

Vietnam Generation

Volume 1

Number 1 *The Future of the Past: Revisionism and Vietnam*

Article 5

1-1989

In Cold Blood: The Vietnam War in Textbooks

David Berman

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/vietnamgeneration>



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Berman, David (1989) "In Cold Blood: The Vietnam War in Textbooks," *Vietnam Generation*: Vol. 1 : No. 1 , Article 5.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/vietnamgeneration/vol1/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by La Salle University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vietnam Generation by an authorized editor of La Salle University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact careyc@lasalle.edu.

In Cold Blood: VIETNAM IN TEXTBOOKS

David M. BERMAN

INTRODUCTION

In May 1967, in the central highlands southwest of Pleiku, 7200 Jarai tribesmen were moved from eighteen villages across the Ia Drang Valley into the Edap Enang resettlement center. Their former home became part of an enormous free fire zone. By the end of the war in 1975 approximately one-third of the one million Montagnards, comprising at least thirty different tribal groups including the Jarai, and inhabiting almost one-half the land area of South Vietnam, were casualties of that war. 85 percent of their villages were destroyed, abandoned, or forcibly evacuated¹. No textbook examined in the following study even mentions the existence of indigenous tribal populations in Vietnam.

In March 1968, in the village of Son My, located in Quang Ngai province, American soldiers slaughtered between 400 and 570 civilians in what has erroneously become known as the My Lai massacre². This atrocity was apparently not unique: "By the time the Americans departed more than one million South Vietnamese civilians had been war casualties, with approximately 200,000 killed and 500,000 seriously wounded by either allied or communist action"³. Of the sixteen texts examined in this study which were published after the assault on Son My, only two refer to the "My Lai massacre" while only six of the 22 make any reference at all to civilian casualties.

In January 1971, Kerry Ryan was born to Maureen and Michael Ryan. She had 22 birth defects, including two vaginas, two cervixes, two uteruses, four ovaries, and no rectum. In March 1979, almost twelve years after Michael returned from Vietnam, and some eight years after the birth of their daughter, the Ryans, along with nineteen other couples, filed a class action suit on behalf of "all 2.8 million veterans who served in Vietnam" against six American manufacturers of defoliants and herbicides sprayed in South Vietnam. The suit was eventually settled out of court for \$180 million dollars⁴. While "attorneys estimated that as many as 40,000 veterans may eventually become ill or die from effects" of toxic herbicides, more than 200,000 claims for injuries were filed under the settlement including "60,000 claims of birth defects among veterans' children and 24,000 miscarriages by veter-

62 VIETNAM GENERATION

ans' wives"⁵. No textbook examined in this study published after 1972 mentioned Kerry Ryan, and no textbook published after 1979 mentioned the class action suit. Of the 22 textbooks reviewed, only one mentioned veterans poisoned by dioxin, American and Vietnamese children born with birth defects, or aerial spraying of toxic chemicals during the war.

Textbooks do not mention the Iron Triangle, or the Ho Bo Woods, or the Street Without Joy. They do not discuss the strategies of generals, the tactics of field commanders, the "pacification" programs devised by Diem and his American supporters. They studiously avoid the topic of the CIA, or the role that organization played in fighting and funding the war. They neglect to explain the secret bombing and land operations in neutral Laos and Cambodia. They fail to discuss the legal questions of American intervention, or the decisions of the World Court. They decline to concern themselves with Vietnamese prewar and wartime culture, or to explain the wet rice farming techniques of lowland villages and the slash and burn cycle of highland tribes. They do not consider the 1.2 million ethnic Chinese, the Khmers, and the Chams of Vietnam to be worth notice. They do, however, occasionally report casualty statistics — American casualties, both dead and wounded, and sometimes even the casualties of our South Vietnamese allies (though the casualties of the international forces, the Koreans, the Australians, the New Zealanders, and the Thais, go unnoted). More rarely still, there appear casualty figures for Vietnamese civilians, NLF and NVA fighters.

Many of the most important aspects of the war are ignored or, at best, treated in a blatantly superficial manner. Textbooks present the events of the Vietnam War without connecting casualty statistics to their human costs, and thus ultimately obscure their impact and effect. "We fought the Vietnam War "in cold blood," Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr. has written.

This cold-blooded approach to war was not unintentional. It was an outgrowth of the limited war theories that reduced war to an academic model. As we go back and read the writings of the political scientists and systems analysts on limited war, they are noteworthy for their lack of passion. The horror, the bloodshed and the destruction of the battlefield are remarkably absent.... The academics could be excused for this omission, but we in the military knew better. It was the job of those of us who had seen war firsthand to add this missing dimension to their academic theories⁶.

Can academics really be excused for "this omission"? When we reduce warfare to a theoretical model we conceal its violence from

our students, some of whom will go on to fight the next war, ignorant of its costs. Academics treat Vietnam as a limited war, for which limited coverage is appropriate. Remarkable for its "lack of passion," our educational writings on the war are consistent with the political tone of textbooks "suitable" for distribution to high school students whose minds are in the process of being shaped to inherit the ideology of the patriotic American community.

The narratives of the Vietnam War which appear in textbooks are the results of a process of remaking history in the image of the myths upon which a culture depends. The image of this war was frequently more important than the reality. In the words of John Hellman: "American leadership would most consistently define the war in Vietnam as a test of American 'will', in effect a symbolic war in which the true terrain was the American character and the ultimate stakes world history."⁷ South-east Asia, like other earlier "frontiers"

became symbolic landscapes, separate yet connected, possessing a moral geography in which Americans perceived themselves achieving their identity and working out their special destiny... When they thought about Indochina, Americans generally saw themselves entering yet another frontier, once again "western pilgrims" on a mission of protection and progress⁸.

Our ethnocentrism blinded us so that we could not discern the political landscape of Vietnam, its long history of nationalistic revolt, its aversion to China. Instead, we asked the wrong questions: "How was it possible for the Vietnamese to fail to realize that the ideas of Democracy and God are more important than life?"⁹

National mythology justifies the war in Vietnam as a war for a noble cause; but this mythology is unable to encompass the savage and painful conflict in which American sons died inglorious deaths for obscure reasons. Texts which prefer to deal in comfortable myths, and thus fail to confront the political and cultural realities of Vietnam must also fail to question the fundamental premises upon which the war was fought. Questioning premises, of course, is not what texts are for: general texts support the mythology which is accepted by our local communities as an ideal for enculturating our children in local public schools. *History of a Free People*¹⁰, *America: The Glorious Republic*¹¹, or *The American Dream*¹² — the titles themselves couched in the romance of the American myth — can hardly be expected to deal honestly with the pain and torment of the Vietnam War.

The intent of this essay is to explore these texts in terms of their failure to confront "the horror, the bloodshed and the destruction of the battlefield". I will examine the methods by which they conceal the

64 VIETNAM GENERATION

"missing dimension" of the Vietnam War from the adolescents for whom these texts are written. I hope to accomplish this at the expense of the national mythology which serves as the foundation for social studies education at the secondary level in the American public schools.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

In an article on textbooks and Vietnam, Dan B. Fleming and Ronald J. Nurse suggest that "the changing perspective of a nation and its people over time is mirrored in the writing of history", and they proceed to examine ten US history texts published in the late 1970s *vis-à-vis* early 1970s texts to support this view¹³. Fleming and Nurse admit that these texts "offer a too sketchy account of the Vietnam War" but suggest that their deficiencies are not the result of "distortion, dishonesty, inaccuracy, or bias". Rather, they assert, "the neglect of certain key topics" is part of a normal selection process which can be "explained, in part, by the limitations of space available to the authors, which is an inherent problem for all survey textbooks"¹⁴. In a similar article published six years later, the authors review another twelve texts published between 1982 and 1986 and note an "improved treatment of the war in Vietnam.... Just as the American public appears to be taking a new look at the war in Vietnam, so history textbooks seem gradually to be presenting a new 'truth'". They remark once again that "because of space limitations, survey texts seldom satisfy anyone in the depth of the coverage of a specific topic", suggesting that teachers need supplementary materials to teach Vietnam¹⁵.

An earlier analysis of 28 high school textbooks and their treatment of the Vietnam War by William L. Griffen and John Marciano proposes, however, that the "neglect of certain key topics" is a product of other than natural selection, and that such choices predetermine the perspective a student will take on the Vietnam War. Griffen and Marciano direct their work "to all Americans who at some time in their schooling become miseducated by dishonest textbooks and do not want more of the same visited on their children"¹⁶. They take as their subject the process by which "the Vietnam War was explained to American students"¹⁷, and they suggest that "through their pretensions of neutrality and objectivity and through their suppression of data and alternative views, textbooks further the hegemonic process by establishing the 'parameters which define what is legitimate, reasonable, practical, good, true and beautiful'"¹⁸. Griffen and Marciano assert that the

twenty-eight textbooks examined the most bitter conflict in recent American history without calling into question a single

fundamental premise surrounding the conflict... American high-school students, teachers, and parents could read these textbooks without considering the possibility that they lived in a nation that had committed the most blatant act of aggression since the Nazi Invasions of World War 2¹⁹.

Though Fleming and Nurse are correct in asserting that space limitations prevent the author from addressing all important aspects of the Vietnam War in a text, they seriously underestimate the importance of paying attention to exactly *which* key topics the author chooses to "neglect". This essay will explore the question of the "truths" presented in textbooks, and attempt to explain the nature of the "distortion, dishonesty, inaccuracy" which Nurse and Fleming dismiss. The truths in these texts are presented within a cultural context; they are so deeply rooted in the American ideal that the fundamental questions which can be raised to test the validity of this ideal go unasked. These texts are often misleading in regard to political events and historical developments, as Griffen and Marciano have noted. The textual narratives which will form the basis of the students' knowledge about the Vietnam War universally fail to acknowledge the human cost of warfare. When the horror, bloodshed, and destruction of the battlefield are absent, the premises which involved us in that controversial war go unchallenged. "In short, integrity in the search for truth is not the aim of the textbook business. Profit is the aim, and profit, when you are serving a quasi-monopoly, is made by satisfying bureaucrats and politicians and by offending as few vocal and organized interests as possible."²⁰

There are good books about Vietnam that "make the impersonal economic and political convolutions of Vietnamese history understandable, they always draw the reader back to the man on the ground who has to live with the consequences of those forces"²¹. It is the failure of textbooks to make this very connection — between the analysis of political and historical events and the consequences of these events for the American and Vietnamese "man on the ground" — which deprives textbooks of life and realism, a choice made by publishers in a premeditated fashion. "(Bernard) Fall's books (about Vietnam) remain popular with American soldiers today because they ring true," writes Kirkpatrick²². This essay presents the conclusions of an analysis of 22 US history textbooks and their failure to "ring true"; a failure which suggests that the reality of warfare in general, and in Vietnam in particular, is diluted for consumption by high school students because academicians are more interested in creating a political and historical approach consistent with a curricular pattern organized in the efficiency model than they are with presenting stimulating narratives of the Vietnam War. The efficiency model promotes organizational

66 VIETNAM GENERATION

stability, efficiency, and propriety of the community, the school, and the classroom at the expense of controversy and creativity. Teaching the Vietnam War in any critical manner could lead students to challenge community ideals, and thus disrupt the orderly dispensation of knowledge from teacher to student. Textbooks, seen within this context, represent the imposition of a particular political and historical framework upon the reality of warfare as seen in human terms. "In most texts," wrote Frances FitzGerald, "the reporting on the (Vietnam) war is no more accurate than their predictions about it were... the texts are neither hawkish or dovish on the war — they are simply evasive."²³

TEXTBOOKS, TIME, AND VIETNAM

The organizational framework of both course and text is the curricular block of the unit or chapter heading: "The American Revolution", "The Civil War", "World War 1", "World War 2". Wars are often the chronological benchmarks by which time is measured and topics are organized. Vietnam — a "limited war" — seldom achieves the status of unit or chapter heading, and is relegated to sub-units or sub-paragraphs. In the text *Americals* (1984), mention of Vietnam can be found in the large unit called "Change", under the chapter heading of "Years of Hope and Tension", under the section heading "The Strain of Intervention"²⁴. *Our Land, Our Time* (1985) places Vietnam in a unit called "New American Frontiers", in a chapter titled "The Vigorous Sixties", under a section heading entitled "Vietnam Involvement"²⁵.

A People and a Nation (1981), features a section entitled "The Disaster in Vietnam". This section is part of a chapter entitled "An Age of Crisis" which in turn is a part of a unit entitled "Crisis". "Crisis" spans the post-World War 2 era through the Carter administration. The "Disaster" section is five pages long, and includes over two pages on the antiwar movement and the 1968 Presidential election, complete with pictures and maps²⁶. The Paris Peace Talks and the fall of South Vietnam are treated in the following section on foreign policy²⁷. *A People and a Nation* avoids discussion of the nature of the war, and offers the student only the statement that "people disliked a war so prolonged, so costly, so unsuccessful, so ruthless and dirty, whose dreadful consequences they could see projected nightly on television"²⁸. If the reader is curious about the nature of those "dreadful consequences", he or she will find little food for the imagination. The text is deliberately vague and general, perhas so that the student cannot read, see, or feel just how "ruthless and dirty" the war was.

In a text called *Our American Heritage* (1983), the unit containing mention of the Vietnam War is entitled "Change and Continuity in America". Chapter headings in this unit include "The Cold War and

Beyond", "Domestic Affairs 1945-1960", and "Only Yesterday: The 1960s to Today". A sub-section entitled "From the Vietnam War to the Present" is part of the "Cold War" chapter and occupies slightly over three pages²⁹. "From the Vietnam War to the Present" is similar in content to the "Disaster" section in *A People and a Nation*. The text explains that "one principle of American strategy during the cold war was to avoid a land war on the vast Asian continent (but) as cold war tensions eased in the 1960s, the United States departed from this principle — with disastrous results"³⁰. The disaster is defined strictly in political terms: "Vietnam was finally united and independent, but under Communist control"³¹.

Designed for middle and junior high school students, *America Is* discusses Vietnam in a four page sub-section called the "Buildup in Vietnam". The text contains an undated map of the "War in Vietnam" with a main United States supply route extending from Quinhon (sic) along the central Vietnamese coast. Another sub-section entitled "The Search for Peace," describes the consequences of the war:

the last American troops left Vietnam. But the war there still went on. While many Americans were saddened by this, they were glad the United States was out of the war. During its involvement, some 46,000 Americans had been killed, and more than 300,000 others had been wounded³².

The student who sought to understand the reasons for the loss of American lives in Vietnam would find only this passage to justify our involvement:

In August 1964, after an attack on American warships by North Vietnamese gunboats... the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution... allowed the President, as commander in chief, to use any measures necessary to halt an attack on American forces, stop North Vietnamese aggression, and aid any SEATO member who asked for help in defending its freedom³³.

While *America Is* does note the existence of a difference of opinion between hawks and doves, and describes some protests against the war, it still presents the American role in the Vietnam War as unquestionably defensive, waged against "a group of Vietnamese communists called the Vietcong (sic) who were well established in South Vietnam"³⁴. Students are provided with no opposing viewpoints; they are intended to accept the premise that the United States was legitimately defending the cause of freedom by putting a stop to Communist aggression in Southeast Asia. When the antiwar movement is described, the context of the discussion is framed by the

68 VIETNAM GENERATION

premise that the war is just, and that the ideology upon which the intervention was based is justified as well.

The texts of the 1960s foreshadow the arguments of the texts of the 1980s. American texts take a consistent approach to Vietnam, failing to address significant issues of foreign policy, ideology, and social convention. They are united by the chauvenism which generates rationalizations in order to justify US involvement in Vietnam. "To have been an editor of one of the mass-market texts in the mid-sixties must have been a nightmare... because of the Vietnam War," writes FitzGerald. "The problem for editors then was to find a compromise formula that would not offend anyone, when there was no compromise position and no way to avoid the whole subject."³⁵ The editors of such texts deliberately sought the lowest common denominator, and, in the process, managed to avoid portraying the war in a manner which cast doubt on American myths. Though these 1960s texts included brief narratives of our involvement in Vietnam, they failed to question any fundamental premises. Even when cataloging the voices of dissent, these texts fail to examine the legitimacy of the arguments of antiwar protestors, or to explore some of the more unsavory consequences of American involvement in Vietnam.

In 1966, when the number of American troops had reached 200,000, *Land of the Free* failed even to mention Vietnam³⁶, while *The Making of Modern America* devoted only four paragraphs on three separate pages to the subject³⁷. *The Making of Modern America* provides the following narrative of the Vietnam War: "North Vietnamese Communists aided guerrilla forces in South Vietnam in an effort to overthrow the pro-Western government.... The United States in turn" sent 10,000 support personnel because, "in the opinion of President Kennedy, the preservation of the independence of South Vietnam was one of the 'vital interests' of the United States."³⁸ Eventually, "American ground forces took a more active part in fighting the Communist guerrillas," while "President Johnson repeatedly expressed a willingness to enter into 'unconditional discussions'. But the North Vietnamese government insisted on complete withdrawal of American forces before any discussions could take place."³⁹

Rise of the American Nation (1966) devotes a portion of two pages to Vietnam and offers a somewhat more detailed, as well as more balanced, discussion of the war. Nevertheless, this text also falls easily into the rhetoric of the era when it notes that "over and over again the President urged North Vietnam's leaders to cease their aggressive actions and to meet around a conference table. 'We remain ready... for unconditional discussion'"⁴⁰. *History of a Free People* (1967) notes that "President Johnson... repeatedly made public offers of negotiation.... But Ho Chi Minh, president of North Vietnam,

made the impossible condition that the United States withdraw all troops before negotiations could begin"⁴¹. *The American Nation* (1966), spending less than a paragraph on the escalating war in Vietnam, asserts that "some diplomatic accommodation was desirable," perhaps because "the mere mass of the Chinese — 700 million persons — seemed to compel their recognition, in the formal diplomatic sense and in the larger sense of coming to grips with their significance"⁴². In other words, Vietnam was to be understood within the context of cold war politics: "the implacable hostility of the ever-more-powerful Chinese communists (now masters of the atom) loomed like a thunderhead in the heavens, a constant threat to the free world..." and to Vietnam⁴³.

By the end of 1966 the number of American troops in Vietnam had reached 400,000, with a casualty toll of about 5,000 Americans killed and 16,000 Americans wounded. The impact of the war was, by then, felt in at least one textbook. *History: USA* (1967) devoted two full pages to Vietnam under a section entitled "Shadows from Abroad Cloud the Visions of a Great Society"⁴⁴. In hindsight, the most remarkable inclusion in this text are the casualty figures: 1,484 KIAs with 7,337 wounded by January 1 1966. These figures are absent in most other texts, even by the 1980s. And the text makes a gesture in the direction of exposing the complexity of the American war in Vietnam by including a statement made by one general, who said that "a soldier has to be much more than a man with a rifle.... He has to be part diplomat, part technician, part politician — and 100% a human being"⁴⁵. If this assertion had been companioned by an explication of the difficulties of fighting a war in an alien environment, and of working with a population whose language and ways are not comprehensible, some good questions might have been raised. But the next sentence denies complexity and appropriates the general's meaning: "... put another way, the object of American policy in Vietnam was to help the South Vietnamese people hold off the communist invader from the north, while enabling them to work toward the establishment of a sound and effective political system....

Meanwhile, the very presence of a huge US military buildup in the poverty-stricken nation was providing a dramatic boost to the local economy and significant progress toward eradication of the ancient ills of hunger, disease, and illiteracy. Should America succeed in this venture, the people of South Vietnam could well be launched toward their own form of a great society⁴⁶.

Underneath the quoted passage, on the very last page of the text, is a section entitled "An American Soldier in Vietnam", which

70 VIETNAM GENERATION

includes a picture and a citation for Pfc. Milton Lee Olive III, who threw himself on a grenade and was posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. A section on the previous page, entitled "GIs Around the World", explained that "the American GI was indeed a world traveler, and his presence either at home or abroad was clear evidence of America's intention to use the full force of its resources in the cause of freedom and national security"⁴⁷. Olive is connected, by the text, to an American warrior tradition; he was in Vietnam because the communists simply would not listen to reason: "President Johnson offered to meet Communist leaders 'anywhere in the world' to arrange a cease fire in Vietnam, but his appeals fell on deaf ears. He also offered to launch a one billion dollar 'Marshall Plan for Southeast Asia,' but the Communists gave him no encouragement."⁴⁸

What is striking about the texts of 1966 and 1967 is not their inability to accurately report on facts and events in the public domain, but their remarkable facility for obscuring the significance of the escalation, as well as their failure to question the purpose of that escalation. The information necessary to construct a critical inquiry into the war was certainly available — the casualty figures in the Allen and Betts' text attest to that. The insistence of these texts that increasing American involvement in Vietnam would have as its chief effect the provision of "a dramatic boost to the local economy" resulting in a Vietnamese "great society" reflects a refusal to deal with difficult issues. American insistence on imposing its own image upon "a world qualitatively different from its own"⁴⁹ is indicative of the ethnocentrism with which we often approach the Vietnam War — as it was fought, and as it is taught.

The 1960s texts reviewed in this paper rationalize, without exception, American involvement in Vietnam as a legitimate enterprise; they view it within the context of the Cold War era, and accept that intervention was necessary to contain communist expansion. These texts were read by young American men who were soon on their way to fight in Vietnam; young men who should have been exposed to argument over the complex issues that the war revolved around, so that they could make intelligent and informed decisions about their involvement in that war. But crucial information was withheld from them because it did not reflect the mythology of equality and justice which pervaded these textbooks at the expense of the scholarship or real argument.

Men from lower to middle income families, who were high school dropouts, or high school graduates without college educations were much more likely to serve in the military, to serve in Vietnam, and to see combat action than their better educated, wealthier peers⁵⁰. The likelihood of military service in Vietnam decreased as income and

education increased. In his detailed study of Pittsburgh area Vietnam War casualties, for example, Thomas Richard McIntyre documents that, during the escalation phase of the war,

casualty status was largely confined to areas marked by lower to middle income levels, normal educational achievement levels and predominantly blue collar employment. In short, such data would apparently confirm the distinctive "working class" character of the casualty profile associated with America's ill-fated Vietnam War effort⁵¹.

In the deescalation phase, marked by a declining attrition rate, "the social demography of the casualty distribution remained virtually unchanged despite pronounced changes in strategy". Vietnamization "did not reallocate the diminished combat burden more equitably.... It was still lower and working class American troops, albeit fewer of them, who suffered the more severe risks of combat...."⁵².

Among this generation, fighting for one's country was not a source of pride; it was misfortune. Going to Vietnam was the penalty for those who lacked the wherewithal to avoid it.... Poorly educated, low-income whites and poorly educated low-income blacks together bore a vastly disproportionate share of the burdens of Vietnam⁵³.

Texts address (or fail to address) these issues in various ways. *The Free and the Brave* (1977) explains that "most of those who did serve were between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one," describing a system which allows men of eighteen to go to war, but does not consider them "old enough to vote". The text admits that "antiwar protesters pointed out that this was unfair," but is quick to detract from their credibility by stating that these same protesters enjoyed the luxury of dissent while others served in their places in Vietnam⁵⁴. As the men from Vietnam "started coming home, the American people tried to heal the wounds caused by the conflict," insists *The Free and the Brave*⁵⁵. Under a heading entitled "Aggression in Vietnam," *America: Its People and Values* (1975) states that "the Viet Cong received weapons and supplies from Communist North Vietnam, from Communist China, and from the Soviet Union," noting that President Kennedy faced a tough decision because "the United States had promised to help South Vietnam defend itself against Communist attack"⁵⁶. This text neglects to discuss, in the following section entitled "American Troops in Vietnam", the fundamental inequity in the composition of troop units; nor is there any mention of the casualties taken by these units in defense of "American national security". The *Pageant of*

72 VIETNAM GENERATION

American History (1975) declares that as the situation worsened in 1967, "more draftees were sent to Vietnam"⁵⁷. But there is no discussion of the racial or class composition of these troops, and never a mention of draft programs such as Project 100,000, though the text later acknowledges this omission in a two-line follow-up tacked on three pages after the larger discussion of the war. *The Pageant* rather sheepishly admits that "the draft itself was upsetting the lives and careers of the nation's youth," and that "the poor, and especially the blacks, were too often drafted. The more fortunate college students were deferred until they finished their studies"⁵⁸. The text neglects to mention that most college students missed out on Vietnam altogether. (This text also devotes a sentence to "the bombing and the burning — often of innocent women and children" during the course of the war, and includes a paragraph which cites the "disclosures of American atrocities committed against North Vietnamese at My Lai"⁵⁹. This last tidbit moved FitzGerald to remark that the author or his editors had "in effect moved the village and credited Lieutenant Calley with a single-handed invasion of North Vietnam".)⁶⁰

By the 1980s, as the war passed from contemporary event into history, one might have thought that texts would begin to offer serious reflections on Vietnam, putting forward assessments of the war's impact on American and Vietnamese society. But although these new texts offer a slightly more detailed description of the political machinations of the Vietnam War era, the majority of the 1980s texts are worse than their predecessors in their failure to consider the human dimensions and social consequences of the war in Vietnam.

These texts dutifully note American (and, occasionally Vietnamese) casualties of war, but fail to pursue the implications of these casualties. The seventh edition of *The American Pageant* (1983) remarks that President Kennedy "had ordered more than 15,000 American men into the far-off Asian slaughter pen" by the time of his death in 1963, and later mentions the death of 50,000 Americans and the wounding 300,000 more⁶¹. But the term: "slaughter pen" seems to have meaning only in the numbers of Americans who were injured, although "many Americans also felt pangs of conscience at the spectacle of their countrymen burning peasant huts and blistering civilians with ghostly (sic) napalm"⁶². Rather than being exposed to a serious treatment of the suffering of war, and an exploration of the context in which this suffering took place, the reader is treated to "cute" section headings such as "Vietnam Vexations", "Vietnamizing the Vietnam War", and "Cambodianizing the Vietnam War". This text includes the famous photograph of General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, the National Police Chief (who is referred to merely as a "South Vietnamese police chief") executing a Viet Cong soldier. The caption for this photo

is "Justice on a Saigon Street, 1968", and the authors never bother to contextualize the image⁶³.

The American Dream makes reference to "an additional 15,000 Americans (who) died in the war that was being 'Vietnamized'", followed by a sentence in parentheses: "(By 1971 about 51,000 Americans had died in the war.)"⁶⁴ It is curious that the author of a 1980 text failed to update the casualty figure. The mention of casualties other than American KIAs would also have been appropriate. *American Adventures (1983)* mentions that "more than 20,000 US troops had been killed" by the time of the February 1968 Tet Offensive, and then makes no references to Tet or post-Tet casualties of any kind⁶⁵. *America's Heritage (1986)* explains that "more than 46,000 American soldiers were killed in combat" in a war which began when "the North Vietnamese began to move down into South Vietnam. They wanted to take control of the new republic"⁶⁶.

A question might be raised about the meaning of the casualty figures represented in the above texts. Certainly the emphasis on American deaths and injuries encourages the reader to assume that the greatest impact of the war fell upon American participants. This perspective also encourages students to draw the conclusion that American policy issues (such as the suppression of communism) have a natural precedence over Vietnamese internal issues (such as civil war and self-determination). These casualty figures work to conservative political ends.

Even in the area of political analysis, these 1980s texts have failed to grow much past their 1960s predecessors. The 1982 edition of *American History* is no more sophisticated than the 1966 edition. American involvement in Vietnam began, according to this text, during "the summer of 1964" when "the former French colony of Vietnam was torn by war"⁶⁷. *American History* fails to mention that Vietnam existed as a nation prior to the French occupation. The text continues:

Communist North Vietnam was supplying aid to pro-communist South Vietnamese guerrillas, who were known as the Viet Cong (sic). The Viet Cong had been seeking to overthrow the pro-American government of South Vietnam ever since Vietnam had been divided into two countries in 1954⁶⁸.

An ideological framework is established which can support a narrative where Americans come to the defense of freedom-loving South Vietnamese who are desperately fighting off the Communist aggressors: "Recent events such as the war in Korea and the Cuban missile crisis seemed to show that the way to check communist expansion was

74 VIETNAM GENERATION

by firmness and force."⁶⁹ *American History's* belligerent tone is reinforced by the repetition of President Johnson's belief that "the fighting in South Vietnam was between local Vietnamese patriots and 'outside' communists"⁷⁰. Chinese and Soviet communists, asserts the text, were "supplying the Viet Cong with weapons and advice, just as the United States was helping the anticommunist government of South Vietnam"⁷¹. Thus, the stage is set for a political struggle of global proportions; leaving no room for discussion of the civil war taking place in Vietnam. According to this text, the consequences of the Vietnam War were the "cost of more than \$100 billion and the lives of nearly 50,000 Americans and a much larger number of Vietnamese"⁷².

"Communists Threaten South Vietnam" trumpets one section heading in the 1985 edition of *America: The Glorious Republic*. The sections which follow are filled with references to "highly disciplined Communists", and "Communist gains". The reader learns that the "Communists launched surprise attacks", and that "the Communists paid dearly for the Tet Offensive". The chapter review is marked by a section entitled "Communist Repression" in which the reader is told that "the repressive nature of communism was revealed by events in Europe and Asia" (Czechoslovakia and China). The Vietnam War is framed in terms of the struggle between the Communist Menace and Free World⁷³. The 1977 edition of the same text had a very similar tone. That edition devoted three pages to Vietnam, and featured a section entitled "The War in Southeast Asia" which started with the claim that

the People's Republic of China began to challenge the Soviet Union for the leadership of the Communist world. The two countries competed for the favor of Communists in other nations. An area of the world in which they showed great interest was Indochina (Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos)... (which) all had strong Communist parties⁷⁴.

Rife with inaccurate historical claims ("The Communists (presumably the North Vietnamese) ... urged South Vietnamese Communists to revolt. These rebels called themselves the Vietcong.")⁷⁵, the narrative in this text forms the basis of the history presented in the 1985 version; the same explanations are rehashed. In both versions the impact of the war on South and North Vietnamese life and culture is ignored.

There are a few texts which deal with the Vietnam War on a slightly more sophisticated level:

The introduction of the section on Vietnam in *Rise of the American Nation* (1982) contains the following passage: "The most serious problem that the United States faced between 1960 and 1980 was a war in South Vietnam. This war had a great impact on the image

of America around the world. It also influenced the way Americans perceived their own country and its role in the world.⁷⁶ This section, peppered with incorrect phonetic pronunciations of Vietnamese names (Ngo Dinh Diem as "NOH DIN DYEM" and Nguyen Van Thieu as "nuh WIN van TYOO"), does present the information that "the war had a shattering impact on all participants", citing both American and Vietnamese casualties. Civilians, it states, "bore the heaviest burden of suffering," and it continues with the assertion that "by the end of 1967, civilian casualties were totaling between 100,000 and 150,000 a year."⁷⁷ Several pages later it cites the figure of 45,729 Americans killed in action and more than 300,000 wounded and also includes figures on Vietnamese deaths: "estimates put South Vietnamese deaths at 160,903 and those of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese at 922,295," also noting that 6 million refugees were created by the war⁷⁸. *Rise of the American Nation* is remarkable because it attempts to describe the suffering which resulted from the war, and includes statistics on both American and Vietnamese victims.

The Americans: The History of a People and a Nation (1982) also stands out from the rest of the general texts. *The Americans* refers to the Vietnam War as "the longest war in US history" and explains that "the direct cost to the nation was 46,000 battle deaths, 300,000 wounded, and a price tag of about \$137 million"⁷⁹. There is mention of "42,000 Vietcong casualties" during the Tet Offensive, and a significant section entitled "The Ground War" which refers to civilian casualties during search and destroy operations, the production of refugees, and the spraying of defoliants which "devastated about 20 percent of the landscape" and "led to birth defects in Vietnamese children and in the children of American servicemen, as well as to liver damage, muscular disorders, and other health problems for the adults who were exposed to the chemicals"⁸⁰. In the 22 textbooks reviewed, this was the only significant passage which referred to the use of toxic chemicals or dioxin poisoning.

Our Land, Our Time: A History of the United States (1985) devotes several pages to Vietnam, briefly citing "atrocities — some unintentional (such as the bombing of civilian targets), and some the result of soldiers cracking under the pressure of a vicious war" although it makes no mention of specific instances of atrocity, such as the Son My (My Lai) massacre⁸¹. In a sub-section entitled "Vietnam's Legacy," this text discusses the tragedy of the war, although the American casualty figure is off by approximately 150,000. It is noted that "probably 800,000 South Vietnamese and a comparable number of North Vietnamese died." Placing these numbers in a graph, the caption notes that "each day during 1968, the most savage year of the war, 40 Americans were killed and 128 wounded. And yet not one of the goals

76 VIETNAM GENERATION

for which all the blood was spilled and all the money was spent was achieved"⁸². This is a unique observation in texts of this kind, and raises significant questions about the nature and value of patriotism, obedience, and authority. The text then points out that "veterans of the war were neglected and shunned, as if they were responsible for it, instead of being its victims"⁸³. Despite the problematic strategy of turning soldiers into "victims" (and thus according them the same status as Vietnamese civilian casualties or victims of atrocities), this text does acknowledge the existence of the phenomenon of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and the difficulties of readjustment for veterans after the war.

Conclusion

Some may argue that there is little room in US history texts for mention of Edap Enang, Son My, or Kerry Ryan. Most people believe that the purpose of these general texts is to survey the history of the nation — the political entity — which, given its scope, excludes detailed treatment of human stories. But the exclusion of particular human stories and the inclusion of others (such as the heroic death of Pfc. Milton Lee Olive) creates a political framework which supports a particular (and not necessarily accurate) narrative of the Vietnam War. Vietnam is discussed in light of "the Communist Threat to South Vietnam"; the need for "The Tonkin Gulf Resolution"; and the wisdom of "Johnson's Vietnam Policies"⁸⁴. The mythology which underlies these narratives is fundamentally incapable of encompassing a war in which American and soldiers fought, suffered, and died (and still continue to suffer) for less than noble reasons. And this mythology is incapable of dealing at all with the questions of Vietnamese history and political culture. An approach which could embrace these topics would lead to fundamental questions of authority and obedience to country, to school; in fact, to all figures of authority.

In an interview several years ago David Marr was asked a question about how to write about Vietnam in high school textbooks. He answered that "for the Vietnam war you will try to find out what are the most common public attitudes about the war, and you will repeat those in one form or another"⁸⁵. A textbook written for the public schools cannot be expected to confront the fact that fathers, husbands, and sons of the community have become casualties for no good reason. Textbooks, reflecting traditional cultural values, must present a history that can conform to "the most common public attitudes" even if they must rewrite events to achieve that end. They are noteworthy primarily because of how they choose *not* to deal with Vietnam, by their evasion, their lack of passion — their presentation of Vietnam in cold blood.

Can educators be excused for this failure to face the facts? Next to parents, we are the primary agents by which our society enculturates its children. How can we justify our failure to confront the consequences of warfare? There is no question that texts ignore the "missing dimension" of the Vietnam War, and there is no legitimate excuse we can make for this ignorance. Frequently the evasion is disguised by a claim of academic objectivity, but this "objectivity" almost always turns out to work in support of a particular political view. The attempt to avoid the controversy which would enter the classroom if we encouraged enlightened discussions about the Vietnam War is an outgrowth of the political constraints placed on the comprehensive public school and of the cultural conditions which shape the schools in the community image.

The treatment of the Vietnam War in American textbooks serves as one of the means by which schools perform their larger social functions. Their most basic function is to obtain an uncritical *acceptance* of the present society, thus hindering rational analyses of conflicts such as Vietnam... the textbook examination of the Vietnam War is eminently reasonable once we understand the role it plays in the larger social functions of schooling⁶.

It is the failure of educators to confront the community, and to question the role which we play in the whole of the educational system which results in the miseducation of our students. If we fought the Vietnam War in cold blood, we have taught the the Vietnam War in cold blood as well.

¹ Hickey, Gerald Cannon. *Free In the Forest: Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands, 1954-1976* (New Haven: Yale University Press) 1982; and Hickey, Gerald Cannon. *Sons of the Mountains: Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands to 1954* (New Haven: Yale University Press) 1982.

² Peers, Lt. General WR. *The My Lai Inquiry* (New York: WW Norton) 1979.

³ Thayer, Thomas C. *War Without Fronts: The American Experience in Vietnam* (Boulder: Westview Press) 1985: 125.

⁴ Blumenthal, Ralph. "Agent Orange Payments Plan Limits Number of Awards," *New York Times* (February 28 1985): B1-4; and, Rogers, Jim. "Agent Orange in Vietnam: America's Shared Legacy," *Indochina Issues* 60 (September 1985).

⁵ Blumenthal: B1-4; and, Linedecker, Clifford; Michael and Maureen Ryan. *Kerry: Agent Orange and an American Family* (New York: St. Martin's) 1982: 176-177.

⁶ Summers, Harry G. Jr. *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (New York: Dell) 1984: 62-63.

⁷ Hellman, John. *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York:

78 VIETNAM GENERATION

Columbia University Press) 1986: 4.

⁸ 1979: 7, 15. (FitzGerald, *America Revised?*)

⁹ Baritz, Loren. *Backfire: A History of How American Culture Led Us into Vietnam and Made Us Fight the Way We Did* (New York: Ballantine) 1985: 26.

¹⁰ Bragdon, Henry W.; Samuel P. McCutchen. *History of a Free People*, 6th revised edition (New York: Macmillan) 1967.

¹¹ Graff, Henry F. *America: The Glorious Republic* (Atlanta: Houghton Mifflin) 1985.

¹² Smith, Lew. *The American Dream* (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman) 1980.

¹³ Fleming, Dan B.; Ronald J. Nurse. "Vietnam Revised: Are Our Textbooks Changing?" *Social Education* 46.5 (May 1982): 338.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*: 343.

¹⁵ Fleming, Dan B.; Ronald J. Nurse. "The War in Recent US History Textbooks," *Social Education* 52.1 (January 1988): 28.

¹⁶ Griffen, William L.; John Marclano. *Lessons of the Vietnam War: A Critical Examination of School Texts and an Interpretive Comparative History Utilizing the Pentagon Papers and Other Documents* (New York: Rowman and Allanheld) 1979: xix.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*: xi.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*: 163.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*: 171.

²⁰ English, Raymond. "Can Social Studies Textbooks Have Scholarly Integrity?" *Social Education* 50.1 (January 1986): 46.

²¹ Kirkpatrick, Charles E. "Personality," *Vietnam* 1.2 (Winter 1988): 82. Kirkpatrick was speaking particularly about the books of Bernard Fall.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ FitzGerald, Frances. *America Revised: History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly) 1979: 124-126.

²⁴ Drewry, Henry N.; Thomas O'Connor; Frank Freidel. *America Is*, Teacher's Annotated Edition, 3rd edition (Columbus, OH: Charles Merrill) 1984.

²⁵ Conlin, Joseph R. *Our Land, Our Time: A History of the United States* (San Diego: Coronado Publishers) 1985.

²⁶ Ver Steeg, Clarence L.; Hofstadter, Richard. *A People and a Nation* (New York: Harper & Row) 1981: 795-799.

²⁷ *Ibid.*: 800-801.

²⁸ *Ibid.*: 797.

²⁹ Bass, Herbert J.; George A. Billias; Emma Jones Lapsansky. *Our American Heritage* (Morristown, NJ: Silver Burdett) 1983: 712-716.

³⁰ *Ibid.*: 712.

³¹ *Ibid.*: 716.

³² Drewry: 639.

³³ *Ibid.*: 635.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ FitzGerald: 122-123.

³⁶ Caughy, John W. *Land of the Free: A History of the United States* (New York: Benziger Brothers) 1966.

³⁷ Canfield, Leon H.; Howard B. Wilder. *The Making of Modern America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin) 1966.

³⁸*Ibid.*: 784.

³⁹*Ibid.*: 789.

⁴⁰Todd, Lewis Paul; Merle Curti. *Rise of the American Nation*, 2nd edition (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich) 1966: 790.

⁴¹Bragdon: 767.

⁴²Garraty, John A. *The American Nation: A History of the United States* (New York: Harper & Row) 1966: 876-877.

⁴³*Ibid.*

⁴⁴Allen, Jack; John L. Betts. *History: USA* (New York: American Book Company) 1967.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*: 709.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

⁴⁷*Ibid.*: 708.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*

⁴⁹FitzGerald, Frances. *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books) 1972: 8.

⁵⁰Baskir, Lawrence M.; William A. Strauss. *Chance and Circumstance: The Draft, the War, and the Vietnam Generation* (New York: Alfred Knopf) 1978:

⁵¹McIntyre, Thomas Richard. *One Body at a Time: The Political Economy of Vietnam Combat Death*, unpublished dissertation (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh) 1987: 259.

⁵²*Ibid.*: 372.

⁵³Baskir: 6, 9.

⁵⁴Graff, Henry F. *The Free and the Brave: The Story of the American People*, 3rd edition (Chicago: Rand McNally) 1977: 680.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*: 681.

⁵⁶Wood, Leonard C.; Ralph H. Gabriel; Edward L. Biller. *America: Its People and Values*, 2nd edition (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich) 1975: 768.

⁵⁷Leinwand, Gerald. *The Pageant of American History* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon) 1975: 632.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*: 635.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*: 634, 646.

⁶⁰FitzGerald, *America Revised*: 124-125.

⁶¹Bailey, Thomas A.; David M. Kennedy. *The American Pageant: A History of the Republic*, 7th edition (Lexington, MA: DC Heath) 1983: 860, 889.

⁶²*Ibid.*: 871.

⁶³*Ibid.*: 873.

⁶⁴Smith: 582.

⁶⁵Peck, Ira; Steven Jantzen; Daniel Rosen. *American Adventures*, New edition (New York: Scholastic Book Services) 1983: 645.

⁶⁶Branson, Margaret Stimmann. *America's Heritage* (Lexington, MA: Ginn) 1986: 544.

⁶⁷Garraty, John A. *American History* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich) 1982: 862.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*

⁶⁹*Ibid.*: 863.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*: 864.

⁷¹*Ibid.*

80 VIETNAM GENERATION

⁷² *Ibid.*: 875.

⁷³ Graff, *America: The Glorious Republic*: 751.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*: 678.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Todd, Lewis Pau; Merle Curti. *Rise of the American Nation*, Liberty edition (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich) 1982: 783.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*: 785.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*: 788.

⁷⁹ Jordan, Winthrop; Miriam Greenblatt; John S. Bowles. *The Americans: The History of a People and a Nation* (Chicago: Science Research Associates) 1982: 720.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*: 699.

⁸¹ Conlin: 766.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Graff, *America: The Glorious Republic*: 742-743.

⁸⁵ Spragens, John; Chris Jenkins. "Reinterpreting the Vietnam Experience," *Southeast Asia Chronicle* 85 (August 1982): 5.

⁸⁶ Griffen and Marclano: 164.