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# White Cong and Black Clap: The Ambient Truth of Vietnam War Legendry

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**White Cong and Black Clap: The Ambient Truth of  
Vietnam War Legendry**

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People who do not know me often attribute to Vietnam War duty my startling array of grotesque facial tics, simian wheezes, and tedious pronouncements about the literary aesthetics of the sucking chest wound. These people, silently nodding to one another, cluck knowingly and say "My, my, it's a damn crime how poor Baky has suffered such

trauma from that evil war. Good God, what must he have witnessed? Isn't it fortunate, though, that he can deflect his psychosis into something so socially useful as collecting the primary resources for the scholarly examination of others?" People who do know me, however, understand that in fact the precise inducement of my richly varied neurosis is not actually anything that occurred in Vietnam, but rather the decidedly post-war exposure I have had to that very act of collecting Vietnam War-related material that can turn toxic that which used to be therapeutic.

Scholars, graduate students, journalists, and writers who examine the *Imaginative Representations of the Vietnam War Collection* at La Salle University will expect that, sooner or later, a Curator of such a Collection must be irreparably damaged by unshielded exposure to such creations as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial kitchen wall clock ( helpfully noted to be "available for a slightly greater price", with wee chips of the original granite WALL inlaid in its face); the John Wayne commemorative wall plate; a 5 ft. by 2 ft. clear plastic holding device into which the owner is meant to insert enormous replicas of his military decorations and then suspend the entire shimmering contraption from his front porch or roof; a colorful board game, suitable for ages 6-14, that proclaims its selfless purpose to be "Making knowledge of the Vietnam War fun for all ages." And, in case you still doubt my caustic eye, I suffer from exposure to things like this gigantic two-volume loose leaf notebook containing hundreds of Viet Nam War memorabilia – for lack of a better term – the M-16 cigarette lighters, license plate frames, armored personnel carriers fashioned out of shaped beer cans, rings, watches, ties, scrapbook covers, tour jackets, more rings, more watches, gold-plated dedicatory weapons, posters, vacation trips, and, that's right, more rings, more watches. On the other hand, the

printed material that forms the much larger core of this Collection has itself achieved a level of toxicity that ought to cry out for the prominent display of a sign warning pedestrians of intellectual "biohazards" contained inside the vault in which the whole throbbing mass of images, artifacts, and booked ideas silently dwells.

Well, having now exploited this forum and your kind attentions to shamelessly drum up curiosity in this Collection, you may - between yawns - be wondering just what in hell any of it has to do with the White Cong and Black Clap of this paper's title. What it has to do with it is that the sort of thing that is in this Collection, and is also represented in the folklore of the Vietnam War, vividly illustrates a very valuable lesson: Namely, that the public understands history according to what they already believe about it, rather than what they might document for themselves or verify through sober authority. That is to say, what people "believe" about the Vietnam War is far far closer to folklore than it is to history or other documentary modes. And further, this tendency to selectively fabricate "knowledge" increases almost geometrically as each year advances past the original event. To anyone familiar with the 1200-odd novels written with various degrees of connection to the Vietnam War, it will come as no surprise that there are persistent narrative patterns that recur. Moreover, I want to caution teachers how some of these literary patterns resemble something much more akin to legend in their structure and origins than to either simple truth or reported fact.

The scores of undergraduate students, visiting scholars, and teaching colleagues who come to dredge the fictive record for muddy factual evidence are all eventually exposed

to a number of "revealed" truths about the war; and, once in the presence of these recurrent tales, the researchers collectively ignore them – journalists appear do this most avidly. People – often teachers - assuming that repetition bestows veracity, often then fail to interrogate these patterns further. This phenomenon seems to be exactly what happened in the recent CNN/TIME Magazine fiasco named Tailwind. Otherwise sober authorities on the historical realities of that Vietnamese conflict do not hesitate a minute before silently assenting to tales of GI's being spat upon, often and copiously, at any of ten different national airports; steely-eyed graduate students who would no more include an unverified footnote in their dissertation than admit to liking professional football will, with alacrity, still accept without question the notion that some VC prostitutes carried on their trade while indulging the puckish frolic of lining their vaginas with sharp objects such as razor blades! Or again, during the course of reading some of the hundreds of novels about the war, critics have glossed over the assertions of characters who swear that they know of an Army Jeep or large piece of lethal armament that eventually was resurrected piece by piece, mirabile visu, in the garage of some GI who simply mailed the pieces home over a year, reassembling them upon their arrival back on the block.

These motifs are everywhere resident in the vast fiction of war, but they are seldom identified or analyzed as legends. The half-dozen narrative motifs here adumbrated represent legends that I believe embodied the personal fears, societal taboos, and the uncertain cultural remorse of tens of thousands of American soldiers (and their expectant families.)

It should be no news to most of you that legendry is both result and process of a larger cultural determinant that has come to be called "folklore." Now the formal academic study of folklore has swollen in seriousness to the point where accredited Ph.D.'s are awarded in something near to 30 universities. I point that out to ensure that neither folklore nor legendry is dismissed as simply unimportant.

Folklore is NOT nonsense. But NEITHER is it history or literature.

The question is, what does one learn from this category of narratives? In fact, it is important that I define what I am calling a legend in the first place. Refreshingly unlike more esoteric academic delimitations, a folklorist's definition of "legend" is pleasing in its consensus. Dr. Lydia Fish, a professional folklorist often focused on the Vietnam War, gives clear voice to what a legend must be when she says it is simply a story told as true. As far as the folklorist is concerned, the historical accuracy of the narrative is never of primary concern. Even a cursory review of the professional literature dealing with legend and its over-arching folkloric origins reveals again and again that a legend must be believed by the teller to have actually happened. That is the absolute extent of a legend's legitimacy. For the purposes of applying the concept of legendry to the fictive product of the Vietnam War a number of other simple characteristics must apply. The tale must: sound plausible; it must have at least part of its origins in oral transmission; it must exist in more than two variations; it must accommodate traditional themes; and it must lack any means of authentication. This last requirement entails anonymity and is most evident in the fact that legends are almost exclusively authenticated by what folklorists refer to as FOAF accounts (friend-of-a-friend), or authenticated by RIITP accounts (read-it-in-the-paper).

I must mention a strong caution here. Care should be taken not to confuse a legend with a rumor. A rumor is merely a sort of plotless unverified report. Rumors, for example, frequently assume the shape of so-called "celebrity legends" like the annoyingly persistent rumor that TV's "Leave It To Beaver's" star Jerry Mathers was killed in combat in Vietnam. There are many of these celebrity-based things. They are not to be confused with legends.

When addressing true legends, "Folklorists accept that the ultimate sources of legends are long lost," so collecting all possible variations of a tale becomes imperative if the core meaning of a particular legend is to be posited. After all, very much like the much more elaborate metaphorical context of myth into which legends sometime fit, it is the concept of truth that is the real fruit of a legend rather any sort of historical data culled from "long-enduring traditions." If encountered in the midst of a well-written narrative or heard from the lips of an otherwise truthful authority, these legends bear a deceptive degree of veracity both in how they are actually related and in the very richness of detail from allusive evidentiary sources like putative eyewitnesses.

From among the 1200 or so novels I have examined that deal in some way with the Vietnam War (and its aftermath), and from among the 600 or so films similarly related to the war, I have so far identified about a dozen distinctly recurring tales or discrete sets of short rhetorical narratives that could be accepted as legends in the general parlance of the professional folklorist. These recurring tales share in common the characteristic that they

are told as truth according to the narrator, that somewhere within the body of the tale is embedded one or more factual elements, and that each tale appears in more than two forms repeated across a long period of time during and after the event to which the tale refers.

Legend #1: a group of tales cluster around the belief that there developed among GI's a certain virulently drug-resistant strain of VD that was so lethal (and no doubt shamefully embarrassing to the armed forces) that its victims were routinely - though very stealthily - transferred to an unnamed island off the coast of South Vietnam. On this island the hapless GI would await excruciating death or miraculous pharmaceutical redemption, whichever arrived first. The island was known as Poulo Condore to the French and, for the Vietnamese/American, Con Son Island. And, it turns out to be, incidentally, the very same real physical island that harbored the infamous and all too real "Tiger Cages" cited by journalists, the military, the CIA, and the Government of South Vietnam itself. This cluster of narratives also bears legendary data such as the names for this strain of VD, how it was treated, where it came from, etc.

Legend #2: This cluster of anecdotes focuses on the ideologically pervasive image of the routine ejections of rope-bound VC prisoners from the wide-open doors of American helicopters. The ceaseless repetition of this image in the films of the era reaches near to Gospel in its stature. With bound VC prisoners hurtling Earthward in mid-scream, booted gleefully from American choppers, we are given a twinned icon that achieves mythic power. This legend is reinvented so often that helicopters and rope would seem



much harder to get and keep than prisoners. In fact, in an extraordinary case of logical absurdity, the film “Off Limits” actually has an American Colonel hurling himself out the door after tossing out three suspected VC.

Legend #3 derives from the mythopoeic belief that returning GI's were routinely spat upon at some time during their repatriation to the USA. This particular round of tales have become so commonplace as to be treated reverently even among many veterans.

Legend #4, old and persistent, valorizes the clandestine VC woman who, masquerading as a prostitute, heroically (and, I might add, seemingly miraculously) lines her vagina with sharp objects - usually thought to be razor blades - then engages GI's in intercourse sometimes, I imagine, causing a bit of, shall we say, troublesome bleeding; only to disappear into the local night.

Legend #5 is that of the periodic sighting of renegade GI's (usually a low-ranking sergeant or, for some reason, a Captain - and, inexplicably, always blond) who run usually with VC units or sometimes with NVA main force elements. This, of course, you will recognize in the Tailwind/Sarin Gas “investigative news” nonsense started by an overly zealous editor at CNN in the late 1990's (the story is documented, analyzed, and debunked by Dr. Jerry Lembcke in his 2003 book entitled CNN's Tailwind Tale: inside Vietnam's Last Great Myth.)

And finally, Legend #6, wherein the hyper-organized (and postally gifted) GI systematically dismantles Government equipment like M1A1 Jeeps and 105 mm howitzers then mails them home, piece by piece, until – as sworn to - the item sits safe and functional in the GI's driveway back in Cleveland. And, just think, this legend comes, ironically, from GI's who used to complain that their franking privileges weren't worth much.

In the time remaining, let us focus on just 4 of these 6 sets of stories that I have seen ensnare researchers more often than the rest. Any scholar wishing to interrogate the origin and motives of these legends must take into account some of the following:

1.) In the case of the first one, the so-called “Black Clap,” the shard of fact that must be present in order to qualify the tale as a true legend happens to be fairly easy to verify. Venereal disease was as common in Vietnam as in other wars. The difference, apparently, was the availability of broad-spectrum antibiotics. These multivalent drugs were used prophylactically by well-meaning Corpsmen in the ill-advised belief that they could prevent their buddies from passing on VD (particularly gonorrhea) to their stateside families simply by giving them one massive dose a day or two before the GI left Vietnam for home. Such injections of conscience proved vengeful. Physicians specializing in infectious disease have long recognized the ability of disease agents to become virulently resistant to even the most powerful antibiotics if the antibiotics are administered in doses that allow the disease vector to build up a tolerance to the drug. That is exactly what happened; and after about 1970 a few Asian strains of VD were extremely difficult to

cure even when treated in isolation back in U.S. medical facilities. That certain of these languishing GIs were spirited away to an island to die alone and un-mourned is a part of the legend that is lost in a cloud of tense anxiety. But it is not hard to imagine the degree of redemptive angst that might build up in the psyche of a 19-year old GI returning home to a nation that suggested to him that he was guilt-ridden just for being where he was in the first place. If he bought into such inventive shame it would seem quite fitting - even logical - that a young man as morally infected as he obviously “was” would not only be incurable, but be made to suffer such vengeful horror in a jail-like setting in an alien nation. Keeping that in mind, we can then also envision another fairly late variant of this disease legend. The novel Meditations in Green written in 1983 (and since reprinted) by Stephen Wright observes that, "The privates were arguing about whose turn it was to have Number Three, apparently a girl of incredibly nimble fingers. Finally they decided to let her choose. Then they congratulated themselves on the easy availability of certified and inspected Grade A prime instead of village leftovers who all carried the Black Syph for which there was no known cure except an indefinite confinement in a military hospital on Okinawa until a treatment could be found. . ." (p. 123)

2.) In set #2 we encounter the “spitting” narrative. Persistent testimony to the revilement of returning GIs by spitting is the hardest of the legend-like tales to interrogate. In Bob Greene's 1989 book entitled Homecoming: when the soldiers returned from Vietnam it is possible to read the edited and selected results of what the syndicated journalist claims are 1000 letters written to him in response to his question: "Were you spat upon when you returned from Vietnam?" What becomes very clear from

these responses is that there seem to be about as many that deny the veracity of the spitting as confirm it. Characteristically, that is not what a legend tends to do concerning an issue. The compelling reality of Greene's hundreds of responses is that returning GIs FELT spat upon by virtue of being pointedly ignored and verbally abused by large segments of the population. Marilyn Young, in her important text Vietnam Wars: 1945-1990 (NY: Harper & Row, 1991) posits this tendency or phenomenon in reaction to a population that simply did not know how to act toward their own collective children who exercised the power given them by a bewildered myth-entangled polity. The vast majority of this "spitting" testimony that a researcher will encounter is of the Friend-of-a-Friend variety, but evident to a troubling degree are those who themselves claim to have been actually spat upon – but with no citations of witnesses, no police reports of any kind anywhere, no newspaper accounts of such encounters in airports or anywhere else, and no corroborating evidence of any kind. Perhaps it is the fact that several veterans who have achieved national audiences are also some of the ones who testify to having been spat upon. Attributions from people such as Larry Heinemann and Linda Van Devanter may produce an effect that distorts memory through imagination. Such distortions are what, after all, drive novels; and in any case, in the face of trauma, probably not a bad thing anyway. It remains curious, however, that this most photogenic of all acts – spitting - is almost never portrayed in the hundreds of films that carry Vietnam War images. Still, that a public act so egregiously insulting and metaphorical of a society's inability to become redemptive is so evident in novels and letters, yet remains nearly non-existent in other narrative modes is inexplicable. The definitive analysis of this spitting phenomenon and its lack of credible evidence is put forth by, again, the sociologist Jerry

Lembcke in his book Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam (NY: NYU Pr, 1998.)

3.) References to the razor-lined vagina are among the most varied and colorful to have come out of the war. This group of tales is the legendry that is least unique to the Vietnam War, at least in the context of oral tradition. The *Vagina Dentata* is a mythopoeic artifact as ancient as narrative itself, and its revisionment employing the grammar of Vietnam attests to the variety of human imagination more than a correlation to that particular war as an historical event. Accounts told as true from one GI to another concerning the ubiquitous Vietnamese prostitute with a razor-lined vagina were extant for the duration of the war, and heard in every Military Region and AO. That is a claim that probably could not be made for the provenance of many of the other legends we might consider. This one was a show-stopper, though. One might wager safely that the power of this particular threat would draw and hold the attention of a post-pubescent male - talk about "just say no!" More to the point, though, the moral implication of GI's being injured in this ghastly way during the precise carnal act usually reserved for joyous rites of passage, is obviously a very fertile cluster of images for interpretation. Just placing the female agent in the role of avenging angel could be another entire paper. In his book The Dynamics of Folklore Barre Toelken points out, rightly I think, that "In the psychology of ethnic folklore, the majority group symbolizes its anxieties about minority groups by seeing them as sexual threats to 'our' innocent males . . . The virtue is on our side, the aggression on theirs." (273) If true, what is interesting in such a gloss is that the male GI's who were being mutilated in the bush (as it were), are in fact the minority, not

the majority. Nearly ageless are related stories of the castrated boy representing a society's dark psychological hostilities. These ancient castration tales have similar ethnic bias resident in them: "one of 'our' innocent people has been mutilated by members of the locally feared minority group. On a somewhat broader level, but related nonetheless, we noted that feared ethnic groups are often depicted as being 'out to get us' sexually." "And of course the image is often used in popular literature and in the movies: The young, innocent, light-skinned heroine is threatened, tortured, or even sexually attacked by an animal-like, darker, aggressive male." Considering the events orchestrated almost operatically near the end of Full Metal Jacket when the small dark Asian woman becomes the dominating lethal hunter of the young, "innocent," light-skinned American boys, it is not hard to see how fear may be translated from one culture's myth system to another.

4.) Finally, a cluster of legends center around the apparent periodic sightings of renegade GI's (usually low-ranking NCO's or, for some reason, a captain - and, inexplicably, always blond.) The renegade GI turned stealthy enemy, sometimes referred to as "White Cong" is one of the most resilient stories to survive the war. In fact, this particular cluster of narratives I happened to have witnessed firsthand in 1970 in northern I Corps. Both then and now the White Cong legends are quite various and in their variety robustly inventive. For example, there are variants of the deserter story that posit the White Cong or "Yankee VC" to be a Special Forces NCO who is blond, and when caught, would be further identifiable by the brilliance of his war record before he ever turned his coat. Kurtz in Apocalypse Now prisms this legend as well in a more extended metaphorical way. In another variant related by Lydia Fish over the Internet in February

1992 she says that the most elaborate version she has ever heard is about an entire Special Forces A-Team that goes over to the enemy -- Since it is racially mixed, it is known as the "salt and pepper team." Dr. Fish explains parenthetically that this is not a new story since she had recently been told of a version from the Philippine War, where the deserter-turned-headhunter is recognized by the presence of his West Point Class ring. Additionally, I have heard related a "Yankee Cong" variant centered in the Mekong Delta area of IV Corps to the effect that there was a black NCO who was canceling medevacs as an act of treason in support of the VC. He was alleged to have shown up at Can Tho Army Airfield. In light of this particular version it is fascinating if depressing to note that the damage perpetrated by this renegade is decidedly cowardly in that it attacks the wounded, but the renegade in this rare reincarnation is a black soldier! Among others, the PFC Robert Garwood case provided what appeared to be ample scraps of truth around which the White Cong renegade could accrete with more than usual authority. Winston Groom and Duncan Spencer interrogate this mythic core extensively in Conversation with the Enemy: the Story of PFC Robert Garwood (NY: Putnam, 1983.) They make a point of "...the way that a minor character can easily assume a large, if one-dimensional, image without facts to deflate it, Garwood's name had become associated with one of the barracks-room myths of the Vietnam War, the man called "Super Charlie..." a figure of prodigious strength and even greater cunning, but more than these qualities, a depth of evil bordering on insanity. In a war in which each side completely misunderstood the other, the figure was that of a soldier, either crazed by battle, brainwashed, or simply perverse, who had abandoned the U.S. force and joined the Viet Cong and combined technology with jungle cunning. The central outrage was the soldier had abandoned not

only his country and his ideology, but also his hemisphere and his race. In the triple-canopy jungle where trails were spiked with bamboo spears poisoned with feces . . . the legend stalked in his tire-made sandals, dressed in loose pajamas. He spoke in an American accent through a bullhorn telling the troops to throw down their arms because, like the jungle, the foe could not be overcome. Like all soldiers in defeat, whether at Waterloo or the Ia Drang Valley many grunts thought they had been betrayed in the jungles, and the turncoat who understood their minds and their manner of operating was the obvious culprit (317-318). Another way to put this is: If you can't bring yourself to blame your government, blame a traitor (whether there is one or not.)

These White Cong stories are so rich in implication that they have persisted in much more elaborate renditions twenty years after the American pull-out. Stephen Wright's 1983 novel Meditations in Green has the following vision: "I see him, I've got one, I've got a gook over here' and all the glasses turned until someone said, 'My God, I think he's white!' not even astonished yet because by now the legend of the American who lived in the bush and ran with Cong was part of the general folklore of the war and if you could get three days in grubby Da Nang for zapping a gook what must be the reward for bagging an out-and-out traitor?" (304). There is an entire feature film starring William Katt wherein he plays a deserter lieutenant sought years later for incomprehensible reasons by a coalition of CIA agents, Khmer rouge thugs, and American political operatives. The title of this film is The White Ghost. Guess what color William Katt's hair is. And finally, do not forget, Tim O'Brien includes in The Things They Carried a chapter in which the grunt's girlfriend arrives in Vietnam and can be interpreted as, of all



things, a female deserter. This version of the White Cong narrative appears in O'Brien's story titled "Sweetheart of the Son Tra Bong" within The Things they Carried. A good example of how the original legend is propagated can be seen by following the earlier stories, to the Garwood publicity trial, to a grade-B film, to the bestselling novel, to – finally, a very good little film starring Kiefer Sutherland as Rat Kiley and titled A Soldier's Sweetheart. And now, we are further blessed with Tailwind!

Though I may be proved wrong eventually, I think that the most useful way to contextualize these legends generated by the Vietnam War is to perhaps view them in the sense that Ralph Ellison valorized the Blues: "The Blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of a personal catastrophe expressed lyrically. [Ellison 1964:77-78] If we accept the countless novels and films in which these legends recur as truly popular art forms, and I believe we should, then Leslie Fiedler was correct when he observed that they ". . . should express the repressed: especially the dark side of our ambivalence toward what any status quo demands we believe." Helicopters raining small tied bodies on an arid chemically blasted landscape, the "Beave" meeting his end in the ghastly snapping jaws of an Asian *vagina dentata*, and a drug-induced strain of venereal disease so vicious that a government would rather execute its victims in secret rather than fight the enemy itself. These are dark visions, in deed. These are the mechanisms that

you will discover driving the hallucinatory guilt that in turn powers the undercurrents so obviously in evidence in the novels, poems, film, and graphic art of the Vietnam War.

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