Paramilitary Fantasy Culture and the Cosmogonic Mythology of Primeval Chaos and Order

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Available at: http://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/vietnamgeneration/vol1/iss3/3
We know the man at first glance: Along the dirty, darkened street a hard-looking guy walks alone, trailed by a gang of savage punks. In an obscure Middle Eastern country a senior marine sergeant stumbles to his feet amidst the burning, bombed-out ruins of an American Embassy, his enraged eyes searching for the laughing Arab and European terrorists whom he knows watch from afar. A time-traveller from a war-torn future materializes naked and breathless, like a new born baby, and then runs into the night on a desperate mission to save humankind from eradication by robots.

Since the late 1970s, shortly after the American defeat in Vietnam, the mythic figure of the heroic male warrior returned. In Death Wish (1974) the middle aged man whose wife has been killed and daughter raped and driven insane by attackers never apprehended by the police, pretends to be a new victim and kills the punks. In Death Before Dishonor (1987) the senior sergeant and his young marine “nephews” both rescue their kidnapped commanding officer—the grand patriarch of this marine family—and destroy the terrorists. And in Terminator (1984), although the time-traveller dies in his attempts to destroy a robot programmed to kill the mother of the future world’s great leader, he first impregnates her. He thus fathers the next generation’s super warrior—the same man who sent him on his mission through time in the first place.

These three films are but instances in a vast cultural resurgence of narratives and visual symbols concerning war and warriors that have been created in the past fifteen years. Hundreds of films have been made, from expensive productions with star casts, to formula films employing lesser known actors; “action-adventure” films have been the largest category of video rentals throughout the 1980s. The same publishing houses that market women’s romance novels, now produce novel series for men featuring commandos, vigilantes and mercenaries who have left normal society and made battle their way of life. From fifteen to thirty series are published each year, with each series coming out four times a year, and print runs from 60,000 to 250,000 (high) per edition. Soldier of Fortune: The Journal of Professional Adventurers first came out in 1975; by 1986 SOF sold up to a quarter of a million
Paramilitary Fantasy Culture

Paramilitary magazines each month and had several competitors. Comic books have in turn borrowed from films, novels, magazines, and their own warrior genre to create series featuring mercenaries and vigilantes.

In conjunction with the print and film representations of war, a new consumer market for slightly modified versions of military assault rifles and their accessories have become a major feature of the domestic gun trade. The US Bureau of Alcohol, Firearms, and Tobacco estimates that from two to three million had been sold by the spring of 1989. Public fears that assault rifles will be banned as a result of the protests that emerged from the Stockton, California massacre in January 1989 have increased demand for the weapons. By April 1989, gun dealers had placed order to import over 900,000 additional rifles to join those produced inside the US.

Taken as a whole, this reworking of traditional war culture constitutes what I call “paramilitary culture.” The new warrior hero is only rarely portrayed as a member of a conventional military or law-enforcement unit. Instead, the new hero fights alone or with a small, elite group of fellow warriors. By being outside the dominant power structure and bureaucracy, the new paramilitary warrior can overcome forms of legal and political restraint supposedly imposed by elites on their subordinates, and thus achieve new mythic victories to replace American defeat in Vietnam. Moreover, paramilitary culture stresses the warrior role as a gender identity for all men, rather than as an occupational identity limited to soldiers and police; all men, be they bankers, professors, factory workers or postal clerks, can be warriors who are always prepared for battle against the enemies of society.

Paramilitary culture represents the newest cultural elaboration of what historian Richard Slotkin calls “regeneration through violence.” In Slotkin’s assessment, European settlers created a fundamental American myth during their wars against the Indians: American technological and logistic superiority in warfare became encoded as a sign of cultural and moral superiority. Thus, European and American civilization morally deserved to defeat Indian “savagery,” and in turn, each victory by Anglo warriors “regenerated” or revitalized the society as a whole. The long history of US victories from the Indian wars through World War II reinforced the centrality of wars and warriors as symbols of masculine virility and American virtue.

Consequently, defeat in Vietnam constituted a two-fold crisis for the United States. First, defeat indicated limits to US political and military powers to successfully intervene in Third World countries. Second, defeat in Vietnam created a cultural crisis. Since American cultural traditions and personal identities are in part sustained and renewed through the myth of “regeneration through violence,” then defeat in war ruptured this fundamental tradition and socialization process.

This disjunction of cultural tradition was amplified by several other major social changes. During the 1960s the civil rights and ethnic
nationalist movements won many victories and successfully challenged white racial domination. During the 1970s and 1980s the feminist movement challenged male sexism. Formerly exclusive male domains in both the labor market and in many areas of social life were integrated by women. What constituted the desirable values of full manhood became a problematic question as women gained more autonomy. The critique of patriarchy became an aspect of women’s and men’s everyday lives.

Finally, extraordinary economic changes marked the 1970s and 1980s. US manufacturing strength substantially declined; both massive trade deficits with other countries and the chronic US government budget deficits have shifted the United States from a “creditor” to “debtor” nation. The post-World War II “American Dream” of high employment rates, rising wages, widespread home ownership, and consumerism no longer seems like a viable future for much of the middle and working classes.

War mythology became a central cultural territory for articulating responses to these changes because war mythology symbolically connects the nation’s historical self-conception to archaic, cosmological notions of how society came into existence from a previous chaotic or warlike condition. Male gods or supermen are the central protagonists in this primordial/historical struggle between the forces of chaos and the forces of order. Slotkin writes:

A mythology is a complex of narratives that dramatizes the world vision and historical sense of a people or culture, reducing centuries of experience into a constellation of compelling metaphors. The narrative action of the myth-tale recapitulates that people’s experience in their land, rehearses their visions of that experience in its relation to their gods and the cosmos, and reduces both experience and mission to a paradigm.... Myth describes a process, credible to its audience, by which knowledge is transformed into power; it provides a scenario or prescription for action, defining and limiting the possibilities for human response to the universe.¹

“Regeneration through violence” refers to the primary American cultural archetype, a term Slotkin defines as a “narrative of narratives, derived from and expressing the common structural form of a constellation of related myth-narratives.”² Thus, James Fenimore Cooper’s Leatherstocking character in early American literature, the legends of Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett, Ned Buntline’s “Wild Bill” Cody character and his exploits, and later, in the 20th century, western and war movies with stars like John Wayne, would be considered as “myth narratives” whose basic structural form is encapsulated in the concept of regeneration through violence.

The component stories in American war mythology usually have an ostensibly secular or historical reference—the defeat of the Indians, the Mexicans, the Spanish, the Germans, the Japanese, or some other
enemy. But the fantastic plots, heroes, and events of most such narratives make them a kind of cosmogonic mythology as well as a more historically specific cultural legitimation and motivating doctrine for an expanding American empire. Cosmogonic myths—the primary narratives of pre-industrial societies—concern the very origins and nature of the universe. Mircea Eliade explains:

Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the “beginnings.” In other words, myth tells us, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality, the Cosmos, or only a fragment of reality—an island, a species of plant, a particular kind of human behavior, an institution. Myth, then, is always an account of a “creation;” it relates how something was produced, began to be. Myth tells only of that which really happened, which manifested itself completely.

Scholars of mythology have found that in most pre-industrial societies, the creation myths take the form of a passage from “chaos” to “order” and that the period of chaos was a war between the “good” forces of creation and order versus the “evil” forces of chaos. Consequently, wars have been conceptualized as not simply about worldly matters of territory or secular ideas about freedom, but rather as struggles against the primordial chaos. Paul Ricoeur calls it the “theology of the Holy War:

According to that theology, the Enemy is the Wicked One, war is his punishment, and there are wicked ones because first there is evil and then order. In the final analysis, evil is not an accident that upsets a previous order; it belongs constitutionally to the foundation of order. Indeed, it is doubly original; first, in the role of the Enemy, whom the forces of chaos have never ceased to incarnate, although they were crushed at the beginning of the world; second, in the figure of the King, sent to “destroy the wicked and the evil” by the same ambiguous power of devastation and of prudence that once upon a time established order.

War mythology thus tells its stories on both the historical, society-specific level, and at the cosmogonic level of creation myth. War mythology takes the person or group back to the back of the Great Battle, which is by definition a great victory. As Bronislaw Malinowski says, myth is not “an explanation in satisfaction of scientific interest, but a narrative resurrection of a primeval reality.” In knowing the tales of the primordial/historical victories (and thus resurrecting the magical time in reciting them), the warrior gains strength. He becomes assured, in Eliade’s interpretation, “that what he is about to do has already been done, in other words, it helps him to overcome doubts as to the result of his undertaking. There is no reason to hesitate before setting out on a sea voyage, because the mythical Hero has already made it in a fabulous time.”
The process of returning to the sacred beginning and so becoming a "god" in the primordial time is both conceptualized and ritually experienced as a form of symbolic rebirth. Many of the rituals, particularly initiation ceremonies and rites of passage, have a three-part structure during which the initiands first "die," then pass through what Victor Turner calls the "liminal" condition of being in between social categories during which they are instructed in sacred truths appropriate for their new role in society. Finally, they experience "rebirth" as new beings living (as Eliade says) at "a higher mode of existence." This rebirth can take two different forms. Most pre-industrial societies have myths and rituals celebrating both order and chaos. Rebirth can take place either in the great war before the creation of the world or in the sacred beginning of the new order.

Thus the resurgence of war mythology and its new development as "paramilitary culture" in the 1970s and 1980s represents a return to mythic origins as a way for men to heal the wounds of military defeat in Vietnam and to simultaneously alleviate the perceived threats from feminism and the many other social and economic changes of the past twenty years. In mythic thought, a strong sense of structural homology can connect categories of events or actions that modern thought holds to be quite distinct and separate. Eliade explains:

The man of traditional societies feels the basic unity of all kinds of "deeds, "works," or "forms:" whether they are biological, psychological, or historical. An unsuccessful war can be homologized with a sickness, with a dark, discouraged heart, with a sterile woman, with a poet's lack of inspiration, as with any other critical existential situation in which man is driven to despair. And all of these negative, desperate, apparently irremediable situations are reversed by recitation of the cosmogonic myth.

Paramilitary culture allows men to travel (in fantasy) back to the chaotic world of primeval war and experience a symbolic rebirth as a warrior to become the hero of the myth. Movies, television shows, novels, and magazines provide the narrative structure and visual imagery for these imaginary journeys; they are ways of "reciting" the cosmogonic and historical myths.

In conjunction with these texts, a whole array of war and weapons festivals have developed, such as gun shows and the annual week-long Soldier of Fortune magazine convention in Las Vegas. A new war game called "paint ball," in which squads of men dressed in military camouflage hunt each other with pistols firing paint-filled gelatin capsules, attracts an estimated 50,000 players each week when the weather is temperate. Shooting real combat weapons, either informally or in organized combat shooting sports, provides another means of ritually "playing" war. Special combat weapons training schools, open to both civilians and military men, have become a big business. As Brian
Sutton-Smith, a scholar of toys and culture says, "It seems to be the nature of play, games, sports, and festivals, therefore, that they are among the more open and fluid of human realities, within which it is more easily possible to express our desires and our contradictions in ways that are not possible within the conventional boundaries of society."\(^\text{10}\)

Since war mythology appears in "entertainment" films, "pulp" reading material, and "games," it is rarely taken seriously by scholars. Indeed, myth is often conceptualized as a form of thought that was abolished when traditional societies were transformed by the development of industrial capitalism and science became the most prestigious intellectual approach to understanding the world. And surely, cosmogonic and historical myths do not have the same intellectual power in the modern era as opposed to times in which myth was the only significant explanation of the cosmos.

Modern scholars of myth have questioned the simple model of development in which traditional "religious" society completely changed into modern "secular" society. Instead, as Richard Stivers contends, "our society is secularized only in respect to what was previously sacred."\(^\text{11}\) For example, the sun is no longer seen as the sky god, but as a gigantic mass undergoing nuclear fusion. Such desacrilization is obvious.

What is not so obvious is that while science has become the dominant mode of conscious intellectual inquiry, it is largely forgotten (or more accurately, repressed) that most intellectual activity or symbolic interpretation of the self and the world occurs "unconsciously." "Conscious" mental actions are only those fragments of mental life that Stivers calls "directly present in awareness."

In myth, images of people and places and objects are concepts about the world. Myth does not have a single author or authors, but is instead an "anonymous discourse" belonging to a society. People who inherit this discourse structure the "concrete" concepts into what Will Wright calls "a theoretical idea of a social order,"\(^\text{12}\) that helps people unconsciously organize their experiences and plan their actions accordingly. In this way myth can thus change to meet new problems facing the society that need explaining, without the change in myth appearing as the conscious, deliberate action or conception of a particular individual or group.

While the sky god has become mundane fusion, other sacred realms still exist. Weapons in the U.S. are discussed in ostensibly secular terms of costs and capabilities, but "Poseidon" missiles, "Trident" submarines, "Apache" and "Cheyenne" helicopters, "Eagle" and "Falcon" fighter planes constitute totemic references to mythical warriors and their weapons. Stivers contends that the "sacred," meaning what is perceived as power and ultimate reality, is still revealed in myth, even in modern societies:
My position is that side by side with modern instrumental rationality embedded in technology exist mythology and a system of rituals, which to a large degree escape our conscious awareness. Primitive man had an intuitive sense of the sacred, whereas modern man has a concept of the sacred (which he applies to every period but the modern) but no intuitive sense of the sacred.  

Consequently, the sacred appears in “profane,” degraded forms—the B-grade genre films, “he-man” magazines, mere “games” and “toys”—that both their creators and their audiences and participants can consciously dismiss to themselves and others as not really important. By dismissing the sacred as profane trash, men show their allegiance to the secular world and its values. At the same time these narratives, images, and ritual games are unconsciously sacrilized as returns to the original worlds of the cosmogonic myths.

Only at the surface level is paramilitary culture the story of a few demented, “deviant” men. Instead the vast domain of contemporary warrior fantasies represents a geologic upheaval, an outcropping whose entire structural formation plunges into deep historical and cultural territories. The subsequent analyses will examine some of the patterns involving the rebirth of man as warrior and his actions in the primeval chaos.

**Death of the Family and the Birth of the Warrior**

In the traditional initiation ceremonies, the neophyte undergoes a symbolic death as the first stage of transformation and rebirth into a new social role. In much of the warrior culture, the man’s symbolic death occurs by having his family murdered, leaving him alone or reborn. The two most famous comic-book “caped crusaders” or superheroes that first appeared in the 1920s and 1930s were orphans. Not only were Superman’s parents killed, but Krypton’s entire populace died in the planet’s explosion. Batman saw his parents murdered when he was a boy—a scene that Frank Miller has redrawn over and over as an aging Batman’s flashback during his 1980s return as *Dark Knight*.

When John Wayne first became a star in the 1939 film *Stagecoach*, he played the Ringo Kid, a man searching for the Plumber brothers who had murdered his father and brother. Many other famous western films, a group Will Wright calls the “vengeance variation,” use the killing of the family to create their male hero.  

In the post-Vietnam period, more dead parents appeared. Contemporary men’s “action-adventure” books began with Don Pendleton’s “Mack Bolan” *The Executioner* series which first appeared in 1969 while the war was still in progress. In the first novel, Bolan is a U.S. Army sergeant stationed in Vietnam. With over 100 confirmed kills to his name, he has become such a famous sniper that he has been renamed by both friends and foes as “The Executioner.” During his tour, he is sent home on emergency family leave to confront a family crisis.
Unbeknownst to Mack, some time ago his father, a factory worker in a Massachusetts mill town, had lost his job because of heart trouble. When his health insurance expired, he borrowed money from the Mafia. Still sick, he was unable to repay his loan and interest payments on schedule and was consequently severely beaten by mob enforcers. Cindy, his teenage daughter, discovered the debt and beating. To save her father, she became a prostitute in a Mafia brothel. Bolan Sr. discovered his daughter’s new occupation, and in a fit of shame and rage, he killed her, his wife, shot and nearly killed his second son, and then killed himself. The surviving second son tells the story to Mack.

Mack deserts the army and declares a one-man war on the Mafia. In the first book he kills about thirty mobsters or “hardmen,” and then for the next 38 volumes (the first phase of the series) he moves from city to city, killing Mafiosi and stealing their money to sustain his onslaught.

Note that Pendleton has “doubled” the death and rebirth sequence. Bolan had already been reborn as The Executioner in Vietnam, before being born again through his family’s death. The war and the jungle were his first death parents. In volume 39, The New War (1981) Pendleton changed Bolan from a one-man war anti-crime army into the commander of a super-secret counter-terrorist force working for the U.S. government: “Mack Bolan no longer existed, of course, in the official sense. He had been recreat...
After volume 39, Pendleton withdrew from writing *The Executioner* series to become a consultant and part-time supervisor for the subsequent Bolan books and the several spin-off series. The structural form and mythic pattern of his works were readily appropriated by the ghost-writers. In *War Born: The Executioner #123* (1989), one of the series' 20th anniversary issues, Bolan returns home to the primal Vietnam war zone, "the end of the world, man. Right where civilization stops and the jungle begins." The narrator—all Bolan books are written in third person with commentary on the story by the narrator—explains the significance of this return: "There had been no true home for the Executioner since the first retaliation against the Mob at Triangle Industrial Park in Pittsfield.... But here he could feel it, the sense of belonging, almost a singing in his warrior's soul as his boots bit into the earth and hurried him on his way."18

Rebirth through immersion in death occurs to many other male characters in films, novels, and comic books. *Death Wish* (1974) and its successors is one prominent example; the killing of the hero's wife and daughter serves the same function as the deaths of the parents. *Mad Max* (1979), the predecessor to the famous Australian post-apocalyptic film *The Road Warrior* (1981), ends with Max's transformation from a highway patrolman into "the road warrior" after a motorcycle gang first burns his partner-brother "Goose" beyond recognition, and then in a second attack, runs over and kills his child and leaves his wife critically injured. In the comics, the leading male character in series such as *Punisher, Vigilante, Verdict, Sable, Tiger-X,* and *Scout* all lost either their parental or conjugal families from attacks by either criminals or Communist invaders. They became enraged, avenging warriors to compensate for their irredeemable losses.

Psychoanalysts Franco Fornari and Dorothy Dinnerstein offer important insights into this phenomenon. Fornari contends that in pre-industrial societies and in the human unconscious of people in modern societies, all deaths are unconsciously conceptualized and experienced as murders. Human relationships are inextricably an ambivalent combination of love and hate. As Dinnerstein shows, the long dependency of infancy and the structure of the infant-mother-father relationship in traditional patriarchal families shapes all subsequent relationships. The infant both loves its all-providing mother and hates her because she does not satisfy all desires immediately. As the infant comes to recognize other people, she/he loves the father as the authority who has miraculously escaped the power of the mother, and at the same time the father is experienced as a threat to the pleasures provided by the mother.19

Because of our ambivalences toward other people, in our unconscious fantasies, we routinely kill our loved ones and others. Their fantasy deaths in turn create both guilt and depressive anxiety in that love objects who met important needs are now (in fantasy) gone. Fornari summarizes the unconscious fantasy of killing, guilt, and projecting this
guilt onto someone else. The "paranoid elaboration of mourning" takes the form of war against the outsider; war is society's way to protect individuals from the deep guilt they feel when they blame themselves for deaths within the society, the "melancholic elaboration of mourning:"

Everyone who dies is murdered by me; I am guilty of every death. Since this would drive me to suicide in this melancholic elaboration of mourning, I must project my guilt into the other and punish him as the representative of my bad self.... By killing the murderer I shall be able to show everyone that I am not the murderer. My relative was not killed by my own unconscious wishes; he was killed by someone else.20

The fantastic characters in films, novels, and comics and their wars against the evil ones thus disguise unconscious aggressions against loved ones. The deaths of family members thus free the male from the ambivalences and restraints of deep emotional relationships. Like Clint Eastwood in his first stellar role in Italian director Sergio Leone’s three famous spaghetti Westerns, he becomes “the man with no name” (without family).21 He is reborn in the mythic word of chaos where he can develop his full powers of destruction and through this destruction, create a new social order.

CREATING THE NEW FAMILY: FATHERS, SONS, BROTHERS, AND LOVERS IN THE BROTHERHOOD OF WAR

Freed from original parental and/or conjugal families, mythic war narratives reconnect the warrior to a new family within the primeval chaos. This search for new familial ties moves in both inter-generational (search for fathers and sons) and intra-generational (search for brothers and lovers) directions.

Not all warriors are reborn directly from the deaths of the original families. Male warriors are also created by senior warrior-patriarchs who impose ordeals on trainees as they attempt the transformation from civilians to soldiers. By far the most famous film depicting this transition is the Marine Corps epic, Sands of Iwo Jima (1950), starring John Wayne as Sergeant Stryker. In Wayne’s words, Stryker’s relationship to the trainees was “the story of Mr. Chips put in the military. A man takes eight boys and has to make a man of them. Instead of four years in college, he’s given eighteen weeks before they go into battle.”22 Stryker says to the trainees when they first meet, that “you’re gonna wish you had never been born. Before I’m through with you you’re going to move like one man, and think like one man. If you don’t you’ll be dead.”

The film contains Stryker’s ritual beating of a trainee with a rifle butt for failure to complete the bayonet stabbing exercise. The trainee happens to be “Pete Conway,” son of Colonel Sam Conway, an officer whom Stryker knew well and liked before WWII; Stryker even named his own son Sam after the colonel. The film’s Marine technical advisor
objected to the scene, but the Pentagon approved a final version in which the violence was softened by a subsequent Mexican hat dance sequence uniting Stryker and the trainee: headquarters understood the mythic value of the ordeal that the beating signified. Later in the film, Stryker saves Conway from a grenade blast, but Conway is still hostile and distant.

Towards the very end of the film, the John Wayne character is killed by a sniper after the Americans win the battle of Iwo Jima. Immediately following his death, Conway assumes Stryker's role. He promises to finish the letter to Stryker's son that Stryker was composing when he was killed. He thus becomes father to both Stryker's biological son and to his "sons" in the squad. Echoing his "father's" words as he finally assumes the mantle of the senior warrior patriarch, the last line of the movie has Conway say, "All right, saddle up, let's get back in the war." In 1983, when the United States invaded Grenada, the Marine Corps showed *Sands of Iwo Jima* to its soldiers on the assault ship U.S.S. Guam the night before the invasion.

In more contemporary films, the father-son dynamics are more muted, but are still present. *Top Gun* (1986) portrayed a Naval fighter pilot whose career is endangered by his self-centered immaturity and disrespect for authority; he is troubled by the mysterious bad reputation of his deceased father, also a Navy pilot. In the course of an arduous advanced training program at "Top Gun," the Navy advance air-to-air combat school, Maverick finds a new father "Vadar," the director of the school, and learns that his biological father was really a war hero who had saved Vadar's life in Vietnam. By the end, Maverick decides that he too will become an instructor at Top Gun, and will help other adolescents make the transition to mature warrior.

Other father-son war movies include *Iron Eagle* (1986), the story of a teenager who steals a fighter plane with the help of a second father figure to rescue his biological father, who has been shot down over a Middle Eastern country and abandoned by the U.S. government; *Heartbreak Ridge* (1986), in which Clint Eastwood plays an aging Marine sergeant close to retirement who transforms an immature group of Marine enlisted men and derelict officers into warriors, first through training and then through the Grenada Invasion; *Terminator* (1984), in which the father saves his mate and begets his warrior son; and *Rambo III* (1988), where Rambo (Sylvester Stallone) travels to Afghanistan to rescue his "father," Colonel Trautman (Richard Crenna) from a Russian prison. Rambo is also adopted by an Afghan boy whose parents were killed by the Russians. The boy insists on following Rambo everywhere—including across a Russian minefield.

the central characters when they were army lieutenants in World War II. The lieutenants are not men serving in the same unit, but are instead men whose paths cross. As the series progresses through *The Captains, The Majors, The Berets, The Colonels*, to *The Generals* (1986), the old senior officers who first served as mentors to the lieutenants retire or die and are replaced by the maturing younger officers. A new generation of young male characters is simultaneously introduced who become the adopted “sons” to the emerging “fathers” after prolonged conflicts and character tests.

Adoption by ordeal also characterizes several of the pulp serials. In *The Black Berets* (1984), a former Vietnam commando team is reunited by their Indian leader, Billy Leeps Beeker, and establishes a base on a Louisiana farm for contract operations on behalf of a super-secret (beyond the CIA) intelligence agency. Beeker rescues a mute sixteen-year-old Indian boy from whiteacists and adopts him: “Beeker saw in the boy the kind of son he would have chosen over all others, if fathers ever got that sort of choice. A youngster who had obvious pride and ability, who continually proved himself trustworthy and even courageous.”

The ordeal for the adopted son comes after the Black Berets leave their home base for an overseas mission. Their enemy, a former CIA enemy named Parkes, sends an assassination team to kill everyone at the Louisiana base. Instead the Indian teenager kills them all. When the Berets return, they notice that the boy has been transformed:

The men looked at the youth, shivering though he was wrapped in the striped blanket from the plane. They remembered similar boyish faces from Vietnam, faces much too young to bear such knowledge and experience behind the eyes. Before they went away, he had seemed a child—his emaciated body had helped that illusion. Now that they had returned, he seemed a man....

Beeker *renames* the boy “Tsali,” in honor of a famous Cherokee Indian warrior. He is thus formally adopted into the Black Beret warrior tribe, as well as his ancestral Cherokee tribe. The other Black Berets, his uncles, buy him clothes, and increase his warrior training.

At the festivals and training schools organized for men to play out certain limited parts of warrior mythologies, adoption ceremonies occur during the conclusions of most events. *Soldier of Fortune* magazine holds its annual convention at the Sahara Hotel and Casino on the Las Vegas strip each year. These conventions attract about 1,000 men for five days of lectures on world affairs, weapons and equipment expositions, short schools for rapelling, knife fighting, and other exotic arts, a combat weapons shooting contest in the desert, and the more mundane activities of drinking, telling tall tales, and gambling. The total environment resembles a theme park for war movies and novels, just as Disneyland is related to Disney movies.
In 1986, the SOF staff decided to hold a shooting competition for the press corps—the conventions are always covered by twenty to forty broadcast and print journalists. The staff took the press out to the Desert Sportsman shooting range on a Saturday morning and gave instructions on how to fire the Glock-17 9mm semi-automatic pistol and the Heckler and Koch MP-5 9mm submachine gun. After firing a few practice rounds, each journalist fired at a series of steel plates scattered around the range, first with the pistol and then with the submachine gun. Whoever hit all of the plates in the shortest time won. At the end, the SOF staff gave out a few modest awards to the winners. It was a way of saying to the press, “You’re one of us now, a member of Uncle Bob’s family.” Robert K. Brown, the publisher and editor of SOF, is always called “Uncle Bob” by the rest of the SOF staff and by the conventioneers who feel part of that community.

The most sacred places in American paramilitary culture are a handful of elite, combat weapons training schools. Representatives from the U.S. military, federal agencies, state and local police forces, and civilians all attend these schools to learn both basic and advanced techniques in firing pistols, shotguns, and rifles. The most famous school is retired Marine Lt. Col. Jeff Cooper’s American Pistol Institute in Pauldin, Arizona.

After the last shooting competitions students are awarded a diploma with a grade: “Expert;” “Marksman First Class;” “Marksman;” and “Certificate of Attendance.” Many students become saddened by their grade. But just at this critical moment when the class cohesiveness is disintegrating through the dual recognition that the class is over and that people are highly stratified in their abilities, Cooper opens up his arms and says, “Welcome to the Gunsite Family.”

All former students are known as “Family Members.” In his two page column in the largest selling gun magazine, Guns and Ammo, Cooper routinely refers to information sent in by “Family Member” as a preface to a man’s name. The graduation ceremony as an accredited gunfighter is thus an adoption ceremony into the patriarch’s tribe (complete with a totem animal, the raven).

Psychologist Samuel Osherson contends that men raised in patriarchal family structures have sought symbolic fathers or “mentors” because “boys grow into men with a wounded father within, a conflicted inner sense of masculinity rooted in men’s experience of their fathers as rejecting, incompetent, or absent.” Small boys do not understand why their fathers are so physically or psychologically distant. Consequently, they invent stories to explain his absence:

The fundamental male vulnerability rooted in the experience of father lies in our fantasies and myths to explain why father isn’t there. Those are misunderstandings, usually unconscious and often very frightening to the son, that cripple our sense of our
own manhood. The son may experience his father’s preoccupation with work or emotional unavailability at home as his own fault.26

Experiencing the failure of the father-son relationship as his own fault, the boy’s growth towards manhood become problematic. In the face of an ostensibly powerful father, the son feels he is “not good enough” to merit the father’s love and attention. Or, conversely, in those instances when the son becomes especially close to the mother, he sometimes feels that he has betrayed and symbolically wounded the father. In both cases, the lack of satisfaction propels boys and men to look for surrogates. As Osherson says: “A powerful mentor may speak to the hunger vulnerable young men have for a strong, all-accepting father-hero, whom he can love and revere unambivalently. ‘I am that father whom your boyhood lacked and suffered pain for lack of,’ said Odysseus to Telemachus.”27

_The Odyssey_ illuminates many of the attractions of the mythic warrior as a surrogate father. Having defeated the Trojans and outwitted the gods during years of war and adventures, Odysseus finally returned to Arcadia. He joined forces with his son Telemachus, and together they fought the false suitors after his wife, Penelope and thus saved the kingdom. To have a mythic warrior as father holds forth the promise of incorporating his power through his instruction and nurturance. The son can then become the equal to the father—who is now his symbolic brother—in the brotherhood of war. Perhaps he can even save the father’s life in battle, providing a rebirth for the father.

At the same time, the family dynamics of _The Odyssey_ are different from those in the contemporary resurgence of warrior myths. Ultimately, Odysseus returns home to Arcadia for good. His last battle indicates that the period of primeval chaos is over; the sacred order is being re-inaugurated. Equally important, Odysseus has a wife and Telemachus has a mother—Penelope.

In contrast, the narrator in _The Black Berets_ describes Beeker’s feelings upon discovering that his commando team’s Louisiana base has been destroyed by men sent by the renegade CIA agent, Parkes. In the quote, Beeker has not discovered that his adopted son survived the attack:

> Parkes’s men had done it: How do you rape a warrior? You violate his unguarded home. You burn his house, you scatter his grain to the wind, you broadcast salt in his plowed fields. You put his children to the sword.28

Beeker is now both mother and father to his adopted son. This is not an isolated passage, but an example of the family structure in much modern warrior myth. Warriors defend the boundaries of society against “enemies.” Warriors live outside the social order, within the primeval chaos. Only their fights against evil allow a stable social order
to be created. Therefore, men's reproduction of themselves as warriors through either self-generated rebirths or transforming boys into warriors is the *precondition* for safety within the society. Only when the evil ones are kept "outside," can female-centered biological reproduction, infant care and child-rearing occur inside society.

From this perspective, heterosexual relationships have very little to do with social reproduction. Instead sexual relationships signal momentary pleasures and serious dangers for the warrior. Danger to the man occurs in two different representations of women. First, women's sexual power is portrayed as dangerous. For example, Beeker's contact or "case officer" with the secret U.S. intelligence agency is a voluptuous woman named "Delilah." Every sexual encounter with her is a struggle for power:

Now he stood in front of the cot and damned himself. He was angry because Delilah was there, waiting for him—waiting for him—waiting for him in every meaning of the term. Naked, her hands were provocatively exploring herself. That, and they were egging him on, moving against that flesh he had come to desire too much—well, he thought, sometimes too much.

He was naked as well. His readiness for her was as apparent as hers for him. It took all of his self-control to stop him from just pouncing, just climbing right over on top of her. But he'd learned a lot about Delilah. He knew that neither of them would leave the room before they'd both got what they wanted. The only question was—who would show the greater need? It was a contest Delilah had no intention of losing. She was going to stay right there on the cot and enjoy this. The smile on her face showed that. She enjoyed the subtle mixture of pain and pleasure that this self-denial inflicted on Beeker.29

Beeker lost this battle. Delilah is, of course, the mythic Biblical Delilah, the woman who cut off the hair of the great warrior Samson and so destroyed his powers. The implication is that sexually powerful women are inherently castrating, and that desiring them and "losing control" is thus a form of self-destruction that must be fought.30

Women's threat appears even more explicitly in the character of the woman agent who threatens to kill the male warrior while having sex. Cowboy, a member of *The Black Beret* team, follows the Iberian airline stewardess into the plane's toilet, where "already her skirt was up, and her panties were down." She says, "I need you so bad." The sexual encounter begins and she pulls a knife from her bra:

Just when she thought she could slice his exposed throat, Cowboy went to work. He stopped the slash of the sharp blade. Then redirected it. Right into her belly.

She drew in her breath sharply. Blood spilled out along the blade of the knife.
Cowboy jerked to one side, to avoid being splashed. They were still very close, together in the tiny cubicle. He looked into her eyes, catching her surprised and terrified gaze. The sharp edge of the knife pointed downward. He pushed up on her hand. Unable to resist, the blade slid deeper, up to pierce the heart, tearing the flesh in a harsh line.

Cowboy held her up till he saw that her eyes had glazed over. Then he shoved her down onto the toilet seat and returned to the first class cabin, leaving an OUT OF ORDER sign prominently on the door.

Many a woman dies such a sexualized death in paramilitary novels. The erotic woman is cast as a life-threatening enemy and is then killed in a long, drawn out narrative in which penetrating bullets, grenade fragments, and knives destroy her flesh and release blood and other bodily matter. In this description, she is turned into a giant mass of excrement that stops the toilet. The German Freikorps, those independent right-wing battalions that destroyed the Left in Germany after World War I, used similar descriptions of becoming excited about killing in their novels and memoirs. They spoke of desiring “the bloody mess.”

According to Klaus Theweleit, the patriarchal code in Western societies has cast male as “mind” and female as “body” and the body has been denigrated as “unclean.” In some societies this has meant that infants never experience their bodies as good and pleasurable. Consequently, infants and later children and adults, psychically withdraw from their bodies. Being withdrawn from the body, men who are taught they are “mind” always have anxiety about the boundaries of the body.

For these men, all “flow” experiences, such as eroticism (which mixes bodies together) overcome boundaries between the self and a larger environment. Bodily contact becomes experienced as threatening the dissolution of the self. Pleasureful sexual experience can only take the form of eliminating this anxiety by obliterating the other body, by transforming it into waste or bloody mess that has no personhood and is distant from the self. In contemporary paramilitary novels, almost all killings (both of men and of women) are described as the sexualized penetration and destruction of the body.

Still other women are portrayed as dangerous because the represent society. They remove the warrior from the freedom of primeval chaos and confine him to domestic order. Cowboy devised a plan to deal with this type of woman as well: “You go in, play the romance, make the proposal, have the big party, luxuriate in the honeymoon—and then you leave. Before she gets fat and you get mean.”

Potential wives or women who love the warrior hero are frequently killed off in modern warrior myths. Ko, the Vietnamese woman (an intelligence agent for the Americans) who aided and came to love Rambo in Rambo: First Blood Part II (1985) is killed by Communist mortars after she falls in love with him and expresses the desire to return to the U.S.
with him. In *Miami Vice*, both Crockett and Tubbs become widowers within weeks of their marriages—Tubbs' wife is murdered on their honeymoon.

Those wives or lovers who aren't killed are sacrificed in another way for a greater cause. Castillo, the commanding officer on *Miami Vice*, re-meets his ex-wife, who is now involved with another man, a “freedom fighter” for another country. He makes no serious attempt to win her back. Nor did *Magnum, P.I.* try very hard to hold onto his former love and his newly-discovered daughter when they resurfaced connected to yet another “freedom fighter” who is trying to overcome the evil ones in his country and found a sacred order.

True loves must be sacrificed because they represent a threat to the brotherhood of war. In sacrificing their women to other men who are themselves warriors, modern war myths’ male heroes affirm their brotherhood. The brotherhood of war between men of different countries is a stronger bond than a man's feeling for his wife or lover. Giving the woman away also reaffirms the warrior's ties with their own teams. Crockett, Tubbs, and Castillo still have each other, as do Magnum and his friends. *Casablanca* (1942), the WWII film in which Rick sends his true love, Ilsa, away with Victor Laszlo, and is left to form a beautiful friendship with the French cop, Renault, is of course the classic case.

Finally, there is important narrative reason for killing the woman or giving her away. When the true loves are killed or otherwise removed to help another man, their deaths or absences justify a rebirth of the warrior and establish his personal motive in launching another assault against the evil ones.

**The Necessity of Blood Sacrifice to Sustain the Brotherhood of War**

In recent years, former marine lieutenant William Broyles, Jr. has become the most noted exponent of “why men love war:” “War was an initiation into the power of life and death. Women touch that power at the moment of birth; men on the edge of death. It is like lifting off the corner of the universe and peeking at what’s underneath.” What this “edge of death” means becomes clearer in another passage on the comradeship of war:

We loved war for many reasons, not all of them good. The best reason we loved war is also its most enduring memory—comradeship. A comrade in war is a man you can trust with anything, because you trust him with your life. Philip Caputo [another marine lieutenant] described the emotion in *A Rumor of War*: [Comradeship] does not demand for its sustenance the reciprocity, the pledges of affection, the endless reassurances required by the love of men and women. It is, unlike marriage, a bond that cannot be broken by a word, by boredom, or by anything other than death.
But what this praise of comradeship in war does not explicitly indicate is that the brotherhood of war requires that some warriors die. The brotherhood of war is a form of death worship. Only death can generate this sacred aura of wartime comradeship. The inevitable ambiguities and insecurities of complex human relationships are degraded in contrast to an imaginary “purity” of death. Ultimately, only another warrior’s sacrifice can redeem the blood already spilt.

In the WWII war movies made from the 1940s until the mid-1960s, customary practice called for part of the group to die; their deaths bonded the survivors. Usually the primary male leads survived the battle—an important indicator of the way films made war seem like a relatively safe ritual transition from boyhood to manhood and why the war romance has been so seductive for men.

Many post-Vietnam war movies have made extreme sacrifices central to their plots. In The Deer Hunter (1979) Robert DeNiro does not successfully rescue his childhood friend who has remained in Vietnam, addicted to self-destruction. In Uncommon Valor (1983), roughly half of the private commando team that rescues American prisoners of war held in Laos dies; the ratio of Americans killed to Americans saved is about one to one. The good “father,” Sgt. Elias, is murdered in Platoon (1987), as the precondition to the boy’s full moral awakening and transformation into a warrior. In Gardens of Stone (1987), the entire plot sequence focuses on ritual sacrifice: a young lieutenant is first trained by two veteran sergeants; he volunteers for Vietnam and is killed. The movie culminates with the return of his corpse to the burial detail at Arlington National Cemetery—his original unit—and the mourning of his fathers.

These sacrifices form the collective bonds of the community. At the closing ceremony of the 1987 Soldier of Fortune convention in Las Vegas, a man presented editor-in-chief Robert K. Brown a five gallon water-cooler jug full of bills and coins. The man explained that the money was to be given to the Nicaraguan Contras. He then pulled off a prosthesis from his leg and held it over his head so several hundred audience members could see. He said that he collected the money during the convention by charging people five dollars to drink beer from his prosthesis. “Tet 1968! That’s what it’s all about!” he cried. In an unconscious repetition of the Christian Eucharist, his sacrificed leg was “eaten” by the community of warriors to renew and strengthen their collective body as symbolic participants in the primeval struggle against the evil ones. Blood sacrifice of one’s own soldiers is a necessary part of the larger “regeneration through violence” in overcoming the enemy.

**Paramilitary Culture and the Absence of the Sacred Order**

Where modern paramilitary culture differs most radically from its direct predecessors, the American war movies and westerns made from late 1930s through the late 1960s, concerns the relationships
between primeval chaos and the sacred order that results from the victory over evil. The war movie tradition follows the cosmogonic myths in that the characters in these movies frequently talk of their hopes for a more cooperative, international world order. Such dialogue was a constant feature of the war movies written and directed by left-leaning Hollywood filmmakers with the influence of the Office of War Information. Many such filmmakers were later purged during the blacklisting drives of the 1950s. While more conservative films often concentrated on regeneration through violence, they nevertheless included scenes linking the soldiers to their wives, girlfriends, and previous domestic lives. These films always pointed to how battles portrayed in the film were responsible for America's world power, affluence, and the good life.

Will Wright studied the hero's relationship to society as the western genre changed its fundamental narrative structure from its rise in the late 1930s to its demise in the late 1960s. Until the 1960s, most westerns reconciled the hero with society. The hero's defeat of the villains was intrinsically connected to the establishment of a better society. In the 1960s, society was frequently portrayed as a corrupt, greedy capitalism that had destroyed the mythic western virtues. The heroes were "professionals," groups of mercenary warriors with special skills, who fight the villains for money to sustain the group. Like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (1969) and The Wild Bunch (1970), the professionals most often died in the process. No social improvement resulted from their deaths. To the contrary, their destruction only signified the increased power of a corrupt corporate capitalism that does not tolerate individual freedom and fidelity to comrades.

Like the professional western, paramilitary culture indicates a disjunction in the cosmogonic and American cultural myths. Struggles in the primeval chaos are no longer connected to the establishment of a sacred social order. In neither the films, the novels, the magazines, nor the war games is there any vision of a world beyond war. Instead there is only a continual armed struggle against terrorists, punks, drug dealers, Third World communist guerrillas, KGB agents, illegal aliens from Mexico, black nationalists, urban dwellers fleeing the city after a nuclear war or economic collapse, motorcycle gangs, and the Mafia.

Although the "regeneration through violence" component of paramilitary culture follows the cosmogonic and American cultural tradition, the disjunction with establishing a sacred order indicates a severe, prolonged social crisis. War is no longer a renewing process necessary for an evolutionary social transition to a better, peaceful order, but instead is a desirable, permanent chaos and destruction. Paramilitary culture indicates that Americans no longer share a significant consensus on what would be a better society and how to create it.

Men especially lack a clear direction as to their proper role in society. A few well known post-Vietnam warrior films have repeated the older myth that when the warrior returned home after the war he would be rewarded with a wife. In these films, warfare becomes the way for men
to stop the women's movement and regain women's affections. In *Heartbreak Ridge*, Clint Eastwood wins back his ex-wife after his third war (Grenada). Similarly, Bruce Willis in *Die Hard* (1988), is reunited with his wife (a rising star in the corporate world who moved away from him and no longer uses her married name) after he singlehandedly defeats an extremely wicked terrorist group. To be sure, *Die Hard* is a parody of the genre, but it is a very loving parody. The desirable future for men is thus a return to the pre-feminist past.

But most of paramilitary culture says that the warrior's role within the primeval chaos is far more rewarding than any male role outside it. Rambo, for instance, is still in Thailand in 1988, seventeen years after most American troops were withdrawn, and thirteen years after the fall/liberation of Saigon.

That the break between primeval chaos and sacred order indicates a severe social crisis does not imply that regeneration through violence is an acceptable cultural dynamic when it is connected to the foundation of a new social order. Another war will not solve America's problems, nor will it solve men's problems. Warrior myths have deep historical roots and are fed by social dynamics other than geo-politics; long lists of enemies can and already have been substituted for Russians. Warrior culture will not go away by simply dismissing it as bad and saying the times call for peace. Instead, war mythology in all its variants must first be full elaborated and analyzed. The task beyond this analytical elaboration is to invent a new cosmogonic mythology or creative vision for men, to begin with the warrior and transform him into another kind of man whose power moves towards another mission.

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6 Eliade: 141.
8 Eliade: 81.
9 *Ibid.*: 31. (My italics.)
13 Stivers: 8.
14 Wright: 59-74.
Vietnam Generation

16 Ibid.: 12.
17 Ibid.: 159.
21 “The man with no name” was actor Clint Eastwood’s name in Sergio Leone’s three famous westerns: *A Fist Full of Dollars* (1964), *For a Few Dollars More* (1965), *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966). This role was Eastwood’s birth as a star warrior.
24 Ibid.: 32.
26 Ibid.: 24-25.
27 Ibid.: 46.
33 McCray, *Cold Vengeance*: 105.
38 I am writing a book on paramilitary culture and warrior fantasies. For a history of the war movie with particular emphasis on how the Vietnam war has been portrayed, see my essay “American Paramilitary Culture and the Reconstitution of the Vietnam War,” in Jeff Walsh and James Aulich, eds., *Vietnam Image: War and Representation* (New York: St. Martin’s) 1989: 10-42.