

SPIT AND SPIN: RIVAL “MEMORY NARRATIVES” OF VETERAN ABUSE

My memory says I did that. My conscience says I could not have done that. Eventually my memory yields.

—Friedrich Nietzsche

In a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true.

—Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*

It's an often-cited moment in an iconic film. Sylvester Stallone's John Rambo, having recently returned from Vietnam and having more recently unleashed mayhem on an American town, is confronted by his former Green Beret commander, who tells him, "It's over, Johnny. It's over." The anguished veteran replies:

Nothing is over! Nothing! You just don't turn it off. It wasn't my war. You asked me, I didn't ask you. And I did what I had to do to win. But somebody wouldn't let us win. Then I come back to the world and I see all those maggots at the airport. Protesting me. Spitting. Calling me baby killer and all kinds of vile crap. Who are they to protest me? Huh? Who are they?

First Blood, where this famous scene occurs, came out in 1982. Sixteen years later, sociology professor and Vietnam veteran Jerry Lembcke published *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam*. In it, he argued that the image of protestors spitting on soldiers returning from Vietnam was a fabrication encouraged by the Nixon administration to marginalize dissenters, certified by films like *First Blood*, and cynically exploited by the first Bush administration to justify the 1991 invasion of Kuwait: "It was the myth of the spat-upon Vietnam veteran," Lembcke wrote, "that galvanized the sentiments of the American people sufficiently to discredit peace activists and give George Bush his war" (1998, 17).

Lembcke was not the first scholar to question the plausibility of the “spat-upon” story. In 1990, Bruce Jackson, writing in the *Journal of American Folklore*, had described such war narratives not as personal recollections but as “strategic devices” essential to identity management (402). Six years later, in her “Military Folklore” entry for a respected encyclopedia, Carol Burke noted both that the story “defies reality” and that it had been told decades earlier about Korean War vets (485). To folklorists, even those who like Jackson and Burke were sympathetic to veterans, the tale had all the trappings of an urban legend.

Lembcke went further, suggesting a political rationale for the story’s popularity. In his analysis, the spitting image shifted blame for the loss of Vietnam away from national leaders and onto domestic scapegoats—the “somebody,” in Rambo’s words, who “wouldn’t let us win.” As he told a reporter when his book first appeared, “The country is still trying to come to terms with the fact that we lost to this small, underdeveloped nation of Asians. So the alibi is that we were not defeated by the Vietnamese, but we were defeated on the home front. We were betrayed by the antiwar movement. The story of the spat-upon veterans fits as part of that” (quoted in Ulin 1998, E1).

As a challenge to one master narrative—the idea that peaceniks had demoralized our troops and thus lost the war—*The Spitting Image* reflected a progressive ideology that saw US foreign policy as fundamentally imperialist and manipulative. At the same time, it resuscitated what Lembcke saw as a suppressed counter-narrative: the story of Vietnam veterans, disgusted with the war, joining the peace movement in a grand alliance to bring their brothers home. Central to this story was Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW), an organization whose most famous—to some most infamous—spokesperson was John Kerry. VVAW was clearly the hero of Lembcke’s tale: the book aimed not merely to correct the spitting myth but to restore dissident veterans to their rightful place at the resistance table.

Liberal reviewers received the book warmly. Thomas Beamish, for example, was a sociologist whose own research (Beamish, Molotch, and Flacks 1995) had prefigured

Lembcke's conclusions about "protestor-troop antagonism" being a government invention; he wrote of Lembcke's "significant contribution to our understanding of a politically powerful wartime legend" (433). Other reviewers referred to *The Spitting Image* as "an important contribution to creating a more complex analysis of the experience of Vietnam veterans" and "a brilliant cultural exploration of the social construction or *mis*construction of meaning" (Sturken 2000, 577; Karner 1999, 389).

If you listened to veterans, though, you got a different picture. A few years after the book came out, I started searching online for threads about "spitting" and "Vietnam" and found virulent rhetoric condemning Lembcke, fellow academics like John Llewellyn (who seconded Lembcke's argument), the mainstream media (the notorious MSM), and—with telling frequency—John Kerry. A good sampling of this contrary discourse was posted on Free Republic (Freep), self-billed as "America's exclusive site for God, Family, Country, Life & Liberty constitutional conservative activists." Freep members asserted that spitting was rife in the Vietnam years, citing either personal experience or journalist Bob Greene's 1989 book, *Homecoming*, which recorded dozens of first-person accounts of spitting incidents. Some questioned scholarly methodology in refusing to take seriously this body of evidence. For example, when Llewellyn claimed that there is "a common sense method for debunking this urban legend," one poster replied bluntly, "Which seems to be anything but surveying veterans."

But the debate over evidence was less striking than the emotions that Freep bloggers invested in "debunking the debunkers." Consider for example the Free Republic posts responding to an article Llewellyn published on Veterans Day 2004. There were hundreds of these appearing under a headline of search words like *academicesspool*, *banaijohnnyacademic*, *idioteducator*, *leftspeak*, and *whaledungexpert*. "I just knew," said the person who forwarded the article to her fellow Free Republic readers, that "y'all would appreciate the opportunity to educate the so-called educator." They did so with considerable vitriol:

- “The author of this article needs a good swift kick in the face . . . Notice this puke publishes this crap on our birthday! Semper Fi.”
- “He’s calling me a liar. I wish he would do it to my face.”
- “Hey buffoon go peddle your crap somewhere else, how dare you add salt to the wound.”

Other comments, aimed at the ivory tower’s “lying, amoralistic academic nutjobs,” denounced Llewellyn for illustrating “all that is wrong with advanced reasoning as it is represented in academia today.” On his admission that you can’t prove a negative, and that therefore someone somewhere might have been spit upon, one poster replied, “In other words, the label [urban legend] is utterly worthless. Thanks, professor.” In response to his comment that “I have studied urban legends for nearly twenty years and have been certified as an expert on the subject in the federal courts,” a poster identified as Texas Cowboy replied, “And you’re still an idiot.”

In a 2005 Op-Ed piece for the *Boston Globe*, Lembcke defended his thesis, going so far as to suggest that spitting stories should be seen as “fantasies conjured in the imaginations of aging veterans” (A13). Free Republic again rose to the bait. Because Lembcke had written a history of the International Woodworkers of America, many Freepers seized on his apparent Marxism. One, after recounting his “humiliation” by a hippie couple at San Francisco airport, commented, “But hey, what do I know? I’m only a veteran not a brilliant Leftwing journalist trying to impress my boss with my anti-American/anti-military psychobabble.” (After his name appeared the tag line “We did not lose in Vietnam. We left.”) Others reflected the distaste for “JFK 2,” which was particularly strong in the wake of the Swift Boat campaign that helped to derail Kerry’s 2002 presidential bid:

Hanoi Jane and Hanoi John slandered the thousands of US servicemen who served in Vietnam as war criminals, rapists, murderers. They are responsible for the spitting—they created the propaganda which motivated it. They should be in Leavenworth for treason, as they actively gave aid and

comfort to the enemy in time of war. Comrade Lembcke is recommended reading on the CPUSA site.

Much of the anger you heard on these sites was directed against an arrogance of intellectual power that permitted academics to tout their research as more reliable than eyewitness memories. But what was really at stake here was neither methodology nor the reliability of memory but the coherence of two polarized world views—views that were grounded in mutually exclusive “memory narratives.” What was most important in these narratives, I suggest, was not their overt content but what each one left out or suppressed.

For liberal revisionists like Lembcke and Llewellyn, the narrative was one of brotherhood betrayed. Once upon a time, warriors and peacemakers joined ranks against an imperial juggernaut. Those who had resisted the war at home and those who had experienced traumatic events in-country came together in order to speak truth to power. Soldiers recognized protestors not as antagonists, but as a loyal home front working on their behalf. Protestors recognized soldiers not as willing agents, but as coerced or misled victims of a duplicitous government. That government was the serpent pushing a counterfeit history in which brother was turned against brother and loyal opposition was reimagined as betrayal.

For the conservative audience of Free Republic, the memory narrative was one of abandonment. In ancient Israel, a scapegoat, or “escape goat,” was a sacrificial animal staked out in the wild, thought to carry the sins of the community to the jaws of wolves and thereby to ensure atonement in the eyes of the Lord. In the Freep narrative, soldiers were cast out in like fashion, but with a terrible twist: Their sacrifice was *rejected* by the home community, and they were condemned to live out their lives as pariahs, dishonored, unsung—and spat upon. In this story, the role of serpent was taken by an unholy alliance of protestors and antiwar vets that stabbed our boys in the back. This was, of course, a conventional—perhaps *the* conventional—story of the returning vet, and it remains today, despite the current infatuation with military heroism, a defining memory narrative of the Vietnam period.

The conventional Freep narrative and Lembcke's revisionist narrative both worked *as* narratives, with a well-defined cast of characters, a visible structure, and even a moral—or at least a political lesson—to be drawn from each. But their coherence depended not on an authentic engagement with complexity, but on a decision to “disappear” uncomfortable facts, to embrace a memory which was also, necessarily, a forgetting. Let me clarify this point by identifying what each story leaves out.

What is disappeared in Lembcke's story is any hint of rifts between soldiers and protestors. In his analysis, the alliance against government is seamless, as proven not only by his failure to find “credible” evidence of spitting, but also by dint of sheer reasoning: Since vets and protestors worked together as allies, it would not be logical to assume—indeed, it would not be *possible*—that some factions were also at each other's throats. Thus, when Lembcke encounters cases of veterans saying, “It happened to me,” he hints that they may be suffering from false memory syndrome (1998, 115ff.). What cannot be allowed to exist is the messy reality of a peace movement that included both well-mannered protestors and spitting maggots.

My friend Sandy Sidar, an antiwar draft counselor during the war, spoke to this messy reality when he reflected on his work with the New Haven Draft Information Center. When I asked him about spitting on soldiers, he said,

Of course that happened. There was a strong bond between the peace movement and antiwar veterans, but it wasn't seamless. We considered Vietnam Veterans Against the War our most powerful allies, but let's be honest: The movement had its loony tunes too, and we were hearing reports of spitting as early as 1967. In fact, we sent out literature urging people not to do that—not to harass soldiers at all—because they'd had a rough enough time already. But it happened. In marches we'd always put vets in the front line. But we'd also put civilians on either side of them, to act as a buffer against this kind of harassment.

Sidar's version of the alliance has a gritty, all-too-human quality that is disappeared in the sanitized version championed by Lembcke.

The Freep narrative also disappears uncomfortable facts. If the impermissible in Lembcke's tale was protestor animus against veterans, the impermissible in the Freep narrative is the in-country behavior that may have precipitated animus—the behavior that made My Lai a household name, that made “Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?” a common chant, that made “Babykiller” such a hated term of abuse, and that generated one of the most disturbing images of the war: the Special Forces t-shirt that read “Kill ’em all. Let God sort ’em out.” In the Free Republic worldview, this unpleasantness is erased, hippies spit on soldiers *for no reason*, and the Winter Soldiers witnesses are simply liars.

Each side remembers, in the words of the old anti-*Times* taunt, “all the news that fits” its own cherished narrative. And in the middle of this recollective muddle is the young GI who, according to your ideological taste, was either the dupe or the agent of mendacious statesmen. In 1973, in a pioneering study of returned vets, psychologist Robert Jay Lifton called these young men “*neither* victims nor executioners.” In the Lembcke-Freep feud, they were *either* victims or executioners. I want to suggest that, if we are aiming for a consciousness that reconciles memory and conscience—that seeks to close Nietzsche's disturbing rift—we must consider the possibility that they were *both*.

In remembrances of Vietnam, even today, two images battle for hegemony: one of soldiers torching hamlets, the other of uniformed youngsters being spit upon. The binary effaces an untidy middle. Remembering truly, wholly, would mean remembering the original context, in which young Americans trekked through the fog of war toward often terrible destinations. The tangle is that it was their victimization as draftees (or gullible enlistees) that positioned them as executioners. And it was their role as executioners that aggravated and sustained their victimization. We don't honor their sacrifice by denying that some of them were responsible for terrible things. Indeed, it is only by acknowledging this that we are able to appreciate the complexity of that sacrifice. Otherwise, they're just pawns without moral agency in the masters' game.

"There is a reluctance to examine the role played by US servicemen in Vietnam," wrote Lembcke, "for fear that such an examination might lead to blaming the victim." Quite right. Yet the solution that Lembcke proposed for handling that fear—to focus on "the war itself . . . not the men who fought it" (123)—is only a more sophisticated evasion than Free Republic's. What he and his conservative antagonists both obscure was the trauma at the heart of the Vietnam experience.

Lifton's book *Home from the War* recounted his and other psychiatrists' work with groups of soldiers who were attempting to come to terms with what they had done and witnessed in Vietnam; Lifton's work created the diagnostic category PVS (Post Vietnam Syndrome), later to be renamed PTSD. In facing that syndrome, the Lembcke and anti-Lembcke groups, again, looked only at what fit their narrative. For Free Republic, the source of veterans' trauma was not the war itself, but their rejection by the home front, in other words, not anything they did or witnessed, but something that was done *to* them. Lembcke made a different but no less bizarre calculation. In his reading, Lifton's analysis "psychologizes the political," and the source of veteran trauma was the medical world's mislabeling of protest as "mad" behavior (Lembcke 110).

What was disappeared in both these readings was the war itself. The reality that could not be spoken, by either camp, was that abusive violence, especially violence against civilians, seems to have been more common in Vietnam than in most other American wars—our wars against Native Americans being a notable exception. In Vietnam, both sides were abusive, but while we are readily able to recall Vietcong atrocities, we tend to minimize the "redemptive violence" of our own side. We would rather not be reminded of the conundrum Vietnam veteran W.D. Ehrhart admitted in his poem "Guerrilla War":

It's practically impossible
to tell civilians
from the Vietcong;
after awhile,
you quit trying.

According to one survey, a fifth of our soldiers reported witnessing abusive violence, and nearly one in ten admitted to participating in it (Frey-Wouters and Laufer 1986, 10). Anyone who supposes that the most “vile crap” of the Vietnam years was saliva at the San Francisco airport has chosen to forget carpet bombing, Rusty Calley, and the grotesque explanation “We had to destroy the village in order to save it.” To deny this historical darkness in an attempt to assuage veterans’ pain is to trivialize the trauma of those veterans themselves.

Yet this is exactly what has happened today. Fifty years away from the end of the conflict, we no longer engage with its complexities. Vietnam has become, no less than the so-called Good War, a disarticulated backdrop for generic heroism—or, if you didn’t serve, for the lack of it. In this hyperpatriotic moment, the uniform itself has become evidence of virtue. We have so homogenized the concept of “patriot” that Vietnam is neither the righteous crusade that Ronald Reagan called it nor the mistake that John Kerry called it, but merely a war, like any other war, which bred cowards and heroes. That flattening of affect, denying memory itself, is understandable. It is also intellectually and morally irresponsible.

I do not suppose that I speak from any high ground. As James Fallows wrote as early as 1975, in an insightful article called “What Did You Do in the Class War, Daddy?”, those of us who chanted, in various timbres, “Hell no, we won’t go,” bear our own scars, and we remain in the muck of the unresolved, even now. In a sense, all of us who lived through that era—warriors, protestors, dodgers, perhaps even statesmen—can echo Tal and Duffy’s grim reminder, “Nobody gets off the bus” (1994). We are still, a half-century later, struggling both to remember and to forget.

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