FROM MEMORY TO HISTORY: 
AMERICAN CULTURAL MEMORY OF THE VIETNAM WAR

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This thesis is an attempt to articulate the meanings of collective memory as well as investigate its utility for analyzing memory of the Vietnam War. This conflict was the longest war in American history and remains one of the most divisive memories for the American public. Two forms of cultural memory, American history high school textbooks and presidential campaign rhetoric, reveal the contested nature of memory. The constant revisions of textbook interpretations of the war highlight the changes in memory over time. In contrast, reoccurring issues in presidential campaign debates reveal the persistent controversies that continue to haunt Americans’ cultural memories of the Vietnam War.
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Introduction

The Vietnam War was the longest war in American history. The conflict began gradually after World War II. The Eisenhower administration supported southern Vietnam and increased American aid after the fall of a fortress at Dien Bien Phu to nationalist leader Ho Chi Minh in 1954. John F. Kennedy continued the commitment of American “advisors” through 1963. Lyndon B. Johnson chose to escalate the conflict dramatically after the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964. American troop levels peaked in 1968 at over half a million soldiers. Also in 1968, the Tết offensive demonstrated to the American public that their leaders’ claims of progress were false and that the conflict was not worth the cost. Assassinations, riots, and the revelation of the My Lai massacre further added to public discontent, and with the election of 1969, Richard Nixon promised to end the war “with honor.” Four long years later, American and Vietnamese leaders signed a peace treaty. The war cost over fifty thousand American lives, and many considered it a military defeat and moral failure. The conflict concluded with the 1975 reunification of Vietnam, but the war lingered in the minds of Americans.

The Vietnam War remains a powerful memory in American culture because the conflict was a turning point in recent American history. Some, such as Pulitzer Prize winning author David Halberstam, have called it the “Second Civil War.”¹ Events of the Vietnam era were a spur to rethink the nature of America, Americans’ cultural assumptions, and American foreign policy. Conflicts over these subjects that opened during the Vietnam War remain unresolved, as historians, politicians, and the public continue to debate the meaning and lessons of the war several decades after the conclusion of hostilities. These debates have taken a variety of forms, including professional scholarship, political rhetoric, memoirs, novels, films, and memorials. The debates concern various topics, such as the relevance of the war to foreign policy and revitalized American militarism, the lasting stigma of politicians’ war records, the limited focus of American films and novels about the war, the controversy surrounding the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and its use by mourners, and the validity of a negative historical analogy of a tumultuous time. All these issues deal tangentially with the

memory of the Vietnam War, they evoke it, and by remaining alive in American cultural and political discourse as “controversies,” they keep the war meaningful in American culture. Before exploring the many facets of American memory of the Vietnam War, it is first important to understand the theoretical framework that unifies these diverse debates.

The persistence of an event or era in national debates, such as the Vietnam War in recent American history, is the particular subject of memory studies. When one thinks of the word “memory,” one most likely thinks of an individual’s mental ability to retain and recall past experience. Yet another type of memory, more abstract and theoretical, pertains to one’s membership in a community. A community consists of individuals who have shared memories that define their own group identity and serve to delineate them from other groups. Just as an individual has an autobiographical memory, so too does a society have a collective memory that helps an individual connect to a group. A group or individual’s recollection of the past is essential in the construction of identity. In fact, memory and identity are inextricably intertwined. What one chooses to remember forms a narrative about oneself. An identity, either an individual’s autobiography or a nation’s history, is basically a narrative formed of conscious or unconscious decisions about what to remember and what to forget. While this selection process to create an individual’s identity occurs consciously and unconsciously within the brain, the construction of a group’s identity is a public process. This process is not democratic, and it is always contested because the power to shape the past is also the power to influence present and future policy. In a free society, individuals and groups of individuals are constantly battling to dictate the past, and the most recent past is always the most contested. In addition to public debates over what should be and should not be “American,” or central to American memory and identity, there are forces at work in a society’s choice of relevant memories that are unconscious. Some examples are social forces, such as the differences of memory between generations and the influence of mass media, propaganda, and power; psychological forces, like a need for nostalgia and national pride; and cultural forces, dealing with the forms of representation.

The issue of memory is crucial in contemporary historical discourse. A useful starting point in assessing this field is an analytical overview of memory studies. Then follows an investigation of memory of the national community in America, with
particular reference to one of the most fiercely disputed events of the recent past – the Vietnam War.

Some scholarship has dealt with memorials and films in this regard. But other, less studied cultural texts deserve attention. High school American history textbooks and presidential campaign rhetoric both codify and inform collective memory of the Vietnam War. Unique power structures inherent in the textbook publishing industry and campaign rhetoric shape these historical interpretations and significantly influence how citizens remember the war. Textbooks have been battlefields of American society since the 1960s. Both the nature of textbooks and historical interpretations of the Vietnam War have changed since that period. This study will show how the changes in American history textbooks from the 1960s to 2000 have, in turn, contributed to changing interpretations of the persistently controversial Vietnam War. Like textbooks, presidential elections have sparked debates over the nature of the Vietnam War. Veterans campaigning for the presidency have attempted to interpret their military service as noble and heroic, and non-veterans have deemed it necessary to justify their motivations for not serving in the military. Yet, the unique nature of the Vietnam War has allowed political opponents to associate the negative aspects of the war with the veterans and question their character.

Origins of Memory Studies

Memory is a way of thinking about how people use the past in the present. But in order to understand memory as a theoretical perspective on history, it is useful to explore the history of the field. Scholars from various disciplines embraced the idea of collective memory in the 1980s, but the groundwork was laid much earlier in the fields of sociology and psychology. In the early 20th century Maurice Halbwachs, the student of eminent sociologist Emile Durkheim, stressed the social aspects of memory and significantly countered Sigmund Freud by stating that memories are socially constructed, not unearthed whole from the subconscious. In The Collective Memory, the pioneering work in the field, Halbwachs emphasized the social context of memory: “We appeal to witnesses to corroborate or invalidate as well as supplement what we somehow know already about an event that in many other details remains obscure… If what we currently see fits into the framework of our old memories, the converse is also true, for these
memories adapt to the mass of present perceptions.” Alternatively, psychologists like F. C. Bartlett emphasized that memory only occurs in individual minds, and that there is no metaphysical “collective mind” to which the term “collective memory” refers. The disciplines differ in their focus on individuals as opposed to a collective, but both fields stressed the subjective “construction” of memories. Indeed, recent cognitive research into memory has reaffirmed the theory that no carbon copy of any situation is retained in the mind; rather, emotionally-laden or particularly significant events remain etched, but only as incomplete and variable fragments. In order for recall to occur, an individual’s brain needs to reconstruct these memory pieces by filling in the blank or inconsistent spaces to suit present needs. This reconstruction includes conscious and unconscious choices, and it is these choices that memory studies attempt to understand through sociology and psychology. Thus, memory began as an interdisciplinary venture.

Although the field did not flourish until the 1980s, two changes in the 1960s and 1970s combined to empower public and local history at the same time as the authority of academic history began to diminish. The result was a more egalitarian and less elitist discipline. The first of these forces was the postmodern critique of authority during the 1960s. Intellectual postmodernism reflected a larger fragmentation of the 1950s consensus. As historian Peter Novick notes in *That Noble Dream*, during the 1960s objectivity was in crisis, and “distinctions between fact and value and between theory and observation were called into question.” Objectivity appeared to be illusory. The resulting soul-searching within the history profession as to its claim to epistemological truth prompted scholars to consider other representations of history. The postmodern impulse also called into doubt the historians’ mantle of authority. If the public remembered the past differently than academic historians, it became possible that people were simply remembering differently rather than incorrectly.

In addition to the loss of authority in academic history, a second change prompted a renewed interest in “useful” or present-minded history. In his work, *Historians in Public*, Ian Tyrell claims that the 1960s renewed American interest in public history.

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“Understood as the radical critique and appreciation of historical representations in diverse media from advertising, film, and popular culture to museums and libraries, the modern drive to make academic history in some way more ‘public’ had roots in the 1960s and the New Left.” One way the history profession renewed its purpose was to make itself useful to the public. Some cynics have argued that the fresh interest in public history was a reaction to a lack of jobs in academia. Another interpretation notes the creation of graduate “applied” and “public” history programs in universities. Whatever the cause, a generation of professionally-trained historians found a position in the public realm, in the government, historical societies, archives, or museums. Academics bestowed second-class status on these professionals, but these public historians, working outside of the ivory tower, further undermined academic history’s claim to authoritative objectivity. According to Peter Novick, “The founding fathers of the American historical discipline had grounded objectivity in a program of … professionalized versus amateur history. By the 1980s… this program had become problematic.” Thus, as professional historians became more present-minded, less elitist, and less certain of their objectivity, historians began to think in terms of the construction of history, and they began to inquire about why people understand the past the way that they do.

A third stimulus for the rise of memory scholarship in the 1980s was the emergence of several political conflicts about truth in historical interpretations. These debates spurred scholars to think in terms of contested but equally valid narratives and spawned some of the first studies in historical memory. The culture wars, which had their roots in the 1960s, truly erupted after Ronald Reagan’s so-called Conservative Revolution in 1980s. Reagan famously revised Vietnam as a “noble cause.” He became notorious for selective amnesia and ideological revision of historical events. Additionally, a call for a monument to memorialize the Vietnam War on the national Mall only a few years after the war ended raised questions about how to characterize the war. The war’s opponents had their way, as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, dedicated in 1982, is a

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6 Tyrell, 154.
7 Novick, 521.
somber black wall featuring only the names of the deceased. Those who sought a more
traditional representation termed the memorial a “black gash of shame,” and won a minor
victory with the later addition of a bronze statue of three men on patrol. Another battle
over historical interpretations erupted in 1994 over the Enola Gay exhibit at the
Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum. The Enola Gay, the plane that dropped
the first atom bomb on Hiroshima, was to be the center of a national exhibit, but soon
became embroiled in a controversy about whether Americans should celebrate the end of
the war or mourn the inhuman consequences of the bombing. Finally, the original
exhibition was cancelled and a less controversial one took its place. These debates over
historical interpretations of wars played a central role in the culture wars. They
highlighted to historians and the public the centrality of ideology to historical
interpretations.

Together, the postmodern critique of authority and objectivity in historical
narration, the renewed interest in useful history, and the public debates over history that
became known as the culture wars provided scholars with the material to which they
could apply the theoretical concept of collective memory developed by Halbwachs
decades earlier.

**History and Memory**

Memory studies may have interdisciplinary roots, but memory is especially
significant to the discipline of history. The concept of a group’s shared memory may
seem interchangeable with the group’s history. Indeed, they have many similarities; like
memory, history is a social construction that helps us to understand the present in the
context of the past. History represents the past by telling a story using traces that remain
from past events. As a term, however, history has an association with one particular
institutionalized discipline. Professional, academic history seems elitist and inaccessible
to those outside the discipline. In a nation-wide survey about Americans’ view of history,
Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen discovered that instead of “history,” the public is
more comfortable with the concept of “the past.” As a term, “the past” better describes
the non-academic’s interactions with the past, which are unprofessional, leisurely, less
rigorous, and more often family or community-based. In contrast, historians’ analytic focus is more often on a nation, class, ethnicity, gender, or an idea rather than on family and community. History, as collectively conceived by academic historians, simply does not trickle down to the public’s historical consciousness. To understand this disconnect, historians have applied the concept of memory to reveal how historical representations affect how people think about the past.

A comparison of the behavior of an individual’s memory to the discipline of history highlights the similarities of the two approaches and memory’s reliance upon professional history. By viewing all history and representations of the past as memory, one must acknowledge that all history is a construction. Just as memory is selective, so history involves a choice of what to include and what to exclude. According to historian Howard Zinn, “To be ‘objective’ in writing history, for example, is as pointless as trying to draw a map which shows everything – or even samples of everything – on a piece of terrain. No map can show all the elements in that terrain, nor should it, if it is to serve efficiently a present purpose, to take us toward some goal. Therefore, different maps are constructed, depending on the aim of the mapmaker.”

Like memory, this act of construction occurs in the present. It begins with the assumption that the way in which people remember the past influences their actions, beliefs, and values today. Memory takes the focus from the past and places it in the present. According to historian Bruce Gronbeck, “A society’s collective memory is regularly reshaped by today’s interpreters so as to make it more useful in the present.” Memory studies primarily concern the contested interpretations of history over time as well as the present-day uses of history to form identities and shape policy. Many historians are less consciously present-minded. According to Zinn, “We have accepted truth as criterion, and we will rush to invoke it, but we have not yet accepted relevance.”

In the process of recalling an event, people revise their memories to meet present needs;

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Similarly, people write history from the perspective of the present, so history might as well serve present needs.

Another advantage to viewing history through the lens of memory is to highlight the social and cultural aspects of memory and the various processes that influence the selection of memories. To do this, memory studies must draw upon various disciplines since the theoretical bases for memory derive from psychology and the social aspects of memory from either sociology or social psychology. Likewise, anthropology and cultural studies provide the theoretical foundation for understanding the functioning of memories within culture. These fields allow scholars to understand the workings of society and culture, but history in its similarity to memory, forms the basis for much work in the field. After all, memory studies are primarily interested in the past, and history contributes the most rigorous methodological framework to understand the past. In this way collective memories are similar to academic historical constructions of the past.

Memory draws upon all the social sciences, and facilitates theory about how humans use the past to interact, remember, and negotiate the constraints of society, culture, generations, and power. Together, the characteristics of memory as constructionist, presentist, and interdisciplinary allow a scholar to appreciate the various influences on the public’s historical consciousness that lie inside and outside of academia. Textbooks and survey courses do not shape the entirety of American society’s historical consciousness. Films, memorials, political rhetoric, novels, the news media, and many other social forces shape individuals’ historical knowledge. A focus on historical memory allows us to understand how people remember and understand the past and how they act based on their historical consciousness.

Although a focus on “memory” places emphasis not on truth but instead on the construction of truth, academic history complements memory studies because history forms the basis of all historical knowledge. From the perspective of memory, academic history recedes to one among many influences on the public’s historical consciousness. As a professional discipline, however, academic history remains the best avenue to historical truth through a meticulous method and a system of internal checks. Generally, academic history is epistemologically superior to folklore, myths, and other “popular” notions of the past, because unlike history, methodologically rigorous professionals do
not evaluate these constructions of the past. Yet academic history does not always live up to its potential, and popular notions have the potential to be just as accurate but may simply have a different focus.

A presentist approach to history is not new. Many academic history books deal with memory, but only peripherally. Introductions often mention common perceptions or “myths” that the research of the book attempts to debunk. Likewise, conclusions often describe “legacies” of the person, event, or era that is examined in the book. Such academic histories are dabbling in memory as a construction based on present concerns, but the scholar’s primary goal remains to approximate a plausible representation of the past – or to tell the “truth” as much as that is possible.

As a theoretical perspective, memory is increasingly popular, especially among public history institutions. For example, the Library of Congress titles its website “American Memory.” Significantly, this national site offers no unifying narrative or didactic theme, but instead prioritizes the primary sources with brief explanatory notes. Many similar sites have appeared, such as the Ohio Memory Online Scrapbook, the Maine Memory Network, and the Greater Cincinnati Memory Project. These sites invite the public to reconstruct their history for themselves rather than imposing a textbook-style narrative upon the sources. Memory is one way for professional historians in museums and historical societies to connect with the public by offering the public power to tell their own story with only minimal explanation and direction by professionals.

Memory also meets a particular need for academic historians. According to Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, two theorists of memory, “working with the concept of memory – provisional, subjective, concerned with representation and the present rather than fact and the past – suggests a way out of the impasse into which historiography might have been driven by the poststructuralist assault on truth.”¹¹ As a result, scholars from various fields have adopted historical memory to understand problems unique to their own interests. The Journal of American History featured a forum on history and memory in 1989, and the journal History & Memory was founded in 1988 to study the National Socialist and Fascist epoch in collective memory. Within this

subfield the journal explores the formation of historical consciousness; this is defined as the area in which “collective memory, the writing of history, and other modes of shaping images of the past in the public mind merge.”\(^{12}\) Also, memory is a valuable category of historical analysis because every human society attempts to make sense of itself through its history. As one anthropologist said, “just as man is a creature of habit, so nations are creatures of history.”\(^ {13}\) Together, the public and academic uses of memory prove that memory is a useful and necessary theoretical perspective on the past.

### Memory Studies

Through the application of the theoretical model of memory, memory studies can illuminate an array of interactions between past and present, individuals and society, conflict and consensus. But no one study can examine all the variables of personal recollection, social contestation, authority, resistance, narrative, and change over time. Although no formal terms exist to characterize these different applications of memory, it is possible to distinguish several themes in the scholarship. Also, since the field allows such different applications of theory, the diverse themes in the scholarship of memory utilize different terms. Scholars have used the terms “collective,” “public,” “national,” “historical,” “social,” and “cultural” to describe a community’s shared memory. Each term has its intricacies and particular utility. Different approaches and uses of the concept of shared memory allow various insights.

Some of the earliest applications of memory studies in America in the early 1980s analyzed states’ appropriation and manipulation of the past to create a consensus and an illusion of continuity with the past. *The Invention of Tradition* by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger typified this approach. They argued that “‘Traditions’ which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented.”\(^ {14}\) These invented traditions serve several purposes; they institute social unity, legitimize the


\(^{13}\) As cited in Michael Kammen, *In the Past Lane: Historical Perspectives on American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), xi.

authority of existing institutions, and inculcate value systems through socialization.\textsuperscript{15} A similar application of memory is Benedict Anderson’s \textit{Imagined Communities}. Anderson argues that a nation is an imagined or invented political community. He says, “It is \textit{imagined} because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”\textsuperscript{16} Anderson focuses on the creation of such an imagined community, but it is implicit in his argument that the state must constantly reinforce this notion of community through rituals, traditions, and means of socialization. Similarly, historian Michael Kammen’s analysis of iconography of judgment in American courthouses revealed how citizens have drawn upon classical symbolism to justify their “temples of justice.” Compared to the previous two studies, this manipulation of the past is less cynical of authority and grassroots in nature. For all these studies, this approach is useful to reveal how the past can be a powerful political tool to create social consensus and maintain governmental authority. With respect to terminology, Kammen applied the term “collective memory” to describe the shared past. The other two studies did not use this term, but only because the field of memory studies did not yet exist, though they applied the same concept in the same way.

Collective memory refers to memories that unite a group. When Halbwachs spoke of a social group’s collective memory, he evoked a unified body of knowledge that individuals of that group share, reinforce, and draw upon. To speak of a community’s collective memory implies that a shared, consensual memory exists. This process, of either corroboration or invalidation, renders a memory “in” or “out” of the body of memories encompassed by the term “collective memory,” as either shared by others, or different from others and instantly disregarded. This term is problematic because it neglects the contested aspects of social memory. Halbwachs, a sociologist like his mentor Emile Durkheim, was interested in the binding forces of a community. Thus, for Halbwachs, “collective memory” describes the \textit{content} of memory, and refers to the memories that people share and continually reconfigure in the process of sharing. As valuable as this insight is to the field of memory, it begs the question of how one might

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 9.
study a collective memory. Although memories shared by individuals doubtlessly foster social cohesion and a degree of consensus, it is not useful to reify memory with this term because the narrative is nowhere tangible, so a scholar cannot directly study a collective memory. Collective memory only exists to the extent that powerful groups successfully impose a memory and silence dissent. The concepts “public” and “national” involve this same difficulty and are only useful to delineate the specific collectivity to which one is referring.

“Historical memory” is more useful because it usually refers to an individuals’ use of history rather than a group. “Historical memory” refers to an individual’s use of group memories, such as those of a nation, ethnicity, or religion, to make sense of personal actions or beliefs. It is similar to collective memory in that the term refers to the content of a memory, or those events that one chooses to define oneself. But more so than a collective memory, it is possible to determine one individual’s sense of the past since it is discrete and individual, whereas a group’s sense of the past is not as coherent. A biographer might apply this concept of historical memory to study the intersection of personal and collective memories. Such a study would attempt to understand how individuals understand and fit into their collective past and how that historical knowledge informs their actions. Only the rare biography fully examines how the subject understood history and its effect on the subject’s actions. One example of this approach is found in the brief biography of Douglas MacArthur in Fred Anderson and Andrew Cayton’s *The Dominion of War*. Anderson and Cayton argue that MacArthur’s passion for the martial spirit was rooted in his class position and in society’s glorified memory of the Civil War. Because of the peculiar and contingent ways that men and women remembered the Civil War, MacArthur “had every reason to believe that fame and meaning lay in war.”

Biographies that account for individual and cultural memory may reveal how individuals use their understanding of the past to fashion their identity. Similar studies might also take a longitudinal focus to explore the evolution of historical knowledge through its effect on the next generation. For example, the glorified popular memory of World War II as the “good war” influenced the Vietnam generation’s historical imagination of war.

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Likewise, Rosenzweig and Thelen’s national survey highlighted the interplay of individual agency and collective forms of remembrance. This interplay is important according to psychologists David Middleton and Derek Edwards. They claim, “The very integrity of a person’s mentality depends upon participation in an environment which owes its very shape to socio-cultural practices.”18 “Historical memory” signifies an individual’s negotiation of these socio-cultural practices to shape individual memory and identity.

Still another concept, “social memory,” refers to the aspects of memory that involve group interaction. This concept is most applicable to studies in psychology and sociology, and these fields attempt to apply psychology terms to collective phenomena. Specifically, it involves the mechanisms or structural processes of memory selection and distortion. For example, social psychologist Arthur G. Neal applied the concept of trauma to collective memory. Trauma, usually applied to events in the personal lives of individuals, is a shocking and painful event. In reaction to traumatic events, Neal also describes periods of collective sadness, fear, and anger in societies. A traumatic event is memorable; psychological tests have shown that emotionally-laden events are likely to be retained. Thus, if a traumatic event disrupts a group’s opinion of itself, then the event either must be forgotten, or that group must alter its values, beliefs, and identity to account for the event.

Trauma accounts for the selection of group memories; similarly, nationalism, nostalgia, and amnesia account for distortion of memories. Nationalism may be bottom-up as opposed to the form of collective memory imposed from the top down in the Invention of Tradition. According to Michael Kammen, nationalism accounts for the harmonious distortions of memory of the Civil War through the late 19th century that served to heal deep sectional divisions.19 Nostalgia is the yearning for something lost that may color historical interpretations to render them more fondly than they might have seemed at the time. In his book, Yearning for Yesterday, sociologist Fred Davis makes a case that “nostalgia, despite its private, sometimes intensely felt personal character, is a

19 Kammen, In the Past Lane, 204.
The decade of the 1950s is an era that often receives nostalgic treatment. Applications of social memory are useful to highlight the reasons that individuals and groups may remember or forget elements of their past. According to theorist Michael Schudson, “Distortion is inevitable. Memory is distortion since memory is invariably and inevitably selective. A way of seeing is a way of not seeing, a way of remembering is a way of forgetting, too.” Social memory focuses on how social structures influence how people select memories, but Schudson’s formulation hints at the most useful application of memory for historians: the historical interpretation, or narrative, produced by memory selection and distortion.

The approach of “cultural memory” views memory as a field of negotiation within which individuals strive to define themselves and their community. By its nature, memory is disputed as individuals compete in the public sphere to preserve, alter, or erase a memory in the narrative of a society. Most studies in the field of memory are a variation on this theme and they share a focus on contested narratives. Narrative functions as the basis for competing ideas in a culture. Defined broadly, a culture is a web of meanings that people use to make sense of life. Within this web, language and social scripts allow people to communicate their past to others. The fundamental social script for making sense of the past is narrative. According to social analyst Hayden White, “Narrative solves the problem of translating knowing into telling; it is a human universal: international, transhistorical, transcultural.” Narrative, the selection of facts and a causal chain unifying those facts, is the basis for communicating history. Since history necessarily takes the form of narrative, it usefully unifies this theory of memory.

The popularity of this approach is due to a changed perspective on culture; Halbwachs applied his theory of collective memory with the assumption that culture was the product of a consensus. Yet, modern scholars of memory, influenced by postmodernism and the tumultuous 1960s, view cultural discussions of memories and identities as riddled with conflict and power relations instead the product of a reasoned

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process of consensus building. According to theorist Michel Foucault, “Power is essentially repression… power is war, a war continued by other means.” Public contestation over these competing narratives necessarily involves structures of power. The efficacy of one’s message in the public sphere is dependent upon the political or cultural power with which one can express oneself. Michel Foucault argues that consensus, or for this purpose a collective memory, exists only through the maintenance of power over individuals’ stories. He says, “If it is true that political power puts an end to war, that it installs, or tries to install, the reign of peace in civil society, this by no means implies that it suspends the effects of war or neutralizes the disequilibrium revealed in the final battle. The role of political power… is perpetually to reinscribe this relation through a form of unspoken warfare; to re-inscribe it in social institutions, in economic inequalities, in language, in the bodies themselves of each and every one of us.” A consensus, or collective memory, may exist if either those promoting the dominant narrative have enough power to suppress the rival narratives, or enough of the population choose to subscribe to the national identity. In times of dispute over memories and the nature of identity, the unified collective narrative splinters, and the realm of collective memory becomes a battlefield where the persuasion of power and rhetoric come into play. The ultimate goal of a narrative is to attain the status of “truth,” or collective acceptance. According to Foucault, “We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth.”

The cultural memory approach views a group’s culture as a battlefield in which narratives of the past compete for power and “truth.” Scholar Marita Sturken applied this approach in Tangled Memories. Unlike many scholars of memory, when Sturken talks of collective memory, she refers not to an agreed-upon narrative or a coherent body of historical knowledge relevant to national identity. Instead, she speaks of collective memory as a realm of contestation rather than a consensus. Using the term “cultural memory,” Sturken defines it as a “field of cultural negotiation through which different

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25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., 93.
stories vie for a place in history.”

Rather than studying the collective content of memory or the social mechanisms that select memories, cultural memory studies the process of competition between different representations of the past.

Scholars have applied this approach to understand how non-elite groups represent the past, with the reasoning that power elites construct the official history of a nation. Any member of a community powerful enough to voice opposition may be heard in the realm of cultural contestation whether or not an opinion alters the “official” history or national narrative. In a way, cultural memory is the radical inversion of the original, cohesive idea of collective memory.

Instead of focusing on the social processes of memory, as practitioners of social memory tend to do, Sturken’s model of cultural memory lends itself to analysis of disputes of memory by their “forms,” or the realm of debate in which the debates occur. This is useful because different forms represent the past differently and have different effects on how individuals understand the past. According to David Middleton and Derek Edwards, these forms of social practices reveal the continuity of social life. They say, “the crucial notion… is the objectification of those practices in the social environment, both material and communicative, such that the world we live in embodies in its very design a relation to the past.”

Sturken applied this definition of cultural memory to study memory of the Vietnam War. Many scholars in the field of memory use memorials and films because they are the most prominent representations of the war in American culture and they are seemingly microcosms of debate that illustrate the many interests at work in commemorating a divisive national event. Yet, by focusing only on the agreed-upon final product of public debates, such as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and films like Rambo, such study only offers a glimpse into how people and groups create, promote, and contest memories. It is problematic to see a memorial or film as a microcosm of a society’s debate because each form of representation entails its own unique power structure. No single debate over history provides a representative view of the various arguments, issues, and contested memories. Therefore, an all-inclusive study of American collective memory of the Vietnam War would be impossibly complex, but a

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28 Middleton and Edwards, Collective Remembering, 10.
brief overview of American cultural memory of the war reveals the points of contestation that appear in history textbooks and presidential campaigns.

**American Cultural Memory of the Vietnam War**

Wars are central events to a nation’s memory and identity, forging nation-states by instilling a sense of national pride and a fear of an “other.” Wars force people to interact and bond with diverse members of the group, and experience the pride of self-sacrifice. So long as most citizens agree that a war is just, the experience of war cements a nation together. Successful wars become even more crucial to national unity by becoming significant events in the nation’s memory. By continuing to evoke wars in textbooks or memorials, nations perpetuate patriotic sentiment and wartime unity. Wars create a shared purpose, or consensus, that is necessary for a coherent national memory. The war in Vietnam not only failed to provoke this nationalist fervor in Americans, but it directly contradicted the pre-war collective memory and aided in the splintering of the consensus.

Views of the war changed even before it ended. The interpretation that saw the war as a noble response to Communist aggression gave way to a fiercely critical assessment by the late 1960s. The media provided evidence for this interpretation with coverage of Têt and My Lai. Richard Nixon, elected President in 1968, was ever conscious about his legacy, so he promoted an alternate interpretation as early as 1969. He reinterpreted the war as a mission to rescue American POWs. Also, he appealed to the “Silent Majority,” and blamed the dovish interpretation as undermining popular support for the war. By the end of Nixon’s presidency, his administration had gone further, publicly promoting Nixon as a peacemaker and blaming Congress by evoking memories of appeasement at Munich. By the time a peace treaty was signed, Americans were tired of debating the war, and the majority of Americans called for “No More Vietnams.” The result of this national trauma was an immediate and near-unanimous purposeful forgetting of the war. In a study of collective memory of the war, historian Fred Turner draws parallels between Vietnam veterans’ efforts to heal the scars of their war experiences with the nation’s collective need to do the same: “During the years preceding the official withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam, traumatized combat veterans
had come home, folded up their uniforms, and tried to get on with their lives; now civilians, urged on by politicians and journalists, joined them in trying to lock the war away.”

Out of this period of intentional amnesia grew a revisionist debate about the meaning of the war. Most American wars begin with patriotic justifications, and only with the passage of time are they reconsidered, revised, and questioned. The Vietnam War was unprecedented in that it experienced “revisionism in reverse,” meaning that the revisionist argument emerged as a defender of the conflict, of American intentions, and of national potency. Following Nixon’s lead, revisionists continued to challenge the critical interpretation of the war throughout the late 1970s, and 1980s. Among the first were members of the Nixon administration, and conservative scholars soon followed.

During the 1980s, politicians and filmmakers reexamined the war, usually in an ahistorical context. Vietnam combat films were just as significant as Ronald Reagan’s revision of the war in shaping the public’s historical consciousness of the war and thus had political implications. Many of these films were self-involved fantasies that portrayed the war as a purely American conflict, with the Vietnamese appearing only in the shadows. The best example of this is the Rambo series of films from the 1980s. John Rambo’s chiseled form, ruthless perseverance, and success in liberating American prisoners of war symbolically remasculinized the nation. Movies like this provided the desired stories of heroism, patriotism, victory, and potency that were often unavailable in the political sphere. For example, the Iranian hostage crisis frustrated attempts at reenergizing American pride in military efficacy, but President Jimmy Carter recognized the American crisis of conscience and attempted to soothe it by simply acknowledging it. The so-called Conservative Revolution of the 1980 election illustrated a collective desire to revive American pride. In that role, Ronald Reagan revised the war, saying, “It’s time we recognized that ours was, in truth, a noble cause.” According to Fred Turner, Reagan then attempted to exorcise the demons of Vietnam by invading Grenada and El Salvador.

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Enacting a fantasy narrative similar to that of the later film *Rambo*, Reagan reenacted Vietnam on a smaller scale: “rather than call the Grenada intervention an ‘invasion,’ Reagan insisted that it was a ‘rescue mission.’” He claimed to be rescuing American civilians from Grenadian communism before they could be taken hostage, and he justified intervention in El Salvador by resurrecting the domino theory. American involvement did little to soothe the memory of Vietnam, but Reagan’s 1984 landslide reelection illustrated a persistent popular desire to return to American glory days.\(^2\)

Reagan used more than foreign policy to revive American confidence. He appropriated the ambiguous symbol of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial by publicly accepting the memorial on behalf of the nation in 1982. He said, “This memorial is a symbol of both past and current sacrifice.” This represented another of Reagan’s attempts to heal the wounds and normalize the lessons of the war. Derided by some, the memorial evaded clear and simple interpretation, as the war itself did. Indeed, the wall has been a screen upon which many groups have projected their meanings for the war and its aftermath. Reagan also exploited the prisoner of war myth. Adopting a previous claim of American soldiers left in Vietnamese prisons, Reagan promised to make the issue a national priority. Reagan again mirrored *Rambo* by revising the Vietnam War as a rescue mission at the expense of historical accuracy.\(^3\)

George H. W. Bush continued to revise Vietnam for American politics and assuage American confidence after his election. During his 1989 inauguration address he said, “This is a fact: the final lesson of Vietnam is that no great nation can long afford to be sundered by a memory.” For Bush, Vietnam taught the wrong historical lesson, so it was best forgotten. The Bush administration’s Operation Desert Storm was another attempt in foreign affairs to overcome what had increasingly been termed “the Vietnam Syndrome.” Bush promised, “This will not be another Vietnam.” He adopted the rhetoric of rescue once again, and he termed the extraordinary demonstration of American military force “the Perfect War.” Bush claimed to have buried the lessons of Vietnam in

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the sands of Saudi Arabia when he exclaimed, “By God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all.”

The presidency of Bill Clinton, which began in 1993, used diplomatic means to further heal the wounds of the war. Under Clinton, Vietnam became a land of economic possibility for American investors rather than a mythical land of jungles and death. This was possible because the memory of the war was becoming a near-forgotten remnant – partially because of politicians’ efforts to heal the wound and Americans’ willingness to forget. During this period, the two nations renewed diplomatic relations, signed a trade pact, and resumed commercial flights. When considering the war, rhetoric often emphasized the future in attempts to forget the unpleasant past. On the first presidential visit to the unified country since the war, Clinton said, “The histories of our two nations are deeply intertwined, in ways that are both a source of pain for generations who came before, and a source of promise for generations yet to come.” Regardless of such promising rhetoric and accomplishments, American involvement abroad, in Haiti, Bosnia, and Somalia, again revived American misgivings of Vietnam.

Despite thirty years of attempted healing, references to Vietnam reverberate into the twenty-first century. In 2001 Senator Bob Kerrey acknowledged his guilt in war crimes and retired shortly thereafter. In the 2004 election between John Kerry and George W. Bush, the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth revived the topic of politicians’ war records, highlighting the fact that to this date no Vietnam veteran has been elected President. Most significantly, some have critiqued the Iraq War by evoking memories of the Vietnam War through terms like “quagmire” and references to influencing “hearts and minds.” Despite decades of deliberate attempts at healing and forgetting, Vietnam remains a cultural watchword, infused with a contested history.

American History Textbooks as Cultural Memory

History textbooks play a central role in the perpetuation of American culture. They provide one element of the educational process that instills civic consciousness and cultural values, and helps shape students’ historical consciousness. Historical knowledge

is an element of citizenship training that is particularly crucial to successful democratic government. Adults debate the values they wish to impart and the society they wish to create to mold the hearts and minds of youth. From a historian’s perspective, the open, public debate surrounding textbooks forges consensus documents, meaning that they theoretically represent the values and historical interpretations of the communities that choose to adopt them. Much like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, these interpretations amount to an expression of public truth, or a sanded-down and neatly packaged form of collective memory. Yet, because of the politicized nature of the textbook publishing industry, these interpretations are also problematic. History textbooks are one unique aspect of American collective memory, and one of those memories notably revised in recent times is that of the Vietnam War.

The content of American history textbooks has long been a battleground for different ideologies and values because of the important function of historical knowledge in democratic citizenship training. The American educational system has always been decentralized and theoretically democratic, so communities have held the power to determine their own curricula. But history curricula have long been limited by the availability of textbooks. In the 19th century, instructors often relied on textbooks as a substitute for well-trained teachers. Even in modern times, American schools have retained the traditional role of the text in American history curricula. The supreme importance that parents and politicians impose on texts creates an intense debate about the content of the books. Different sides often polarize along political lines, dividing between liberal and conservative interests. Textbooks may be either instruments for conservatism, to perpetuate the status quo of the society by instilling a sense of nationalistic pride and respect for authority, or for liberalism, by inspiring a need for progressive changes to promote respect for diversity and critical thought to question government rhetoric.

In 1979 Frances FitzGerald, journalist and author of one of the most elegant studies of the Vietnam conflict, rekindled the modern textbook debate. Her book, America Revised, brought public attention to the debate between consensus-minded conservatives and multicultural liberals. FitzGerald’s study analyzed the content of history textbooks of the twentieth century and the dominating influences over their
content. Her major theme was that social changes and educational fads along with political interest groups have periodically affected the rewriting of history textbooks. This continual rewriting to meet the desires of these various groups has contributed to dull and uninformative textbooks that attempt to meet the desires of everyone. According to FitzGerald, the scholarly authors of texts have relatively little sway over the contents of the book. Rather, editors have a better idea of what the public wants to read, and play a major role in drafting the historical account.\(^{36}\)

This supposedly democratic market, however, is also not adequately representative to suit all tastes. Success in the textbook market relies on a book’s ability to appeal to interest groups, particularly in large adoption states. Publishing houses fear to offend any civil rights, religious, or community interest groups. These groups often fund independent reviewers to scrutinize texts for their portrayal of a certain issue or group. Twenty-one states have adoption committees that choose the texts available to school districts in that state. These statewide adoptions determine a book’s market success, so texts’ contents cater to these states. The states that allow city- or district-wide adoption receive less attention. One example of both of these interests at work is the husband and wife team, Mel and Norma Gabler in Texas, who exert a disproportionate influence over textbooks’ content and market success. Texas is one of the two largest statewide adoption states, and publishers are especially wary of offending these reviewers. Several publishing houses solve this by producing a special “Lone Star Edition,” but some texts for the nation as a whole may be inclined toward their interests of states’ rights, free market, and evangelical religion. A final factor in the convoluted system of textbook production and adoption is that there have been fewer and fewer dissenting texts in the market in recent times. This is because publishing houses continue to merge, so that there are only four major textbook publishers in America today. That leaves fewer companies to appeal to niche markets, and more large conglomerates to fight for the middle-of-the-road market share. FitzGerald best summed up the complexities of textbook publishing even before the recent mergers: “All of them try to compete for the center of the market, designing their books not to please anyone in

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particular but to be acceptable to as many people as possible. The word ‘controversial’ is as deeply feared by textbook publishers as it is coveted by trade-book publishers. What a textbook reflects is thus a compromise, an America sculpted and sanded down by the pressures of diverse constituents and interest groups.” Afraid to offend, textbook writers create narratives that are unexciting and forgettable. Fearing to neglect a person or event that might be important to an interest group, texts are encyclopedic yet lack narrative focus. Additionally, anxious to placate all interested parties, texts avoid value judgments; this necessitates the use of what one critic has called an “irresponsible impersonal” voice to explain delicate subjects. Textbooks are not democratic, nor do they operate in a free market; but despite the complexities of textbook publishing, texts are useful indicators of social and cultural changes because they reveal what publishers believe to be the middle-of-the-road, politically correct interpretation.37

This “politically correct” approach had its roots in earlier efforts to promote consensus and avoid controversy. In 1939, a series on American civilization by Harold Rugg of Columbia University came under fire from a number of companies and interest groups who called the it Socialist or Communist propaganda. The books disappeared from the market altogether in the early 1940s. The Rugg controversy spurred a conservative reaction in the textbook industry, and other dissenting books perished as well from fear of a similar fiasco. As a result of this, Frances FitzGerald noted, “the political spectrum of the texts narrowed to a point somewhere in the neighborhood of Dwight D. Eisenhower and remained there for the next twenty-five years.” A second cause of the consensus in the larger American history profession was fear of dissent because of McCarthyism, the anti-Communist crusade of the 1950s. A third cause was a genuine fear of Communist influence that necessitated a united posture. American history underwent an ideological freeze during this period that forged a domestic and foreign policy consensus.38

The first text in this study, Henry W. Bragdon and Samuel P. McCutchen’s 1961 History of a Free People, represents this ideological consensus. It is representative of the

37 FitzGerald, America Revised, 46-7; Chester E. Finn, Jr., “Foreword,” in A Consumer’s Guide to High School History Textbooks by Diane Ravitch (Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2004), 5.
tone of the textbooks of the 1950s and early 1960s. Indeed, Frances FitzGerald described this text as one of the most “respectable of the high-school texts of the period.” Texts of this time presented America as an exceptional nation in human history. Americans were the proponents of freedom, liberty, equality, and goodness. In the polarized context of the Cold War, this unique American nature was a vivid contrast to the apparent wickedness of the Communist world. In the section titled “World Leadership,” the text justifies American foreign policy as necessarily opposed to the insidious threat of Communist infiltration. In contrast to the promise of American-promoted freedom, “Communism is a foe which operates at many levels. Its seed ground is poverty and distress. Therefore a major element in American policy has been to help raise standards of living in the non-Communist world.” The authors justify American struggles against this ruthless foe: “Whatever its mistakes or blind spots, American foreign policy has had one single purpose – to enable us to live in peace with our neighbors.” The text warns young citizens of the deceitfulness of the opposition. “The strength of communism rests not merely on Russian armies and the attractions of the Communist message, but also on Communist agents all over the world. Unquestioning party members, and their dupes, are found everywhere. Such tactics were used…in Indochina.” This Manichean battle runs throughout the text and substantiates containment, the domino theory, and early interpretations of the Vietnam War.39

Bragdon and McCutchen’s text is patriotic, hawkish, and pro-war. Two large maps delineate the policy of containment in Southeast Asia and the world by coloring Communist countries one color and countries associated with the West another. With a line at the 17th parallel, North Vietnam was clearly labeled a Communist country. The beginning of the war in Indochina coincided with the end of the Korean War, according to this text, because it “released Chinese Communist troops to fight elsewhere.” The text does not even explicate the reasons for defending Indochina, but in the context of previous discussions of Communist containment, they are obvious and assumed. The text also subscribes wholeheartedly to the domino theory, or the assumption that the fall of one nation in Indochina would lead to Communist takeovers in all of Southeast Asia. “To

save the first domino, the French suggested that American planes bomb Communist positions.” This text leaves no room to call the war a civil or nationalist conflict: “In Indo-China a confused civil war eventually became a war of Communist aggression.” This early explanation of the war was unabashedly anti-Communist, pro-war, and left no room to question its authoritative tone.⁴⁰

The radical changes of the mid-1960s caused people to reconsider traditional authority. FitzGerald argued that the civil-rights movement was the catalyst for multicultural revisionism in schoolbooks. Simultaneously, a debate about postmodernism in the historical profession questioned any claim to objective authority, and more than splintering the narrative, it rendered textbook objectivity obsolete. In addition to multiculturalism and postmodernism, the Vietnam War unleashed questions about government credibility and “official” versions of history as never before.

Despite the radical changes of the 1960s, Margaret Stimmann Branson and Edward E. France’s 1970 text, *American History for Today*, retained the authoritative tone and anachronistic optimism. The authors describe America as “one of the greatest success stories of all time,” and observe how Americans repeatedly “overcome problems.” The book glosses over the conflicts of the 1960s by saying that even though men disagree, they would not “lose sight of an ideal – liberty and justice for all.” There is no hint of the orthodox position that might argue that blind pursuit of those ideals was a problem.⁴¹

Instead of the guiding, faithful hand of providence and progress of the 1950s, the Vietnam War helped to replace that optimism with inevitable “problems” and “challenges.” The Vietnam War falls under “Part IV, Challenge and Change: The United States in the World of Today” in a unit titled “Great Plans, Great Problems,” with the problems clearly referring to the conflict abroad. Also, in the narrative of the Gulf of Tonkin incident, the phrases “the problems in Vietnam took a turn for the worse,” and “A new crisis was at hand” were used; these sentences interpret American decisions to go to war as an unavoidable force. Likewise, the United States attacked the Ho Chi Minh trail “to stop the flow” of North Vietnamese soldiers. In this way, “Bit by bit, and step by step,

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the United States became ever more deeply involved in Vietnam.” The logical response to this slow sinking into war is to describe the conflict as “frustrating and discouraging.” This text echoes David Halberstam’s quagmire thesis, or the argument that American leaders, despite their best intentions, involved the nation in a costly war by repeatedly making small commitments and refusing to turn back. First articulated in his 1965 book, *The Making of a Quagmire*, this thesis works well for a schoolbook interpretation because it allows the authors to portray American leaders as helpless in the face of the inextricable pull to defend a noble cause. Also, because the text was published in 1970, it makes sense to adhere to this interpretation because it focuses more on the gradual escalation of the early years under Kennedy than the most recent period, which texts often neglect. Because of the perspective, American escalation in this version begins with John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon B. Johnson only continues this precedent.42

This interpretation did not contradict the official version of events. There is no hint of criticism of the war that was, by 1970, substantially unpopular. Ho Chi Minh appears purely as a Communist pawn without a hint of nationalist intent. And one reason the United States had to intervene, according to this book, was because “Communists from the North began sneaking down the Ho Chi Minh trail into the South.” America intervened because “South Vietnam found it was not easy to be independent,” and “The United States did not want the Communists to take over the Saigon government.” These decisions are seemingly self-evident to the authors. The text also quotes American leaders to explain decision making, as when it records Johnson saying, “We have a promise to keep.” It explains that American escalation was only the result of Vietcong attacks on American bases and soldiers. It blames the brutal nature of the war solely on the Vietcong: “Americans had to change their fighting ways to suit the war.” The Vietcong “used terror tactics in an effort to win. They raided towns and killed men, women, and children. Often they blasted heavily populated places with bombs and mortar shells.” The text offers no hint of the terrible, practical effects of military tactics such as

relocation, deforestation, the civilian toll of massive bombing, and search and destroy missions. Instead, the war becomes a series of Vietcong cruelties.\(^{43}\)

Branson and McCutchen’s text is also hawkish and pro-Nixon. War protesters create “noisy demonstrations,” but the text praises Johnson for not changing his policies in response to pressure: “He insisted that for its own safety the United States must help the one billion people in non-Communist Asian lands to defend themselves.” Furthermore, the text asks, “Why did the Vietnam War become unpopular?” but it offers no satisfactory answer. Also, the text’s description of hawks and doves illustrates its bias: “Those who were ‘hawks’ said the United States should fight and win – and win quickly.” Who would have not wanted to win quickly? It does not discuss the implications of “winning quickly.” On the other hand, “Doves argued that the United States should pull out and make peace at any price.” This sounds like the makings for a stab-in-the-back complex. In fact, the text mirrors Nixon’s claims that the media and anti-war protesters were preventing American victory. The text emphasizes the “other war” in Vietnam: millions of dollars in American aid, spent on education, police force, and hospitals. “All of the steps taken in the ‘other war’ were to prepare the Vietnamese to run their own democracy once peace came.” This reinforces the notion that America was there for unselfish reasons and with only virtuous intentions. That war was little known, however, because “Newspapers and television focused on the military action.” Also, the text philosophizes, implicitly in response to claims of anti-war doves, that “refugees and heartache were something found in all wars.” In this text, Nixon’s Vietnam policies look promising: “Nixon promised to take a fresh look at foreign policy. He felt that in the future the United States should not act alone as it had in Vietnam.” This expression of liberal diplomacy did not manifest itself in Nixon’s policies, nor did it end the war quickly.\(^{44}\)

Overall, the 1970 text justifies American policy in Vietnam, glosses over the controversial issues, portrays American intervention as unavoidable, and finally is inconclusive and confused about how to categorize the era. The unit is titled “Great Plans, Great Problems.” The text says of the 1960s, “It was the best of times, it was the


worst of times.” It cites foreign opinion of the United States as “They love us and they hate us.” This text is conflicted and perplexed by the previous decade. With no time for reflection, the decade evades a clear, teachable narrative. The previously upbeat textbook tone could not, with any respect for reality, hope to paint a rosy picture of the Vietnam War in 1970. But neither could it totally abandon that patriotic exceptionalism: “Americans enjoyed many advantages, but they also faced serious problems in the late 1960’s.” The text does allow some room for unprecedented questioning, but immediately answers questions with an irrefutable, debate-free narrative. It evades and glosses over controversial topics that might threaten American glory. The result is a purely optimistic picture of the future like that of the 1961 text: “Americans are determined to work for a more peaceful and just world, no matter how bumpy the road ahead may be.”

A textbook published in 1974 by Allan O. Kownslar and Donald B. Frizzle, illustrates a passing trend in textbooks during the period. Discovering American History is an inquiry, or discovery, text that contains primary sources and a few essays by professional historians. One can see inquiry texts as the epitome of postmodernism in textbook publishing with the replacement of an authoritative narrative with individuals’ interpretations. As Frances FitzGerald says, “In these books, history is clearly not a list of agreed-upon facts or a sermon on politics but a babble of voices and a welter of events which must be ordered by the historian.” As a result, Discovering American History can stray from the traditional textbook role and criticize American involvement in Vietnam much more than any narrative text for years to come.

The title of the Vietnam chapter is “A Case Study,” indicating that an agreed-upon narrative was still elusive and that interpretation was wholly open to debate and revision. The documents contrast a sympathetic Ho Chi Minh with an unyielding Lyndon Johnson. The brief explanatory text defines the conflict as a civil war, not one of Communist aggression. The text also presents a long history of Vietnam to contextualize Ho Chi Minh’s “popular, nationalist” movement. With critical questions like “Do you think the United States was right to intervene in the affairs of Vietnam?” American intervention in a Vietnamese civil, nationalist war seems unjust. The text, however, could

45 Branson and France, American History for Today, 540.
46 FitzGerald, America Revised, 12-3.
have been more critical. For instance, it asks, “Do you think that American involvement in the Vietnam war might have been unconstitutional?” But it neglects to explain the Gulf of Tonkin incident, the necessary prerequisite for such a question.47

After the section on the war, the text concludes with “Lessons to be Learned from the Pentagon Papers.” This section ends conclusively for an inquiry text, and the conclusions are intensely critical of the American government. The text says, “I believe this pattern of concealment and half-truths has been and still is a way of life in our government,” and “The lesson of Vietnam should be no direct U.S. military intervention abroad except against [open] aggression by another great power and then only with the explicit approval of Congress.” Thus, the text subscribes to two critical legacies of the war. The text is extraordinarily critical of the war and sympathetic to the Communists.48

Lewis Paul Todd and Merle Curti’s 1977 Rise of the American Nation continued the previous trend of using an inexorable force to explain American decisions to intervene in Vietnam. For example, the text states that “world peace was threatened by another crisis in the Far East.” Also, it declares, “Crises continued to develop in Asia.” This ambiguous language gives the idea that Johnson had no control over his situation: “In January 1965 Lyndon B. Johnson dedicated his administration to the solution of crucial domestic problems… however, it was clear that the United States was waging two major wars,” one of which was “the conflict in Vietnam abroad.” Similarly, “the number of American advisers… had risen.” By using numbers and passive verbs, the early texts avoid placing blame or responsibility for unpopular decisions.49

Like the 1970 book, this text also goes to great ends to displace any semblance of blame on American leaders. It describes Johnson as proactively and single-mindedly pursuing peace. Neglecting an explanation of the strategic reasons for doing so, it simply states that Hanoi was reluctant to negotiate; the text says, “President Johnson added persuasion to force in his effort to bring North Vietnam to the conference table.” Johnson only escalated the war “after [his] peace offensive failed.” Further, it blames the devastation and human misery of the war on the Vietcong for fighting that kind of war.

48 Ibid., 828-9.
“This kind of warfare produced widespread devastation and human misery… victims of Vietcong terror or allied counterattack… organized terrorism and guerrilla warfare.” False reports of military success were the result not of conscious deceit of the leaders but of the reports themselves. The text also shrugs off the blame of losing the Vietnamese hearts and minds, and puts the onus on the South Vietnamese government: “To win the political contest, the Saigon government had to convince the Vietnamese people that it genuinely cared about their welfare.”

This text demonstrates a slight shift to allow for more questioning of America’s role in the world. For instance, the chapter title covering Vietnam is “Re-examining the Nation’s Role in World Affairs.” By reconsidering America’s role instead of reasserting it, this narrative text allows for some criticism of American involvement even though it suggests that American leaders only wanted peace.

A text from 1984, *The Challenge of Freedom* by Robert Sobel, Roger LaRaus, Linda Ann De Leon, and Harry P. Morris, remains optimistic, elusive about controversial issues, and generally confused in language about how to characterize the era. The writings, however, are less ardently pro-war. In its word choice, *Challenge* retains the language of ambiguity from previous texts, as demonstrated in the unit labeled “America Faces New Challenges,” and the two chapters titled “Years of Turmoil” and “Years of Change.” What that turmoil meant and how to characterize the change is still either undecided or unready to venture an assertive narrative. The language is bland and uncertain: “Foreign relations caused many problems for the United States,” and “One of the most serious foreign problems during that time was American involvement in a war in Southeast Asia.” As if the decisions were out of American leaders’ control, the text says, “When the war grew worse, the United States was drawn into the fighting.” One section, titled “The Problem of the Vietnam War,” illustrates the continued relevance and difficulty that the war posed to Americans in general, and especially to the would-be optimistic textbook industry.

Through 1984, texts continued to describe the war in hawkish, patriotic terms, but instead of continually justifying American involvement, they increasingly became

50 Ibid., 701.
evasive when discussing a controversial issue or one that reflected poorly on the American war. This nationalistic style has deep roots in textbook writing, and a high school textbook entirely critical of the war was unfathomable because, to some extent, texts aim to instill a degree of respect for America. As Frances FitzGerald observed, “History textbooks for elementary and secondary schools are not like other kinds of histories. They serve a different function, and they have their own traditions, which continue independent of academic history writing.” Despite the rise of postmodernism and the fragmenting of the historical narrative, narrative textbooks remained nationalistic histories, concerned primarily with the nation-state. They also intended, according to FitzGerald, “not to explore but to instruct – to tell children what their elders want them to know about their country… Like time capsules, the texts contain the truths selected for posterity.”

This approach to Vietnam changed in the 1990s. A 1993 textbook, History of the United States by Thomas DiBacco, Lorna Mason, and Christian Appy, changed the narrative of the war in important ways. Of the seven surveyed books, it was the first to tell the story of the Vietnam War in one all-inclusive chapter instead of scattering references over different sections and chapters. This change is noteworthy because it signifies a shift in thinking about the war. A trend in texts up to this time had been a lack of explanatory detail or even justification for American involvement and escalation. Another change was that the 1993 text associated an entire era with this bloody conflict overseas. Previous texts had mentioned the war in chapters covering both domestic and foreign policy issues. The war was just another foreign conflict among the myriad American interventions during this period of the Cold War. The domestic repercussions were not directly related to the war, but indicative of deeper cultural divides. During this period, texts began to use the domestic and foreign issues of the 1960s and the early 1970s as the context to describe the war in Vietnam. By associating many of these events of the era with the Vietnam War, the text illustrates that collective memory began to see the war as the defining event of the period, and all the domestic issues as relating to that

52 FitzGerald, America Revised, 47.
foreign conflict. There are several possible reasons why the authors chose to foreground the Vietnam War at this point.\textsuperscript{53}

One reason for the drastic change in this text is an author’s influence. Christian G. Appy, one of the text’s authors, wrote a seminal study of American soldiers in the Vietnam War, \textit{Working-Class War: A Study of American Soldiers Who Fought in Vietnam}. Indeed, this monograph was published the same year as the textbook. By focusing on the average soldier’s experiences, Appy taps a reservoir of painful memories. The tone of the book is not patriotic or heroic because, in Appy’s words, the soldiers “were among the Americans who could raise the worst memories and the most troubling questions about the war.” By remembering their story, Appy breaks from the nationalist mold of relating the narrative of the nation-state. This new perspective naturally lends itself to critical evaluation of American intervention.\textsuperscript{54}

Another reason for the change at this time is decreased cultural relevance. Before the 1990s, the context of the war was more widely known public knowledge. Previous editors assumed students would understand the basic American cultural assumptions that led to the war, such as the self-evident need for containment. Within the context of generations, the more distant an era becomes, the more background and context students need to understand the issues and controversies of the recent past. So beginning in the 1990s, editors no longer assumed students would be culturally conversant with the history of the Vietnam War. Also, by 1993 the Cold War was over and the American public was ready to confront Vietnam again after a period of forgetting and another longer period of valorizing the American war without respect for historical accuracy.

A final reason for the dramatic shift in narrative of the war is related to the complications of recent memories for textbooks. The realms of private and collective memory are not mutually exclusive, so personal memories may affect changes in American culture. A \textit{Time} magazine article, a decade old but still relevant, explains the personal resonance of Vietnam in American culture for those who lived through it:

\begin{quote}
Saigon fell on April 30, 1975, but Vietnam is still with us. A politician's war record--or antiwar record--evokes scorn or approbation; the
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{53} Sobel, et al., \textit{The Challenge of Freedom}, 644.
masterfully manipulative *Forrest Gump* makes adults weep; we fret over quagmires, and still we can hear the air torn by helicopter blades and see that canted, top-heavy map on the evening news and recall precisely our draft-lottery number or that of our brother or son. Some brothers and sons did not return; they are still with us as well.

Such living memories are troubling for textbook writers. Recent history is controversial since a reader of a text can critically compare the text’s version to his own memories. As FitzGerald stated, textbooks are by nature opposed to controversy, which may help explain the often brief and evasive descriptions of the war up through the 1980s. As the war became less controversial and likewise less culturally relevant, textbooks were increasingly free to narrate in their usual authoritative style, without the possibility that a reader may disagree. Rather than evasively mentioning the war, then, texts could begin to explain the war and its significance. The distant past inspires less debate and criticism than simple rote memorization.55

As a result of either Appy’s influence, a shift in collective memory, or a decreased cultural relevance coinciding with the end of the Cold War, this text is more dovish and critical of the American war than any other texts studied. Most importantly, this text describes the war as a nationalist struggle rather than a battle against communism. The chapter on the war begins with a long history of the nation of Vietnam and its repeated repelling of foreign invasions, which became significant because those episodes foreshadow the American defeat: “Had [American leaders] paid more attention to Vietnamese history and geography, American policymakers might have been less surprised.” The dominant theme through the narrative blames American misperceptions and misunderstandings of the Vietnamese and the truth of their affiliation with communism. It presents Ho Chi Minh as a nationalist first in this text, but declares that Americans could not understand the North Vietnamese leader. Indeed, they often undermined democracy to oppose what they considered a Communist threat but which was largely a nationalist effort. For example, reporting a controversial issue absent from all previous texts, in 1954 “American leaders opposed a nationwide election because they believed Ho Chi Minh would win and all of Vietnam would become Communist.”56

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Another important addition to the Vietnam narrative was the inclusion of individual soldiers’ combat experiences, which were likely the result of Appy’s influence. A consequence of this change in narrative perspective was to portray the war in a negative light. Echoing previous texts, this book describes the war as “frustrating and confusing,” and in Appy’s interviews of veterans, he would have heard the war often described as such. But it goes deeper into the real, personal, and appalling effects of American strategy on Vietnamese peasants: “Distinguishing Vietcong from innocent peasants was often impossible. GIs did not want to kill villagers, but too often civilians lost their lives in the soldiers’ pursuit of guerrillas.” Describing policies of attrition, forced relocation, search-and-destroy missions, body counts, and civilian bombing, the 1993 text ventures into uncharted territory for a textbook narrative of the war.  

Controversial issues best demonstrate the interpretation of a text, and two of the most controversial topics of the war are the Tonkin Gulf incident and the My Lai massacre. The 1993 text is passionately anti-war and critical of American intentions to the point of demonizing American leaders. The best example is the discussion of the Gulf of Tonkin incident. Using the sailors’ own words, the text claims that Johnson launched a war under false pretenses: “Whether there had actually been a torpedo attack that night did not matter to Lyndon Johnson. ‘For all I know,’ he confided to an aide, ‘those sailors were just shooting at flying fish.’” This narrative explains American escalation as Johnson’s manipulative attempt to bypass the Constitution and widen his political support. Another important change in the narrative of the war in 1993 is the inclusion of the My Lai massacre. Revealed to the American public in 1969, remarkably the massacre does not appear in texts until the anti-war 1993 text. The book additionally puts it in the context of Nixon’s secrecy and the harm of the revelation to the war effort. By refusing to paint it as representative of the unjust nature of the entire war, this narrative of the event is fair and unbiased, unlike the depiction of the Gulf of Tonkin incident. But more importantly, the first appearance of the massacre in 1993 suggests the patriotic conservatism at work throughout the 1970, 1974, 1977, and 1984 texts.

57 Ibid., 743.
58 Ibid., 739, 752.
Following the trend of the 1993 text, the 2003 version of *America: Pathways to the Present* by Andrew Cayton, Elisabeth Israels Perry, Linda Reed, and Allan M. Winkler presents Vietnam in the same form, but much less critically. The war remains nearly inclusive in one chapter, but it is just another turning point along with the civil rights movement, Kennedy and Johnson’s politics, and “the era of activism.” It is also middle-of-the-road, and attempts to be balanced in its interpretations of controversial issues. It acknowledges the divisiveness of the war, explicates the reasons for the divisions, but does not passionately advocate one side or the other. The narrative still begins with a long history of Vietnam, and the war has become a cross of nationalist civil war and Communist aggression. The text explains the context and thoughts of American leaders without criticizing them or placing blame.

The middle course chosen by the authors is also apparent in the text’s portrayal of the My Lai massacre. It appears directly after a section on “Communist Brutality.” After describing the Communists’ “uncommonly brutal” slaughtering of “anyone they labeled an enemy,” the American incident seems less monstrous; as the text says, “Surrounded by brutality and under extreme distress, American soldiers also sometimes committed atrocities. Such brutality came into sharp focus at My Lai…” This version tempers the symbolic effect of My Lai by effectively saying the other side did the same. In this text, it is vague whether or not My Lai was an aberration. Saying that soldiers “Sometimes committed atrocities” sounds like it was representative, but the text explains and justifies the soldiers’ mindset by saying they were “Surrounded by brutality and under extreme distress.” This is a fine line to walk, but this interpretation is the natural textbook version of the accepted, orthodox academic interpretation that tends toward more criticism of American involvement.  

The 2003 text also benefits from decades of historical scholarship that portrays neither side as entirely righteous or atrocious. For example, the text depicts the controversial Gulf of Tonkin incident neither as entirely Johnson’s plot, nor as an undeniable act of Vietnamese aggression. The text says, “Details about the attacks were sketchy, and some people doubted that they had even taken place. In any case, Johnson

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used the Gulf of Tonkin incident to deepen American involvement in Vietnam.” This interpretation reflects the best scholarship on this incident, which is Edwin Moïse’s *Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War.* In this work Moïse says, “The evidence that is available on the American side does not support the Vietnamese charge that the Johnson administration knowingly faked the incident of August 4 in order to create an excuse to escalate the war.” Unlike the 1993 text that blamed Johnson for lying about the incident to escalate the war, this version benefits from years of scholarship to temper that critical interpretation.⁶⁰

The memory of the Vietnam War in textbooks parallels other forms of cultural memory of the war. The need to justify and glorify the war through the texts of the 1970s and 1980s reflects a similar trend in political rhetoric and actions. In the 1980s Hollywood and Washington revised Vietnam as a noble cause, glorified American character, and embraced veterans. While American culture reconsidered Vietnam outside a historical context, textbooks simply became evasive. In the 1990s Americans pretended their wounds were healed, so textbooks were able to reexamine the less-controversial war and were exceptionally critical. And as recent political events have recalled the war and made it relevant once again, textbooks have sought a dispassionate and more historically truthful narrative of the war.

The revisionism surrounding the war in Vietnam as demonstrated by these seven textbooks illustrates that versions slowly became more critical over time, but they recently reached a middle-of-the-road interpretation that is realistically critical of American intervention but still sympathetic to American intentions. Beginning as purely justifying American Cold War foreign policy, the texts were evasive on touchy issues. A different format allowed unmatched criticism and inquiry, but narratives throughout the 1970s often explained the war as an inevitable force. The 1984 text remained conservative, but used less passionate or defensive language. The 1993 text was the best example of this trend; it was passionately anti-war and included the war in a separate chapter. This narrative changes coincided with the war’s passing from the American public’s recent collective memory to a state of less cultural relevance. Finally, the 2003

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text followed the trend associating an entire era with the war, but provided a more balanced narrative.

**Presidential Campaign Rhetoric as Cultural Memory**

Similar to textbooks, elections bring the past into the present. Public debates about the past both influence individuals’ memories of past events as well as represent how politicians want their constituents to think about the past. Often politicians’ rhetoric works because it draws connections between the past and the present and appeals to the public’s memories, sentiments, and values. A politician rarely offers a radical historical interpretation that might alienate the majority of the public. Thus, the rhetoric in itself represents what a politician deems acceptable at the time, or most resonant with the public’s collective memory. Elections are particularly useful since they are periods in which the American representative democracy is most democratic and most concerned about connecting with public opinion. Presidential elections are the only national elections, and thus are the most valuable for determining American collective memory. These elections function as a four-year ritual discussion on the state of the nation, the future of policy, and the triumphs and tragedies of the past. Political discourse is a significant facet of American collective memory, and a study of the frequent political references to the Vietnam War in presidential elections from 1988 to 2004 can give some insight into the changes in American memory of that war.

Traditionally, Americans have viewed military service as a campaign asset in presidential campaigns. Of the forty-three Presidents of the United States, twenty-six could claim military service in some form or another, although many did not include combat. The tradition was born with the first President, George Washington, who was elected primarily because of his leadership as a general during the Revolutionary War. The first election in which military service was a decisive issue was the campaign of 1840, featuring Van Buren and William Henry Harrison. Harrison portrayed himself as the hero of what was a comparatively minor action at Tippecanoe Creek, Indiana. According to historian Michael Kimmel, the election victory of William Henry Harrison “set a dubious precedent: Since 1840 the President’s manhood has always been a question, his manly resolve, firmness, courage, and power equated with the capacity for
violence, military virtues, and a plain-living style that avoided cultivated refinement and
civility.” Other candidates who translated a heroic military reputation into a successful
presidential bid were Andrew Jackson, Zachary Taylor, Ulysses Grant, and Dwight
Eisenhower. In addition to these unquestioned military leaders, other Presidents sought,
despite their relatively low rank, to portray themselves as heroes. Candidates saw their
military service as a boon, and at certain times in American history, almost a prerequisite.
From 1865 through 1900, seven out of eight Presidents were Civil War veterans.

Theodore Roosevelt’s fame from his masculine and military exploits continued this
tradition into the twentieth century. At the end of World War II, the culture of the Cold
War again privileged military service. Harry Truman fit the bill as a World War I veteran,
and Eisenhower epitomized military heroism. John Kennedy promoted himself as a
World War II hero on PT-109. Lyndon Johnson sought a similar image. According to
historian Robert Dean, “With public retellings, Johnson exaggerated and embellished the
tale [of combat] for maximum political impact, until he sincerely came to believe in his
own heroism.” Likewise, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan,
and George H. W. Bush could point to various degrees of military service during World
War II and Korea to validate their role as Commander-in-Chief during the Cold War.

This formula for Presidential success, however, has not held true in the case of the
Vietnam War.

Since Vietnam, military service has become of indeterminate benefit to success in
public life and can even be a detriment, as illustrated by the 2004 election. Every other
major American war, other than the Vietnam War, has produced a veteran who became
President. It is no coincidence that more Vietnam War draft evaders have won on a
Presidential ticket (Dan Quayle, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush) than Vietnam veterans
(Al Gore). Vietnam War veterans were not immediately made war heroes because they
went to Vietnam, and those who dodged active duty could actually present their service a
respectable alternative.

62 Kimmel, 267.
63 Robert D. Dean, Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy (Amherst: University of
Massachusetts Press, 2001), 52.
65 Gore served as a photographer and journalist and not in a combat role.
A Vietnam veteran has not attained the Presidency because of the exceptionally unpopular nature of the Vietnam War. By the war’s end, many Americans viewed the brutal guerrilla war as an immoral mistake. Those wars that were perceived to be just and legitimate have produced the most veteran Presidents. The Civil War, which became glorified and romanticized in the decades after its end, spawned seven Presidents, from Andrew Johnson to William McKinley. World War II and the Cold War fit this mold, and politicians from Kennedy to the first Bush profited from their association with the military. Yet, attempts to glorify the Vietnam War in collective memory stretched the limits of plausibility. Decorated Vietnam veterans such as John McCain and John Kerry, while both have achieved the position of Senator, have been unable to achieve the highest office. Not only have McCain and Kerry found their service in Vietnam more difficult to unambiguously glorify, but also campaign “spin doctors” have successfully vilified their military records.

The reason McCain, Kerry, and other Vietnam veteran Presidential candidates have been susceptible to vilification is the ability to connect the negative associations of the war with a candidate’s image. For those seeking public office in America, one of the most valuable political assets is an ambiguous attribute called character or image. The negative memory of the Vietnam War complicated any attempts to portray service in Vietnam as beneficial to one’s character. Attempts to dodge service in Vietnam have also become vilified as a character issue. The Vietnam era forged politicians who in recent decades have been unable to proudly assert their choices during that tumultuous period. Since the debates in the Presidential elections often involved attacks on character, one aspect of American collective memory of the Vietnam War is embodied in the Vietnam generation.

Many of the negative sentiments from the war came to be associated with those who served in Vietnam. A stereotype of the Vietnam veteran developed over time. The stereotypical veteran battled with nightmares, anxieties, and other symptoms of delayed stress that afflicted some returning soldiers. The term Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) described the psychological damage sustained from combat. PTSD became an excuse for society to stigmatize returning veterans for participating in an immoral war.

66 Mattox, Table 1, http://www.unc.edu/depts/diplomat/AD_Issues/amdipl_1/milsvc_T1.html
and for losing. According to two doctors who have worked with veterans, “The veteran’s experience encapsulates a societal process yet to be widely acknowledged or understood in which individuals involved in morally troublesome actions are disowned by society.”67 Not only were veterans disowned and marginalized, but they were also viewed as unstable. In the years after Vietnam, extreme PTSD became a legal justification used by defense attorneys to defend their Vietnam veteran clients. One PTSD defense successfully obtained a not guilty verdict “by reason of mental defect.”68 This use of PTSD as a legal excuse caused Americans to associate Vietnam veterans with the minority of unstable criminals among their ranks. In fact, this defense remains in use to this day.69

Many Americans also read in newspapers about Vietnam veterans running amok at home. The New York Times featured a front-page article about Sergeant Dwight Johnson, a decorated war hero who murdered a Detroit grocery store manager.70 Movies also aided in creating a stereotype of violent, unstable Vietnam veterans. The 1972 film, Welcome Home, Soldier Boys, depicted recently returned Green Berets who go crazy and are gunned down by the National Guard; the films Tracks and Taxi Driver also fall into this genre. In television programs, the psycho Vietnam veteran became a marketable villain. According to historian Harrison Salisbury, “Kojack, Ironside, and the friendly folks at Hawaii Five-O confronted crazed, heroin-addicted veterans with the regularity and enthusiasm Saturday morning heroes once dispensed with godless red savages.”71 This legacy continued into the twenty-first century with the realization that Bob Kerrey, a respected Senator and former Presidential candidate, participated in war crimes in the Vietnam War.72 In the years after Vietnam, and continuing to this day, Americans saw various examples of traumatized Vietnam veterans turned psychopaths. This fundamentally changed the American perception of war veterans in American collective memory that previously overlooked the little-known incidents of “shell shock.” Instead,

68 Ibid., 219.
70 Turner, 50-51.
the widespread and misunderstood association of PTSD with Vietnam veterans
delegitimized these veterans in the public arena.

The other development that can account for the lack of a Vietnam veteran
President is the decline of the citizen-soldier ideal since the end of the Vietnam War. This
ideal was intended by the nation’s founders in fitting with the consent theory of
government. Thus military service became accepted among a citizen’s obligations. In
the American democracy, the government mandates only two kinds of forced labor: jury
duty and military service. Indeed, military service was often a badge of citizenship; full
citizenship historically has been earned through military service. In the words of
historian Eliot Cohen, the necessity of these two “essential objects of government”
functions to “ennoble coerced service.” Also, military service is celebrated in the public
sphere. According to Cohen, “Military organizations, military successes, military
pageantry, and rituals… represent public endorsement of such values and their
institutionalization in national culture.” This ennobling of military service as a citizen’s
duty helps explain the traditional success of civilian-soldiers in politics.

The Vietnam War irreparably fractured the citizen-soldier ideal. As historian
Andrew Bacevich says, “For the generations that fought the Civil War and the world
wars, and even those who served in the 1950s and 1960s, citizenship and military service
remained intimately connected.” The Vietnam War revised the sacred connection
between the civilian and the military because the Vietnam-era draft was notoriously
unfair. The war was widely considered a working class war, and the rich escaped into the
National Guard or into college with student deferments. The result was a widespread
reaction to the draft, and in 1973, the military became the All-Volunteer Force (AVF).
Afterwards, in American culture military service became less as a citizen’s obligation and
more of an economic choice. Vice President Dick Cheney argued in 2000 that he had

73 Peter Karsten, “The U.S. Citizen-Soldier’s Past, Present, and Likely Future,” Parameters 31, no. 2
(Summer 2001), 61-73.
48-60.
Paul R. Higate, 111-123 (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 112.
77 Bacevich, 27.
78 Christian G. Appy, Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam (Chapel Hill:
“other priorities” than military service. In 1988, Senator Jeff Bingaman defended his non-combat service in the National Guard: "I felt the Army Reserve was a perfectly legitimate option for me and my family, and preferable to enlisting for a three-year tour." Not only were Vietnam veterans vilified, but the veterans were accorded less respect because what they saw as their civic duty came to be seen in the context of the widely dodged draft and the AVF as their individual choice. Bacevich explains, “Whereas previously Americans had recognized a link between citizenship and military service – for example, according to veterans a privileged status in American public life – Vietnam all but severed that relationship.” The switch to the AVF, however, has not completely severed the public respect for military service. Even nominally professional soldiers in the Iraq War describe their motivations in the vocabulary of the citizen-soldier. Thus, in American discourse about Vietnam veterans turned politicians, there is a curious mixture of vilification and respect. Vietnam veterans are tainted heroes, and those who refused to serve may be seen as heroes in their own right. Conversely, in discussions about those who did not serve in combat or dodged service altogether, there is both, as Cheney said, a widespread acknowledgement of an individual’s choice to serve, yet also a memory of the sacred tradition that privileged military service.

The first presidential election to see a Vietnam generation politician as a candidate was 1988. It involved Dan Quayle, who served in the Indiana National Guard during Vietnam, as President George H. W. Bush’s running mate. Seemingly, Bush wanted to revise the memory of Vietnam not only as to the Vietnam Syndrome but also as to the controversial Vietnam veteran. Bush defended his choice of Quayle by saying, “Do we condemn an entire generation? I don't think so.” One point of contestation was that Quayle did not serve in the active duty force. Senator Alan K. Simpson of Wyoming said, “I never heard anybody getting criticized for trying to get into the Army. The

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81 Bacevich, 27.
82 Cohen, 23-28.
National Guard is a symbol of honor in the United States.”\(^{84}\) Even though the Vietnam-era National Guard was a popular refuge for sons of the wealthy and connected, it was more respectable than draft resistance because it technically counted as military service but without the risk. President Bush defended Quayle saying, “The National Guard is honorable service… Some went to Canada.”\(^{85}\) Of his service, Quayle said, “I am proud of it,” and “serving in the National Guard is patriotic… I served my country.”\(^{86}\) Although Quayle in reality subscribed to the AVF individual-choice mentality, he defended his actions in terms of the traditional ideal of the citizen-soldier.

At issue was not only Quayle’s lack of active service, but also possible preferential treatment to find Quayle a spot in the Guard. Wendell Phillippi, a senior editor of the newspaper owned by Quayle’s family, also happened to be a major general in the Indiana National Guard. Phillippi said he contacted a top Guard official on Quayle’s behalf.\(^{87}\) Men of Quayle’s generation who may have been seeking to enlist before they were drafted often had a difficult time finding a position in the Guard or the Reserves because of long waiting lists. This issue was more damning in the eyes of many. Senator John McCain said, "If there was some manipulation of the process that gave him some advantage over others, then I think it's a serious political problem.”\(^{88}\) Senator Bob Dole thought the selection of Quayle would damage the Republican ticket. Quayle responded “with some defiance” that nepotism did not aid in finding him a position in the Guard.\(^{89}\)

The National Guard issue received some criticism from the press, but the Democratic candidate, Michael Dukakis, refused to attack. One reporter presumed, “the National Guard question is a relatively peripheral aspect of the larger point: the contention that Mr. Quayle is too immature, too inexperienced and too much of a legislative and intellectual lightweight to be taken seriously for an office from which he

\(^{85}\) Dowd, August 22, 1998.
\(^{87}\) Toner, August 19, 1988.
\(^{88}\) Ibid.
might move to the Presidency.”

As a result of Dukakis’s reluctance to exploit this issue, the controversy dominated discussion for only a week and had no noticeable effect on the election. The Bush-Quayle ticket, featuring a World War II veteran and a Vietnam veteran, won the 1988 election, but the debate foreshadowed more discussions about Vietnam-era politicians’ service records.

In contrast to the 1988 election, discussion of Bill Clinton’s service record continued through most of the race in 1992. Following on the heels of reports of marital infidelity with Gennifer Flowers, Clinton’s draft controversy surfaced in time for the New Hampshire preliminaries. Clinton took advantage of student deferments, but when those ran out, and after receiving an induction notice while attending Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar, he promised to join the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) at the University of Arkansas. Yet, after having obtained the deferment, Clinton broke his promise and chose not to enroll at the University of Arkansas law school. Some writers saw the prospect of draft dodging as another reflection of his character. Many considered it “morally murky.” Implicit in this judgment was a still-prevalent belief in citizen-soldiers, although many note that ideal crumbling in Vietnam. One analyst thought the ambiguous nature of Clinton’s actions in context would hurt him if people remembered Vietnam from the perspective of the Gulf War: “Part of the problem is, Clinton will be judged out of a historical context by an awful lot of people; the voters aren't historians, and a lot of them will be thinking about this issue as much in the context of the war in the Persian Gulf as the war in Vietnam.” Clinton defended himself, saying that the ROTC was “the honorable way not to be drafted at the time.” As with Quayle, since the decline of the citizen-soldier and the rise of the AVF, politicians defended their decisions to not serve in combat roles as “honorable” and “patriotic.” The fact that these issues were on the table, however, suggests that in the 1990s it was still less acceptable to have avoided active military service. Indeed, another candidate from the 1992 election, a Vietnam veteran, campaigned with the assumption that Vietnam-era military service was

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still ennobling. Senator Bob Kerrey began to highlight his war record to contrast with Clinton’s draft dodging image. He also asserted that Clinton was “unelectable because he avoided military service.”

During the election, Quayle’s controversy resurfaced, but he insisted no rules were broken, and refocused attention on Clinton’s similar issue. Again, as with Quayle, the question came to be whether Clinton used his privilege to get into the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC). The ROTC recruiter, Col. Eugene Holmes, said he got a phone call from the Arkansas draft board, saying Senator J. William Fulbright was interested in Clinton's status. In addition, an Arkansas newspaper uncovered a memo by the former Senator's top aide suggesting calls were made on Clinton's behalf. To make the controversy worse, Clinton offered contrasting versions, only admitting to receiving the induction notice after he made previous statements contradicting that chronology. Also, a letter surfaced that Clinton wrote to the Colonel of the ROTC, indicating that after having obtained the deferment at Arkansas, Clinton broke his promise and chose not to enroll at the University of Arkansas law school. He wrote to the ROTC Colonel thanking the officer for saving Clinton from the draft and apologizing for misleading the Colonel about his intentions for joining the ROTC.

In addition to criticizing Clinton’s deceptions and privilege, the Bush campaign attacked Clinton’s antiwar stance as unpatriotic one month before the election. Bush said it was “wrong of Mr. Clinton to participate in antiwar demonstrations outside the borders of the United States.” This issue represents the greatest benefit of military service to a public figure: Bush’s ability to wrap himself in the flag and question the patriotism of those who did not serve and were opposed to the war. One Representative, Randy (Duke) Cunningham, said Clinton was “directly responsible" for the deaths of American military men in Vietnam,” and compared him to Tokyo Rose, the anti-American radio

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97 Ibid.
propagandist of World War II, and to Ho Chi Minh, the Communist leader of North Vietnam.  

While the debate over Clinton’s military record and patriotism was prolonged, there is little evidence that it affected the voters. Clinton did pick a Vietnam veteran, Al Gore as his Vice President, but Gore did not lend much military might to the ticket because he was a photographer and did not see combat. The significant issue of the election became Clinton’s character and willingness to dissemble more than his military service. In fact, the Bush ticket was unable to disparage Clinton’s lack of service directly because Quayle’s circumstances were very similar. For instance, one reporter referenced this in his article, “Quayle’s Glass House.” According to another reporter, “Bush campaign operatives see Mr. Clinton as vulnerable not so much because he did not serve in the military during the Vietnam War but because his explanations of why he did not have followed such a tortuous path since the issue arose this year.”

Considering the huge disparity between Clinton as a Vietnam War draft dodger and Bush as a veteran of World War II, Clinton’s victory demonstrated that the issue was not decisive for most voters, and that military service expectations had changed. For example, the executive director of the Vietnam Veterans of America, who could have had reason to be critical of Clinton’s lack of service, said it was a “cheap shot” to hold Clinton responsible “for a decision that was difficult for many of those in his generation.” This sympathy demonstrated a public understanding of changing attitudes toward the ideal of the citizen-soldier. Vietnam changed the war veteran’s unquestioned privilege in seeking public office. One Vietnam veteran wrote to the New York Times to argue for a relativist perspective on Clinton’s service. He said Clinton should not be judged by World War II standards: “George Bush can be proud of his own military service during World War II. But he and his campaign have no business impugning the legitimate and honorable choices made by Bill Clinton and distinguished service

academy graduates during the Vietnam War era.”

Despite Bush and Quayle’s attempts to question Clinton’s patriotism and service, this writer and the voting public judged Clinton’s draft dodging in the context of reduced expectations for politicians’ military service that began with the Vietnam War. Only during the Vietnam War was it “legitimate and honorable” to evade obligatory service.

In the 1996 election that pitted incumbent Bill Clinton against Republican challenger Bob Dole, the issue of the Vietnam War was insignificant. This is remarkable because Clinton again faced a decorated World War II veteran in Dole. One passionate article in the ardently Republican state of West Virginia again took the issue of Vietnam to castigate Clinton. The writer stated, “Clinton’s self-absolution of his conduct during the war… is a smack in the face to all veterans who proudly served their country.”

Plying rhetoric that allowed for no dissent, the article said, “It is each and every one of our responsibilities to stand up to the call, not dodge the draft and protest against their country as Clinton did.” This heated language illustrated that partisan feelings still burned, but that for the most part they smoldered quietly under the surface. Instead of focusing the election on draft dodging in the old war, the political discourse on Vietnam centered on normalization of relations with Vietnam. The 1996 election reflected the ebb of partisan rancor about the Vietnam War in recent memory.

In 2000, the issue of Vietnam-era draft dodging surfaced again, this time with regard to George W. Bush. Bush’s story was similar to that of Clinton and Quayle. He joined the Air National Guard, but reportedly was able to do so by pulling strings. The former speaker of the Texas House of Representatives, Ben Barnes, admitted to securing preferential treatment for Bush to join the ranks of the Guard. Whether or not Bush requested it, he received special treatment. He was admitted to the Guard that had a long waiting list, was promoted without going to officer candidate school, and obtained flight training without previous aviation experience.

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105 Larry Kimble, “McNamara’s Denial is a Slap in the Face,” Charleston Daily Mail, April 20, 1995.
106 Ibid.
“Champagne Unit” because it consisted of sons of prominent public figures in Texas.\textsuperscript{109} Even though these facts seemed to stigmatize Bush as an elitist who was not eager to serve his country, he promoted his Guard service as “an entirely honorable alternative to Vietnam,” and said, “I was proud of my service.”\textsuperscript{110} The argument that military service was no longer relevant to public office received public endorsement. One article entitled, “Military Service is Not Required for U.S. Leaders,” argued that Bush’s favorable treatment should not affect his chance to be president.\textsuperscript{111} Stating the matter bluntly, it said, “The U.S. is now a nation of professional, not citizen, soldiers. Voters no longer see military service as a requirement for national office.” The article acknowledged that American cultural expectations have changed from honoring Bob Dole as “a genuine war hero” to accepting George W. Bush, who was “part of a generation in which many sons of privilege and connection found countless ways to avoid service.” It cited the Vietnam-era draft as the reason for this change.

Yet, the same article also neglected the long tradition of honoring military service. The tradition of glorifying military service in public life did not die the instant the All-Volunteer Force was implemented in 1973. This was evident in letters to the editor responding to such an argument. One such letter, “What Candidates Did in War Matters,” argued that a president should prove willing to share the burden and should not have deliberately avoided service. The response continued, “voters may legitimately question the authority and character of those who deliberately avoided unglamorous and dangerous duties yet seek the power of high office.”\textsuperscript{112} This argument was strong enough to prompt some reporters to theorize that Bush might pick Chuck Hagel, a Vietnam veteran and Senator, for his running mate; similarly, two other theories proposed Vietnam veterans Colin Powell and Tom Ridge.\textsuperscript{113} As illustrated by these conjectures, being a Vietnam veteran was such valuable political currency as to recommend these men

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.
independent of their other qualifications. Instead of choosing a Vietnam veteran, Bush chose Dick Cheney. Cheney defended his lack of service by arguing that he simply had “other priorities” than military service.\(^{114}\)

For the Republican ticket, Bush competed against a Vietnam veteran, Senator John McCain. McCain was often described as a “Vietnam War hero” because he actively touted that image. He learned early in his political career that, as a famous war hero, he had a potent political tool.\(^{115}\) In the judgment of one article, McCain was “playing the POW Card.”\(^{116}\) In 1999 he published an autobiography of his early life, *Faith of My Fathers*, highlighting his five and a half years as a Prisoner of War in a Vietnam prison.\(^{117}\) He also chose to flaunt his family’s military legacy. Clearly, he was appealing to the pre-Vietnam War ideal of the citizen-soldier. He also campaigned with a busload of veterans who were prisoners of war with McCain in the “Hanoi Hilton.”\(^{118}\) McCain was the only one to cite veterans as part of his political base and vital to his success. In an attempt to film a campaign advertisement at Arlington Cemetery, the McCain campaign violated the cemetery’s rules. He said, “I'm not embarrassed to be seen at a cemetery where my father, grandfather and a couple of uncles are buried, but we didn't get permission and we violated the regulations.”\(^{119}\) McCain portrayed even his political missteps as patriotic and in the traditional vein of honoring military service.

The ability to unambiguously glorify military service ended with the Vietnam War, as McCain realized early in the 2000 presidential race. The ideal of the citizen-soldier that he proudly embodied became tarnished in Vietnam to the extent that the Bush campaign was able to question his mental stability because of his war service. This campaign strategy, supposedly crafted by advisor Karl Rove, drew from the entrenched cultural image of unstable, Vietnam veterans.\(^{120}\) McCain responded with appropriate surprise. “What's happening now is just unbelievable,” he said.\(^{121}\) Warfare had never

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\(^{119}\) Ibid.

\(^{120}\) On Rove: Mark Shields, “How Dumb Do They Think We Are?” Creators Syndicate, July 18, 2005.

made a candidate unfit for the White House. The specific charge was that McCain was unstable because of the time he had spent as a POW in isolation. In response, the McCain campaign released hundreds of pages of documentation about his sound mental health. According to one reporter, “That McCain felt compelled to release all this information is testimony… to the power of the whispered allegations against him.” The accusation reared its head only briefly in December 1999, and was likely not a large factor in the primaries, but it presaged of a similar strategy to be plied by Rove in the 2004 election.

Al Gore was running for the Democratic ticket, and he was the only other Vietnam veteran in the race. Gore never saw combat, but did serve as a photographer despite his antiwar stance. Gore’s service allowed prominent Democrats to launch an offensive against Bush and Cheney. Of Cheney, one Senator said, “Other priorities - well la-di-da.” Many people posited that Gore would nominate a decorated Vietnam veteran as his running mate; reportedly on Gore’s short list for VP were John Kerry and Bob Kerrey. Again like Quayle and Clinton, Bush’s National Guard service was highly publicized, but not too much of a political detriment to prevent his victory over two Vietnam veterans in the 2000 election. Then came the 2004 presidential election between George W. Bush and John Kerry.

As John Kerry was positioning himself as a presidential candidate for the 2004 election, analysts thought that his service in Vietnam would be his greatest asset. In the past, Kerry’s status as a veteran was indeed a badge of honor that benefited him well. A group of about a dozen Vietnam veterans was instrumental in his Senate campaigns. In 2003, one article in the Economist said, “Mr. Kerry’s… biggest advantage is his record in Vietnam. He served two tours of duty, earning a Silver Star, a Bronze Star and three Purple Hearts for being wounded before returning home to join the critics of the war… So far Mr. Kerry has squandered the huge advantage that he earned in the jungles of Vietnam.” As Kerry began to take such advice, the 2004 election became a microcosm of the debated memories of the Vietnam War in American collective memory.

122 Shields, July 18, 2005.
124 Sisk, August 1, 2000.
By choosing to portray himself first and foremost as a Vietnam veteran, Kerry was making two assumptions. One was that military service remained a determining factor in Presidential elections. From the vantage point of the 2004 election, the previous four victorious Presidential tickets had included a politician with a questionable route of evading combat duty in the Vietnam War. As one reader stated in a letter to the editor, “[Kerry] chose to wrap himself in Vietnam at the convention. While it seems a tad silly to suggest that four months of combat, however noble, is a basis to elect one president, Mr. Kerry made that choice.” This sentiment signaled the continued decline of the citizen-soldier ideal. Yet, it was evident throughout the campaign that, in fact, Kerry’s mere four months of combat service did indeed recommend him to many veterans. A second assumption was that his military record was sufficiently heroic to prevent any negative interpretation of his service. In fact, Kerry was wrong in his belief that his service was a strong foundation for his campaign. The Bush campaign ran a well-executed attack on Kerry’s military service, and turned his Vietnam-era activities against him.

Publicly the Bush administration attempted to distance itself from the mud-slinging group of disgruntled Vietnam veterans calling themselves the Swift Boat Veterans For Truth. Their public statement claimed “The Bush-Cheney campaign has never and will never question John Kerry's service during Vietnam. The election will not be about the past, it will be about the future.” Bush, however, refused to condemn the television commercials aired by the Swift Boat veterans. This may be because the primary financier of the group was revealed to be a Texan and friend of Karl Rove – implicitly connected to the Bush campaign. The group aired television advertisements that accused Kerry of lying about his war record, such as the events surrounding his medals, and betraying his fellow soldiers by later opposing the war. Even though Kerry responded that the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth were “the ugly face of the Bush attack machine,” Rove’s strategy was persuasive for some voters since it drew upon entrenched cultural beliefs about antiwar protesters’ disloyalty during the Vietnam

Thus, the Bush campaign slyly sabotaged Kerry’s war hero strategy through informal channels.

On another front, the Swift Boat Veterans had little work to do because Kerry’s war hero strategy was inherently flawed. While the Bush campaign depicted Kerry as a liar about his military record, his antiwar activities upon his return to America convinced Vietnam veterans that Kerry was a turncoat. Kerry draped himself in his heroic Vietnam service, but his antiwar actions alienated some Vietnam veterans because Kerry attested to witnessing brutal violence by American soldiers and because his antiwar stance aided and abetted the enemy. The Swift Boat advertisement claimed that Kerry attacked the Vietnam War as a criminal enterprise and threw away his decorations. Reactions to Kerry’s antiwar activities demonstrated that feelings about antiwar sentiment were still divisive. According to one reporter, “many veterans have not forgiven him for trashing the Vietnam War back in the 1970s.” In a film that aired nationally immediately before the election, “Stolen Honor: Wounds That Never Heal,” former prisoners of war from Vietnam called Kerry's 1971 Senate testimony a betrayal that prolonged their captivity.

Since Kerry portrayed himself first as a Vietnam veteran, his campaign thrived and declined because of Vietnam veterans. Before the Iowa primary, when Kerry was down in the polls, fellow Vietnam veterans stumped for Kerry and turned the tide. According to one reporter, “As Hurley, Cleland, Sandusky and other veterans trooped through Iowa's snows to visit American Legion halls and to work phone banks, they breathed new life into the campaign. Soon Kerry was surging in the polls.” Later, after the Swift Boat Veterans’ campaign aired on national television, Kerry’s reputation among veterans and the voting public in general declined. After two weeks of the negative advertisement playing nationally, one reporter noted, “A poll conducted by The Los Angeles Times found that Mr. Bush was running ahead of Mr. Kerry for the first time this year and suggested that some of the erosion in Mr. Kerry's support could be linked to the

132 Ibid.
attacks on his military service.”¹³⁵ As the campaign neared its end, one reporter wrote, “Kerry desperately needs to convince these vets and the millions they represent that he may be a Massachusetts liberal but he no longer holds them, their war and their values in contempt; that he is, in short, patriotic enough (by their definition) to be a wartime President.”¹³⁶

Just as the Bush campaign tried to depict Kerry as a disloyal antiwar radical, Kerry revived the controversy over Bush and Cheney’s Vietnam service. Kerry portrayed Bush and Cheney as draft dodgers.¹³⁷ Kerry replied, “I'm not going to have my commitment to defend this country questioned by those who refused to serve when they could have… The vice president even called me unfit for office last night. I guess I'll leave it up to the voters whether five deferments makes someone more qualified to defend this nation than two tours of duty.”¹³⁸ Kerry assumed that military service naturally benefited a veteran in the realm of electoral politics. This assumption, however, was flawed. By 2004, the public realized that President Bush had pulled some strings to find his position in the Guard. As one reporter said, “The evidence that Mr. Bush had been at best halfhearted in fulfilling his duty to the Guard was… clear. People figured out how much that mattered to them when they went to the polls in 2000.”¹³⁹ Lack of active combat service was likely not decisive in the 2000 election. Since Kerry appealed to veterans as a primary voting bloc, Bush’s attempts to paint him as unrepresentative of most Vietnam veterans, and indeed, their enemy, were surprisingly successful in turning public opinion from the Kerry campaign.

This discrepancy between opinions about Bush and Kerry’s service illustrated the distinctiveness of memory of the Vietnam War. The election of 2004 was not the first time a politician with a respected war record was beaten by a politician without military service. But as all the elections from 1988 to 2004 demonstrate, the Vietnam War changed the usual calculus that benefited war veterans and impaired those who chose not to serve. In the case of Vietnam, Kerry was not necessarily a war hero because he went to

¹³⁸ Ibid.
Vietnam, and Bush could actually portray his cushy and part-time position with the Guard as a respectable alternative.

Conclusion

Michael Herr, who was a journalist in Vietnam from 1967 to 1969, concluded in his memoir *Dispatches*, “Vietnam Vietnam Vietnam, we’ve all been there.” All Americans have metaphorically experienced the Vietnam War either through personal memory or representations of collective memory. Many of the Vietnam generation, like John Kerry and John McCain, daily negotiate the paradoxical memories of that era. Those born after the war ended experience Vietnam only through representations of the war: movies like *Rambo*, memoirs such as *Dispatches*, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, references from politics, and American history textbooks. The demand for movies, memoirs, and memorials has declined over the years, but both presidential campaign rhetoric and American history textbooks continually revise the war.

The reoccurring issues in political debates and changes in textbook interpretations represent larger themes in American collective memory of the Vietnam War. As the Vietnam generation assumed the responsibility of government, Presidential elections reflected the lingering conflicts over character and military service from the Vietnam era. Politicians realized in 1988 and again in 1992 that dodging the draft and minimal Vietnam service were not significant political liabilities. As McCain campaigned in 2000 and Kerry in 2004, unresolved memories of the Vietnam War twisted military service into a potential political liability. The persistent issues in Presidential campaign debates reveal the unresolved problems that continue to haunt Americans’ cultural memories of the Vietnam War. In contrast, textbooks’ interpretations in the twenty-first century are less controversial but will continue to change. In the 1970s the inquiry format skirted the issues, and in the 1980s the passive voice was the best means to avoid controversy. By the 1990s, the war was sufficiently distant to allow criticism to enter the texts. Even though the most recent texts use less critical language, the Vietnam War shows no signs of moving into the less publicly contested realm of history.

In the post-September 11th world, politicians may continue their attempts to purge the memories of Vietnam in favor of a new foreign policy paradigm. Meanwhile, textbooks will likely reinvigorate the memory of Vietnam by discussing the war’s unfortunate parallels with the second Iraq War. Likewise, in the heated political debates over the Iraq War, patriotism, and flag burning, references to the Vietnam War are a common occurrence. In the run-up to the 2006 congressional elections, Democratic nominee Jim Webb, who was a decorated Marine in Vietnam, endured a Republican attack ad. The Republican nominee, who spent summers working on ranches while Webb was in Vietnam, accused Webb of supporting flag burning. Webb countered, “People who live in glass dude ranches should not question the patriotism of real soldiers who fought and bled for this country on a real battlefield.”

America’s longest war illustrates the divisive power of memory. Since 1975, memorials, Presidents, and movies have promised Americans healing, but the war defies easy resolution. As long as the war remains relevant, textbooks and American politicians will continue to contest its meaning.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY

Memory


**Textbooks**


