

In Search of the Great American Political Novel of the Vietnam War

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Nearly five decades after the large-scale commitment of US combat forces into the Vietnam Conflict and nearly four decades after the fall of the South to victorious Communist invaders, a pervasive myth attending American conduct of the war remains that US defeat occurred not on the battlefield, but in the arena of American national opinion. Accordingly, fictional narrative of the Vietnam War has frequently concerned itself both with the military experience of the war abroad and with its deeply contested domestic reverberations in the American polis and the American body politic. This has frequently led to the re-writing of the political novel in its traditional sense, as the individual protagonist responds to direct personal experience of the war, while attending on return to often conflicted personal and ideological attitudes toward the affairs of politics and the operations of the state. In important instances, the form might be thus said to honor the tradition of Dostoevsky; Turgenev; Stendhal; Dickens; and, later, Joseph Conrad; André Malraux; and Graham Greene—albeit filtered through certain twentieth-century American subgenres: visions of absurd apocalypse, such as Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*, Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five*, and Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, at once indictments of twentieth-century war and of what Alfred Kazin has called the war-breeding system; and variations on the popular mid-century Washington novel in works as diverse as Richard Condon’s *The Manchurian Candidate*, Allen Drury’s *Advise and Consent*, and Fletcher Knebel’s and Richard Bailey’s *Seven Days in May*. One of these is actually concerned with Southeast Asia. In William Lederer’s and Eugene Burdick’s *The Ugly American*, the titular character, quite physically unattractive and called so by the natives of Sarkhan, a Vietnam-like country, is a practical, plain-spoken engineer on an aid mission and, by far, the most admirable US figure in the book. Nor,

in the age of the non-fiction novel, for all Norman Mailer's claims to have invented the form, should one neglect, in this regard, David Halberstam's journalistic masterpiece of the US policy origins of the war, *The Best and the Brightest*.

As to immediate literary inscriptions of the modernist political novel, certain fictional texts of the Vietnam War, now considered of major canonical status, seem largely so regarded in their distinct invocations of the inheritance of the Anglo-European tradition. Foremost among these is, of course, Graham Greene's own *The Quiet American*, which, in tracing the ultimately deadly misadventures of the titular figure, the idealistic and destructively misguided US agent Alden Pyle, remains to this day the great prophetic text of mission. In the mode of André Malraux, and the vision of the author as the existential *homme engagé*, one distinguishes a late 1960s political trilogy by Norman Mailer, two texts of literary journalism concerning the upheavals of Vietnam war-era American politics and culture—*The Armies of the Night* and *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*—and a densely experimental novel, a phantasmagoria of American greed, waste, and violence, extending its vision from right-wing, oil-rich, gun-nut Texas to the Brooks Range of Alaska, actually entitled *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, and offering an announcement on the last page by the youthful protagonist of his departure for the war in Southeast Asia. A third rendering of modernist homage, in this case to the Joseph Conrad of *Heart of Darkness* and *Nostramo*, undergirds the achievement of Robert Stone's *Dog Soldiers*, the account of a doomed apocalyptic heroin scam moving back from poisoned Saigon to the garish wastes of California, specifically Oakland, Berkeley, Los Angeles, Hollywood, and—with a further nod to B. Traven—journeying dead-south to Ken Kesey's La Honda.

In *The Quiet American* (1953), as noted in countless surveys of the literature of what is still called by the Library of Congress, “Vietnamese Conflict—1961–75,” Greene, in many ways, seems to have written the book on the American war even before it started. Through the eyes of the cynical narrator, the truly “doubting” expatriate English journalist Thomas Fowler, long versed in both the corrupt workings of the French *mission civilisatrice* and the

murderously factionalized and labyrinthine complications of Vietnamese revolutionary anti-colonialism, the book's depiction of the birth what came to be called the US Mission is an astringent Cold War critique of assumptions about American historical innocence and geopolitical invincibility—a prophecy of their catastrophic consequences for Americans and Vietnamese a decade later in what would become a genocidal ten year war embracing all of Southeast Asia. Along with other sites of Cold War geography that would ultimately seen to comprise Greene-land, Saigon, the latest Western-sponsored shithole, suffers and bleeds through the process of being taken over by the newest Western colonizers, the hopelessly well-intentioned Americans. Alden Pyle, the titular hero, surely a descendant of John Alden, Longfellow's legendary Puritan, is now a major pain in the ass, embodying the classic national mixture of blinkered can-do idealism and catastrophic innocence. The Ivy-league educated, state-department sponsored apprentice spook, having steeped himself in the counterinsurgency doctrines of the latest US "expert," York Harding, Pyle remains heedless of warnings by those more experienced or, for that matter, of any larger vision of History save his own American right-mindedness. Pyle, therefore, commits himself to the destructively quixotic search for an envisioned Third Force that will somehow save the country. Wreaking havoc along his dreadful pilgrim's progress, both personal and political, in love and war, the idealistic meddler winds up paying for his patriotic innocence with the lives of countless Vietnamese and, ultimately, his own as well.

Further, in keeping with many of the major fictional narratives of the Indochina conflict to come, as a popular culture commodity, *The Quiet American* would also become a Hollywood political entertainment. Greene's text, with its unsettling quality of prophecy resident in the fact that, reflecting the contested politics of the war over the decades, would eventually appear in not just one but two movie adaptations, with ideological implications more or less opposite. In the first, a product of the black-and-white Cold War 1950s, along with roughly contemporary B-movie analogues, such as the garish *A Yank in Indochina*, Pyle, played by Audie Murphy—himself the

most decorated American combat soldier of World War II—dies a patriot-hero on the frontiers of freedom. In the post-Vietnam 1990s version, starring Brendan Fraser as Pyle, the young American actor's signature foolery and mugging naiveté become part of the cover for a remorseless ideologue, a Vietnamese-speaking operative revealed to be into the violence up to his boyish CIA eyeballs.

During the era of the war itself, in American political writing generally and American political fiction in particular, it is hard to overestimate the central role played by Norman Mailer. From the outset, indeed, his distinguishing feature among his competitors seemed to be his central conception of himself as a political novelist. That is to say, his large subject from the beginning, in the sense reminiscent of Tolstoi, Dostoevsky, Stendhal, and Dickens—or in its early twentieth-century American rendering, Dos Passos—was ideology. Mailer's great novel of World War II, *The Naked and the Dead*, becomes a harrowing tale of island combat in the Pacific, and concurrently, in its central psychological conflict between the crypto-fascist General Cummings and the liberal leftist Lieutenant Hearn, a fable of the great tectonic shiftings and manipulations of geopolitical power in a world of war. In the bleak, experimental *Barbary Shore*, he attempted a Kafkaesque allegory of Cold War fear and isolation. In *The Deer Park*, the analogous theme was sited amidst Hollywood phantasmagoria, and in *An American Dream*, New York became the neogothic nightmare city, with the Maileresque narrator-protagonist as sexual hero, adventurer psychopath, the artist as hero villain, in a world of political power relations dense with conspiratorial threat. Accordingly, afloat in paranoiac congruencies of style and vision, his political novel of the Vietnam war at home and abroad, *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, appeared in the crucial year 1968. It was further embedded in a kind of hybrid political trilogy, *The Armies of the Night* (actually subtitled *History as a Novel; the Novel as History*)—about the 1967 Washington DC antiwar March on the Pentagon and *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*—covering the 1968 political conventions of the two major parties, with each trying to cast off the burden of the war. As if completing some vast national topography, Mailer's novel, in turn, took place far from these centers of power,

making its own Pacific outpost in the Brooks Range of Alaska, with big game hunters laying waste to the animals and surrounding ecology, but also executing frequent intertextual stops in right-wing Dallas and heart of darkest Harlem.

With an irony Mailer himself might posthumously appreciate, persistently outdone in their years of publication by television, the political violence in the streets, the two works of Vietnam war era new journalism—“factual fictions” as they were once called—and especially *The Armies of the Night*, for which enormous claims were made at the time—now seem much like archaeological artifacts, perhaps like prehistoric insects or seedpods preserved in amber, classic megalomaniac Norman Mailer conceits. The organizing principle synthesizing style with large-scale political vision in both clearly remains, in Mailer’s self-invented existential tautology, “History as a Novel; the Novel as History.” Accordingly, they still strike us now as relics of vintage Norman Mailer: literary-cultural narcissism, the narrator protagonist in the third person, trailing the after-the-fact newspaper clippings of his behavior at the time, great shows of virtuosity in their endlessly self-reflexive diction and syntax. Yet what one senses concurrently is the degree to which both are now distinctly period pieces in terms of both style and historical-political content. The events themselves, along with their Maileresque renderings, now seem incredibly dated. So also, the historical giants of the era—anti-war writers, such as Mailer, Lowell, Goodman and politicians, such as Nixon, Rockefeller, Reagan, Humphrey, McCarthy, McGovern, Wallace—come back to us as bizarre caricatures, with the whole panoply presided over by the specter of Lyndon Johnson in the White House and the ghost of Robert Kennedy. Great shows of writerly pyrotechnics on some of the most volatile domestic political moments of the American 1960s, they are readable, if at all, mainly as objects of literary or documentary cultural study

The aforementioned novel part of the late 1960s triad, *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, produced roughly contemporary with its garish violent, rah-rah comic-book counterpart Robin Moore’s *The Green Berets*, now seems mainly a hard-to-find textual curiosity,

yet another dazzlingly executed experiment in political and literary bravura styled as megalomaniacal writerly conceit. Mailer's great fictional narrative of the era and its great war at home and abroad takes as its premise the attempt to explain why we are there domestically textualized as who we are here. Invested beyond even its own bizarre content by a familiar, increasingly well-worn Mailer metaphysics of the artist, the hipster, white negro, the politics of the orgasm, the poetics of cancer, the book provides the answer to its titular question by writing about everything but the war, and thereby bringing it all back home. Until the novel's last page, that is, the book is simultaneously about what the Vietnam War has awakened in the American consciousness, even as it makes the war the inevitable extension of that consciousness.

The attempt at some primal emanation of that consciousness, indeed, seems to be Mailer's literary and political point, the creation of a voice itself already out there beyond the page, blaring forth, in stoned, scabrous fantasy, on all possible channels. A media concoction of something like pure voice, it conjoins the simultaneous narrations of the callow, profane young D. J., a scion of oil-rich Dallas, with Dee-Jay, a black radio personality broadcasting from Brooklyn, both riffing endlessly on Texas, gun violence, sex, drugs, the Kennedy assassination, oil exploration, and big-game hunting in the white, frozen, frontier wastes of the new fiftieth state. Apace, the "why?" of the title becomes in effect, the answer to its own question. To borrow from a rival celebrity prophet of the era, H. Rap Brown, "Violence is as American as cherry pie."

Although it may be hard to remember now, the all-but-unreadable *Why Are We in Vietnam?* seemed at least at the time to be the ultimate, if mystifying, extension of his genius in the attempt to write significantly about the new war in Asia and what Alfred Kazin called the manic plenitude of American destructiveness there. How could one predict the evolution of that genius for hermetic, obscurantist myth into an ever-extending political range of vision, in settings as diverse as ancient Egypt, Mormon Utah, the labyrinthine recesses of the CIA, the Germany of Hitler's childhood, and on subjects including Marilyn Monroe, Lee Harvey Oswald, Gary

Gilmore? In context, the project now seems clearer. Amongst his grand subjects, Mailer had clearly distinguished one as the most significant political passage in the national experience between World War II and the new Age of Terror and had felt impelled to write about it in a new political form appropriate to the bizarre ideological topography of the twentieth-century soul.

Better known as a distinctly political text of the domestic reverberations of the Vietnam War and still much read and written about—a properly modernist political fiction, one might call it, in the sense of Greene, Malraux, Conrad, and others—is a novel appearing in the doomed interval between the withdrawal of major US forces and the endgame being played out between North and South Vietnam, Robert Stone’s *Dog Soldiers* (1974). Indeed, here, the subject, directly announced in a Conradian epigraph, is the ultimate post-Vietnam US transmutation of “the flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly” (Conrad, 40) This is likely a quibble, but the quotation is primarily to the epigraph. : in this case a transpacific heroin scam, originated in Saigon by two American outriders, eventuating in an odyssey of greed, nihilism, and amoral violence and death, burning its way back into the American continent. The Dog Soldiers of the title are the aptly named free-lance John Converse, the scariest man in the world and his old US Marine buddy Ray Hicks, the Nietzsche-Zen warrior and possible borderline psychopath. Their return back across the Pacific, trailing the heroin, accordingly transmutes the landscape of Greene, Malraux, Conrad, into the modernist wasteland of the California of the druggy, psychedelic, and violent 60s and 70s: Oakland; Berkeley; Los Angeles; Hollywood; and, at the end, Ken Kesey’s La Honda. Atop a Southern California ridge overlooking the endless lights of the city, Hicks sums it up in a sentence: “Fucking L.A.,” he says. “Go out for a Sunday spin and you’re a short hair from the dawn of creation” (Stone 164). To borrow from the author, it is all a ride on the edge. In Vietnam, Converse has said, “Let laughter flee. This is the place where everybody finds out who they are” (Stone 56). Hicks warns, “You’d better be careful. . . . It’s gone funny in the states.” Converse replies, “It can’t be funnier than here” (Stone

57). Converse is wrong. Back in the world, the Vietnam adventurers find a vast conspiratorial nexus of treacherous co-conspirators, rival dealers, and renegade agents. At the end, the whole phantasmagoria trails itself back to the ruined outpost, where it all seemed to begin so righteously with Kesey and the Pranksters, a washed-up Guru named Dieter, a mad child named K-Jell. Amidst all the murder and the madness, La Honda has become just another firebase, with John and Marge Converse driving there southward into the wastes of the desert and Hicks doing escape and evasion there through the mountains. All seek the ultimate rendezvous with the death-drug. Along with Conrad and Greene here, one may recognize the novelistic landscape of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. As one of Stone's characters puts it elsewhere, we are already somewhere south of B. Traven; or west, somewhere out with America and the old dream of the conquest of history. "Anyway," wrote Michael Herr, in his own novelistic classic of journalism about the war, the legendary *Dispatches* (1977),

you couldn't use standard methods to date the doom; might as well say Vietnam was where the Trail of Tears was headed all along, the turnaround point where it would touch and come back to from a containing perimeter; might just as well lay it on the Proto-Gringos who found the New England woods too raw and empty for their peace and filled them up with their own imported devils. Maybe it was already over for us in Indochina when Alden Pyle's body washed up under the bridge in Dakao, his lungs all full of mud; maybe it caved in with Dien Bien Phu. But the first happened in a novel, and while the second happened on the ground, it happened to the French, and Washington gave it no more substance than if Graham Greene had made it up too. (49)

Quickly established in the canon as a major domestic political text of the war, Stone's novel, as it turns out, became significantly of a piece with the vast fictional literature of Vietnam written by veterans and related figures of the generation of the war. Like many of its counterparts, it frequently divided its focus between representations of savage combat and troubled attempts of the deeply

politicized returned veteran at cultural reassimilation in an equally politicized culture. Re-inventing the traditional political novel, here and elsewhere the geopolitical spectacle of fighting and writing the war began to take place both in the combat zone and in the domestic sphere of mid-century American political life. Accordingly, again, as with Greene's *The Quiet American*, nowhere was its appeal to popular culture understanding more clear than in its extension into a Hollywood version, *Who'll Stop the Rain* (1978), with war-zone Creedence Clearwater Revival soundtrack and haunted, hypnotic performances by Nick Nolte as Hicks, the relatively unknown Michael Moriarty as Converse, and Tuesday Weld, ex-60s blonde ingénue as Marge. Anticipating a spate of new American novel/movie amalgams, the political topography seamlessly merged in-country with back-in-the-world. The Americans, the Vietnamese, and, of course, the scag, the narcotic—"the big H," Hicks calls it, "walking with the King" (Stone 171), become co-inhabitants, again to borrow Michael Herr's phrasing, of the country that was the war.

Bringing the war back home, of course, in the more traditional sense of the veteran narrative, has long been a staple of political fiction—the returned individual protagonist in some newly problematic, frequently conflicted relationship with state power and/or governmental authority. In the Anglo-European tradition of Tolstoi, Stendhal, Henri Barbusse, Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon, one locates, for instance, twentieth-century US literary modernists, including John Dos Passos, Ernest Hemingway, William March, James Jones, Kurt Vonnegut, and Richard Yates. In the literature of the Vietnamese War, such a merging of military and political topographies becomes a signature feature of both autobiographical and fictional narrative. Among countless choices, from the former one may cite Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone*; Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*; Robert Mason's *Chickenhawk*; and Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July*. Novels might include O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*, *Northern Lights*, *The Things They Carried*, *In the Lake of the Woods*, and *July, July*; Philip Caputo's *Indian Country*; and Larry Heinemann's *Close Quarters* and *Paco's Story*, as well as those by non-veteran writers, including Ward Just, Bobbie

Ann Mason, and others. So are the characteristic forms and themes of such works recapitulated in an explosion of major movies—themselves as often as not drawn from literary sources: *Taxi Driver*; *The Deer Hunter*; *Apocalypse Now*; *Coming Home*; *Born on the Fourth of July*; *In-Country*; and *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*. At the time, the book/movie phenomenon seemed to form a genre centering on the crazed vet. In long retrospect, it may now be seen equally for a larger, overarching political design: The Vietnam Syndrome, it was called dismissively by political figures. The writers and filmmakers knew better. The time had come for bringing it all back home. So wrote Ron Kovic, in a rude poetic epigraph to his classic memoir of wounding and disability: “I am the living death,/a Memorial Day on wheels./I am your Yankee Doodle Dandy,/your John Wayne come home,/your Fourth of July firecracker exploding in the grave.” So speaks Philip Dosier, the narrator protagonist of Larry Heinemann’s *Close Quarters*:

I have traveled to a place where the dead lie above the ground in rows and bunches. Time has gone somewhere without me. This is not my country, not my time . . . have not come home, Ma. I have gone ahead, gone back. There is glass between us, we cannot speak. I hear voices. I have seen a wraith, Ma. He wore black boots and britches and strange livery. He talked to me, he whispered, he laughed. He touched my stomach with the back of his hand, like people will put an arm on your shoulder when they speak, and it burns. (307)

Here, then, is fictional narrative of the Vietnam War and of its domestic reverberations in the American polis and the American body politic. As in Michael Herr’s classic *Dispatches*, the war is seen haunting the streets and cities of the nation. “My days are darker than your nights,” reads the sign of a blind street beggar Herr recalls encountering in New York, while accompanied by a former First Air Cavalry medic. “Don’t bet on it,” says the medic (Herr 245). PTSD is the name of the new national disease, in both a psychological and a political sense the signature malady of a post-Vietnam War America.

Of this new, hybrid book/movie political genre outlined above, two examples in particular now stand forth as perhaps among the most influential and widely-known cultural texts of the era: David Morrell's *Rambo/First Blood* and Winston Groom's *Forrest Gump*. This is so, even down to the new domestic re-imagining of the great fictional topographies of Greene's Saigon; Mailer's Washington, Miami, Chicago, Brooklyn, Dallas, Alaska; and Stone's hallucinatory, burnt-out California. With Morrell, the war in Vietnam, in the fullness of its horror, is brought home to a small town in Kentucky. (In the movie version of the tale, the action is resituated to the Pacific Northwest, followed by sequels extending the hero's adventures into global precincts including Southeast Asia, where he is sent in search of American MIA/POWs, and eventually pre-9/11 Afghanistan, where he assists the American-supported Mujahideen in fighting off Russian invaders.) The locales of *Forrest Gump*, both book and movie, include Vietnam; the Alabama Gulf Coast; Bear Bryant's Tuscaloosa; Lyndon Johnson's Washington, DC; Mao Zedong's China; cannibal New Guinea; and, at least briefly, outer space before returning the protagonist back to his beloved Bayou la Batre at the end.

To put it simply, the political spaces in both of these book/movie hybrids are those of American popular culture myth. Accordingly, both found their political visions in two long accredited favorite genres in American popular culture: the first in the action-adventure tale in the vein of Cooper, Crane, London, Hemingway, eventually Irwin Shaw, Leon Uris, Tom Clancy—not to mention of comic book and cartoon superheroes without number; the second in the American picaresque, the adventures of the low-life hero, as perfected by writers as diverse as Herman Melville, Mark Twain, William Faulkner, Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut, and a host of others.

Morrell's 1972 novel, his first, as well as the earlier of the two in chronology, turns out to be the single book that may well have brought the war back home definitively to law-abiding, small town America. To be sure, almost completely unread at the time of publication, it even now continues to be known best for its movie adaptation, not to mention its ever outlandish sequels. As a cultural