John Kerry’s acceptance speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention in Boston was as much about myth making, in the Barthesian sense, as it was about speech making. By declaring immediately that he was “reporting for duty” as he presented the convention and wider viewing audiences with a military salute, Kerry, as the old soldier, signified the homologous unity of Americanism and militarism. This significance, in and of itself, was not particularly noteworthy. The figure of the patriotic soldier, after all, is absolutely central to nationalist narratives and mythologies. But Kerry’s gestures held a wider significance that was lost on no one. By evoking his past as a highly decorated soldier in Viet Nam, Kerry symbolically reclaimed the mantle of patriotic militarist from George W. Bush, the military ‘deserter’. A series of campaign ads depicting images of Kerry, gun in hand, walking through the jungles of Viet Nam anticipated this moment of mythic militarism. It is clear that the Kerry campaign hoped that

And a merciful God did not come: a reflection on John Kerry’s Viet Nam quagmire

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Abstract: The ‘Viet Nam War’ entered the 2004 US presidential election in a most uncanny fashion, sparking a surrogate discussion of the limits of present imperial ambition and doctrine. This essay explores the limitations and possibilities of this proxy discussion to facilitate an understanding of John Kerry’s political unraveling, as well as the continuing political dilemmas facing the US left.

Keywords: electoral politics, imperialism, militarism, politics of history, United States, Viet Nam, war

“We wish that a merciful God could wipe away our own memories of that service as easily as this administration has wiped away their memories of us. But all that they have done and all that they can do by this denial is to make more clear than ever our own determination to undertake one last mission – to search out and destroy the last vestige of this barbaric war, to pacify our own hearts, to conquer the hate and fear that have driven this country these last ten years and more, so when thirty years from now our brothers go down the street without a leg, without an arm, or a face, and some small boys ask why, we will be able to say, “Vietnam” and not mean a desert, not a filthy obscene memory, but mean instead the place where America finally turned and where soldiers like us helped in the turning” (John Kerry, 1971 testimony to the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee).
the accumulated weight of these historic images and symbolic gestures, in stark contrast to Bush’s preferential treatment and MIA (missing in action) status during that war, would finally leave no doubt as to which candidate was most deserving and fit to be commander-and-chief of the US imperial military.

In rebuttal, Republican Party operatives began circulating images of another John Kerry: the anti-war activist. Televised ads paid for by a group called the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth saturated the airwaves, questioning the merits of Kerry’s war-related medals and his support of US ‘troops’ in Viet Nam and, by extension, Iraq and Afghanistan. These ‘swift boat veterans’ proclaimed they were still enraged by Kerry’s eloquent and moving 1971 Senate testimony, in which he spoke about atrocities committed by US forces against a predominantly civilian population in Viet Nam. Translating Kerry’s public testimony and criticism of the officially sanctioned genocidal conduct of the war as a personalized attack on lowly ground forces, these swift boat vets claimed to represent a purported widespread disgust that US military veterans held for Kerry’s hypocrisy. Although the multiple ties between the supposedly independent swift boat veterans and the Bush administration were exposed by the investigative journalist Joe Conason of salon.com, among others, the desired political damage was done. Together with an earlier, widely distributed set of images of Kerry as a young anti-war activist, the swift boat ads tapped into the reigning myth-narrative of the ‘Viet Nam War’ in the US. This narrative centers on veteran victimization caused by the hostility of anti-war activists, as well as the indifference of the wider civilian population (cf. Carbonella 2003). By placing Kerry on the ‘wrong’ side of this constructed soldier/civilian divide, the swift boat ads called into question Kerry’s fitness to lead the US military in its expanding ‘war on terror’.

Clearly, the symbolism generated by Kerry’s presidential campaign and the Republican counter-response linked the issue of national leadership to a narrowly focused politics of historical definition. At stake in the wide dissemination of competing images of the Viet Nam War was nothing less than the ability of either party to fix the meaning of this bloody and sorrowful past in a way that discredited their opponent’s claim to power. Yet against the attempted closure of history at the highest levels of government, a new optic of the ‘Viet Nam’ years was erupting in popular culture. “Like specters waiting to avenge themselves if the present fails to remember them” (Harootunian 2000: 18), the fragmented images and historical traces emerging in popular culture unsettlingly, even if hesitantly, brought the massive soldier and civilian opposition to the Viet Nam War, exemplified by Kerry’s 1971 Senate testimony, into historical focus. This convergence of alternative interpretations of the Viet Nam War on the 2004 political stage provided an exceptional opportunity for a much needed public debate on present US imperial ambition and doctrine. The choice Kerry was presented with here, as I see it, centered on either reclaiming or repressing his own past of anti-war leadership, in which he forcefully articulated a vision of a non-imperial future for the US – a choice, ultimately, between ‘dreaming forwards’ (Bloch 1996) or merely ‘dreaming of the status quo’ (Harootunian 2000), respectively. By choosing to define the past in a way that makes the present course of military imperialism appear inevitable, Kerry utterly lost the moral clarity that infused his entry onto the political stage thirty-three years ago, and hence failed to generate the kind of enthusiasm that earlier greeted Howard Dean’s anti-war candidacy.

In this most uncanny fashion, the Viet Nam War entered the present as a surrogate discussion of the tensions of empire. A brief exploration of the contradictions of this proxy debate, then, may help us understand both Kerry’s political unraveling and the continuing dilemma facing the US left if it continues to support the Democratic Party’s ‘Republican-lite’ political agenda.

Since 9/11, images of the US imperial misadventure in Viet Nam have permeated popular culture, and their prominence has only grown during the current campaign. Indeed,
a visitor from Saturn may be forgiven some confusion over whether the US is currently invading Iraq or Viet Nam. In film, Viet Nam War documentaries abound: Errol Morris’s (2004) *The fog of war* was a brilliant success; Peter Davis’s 1972 Academy Award–winning documentary *Hearts and minds* was recently rereleased on DVD, and was showing in New York City as I began writing (two days before the election); and Gillo Pontecorvo’s docudrama *The battle of Algiers*, which was considered almost obligatory viewing before anti-war protests in the 1960s, has been released on DVD in only the last two weeks. In addition to the documentaries, the recent filmic remake of *The quiet American*, Graham Greene’s classic novelistic excoriation of US imperial ambition and machination in Viet Nam, received an Academy Award nomination. In music, a similar situation obtains. Billy Bang’s (2002) CD *Vietnam: the aftermath*, one of the most well-received jazz albums of the last two years, performed by a band of Viet Nam War veterans, opens with a tribute to Ho Chi Minh; while Old Crow Medicine Show’s (2004) ‘Big time in the jungle’, a newly minted Viet Nam era protest song, receives heavy rotation on alternative and Americana radio stations. And *American dreams*, a new weekly television series, reinvites the Viet Nam War for a new generation of viewers. All of this, of course, is in addition to the documentaries, books and ads on Viet Nam War related topics produced by both the Democratic and Republican campaigns and those close to them.

At the same time, stories of US atrocities in Viet Nam have continued to make news. The *Toledo Blade*, a daily newspaper in Toledo (Ohio), ran a series of investigative reports in October 2003 on the cover-up of a 1967 sequence of atrocities by US forces throughout Quang Ngai province, in South Viet Nam’s Central Highlands. Seymour Hersh, who broke the original Mai Lai story, summarized and expanded upon the original *Blade* series in the pages of *The New Yorker* (2003: 41–4). Additionally, Daniel Ellsberg’s 2002 book, *Secrets: a memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers* – an insiders’ account of imperial hubris and blind faith at the highest levels of the Johnson and Nixon administrations – has been released as a mass-market paperback by Penguin Press.

Manifestly, ‘Viet Nam’ continues to frame questions and conversation about the limits to imperial ambition and military power. This is not uniformly true, of course. Recent studies by Lesley Gill (2004), David Harvey (2003), Chalmers Johnson (2004), Rashid Khalidi (2004), Catherine Lutz (2001) and Neil Smith (2003), among others, attest to the rising scholarly interest in the US’s contemporary imperial aspirations. Within popular culture, though, reference to Viet Nam provides a readily understood opportunity to call into question the soundness and legitimacy of neo-conservative foreign policy objectives, as well as providing some space for the emergence of oppositional perspectives.

Yet there are limits as to how far this proxy conversation about US imperialism and militarism can proceed. The reigning discourse in the US of the ‘Viet Nam experience’ renders obscure both the history of the Viet Nam War and the massive protests against it. A brief summary of this discourse will serve to illuminate John Kerry’s seemingly inexplicable silence about his own activist past in the face of the exploding public conversation about the Viet Nam War. To begin with, the Viet Nam experience refers primarily to events and contentions that took place within the territorial boundaries of the United States. As this story has unfolded over the last twenty-five to thirty years, Viet Nam itself and the US invasion function only as backdrops to the deepening fissures of the (US) nation during the 1960s. The figure of the victimized veteran – spat upon and vilified as a ‘baby killer’ by virulent anti-war protesters, and treated with indifference by the larger civilian populace – stands at the heart of this dominant memory of Viet Nam (the nation itself is reduced in language to an event in US history). Much ink, filmic representation and public memorializing have ensured that this lesson of Viet Nam is not forgotten. The Republican strategists were clearly mindful of this relatively systematic set of words, expressions,
images and narratives, which now constitutes the ‘official story’ of the Viet Nam War, when they aired the images of Kerry as a young anti-war protester. This framing of the Viet Nam War in terms of the veterans’ trauma on their return home has sharply limited what is publicly speakable about US imperialism and militarism. To oppose a war in the contemporary United States is to invite charges of betraying the troops.

John Kerry, ever mindful of the consequences of appearing disloyal to the troops, obviously felt he must now disown his own past of anti-war leadership. In this, he was completely in accord with the desires of the Democratic Party leadership to present a united militarist face to the American electorate, and thus appear as tough on ‘terrorism’ as the Bush administration. By all appearances, Bush’s bellicose, post-9/11 statement that the world is “either with us or against us”, seems to have resonated most strongly among the Democratic leadership. Kerry-the-candidate never failed to distance himself from Kerry-the-activist for fear of being painted as one who is ‘against us’. That being the case, the political strategists of the ‘third way’ Democratic Leadership Committee, controlling the Democratic Party, could not have been pleased that renewed popular interest in the ‘Viet Nam experience’ was providing a surrogate outlet for airing concerns and questions about imperial ambition and military adventurism. Kerry’s advisers seemingly emphasized the necessity of reframing this ‘unruly’ meaning of the Viet Nam War within a dominant discourse of American innocence abroad. After all, the Clintonista Democratic Party would like nothing more than a return to the Washington-led globalization boom of the 1990s, but now more publicly envisioned as the marriage of free trade and militarily installed democratic ‘freedoms’. Under these conditions, Kerry’s silence is understandable, if repugnant.

Nonetheless, a cascading chain of silences of great consequence followed from Kerry’s repression of his own past, thwarting political discussion during the 2004 presidential campaign. Kerry could not or would not seize upon the memory of the actual Viet Nam War as it exploded through the fog of the official story to make a convincing moral argument about the invasion of Iraq. In a more perfect world, the Republicans’ calculated gamble in airing images of the younger war protester would have provided the Kerry campaign with a timely opportunity to state unequivocally that the war in Iraq is fully as wrong as the earlier misadventure in Viet Nam, and that the US must embark on a course of unambiguous withdrawal. Who better to make this claim than John Kerry? He held center stage in US politics at the moment. And he has, as well, the requisite credentials of an old soldier turned peace activist to deflate at least some of the masculinist fantasies of war that now permeate the public sphere, not to mention the persistent idea of betraying the troops. As importantly, by arguing that the civilian and military deaths in Iraq cannot be either morally or politically justified, Kerry could have tapped into the lingering distaste among a large segment of the American people for imperial and military adventurism since the Viet Nam War, as evidenced by the rising din in the public sphere over the lessons of Viet Nam. Certainly this argument would have appealed to the strong anti-war sentiments among the Democratic base. Instead, the Kerry campaign responded by further emphasizing his credentials as a military hero, capable of fighting a smarter, more strategic war on ‘terror’.

To have hoped for another response from a US presidential candidate at this point in time may appear as wishful, even utopian, thinking to many. Be that as it may, it is nonetheless difficult to completely understand the unconditional pass that the US left gave to Kerry-the-born-again-militarist. Much like Walter Benjamin’s angel of history, Kerry-the-decorated-war-veteran turned his face to a past littered with the accumulated human and social wreckage of decades of war and imperial ambition and called it progress, or at least necessary. Clearly, this is not the ‘turning’ that Kerry anticipated in 1971, as he movingly recounted the barbaric disregard for human life central to US policy in Viet Nam to a US Senate committee stunned into respectful silence.
Or, for that matter, it is not the end to misbegotten wars that Kerry envisioned as he and hundreds of other Viet Nam veterans threw their medals onto the White House lawn the next day in one of the most moving and effective protests of that era. While the intelligence and courage that Kerry brought to bear in his efforts to end the Viet Nam War were missing-in-action in the 2004 campaign, it is, oddly enough, this younger Kerry that many on the US left thought (hoped, perhaps) they were supporting for the presidency. The idea that the passionate younger man was ‘winking’ at us, while the old militarist shored up the support of undecided mainstream voters echoed throughout multiple public and private conversations on the left.

In spite of this, it is impossible to recall how often I had been involved in conversations that turned on the hope that this other Kerry would still surface, and that he would transfix us once again with the force of his moral argument. Why, my friends and acquaintances seemed to be saying, does Kerry not simply seize hold of the memory of US atrocities in Viet Nam that the Republicans conveniently threw onto the public stage to fan the hopes that he embodied in the past. A sense of the unfinished business of history – what Walter Benjamin (1968) understood as the realizable promise of the past – loomed large over this process of collective searching, or longing, for evidence of Kerry’s courage and determination as a young veteran to manifest itself in the present, calling into question the new face of US military imperialism. Most everyone on the left, and a good many people who would not embrace that political label, surely recognize now that a persistent opposition to the expanding ‘war on terror’ is necessary to forestall further catastrophe. Yet I hope it is also evident by now that support for a presidential candidate who promised to expand the military forces in Iraq, and to ‘support the troops’ with the latest military hardware and armament, has greatly reduced the chances for securing a reversal of the neo-conservative approach to foreign relations.

In the face of Kerry’s defeat (I write these concluding remarks the morning after the election as Kerry’s defeat seems assured), the US left should continue to press the same demands: for an immediate withdrawal from Iraq on moral and humanitarian grounds, for the restoration of democracy within the US, and for an end to the military colonization of the globe. In this, we can surely learn from the younger Kerry’s courage and conviction in bringing about an end to the Viet Nam War. But we can no longer wait for the promise of the ‘wink’ to be fulfilled, whether by Kerry himself or the Democratic Party. The struggle to defeat the neo-conservative agenda, it is now absolutely clear, will take place outside of the Democratic Party. We can start by persistently renouncing the US’s genocidal and torturous conduct in Iraq and elsewhere. Here surely the testimony of an earlier generation of veterans, Kerry among them, as well as their dramatic demands for immediate withdrawal from Viet Nam can stand as inspiration. This is the useful history of the Viet Nam War that must be reclaimed in this present moment of danger. Yet as those veterans and other opponents of the Viet Nam War so clearly understood, and pace David Harvey’s (2003) argument in The new imperialism, opposition within the US alone will not secure the reversal of the raw militaristic imperialism offered up by the neo-conservatives. We will continue to need more than a little help from our friends.

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Notes

1. As was widely reported in the media, George W. Bush used his family influence both to secure a much coveted assignment in the Texas Air National Guard and to avoid punishment when he failed to report for duty the last two years of his tour.

References

Books and articles

Music

Film