

Nuclear Narratives in American Culture

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THE END OF VICTORY CULTURE

Cold War America and the
Disillusioning of a Generation

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Triumphalist Despair

ON DECEMBER 8, 1941, the morning after Japan's "unprovoked and dastardly attack" on Pearl Harbor, that "date which will live in infamy," President Franklin Delano Roosevelt addressed a joint session of Congress. Speaking of "severe damage to American naval and military forces" and "very many American lives . . . lost," he offered up a litany of defeat and disaster. "Last night Japanese forces attacked Guam. Last night Japanese forces attacked the Philippine Islands. Last night the Japanese attacked Wake Island. And this morning the Japanese attacked Midway Island." Yet he also offered the American people one certainty in the face of "this premeditated invasion." He promised that they, "in their righteous might, will win through to absolute victory," to "inevitable triumph."

The press followed the president's lead. *Life* magazine, in its first report on Pearl Harbor, spoke of Japan's attack as potential "national hara-kiri," and of the future possibility of "strangl[ing] the island empire by blockade. . . . It will take not only all-out U.S. military might but great persistence and great courage to hurl back attack and to win the final victory." But victory was not to be doubted. It was "the ultimate goal," the magazine commented the following week, one that already had in place "its battle cry . . . a fine fighting slogan . . . 'Remember Pearl Harbor.'"¹

Almost immediately, Hollywood's film studios began producing war movies in which, from Wake Island to the Philippines, a savage, non-white enemy ambushed and overwhelmed small groups of outnumbered American soldiers. In these films, too, however, defeat was only a springboard for victory. Such triumphalism in a moment of despair was not just a propaganda ploy to mobilize a shocked nation. Triumphalism was in

the American grain. From the president to ordinary citizens, it seemed second nature to call on an American culture of victory hundreds of years in the making to explain such an event.

After all, hadn't American history been a processional of progress from the moment European explorers and settlers first set foot on the continent? Weren't defeats, from the Alamo to Custer's Last Stand, just mobilizing preludes to victory? Ultimate triumph out where the boundary lines were still being drawn was a given; and victory, when it came, was guaranteed to bathe all preceding American acts in a purifying glow.

As every child learned in school, our history was an inclusive saga of expanding liberties and rights that started in a vast, fertile, nearly empty land whose native inhabitants more or less faded away after that first Thanksgiving. From its oversized flocks of birds and herds of buffalo to the massive, ancient bones its early naturalists dug up, size seemed to embody the promise of America. The largeness of its mission—whether imagined in terms of a wilderness to be tamed, a continent to be populated, freedoms to be granted, immigrants to be welcomed, a destiny to be made manifest, or a needy world to be supplied with goods—was seldom in doubt. If occasional wrongs were committed or mistakes made, these were correctable; if unfreedom existed within America's borders, it was only so that—as with slavery—it might be wiped away forever. In this land, whites had fought each other reluctantly, with great heroism, and for the highest principles, whether in rebellion against a British king or in a civil war of "brother against brother."

This was, you might say, the free story of America, given away to millions of children who could not wait to be let out of school to pay for a second, recess version found especially at the movies. This second version—a sanguinary tale of warfare against savage lesser peoples—anchored the first in American consciousness, expanding the boundaries of that space within which freedom might "ring." In this tale, embodied in countless westerns, the land was not empty but to-be-emptied, and pleasure came out of the barrel of a gun.

As the enemy bore down without warning from the peripheries of human existence, whooping and screeching, burning and killing, the viewer, inside a defensive circle of wagons, found himself behind the sights of a rifle. It was, then, with finger pressing on trigger that American children received an unforgettable history of their country's westward progress to dominance. In this tale, you had no choice. Either you pulled the trigger or you died, for war was invariably portrayed as a series of reactive incidents rather than organized and invasive campaigns. When the savages fell in countless numbers in a spectacle of slaughter, it

was instantly made innocent—and thrilling—by the cleansing powers of the just victory certain to come.

At the heart of this story—what I will call the American war story—lay the nearly 250 years of Indian wars that "cleared" the continent for settlement. From its origins, this war story was essentially defensive in nature, and the justness of American acts was certified not only by how many of *them* died, but by how few of *us* there were to begin with. The band of brothers, the small patrol, or, classically, the lone white frontiersman gained the right to destroy through a sacramental rite of initiation in the wilderness. In this trial by nature, it was the Indians who, by the ambush, the atrocity, and the capture of the white woman (or even of the frontiersman himself)—by, in fact, their very numbers—became the aggressors and so sealed their own fate. Assimilating the Indians' most useful traits, including their love for the wilderness, the individual or the small group earned the moral right to kill, and kill again, in a defensive, if orgiastic, manner.

Whether those lone figures were forced to turn themselves into killing machines or the collectivity arrived in time to destroy the savages, inferior American numbers were invariably translated into a numerology of Indian destruction. When the frontiersman merged into a larger war scenario, he ensured that help would arrive just in time to dispatch the savages who held the white woman captive or encircled the wagon train, settler's cabin, or fort. From the seventeenth century on, Americans were repeatedly shown the slaughter of Indians as a form of reassurance and entertainment; and audiences almost invariably cheered, or were cheered, by what they read, heard, or saw. In this war story, the statistics of slaughter were prized and emphasized.

The American war story was especially effective as a builder of national consciousness because it seemed so natural, so innocent, so nearly childlike and was so little contradicted by the realities of invasion or defeat. Although a racially grounded tale, it deflected attention from the racial horror story most central to the country's development—that of the African-American—and onto more satisfying borderlands of the imagination. In a country uninvasion since 1812 and, after 1865, opposed at home only by small populations of native peoples, most Americans encountered war as a print, theater, screen, or playtime experience.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor fit the lineaments of this story well. At the country's periphery, a savage, nonwhite enemy had launched a barbaric attack on Americans going about their lives early one Sunday morning, and that enemy would be repaid in brutal combat on distant jungle islands in a modern version of "Indian fighting." A mobilized

nation's armed forces would embark on an island-hopping campaign of revenge leading to total victory, while, for most Americans, war would still be a distant experience.

On the home front—despite the rationing of some consumer items and the absence of others—the war had a dreamy, unwarlike quality. Between Pearl Harbor and V-J Day, Americans who had lived the previous “peace” decade in the desperation of the Great Depression found themselves with jobs, cash, and prospects. Resorts and hotels operated at capacity despite gas rationing; nightclubs were packed; racetracks were mobbed (until closed in 1945); movie theaters overflowed; book sales leaped; and the greatest fear of the American public, according to pollsters, was not defeat abroad but the possibility that peace might bring another economic collapse.²

On August 6, 1945, all that changed in a blinding flash over the city of Hiroshima that left Americans more bereft than they could then have imagined. In the afterglow of Japan's surrender, Americans would experience an ambush that could not be contained on distant frontiers, and their postwar culture would be transformed in bewildering ways, as the story that had helped order their sense of history for almost 300 years proved no longer sustainable. The atomic bomb that leveled Hiroshima also blasted openings into a netherworld of consciousness where victory and defeat, enemy and self, threatened to merge. Shadowed by the bomb, victory became conceivable only under the most limited of conditions, and an enemy too diffuse to be comfortably located beyond national borders had to be confronted in an un-American spirit of doubt.

From the rubble of war rose communism, a “hydra-headed” super-enemy, where previously the triple nationalisms of fascism—German, Italian, Japanese—had stood. A shape-shifting adversary, its forms proliferated in the American imagination. It was “monolithic godless communism,” “the Communist conspiracy,” “the Communist menace,” “international communism”; or regionally, “Asian communism,” “Chinese communism,” “the puppets of Moscow and Peking”; or more grandiosely, a “Red blueprint to conquer the world”; or domestically, “internal subversion” or “twenty years of treason.” Although the enemy was often identified with one super-nation, the Soviet Union, it seemed to mock all national boundaries and stories.

In a sense, communism had never existed in the same world with the United States and its story of national exceptionalism. Its founding father, Karl Marx, had imagined it as a burrowing “old mole,” respectful of no national borders. It was at home only in opposition to those boundless twins, capitalism and imperialism, and long before World War II it had become identified in the United States with labor strife and oppressed eth-

nic or racial groups, exactly the sorts of phenomena that the frontier story of the suppression of the Indian so successfully avoided. If what could be universalized in the American experience—the promise of freedom and abundance—came out of a providential national tale, what was national in the Communist story seemed a happenstance of history. The United States could only be the United States, while communism was the Soviet Union only by the luck of the historical draw.³

Being everywhere and nowhere, inside and out, the postwar enemy seemed omnipresent yet impossible to target. A nightmarish search for enemy-ness became the defining, even obsessive domestic act of the Cold War years, while strategic planning for future victory abroad led “prudent” men, familiar with the triumphant lessons of World War II, toward the charnel house of history. American policy makers soon found themselves writing obsessively, not for public consumption but for each other, about a possible “global war of annihilation.” In their new combat scenarios, the United States could either forswear meaningful victory or strike first, taking on an uncivilized and treacherous role long reserved for the enemy. In secret directives, these men began to plan for the possibility that 100 atomic bombs landing on targets in the United States would kill or injure 22 million Americans, or that an American “blow” might result in the “complete destruction” of the Soviet Union.⁴

The question of whether or not to use triumphal weapons of a suicidal nature to accomplish national ends proved deeply unsettling not just for adults planning global strategy, but also for children experiencing both the pride of parents returning victorious from the world war and the fear that that war's most wondrous weapon engendered. As one young man told sociologist Kenneth Keniston in 1967:

I remember the end of World War II, and leading a parade of kids around our summer house, me with a potato masher . . . [and] I remember a guy came to our summer house, it must have been '48 or '49—and sold my mother . . . the first A [volume] of an encyclopedia. . . . I remember reading it and seeing a picture of an atomic bomb and a tank going over some rubble. And I think I became hysterical.⁵

If the story of victory in World War II was for a time endlessly replayed in the movies, in comics, and on television, other cultural vistas were also opening up for the young, ones that led directly into whatever terrified grownups. To escape not into the war story but into places where that story was dissolving held unexpected pleasures, not the least of which was the visible horror of adults at what you were doing. In fears, there turned out to be thrills. Many children instinctively grasped the

corrosiveness of the postwar transformation, gravitating toward new forms of storytelling that seemed to rise unbidden from alien worlds: horror comics and science fiction films that drew on the horrors of the bomb, the Holocaust, and the Communist menace; juvenile delinquency movies and fashions that drew on fears of a missing underclass; rock and roll and hipsterism, which fed off fears of racial and sexual otherness; and *MAD* magazine, which drew on a mocking, dismantling voice lodged deep in the culture. In those years, some children embraced with gusto the secret despair of adults who claimed to be living happily in the freest, richest, most generous country on Earth.

From that world of haunting pleasures, I have one personal document—a map of Chinese world conquest I drew in 1959 on a piece of paper hidden inside my American history textbook. While our teacher discussed the Constitution, I took the cartographical look of the island-hopping campaign in the Pacific, globalized it, and set it in an unimaginable future nine years distant. (The map is labeled “War Ends Oct. 6, 1968.”) In an otherwise blank mid-Pacific, I drew a crude mushroom cloud captioned, “Atom blast destroys Pacific Isles & U.S. missile supply,” an indication of how difficult it was to imagine World War II-style scenarios in a nuclear age. With atomic weapons in place, after all, one might have had the more daunting task of visualizing extinction. My approach to the fighting was otherwise traditional—hundreds of tiny arrows winging their way over every land mass from Greenland to Australia. To reach the United States, the Chinese invaders crossed the Bering Strait, met up with another army routed through Greenland, and swept down on my home. I would have been twenty-four when I became a “Red Chinese” subject.

It seems unsurprising that in those years when fantasies of enemy invasions and takeovers sprouted unchecked, an adolescent, even from a liberal New York City family, would have absorbed the mind-set of his society. My map, in fact, traced a horror story that would soon obsess Kennedy-era officials like Secretary of State Dean Rusk and military adviser General Maxwell Taylor, who believed Chinese “aggression” and “expansionism” presented dangers not just for Asia but for the world. Yet this map was something more than a child’s version of Cold War fantasies and fears. To make that map in a class presenting an ideal view of state and citizen, to make it inside a textbook whose dedicatory page held an ode to the American car (“In our great country can be found factories with parking lots full of automobiles. . . . They are symbols, too, that their owners are free . . . free to move on to other work, free to seek other ways of life, free in body and spirit”) constituted a half-conscious oppositional act. It is not simply that the map amuses me now but that I

found secret pleasure and entertainment then in playing with the worst nightmare the anti-Communist mind could produce.⁶

Like so many other adolescent acts in those years, that map was a corrosive gesture. With every arrow, a bit of another country fell not to victory culture but to a darker culture of defeat. Representing horror and yearning, that map said: This is what it would be like if *your* vision proved true, and wouldn’t it be something! Part of the secret world of my childhood, that map prefigured a far more unnerving future I could hardly have imagined. Only a few years from the moment I sat in that classroom, some young radical students, recently made aware of an American war in a country called South Vietnam, were producing a map that went far beyond my ambiguous product, but was related to it. In that 1965 map, which appeared in the *National Vietnam Newsletter*, “enemy-occupied areas” of Vietnam turn out to be those occupied by the United States and its South Vietnamese allies.⁷

Yet the boys who fled into the haunted landscapes of the Cold War held another sort of flight close to their hearts as well. They were the last generation to celebrate the national war story with generic toy soldiers on the floors of their rooms, or with toy guns in streets or parks; the last to enact or cheer the moment when the enemy dropped in his tens, hundreds, thousands before our blazing guns, proof of American triumph.

Scenarios of ambush and slaughter, of their savagery and our civilization, of their deceit and our revenge, so essential to victory culture, were still basic to boyhood in the 1950s. This escape into a triumphal past—for generally, children were less likely to shoot down Chicoms or Ruskies or Reds than Indians or Japs or Nazis—held little of the dark or frightening. Children of the 1950s would later remember with genuine fondness these sunny moments of play out of sight of grownups and deeply involved in a story draining from adult culture. Men, and sometimes women, even those who identified themselves as antiwar during the Vietnam years, often recall the war play, war scenarios, and war toys of their childhood with a special fondness.

So those children of the 1950s grasped the pleasures of victory culture as an act of faith, and the horrors of nuclear culture as an act of faithless mockery, and held both the triumph and the mocking horror close without necessarily experiencing them as contraries. In this way, they caught the essence of the adult culture of that time, which—despite America’s dominant economic and military position in the world—was one not of triumph, but of triumphalist despair.

Triumphalist despair proved a unique and unstable mix. Without the possibility of total victory, without the ballast of the war story, “freedom” came unanchored as the “freest country on earth” presided over a

"Free World," many of whose members from Franco's Spain to Diem's Vietnam embodied unfreedom. Though the political rhetoric of freedom grew ever thicker, within a decade American freedom, like the Free World, would seem a sham to young people horrified by a war fought in freedom's name that had the look of an atrocity.

It is now practically a cliché that, with the end of the Cold War and the "loss of the enemy," American culture has entered a period of crisis that raises profound questions about national purpose and identity. This book, however, views that loss of enemy as part of a crisis that began with the atomic explosion over Hiroshima—at the moment of total victory in World War II. How Americans have dealt (or failed to deal) with the implications of the global dominance to which their history had brought them in 1945, and how they have (or have not) come to terms with the slow-motion collapse of a heroic war ethos thereafter, are central themes underlying American popular culture from 1945 on.

Between 1945 and 1975, victory culture ended in America. This book traces its decomposition through those years of generational loss and societal disillusionment to Vietnam, which was its graveyard for all to see. It was a bare two decades from the beaches of Normandy to the beachfronts of Danang, from Overlord to Operation Hades, from GIs as liberators to grunts as perpetrators, from home front mobilization to anti-war demonstrations organized by the "Mobe." The shortness of the span seemed surrealistic. The answers of 1945 dissolved so quickly into the questions of 1965. How could a great imperial presence have come to doubt itself so? Nothing was more puzzling than this—than the question mark itself—except the fact that one of the least significant nations on earth seemed responsible for bringing it to public attention.

Indicative of this stunning transformation were the official propaganda films the government produced for each war. Soon after World War II began, at the request of Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall, Hollywood director Frank Capra (*Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*) embarked on the production of a series of documentaries. Their purpose was to orient American troops to the nature of the enemy they were fighting and to the postwar world they were fighting for. These movies relied on enemy film clips, according to Capra, to "let the enemy prove to our soldiers the enormity of his cause—and the justness of ours." They appeared under the general title *Why We Fight*. The "why" was purely informative in nature. It had no interrogative force whatsoever. In it lurked not the faintest hint of a question, only of a powerful answer.

With their stark vision of "a free world" versus "a slave world," of

"civilization against barbarism" and "good against evil," backed up by dramatic Disney-produced animated sequences, these films exuded the clarity and confidence of a country that knew its place in history. The last of them, *Know Your Enemy—Japan*, was released on the day of the atomic bombing of Nagasaki. The first, *Prelude to War*, was considered so powerful that President Roosevelt urged it be put into commercial distribution. As one trailer touted it, "55 minutes of Democracy's Dynamite! . . . the greatest gangster movie ever filmed . . . the inside story of how the mobsters plotted to grab the world! . . . [M]ore diabolical . . . than any horror-movie you ever saw!"⁸

Prelude to War vividly depicted enemy atrocities ranging from the real (Nazi desecrations of churches, a Chinese baby killed in a Japanese air raid) to the imagined (the "conquering Jap army" superimposed on the White House—"You will see what they did to the men and women of Nanking, Hong Kong, and Manila. Imagine the field day they'd enjoy if they marched through the streets of Washington"). Behind these atrocities—the acts of "a savage with a machine gun"—lay a mobilizing vision of an "us or them" struggle. Faced with two animated globes, one white, one black, a daylight world and a world of endless night, what question could there be? "Two worlds stand against each other," intoned the narrator. "One must die, one must live. One hundred and seventy years of freedom decrees our answer."⁹

In 1965, the government released its first film about the war in Vietnam. Modeled on the *Why We Fight* series, it was framed by images of Hitler and Mussolini arriving in Munich in 1938, and of British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain declaring peace-in-our-time while Nazi flags flapped and *Sieg Heils* were offered up ("Peace in our time," comments an ominous voice-over, "a shortcut to disaster"). This was expectable framing material, for the immediate war story within which Americans, from the president on down, still generally cared to live was that of World War II, and Hanoi was imagined to exist somewhere just south of Munich.

There was, however, another, more alien frame for this film, scripted by the State Department to rally support for President Lyndon B. Johnson's already embattled Vietnam policy. The film opens on the president at a press conference reading aloud a letter from "a woman in the Midwest who wanted to know why her son was in Vietnam."

"In my humble way," the president recites slowly in his homey, nasal twang, "I am writing to you about the crisis in Vietnam. I have a son who is now in Vietnam. My husband served in World War II. Our country was at war, but now, this time, it is just something that I don't understand. Why?"

Johnson's voice picks up the question, "Why Vietnam?" as if it were his, not the woman's, and the phrase resonates three times as the film's title, *Why Viet-nam*, flashes on the screen. Though the written title lacks the question mark, a question mark seems to tremble behind every clip of the film. "Why," the president soon asks, "must young Americans, born into a land exultant with hope and with golden promise, toil and suffer and sometimes die in such a remote and distant place? The answer, like the war itself, is not an easy one." In fact, no answer, only an endless question, is forthcoming.

In the inability of government propaganda to evade this question mark lay an unnerving change in consciousness. Despite an unrestrained desire to present the government's point of view, the film's producers could find no stance beyond a defensive one. Every statement was essentially a response to a question that would not go away. Doubt, not confidence, was where you now had to begin.

In 1965, the time had already passed when the enemy could prove themselves monstrous to Americans. It is the president who has to claim in their name that the war is "guided by North Vietnam and . . . spurred by Communist China. Its goal is to conquer the south and to extend the Asiatic dominion of communism." It is Secretary of State Dean Rusk who has to claim in their name that "the declared doctrine and purpose of the Chinese Communists remain clear, the domination of all of South-east Asia, and indeed if we listened to what they're saying to us, the domination of the great world beyond." When one of their film clips is used, North Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh, shown surrounded by enthralled children, seems to have the spontaneous charm of a Charlie Chaplin. ("Behind the smile is a mind which is planning a reign of terror," claims the narrational voice-over defensively.)

For most of the film, however, while the enemy's atrocities are enumerated, the enemy remains strangely absent—as vague and frustrating to pinpoint as an explanation for the war itself. Over shots of a wounded American being helicoptered out of battle, the narrator explains that "even with superior equipment, this is a different war to prosecute. There are no front lines here. The war is everywhere, against an enemy that is seldom clearly seen."

Much of the rest of the film involves little more than scenes of victimization—destroyed U.S. military equipment, wounded or dead American soldiers and civilian personnel—scenes in which no enemy is ever in sight. Against this backdrop, the alternating voices of president and narrator can be heard awkwardly fending off questions the film never directly acknowledges, swearing that "we will not surrender," "not retreat," not abandon our "commitment," not "dishonor our word." It is

as if the film had remained at that news conference, answering increasingly hostile questions from a public as present yet invisible as the enemy.

The film's final scenes are set against flag-draped coffins being unloaded from a plane for burial in the United States, scenes unimaginably distant from the triumphal certainty of World War II. It is in the presence of what could not help but look like defeat that the president almost plaintively pleads his case: "I do not find it easy to send the flower of our youth, our finest young men into battle. . . . We did not choose to be the guardians at the gate, but there is no one else. Nor would surrender in Vietnam bring peace, because we learned from Hitler in Munich that success only feeds the appetite of aggression."

Despite the framing shots of Hitler, next to nothing of the ethos of World War II or the war story remained in *Why Viet-Nam*. No longer was it a simple matter of fleshing out the nature of an aggressive and savage enemy, assuring the public of a victory to come, or laying out postwar goals. While these propaganda films were released into high schools and colleges, their theatrical release was evidently not considered. Then again, mobilizing the public was never part of the Vietnam agenda. Something stranger was going on. The public was to be shored up, TV event by TV event, to offer support only in the form of "opinion" to pollsters. In fact, the public's most important act of support was simply to remain inert. It was to be mobilized to do exactly nothing. Its task was not to act, because action, in the context of Vietnam, meant opposing the president's war. The president needed the support of abstract "opinion" to ward off the question mark, and an absence of live oppositional bodies to ensure that the invisible enemy be held at bay.

"If freedom is to survive in any American hometown," declares the narrator of *Why Viet-Nam*, "it must be preserved in such nations as Vietnam." Yet the continental United States was under attack only in the sense that the memory of World War II was being slowly picked apart, and just circling the wagons wasn't protection enough. *Why Viet-Nam* conveniently located American doubt in those simple people out there—mothers in the Midwest who wanted to be convinced that this was indeed World War II. The question mark, however, had lodged itself, first and foremost, within official Washington. Doubt grew like some subversive foreign entity right inside the president's head. It was certainly no fluke that the question mark was lodged so deeply in, yet not officially on *Why Viet-Nam*. Thanks to an article by James Thomson, Jr., a State Department East Asian specialist in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, we know that the issue of acknowledging the question mark was argued out in the most literal way within at least one part of the

Johnson administration. "[M]y most discouraging assignment in the realm of public relations," Thomson recalled, "was the preparation of a White House pamphlet entitled *Why Vietnam*, in September, 1965; in a gesture toward my conscience, I fought—and lost—a battle to have the title followed by a question mark."¹⁰

But the question mark could not be evaded by technical means, for it was already there. In that year of massive escalation, the defensive stance of the government's first significant propaganda film about the war only confirmed its existence. The no-name director of *Why Viet-Nam* faced a problem Frank Capra could not have imagined. It was not the enemy but Americans who were now required to deny the "enormity" and prove the "justness" of their cause, and their cause, when examined, did not look so great.

The strain of doing this made for propaganda that looked exactly like what it was. The growing oppositional movement took it as such. The historian Henry Steele Commager, for instance, denounced the film for its "fabrications." "When Communists sponsor such propaganda," he wrote in the *Saturday Review*, "we call it brainwashing." Some in the antiwar movement found such films useful organizing tools: "The U.S. Army and the Department of Defense have made numerous and expensively produced films arguing their case for Vietnam and wars of counter-insurgency in general. Made with your tax money, they are available for 'educational' showings (free) and should be used with films made by the Vietnamese showing why they are fighting," suggested the May 1969 issue of *Liberation* magazine. To them, the government's defensive lies and evasions were instantly visible, even laughable, when set against the Capraesque mobilizing emotions of enemy propaganda films.¹¹

Already in shreds in 1965, the film's response to the question, Why Vietnam? has long since dematerialized, but the question mark is still with us. In this, the film was in good company. There was no American narrative form that could long have contained the story of a slow-motion defeat inflicted by a nonwhite people in a frontier war in which the statistics of American victory seemed everywhere evident. Instead, the forms that might once have contained such a war dematerialized as well. By the early 1970s, the war story was even being swept out of childhood, along with the war films, westerns, comics, war toys, and TV shows that had been its vessels. The very word *war* had fallen into disrepute as an attraction for the child audience, and the United States had been shorn of a version of its history that was close to a secular religion.

Certainly, Vietnam marked a definitive exit point in American history and the 1960s, a sharp break with the past. There, the war story finally lost its ability to mobilize young people under "freedom's banner" except

in opposition to itself, a loss experienced by a generation as both a confusing "liberation" and a wrenching betrayal. There, the war story's codes were jumbled, its roles redistributed, its certitudes dismantled, and new kinds of potential space opened up that proved, finally, less liberating than frightening. Americans had lived with and within victory culture for so long that no one left its precincts voluntarily. Even the assault on that culture by the young in those years was hardly as oppositional as then imagined. In part, it too was a playing out of aspects of victory culture, and as that culture collapsed, those who had opposed it, being caught up in a symbiotic relationship with it, collapsed as a force as well.

The loss of boundaries beyond which conflict could be projected and of an enemy suitable for defeat in those borderlands meant a collapse of story. The post-Vietnam War years have so far represented only the after-life of this societal crisis, the playing out of storylessness. It is hardly surprising that, after 1975, the basic impulse of America's political and military leaders (as well as of many other Americans) was not to forge a new relationship to the world but to reconstruct a lost identity of triumph. After all, the ruins of the war story are all around us, as are the ghostly fragments of what was once repressed from that story. But in a world that has moved far beyond triumphalist despair, the war story cannot be simply reconstituted.

Experts in "Communist studies" used to say that Communist states could not exist without external enemies. Ironically, this very issue has proved central to American national identity. Is there an imaginable "America" without enemies and without the story of their slaughter and our triumph? Can there be a new story Americans will tell about and to themselves, no less to the world, that might sustain them as citizens and selves? So far only warring fragments of race, gender, religion, and ethnicity have risen to fill the space emptied of victory culture. Whether those fragments of "identity" presage some longer-term collapse or something new remains unknown.