

Commentary by Alex Vernon

War's Return

EDITOR'S NOTE: This essay is based on remarks made at Roanoke College, February 8, 2005, and on excerpts from Alex's recent memoir *most succinctly bred*.



War returns upon itself, the present US war in Iraq a monstrous hybrid of the US war in Vietnam and my war, the Persian Gulf War of 1990-1991.

War returns to veterans in ordinary times, on ordinary days, by ordinary ways. For me, one of those ordinary ways has been movies, and not necessarily war movies. Kenneth Branagh's mediocre film *Dead Again*, which has nothing to do with war, but does turn on the resurfacing of past violences, sent me into a several-hour sobfest. A few years later Ron Howard's *Apollo 13* sent me over the edge into a depression—the plight of those three astronauts hurtling through the uncertainty in that tin hunk for four days corresponded closely enough with the four days my crew and I spent in our tank. A few years later still it wasn't even a movie but a movie trailer, for the really bad Ben Affleck film *Pearl Harbor*, which brought on the tears and nearly sent me from the theater (I was probably there to see Harry Potter). In the trailer, the Japanese zeros on their way to bomb the naval base pass over a woman hanging her clothes to dry. She looks up—that's all it took.

War returns to veterans in extraordinary times, such as our present time, when the old wars reverberate in the new. I've cried more in the past two years, and fought depression, more than any period of time I can remember. When I've cried, it's never been when thinking about myself, but when I let myself—or am forced to—imagine the experiences of those currently in harm's way, and I don't just mean American soldiers. And I've cried whenever I re-arrive at the conclusion that we'll always find a reason, despite everything we know, to wage war.

And still more: According to a 2000 report by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, the children of Australian veterans of Vietnam “have three times the suicide rate of the general community.” In my admittedly hurried internet

search, I found no similar studies of children of US veterans of that war, though I also know of no reason why their numbers would depart significantly from those from Australia (indeed the same CDC study noted that the US and Australian veterans “reveal a similar excess of mortality from external causes”).

As for their parents, the veterans themselves, since the present war against Iraq began VA outreach centers in Massachusetts have noticed a increase in the numbers of Vietnam and Desert Storm veterans seeking emotional support. They’ve also noticed a marked increase in single-car accidents driven by veterans, some of which resulted in fatalities. Such incidents would be categorized not as suicide but as “early mortality.” One Massachusetts veteran has hanged himself.

Then, finally, this: On February 11, 2005, the Reverend Alan McLean of Wenatchee, Washington, who had portions of both legs amputated as a result of wounds suffered during his service as a Marine lieutenant in Vietnam, took his life with a .45: “The first Gulf War left him nearly debilitated,” his daughter said. “Panic attacks followed the *whup-whup-whup* of a helicopter. War footage, especially about ground wars, left him shaken. Over the years, the reactions worsened.” In a suicide note drafted on his laptop the day before his non-hostile, self-inflicted death, Rev. McLean wrote that the present war in Iraq “unbearably amplified his nightmares.”

The months of rhetoric leading to the March 2003 US invasion of Iraq also saw violent episodes from veterans of the first Gulf War. In October 2002, Robert Flores Jr., a nursing student and a fellow Gulf War veteran, killed three instructors and then himself. The D.C.-Maryland-Virginia beltway sniper turned out to be two men, and the older one, presumably the leader, John Allen Muhammad, was also Gulf War vet. A Marine Corps sniper. In the first week of December yet another vet, David L. Fuller, kidnapped, raped, and murdered Kacie Rene Woody, a thirteen-year-old girl, then killed himself. This horror occurred outside Little Rock in Conway, Arkansas, the small town where I teach. At the time, I began to fear that the old phrase *going postal* from the 80s and 90s might soon become *going Gulf*.

A small front page bullet in a February 2003 paper noted that Louis Jones Jr., who in 1995 in Texas kidnapped, raped, and murdered Air Force Airman Tracie McBride, had written President Bush, asking him to spare his life. He blames his crime on both childhood abuse and exposure to nerve gas during the first Gulf War.

Hypotheses to account for this news of Flores, Mohammed, Fuller, and Jones:

- (1) The media reported stories and/or details of stories—these men's status as Gulf War veterans—that they would not otherwise report simply for their coincidental topicality.
- (2) The media reported stories and/or details of stories—these men's status as Gulf War veterans—as subtle, liberal cautionary tales about the perpetuation of violence, about what can happen to those we send to do our killing when they come home.
- (3) The media reported stories and/or details of stories—these men's status as Gulf War veterans—because the call to collective violence against Iraq truly resounded in these men as a call to personal violence. The correspondence holds: the vindictive anger over September 11 directed against a people unconnected to that event paralleled the anger of these veterans directed against the innocent. A different kind of backlash.
- (4) By reporting stories and/or details of stories—these men's status as Gulf War veterans—the media replayed an age-old fear, the age-old misapprehension, of the violent vet, the Travis Brickells and Tim McVeighs of history. Anthropologists have documented cultures that submit warriors returning from battle to cleansing rituals to remove war's taint, though my own admittedly catch-as-catch-can research indicates that veterans are no more prone to random violence than the rest of you.

You have invited me tonight to speak about the local effects of a distant war, in particular about the personal effects an ongoing war has on veterans. I won't speak as a military historian, a political scientist, or a war theorist, because that's not why we are here, and because, frankly, I'm not qualified to speak from any of those perspectives. But it so happens that, in addition to being a veteran, I'm also a student of war literature, and an English professor at a liberal arts college like yours. I've spent significantly more time now reading, writing, and talking about war literature than I spent preparing for and engaging in combat. I tell you this because the further I find myself from my war, and the more deeply immersed in war literature, the more impossible it becomes to talk about war without talking

about literature. We study literature, after all, to learn about ourselves. Thus your kind invitation to speak tonight has prompted me to ask after literary models of my situation, of writing by combat veterans of one war who find themselves distant civilian witnesses to another.

There aren't many. After the initial success of his first novel, the semi-autobiographical World War II work *The Naked and the Dead*, Norman Mailer's career flopped and floundered until Vietnam came along, inspiring his remarkable anti-war *Why Are We in Vietnam?* in 1967 and *The Armies of the Night* in 1968.

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s *Slaughterhouse-Five*, one of the finest books I know about war or anything else, appeared in 1969. Vonnegut's narrator—a virtual version of Vonnegut—introduces his book with this bit of personal history:

When I got home from the Second World War twenty-three years ago, I thought it would be easy for me to write about the destruction of Dresden, since all I would have to do would be to report what I had seen. And I thought, too, that it would be a masterpiece or at least make me a lot of money, since the subject was so big.

But not many words about Dresden came from my mind then—not enough to make a book, anyway. And not many words come now, either, when I have become an old fart with his memories and his Pall Malls, with his sons full grown. (2)

It took Vonnegut and his narrator twenty-three years to write their novel about the Dresden firebombing, which they experienced on the ground as POWs. Perhaps twenty-three years because the subject *was* so big—so big, so traumatic, that it required a period of such length to wrestle it to writerly manageability. Perhaps twenty-three years because it needed an external event to force it out, that event being, of course, the war in Vietnam.

The undoing of the book's protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, begins in 1967, when he either is or imagines he is kidnapped by aliens from the planet Tralfamadore. Despite Billy's raising his family to oppose war, his son Robert, who "had a lot of trouble in high school," joins the Green Berets, "straightened out, became a fine young man, and he fought in Vietnam" (24-25). Billy will later discover a 1932 science fiction novel by Kilgore Trout that "predicted the widespread use of burning jellied gasoline on human beings" dropped from airplanes by robots with "no conscience, and no circuits which would allow them to imagine what was happening to the people on the ground" (168). Vonnegut wants us to conflate the napalming of Vietnam with the firebombing of Dresden; he wants us to consider

the identical rationale driving both. I am reminded of Robert McNamara's quoting of Curtis LeMay in *The Fog of War* about the firebombing of Japan: "You know if we lose, we'll be indicted for war crimes." Vonnegut also wants us to consider that such things should only be possible in science fiction, because only in science fiction can we imagine people—in the form of robots—devoid of conscience and of the circuitry for sympathetic imagination.

William Eastlake's *The Bamboo Bed* also appeared in 1969. Eastlake served four years in the infantry, was wounded at the Battle of the Bulge, and briefly covered Vietnam as a correspondent. If *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a World War II novel also "about" Vietnam, *The Bamboo Bed* is a Vietnam novel also about World War II. Both novels bounce back and forth in time as they suggest that the twenty-five years between the wars hardly mattered, that we have learned nothing, that cyclic repetition is the nature of human history, and that no one, much less no nation, is immune to evil. Like Vonnegut, Eastlake sees an ideology of moral arrogance connecting the two wars: "Love is a lot of Christian shit that went on all over Germany while the Germans were burning people in ovens," one character argues, "And now love goes on all over America while Americans are burning people in villages."

Four years earlier Eastlake published his first war book, *Castle Keep*, set solidly during WWII. *Castle Keep*, however, lacks the rage of *The Bamboo Bed*. Indeed the central plot involves whether a castle full of art should be spared for the art's sake or destroyed in order to break the enemy lines. It is a tight, controlled narrative—the war in Vietnam had not yet spiraled out of control when Eastlake wrote his book in the first half of the decade. He perhaps still shared some degree of belief in the war's ideological necessity. As Philip Caputo has described his own faith in country before arriving as an infantry officer in Vietnam in 1965, the year of *Castle Keep*:

America seemed omnipotent then: the country could still claim it had never lost a war, and we believed we were ordained to play cop to the Communists' robber and spread our own political faith throughout the world. Like the French soldiers of the late eighteenth century, we saw ourselves the champions of a "cause that was destined to triumph" [...] and that we were doing something noble and good. (*Rumor*, xiv)

But *The Bamboo Bed* appeared in 1969, the year after the Tet Offensive, and the year we learned about My Lai. *Castle Keep* muses; *The Bamboo Bed* sears. It sears with the kind of anger only a veteran can harbor as the flag under which

he fought, from under which he cannot duck, has come to represent something he abhors.

How might a veteran novelist shape a work in the context of the current war? It is impossible to say. We have practically no works of fiction by veterans of and about the first Gulf War, and now the moment for “pure” stories about that war has passed—and by pure I mean untainted with the knowledge of the second war in Iraq. Vietnam veterans too ignored my meager war—Tim O’Brien, Philip Caputo, Tobias Wolff, Stephen Wright, Donald Pfarrer—none of them, to my knowledge, have touched it. But this new war, as it has mutated from something akin to my war into something akin to their war, as it has enflamed old memories, with this new war that includes Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay, I see possibilities, I see the promise of another *Slaughterhouse-Five* or *Bamboo Bed*.

Maybe we will get a re-envisioned *Gravity’s Rainbow*. In Thomas Pynchon’s 1973 novel, Tyrone Slothrop, scion of an establishment American family, bumbles across a postwar Germany under control of foreign military powers—but who’s kidding whom: nobody’s in control—hunting the history and whereabouts of a very mysterious V-2 rocket program which he suspects holds the key to his own identity. It’s a novel about conspiracies and deceptions, paranoia and insecurity, about armed rogue groups operating freely throughout the postwar Zone with who knows what motives, means, and connections. International corporations are thoroughly integrated with government offices, and are possibly running the whole show. There’s plenty of sadism, too.

Imagine not only fictions set in Baghdad, Fallujah, Mosul, and Abu Ghraib; imagine not only a novel based on the US civilian contractors who assumed the authority to torture Afghans in your name; but imagine also novels from the home front about families left behind as husband or wife or even both are deployed indefinitely, and novels about wounded reservists stuck in limbo in hospitals away from home facing excruciating surgeries and rehab alone, as well as novels about men like Robert Flores Jr., John Allen Muhammad, David L. Fuller, and Louis Jones Jr.

It will take several years for the talented young writers of this warring generation to write such works, but veterans from our other wars, as far as any of us know, are already hard at work, and bringing their own wars into their texts, however inconspicuously, will only deepen their reach.

Let me return to my war, to my wars.

The only people to serve in Vietnam from my parents’ generation would have been career soldiers, and in the nice Kansas City, Kansas suburb where we grew up, we didn’t have any of those around. I came of age in the Madonna “Material

Girl” generation, attending junior high school and high school in the early 1980s. The war’s end was not even a decade past. Thirty-year-old veterans must have lived among us—we were oblivious. Our teachers had lived through it; we were born at its apex; yet it was, to us, ancient history.

At the United State Military Academy, Vietnam was more apparent. There I first “learned” that the civilian leadership, not the military, lost the war. Most every lieutenant colonel, colonel, and general wore a combat patch from the war, though they didn’t talk about it much. They were too busy running the place: teaching us calculus, lecturing about honor, issuing demerits.

Vietnam doubtless contributed to developing the small unit infantry tactics we learned and practiced during summer training. But in the classroom when we practiced our military map reading skills, when we worked on our small unit military operational graphics, when we studied larger mechanized offensive formations and defensive positions, we always used maps and three-dimensional terrain boards depicting Eastern Europe. The town names on the maps and terrain boards were German, because the army saw the Fulda Gap as the most likely avenue of approach for a Soviet offensive into Western Europe. We studied Soviet tactics, formations, equipment, organization, and capabilities to prepare for that threat as well as the threat from the several other potential enemy nations equipped and trained by the Soviets. (One classmate, a general’s son, predicted we’d be at war in the Middle East within the decade. I had no idea what he was talking about.)

The “Material Girl” generation did not grow up practicing nuclear fallout drills in school by hiding under desks or sitting against hallway walls holding notebooks on our heads. But we did grow up with *Dr. Strangelove* in our VCRs, and with *Mad Max* and the other post-apocalyptic sci-fi flicks on screens big and little. In 1983, my junior year in high school, the made-for-television movie *The Day After* aired. Its proposition: Soviet nuclear missiles hit Kansas due to our own nuclear missiles siloed underground throughout the state. The symbolic reason involved the state’s association with Dorothy, Toto, and Auntie Em. There’s no place like home. Like Kansas. The heartland, and my home. If a single image represents the Cold War for me, it is that of my high school classmate Ty playing a child in a late scene in the movie, his face swaddled out of sight as he pulls a ring off a corpse.

At West Point, we Cold War cadets received a block of instruction on the proper defensive posture in case of a blast. We learned to record our location, the compass direction to the blast, the time of the blast, and the seconds between the blast and the first wave, and the first wave and the return wave. Record and report—assuming our radios still worked, that is, and we were still alive. Our instructors also told us a smattering about the US army’s arsenal of tactical

nuclear warheads deliverable via conventional artillery. During my plebe year West Point awarded the Sylvanus Thayer Award, an award presented annually to “citizens of the United States in honor of their record of service to their country, accomplishments in the national interest, and manner of achievement exemplifying outstanding devotion to the principles expressed in the motto of the United States Military Academy—Duty, Honor Country,” to Edward Teller, one of the principals in the development of the atomic bomb, dubbed the father of the hydrogen bomb: *the real Dr. Strangelove*.

In 1989, the year I graduated from West Point, the Cold War ended. We left it behind. It happened that fast. So we thought. That November I watched the Berlin Wall come down from my quarters at Fort Knox, Kentucky, a few weeks away from assuming duties as a tank platoon leader at Fort Stewart, Georgia.

Then I went to war. Iraq invaded Kuwait on August 2, 1990, and I found myself in Saudi Arabia by month’s end. Five months later the air campaign against Iraq’s military began; forty days later, we launched our ground offensive which lasted a breathtakingly minimal 100 hours. After several weeks occupying southern Iraq, my division returned to Fort Stewart, and to the rest of our lives.

Ten months later, I left the army and sprinted to graduate school. Back to school because, like Ernest Hemingway’s Nick Adams fishing the Big Two-Hearted River after returning from his war, I wanted to deny the war’s effect by immersing myself in my prewar self, in the place I felt most comfortable, most secure, most in control: the classroom.

Depression struck a few years in, driving me out of graduate school. That’s when a classmate and fellow Gulf War vet asked me to take over the writing of a collaborative memoir he had begun with three others, the book that became my first, *The Eyes of Orion*. *Orion* appeared after I returned to the PhD program at the University of North Carolina; for my second book, my dissertation, I chose to write about something that mattered personally: veterans turned writers, namely Ernest Hemingway, James Salter, and Tim O’Brien. In the summer of 2001, PhD in hand, I moved to Little Rock, Arkansas, to begin my career as a professor. The week before classes started, the World Trade Center and part of the Pentagon came down, and in a Pennsylvania field, a plane crashed.

We invaded Afghanistan, and then, in the summer of 2002, the saber-rattling for Iraq began, with President Bush’s graduation speech at West Point. Naturally.

In the first week of December, I learned that 1-64 Armor, my tank battalion from the first war, was sitting in Kuwait preparing for battle with Eric Schwartz, a company commander in the battalion during Desert Shield and Desert Storm, now in command of the “Desert Rogues” battalion. On February 6, Secretary of

State Colin Powell presented the case for war to the U.N. I pulled off the road, onto the shoulder, and cried.

Our daughter, our first and only child, was due the first week of April. Melodramatic me imagined us in the hospital on delivery day with nothing on television for distraction except the war. *How will that work?* I wondered. *How will the tears fall?*

The war began Wednesday, March 19, 2003.

From tank hatch lieutenant twelve years before to armchair general. Paradoxically, my primary connection with the new war was a sense of disconnection. As a lowly tank platoon leader, I only had the vaguest idea of where I was, of the happenings around me, of the entire theater of operations. Family, friends, and the general public, however hypnotized by CNN, were equally in the dark. In the new war, the presence of so many embedded journalists tricked the viewing audience, once again, into thinking we knew more than we did. The journalists' presence teased. With every revelation, I ached to see a little more. The 3rd Infantry Division, one of the two main efforts in the invasion, was essentially my old division. Back then we were the 24th, but after a decade of division restructuring, the 3rd today has the same units—like Eric Schwartz's 1-64 Armor—in which and with which I fought. So during the invasion when I heard about operations of the 3rd ID, I wanted to know which brigade, which battalion, which company.

For today's soldiers also—despite the embedded journalists among them, and the satellite-linked touch-screen computers in their vehicles by which some soldiers can view what's knowable about the battlefield situation—I suspect that their world remains primarily that which they can see through sandstorms, scopes, and night-vision devices. During the invasion, lost platoons and firefights between friendly units evidenced as much.

I was interviewed a half dozen times about what the soldiers were experiencing. My answers were pretense; I could never, and never can, truly know this war.

In 1991, the ground war stopped after four days and four hours, when the real challenges would have begun: our supply lines were stretching very thin, our ammunition was starting to run low, and our vehicles were beginning to break down from the hard and fast riding we gave them. And we were exhausted. After four days, this ground war was just getting underway. After the first week's shamal, those tankers and grunts faced hours upon hours of cleanup. The news reported two accidents: two US soldiers killed when a friendly vehicle ran over them, and an M1 crew of four drowned when their tank drove off a bridge. That exhaustion played a part in those deaths seems likely. The US military operates by being far more flexible and responsive than the enemy. With a deliberately dynamic battlefield, vigilance and clear-headedness are those men and women's

greatest resources. They are also a tired army's first casualties. Accidents happen. Fratricide happens. The scenes shift too quickly for the actors to avoid colliding.

And, of course, civilian casualties happened, are still happening. I hurt for the soldiers who have faced impossible moments and who must live with the consequences. With the overheard conversations about collateral damage for the rest of their lives. Aside from the geopolitical and the human costs of this war, as a veteran I worry about when these men and women come home. This new generation of veterans might have more conflicted emotions about their participation than veterans of my war. As if images of their own dead and maimed, of dead and maimed Iraqi soldiers and civilians, weren't enough to contend with.

As the war progressed, Michelle and I seized its language. We had scheduled an induction, and talking about it to others, we declared that our child would be born *at the time and place of our choosing*. As the offensive push by the 3rd Infantry Division and the Marine division stalled, and as Anna Cay took her own sweet time, I announced to friends that we were undergoing *an operational pause*. Michelle, looking fit to burst, described our halted progress with another now tired phrase from that phase of the newest most mediated war: *we're fifty miles from Baghdad*.

Eric Schwartz's Task Force 1-64 entered Baghdad on April 5, surprising and shocking everyone, Schwartz and his men included. On television I watched clips of the tanks and Bradleys maneuvering down the streets. Of my tanks—B21, my old tank, was there, somewhere, a different lieutenant, a different crew. *Blitzkrieg*, we had named it, because my crew had wanted to call it *Balls to the Wall*, but I knew our commander would object and so convinced them that *Blitzkrieg* meant *Balls to the Wall* in German.

On Anna Cay's due date, Schwartz's battalion and the other two in the brigade reentered the city, this time to stay. Baghdad officially fell on Wednesday the ninth. Motion images of Iraqi citizens pulling down a Hussein statue and beating the hollow head with their shoes dominated the television for days and will surely appear in every future broadcast or documentary account of the war.

We checked Michelle into the hospital early Friday morning. After forty-five minutes of hard, futile pushing by her mother, Anna Cay Kaemmerling Vernon entered this world at 1639 hours via a C-section. I couldn't believe the pool of blood that a second before was my wife's belly. I couldn't believe how the doctor strained to pull the baby out; her arms surely ached the next day. Michelle was pale and quaky with the anesthesia, barely emotionally aware.

I camped in the hospital room with my family for the next few days, holding and changing our baby, helping my wife breastfeed and in every other way I could. On Saturday CNN ran a list of US soldiers killed in action. Like movie

credits, the white roll call climbed the black screen. I sat on the small couch, Anna Cay a seven-pound bundle of mushy redness in my arms, and looked back and forth through tears between the roll call and my daughter as the fog of memory moved in: my soldiers, my fellow officers, my academy classmates, their faces, their laughter, the things they did that pissed me off then that endear them to me now. I turned off the television, fearing I might recognize a name.

The glory of war is rhetoric; the miracle of birth is understatement. I claim full responsibility for every death, every injury, every trauma from my war and its aftermath; I cannot fathom having anything to do with the perfection that is this child. Ten fingers, ten toes, and a button nose to die for.

We went home on Monday, our entire stay lasting nearly eighty hours, almost as long as the ground combat during the first Gulf War.

That was 2003. In 2004, the presidential election captured my passion. Had I not served in the first Gulf War, I doubt my feelings would have been so strong. Of course many non-veterans felt deeply about the election and in particular about the war in Iraq, and I do not mean to claim deeper feelings. Only that, for me, the election seized me more than any other election largely because of my war's return. This one was personal.

As the election progressed, I grew angrier and angrier at the mass emails sent around by West Point classmates and fellow army veterans denouncing John Kerry's service. I'm the first to admit that competent junior combat leadership has little to no bearing on one's geopolitical leadership forty years later. But I could not brook the accusations that Kerry was a rule-breaking miscreant of an officer, and a traitor to boot.

Lt. Kerry broke the rules when, instead of continuing to risk his and his subordinates' lives by playing sitting duck for riverbank VC ambushers, he aimed his Swift boat at the VC, drove into the bank, and chased them down on foot. For his actions, he was awarded the Bronze Star by the very admiral who had established the sitting duck policy. My email to the recipients of these anti-Kerry messages asked them to admit that, had Kerry been the Republican candidate, they would have praised him for taking the initiative, for responsibly disobeying a bad order, for being the heroic American individualist soldier we generally celebrate.

No one would admit as much.

As for Kerry's post-war anti-war activities, I declared that he was doing what the military taught us that good leaders do: taking care of his troops. While in Vietnam, he did his duty by respectfully questioning his superiors when he had doubts about particular missions, yet in the end he followed his orders. After the

war, he did his duty once again by voicing his complaints about the war. The man acted out of both passionate conviction and patriotism. That he threw away his medals is hardly worth condemnation. He was a young man in a crazy time expressing himself as he saw fit—other veterans returned home to abuse alcohol, drugs, wives, and children, and we've all had our youthful moments of grand, if retrospectively unwise, gestures. Nor did a future in politics motivate him: the young man was already so well-connected that the wiser strategy, politically speaking, would have been to lie low.

I also wanted my classmates and fellow veterans to explain the sea change in attitude from a decade before, from when combat service was the primary criterion of character in presidential politics. In 1992 they hated Bill Clinton because he had studied at Oxford instead of fighting a war he didn't believe in; at our 1989 graduation some of them booed when the Republican Vice President Dan Quayle's introducer mentioned his stateside National Guard service stateside during Vietnam. How could they now despise the veteran Kerry, a man who dutifully fought in a war he doubted instead of dodging a war he mongered?

I never got an answer.

I've bothered you with my version of the last election not because I have the opportunity to vent publicly, but because I'm struggling to express how my war has returned, how it continues to make and remake me. I'm also struggling to understand how my war makes and remakes other veterans.

After the second Iraq war ended in April 2003, one fellow Desert Storm veteran from my unit, now a full colonel, emailed around his assessment that the invasion went smoothly and quickly because Iraq's military had not fully recovered from our destruction of it back in 1991, in equipment and personnel, yes, but also in morale and confidence. We had killed their will to fight us again. The colonel, who did not participate in the operation to find WMDs or uncover terrorist training camps or punish Saddam or liberate the Iraqis or ignite freedom's flame or whatever in God's name we started the war—and can't you just see Lady Liberty from her Ellis Island perch bending backwards over the ocean with her scorching torch?—that colonel is probably correct in his assessment. It makes sense, and apparently enjoys a consensus among Desert Storm veterans.

It intrigues me. Not the assessment itself, but the possible need to connect our spuriously heroic war with this (at the time) triumphantly heroic one. A need to be a part of the finishing of the job, a need for personal closure through the collective. Clearly I'm speculating, clearly and perhaps wildly, but only because I'm grasping to understand how my fellow veterans can believe in the new war and its leaders as furiously as I oppose them.

There's a poignant scene in *Home Before Morning*, Lynda Van DeVanter's memoir of serving as a nurse in Vietnam, a scene that I suspect speaks to this kind of investment in war by veterans.

Back home, Lynda and a woman friend retreated to an officer's club bar, where a group of amputees accosted them. Upon learning that Lynda's companion was on her way to Vietnam and Lynda had just returned, the men unloaded:

"If only I could kill one more gook," one of them said.

A guy in a wheelchair agreed. "I'd give anything to be able to douse every dink between Saigon and Hanoi," he said. "And when I got there, I'd fuck Ho Chi Minh's old lady."

"He doesn't have an old lady," someone else interjected.

"Then I'll fuck his sister and make him watch."

"Ho Chi Minh is dead," [Lynda] reminded them. They ignored the comment.

"Wouldn't you like to kill a few of those slimy yellow bastards, too, Blondie?"

"Wouldn't [you] love to see every one of those fucking Vietnamese jerkoffs blown to shit?"

"Shouldn't we kill all the women first so they couldn't reproduce any more baby gooks?"

"What's the difference between a truckload of dead baby gooks and a truckload of bowling balls? You can't unload the bowling balls with a pitchfork."

Later that night, another friend tries to help Lynda understand those men's reactions:

"Lynda," she said, "don't you see what those men were doing? It's precisely because they lost something so tangible in Vietnam that they have to believe they lost it for a reason. And if they lost it for a reason, they have to say that they would be willing to go back and do it again. They have no choice."

My army cohorts' support for our nation's going back to Iraq never reached such obscene fury, though none of my mates left a limb behind. I'm not sure what they lost in Iraq; I'm not sure how Iraq inhabits them; I can't explain their insistence on this war's necessity.

I watched Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9-11* on DVD at home a month or two before the election. Defying my expectations, the film did not emotionally rack

me. It did not rile me as much as it did its detractors. Because I had heard so much about it before watching it, I think, and because we all knew it was propaganda. We always know what Michael Moore is up to; he tucks nothing in. Maybe too the film didn't touch me because, eighteen months after the war it documented, the war had metamorphosed into a creature even less kin to my war. If I initially felt this war viscerally as a perverse reincarnation of my own, that feeling waned as it began to behave a lot more like the one in Vietnam.

One moment in the film, however, did threaten to undo me. I heard the growls and the sniffing at the door. A young tank crewman, a teenager, stands before his tank singing the song piped into his headgear through his tank's intercom during combat:

The roof, the roof, the roof is on fire
We don't need no water let the motherfucker burn
Burn motherfucker burn.

As he speaks, his *a capella* rendition is replaced by the actual band's production and his image is replaced by a shot of Baghdad in flames.

Here the film and my war connected, as tankers in the first Gulf War also played inspirational music over the intercom. "Blaze of Glory" was a popular song, though one I didn't care for because of its fatal promise. Still, it's the song I share with my war because they evoke one another. Tim O'Brien and his war, Vietnam, share a song too: one day, his platoon marching through a rice paddy struck up with the Beatles' "Hey Jude."

Shortly after this ongoing war first ended in April 2003, I emailed some veteran friends, something about feeling closure, not because this particular war somehow finally concluded our war in a geo-political and therefore a personal way, but because the war now had a historical frame and context, because I was no longer a veteran of the country's most recent war. And that's partially true. But as this war has persisted, I have found myself linked to the historical context in disturbing, open-ended ways. Perhaps we were all suckered by my war's promise of a clean war—"We the press," the reporter Christiana Amanapour has reflected, "presented the war as a risk-free, casualty-free operation, as a surgical operation. It was a lie; there is no such thing..." (*Reporters at War*).

I am connected to this war's atrocities, and to every death and every physical and emotional wounding, to those our military intended and those it did not, even to those wrought by the insurgents. I am connected by my war, by my military service more generally, and most decidedly by my citizenship. You are too. *We* tortured bodies in Afghanistan, Abu Ghraib, and Guantanamo Bay. *We*

were with the Marine who killed a defenseless, wounded Iraqi, and we were with the “bullish lieutenant” who told a reporter for *The Economist* that

If anyone gets too close to us, we fucking waste them. It’s kind of a shame, because it means we’ve killed a lot of innocent people... It gets to the point where you can’t wait to see guys with guns, so you start shooting everybody.

And if you can’t hear yourself ever saying such a thing, you suffer a profound disability of your imaginative faculties. That lieutenant is one step away from My Lai, Vietnam, and one step away from Roanoke, Virginia; he is one step from William Calley, and one step from you and me; and when we forget this propinquity, we forget why war must only ever be the last, truly the final, resort.

Through the historical link between my war and this one, and by virtue of this stepping or falling into history, I’ve also discovered a new familiarity, a new intimacy, with our war in Vietnam. John Kerry, and Tim O’Brien, and Phil Caputo and William Calley—I have never felt so close to these soldiers. To Lynda VanDevanter, and William Eastlake, and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. All of America’s wars are different; they are also connected. And they connect us. *All* of us.

The author of four books, **ALEX VERNON** teaches American Literature and writing at Hendrix College. He is a Contributing Editor for **WLA**.