



TOM CRUISE as Ron Kovic.

Courtesy of Universal City Studios, Inc.

Oliver Stone's Film Adaptation of *Born on the Fourth of July* Redefining Masculine Heroism

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RON KOVIC'S *BORN ON THE Fourth of July*, published during America's bicentennial, is a bitterly ironic birthday present to his country. An inverted success story, Kovic's autobiography is "an extended attack upon the American society and American myths which in Kovic's view compelled him to go to Vietnam and to be permanently disabled" (McInerney 198). The author conceives of himself as the All-American Boy—literally born on the Fourth of July—a "Yankee Doodle Dandy" who wholeheartedly embraced small-town and working-class values like hard work, competition, sacrifice, duty. These components of heroic manhood are summed up in his declaration that "all his life he'd wanted to be a winner . . . to be the very best" (Kovic 186). The baseball field, the television set, and the movie house of small-town America made Kovic a true believer in this manly heroic ideal, and especially that version of it contained in war movies like *The Sands of Iwo Jima* and *To Hell and Back*, films which updated the American frontier myth: the archetypal American male as virtuous warrior heroically establishing civilization amid savagery. Kovic enlisted in the Marines and fought in Vietnam trying to fulfill that patriotic myth. His quest carried him into what John Hellman has called "a nightmare version of the landscapes of previous American myths," a

place where American assumptions and values were inverted (102).

Like others of his generation, Kovic discovered that the savagery he committed in Vietnam was not validated by civilization's progress, that he had become the enemy of the population he came to save, that he was the successor not to his "own mythic forebearers but rather to the Europeans against whom those forebearers defined themselves" (Hellman 110). Kovic's story dramatizes his failure to be an American hero and the failure of his generation to establish Kennedy's "new frontier" by re-enacting outside continental boundaries the traditional story which encodes America's understanding of its place in geography and history. Beginning and ending with the wound which paralyzed him in Vietnam, Kovic's cyclical narrative emphasizes an unjustifiable loss which is at once personal and national.

Oliver Stone's cinematic adaptation of the book (with Kovic as screenplay co-author), while faithful to the original is, nonetheless, more coherently focused and positively concluded. To those ends, new characters, episodes, and dialogue are added; the protagonist's development is clarified by a chronologically structured plot, and the theme is highlighted by an extended sexual trope. These alterations for the film emphasize Kovic's story as an escape from a spuriously defined masculinity underlying America's fundamental values and myths. On the whole, the film constitutes a more profound and comprehensive "attack on the authoritarian macho mentality that led us into Vietnam..." (Ansen 74). This sharper focus is maintained by a screenplay which restructures the original autobiography's bifurcated chronology into a three-act, linear narrative: the formation of Kovic's heroic masculine ideal in small-town America, its deformation in Vietnam service, then its reformation in the antiwar movement. Additionally, casting

Tom Cruise in Kovic's role guaranteed an audience for this iconoclastic theme and clarified that theme by trading on Cruise's all-American-boy image. As Stone said, "We wanted to show America, and Tom, and through Tom, Ron, being put in a wheelchair, losing their potency. We wanted to show America being forced to redefine its concept of heroism" (Chutkow H-9).

Understanding the cinematic reconstruction of Kovic's story begins with the adapters' decision to dwell on Kovic's war wound more as impotence than as paralysis. As Tom Cruise noted in an interview for *Playboy*: "With *Born*, I could feel the script in my balls" (Scheer 53). Certainly in the adaptation, Kovic's "outrage at losing his potency is more graphic and real to us than anything else" (Kael 123). Moreover, because Kovic's impotence is made synecdochic, the cinematic version takes on not just more poignancy and drama but more thematic richness than the printed text. In the film the Vietnam veteran's physical emasculation symbolizes psychological, political, and spiritual impotence as well—all ironic consequences of seeking manhood through duty to God and country. Although Hollywood film typically has made Vietnam War wounds "marks of equivocation, disillusion, and rage with war itself" (Auster & Quart 42), *Born on the Fourth of July* focuses on the one wound feared more than death itself—a living death. What is, in effect, the protagonist's castration makes terrifyingly concrete the Vietnam War's eradication of the American patriot's most basic means of establishing his identity and bequeathing a legacy of that self.

The film's retelling of Kovic's war story in sexual terms is so methodically developed as to constitute an elaborate objective correlative: specifically, the screenplay's alteration of love and lust interests for Kovic (Donna and the Mexican prostitutes); the expansion of Kovic's mother's role; and the frequency of explicit reference in vernacular dialogue to

various and numerous sexually charged activities to allegorize America's Vietnam experience as an act of love perverted into obscenity.

In sum, the film partially fictionalizes Kovic's non-fiction narrative, taking license with some biographical and historical facts in the interest of articulating more significant and moving conceptual truths about America's Vietnam involvement. The Stone/Kovic film of *Born on the Fourth of July* becomes the story of all America's boys who were seduced into the Vietnam War trying to fulfill their culture's myth of heroic manhood, who then were handicapped by confusing rules of engagement abroad and opposition to the war at home, and who were finally repatriated by joining the fight for peace. The film becomes the story of America's Vietnam soldier who, in a sense, died fighting an emasculating war in a foreign country and returned to be resurrected by fighting another for remasculinization within his own country. Thus, the cinematic retelling gives Kovic's personal odyssey great resonance, voicing the profound and multifaceted consequences of the Vietnam conflict while at the same time clarifying them and intensifying their emotional impact.

The film begins with the adult Kovic remembering his childhood as a masculine proving ground: A long shot tracks at a low angle on sun-dappled trees, gradually craning up and tilting down to a bird's-eye view of Ron Kovic as a boy in a World War II American Army helmet; meanwhile the mature Kovic's off-camera voice speaks for a generation as he recalls "it was a long time ago.... We turned the woods into a battlefield and dreamed that someday we would become men." The ensuing scene of prepubescent boys re-enacting their fathers' combat experiences undercuts that aspiration dramatically as surely as the stature-diminishing camera angle does perceptually: Young Kovic is ambushed, ending up on his back, covered with dirt, another boy

kneeling over him firing a toy pistol and shouting “You’re dead, Ronnie Kovic, and you know it,” while Kovic shakes his head and tries to rise from his premature burial.

From a high-angle close-up of young Kovic denying the death of his dream of becoming a man, Stone jumps to a completely black screen and then to a metaphorical match cut—a high-angle close-up of a pinwheeling firecracker exploding in the grass at a Fourth of July parade. This opening scene and its transition offer a condensed preview of the film’s narrative structure and paradoxical theme: It is the dramatic and visual equivalent of the poetic epigraph to Kovic’s book:

*I am the living death
the memorial day on wheels
I am your yankee doodle dandy
your John Wayne come home
your fourth of july firecracker
exploding in the grave (11)*

Just as the film’s opening prefigures the archetypal American boy’s emasculation and death, its concluding scene confirms his remasculinization and resurrection. This scene depicts Kovic’s most triumphant moment when he wheels himself out to address the 1976 Democratic National Convention as an antiwar spokesman. To emphasize this theme, Stone intercuts Kovic’s slow-motion progress toward the microphone with predominantly peaceful short-duration shots from Kovic’s youth—the family gathered around the television set in the living room, a kiss at the high school prom, a Little League game-winning homerun, as well as the war game. In other words, the film defines a man whose vision of himself has been shaped by more than dreams and nightmares of war. In fact, Kovic tells a reporter behind the scenes that “just lately I’ve felt like I’m home,

like we're home," and, as he moves toward a national audience to say what he has learned, he is bathed in an intensely bright light from above.

Growing up in the small town of Massapequa, New York, Kovic is told what it means to be a man, and he remains a true believer even though his faith is sometimes contradicted by childhood experience. The nation's heroic ideal of manhood is taught in the home and the school, over the airwaves and in the community's public celebrations. To become a man one must seek out physical competition, and through clean living, hard work, and self-sacrifice rise above suffering to attain victory confirmed by the applause of the crowd. The young Kovic acts out this scenario in ritualistic play: war games in the woods, Little League baseball, and high school wrestling. When the war game concludes with Kovic being declared a dead loser, he simply denies that result. Hitting a game-winning homerun in a Little League game, being held aloft and carried victorious from the field by his teammates to the accompaniment of wild cheering led by his father confirms for him the validity of this dream of manhood. As a child he has emulated the exploits of his hero, Mickey Mantle, and seems to have earned the New York Yankees' cap he receives as a birthday present on the Fourth of July. In the cultural mythos, Micky Mantle, John Wayne, and later John Kennedy are young Kovic's true fathers, more real than his own who is merely a supermarket clerk. As Hellman notes, Vietnam-era protagonists typically reject the father as a false parent associated with a failed present and identify with American heroic archetypes in an attempt to fulfill the mythic past by which the ideal American male defines himself (103-05).

But Kovic's faith in heroic manhood is tested as a member of the high school wrestling team. His coach articulates the destructive implications lurking within America's patriarchal definition of its ideal citizen: To be a winner, others must

be losers; to live fully, others must die; to be a man, others must be women. As the coach drives his boys mercilessly, he teaches them to fear compassion and failure as feminizing: "I want you to kill....Come on, Ladies. You got to suffer. The price of victory is sacrifice."

As a boy at home, Kovic hears the same doctrine of sacrifice used to define patriotism in President Kennedy's televised inaugural speech exhorting a new generation of Americans to whom the torch has been passed to "bear any burden, pay any price" in establishing the "new frontier." As Kovic's devout Roman Catholic mother listens to Kennedy, she tells Ron of her dream: "You were speaking to a large crowd, just like him, and you were saying great things." When as an adolescent, Kovic arrives home late from wrestling practice and refuses food in order to make his weight classification for the conference championship, his mother construes that sacrifice not just as manly or patriotic, but blessed.

However, as the coach's worst epithet, LADIES, suggests, this definition of heroic manhood in the service of God and country is a patriarchal ideal involving sexual domination and repression. When Kovic's mother finds *Playboy Magazine* in his room, she lashes out at him for "filthy, impure thoughts" and tells him "God is going to punish you." She demands he remove the magazine from the home and go to confession. Although Kovic is admired by women while growing up, he is taught to avoid their corrupting influence in order to become a man. When he is kissed by Donna, a young girl at the Fourth of July fireworks, he doesn't know if he likes it and abruptly tries to impress her by doing pushups. Later, at the baseball game and the wrestling match, Donna, like his mother, can only adore Kovic from the stands in the company of presumably lesser males. The blessed warrior hero may seek the approval of women but must remain separate from

them to avoid confusion about what he is. By adding Donna's role and expanding the mother's, the screenplay places new emphasis on the destructive nature of the heroic masculine ideal young Kovic inherits.

Despite pure thoughts, hard work, and self-sacrifice, Kovic fails to measure up to his ideal as an adolescent. While the book celebrates its attainment when he wins a Christmas wrestling tournament, the film depicts him as a loser. In the final seconds of his match for the conference championship, he struggles futilely against being pinned beneath a superior male—a position of humiliating defeat while family and friends urge him to do the impossible: to fight harder. As Kovic lies on his back, the humiliated and isolated victim of all he has been taught, listening to the outrage of the hometown crowd whose creed is threatened by his failure, Stone's camera work recalls and builds on the conclusion of the war game in the woods: close-up of Kovic being counted out by the referee, a high-angle medium shot of Kovic prostrate on the mat crying, and a slow zoom-in for a close-up of his face registering a defeat which this time he cannot deny before an impartial judge and sympathetic witnesses. It seems a metaphorical preview of America's Vietnam experience. Again the screen fades to black.

Although Kovic's dream of heroic manhood is nearly buried by this public mortification, that dream is resurrected in the next scene. With the screen dark as a grave, Stone initiates a sound overlap like the door of a burial crypt being opened; simultaneously he raises the light level to reveal two Marines marching into Kovic's high school auditorium on a recruiting visit. Speaking in a deep voice reminiscent of John Wayne, Sergeant Hayes confirms that there is still a place where boys can become men by fulfilling the American myth of the heroic warrior with a mission: "Just try thirteen weeks of hell at Parris Island, South Carolina.

You'll find out if you really are a man. We have never lost a war. We have always come when our country has called us.''

Childhood and adolescent experience seems to have shaken Kovic's faith in this cultural ideal, but his failure to live up to it in the war game or the wrestling arena only motivates him to accept a presumably more authentic, mature test of masculinity on the battlefield. It will take the Vietnam experience to disabuse Kovic and many of his generation of this anachronistic, naively arrogant, destructive definition of heroic manhood—to, as Stone would have it, emasculate them.

Earlier Stone's undercutting of the heroic view of masculinity which contributes to war is previewed in the Fourth of July parade which a young Ron Kovic views from atop his father's shoulders. During the celebration he comes face-to-face with the disabled veterans of America's previous wars: a man with no arms and a grief-stricken face unmollified by the crowd's cheers; a paralyzed Marine sergeant (played by the real Kovic) in a wheelchair who flinches at exploding firecrackers. The idea that sacrifice may be inglorious and that celebrating sacrifice may wound rather than heal lurks within the parade like a nightmare within the communal dream. But if the prepubescent Kovic is sobered by the horror of manly sacrifice at the parade, he is intoxicated again by his own heroic potential when he ferociously unwraps a birthday present from Donna—a real Yankees' baseball cap. When another boy steals the cap, Kovic is not confused about what he should do: rather than staying with Donna, he chases the boy, pursuing the symbol of heroic stature which he intends to earn.

He does, however, feel confusion between the myth of the heroic warrior and his attraction to Donna, an attraction he experiences on the night of the high school prom when he stays home to pack for boot camp. Although he tells his

parents he loves his country and is willing to die for it, in his room he confesses to God, "I'm so confused. Sometimes I think I just wanna stay here in Massapequa and never leave. But I gotta go." Torn between love of country which he has been taught to feel and love for Donna which he has come naturally to feel, he prays to make the right decision. Then, as if receiving divine guidance, he rushes through rain-soaked streets to the prom where he asks Donna to dance with him, kisses her lovingly, and clings to her tightly. As an adolescent awakening to his own repressed sexuality, Kovic feels sorrow at having to sacrifice his personal desires for conventional masculine obligations. Perhaps he imagines he can return to reclaim what he gives up, but the war will make that impossible.

The romantic prom scene poses an alternative to the dream of masculine identity achieved through war—maturing heterosexual love. Kovic's confusion of these two dreams of becoming a man is conveyed visually by Stone's establishing shot in-country. Fading from the scene of Kovic dancing with Donna to an eerie pink screen penetrated at the left edge by the silhouette of an erect column, the camera cranes down to a long shot of American soldiers marching toward us silhouetted against the dawn. A white subtitle identifies the location as the Cua Viet River, 1967. As the shot develops, our perception of the dark image on the left changes from phallic blade to war-ravaged tree in a barren but perversely beautiful wasteland. The dead and limbless trunk on the real battlefield comments ironically on the sun-dappled living trees of the Massapequa woods where Kovic played war as a boy. The dead tree also suggests comparison to the soldiers who share its shadowy ambiguity as creative or destructive forces. And, finally, the tree anticipates the soldiers' fates as amputees, KIAs, and burnt-out cases. Juxtaposed to the dream of love, the dream of war is a nightmare.

Kovic's war experience is dramatized and filmed so as to emphasize his confusion about what is manly, patriotic, and righteous. Instructed by his lieutenant, Sergeant Kovic stares hard at a Vietnamese village and tries to confirm that he sees VC with rifles. A point-of-view shot indicates he does not, but when pressed by the lieutenant, Kovic sees what he is told to see—just as if he were back home and being spoken to by his elders. Although he instructs his squad to hold their fire, they do not. Kovic excuses the firing to his lieutenant as “a possible accidental discharge, sir.” When Kovic leads a small detachment in to survey the damage, he discovers only mutilated women and children. Shocked and distraught that Marines under his command have killed those they sought to protect, Kovic tries to repair the irreparable when, suddenly, NVA troops overrun the village, reinforcing powerfully, once again, the ambiguity that faced American soldiers in Vietnam. His lieutenant pulls him away from the innocent victims, repeatedly telling Kovic the slaughter is not his fault and forcing him to retreat. Falling back, Kovic is blinded by the sun and fires three rounds into the silhouette of a soldier emerging over the crest of a dune above him; the soldier is one of his own Marines, Corporal Wilson, whose safety he had guaranteed just prior to the battle.

Stone films Kovic's failure to fulfill America's myth of the heroic warrior so as to intensify his and the audience's confusion and shock. First, inside one village hootch, as the soldiers realize what they have done, Stone uses a hand-held camera, zip pans, and a series of quick cuts before the content curve. The effect is a physically felt destabilization of the soldiers' sense of who they are and what their mission has been. It is the visual equivalent of one Marine's incredulous, “Motherfucker, we wasted them.” Second, when Kovic accidentally shoots Corporal Wilson, Stone photographs it from Kovic's point of view in slow and then

in fast motion. The scene concludes with a slow zoom from a long to a full shot of Kovic on his hands and knees silhouetted against a pink sunset. Consequently, Stone makes us share Kovic's sudden panic at feeling overrun, his gradual realization of his mistake, and his frantic confirmation of having murdered a fellow patriot. Finally, in the color and shadow of the Cua Viet River establishing shot which introduced Vietnam as the authentic test of heroic manhood, we witness Kovic's grief at having failed.

Although Kovic is willing to accept responsibility and make amends for the "accidental discharges" which have murdered Vietnamese civilians and a fellow Marine, his commanding officers will not permit him to do so. His lieutenant will not let Kovic risk his life by treating a dying baby and absolves him of blame. Similarly, Kovic's repeated attempts to confess shooting Corporal Wilson are denied by his executive officer who threatens him with violence.

Guilt thus compels Kovic to find his own penance, once again victimizing himself by acting out the myth of the heroic warrior. In January 1968 near the DMZ he has his chance. As American infantry sweep through an open field, Sergeant Kovic's black machine gunner introduces the redemptive mission with a string of thematically appropriate profanity: "I'm gonna kill me some motherfuckin' gooks....This must be hell.... Where the motherfuckin' devil?" As they are ambushed and Kovic is literally shot in his Achilles' heel, he reacts in similarly realistic, if offensive, language: "Son of a bitch! Fuck, man!" Despite his wound, Kovic rises again and, as he later describes it, plays "John Fuckin' Wayne" by recklessly exposing himself to fire. This time Stone shows Kovic's paralyzing second wound in slow motion complete with blood spray and a death-rattling gurgle, intercut by a sharply contrastive, almost subliminally short flashback to the childhood war

game. The black medic who evacuates the nearly dead Kovic under fire chants the final commentary on this scene like a perverted litany: "Motherfucker, motherfucker, motherfucker."

Each of these monologues seems designed to do more than merely illustrate that soldiers talk dirty. The characters' sexually charged profanity works in concert with the film's images to elaborate upon the theme of emasculation. For example, the wound which concludes Kovic's participation in the Vietnam War is graphically depicted as a bloody penetration which serves as incremental repetition of the two earlier scenes ending in flat-on-the-back submission and failure, one concluding the war game and one the wrestling match. Ironically, the child's dream of becoming a man which his culture has provided has unmanned him. Very subtly, Stone's realistic dialogue suggests his meaning at another, deeper level. The confusion of righteousness, patriotism, and manliness (which constitutes the most comprehensive version of the American male's dream of heroism turned nightmare) is amply illustrated in the language and imagery of sexual taboo to create an elaborate objective correlative for Kovic's war experience. They seem designed to shock the film's audience into feeling as well as apprehending the destruction of America's heroic masculine ideal in Vietnam.

Kovic's emasculation in Vietnam nearly kills him. He is given the last rites of the Roman Catholic Church by a chaplain in a field hospital but refuses to actually die. Evacuated back to the States and consigned to a living death as a castrated loser in what Stone pictures as a patriarchal culture intolerant of anything less than clearly winning—either the war or the peace—he begins a long, slow process of trying to resurrect himself as a man.

In the Bronx Veterans Hospital, physicians tell Kovic what he has lost is irretrievable: he will never walk; he will

never have children. Initially, Kovic refuses to accept what the war has made of him. In a dream he rises from his wheelchair, walks and then runs from his fellow disabled veterans in the hospital. But in actuality, he only drags himself around the hospital on crutches. "Walking from midchest. Semper Fi, Motherfucker. It can be done," he exclaims proudly before falling to fracture one of his legs and end forever the dream of holding himself erect and walking again.

Meanwhile the hospital staff mock what Stone portrays as Kovic's naively heroic attitude. As the orderly extracts an enema tube from Kovic he jokes, "my man, Kovic, it's the Fourth of July" then makes a popping sound with a finger inside his cheek. Kovic's physical therapist, Willie, tells him "you so gung ho you don't know shit about what's goin' on in this country. It's a revolution goin' on. If you aren't part of the solution, you part of the problem." When Kovic calls out to his nurse (appropriately enough named Washington) that he is tired of lying in his own wastes and he wants her to treat him like a human being because he fought for his country, she replies "don't you raise your voice to me, Mr. Kovic." Finally, an orderly tells Kovic that he doesn't "give a shit about Vietnam; you can take Vietnam and shove it" Again, this speech is more than merely talking dirty. The excremental language in these hospital scenes suggests metaphorically that Kovic slowly is being purged of his notion that he is a man because he made an heroic sacrifice for which his country is grateful. This is a lesson which he is taught primarily by Black men and women, other victims, Stone implies, of American patriarchal domination whose weakness and dependency Kovic's physical wound compels him to share. Although he remains prowar even in the VA hospital, it is there that he experiences how it feels to be helpless, like a woman or boy, in a society dominated by the kind of macho man he

has dreamed of being. Ultimately, this combination of physical and psychic wounding forces Kovic to begin to question his attitude toward the war and to redefine what it means to be a man in America.

Back in Massapequa, Kovic's confidence that his sacrifice has been worthwhile is further undercut in Stone's film. At a Fourth of July parade welcoming him home as a hero, he witnesses that the war itself has come home. Along the street some spectators smile and give him a thumbs-up sign, but others shake their heads in disbelief or give him the finger. Thus, Kovic's secret knowledge that he is no hero is given public expression by some hometown Americans. The smoky parade route itself literally becomes a battlefield between marchers and spectators—mirroring the Vietnam veteran's own internal turmoil. Later during the celebration Kovic has a flashback so realistic that he is unable to complete his speech echoing the clichés of the World War II veteran who precedes him. And that evening Kovic confesses to his fellow veteran and best childhood friend, Timmy, that his failure to meet the test of manhood in Vietnam has compromised his beliefs. "I made terrible mistakes. I was castrated that day because I was so stupid....I'd give everything I believe in to be whole again."

In the autobiography, Kovic's rehabilitation includes attending college, but in the film he visits Donna at Syracuse University; this change develops the film's link between physical and political impotence. Discovering that Donna has become an antiwar activist, Kovic sees that renewing his love for her is as impossible as climbing the stairs to her dormitory in his wheelchair. Then, at an antiwar demonstration on campus, he realizes that the country to which he has returned has changed as much as the girl he planned to come back to and love forever: he witnesses a Black veteran throw away medals won in Vietnam; he is clubbed by a

policeman while in his wheelchair; he is forcibly separated from Donna as the war at home escalates. This new episode demonstrates Kovic's discovery that being a disabled Vietnam veteran is no protection against being regarded a traitor merely for exercising his right of free assembly; it confirms his political impotence.

Returning to Massapequa, Kovic is so obsessed with grieving for what he has lost that he can find no way to recover. Coming home drunk one night, he quarrels bitterly with his mother. This amplified scene dramatizes the clearest and most emotionally charged connection between physical, political, and spiritual impotence that is the consequence of the American soldier's Vietnam service. In an interview for *American Film* Ron Kovic noted that it was "the most difficult scene in the movie—for all of us, not just myself, for all the actors and actresses" (Seidenberg 31). In the scene, Kovic removes the crucifix from the living room wall and tells his mother bluntly that he is a nonbeliever, that America's holy war against communism in Vietnam was all a lie, that he killed women and children, and that she is to blame because of what she taught him. This dramatic confrontation is couched in language clearly calculated to shock an audience into feeling as well as understanding the humiliation, pain, and outrage of the Vietnam veteran who is in every conceivable sense of the word disabled precisely because he attempted to fulfill his country's ideal of heroic manhood. "Stone has never been a feel-good director, has never shrunk from assaulting the sensibilities of his audiences. He likes to make them squirm before the bad and the ugly, forcing them to look when they'd prefer to avert their eyes" (Biskind 63). Here the film's perhaps most painfully protracted and offensive dialogue defines Kovic's—and by extension, America's—Vietnam involvement as an ideal-shattering obscenity.

Targeting the political, religious, and sexual sensibilities of his viewers, Stone in this scene clearly means to drive home his point that Kovic's loss represents the loss of all purpose and belief. In rage, Kovic tells his mother that she needs help with her God and her dreams, that all is a lie, and that God is as dead as Kovic's dead legs, as dead as his dead sex organs. This furious and accusatory exchange between Kovic and his mother results in her expelling him from the house.

Ironically, Kovic's banishment from home is the familial equivalent of the "my country, love it or leave it" ultimatum repeatedly directed at war protesters. When Kovic's father puts him to bed that night he asks his son what he wants. Kovic replies, "I want to be a man again," then asks, "Who's gonna love me?" In the film adaptation, then, Kovic's losing the love of his girlfriend and his mother is the immediate dramatic equivalent of having lost the love of his country. Tragically, he has become an object of pity or contempt in seeking the approval of others in ways those others prescribed. In the film, as in the book, Kovic goes into self-imposed exile in Mexico in an attempt to recover a manhood which will allow him to be loved. Again, this quest is articulated in sexual terms.

South of the border, he meets a legion of Vietnam veterans who, like Kovic, are self-banished from their mother country. Stone's visual introduction of this sequence suggests that this exile is a doomed search, one equivalent to that for manhood in Vietnam. Stone begins with a flashback to the pink sky and dunes along the beach where Kovic unintentionally helped murder women and children and accidentally shot Corporal Wilson; then, following a match-cut to another beach, the camera tracks and pans to a complex of thatched huts identified as Villa Dulce, Mexico, 1970. Here veterans are drinking, playing poker, and fondling prostitutes: acting out the grown-up, peace-

time version of the debilitating macho definition of manhood they accepted when they went to war. As Kovic enters the group, another veteran refers to them all reductively and intentionally, offensively remarking, “just what we need around here, another limp dick.” A burnt-out case named Charlie introduces Kovic to the scene, implying that sexual activity can still console the impotent Vietnam veteran and purge him of bitterness. His advice for dealing with Mexican prostitutes seems a black humorist foreshadowing of Kovic’s rehabilitative triumph as the veterans’ antiwar spokesman at the 1976 Democratic National Convention: “If you don’t have it in the hips, you better have it in the lips.”

Briefly, Kovic is able to convince himself that he is still a man by consorting with whores, but that too is a lie, a trick which grows increasingly obvious. Vietnam flashbacks prevent Kovic from sustaining the illusion of potency, and eventually the prostitutes openly laugh at Charlie who thought he had found paradise in a whorehouse. When Kovic accompanies Charlie, searching for a new paradise where they might be regarded as men again, Charlie becomes so abusive that the driver abandons both veterans in their wheelchairs in a desert. This scene, added by Stone, illustrates the futility of the Vietnam veteran’s attempt to regain his manhood in exile. Nearly inarticulate by this time, the two ex-patriot veterans argue in sexual and scatological obscenities who is the better man as measured by the Vietnam experience:

Charlie: Fuck ’em. Fuck the Mexicans. Fuck the gooks. Fuck ’em all....You ever have to kill little gook babies? I’ll bet you was never ordered to kill little gook babies.

Kovic: Leave me the fuck alone. Maybe I killed more babies than you did.

Charlie: You ever look at yourself in a mirror? You better than us? You a hero? Shit, Kovic, you wasn't even there.

As the argument develops, the two circle one another in their wheelchairs. Moving closer and closer until they stare into each other's face as if into a mirror, they drag one another down and roll over and over fighting to exhaustion in an orgy of self-destruction. This time Kovic's wrestling match has no referee, no spectators, no winner. It is a *reductio ad absurdum* of the notion of heroic manhood which first seduced the two combatants into Vietnam. Charlie is what Kovic will become unless he can answer the question he asked when abandoned in the desert: "How are we gonna get out of here?"

Kovic does go home again: rescued from the desert by an anonymous "good Samaritan, the wounded veteran repatriates himself (and symbolically other veterans) by apprehending new ways to be a man. In a scene added to the film Kovic goes to Venus, Georgia—Corporal Wilson's home town. Stopping in the cemetery at Wilson's grave is like visiting his own tomb: As Kovic approaches, Stone's camera gives slow-motion point-of-view shot tracking in to a close-up of the headstone, then a reverse-angle close-up of Kovic. While this visual is held in a long take, there is a voice-over flashback of Kovic's pre-battle conversation reassuring Wilson and his post-battle conversation angering the executive officer who did not allow him to take responsibility for Wilson's death. In effect, Kovic is visiting the grave of his own buried manhood. He resurrects himself when he goes to Wilson's home to confess.

The Wilsons' living room is a war shrine filled with mementos of the family's long history of patriotic combat. Mr. Wilson describes his son's glorious funeral and Colonel Moore's letter indicating how Wilson distinguished himself in the fight and died quickly. But a close-up of the wall clock indicates time has run out for these anachronistic clichés of heroic manhood. It is the mother who admits "of course, we never really knew what happened." As Kovic confesses to Wilson's family, he experiences a Vietnam flashback in black and white. His grief-wracked, tear-stained, eye-witness account drains all the color from their illusion of American boys as heroic warriors. Kovic strips away the lies that make it easier for parents to sacrifice their sons: they killed babies; he wasn't Wilson's friend because they didn't talk to new guys much; the battle was confusing, crazy; by accident, he killed Wilson who had fallen behind in the retreat.

The women of the family acknowledge his confession. Wilson's widow tells Kovic that she can never forgive him but perhaps God can. Wilson's mother says simply, "We understand the pain that you been goin' through, Ron." Wilson's father sits in stunned silence, his family's notion, his country's notion of heroic manhood called into doubt by what Kovic experienced in Vietnam.

But Kovic is remasculinized, repatriated, and resurrected by his confession, as Stone's camera work and editing suggest. Kovic's departure from Wilson's home is captured in a crane shot which slowly rises above Wilsons' front yard littered with generations of cast-off junk and up through brown autumn leaves clinging to a tree in the foreground. A sound overlap of the song, "When Johnny Comes Marching Home," begins and continues as a large American flag is superimposed over the tree. This tree is more like the sun-dappled, green-leaved tree of Kovic's youth than the ravaged battlefield tree in Vietnam: this tree

is mature, and although dormant, not dead. Rising above the guilt, Kovic has begun the process of regaining his manhood, his patriotism, and his life by coming home to admit the truth of what he did in Vietnam, to take responsibility for it, and to communicate that to fellow Americans who must share that responsibility. What Kovic learned during his exile in Mexico is that "if you don't have it in the hips, you better have it in the lips." Now he sets out to fulfill an alternative, non-violent dream of manhood bequeathed by his mother before the Vietnam War: to speak to a large crowd just like the President and to say great things. The scene which follows literalizes the sound overlap: Vietnam veterans marching home again to protest against the war at the 1972 Republican National Convention in Miami. The camera provides a long shot of the American flag waving, then tilts down to a high angle and zooms in to Kovic in his wheelchair serving as flag bearer in the parade. The flagstaff rests in Kovic's crotch; he and his fellow veterans chant, "one, two, three, four /we don't want your fucking war." The shot defines Vietnam veterans' political activism as regained potency. This metaphor is extended visually as Kovic and two other veterans in wheelchairs break into the Convention Hall without credentials and disrupt President Nixon's acceptance speech. As Kovic speaks before the cameras, he rises from his wheelchair and holds himself erect with indignation. For thirty seconds the image of Ron Kovic replaces the image of the President on the huge TV monitor in the Convention Hall. Those Americans who are most supportive of the Vietnam War are forced to listen to the militant casualties of that conflict. A changed Kovic disputes the creed he was taught:

We were lied to, tricked into going. They say if you don't love America, get out; well, we love

America, but I can't begin to tell you how the leadership of this country sickens me. The government is a bunch of corrupt thieves....The truth is they have killed a whole generation of young Americans....We are never going to let the people of the United States forget this war. We are your Yankee Doodle Dandy come home.

The film makes opposing the war in 1972 the patriotic equivalent of fighting it in 1967. Kovic and his fellow veterans are forced to retreat from the convention hall by security. They are betrayed and attacked by police disguised as fellow veterans. As this scene unfolds outside, Stone crosscuts to inside the convention hall where the President shamelessly lies to the American people. Inside, the huge television monitor displays Nixon's image urging Americans to "give the veterans the respect they deserve" while outside they are being beaten and arrested. When Kovic is assaulted by an undercover policeman who wants to kill him for being a traitor, he is rescued by veterans in a scene resembling his evacuation from Vietnam. But the sense of *déjà vu* ends there. This time, Kovic's rehabilitation is managed by fellow veterans, not unsympathetic bureaucrats. Within minutes, he is medically evaluated, restored to his wheelchair, receives a situation report, and rallies his troops to retake the hall. At home, the veterans regain self-respect by becoming guerrilla fighters in what Stone pictures as a new American Revolution, attempting to wrest power from an increasingly remote and corrupt political establishment.

Unlike the autobiography, which ends as it began with Kovic's being wounded, the cinematic adaptation concludes in 1976 at the Democratic National Convention in New York City, when veterans speaking through Ron Kovic are depicted as true patriots trying to restore democracy at home rather than impose it abroad. This convention scene

opens with a speech by New York's Congressman Dellums on the huge television monitor. Dellums, a Black man, describes the Democratic party as returning America to its heritage by reaching out to include rich and poor, White and Black, men and women. Joining this cause, Kovic and other Vietnam Veterans Against the War are resurrected as redemptive heroes: enlightened by the Vietnam experience, they awaken, Stone suggests, fellow citizens to the folly and waste of violently imposing the American frontier myth upon an alien culture. In helping to repatriate other disenfranchised citizens as well as themselves, they exemplify the Vietnam veteran as a reformed warrior hero: one committed less to the conventionally masculine attitude that there are things worth dying for than to the conventionally feminine one that there are things worth living for (Jeffords 74). Having suffered betrayal, victimization, and loss of esteem by acting as the violent instruments of a patriarchal myth, they have acquired a chastened, matured, broadened conception of what it means to be a man.

In *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*, Susan Jeffords argues that most Vietnam War literature can be read as favoring a return to traditional roles which serve the interests of patriarchy. Strikingly, Oliver Stone's adaptation of Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* seems an exception. The film's transformation of a static circular plot into a linear one which emphasizes the protagonist's being forced to redefine his manhood, its expansion of female roles, its addition of unconventionally heroic episodes like the visit to Corporal Wilson's family and the address at the 1976 political convention, and its development of an extended sexual trope in both dialogue and image—all provoke re-evaluation of the heroic masculine ideal inherited from America's frontier history. Rather than polarizing traditional gender constructions, this film blurs

them; rather than celebrating patriarchal domination over “feminized” others, it expands upon the disastrous consequences of such domination for both sexes; rather than reaffirming the American frontier myth as a license to commit violence abroad, the film redefines the myth as a mission to extend a non-violent political franchise at home. In these ways, the film version of *Born on the Fourth of July* is revolutionary. Oliver Stone’s film, in its troubling language and powerfully evocative cinematography, as well as in its aggressive sexual metaphors, works to incorporate America’s painful legacy of Vietnam not only into a mythic past but also into an ameliorated future.

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