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FIRST BLOOD REDRAWN

DON KUNZ

Nearly everyone speaking or writing about America's Vietnam soldier eventually feels compelled to mention Rambo. As David Morrell notes with pride, the name of the character he created in his novel, *First Blood*, has entered our nation's household vocabulary¹. It resembles in this case the title of Joseph Heller's World War 2 novel, *Catch 22*, and the macho movie-star name of Marion Robert Morrison — John Wayne. There is more at stake in the popular adoption of those terms than a simple enlargement of the dictionary. The evolution of Rambo from character to icon illustrates the fictionalizing process by which history is accommodated to myth.

Rambo is an ambiguous and contradictory epithet, its meaning shifting as a result of an elaborate revision process still underway. Morrell's protagonist has been appropriated variously as a symbol of American patriotism, mindless savagery, the frontier hero, and Frankenstein's monster. President Reagan has invoked Rambo as the *deus ex machina* to his administration's hostage crisis and tax reform problems². Rambo has subsequently trickled down into parental discussions of overly zealous Little League coaches, and to newspaper headlines about Los Angeles freeway killers. In the semantically confusing aftermath of the Rambo films — Ted Kotcheff's *First Blood, Part 1* (1982), George P. Cosmatos' *Rambo: First Blood, Part 2* (1985), and Peter MacDonald's *Rambo 3* (1988) — David Morrell's 1972 novel has almost been forgotten.

Critics have written about the Rambo films in relation to one another and in relation to other films about Vietnam, ignoring the original literary work. I intend to reestablish the importance of the novel by a comparison of its setting, characterization, and theme to the revisionary film adaptation. I will then demonstrate the ways in which the two cinematic sequels to *First Blood, Part 1* continue the transformation of a provocative, engaging fiction into a familiar and comforting myth.

The film adaptation and its sequels repackage and resell the Vietnam experience as an entertainment commodity for safe mass consumption — a sanitized rerun of America's first television war. In the

films, David Morrell's complex and disturbing protagonist is simplified and softened in order to transform the public's concept of America's Vietnam veteran from psychotic loser to incorruptible and invincible superpatriot; Sylvester Stallone's muscular incarnation of John Rambo glosses over Morrell's profoundly troubling conclusions about America's treatment of Vietnam veterans.

In Morrell's original story, protagonist and antagonist alike are realistic extensions of the national character, reflecting the historic era. Their suffering is psychological as well as physical; the conflict is more tragic than melodramatic. Reading the novel, we are invited to acknowledge the humanity of those who provoke the returned veteran's violence. As a consequence, we are unable to deny that to some extent the antagonists represent us, ordinary Americans of no great power or influence who nevertheless share responsibility for what happened to the Vietnam veteran.

Morrell's Rambo returns to an America which is hostile territory for anyone who looks different. The setting of the novel — Madison, Kentucky — is apparently unremarkable except for being near the heartland of America, for which it stands. Rambo, with his heavy beard, long hair, and ragged, dusty, patched clothing, is nearly run over by a car as he is hitchhiking in Madison, and a gas station attendant quickly calls the police because he looks like a vagrant. The Chief of Police, Wilfred Teasle, drives Rambo to the edge of town and leaves him in the ditch, like a throwaway bottle. When Rambo returns, Teasle tells him he looks like a drifter, a moocher, a drug pusher; he stands out "like some black man"³. Escorting Rambo to the city limits for the second time, Teasle remarks angrily that his town is changing: kids are hanging out on the street, littering, making noises that he doesn't want to hear. Rambo should get a haircut, a bath, and a job. Morrell makes it clear, when Rambo thinks to himself that Madison is the fifteenth town he has been pushed out of, that this old Kentucky home is just like the rest of America in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In Morrell's America, blacks have been excluded from full social participation, ghettoized out of sight; there is a generation gap, an internal war between Establishment and counterculture. The local police have obviously taken President Nixon's speeches about law and order to heart. In fact, Chief of Police Teasle has made his home in the police station; an old schoolhouse newly repainted red, white, and blue. Rambo eventually dynamites the station along with the courthouse, and Teasle thinks, "Christ, he's gone out of his mind.... He wants to blow up the whole town"⁴. Synecdochically, the town is America.

In contrast, Kotcheff's film adaptation of Morrell's novel makes

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the town which casts Rambo out seem atypical and fantastic. (The film was shot in Nelson, British Columbia; the same otherworldly location Fred Schepisi and Steve Martin used for *Roxanne*.) The neon sign at the city limits proclaims, "Welcome to Holidayland". A remote resort surrounded by snow-capped peaks, this place seems special, not the average American small town. In *First Blood, Part 1*, a black family lives beside a sparkling lake where children play happily together. The Police Chief contentedly belches and pats his full belly as he emerges from the station to banter good naturedly with the locals. The streets are bathed in sunlight reflected from the majestic, snow-covered mountains. This town's allegorical name is consistent with Kotcheff's revision: Hope.

Kotcheff's Rambo returns to America with a set of expectations which are soon dashed. Unlike Morrell's character, this Rambo is not just passing through one more American town along an endless road. Instead, he has come to Hope expecting to be welcomed; he has come to look up Delmore, a black comrade, the only other survivor of his Green Beret unit. In the opening scene, Delmore's mother bitterly informs Rambo that her son died of cancer brought on by his exposure to Agent Orange. Rambo is crushed to learn that there is no hope of escaping the damaging effects of the war, even after being discharged, and the sky actually darkens as he heads into town, looking for someone to blame. Hope is a false promise. The town seems beautiful, friendly, but it is actually a closed community harboring its own cancer; a utopia maintained by violently repressive and sadistic forces, denying access or understanding to outsiders. Kotcheff grants his film audience license to regard this town, and especially its inept and villainous police force as isolated from, rather than typical of, the nation at large.

In contrast, Morrell's Madison is just like the fifteen other town Rambo has been pushed out of on his aimless journey through America. The novel does not permit the reader to escape the unsettling conclusion that rejecting the Vietnam veteran and denying him a place in the society he fought for can only result in his decision to turn against America, to bring the full horror of the Vietnam War home.

Neither the novel nor the film give much insight into the townsfolk; it is the character of the police force which precipitates Rambo's decision to reenact the guerrilla war. In the novel the police are plausible civilian surrogates, representing America at home as the soldier does in Vietnam. The policemen of Madison are ordinary people who follow procedures, live routinely, think conventionally. Rambo can anticipate and openly mock their clichéd remarks: what sex is he? and let's take up a collection to buy him a haircut. Chief Teasle automatically assumes that Rambo is a fugitive because he

does not carry any identification. The wounds which are revealed to Teasle during his strip search of Rambo are assumed to be related to civilian life rather than military service. Teasle and his men are wholly unprepared to deal with an alienated, intelligent, skillful Green Beret who once escaped a North Vietnamese prison camp and was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. When an inexperienced policeman named Galt shakily draws his gun (against Teasle's orders) Rambo instinctively lashes out with the razor being used to shave him. The war at home begins with the police force unaware that Rambo is a veteran. In fact, they have been so conditioned to expect trouble from the opposite end of the political spectrum — counterculture war protesters — that they mistake Rambo for one.

Isolated and silent, rather than tribal and vocal, Rambo has not returned from the war to join the ranks of the protesters against it. He has, however, become a kind of dropout, scavenging, surviving off the land, and rejecting the option of settling down with a regular job. The badges of his status are his long hair, beard, and ragged clothing. The way Rambo chooses to live after the war is implicitly a critique of the establishment which sent him abroad to perpetuate its values. In suggesting at least a superficial (counter)cultural resemblance between the veteran and the antiwar protester, Morrell's novel invites our conclusion that the Vietnam War pointed an entire generation in roughly the same direction. Like us, the police officers of this typical American town do not, at first glance, understand the situation. They are average Americans of an older generation hostile toward a younger one, ignorant about Vietnam and unable to imagine how the war will have an effect on them.

The film adaptation depicts Hope's police as melodramatic villains who are aware of Rambo's war service almost immediately; they have read his dog tags. When a young policeman (Mitch) calls attention to Rambo's scars, the older officer (Gault) says curtly, "Who gives a shit?" Although Mitch can see Rambo is growing agitated and tries to calm him down, Galt, as senior officer, mocks and tortures the "soldier boy". Without provocation or warning he strikes Rambo in the kidneys with his nightstick, washes him down with a firehose while laughing sadistically, and puts a choke hold on him when Rambo starts to object. Galt's brutality triggers Rambo's flashback to torture in the POW camp, and precipitates his violent escape. The cinematic flashback clearly equates Hope's police force with the North Vietnamese. As Elizabeth Traube notes, "Domestic violence is modeled on the represented foreign violence, and the film makes a manifest attempt to identify the oppressive domestic forces with the Vietnamese enemy"⁵.

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Kotcheff's film adaptation transforms Galt from the least experienced to the oldest veteran on the police force. In the novel, Galt acts from ignorance and fear, as any of us might. In the film his blatant disregard for the veteran's pain and his eagerness to abuse Rambo make him hateful beyond the point of audience identification.

This reckless brutality is more characteristic of Hope's police force than not. Teasle's chase after Rambo is a crazy, headstrong charge off the highway, on to backroads, across fields and streams, through closed pastoral gates, until the officer overturns his car on the mountainside and crawls from the wreckage to fire a parting shot. The police cruiser is not the only thing upside down here.

It is no wonder that Teasle describes the evil Gault as his oldest and best friend: they are both corrupt authority figures who disguise their sadistic tendencies by maintaining the pretense of a rule of law; ironically, they provoke the disturbance which they are pledged to guard against. This conspiracy envelopes other citizens of Hope, such as the civilian whom Teasle employs to track Rambo with dogs. Dobermans, he asserts, are better than Bloodhounds because the fiercer dogs "can eat on the run". Although Hope's police force wears white cowboy hats, the officers are clearly not the good guys of this cinematic melodrama. Their crude disregard for and sadistic treatment of the Vietnam veteran justify the magnitude of the destruction which he visits upon them and, more importantly, forestall any audience sympathy.

The police officers' willfully callous abuse of John Rambo, their disastrously ill-conceived search and destroy tactics, and obsession with avoiding at any cost a publicly humiliating defeat by a presumably inferior force might help the audience to the conclusion that these men are small-town surrogates for civilian and military leadership during the Vietnam War. But Rambo's prison flashback qualifies that interpretation, inviting the audience to regard Hope's police force as a quasi-foreign corruption of American civil and moral authority — the metaphorical equivalents of his brutal North Vietnamese captors. As such, they are justly punished by the Vietnam veteran who has returned to protect us from them.

Morrell's Police Chief Teasle is a more complex invention than his film counterpart. Though he orders the stranger out of town by sundown (exhibiting the typical macho of the frontier sheriff), he also offers him a ride to the city limits and, later, when Rambo returns, asks him if he needs a job. Teasle's tough talk is softened by some paternal gestures and an occasional smile which permits a glimpse of humanity beneath the gruff professional exterior. His police cruiser accident is not melodramatic but comic: Teasle is so astonished at seeing Rambo

back in town that he stops short in traffic and get rear-ended by one of the local citizens. Fending off public embarrassment, he gives the man a ticket because "the law says the car in back is always wrong. You were following too close for an emergency"⁶. The episode depicts Madison's Police Chief more humanely, and serves as ironic commentary on his pursuit of Rambo — Teasle follows him too closely, unable to anticipate the accident he is about to cause. Morrell's Teasle is complex because we have access to his consciousness. We see him worrying about the wife who has left him, remembering his father's death in a hunting accident, and considering how to renew relations with his surrogate father, Orval. Although Teasle denies it, even Orval (and, hence, the audience) recognizes that it is displaced anger that compels Teasle to pursue Rambo. Teasle is unable to separate his personal and professional life, creating a dangerous and volatile situation.

In Morrell's novel, Teasle and his police force are not evil men; they are simply unfamiliar with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), dulled by small town life and official procedures, and overly protective of their authority. They are not prepared to cope with the emergency which the Chief's routine rousting of Rambo provokes. Most importantly, they show no initial malice toward Rambo, and have no suspicion of his veteran status. The police of Madison are simply implementers of America's domestic law-and-order agenda. Morrell makes it difficult to hate these policemen and easy to believe they are only average men making natural mistakes which must inevitably trigger Rambo's violent backlash. Madison's policemen are family men.

The guerrilla war which Rambo brings home to America in Morrell's novel is, finally, a family affair. Rambo is the son Teasle wanted but could never have. Morrell has carefully constructed Rambo's entrance to coincide with the departure of Teasle's wife: Teasle wanted a child; his wife didn't want the "trouble"⁷. Teasle is old enough to be Rambo's father and, even after he learns Rambo's name, continues to refer to him only as "the kid" — an epithet which the rest of his men adopt. Teasle and Rambo are very much alike; they have matching temperaments. Both are proud, independent, macho personalities, men without the softening influence of women. Neither likes to receive advice or take orders or negotiate.

The novel's protagonist and antagonist have been shaped by similar experiences. They are heroic veterans: Rambo is a Congressional Medal of Honor winner, Teasle is a recipient of the Distinguished Service Cross for his conduct in Korea. Both men have macho foster fathers (Orval and Trautman) who they have grown to resemble and whose authority they have challenged in rites of passage to adulthood. Both

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men are alienated: Teasle returning from Korea to be Chief of Police in his hometown, "except it was no more home, just the place where he had grown up"⁸, and Rambo returning from Vietnam to wander, homeless, from town to town. The personal war between Teasle and Rambo continues the cycle of rebellion against a harsh father figure in whose image a boy has been raised. Morrell uses family violence as a trope to explain the blind ferocity and self-destructive nature of a tragic action replicated on a national scale. The war between father and son is prologue to, and rehearsal for, foreign war. And now the war has come home again, the family enlarged, the epilogue written.

As Teasle's battle with Rambo unfolds in Morrell's novel, it becomes more personal, more intimate. He enlists Orval's help in tracking Rambo, and then loses all professional perspective when Orval is shot: "... Teasle was vowing to track the kid forever, grab him, mutilate him... No more because of Galt.... Personal now. For himself. Father, fosterfather. Both shot. The insane anger of when his real father had been killed, wanting to strangle the kid until his throat was crushed, his eyes popping"⁹. The Vietnam War has come home for Teasle, threatening first his professional reputation and his pride in keeping order in his hometown, and then threatening his personal relationships and his ability to control and order his family life.

Although the State Police and the National Guard become involved in hunting Rambo, Morrell focuses primarily upon the developing intimacy between Teasle and his prey. Each crawls painfully through a thicket of brambles to escape the other (Teasle in the mountains and Rambo in town); each experiences chest pains (Rambo because of broken ribs, Teasle because of heart trouble); both want to end their war but cannot, caught in the escalating struggle which moves the war from the mountainous wilderness into the town itself.

The plot moves to resolution as they fire reflexively and simultaneously, wounding one another with pistols. And, significantly, each experiences mysteriously transcendent moments which precede the catastrophe. Rambo's transcendence occurs at a level which "the native allies in the war had called ... the way of Zen, the journey to arrive at the pure and frozen moment achieved only after long arduous training and concentration and determination to be perfect. ... the moment could not be explained. The emotion was timeless, could not be described in time, could be compared to orgasm but not so defined because it had no physical center, was bodily everywhere"¹⁰. Teasle's moment occurs first as a dream in which he foresees exactly how Rambo will escape the trap set for him by detouring through a "graveyard" of junk cars and stealing a police cruiser, and, then, after

Rambo shoots him, in a moment when "it was all reversed, him outside of himself, but everything out there within him.... He had never seen anything with such distinct clarity"¹¹. Teasle has become Rambo's secret sharer.

What the two veterans have suffered together has made them reluctant antagonists. After he has wounded Rambo, Teasle admits, "I shot him and all at once I didn't hate him anymore. I was just sorry"¹². Similarly, Rambo "squinted to clear his vision, looking down the mound where Teasle lay flat in the brush. Christ, he had hit him. God, he had not wanted that"¹³.

Their developing intimacy in the novel is publicly acknowledged just before death. As Teasle lies wounded, "the one policeman shook his head queerly. 'He thinks he's the kid.' 'He's gone crazy,' the other said"¹⁴. Teasle is perceived by observers not just as having lost his mind like Rambo, but having, in a sense, become Rambo. Killing Rambo is like killing himself. When Teasle continued to stalk Rambo despite his own mortal wound, he argued with Trautman about who had the right to end it: "He's mine," says Teasle. "Not yours. He wants it to be me"¹⁵. As he was tracking Rambo, Teasle thought, "There was blood here on the fence. The kid's. Good. He would be going over where the kid had. His blood dripping on the kid's...."¹⁶

But it is Captain Trautman, who finally kills Rambo, taking off the top of "the kid's" head with a shotgun blast as the dying Teasle watches: "He thought about (his wife) again, and she still did not interest him. He thought about his house he had fixed up in the hills, the cats there, and none of that interested him either. He thought about the kid, and flooded with love for him, and just a second before the empty shell would have completed its arc to the ground, he relaxed, accepted peacefully. And was dead"¹⁷. The tragic conclusion of the personal war between Rambo and Teasle is couched in the intimate terms of a belated reconciliation between estranged father and son whose life experiences mirror one another.

In Morrell's novel, the body count from Rambo's guerrilla war at home is a staggering 200 kills¹⁸, indicating the extent to which the Vietnam veteran succeeds in making his fellow Americans experience the pain and suffering of the conflict which they had exported to Southeast Asia. Like America's policy makers, the Madison police force pay an enormous price for steadily escalating the conflict. But in this tragic novel's catastrophe, Rambo manages to make civilian and military authorities recognize the pain of the Vietnam veteran who was the instrument of America's destructive policy abroad and a casualty upon his return. Teasle and Trautman, who serve as Rambo's civilian and military foster fathers, discuss the murder of their "son": "'What's

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it like for you?' 'Better than when I knew he was in pain.' 'Yes' '19.

Ted Kotcheff's film adaptation spares its audience the pain of any such discussion of strife between fathers and sons. For one thing, neither Teasle nor Rambo die on celluloid. Instead, Trautman talks Rambo out of killing the sadistic and obsessive Police Chief of Hope, and then leads him off to prison. Trautman and Rambo march side by side through an assembled crowd, through flashing lights that seem more awed tribute to a returned Vietnam veteran's victory over evil forces than an arrest — a belated parade in which he has compelled them to march. This Teasle is not like Rambo: he is not a war hero, or even a veteran. This private war is not structured so that the experiences of the combatants reflect one another. There is no mutual respect in their final orgy of destruction.

Kotcheff's Teasle is a ghoul in a horror movie, the bad guy in a western — a sadist who wants "to kill that kid so bad he can taste it". The scene where Teasle and his police force pursue Rambo in the wooded mountains is a cinematic hybrid. Rambo, garbed like an American Indian, ambushes and cripples each white-hatted deputy in turn. The techniques he uses seem to come from the latest manual of guerrilla warfare. Resurrected from his tragic end in the novel to become a muscular romantic film hero, Rambo rises mysteriously from the forest floor, leaps from trees; he stabs one deputy in the leg, lashes another to a tree with a garrote, impales another on punji sticks. Lighting flashes, thunder booms, and each wounded deputy screams for help. Rambo finally pins Teasle against a tree and holds a knife to his throat: the savage delivers a civilized warning: "In town you're the law; out here its me. I could have killed them all. Let it go or I'll give you a war you won't believe. Just let it go." And Rambo disappears silently back into the forest darkness.

The film *First Blood, Part 1* is a revisionist Western like Ralph Nelson's *Soldier Blue* (1970) or Arthur Penn's *Little Big Man* (1971), inverting our sense of who is savage and who is civilized. Teasle and Rambo are intimate, but opposite. Rambo is a modern version of the prototypical American hero: the Green Beret, like the Indian Fighter, adopts the alien other's costume and tactics in the service of fighting for progress along a frontier poised between savagery and civilization. In Vietnam, the Green Beret used the small-band guerrilla tactics of the Viet Cong, and now he has returned home to use those same skills on the war-making savages who masquerade as righteous representatives of law and order. Like the mythic American frontier hero, the Green Beret is distinguished from the savage antagonist whom he resembles not only by the progressive mission which his savagery serves but also by the civilized restraint which exercises.

But Kotcheff is also making a horror film. Harvey Greenburg notes that *First Blood, Part 1* can be considered a "bridge" film which connects earlier works depicting the Vietnam veteran as an urban vigilante (a kind of post-modern Western) to the spectral lunatic haunting "slice and dice" thrillers²⁰. This first Rambo film is an updated *Frankenstein* with Rambo as the rejected monster and Trautman as the scientist-creator "come to reestablish control over the dangerous power that he has unleashed"²¹. In the novel, Teasle sends for Trautman; in the film Trautman mysteriously appears immediately after Teasle exclaims, "What ever possessed God in Heaven to make a man like Rambo?" "God didn't make Rambo. I did," says Trautman. Trautman speaks of Rambo as if he were not quite human, but rather a sort of bomb that needs to be "defused". Through its mixed homage to two of cinema's melodramatic forms, the Western and horror genres, the film *First Blood, Part 1* distances its audience from the conflict between the returning Vietnam War veteran and his countryman; by its conventional fictionality, the adaptation forestalls consideration of the troubling conclusions to which the more inventive novel leads its readers.

In Kotcheff's film, Rambo brings the guerrilla war home simply because he is brutalized by police so sadistic they seem foreign. In the novel his motives are complex and disturbing. When Morrell's Rambo breaks out of jail he is not being tortured but being made to look like a solid citizen: bathed, clean-shaven, and short-haired. Morrell's Rambo has gotten himself into jail in the first place as a matter of principle. He maintains that he has the right to dress, eat, sleep, and go where he chooses. This Rambo sees himself first as an American civilian entitled to basic liberties that have been systematically denied to him in the last fifteen towns he has passed through. He feels strongly that his wartime service also entitles him to respect. Finally, Morrell's Rambo admits that he misses the war and is hungry for some action. This matrix of motives inevitably conspires against peace when the Vietnam veteran returns to an America divided between respect for authority and preservation of liberty. As a result, everyone is drawn plausibly into an insanely escalating conflict which results in the winner of a Congressional Medal of Honor getting killed for demanding his basic civil rights and a minimal veterans' benefit — respect. Morrell's story poses a challenge to America's sense of innocence, righteousness, and invincibility.

Kotcheff's film does not dramatize the Vietnam veteran's painful homecoming in terms which would lead the audience to self-scrutiny. The film focuses on special effects excitement — exploding helicopters and massive firepower. It is almost as if the filmmakers set out to eradicate traumatic memories of the Vietnam era in the same way

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that policy makers tried to win the war itself; with a technological fix. Only in the movie's final scene is the veteran allowed much more than a sullen expression to articulate his feelings about the war and its aftermath. In a rambling monologue, Rambo responds to Trautman's assertion that "this mission is over". Rambo answers that the war cannot simply be turned off by those who turned it on. Although repelled by the horror which he experienced in war, the civilian life to which Rambo has returned is nothing without the code of honor by which he lived in Vietnam. He wants to "go home", but where is that? The war is officially over, but Rambo cannot hold a job, or even talk to anybody "back in the World". The film adaptation urges us to conclude that the Vietnam veteran's real home is not with us but in the military. In fact, Trautman tells Rambo he has called a helicopter to fly him back to Fort Bragg. With the wildman/monster back on his military reservation, and the quasi-foreign, police-state authorities killed-in-action or hospitalized in intensive care, the theater audience can escape any lingering concern about everyday issues like non-violent abridgement of civil liberties or PTSD.

Cinematic revision of Morrell's novel facilitates assimilation of the Vietnam "experience" into the popular consciousness in a non-threatening (or even self-congratulatory) way. Richard Crenna recently referred to the Rambo film phenomenon as "an audience participation cartoon"²². Through such mass-audience entertainments we escape the spectres of the Vietnam War and the turbulent 1960s. Personal betrayal, military failure, and moral bankruptcy can be attributed to corrupt authority figures. In *First Blood, Part 1* the audience can identify with the Vietnam veteran as a victim who exacts violent poetic justice upon a police force so brutal that they represent corruptions of American civil and moral authority. We do not recognize them as part of our national family, but as quasi-foreign infiltrators who are destroying the country from within.

The second Rambo film, George Cosmatos' *Rambo: First Blood, Part 2*, presents the comfortable spectacle of the Vietnam veteran's return to Southeast Asia for a rematch against the North Vietnamese. Rambo wins a belated victory by destroying a prison camp and liberating a small band of American POWs. Because the North Vietnamese are assisted by Russians, there is the additional satisfaction of seeing American fighting mettle tested successfully against the Evil Empire... almost as a preview of coming attractions. More importantly, the enemy soldiers are depicted as both foreign and familiar: the North Vietnamese wear distinctive "Asian" uniforms, but the beret-clad Soviets look western; both use technologically sophisticated weaponry and employ massively superior numbers in

either conventional front line assaults or search-and-destroy missions. The screenwriters have constructed a fiction in which the historic image of the Vietnam-era American soldier is linked (through uniforms and berets) to one so foreign and sinister that we are pleased to see it eliminated. Similarly, the fictional American and South Vietnamese forces (Rambo and his native intelligence contact, Co) are costumed and deployed as guerrillas: without uniforms; vastly outnumbered; relying upon primitive weaponry or what they can steal; and practicing deception, harassment, and hit-and-run tactics on fixed defensive positions. The image of the Viet Cong has been projected onto the fictional allied forces in a way which makes the fantasized American victory more plausible. This first sequel revises history by a fictitious role reversal. The implication is that Americans could have won the Vietnam War if we had relied less on technology, superior numbers, and conventional tactics.

Ultimately, this conclusion is an indictment of American leadership, a shifting of blame away from the many individual veterans with whom we share the movie theater, and onto a few more distant political and military decision makers. This *Rambo*, then, rehabilitates the reputation of the Vietnam veteran by demonstrating that he could have won the war, *and by* identifying a scapegoat who prevented him from winning.

Cosmatos' sequel starts by clearing Rambo's former commanding officer, now "Colonel" Trautman, of any taint of betrayal. In the opening scene, we see that Rambo has not been flown back to Fort Bragg, as Trautman had promised, but has been condemned to hard labor on a prison rock-pile. Trautman comes to the imprisoned Rambo and asks him to believe that he tried to prevent this punishment, but was over-ruled by higher authorities. Moreover, Trautman has been instructed to offer Rambo immediate release from prison, a temporary reinstatement in the Green Berets, and a possible Presidential pardon in exchange for his services on a covert reconnaissance mission. Rambo asks only one question: "Sir, do we get to win this time?" Trautman replies, "This time it's up to you."

But it isn't. The sequel asks us to believe that the same "higher authorities" who kept us from victory in Vietnam are also preventing the recovery of American POWs. This time "they" have conspired to use Rambo and Trautman in a scheme to cover up the existence of American prisoners in Southeast Asia. Rambo is to be sent to reconnoiter a POW camp that American authorities know will be empty, so that when this notorious war hero and defender of veterans' rights reports that he found nothing, a potentially embarrassing and costly political issue will be convincingly closed. The Vietnam veteran has been

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seduced back into his country's service under the illusion that he will be freed from debilitating restraints imposed by devious or cowardly leaders and so be given an opportunity to conclude the war's unfinished business honorably. In Cosmatos' film, the betrayal of the Vietnam soldier is compounded, the stakes doubled, the potential for cathartic revenge increased.

The covert mission is directed by Marshall Murdock, a man who identifies himself as Head of Special Operations in Washington, and who alludes to his committee's interest in resolving the POW-MIA issue. While Murdock tells Rambo that he himself served in Vietnam and cares passionately about finding and rescuing POWs, he later explains to Trautman that it is doubtful any POWs will be found and that the whole mission is a public relations strategy to pacify special interests. Before being deployed, Rambo tells Trautman he knows Murdock lied about serving in Vietnam, and that Murdock is not to be trusted. Because of mis-timing, Rambo does discover a handful of American soldiers being held prisoner by the South Vietnamese and, instead of simply taking pictures, he actually brings a prisoner back to the pickup point. Murdock then aborts the mission — abandoning American soldiers as a sacrifice to political and economic expediency. Returning from witnessing the aborted pickup, Trautman confronts Murdock about the mission, shouting, "It was a lie! Just like the whole damn war!" Murdock's reply is that Vietnam wasn't his war; he is just there to clean up the mess, bring it to a conclusion, and indulge in some "bureaucratic ass covering". Once this conspiracy is revealed fully, Trautman has to be restrained and arrested to prevent him from assisting Rambo, and Rambo, even while being tortured by Russians, vows to return to "get" Murdock.

In Murdock the screenwriters have created a comfortable scapegoat. He is a politician accustomed to acting out of expediency, not principle; he is a bureaucrat quick to absolve himself of responsibility by pleading that he only follows the orders of those higher up; he is a technocrat who augments his own feeble powers with the most recent sophisticated computers, communications devices, and weaponry. Obviously, he is a foil for Rambo who lives by a personal code of honor, gladly assumes responsibility for winning "a war someone else lost", and relies on his own mind and muscle. While Rambo gets tangible results by taking aggressive action in the jungle, Murdock manufactures false, image-saving political solutions in the comfort of his artificial environment. It is worth noting that Rambo is so burdened by the technological weaponry which Murdock provides that it nearly kills him at the beginning of the mission. Literally cutting himself free of this technological baggage in order to depend upon more primitive

devices and his philosophy that "the mind is the best weapon", Rambo authentically completes the mission that Murdock's dependency on artifice would have doomed to failure.

In *First Blood, Part 2*, protagonist and antagonist conform closely to the familiar conventions of American myth. Rambo is the archetypal American hero: his German/American Indian ancestry is a literal mingling of immigrant and native characteristics. His hometown in Arizona, his costume (bare chest, headband, necklace), his weaponry (bow with flaming arrows, Bowie-like survival knife), and his penchant for physical violence controlled only by a personal code of honor are clear reminders of the frontier experience which shaped the American character. And Murdock is a familiar antagonist for the frontier hero. He is from the city (Washington, D.C.), costumed in a white shirt and tie (a man of ideas, not action), dependent upon the artificial brains of his computers for decisions (and thus has no personal honor), and relies on the weapons of his functionaries for protection (shrinks from participating in physical violence).

Susan Jeffords argues that this sharp contrast between protagonist's and antagonist's style, behavior, and values in effect constitutes gender stereotyping: "Surrounded by comforts, computers, and loyal personnel, Murdock marks a clear feminine to Rambo's expanded masculine"²³. In fact, the film's shot composition repeatedly supports this assertion. The Rambo character is photographed with angles, distances, and lighting which enhance Sylvester Stallone's well-developed musculature and place particular emphasis on his biceps and pectorals so that the physical aspect of his masculinity is exaggerated to the level of a cartoon figure like that of Arnold Schwarzenegger in the *Conan* films. Moreover, when he returns to "get" Murdock he enacts a symbolic rape. First Rambo destroys Murdock's computers with gunfire while Murdock cowers in an adjoining room. Then Rambo bursts through the door, throws Murdock down across a desk, draws his knife, and lying on top of Murdock plunges the knife down next to his ear. Jeffords concludes that "this overtly sexual display confirms the defeat of the weak feminine by the phallic strength that is celebrated in all these recent Vietnam films"²⁴.

Feminizing the scapegoat is yet another facet of re-enacting American myth, specifically the flight of the male hero from civilization associated with the female and the restraints she entails. In this sense, *First Blood, Part 2* is about reestablishing the masculinity of the Vietnam veteran, cast in doubt by the loss of the war. In this fictional resolution of the trauma of emasculation, the veteran reclaims the manhood deviously stripped from him by those "feminine" influences which constrained him from winning the war and recovering his captured

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comrades.

What, then, are we to make of Co, the female intelligence contact who guides Rambo to the POW camp and rescues him from his Russian torturers? Her first words to Rambo are, "You did not expect a woman, no?" And, indeed, women are excluded from the masculine universe of Ted Kotcheff's *First Blood, Part 1* and do not appear in Peter MacDonald's *Rambo 3*. Co is an anomaly. She fulfills the conventional role of the woman in the Hollywood epic of male adventure, nursing Rambo when he is injured, cheering for him when he escapes death, providing an audience to whom he can explain his values and by whom he can hear them confirmed, and, as a love object, she acts as something immediate and tangible for him to value and protect. But in her tenacious loyalty, her readiness to fight physically, and her courageous rescue of American POWs, Co assumes those desired masculine characteristics which Murdock's feminized character lack. Because Cosmatos locates evil in the feminine, Co can be a sympathetic character only if she is masculinized. Through the alchemy of fiction, *First Blood, Part 2* projects masculine characteristics upon the female, and feminine characteristics upon the male just as it projected American costume and tactics upon Soviet and Vietnamese soldiers, and the guerrilla behavior of the Viet Cong upon the American hero and South Vietnamese heroine. Cosmatos offers us a fiction which seems to reflect history's reverse image: the historical negative is projected as a fictional positive.

The result of the process by which fiction revises history into myth is the creation of closure. As a South Vietnamese still loyal to the cause for which her father died (preservation of a non-Communist state), Co reaffirms for Rambo the validity of his earlier trials in Vietnam. In her desire to leave Vietnam (which she defines as a place of death) and go with Rambo to America, she reconfirms that the values which the United States tried to export to Southeast Asia may not have taken root there but are still prized and worth fighting for. When Co is killed by the North Vietnamese, Rambo dons her good luck charm, vows not to forget her, and sets out with renewed determination to free the American POWs not only for the sake of US honor, but also in memory of those South Vietnamese who relied upon American promises and support. *Rambo: First Blood, Part 2* provides a victorious surrogate closure to all of the unfinished items of business entailed in the Vietnam War: loyal South Vietnamese are brutally murdered and then properly avenged; POWs are rescued; the Vietnam veteran's manhood is restored; and, the effeminate politicians responsible for the war's loss are identified and brutally threatened.

The third Rambo film, Peter MacDonald's *Rambo 3*, moves the

Vietnam War into the present by recreating it in Afghanistan. Stallone, who co-wrote the screenplay with Sheldon Lettich, rejected David Morrell's initial suggestion to set the story in Nicaragua, presumably because Americans were so divided on US covert involvement there²⁵. Once again Morrell was interested in facing up to the complex and disturbing legacy of Vietnam, but the filmmaker preferred a less troubling scenario.

As *Rambo 3* opens, the twice-betrayed veteran has retreated to find peace in a Buddhist monastery. When Colonel Trautman arrives to request his assistance in a covert mission in Afghanistan, Rambo declines. He tells Trautman that "it's not my war," and refuses to believe that his involvement would make a difference. Only when Trautman is captured in Afghanistan does Rambo reluctantly join the war effort. The theme of the veteran's abandonment by cowardly, lying American bureaucrats runs as strongly through this film as it does through its predecessor. An American embassy official, Griggs, helps Rambo infiltrate Afghanistan, but tells him, "We can't do anything about it. Not officially. If you are captured, we will deny your existence." Rambo replies, "I'm used to it." Similarly, when his native guide, Mousa, tells Rambo, "If you fail, I will accept no responsibility," Rambo remarks laconically, "Sounds familiar." This time Rambo has taken on the POW rescue mission for reasons more personal than patriotic: *Rambo 3* is a buddy film.

Despite its continued scapegoating of American politicians and bureaucrats, this film offers an even fuller opportunity for the audience to revise the negative image of America which is the historical legacy of involvement in Vietnam — this time by projecting it more completely and explicitly onto the Soviet Union. As Colonel Trautman tells his Soviet counterpart, Colonel Zaysen: "We already had our Vietnam. Now you're going to have yours." The Green Berets, Rambo and Trautman, advise and assist the oppressed natives, who are victims of Soviet atrocities. These *mujahadeen* guerrillas ride horses, lurk in mountain caves, and fire primitive weapons against a massive Soviet army of occupation, which conducts genocidal search and destroy missions with helicopters, rockets, napalm, and automatic weapons. But once Trautman and Rambo have killed an enormous number of Soviets and have escaped the rest with the help of the *mujahadeen*, they decline any further participation in the war and ride off together in a jeep, sharing a joke about getting soft. The war is recognized as the proper responsibility of not only indigenous but also younger males like Little Hamid, who self-consciously imitates Rambo's super-masculine heroics. (It is possible that we are only one sequel away from *Son of Rambo*). In *Rambo 3* the screenwriters have recast

America's role in a foreign war to illustrate that we have transcended the mistake that was Vietnam. Americans are shown acting in accordance with their mythic sense of self: peace-loving people who make war reluctantly and only for a righteous cause which ensures their triumph.

John Hellmann argues, in *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam*, that our more "realistic" national literature about the Vietnam War illustrates profound disillusionment with the fundamental myth of our culture. Specifically, the lesson that the American Adam learned in Vietnam is "that his parentage ties him to a fallen past, that he is not an exception to history and the fallen world of time, but is rather a limited, fallible person whose destiny is in profound doubt"²⁶. The myth of the American hero, who defines himself by fleeing from feminine civilization into a masculine wilderness where he is regenerated by violence exacted according to a code of personal honor, is challenged by many Vietnam novelists. David Morrell, in *First Blood*, contributes significantly to the restructuring of this myth. Morrell's Vietnam veteran returns home to demonstrate what he has learned abroad in a limited war presumably fought for reasons of national security. The code of *machismo* locks us into a sadomasochistic cycle of unregenerative violence — an unreasonably escalating use of physical force visited back upon the father by the son to whom he taught it — an American family engaged in mutually assured destruction.

Ted Kotcheff's film adaptation of *First Blood* is a step backward, reaffirming the failed American myth by denying the history of the Vietnam War. In the film, a more restrained violence is justifiably visited upon a scapegoat by a heroic veteran who uses the guerrilla tactics he learned in Vietnam to restore America's lost innocence. Cosmatos' sequel, *Rambo: First Blood, Part 2*, is yet another step backward; one in which the veteran is elevated to a mythic savior whose special mission is to illustrate that America could have won the Vietnam War and still can free its soldiers from foreign captivity if it will only throw off the feminine influences which hold its masculine heritage enthralled. The retreat from history continues in Peter MacDonald's *Rambo 3*, in which Americans are shown that a war like Vietnam could only be perpetrated by the Evil Empire, and that it is the natural tendency of Americans to join with freedom fighters against oppression.

All three cinematic spinoffs exaggerate the masculine characteristics of the American hero and link him in a variety of ways to a conventionally fictive version of our country's frontier heritage. The second (and most popular) Rambo film most fully perverts Morrell's message by blaming America's failure in Vietnam on feminine rather than masculine failings. The third film inverts Morrell by showing Rambo

blissfully bequeathing the American macho legacy to a foreign surrogate son. More than one analysis of recent political events suggests that such artistic revision supporting the myth of American power and innocence are not only eagerly sought out, but also acted out: "Americans especially tend to live in a timeless and mythical world in which reality is not allowed to intrude very much upon the Walt Disney epic which insists that we are heroes, the defenders of freedom and justice, and the protectors of the weak and oppressed"²⁷.

In "Reporters of the Lost War," Thomas B. Morgan concludes that in telling the Vietnam story "rewriting history is the alternative to facing up to it.... To come to terms with what happened in reality, not nightmare or illusion, remains a debt of honor"²⁸. The successive cinematic transformations of David Morrell's fictional but believable Vietnam veteran, John Rambo, deny the importance of any search for historical accuracy. In this case, American popular culture actively encourages the decision not to face up to the limits of America's moral and military power by providing a barely qualified, fantastic reaffirmation of belief in the myth of American innocence, righteousness, and invincibility.

¹ Barr, Robert. "Returning Veterans Were Inspiration for Rambo Author," Providence Sunday Journal (22 May 1988): 13.

² Traube, Elizabeth G. "Redeeming Images: The Wild Man Comes Home," *Persistence of Vision* 3/4 (1986): 71-94.

³ Morrell, David. *First Blood* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1972): 18.

⁴ *Ibid.*: 232.

⁵ Traube: 74.

⁶ Morrell: 26.

⁷ *Ibid.*: 79.

⁸ *Ibid.*: 92.

⁹ *Ibid.*: 111.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*: 215.

¹¹ *Ibid.*: 239.

¹² *Ibid.*: 244.

¹³ *Ibid.*: 254.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*: 244.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*: 246.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*: 252.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*: 256.

¹⁸ Barr: 13.

¹⁹ Morrell: 256.

²⁰ Greenburg, Harvey R. "Dangerous Recuperations: *Red Dawn*, *Rambo*, and the New Decaturism," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 15 (1987): 65-66.

²¹ Traube: 76.

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²² Janusonis, Michael. "Crenna Defends *Rambo* Violence," *Providence Sunday Journal* (22 May 1988): 13.

²³ Jeffords, Susan. "The New Vietnam Films: Is the Movie Over?" *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 13 (1986): 192.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Janusonis, Michael. "Sty's a Sensltive Guy," *Providence Journal* (22 May 1988): 13.

²⁶ Hellmann, John. *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: Columbia University Press) 1986: 217.

²⁷ Bellhouse, Mary L.; Litchfield, Lawrence. "Vietnam and Loss of Innocence: An Analysis of the Political Implications of the Popular Literature of the Vietnam War," *Journal of Popular Culture* 16.3 (1982): 158-159.

²⁸ Morgan, Thomas B. "Reporters of the Lost War," *Esquire* (July 1984): 50, 60.