted to unify America by reconstructing the war itself. Yet try as he might, the war to many, continues to carry on in the American consciousness in various forms, mostly in the context of "getting over" something and returning America to military prowess and confidence around the world.

Reagan's feelings toward the war continue to affect the administrations of his successors. President George H.W. Bush, after a swift victory over the forces of Saddam

²⁹¹ Ben A. Franklin, "President Accepts Vietnam Memorial," 3.

Hussein in 1991, claimed that America was finally over the war in Vietnam and that its “specter” was “buried forever in the desert sands of the Arabian Peninsula.”²⁹² It turned out to only be metaphorically buried until the next administration, however. President Clinton (the first president to visit Hanoi) paralleled Reagan when he commented that he wanted to “regain” confidence and “control over [America’s] destiny” after the Vietnam War during a 1993 visit to the Wall.²⁹³ His successor followed suit. In 2007, President George W. Bush, attempting to prolong his own “Vietnam” in Iraq by continuing operation Iraqi Freedom, equated a pull out of forces from that country with America’s withdrawal from Southeast Asia. That same year he stated that “the price of America’s withdrawal [from Vietnam] was paid by millions of innocent civilians” and he did not want a similar situation to manifest itself again in Iraq. In the same speech, Bush maintained an additional type of defensiveness toward American superiority abroad when he argued that “American credibility” was not altered by the struggle in Vietnam and would thus not be derailed by terrorism.²⁹⁴ In 2012, President Barack Obama harkened back to a healing of wounds and the “complexity of America’s time in Vietnam” in regard to its tough lessons and potential to unify Americans in the present.²⁹⁵ Though hindsight inevitably afforded President Obama perhaps the most eloquent and profound words of all post-Vietnam presidents on the war, it remains a cautionary tale in many

²⁹² George W. Bush, “George W. Bush Proclaims a Cure for the Vietnam Syndrome,” www.vandvreader.org (Voices and Vision), accessed March 18, 2021, <http://www.vandvreader.org/george-h-w-bush-proclaims-a-cure-for-the-vietnam-syndrome-01-march-1991/>.

²⁹³ Clinton Bill, “Transcript of Clinton Speech At Vietnam War Memorial (Published 1993),” *The New York Times*, June 1, 1993, <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/06/01/us/transcript-of-clinton-speech-at-vietnam-war-memorial.html>.

²⁹⁴ George H.W. Bush, “Bush Invokes 'Tragedy of Vietnam' against Iraq Pullout,” *CNN*, accessed March 18, 2021, <http://www.cnn.com/2007/POLITICS/08/22/bush.iraq.speech/index.html>.

²⁹⁵ Barack Obama, “President Obama's Memorial Day Remarks at Vietnam War Memorial (Transcript),” *Fox News* (FOX News Network, January 27, 2015), <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/transcript-president-obamas-memorial-day-remarks-at-vietnam-war-memorial>.

respects, a purely dark mark never to be repeated and its effect to be endlessly overcome. No matter the debate over the war's impact on the country since its conclusion, it is my summation that it will no doubt maintain its significance in both academia and the American public.

I find it essential to conclude with a final remark from the man himself. Reagan seemingly never gave up his fight to restore optimism to the country and often did so at the expense of candid debates and a charming yet unique silencing of the opposition. This fact was especially important to the legacy of Vietnam and the potential for attacks on his beliefs about the war to arise. It is fitting, then, to conclude with an example of his oratorical power, for better or worse, via his remarks at a Heritage Foundation Anniversary dinner on April 22, 1986. Reagan could hold an audience's attention like no other and his charm was on full display that night as he took to the stage in the Grand Ballroom at the Shoreham Hotel. On this night he referred to the "splendid misery" of the office of the president, to many laughs. He then broke into a section of his speech which perhaps better than anything summed up his goals for the war's legacy as the end of his tenure was fast approaching. "It's telling proof that the eighties is a break with the past," he commented. "There are those, of course, who are a little slow to catch on to all this...but even this is changing. The old politics, the post-Vietnam syndrome, the partisans of 'Blame America First,' are fading fast." In closing, he professed "Yes, we Americans have our disagreements, sometimes noisy ones, almost always in public – that's the nature of an open society....We are Americans. We love our country, we love what she stands for."²⁹⁶ Vietnam had influenced Reagan's presidency immensely and

²⁹⁶ Ronald Reagan. "Remarks at the Heritage Foundation Anniversary Dinner: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library

quite often negatively yet on this night, in front of a standing ovation, even critics seemed to applaud him in adoration.

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