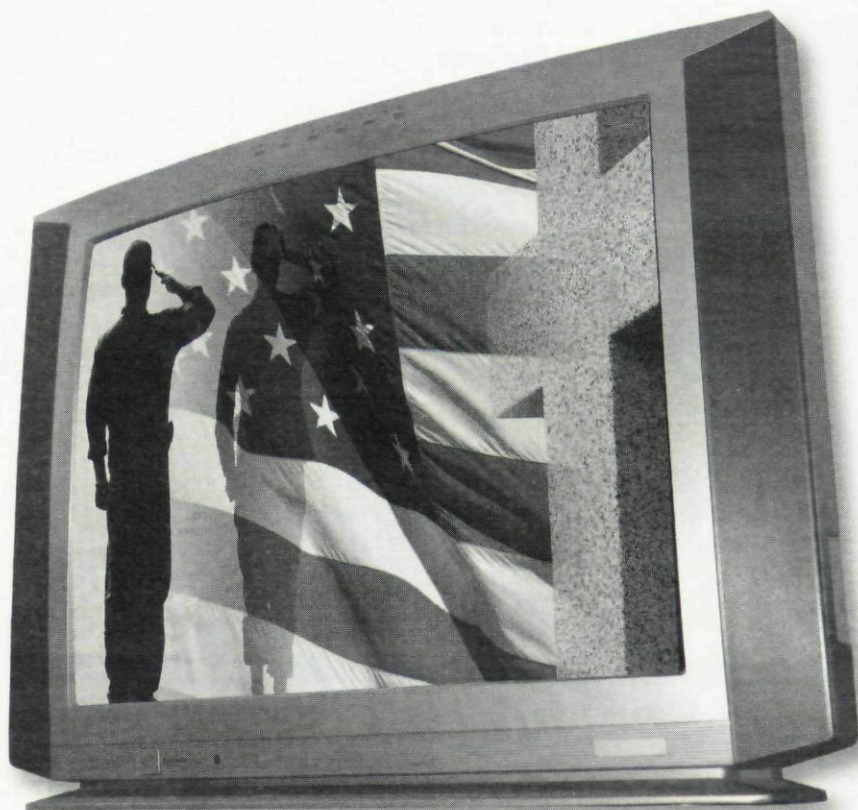


# THE MYTHOLOGIZING OF WAR FROM VIETNAM TO IRAQ

by Camillo C. Bica



THROUGHOUT U.S. HISTORY there have always been political leaders, convinced of the nation's manifest destiny, who urged unconditional acceptance of war's necessity and warrant. During the Vietnam Era, for example, our national conscience was assailed in earnest by the equating of patriotism and civic responsibility with a blind and unquestioning participation in and support for the war in Southeast Asia. Following a post-Vietnam malaise, with the resurgence of a Ronald Reagan-inspired nationalism, and no longer deterred by a Soviet threat of retaliation, policy makers enthusiastically embraced the military option as a viable and attractive tool of foreign policy. Consequently, to encourage public tolerance—perhaps even exuberance—for war as an extension of diplomacy, these opportunists successfully portrayed as unpatriotic, even treasonous, the equally important duties of citizenship to evaluate, legally and ethically, the causes and justifications for war, and to speak out and dissent against wars they found immoral, un-

just, and inexpedient. This was often accomplished through public lies, deceit, and misinformation; intimidation and manipulation of the media; and a general exploitation and exacerbation of fears and paranoia regarding threats from enemies foreign and domestic.

An important aspect of this process has been the attempt to distort the reality of war. This mythologizing move is multifaceted. First, it contrives the illusion that war is necessary to defend the country from some absolute evil. Second, it portrays war as antiseptic, discouraging or preventing any media reporting that would reveal its inevitable horrors. Third, it appropriates religious rhetoric to depict war as a holy crusade against evil, encouraging participation as righteous, glorious, honorable, and heroic. Fourth, it blurs the distinction between the enterprise of war and those human beings who do the fighting, killing, and dying. Fifth, it seeks the silence and compliance of those most likely to realize the deception—members of the military, veterans, and



gold star family members who have experienced the horror and consequences firsthand—by heinously exploiting their pain, suffering, and grief. Finally, it seeks support for the war, or at least discourages opposition, by preying upon the gratitude, empathy, and guilt of an ill-informed public now convinced that these sacrifices are made on their behalf. Caught within the frenzy of mythological war, the public becomes bewildered and confused into ignoring legal and moral concerns, into rationalizing justification and warrant, and inevitably into celebrating the cause as noble and the sacrifices as necessary.

Culpability for this distortion of war, it must be noted, isn't exclusive to any particular political party or group. During the Vietnam era it was the liberal Democrats who lacked the moral courage and forthrightness to accept their Vietnam policy as inexpedient, ineffective, immoral, and unlawful. They chose, though not without considerable dismay and frustration, to gradually increase the American presence, escalate hostilities, and use lies and deceit to forward their agenda. Today the myth makers are right wing Republicans and neoconservatives who have gone so far as to recruit into their service a small but vocal group of Vietnam veterans who have become collaborators and co-conspirators willing to defame the integrity and honor of decorated war heroes like Max Cleland, John Kerry, and John McCain.

Indeed, judging by the intensity of the debate over the Vietnam War that plagued much of the 2004 presidential election, the divisiveness of Vietnam hasn't been resolved. If anything it has festered, inflamed by similar concerns and questions regarding the legality, morality, purpose, and necessity of the war in Iraq. The continued polemic about a war some thirty years gone and the escalating antagonism toward opponents of the Iraq war seem to be symptoms of the public's bewilderment and confusion regarding the realities of war and a consequence of the myth perpetuated by political leaders pursuant to their goals of hegemony, neo-colonialism, and empire.

To illustrate the sophistication, complexity, and impact of this stratagem, consider the admonishment delivered by American Legion National Commander Thomas Cadmus at the veterans organization's annual convention in August 2005. In an emotional presentation to his fellow Legionnaires, Cadmus condemned as unpatriotic, even treasonous, anyone, including veterans and gold star family members, who would publicly oppose the war in Iraq. Evoking the specter of Vietnam and of Jane Fonda, he warned:

We had hoped that the lessons learned from the Vietnam War would be clear to our fellow citizens.

Public protests against the war here at home while our young men and women are in harm's way on the other side of the globe only provide aid and comfort to our enemies.... For many of us, the visions of Jane Fonda glibly spouting anti-American messages with the North Vietnamese and protestors denouncing our own forces four decades ago is forever etched in our memories. We must never let that happen again."

Rallying behind their leader, the 4,000 delegates to the convention unanimously passed the following resolution. "The American Legion fully supports the President of the United States, the United States Congress and the men, women and leadership of our armed forces as they are engaged in the global war on terrorism and the troops who are engaged in protecting our values and way of life."

In his speech Cadmus clearly illustrates how patriotism can be misrepresented and dissent suppressed. First, he doesn't address whether the wars in Vietnam and Iraq were just or necessary and he encourages a similar indifference to issues of morality and justice. Second, in his view, antiwar activists such as Jane Fonda weren't exercising their First Amendment right to speak out against and condemn a war they believed unjust and unnecessary but, rather, demonstrated their lack of patriotism and hatred of our nation by "spouting anti-American" rhetoric. The protestors, in his view—many who understood they were calling attention to a pattern of lies, misinformation, and deception—weren't fulfilling their civic responsibilities but denouncing the troops.

Sadly, the crucial lesson Cadmus seems to have learned from the debacle of Vietnam wasn't that disenfranchised people will endure tremendous sacrifice and struggle heroically and steadfastly against foreign occupiers and aggressors, or that military superiority and advanced weapons' technology don't guarantee victory, but only that, by actively demanding that our nation act morally and justly and that our leaders be truthful and forthright with the American people, activists were giving aid, comfort—and presumably encouragement and hope—to the nation's enemies.

Further, despite evidence to the contrary, Cadmus describes the war in Iraq as the global war on terrorism and implies that the soldiers are sacrificing their lives and mental and physical wellbeing to protect American values and way of life. Therefore, we must don our moral blinders and obediently march off to war. Or, at the very least, Americans must demonstrate patriotism and concern for the troops, as well as gratitude and appreciation for their sacrifices, by avoiding and condemning any public dissent and protest



and by supporting the president, Congress, and thereby the war.

The conclusion to be drawn from this isn't that Cadmus or members of the American Legion are conspiring to intentionally confuse and mislead the American people. Rather, the above makes clear that this subterfuge is so cunning, subtle, and compelling that many sincere and otherwise rational individuals become unwitting accomplices.

The efficiency of the myth and malevolence of the myth-makers become apparent when we consider the impact on those rendered most vulnerable by war: members of the military, veterans, and the families who have lost loved ones. After having experienced the moral ambiguity of guerilla or counterinsurgency warfare—in their efforts to maintain their moral integrity, self-esteem, and to recover from the trauma of war—many veterans feel compelled to staunchly defend both the Vietnam and Iraq wars. They find comfort in and embrace the myth because of a dread, perhaps unconscious, that unless the war they fought be remembered as just, and the threat as real, readjustment—living with the memories of the horrors of combat—would be even more unendurable. Consequently, history must be changed to record the Vietnam war as a noble and necessary crusade against the evils of communism, and the invasion of Iraq as a justifiable response to the attacks of 9/11. And this revisionism is as integral to the war against global

terrorism and, of late, to the freedom and democracy of the Iraqi people.

Accordingly, to preserve their dignity and self-respect within the mythic parameters, vulnerable Vietnam veterans labor to explain and justify America's first defeat in war. The Vietnam war was lost, they argue, not because they lacked ferocity, bravery, or ability—the noble virtues of the warrior. Rather, victory was stolen from them by the lack of courage, resolve, and steadfastness of inept public officials; cowardly, self-indulgent college students; and worse, traitorous returning veterans who “betrayed” their comrades by speaking out against the war, revealing the myth, and shamelessly desecrating the warriors' ethos by publicly discarding their war medals, the icons of mythological heroism. Such treason and lack of patriotism, they would have us believe, are threatening our effort in Iraq today. The myth lives off the pain and suffering of war's participants and the very mention of those who have already been injured or died discourages any talk of impropriety or wrongdoing, or of ending the conflict before final and ultimate victory has been achieved.

Many family members of those killed in war are also understandably hesitant to acknowledge the truth about war because the myth that they've been influenced to believe helps them cope with the tragic loss. They speak of their loved ones as heroes and are comforted by the thought that

they suffered or died for some important cause, to rectify some dire circumstance, to eradicate some prevailing evil. All that remains are the memories, letters, photos, a Purple Heart medal, and pride in their child's sacrifice on behalf of freedom and American values. Dying for a mistake would, in their view, make the death more tragic and living with the loss more intolerable. Once war becomes mythologized and intricately linked to the warrior, any questioning of purpose, justness, or necessity dishonors those who died, discredits the sacrifices of those who served, and further overwhelms those struggling to recover from its inevitable trauma.

I can truly understand and sympathize with these veterans and family members whose motivation in embracing the mythology is the fear that their efforts and sacrifices or those of their loved ones would be defiled or diminished should their war be remembered as it truly was, unnecessary, unjust, and misguided. I can empathize with their apprehension as I too have wrestled with such concerns.

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Was it all for nothing? Did our comrades and loved ones die in vain? While such questions are certainly anxiety provoking, I have realized that the cost of a false sense of comfort is unacceptably high and that we ignore the realities and lessons of past wars at our peril. As long as we mythologize war and connive to change history, the divisiveness that surrounds Vietnam will never be resolved and the underlying and pervasive pain of war and loss will forever linger and fester.

The images of the destruction of the Twin Towers and the tragic and inexcusable deaths of so many innocent people are profoundly troubling and will take their place beside the other traumatic experiences of devastation and slaughter that will forever haunt my existence. Over the long term, however, what threatens the very foundations and fabric of our way of life in these dangerous times isn't some amorphous, enigmatic horde of bloodthirsty terrorists. Rather, it is the assault upon truth, individual freedom, and the values of justice and morality by those opportunists, obsessed and motivated by wealth and power, determined to forward their agenda. To meet this threat true defenders of American values must recognize the perversion and garner the strength of character and presence of mind to demand truth rather than comfort themselves with deception, to live courageously in reality rather than cower in myth and fantasy, to stand defiantly apart from the crowd rather than find refuge within the obeisant multitude, to boldly withstand criticism and alienation if need be rather than wallow compliantly in a vacuous approval and acceptance, and to live principally rather than hypocritically.

For those of us who have experienced the trauma and horror of the battlefield, or suffered the loss or injury of a loved one, accepting the truth about war, though difficult and disconcerting, will ultimately prove uplifting and curative. When we have realized the deception and mythologizing of war, and begin to see clearly, it becomes apparent that our legacy, dignity, self-respect, and integrity rest not on fantasy, lies, and fabrications. We have proved our patriotism, selflessness, valor, and nobility, not with shallow rhetoric but by our actions and our sacrifices in doing what we were deceived into believing was necessary and right. Though we as veterans must accept some personal responsibility for our actions, culpability is to be shared by all who supported the war or did nothing to stop it. Most blameworthy, of course, are those political leaders whose avarice for wealth and power, misguided policies, incompetence, and paranoia ultimately make killing, dying, and grieving inevitable.

Perhaps war is a reality that will not soon go away and sacrifices on the field of battle will again be required. But by

demanding truth and recognizing war as it truly is, we will ensure that it remains a means of last resort, that no other person will again have to kill, die, or grieve the loss of their son or daughter for a cause that is misguided, and that those who dare to initiate such wars and connive to use deception and myth to encourage participation and support are held responsible for their crimes against humanity. ☐

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