

Fathers, Sons, and Vietnam: Masculinity and Betrayal in the Life Narratives of Vietnam Veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder¹

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Vietnam, it has been said, was first and foremost a division of sons from their fathers. It “made a whole generation of fathers look like liars and betrayers, and a whole generation of sons victims of their own initiation” into manhood.² Symbolically, Vietnam represented the end of World War II warfare, the end of the United States’ “winning streak,” and perhaps, the end of traditional masculinity in America. After Vietnam, American society was still a patriarchal system but, according to Boose, “with an unoccupied and no longer occupiable center.”³ She elaborated, “chronologically bracketed by the assassination of the national father at one end, marked by the forced retirement of his successor at the middle, and culminating in the disgraced resignation, a few steps ahead of impeachment, of the final father of the era.” The Vietnam war resulted in the “literal and symbolic evacuation of authority.” The office of the Presidency was disempowered, the 1950s political ideology of consensus dissolved,⁴ and the authority of the father and his military model was morally challenged.⁵ In this “crisis of credibility,” traditional hierarchies of authority and meaning crumbled under the weight of Vietnam and the ensuing social unrest.⁶

In this paper, I will illustrate this shift in traditional masculinity and patriarchal authority in the life narratives of specific Vietnam veterans by analyzing lengthy taped interviews in which they discuss their experiences. These men’s narratives document the prevalence of World War II models in the lives and

images of their fathers in demonstrating how manhood was to be achieved. However, the cultural models of patriarchal authority in America did not match these men's combat experience or help them come to terms with the public perception of Vietnam and their roles as warriors. Indeed, when they looked to the images of war and its attendant male adulthood, the social definitions of masculinity, soldier, breadwinner, and family man often represented elusive ideals that only contributed to a sense of failure and unattainable manhood. By comparing these Vietnam veterans' expectations with their own life experiences, the differences become more apparent. Thus, through a gendered cultural analysis of these men's narratives, I argue that the shift in notions of masculinity can be traced and the lack of supportive cultural resources for a more progressive masculine ideal identified. As one veteran said, "nothing makes sense anymore."

When I came back from the war I was a different person than I was when I went to the war. . . . Everything had changed in terms of the way I looked at the world, I guess. . . . [It] didn't make sense anymore. Nothing makes sense anymore. Still doesn't make sense anymore for me. I've got two ways to go. I can either play that it's honorable to go and kill people and to come back into this side, and have that be an honorable thing, or I can be my real self, and reject society, and say that's not acceptable—that you're all crazy. The world's crazy. And I know that because I went to this war and the rest of you haven't been to that war, if you've been there, you'll know. So, it's kind of like a rock and a hard spot. . . . I'm not saying that society is all crazy and bad, you know, although, the world is crazy, very crazy (Marty).⁷

The data on which this study is based are drawn from intensive interviews with Vietnam combat veterans and participant observation on a PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) unit of a Veteran's Administration Hospital in the midwest.⁸ During the spring of 1991, one half of the inpatient unit's population--15 veterans--were interviewed one to four times each, and were observed in a variety of hospital settings. In addition, I interviewed hospital staff, sat in on staff meetings, and had access to autobiographies written by the veterans as they entered the hospital. All the patients were Vietnam veterans and one was also a Gulf War veteran. All but one of the men interviewed were white—one of whom was part Native American—and one was African American. The veterans ranged in age from 38 to 47 years and all were from midwestern states.

The veterans' retellings provide the narratives for this analysis. As Denzin asserts, a "life is a social text, a fictional narrative production."⁹ Indeed, telling one's life story is an imaginative enterprise that creatively organizes experiences, events, feelings, and actions. Like other literary traditions, it follows a genre that

is founded on a notion of coherence and directional evolution. Additionally, narratives are an interactive process. The veterans used the cultural conventions of storytelling to construct personal narratives that reflected their historical era and its cultural assumptions. “The culture ‘speaks itself’ through each individual’s story” and reveals the normative conventions of the social context of the teller.¹⁰ It makes known the available social and cultural resources from which such narratives can be created. In fact, it is the “performative and narrative” resources that make an event “storyable;” without appropriate raw materials stories remain untold.¹¹ “There are socially specific models for telling the story of one’s growing up or of one’s making an important decision . . . [and there are] advantages to be reaped if one abides by these rules and the price to be paid if one does not.”¹² These social templates for narratives constrain the individual story; within these parameters, the social structures are also laid bare. Narratives of compliance as well as rebellion are “responses to the system in which they originate and thus reveal its dynamics.”¹³ Life stories, then, provide a view of individuals and the society within which the narrators act out their lives.

Unfulfilled Manhood

In the midst of the social turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s, the Vietnam veterans returned to a society that had rendered them “mute and invisible”—silent reminders of what had occurred. Reflected at the core of Vietnam narratives was “a loss of power which had been an assumed privilege of white American manhood.”¹⁴ Narratives of the veterans pour forth a personal sense of division of self and feelings of traumatic separation from both their former selves and society in general.¹⁵ Revulsion at Vietnam and all it stood for countered conventional manhood.¹⁶ As such, the cultural expulsion of traditional masculinity, symbolized in the “father,” did not “liberate the sons” but “stamped them with the intensity of a generation stuck in its own boyhood and now playing out, with increasing violence, an unconscious cultural myth that attempts to recover the father.”¹⁷ Indeed, Jeffords argued in her book, *The Remasculinization of America*, that the central project of all the cultural representations of the Vietnam war was to reclaim a dominant position for traditional manhood and reinvigorate the patriarchal system of power relations.¹⁸ Gender interests, she claimed, were at the heart of the “discourse of warfare.” The “arena of warfare and the Vietnam war in particular are not just fields of battle but fields of gender.”¹⁹

Returning from Vietnam to social and cultural silence denied any recognition of the manhood that the veterans had sought in combat. The lack of acknowledgment of their masculine status had two specific effects on the men of this study. First, it suspended them in their adolescence and left their manhood unfulfilled. And they were left to fall back into teenage means (acts of bravado and anti-social behavior) for proving themselves—yet with an increased capacity and skill for violence. Second, it constituted them “in the role of Other in patriarchy.”²⁰ They

could no longer exercise an assumed privilege of maleness. They were banished to the margins of society. “Like women, after the war [veterans] were both part of the system (soldiers, of course *were* the war) and excluded from it, ironically acting in history but muted, for ten years, in the official discourse about that history.”²¹ In both these ways, the veterans had become socially unmanly—an adolescent Other. They found themselves stranded somewhere between who they once were and who, after Vietnam, they could never be. They lived in a nebulous state of unfulfilled manhood, where traditional means of attainment had been invalidated and their strivings to regain this loss were manifested in forms that I characterize as “toxic masculinity.”

Fathers and Sons

The life narratives of Vietnam veterans provide a useful site to trace the shift from traditional idealized male authority—the statuses of a combat soldier, the breadwinner-provider, and the family patriarch. Remembrances of their own fathers and their own early view of what men should do and be delineate the notions of male adulthood that they had internalized. In comparing their youthful expectations and ideals with their later life experience, the shifting models of manhood can be more readily seen. None of the status or economic rewards that were bestowed on their World War II fathers were available for those returning from Vietnam. This change in the requirements for male social esteem left these veterans bereft in their adolescence—marginalized social Others.

The distinct rupture point of Vietnam clearly demarcated these veterans’ lives and erased most notions of continuity. Thus, conceptually, Vietnam represented the turning point—it was a shift that took place processually, constituting its own “substory” in the life narrative. For many men, entering the military had been an attempt to achieve a cultural standard of “manhood.” These veterans had experienced youthful ideas of male adulthood through the lives of their fathers; Fathers “invoked the ideal of manliness” for their sons.²² The father’s manhood was absolute; the son’s was yet to be attained. These men had struggled to understand their fathers as models of what it meant to be a man. Seeking their fathers’ approval and respect, the veterans aspired to achieve the symbolic bestowal of their own manhood. Meanwhile, the veterans excused their fathers’ violent behavior toward the family and attributed the paternal brutality to their own youthful inadequacies. Since the father embodied masculinity, his actions were not questioned—whereas the son’s manhood was always in doubt. Outside the family, the men’s first steps toward manhood had revolved around finding steady employment and the motorcycles and cars they were able to buy. When these failed to gain the respect of the father, they then turned to the military to “make men” of them, some specifically joining the marines to be “tougher” military men than their fathers had been. They often subsequently volunteered for combat duty—since, from their perspective, warfare provided the ultimate

proving ground of masculinity and male adulthood. For it was within “the brotherhood of war” that the son could become the “equal to the father,” who then became his symbolic brother.²³

The veterans of this study had spent their youth within the post World War II culture. Amid the cultural heroism, the political consensus, and the economic boom, these men absorbed the social narratives of the time. Their own stories of childhood reflected and “spoke” this culture. They also revealed the shifting male conventions from the traditional, warrior model of manhood to the modern, bureaucratic conception that necessitates monetary and career success. Paramount in their personal narratives was the desire to achieve a comfortable and familiar masculine identity. Many of their accounts seemed prefigured with generalizations about male behavior.

Growing up in the post World War II United States, these men were consequently presented with an idealized nuclear family and separate spheres of interaction and identity for men and women. Coontz asserts that “the 1950s was a profamily period if there ever was one.”²⁴ She contends that the fifties were also unlike any decade previously with regard to the promotion of the nuclear family. Far from being the last decade of *the* traditional family, it was the *only* such decade. During this unique time, gender roles were tightly enforced, most pointedly within the family.

Husbands and wives are here seen as living separate—almost secret—lives, neither being able to enter properly into the other’s world: the wife will know little or nothing of her husband’s job and social life, the husband will take not responsibility for the housework or childcare. . . . This rigid division between the activities of the husband and wife cannot but make for an empty and uninspiring relationship.²⁵

Such a separation of gender spheres required the absence of male adults from childcare, which left young boys to identify with an *image* of male adulthood, rather than the *presence* of a paternal individual.²⁶ These rigid distinctions between gender cultures, coupled with the notion that masculinity is often considered a “relational construct”—that is, more about what one should *not* do, than what one should do—also increased the social pressure to conform, albeit to an absent and idealized model.²⁷

Idealized Fathers and Abusive Men

The role fathers play in gender identity acquisition is still debated in the psychological literature. “Disagreements arise over whether the acquisition of sex-identity and sex-typed behaviors is a function of identification or imitation and over whether reinforcement and punishment or cognitively based autono-

mous motivation promote the development of sex-identity and sex-typing.”²⁸ Nevertheless, for young men growing up in the 1950s, their fathers were the primary models of male adulthood and families constituted the fundamental setting for learning “how to do gender.”²⁹

The 1950s orientation toward opposing gender roles is strikingly consistent with the remembrances of these veterans. The internalized gender models for the behavior of adult males and, specifically, fathers is a prominent and consistent theme in their narratives. The veterans’ retellings reflected the cultural expectations and rigid stereotypes of their youth. For example, Chris offered this gendered representation of his father: “My father was the kind of man who went to work in the morning and came home in the afternoon, okay. Every day, five days a week and sometimes six days, ‘cause he worked some overtime.” This cultural model may also have affected the way in which the memories were structured—fathers were remembered for their “traditional” behaviors, whereas the memories of their fathers engaging in less idealized behaviors may have been buried deeper or at least not volunteered. The “good father” description was always offered first, as Walter’s narrative illustrated. “My dad and I, I remember as a little kid, we were real close. I remember him coming home from work from the mines and he had a candy bar for me or something like that.”

However, as Walter continued to describe his father, he let us know that the “good father” was only the father of his early youth. “He was a chemist and he was a truck driver. He would work extra even in the mines so we’d have a place to live, a nice house. And . . . he’d take me out to target shoot a 22 rifle. And different things, you know. And all of a sudden, he got in the bar business, and everything, life changed.” With further discussion, Walter continued to loosen the idealized version of his father with which he had begun. “And a lot of times he would stay after the bar’s long closed and drank with people. And you know, I remember how, his violent temper stuff, and his violence towards me, I mean, he’d hit me real hard with his fists or slapped me or hit me with a belt.”

As the veterans’ oral narratives unfolded, they portrayed a contradictory and less idealized view of their fathers. Many of these fathers were violent, strict, authoritarian men with alcohol problems who believed hard work was the best way to raise their sons. Hillman suggests that these “destructive” fathers destroy their sons’ idealized view of not only their fathers, but of themselves as well.³⁰ These narratives revealed the son’s continuing struggle to balance between an idealized view and his lived experience. Of all the veterans interviewed only one, Tommy, did not remember suffering at the hand of an abusive father.

In contrast to their fathers’ behaviors, these veterans’ childhoods were also imbued with their father’s military glories. Growing up with fathers who had served or continued to serve their country, these young boys were also given a heroic picture of military duty. In the years following the “good war”—World War II—military service was seen as a natural rite of passage from boyhood to manhood. War movies of the era portrayed “war as a crucial ritual transition from

male adolescence into manhood.”³¹ Men who had served held a place of social esteem and were rewarded for their contribution to “the American way of life” and to “keeping America free.” Nationally, this social gratitude and status was operationalized with “broad readjustment benefits” made available by the federal government to *all* returning veterans.³² MacPherson has noted that Vietnam veterans were “marked” by their fathers’ World War II memories and that if Vietnam had occurred later in time, so that the fathers would have been Korean veterans, the “blind patriotism” would have been less pronounced, thus, being less likely to motive young men to glamorize combat and enlist.³³

However, many of these fathers were remembered by their sons not simply according to the social myth of military men as heroic, stalwart protectors of society, but as violent, unhappy men, many of whom had problems with alcohol. Their sons grew up with the idealized picture of the good soldier “doing his duty for God and country” while often simultaneously experiencing a reality of physically and emotionally abusive veteran fathers. Dan proudly mentioned that his father still carried scrap metal from the war—“Dad was a WWII metal wearer”—which prompted both he, his brother, and two sisters to all enlist in military service. In addition to having credited the father with the financial well being and geographic location of their youth, the father’s violence and anger (or lack of it) seemed to set the emotional tone of the home.

Following the Patterns of the Father

Several factors played a role in these veterans’ decisions to enter the military. Of the fifteen men interviewed, only Bill was drafted. All of the others made a conscious choice to join the service. Many joined for job training and employment. MacPherson notes that many blue-collar young men enlisted with a sense of inevitability—if they didn’t enlist they would be drafted.³⁴ One veteran remembered military recruiters stressing that enlistment was a “career” move toward job skills and training, whereas the draft meant Vietnam and combat. Tommy, however, dropped out of school specifically to go into the army to fight in Vietnam.

It’s just the way they [returning Vietnam veterans] looked . . . a thousand yard stare and stuff, stare and uh the way they treated people and acted. And I thought “I need to be like that.” They were, they’d changed. Life for them had changed. Vietnam had changed them. I seen great men that I respected, that went as kids. . . . And I thought that’d be great. And I was already patriotic as hell (Tommy).

His family supported his decision and he remembered his Native American grandfather’s advice, “If you want to become a warrior, be good, be a good one.”

So Tommy set out to make his grandfather proud, going to “jump school” and “ranger school,” doing everything he could to be a good warrior. Though Tommy’s focus in joining the service specifically to go to Vietnam was not universal in this sample, his need to uphold family honor or to prove worthy of family pride was shared by others.

Within the veterans’ recollections, family honor and pride took two forms. One was the need to carry on traditions of the male family members’ previous military participation. Lewis suggests that understandings of war are generated most commonly through conversation and the “responsibility for explaining and justifying the necessity of war devolved upon close male kin, predominately the father.”³⁵ Ramsey wrote in his autobiography, “I felt patriotic and wanted to serve my country just as my father and grandfather before me.” David echoed these same sentiments, explaining that he entered the service, “[be]cause like my grandpa was in World War I, my Dad was in World War II.” Some, like Dan and John, even enlisted in the same branch of the service in which their fathers and grandfathers had served. The majority of these men had fathers who had served during World War II, which added another dimension to, and reinforced, their perception of military life, patriotism, and family honor. Since there was “evidence enough in the form of medals, honors, recognition, jobs, education, and success for those who served, popular expectations have reinforced the military’s role as patriarch under whose influence and discipline a doubtless man emerges.”³⁶ And World War II veterans had garnered the greatest amount of social rewards for their service. As Dean asserts, they were “the *exception*, not the *rule* in the history of American veterans.”³⁷ They were welcomed back with broad readjustment benefits for all veterans, not just the disabled. This was not the case for all other American veterans, from the Civil War through Vietnam. In addition, the unprecedented economic prosperity of the post World War II era provided greater benefits than were available during the recession of the mid-1970s. Furthermore, the veterans’ personal sacrifice of combat duty was seen as directly responsible for the society’s new abundance.³⁸ The World War II veteran fathers had reaped the benefits of a grateful society. It was from this heroic stance that they modeled military service for their sons.

Larry explained the impact of the era, “The 50s and the 60s were patriotic, Americans was patriotic . . . so they looked up to the uniform.” The veterans of World War II had come home as national heroes, and these Vietnam enlistees had grown up with “hero-fathers” who, by virtue of having participated in a unique historical event, fighting the “good war” presented a difficult standard of family honor to follow. John had grown up with the men of his family telling war stories, so when he joined the service and was assigned to a desk job in Kentucky he was frustrated because he “wanted to be fighting somewhere, anywhere—I wanted a war to go to.” His desk job would not give him the battle credentials needed to enter into the circle of men with whom he had grown up, so he volunteered for Vietnam. John felt that he needed to “go and see what the war’s like and say well yeah, I killed one of them.”

The other aspect of family pride, besides maintaining male traditions was the need to prove themselves in comparison to their fathers' military careers. Gibson suggests a motive for this competition, "Experiencing the failure of the father-son relationship as his own fault, the boy's growth toward manhood becomes problematic. In the face of an ostensibly powerful father, the son feels he is 'not good enough' to merit the father's love and attention."³⁹ On the other hand, van der Kolk concludes that such "lack of paternal attention and respect leaves the next generation of males with a lifelong search for acceptance and, often, revenge."⁴⁰ Larry expressed a desire for acceptance and recognition from his father in his choice to join the Marine Corps. Larry's father had served in the Navy so he entered the Marine Corps "just to show him I could do something better than him."

Well when the Korean war was going on, I heard a lot of publicity about the Marine Corps. They was the baddest, meanest on the block and that's what I wanted to be . . . [a] macho man at seventeen . . . and the Marines had the best uniform. They was the meanest, first to fight, and highly respected and that's what I wanted. Plus, it was gonna show my Dad that I could do it (Larry).

Competition between father and son took a different turn for David. He had grown up with an ex-Marine father who had often chided him with the comment that he could never even "make it through Marine boot camp." David wrote in his autobiography about the need to prove his father wrong. "When I went through[h] hard times I would think of my dad. . . . So when I didn't think I was going to make it I thought of what my dad said, and it gave me the strength to make it through." Chris also went into the same service, the Navy, as had his father. However, Chris was able to become a S.E.A.L., a member of a specialized fighting force. While his father was "only" regular Navy, Chris had proved himself by making it to "the elite of the elite—one out of five hundred make it." So for Larry, David, and Chris the military provided a way to measure themselves against their fathers, who represented their cultural, and personal, archetype of achieved manhood. Through their service they hoped to join their fathers as symbolic brothers in the "brotherhood" of the military and warfare.⁴¹ As Larry elaborated, "It was a good way to be a man."

Another reason mentioned for enlistment concerned employment, also a prerequisite for the attainment of male adulthood.

Really being right out of high school . . . I didn't have any qualifications for anything and so my uncle said "So what are you gonna do, just stay here and mooch off of me?" and I said, "No I'll find something" and he said "Well why don't you go

in the army and get it over with?" So that's where I went . . .
That'll grow you up real fast (John).

For some, entering the military was a career choice. The veterans of this study were from working class homes, making them "most susceptible to the military's promises of opportunities for training, travel, and a better future."⁴² In this way the traditional work ethic for men, "which equates masculinity with productivity, occupation, and breadwinning," could also be realized through military service.⁴³

I wanted to learn something that would be a real good trade and I was thinking of my future and I thought in aviation if I would learn to work on helicopters that I would be able to go to work for Bell helicopters and make helicopters. . . . It was a career choice to where I could do better, be more successful and . . . come out of there with a good job and drive a new car you know (Ramsey).

Thus, military life, for Ramsey, seemed to be a step toward the "good job" that would enable him to realize the American lifestyle. One's occupation is the primary vehicle for accomplishing one's goals for the future.⁴⁴ For Ramsey, the military was a logical path to self-supporting adulthood.

Even though the veterans had different reasons for joining the service—wanting to go to war, carrying on the family tradition, proving oneself, or looking for employment—they all shared a belief in the "mystique" of the military. And many traced this image from mass media presentations during their childhood. "Hollywood went to war with gusto. Blatant morale-building propaganda was a staple of its plots, speeches, and visual images."⁴⁵ These "morale building" efforts glamorized and aggrandized both soldiers and war. As young boys, the World War II "battle flicks" played a predominant role in their mass culture socialization. In addition, with the advent of television, combat shows brought the image even closer to their boyhood. Marty, for example, described the military way as glamorous.

I thought that that was pretty darn glamorous to go into the Marine Corps, the toughest unit they've got, and to go to the war front. . . . If one would just simply watch "Victory at Sea," or anything that kids that was in my slot grew up watching, war was shown as a very glorifying and admirable thing to participate in (Marty).

Larry had also been influenced by war films, especially the newsreels of the Korean conflict. He remembered distinctly seeing "some pictures of dress blues and such" and how the Marines were "the first to go in before war is declared." War movies of the era "imply that the soldiers' victories will be well respected

since they have both defended their society and embody the society's highest ideals."⁴⁶ It was while watching newsreels that Larry decided the Marine Corps was the "best" and he wanted to be the best. Walter, much like Larry, was also intrigued with the image of a military man in uniform. "I'd seen some TV shows, John Wayne stuff, and I always figured there was a marching band and I figured I'd go in the Marines in a nice uniform and medals and stuff." Walter continued, "but yeah, I thought it would be a lot different. I'd come home and uh, be really tough guy and . . . heroic, you know. But it wasn't nothing like that."

When they spoke of their image of the military and their decisions to enlist, they sounded like young men seeking social acceptance. When Tommy remembered as a child seeing veterans returning, he saw them as "great men" and he wanted to be like them. Larry, sizing up the different military branches, decided that the Marine Corps was "the meanest, first to fight, and highly respected and that's what I wanted." Both Tommy and Larry looked for available social images of accepted and respected men and attempted to fit themselves into those images. Walter's assessment that he would return from military service as a "hero" was another venture to appropriate a manly role for himself.

Returning from Vietnam

As the country of Vietnam disappeared behind them, memories of Vietnam took up permanent residence in the minds of these veterans. Combat, with all its victories, failures, fear, and adrenaline, provided the benchmark of their past, present, and future lives. Within the day-to-day interactions of warfare, the veterans had come to know who they were as soldiers, which had given them a distinct and powerful self image. Vietnam, as the larger context of their combat experience, gave them a notion of the social "roles" that were available for them to play. This modeling came through in the narratives of their lives after Vietnam, particularly in their tales of failure and betrayal. They returned as social "orphans" desiring the same admiration and respect that earlier veterans had received. Participation in combat set their expectations for how the world should treat them, and what kind of opportunities should have been accessible to them.

These young boys had "played by the rules" and by going to war they were doing what their fathers and their fathers' fathers before them had done. They were following the patterns of manhood that had been laid before them—and by coming home alive they had survived the test. They had lived through twelve to thirteen months of the grueling uncertainty of combat but received none of the glory or expected rewards for it. The implicit social covenant that their country made with them to honor their sacrifice remained uncompleted. Marty pondered this dilemma.

Then I fell into the category of, you know, I was twenty years old, back on the street, a Vietnam combat Veteran. . . .

Discharged. Couldn't vote or buy a beer in California where they let me out, so I was still very, very young at that time. But that was a very important time, you know. That's a very important time for youngsters to be developing. And mine was, as a lot of these other men, thrown into a real chaotic, terrible, bloody war, and then a non-supportive country when they came back, which, that scenario sets up a large area of the problems for those gentlemen who happened to have that dealt to them. So it's easy to see for me in terms of why I was one to have problems.

Dan echoed Marty's notions. "They just wanted to come back and be able to hold their head up and have pride at what they'd done. And the American people took that away from them—smooth away from them. And when you take somebody's pride, you scar 'em pretty heavily."

Returning to the United States and to their previous lives provided an abrupt termination to the combat experience. The rupture point that Vietnam played in these men's lives and personalities was sealed with the end of their final tours. They left the bush and came home feeling that it was finally over. They had survived. It should have all been okay. Or, as Kurt wrote in his autobiography about the end of his tour, "Now I'm free, but I'm not." They weren't free and it wasn't okay and Vietnam wasn't over for these veterans. Vietnam and their previous soldier identity were integral parts of who they had become. In a study of identity in prison, Schmid and Jones found that inmates would "suspend" their pre-prison identity, believing that they could resume it after release.⁴⁷ However, the prison identity that they adopted for survival, much like the veterans' combat identity, fundamentally changed them and they could not simply revive their old selves. Vietnam veterans described a similar belief in their ability to jettison their combat identity, or at least, relegate it to a heroic past. Nevertheless, their Vietnam self had become embedded in their sense of who they were: something continuously present which could not be removed or forgotten. Their combat tour had become the veterans' "frame of reference."⁴⁸ Vietnam had become the fulcrum upon which all other experiences and events were balanced. They learned things about themselves in combat that most people never have to confront. They knew that they could kill and some knew that they had enjoyed the power that came from killing. And they remembered their Vietnam self that had participated in violent acts; they remembered their childhood desire for manhood and a future.

World War II had provided a model of how soldiers were treated as well as how warfare was conducted. As children, they had seen or heard about their fathers' reception after the war and the social esteem they had garnered. World War II veterans had come home *en masse* to a grateful public and had been honored with parades and great fanfare; Vietnam veterans returned alone. "They

were reinserted into civilian life one by one as they completed their tours, just as they had been inserted into combat one by one a year earlier.”⁴⁹ Although these men had entered the military with “glamorous” ideals of manhood, patriotism, and heroic sacrifice, the realities of their homecomings shattered their ideals of social gratitude and honor. Walter tried to explain the difference between his expectations and his experience.

I thought it would be a lot different. I’d come home and be [a] really tough guy and . . . heroic, you know. But it wasn’t like nothing like that. I got in my uniform and I hit California and changed into my civilian clothes in the bathroom. I didn’t want them knowing I was in the service.

Similarly, David recalled being told *not* to wear his uniform on the plane home, “[be]cause they start riots.” Many of the veterans were met by protesters when they returned to the States. The anti-war protests provided a poignant symbol of dishonor—a clear message that denied any respect or veneration to the veteran or his contribution in the war. “It was about betrayal,” explained Dan, “what I did was obscene in everybody’s eyes here, and all I did was answer the call of my country when they called.” These men had gone to war, “done their duty to God and country,” and felt rejected for it. Their narratives were full of disillusionment and discouragement. David’s comments were typical: “I figured I’d be coming home and people would be proud of us ‘cause we put our lives on the line. Why were we treated this way? I wish I could understand why we were treated this way but I don’t think I ever will.”

Given their youth and the idealism that had led many of these men into military service, such a loss of pride could be irrevocable. In fact, the most prominent themes in the postwar narratives were the continuous attempts to recover the honor, integrity, and manhood that were supposed to have been bestowed on them through combat. Reflected in the larger social milieu, veteran portrayals sought the same recovery of morals and meaning. These social depictions were also constructing an image of “who” they were. As early as 1969, with the revelation of the Mylai Massacre, the veterans were being seen as the symbol of all that was wrong with the war. Veterans were constructed as corrupted and tarnished “instrument[s] of mass destruction.”⁵⁰ Consequently, these available cultural resources only reinforced the sense of betrayal and despair.

These veterans felt rejected by society and they, in turn, rejected society. Media images of the Vietnam war had an impact on the nonveteran public as well as on the veterans. In the face of such powerful and pervasive denunciations, veterans’ strivings for acceptance were eventually abandoned and followed by resignation to defeat and withdrawal from almost all social interactions. For Marty, his estrangement was at the most basic level of mere communication.

I try to relate to people and I make concerted efforts to try to put my war experience away and to try to learn about other people. And I try to get involved with what they're involved with and become . . . like normal. But I always find myself, that . . . it's almost seems superficial like your life is like, they don't know what to do and I don't know how to, how to blend with these folks. And that all comes from me. It's not their fault.

These Vietnam veterans all described a sense of alienation, of no longer fitting into society. Bill remembered being treated "strange" by people in his community. "[They] would more or less turn their back on me or act like I wasn't even there. They never said hello, welcome home, good to see you made [it], good job, nothing." Larry said that "telling somebody that you were a Vietnam veteran was like telling you had a disease or something." Mangum said that disclosing his Vietnam veteran status caused people to "just kind of ease off from you." In addition to the social stigma, many believed that their combat experience had changed them so deeply that they could never fully "come home." Their Vietnam self predominated and they could no longer adopt a innocent approach to life. Emotionally, they felt tainted by their participation and needed to maintain a more "authentic" lifestyle than our consumer culture advocates. "I don't live for society," Bill acknowledged, "I live for myself." Whatever their particular view of displacement, it was strong enough to sustain their sense of difference and prevent emotional closure to their tours of duty.

The Lessons of the Father

As veterans of an unpopular war, these men had no precedents to follow, only memories and stories of heroic homecomings from other wars. A common response was to hide and to deny one's military involvement and try to get on with one's life. However, this proved onerous. They found it hard to participate in acceptable behaviors of manhood. The social models of the breadwinner and family provider roles were male ideals for which combat had ill prepared them. The war lessons about alertness, constant danger, families of men, betrayal of organizations, denial of loss, and violence that they learned in Vietnam did not translate well to their stateside, post-military lives.

Next to the adrenaline rush of combat and the challenges of survival, the normative structures of job, family, church, and community seemed, for many, banal and superficial. Moreover, the veterans' ambivalent attitude almost ensured a lack of success. Even though they had, for the most part, rejected these ideals of male adulthood, their thwarted efforts still affected their self image. All these men had spent a few years attempting to measure up to the social roles they perceived to be manly. However, they all eventually stopped playing those roles

and began to expend more and more energy on activities that I refer to as “toxic masculinity,” such as excessive drinking, almost compulsive fighting and violent competition with other men or male authority figures, dangerous thrill seeking, and reliving or reenacting combat behavior in their stateside environments. The level of failure they felt in traditional accepted modes of male adulthood, coupled with their feelings of any ambiguities in their combat performance, seemed to correlate with their need to utilize such models of toxic masculinity.

Breadwinners and Providers

Culturally, one’s occupational position is central to the idealized male role. As Doyle has written, “a male is expected to be a success, to be a winner at everything he does, no matter if he is at work, at play, or in bed. A real man is a success at *everything*.”⁵¹ Work is one of the most important symbols of masculine success. However, finding and keeping a job proved to be very difficult for most of these men. It is difficult, however, to separate out which problems and difficulties may have been a consequence of the veterans’ social class background and the type of employment and wages that were available to them from issues of combat readjustment. Clearly, the flashbacks and the memories of Vietnam that facilitated the self-medication and all the attendant complications that come with excessive drinking and substance abuse were enhanced, if not caused by, their reaction to combat. However, it is important to note that working-class men in American society are often “profoundly alienated men . . . who assume a primary male responsibility for work but seek basic satisfaction elsewhere.”⁵² The post World War II abundance in which they had been reared was thought to have been “undepletable.”⁵³ After all, Vietnam veterans had seen their fathers return from “the good war” to jobs that enabled them to provide for their families. Unfortunately the reality of the Vietnam generation’s experience was a deepening disillusionment with work and any possibility of financial success. During the 1970s and 1980s, working-class real income declined as the result of wartime inflation, in contrast to the prosperity of the sixties.⁵⁴

The National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment study found that veterans who had been exposed to “high war stress” were less educated than noncombat veterans of the same era.⁵⁵ In addition, veterans with PTSD reported significantly higher employment instability; they were also less educated and more likely to be unemployed than nonPTSD Vietnam veterans. In contrast, Dean quotes wage statistics from 1977 that found Vietnam veterans had a higher median income than similar civilians—they made \$24 a week more.⁵⁶ Furthermore, Dean suggests that Vietnam veterans were the best educated in American history. Of the veterans in this study, Kurt, Bill, David and Walter had graduated from high school; Kurt went on to one year of college; and Bill had attended trade school. Marty, Ramsey, Larry, Mangum and Tommy left high school without finishing, as did Chris, John, and Dan, although they all eventually took the G.E.D. high

school equivalence exam in the military. Unemployment for this group was high—only David had a position waiting for him when he left treatment. Lack of employment was also part of the process of obtaining a PTSD diagnosis and disability claim—and may be the cost of inpatient treatment. Unemployment among these veterans should be viewed as an effect of PTSD treatment issues as well as due to their ability to get or keep a job.

Vietnam veterans had seen, and heard stories of, their fathers' return from World War II to good jobs that enabled them to provide for their families. Yet this was not these veterans' experience. Ramsey remembered his father's stories of returning from World War II and easily finding employment.

He was in the Navy but he shot a lot of planes down and went up inland into Japan when they bombed Hiroshima and all that and went without sleep for days and days. He lost his eyesight from the sun and had a nervous breakdown when he come back. . . . He got back from out of the war and went straight to driving a truck . . . that's what I wanted to do too, but I told them the truth about myself and they wouldn't hire me.

Most of the men thought that the social stigma of being Vietnam veterans hindered their ability to get hired. Kurt talked of looking for a job during his first year back, "the same thing I heard over and over, we don't have any jungles or we can't carry any weapons," which was the potential employer's way of conveying his lack of useful skills. Kurt was also quite aware that the lessons of Vietnam were very different from the norms of stateside society.

I have learned a lot from Vietnam is survival 'cause Vietnam vets know how to survive, you know. We can go anywhere in the mountains and the woods and have just a knife and we can survive. It taught me how to survive. It taught me not to trust. [It] taught me that I can make it on my own without depending on somebody and it also taught me not to get too close to anybody. If we got anywhere near close to somebody and we lost them then, you know, the emotion really effects you. That's why we don't have emotions . . . except anger. We got jacked with so many years before we went to Vietnam in boot camp all the way through Vietnam we got jacked with and we got jacked with for twenty years after Vietnam so that's the reason we got anger, but we don't got emotions.

Kurt had also seen that he, as a Vietnam veteran, was oriented toward the world with a completely different set of assumptions than most nonveteran members of society.

When these veterans did find employment, they found it hard to keep it. Most chose a general trade where they worked sporadically. Ramsey laid carpets. John and Bill worked in construction. Mangum was a cement finisher and Chris drove a truck. David and Walter held factory jobs. Tommy did custom horse shoeing. Because only two of these men had had any post secondary education, their choices were limited. All of them contended that their Vietnam experiences interfered with their ability to stay employed, whether because of the flashbacks or the resulting drinking or drugging, the anger, or difficulty working alongside Vietnamese refugees—it was all problematic. Dan explained it this way: “I just couldn’t keep a job. I’ve had like 700 jobs since I’ve been out of the service. And I couldn’t keep a job, so I’d work drilling rigs, ‘cause you can work for a rig one week, and if you get pissed off, you can go to the next . . . it’s real easy. And it’s good money.”

Larry had initially tried working as a milkman. His narrative illustrated the different point of view for someone who has experienced combat.

From the time I was seventeen ‘til the time I was twenty-three . . . I was taught to fight in the Marine Corps. It was my job to fight, search and destroy. After I left . . . I got on at the milk company. I was a salesman, but the customers complained. Said I wouldn’t talk to them or something. Who can I talk to a civilian about? All I’d known for the last five years is killing and what I was trained to be. I didn’t know nothing about the weather. The weather didn’t interest me. I could get by with the weather regardless what it was. Sports, I didn’t know nothing about the sports, I’d been in a combat zone for the past year, and what could I talk with them about? I had nothing to tell them.

Of all the veterans included in this study, David was the only one to hold a job for any length of time; he saw this, however, as a kind of failure. “I’ve worked in a factory for seventeen years and I’m not making over ten dollars an hour and they treat me like a dog,” David lamented, but “it’s the only thing I know.” In contrast, the other veterans were more mobile over the last two decades, often changing towns as well as jobs. “I know my suitcase fits in the trunk of my T-bird and I’m gone,” Bill explained, “that’s how I move.” Ramsey also had lived out of a suitcase for the majority of his adult life. Kurt had traveled from job to job, saying the longest he ever stayed in one place was the year and a half he spent institutionalized in a Veteran’s Administration Hospital. Wherever they went, the drinking or drug use, and their anger, caused problems for them. Ramsey expounded on his frustration of trying and failing, what seemed to him, every single time. He also illustrated how employment had affected the other aspects his life, often creating an even more overwhelming sense of despair and inability.

You need to grow up and get a decent job. [I] still never had a decent job. I learned how to do my own thing, laying carpet, cause I knew you could work out of anywhere you want to, independent, nobody telling you what to do. If I didn't like them—say, “to hell with them.” And that's the way I was. I worked in every carpet store in [the tri-state area]. I mean I went through all of them and been evicted out of every house I've ever been in that I've rented. I've been evicted, drinking always get the best of me. And sure enough I start having my bad dreams over my visions of death.

All but three of the veterans in this study had been unemployed for several years. John summarized his working years, “I cannot think of any jobs that I really liked.” They had given up any attempts to achieve any success or satisfaction from their work. “I just quit,” Bill admitted, “I didn't want to work no more—I said the hell with it.” Bill and many of the others had been officially labeled partially disabled, due to both physical and emotional wounds. They found themselves in the conflicted state of looking and feeling capable but being unable to work or maintain a job. Marty spoke about trying to come to grips with this contradiction.

Oh man, it's like a paradox. It's like, “God, you've got me thinking for twenty-four fucking years, man. When are you going to stop thinking about this?” . . . And the world coming to you and says, “We even recognize it [PTSD]—here, have rent and food and cars and stuff and don't worry about it.” And sometimes I just don't know. I don't know where I'm at. . . . It's hard for me to accept that I'm now disabled or handicapped or feel, I don't know how to explain—that Marty Reidy has presented himself as reasonably clean cut and intelligent, and certainly not crazy, well dressed generally. [And] it's not really that. It's not really that at all. He could play that game real well, and he can pick up girls that way. He can get jobs that way.

Marty knew that he looked the part of someone who could participate in society. He said he could even “play the game” and convince others to see him as capable, but Marty also had “an official stamp that I am anti-social and that I don't fit into the mainstream of my country.” He was in a quandary as to how to view himself—was he capable or was he disabled? Marty did not accept himself as either. Thus, this dilemma of a paradoxical sense of self curtailed his ability to come to terms with either possibility. The physical wounds of the other veterans were, for the most part, imperceptible. The invisibility of their difficulties added additional

layers of stress to their predicament. The deception of looking like, but not being, “able bodied men” created a tension, especially when the veterans were unable produce at an expected level. One solution to this paradox was to remove themselves from social contexts that exposed their inabilities to meet social expectations. Isolating themselves from others seemed to be a common mechanism they used for coming to terms with their increasing sense of inability and disability. Bill explained further,

It’s just me by myself, I can’t live with nobody. I’m too moody; when I go out and drink I don’t communicate. I don’t talk because I don’t know what, if I want to talk nobody seems to understand because you can’t understand unless you been there. . . . You hate yourself, you hate society, you hate the people. It’s just a world of hate. Every time the VA screws you, you hate them more or taxes or presidents or, you know, everything. You just haven’t learned how to live in society I guess. . . . That’s just the way its going right now; people are just passing by, they are just figures. And you’re defensive about all of them, you either hate them or you wait for them to make a move or do something wrong or they’re going to screw you sooner or later.

Forsaking the traditional roles of breadwinner and provider for men was done with anger, betrayal, and a sense of victimization. They blamed society for not accepting them and not making an economic place for Vietnam veterans. They blamed nonveterans as well, holding them responsible for not understanding these veterans and their differences. The values of our consumer society also seemed superficial compared to combat issues of survival. These men exhibited a sense of alienation from common middle class goals. John described his attitude. “I realized, I don’t need all this fancy stuff: new car, new this and new all that stuff. . . . I can do without this and it’s made me realize what I can do without in my life, you know? I don’t need this, to keep up with the Jones, or any of this other stuff.” Indeed, without steady, well-paying employment these veterans had little chance of acquiring any of the material trappings of success or status. Thus they could not meet the measure of “real” men by Doyle’s criteria of success.⁵⁷ Desiring acceptance as men and failing by social standards exacerbates psychological and physiological stress.⁵⁸ Stress also increased the prevalence of combat reactions of anger and flashbacks which, in turn, necessitated more drinking and drug use as a means of coping. Failing at traditional male duties not only added to their readjustment difficulties, but intensified them as well.

Family Men—Appropriating the Role of the Father

After feeling that they had failed, these veterans withdrew and no longer sought employment. Their feelings of alienation were also prevalent in their personal relationships. In Demos' study of traditional American fatherhood, a man who was unable to provide financially for his family "was likely to seem a failed father."⁵⁹ Thus lack of employment success directly affected their capacity to maintain their family relationships. Kurt cut all ties to his family of origin soon after his return from Vietnam, whereas many of the others maintained only distant relationships. Two other veterans, John and Mangum, had both been left by their first wives after they completed their tours. Only Larry, who had been married to the same woman for twenty-four years, was able to sustain his marriage. All the other veterans complained of marital and relationship problems over the years. Ten of these fifteen veterans were divorced or in the process of divorcing. Besides Larry, only four other veterans—John, Dan, Mangum, and Ramsey—were married at the time of the interviews.

Returning to family meant returning to people who knew the veteran before Vietnam. These individuals were in the best position to "see" changes in the postwar veterans. After having served a combat tour, each man had been given thirty days leave before beginning his new stateside post. Relationships with family members were often the first these veterans attempted to renew. Since these bonds had often been difficult and tenuous prior to their tour in Vietnam, the veterans' homecoming was both enigmatic and perplexing. Ramsey recalled returning to his family's home, "I told my little sisters to stay out of my room because I didn't want to accidentally hurt them. My mother tried to hug me and kiss me on the cheek and I pulled away from her. I felt unclean." Going home to the family members who had known them before Vietnam was difficult for most of these veterans. The veteran's family held an image of him as the youthful son that the veteran knew he no longer was. His Vietnam self provided a striking contrast to the child he had been. Family members expected the same son to return and were confronted by "strangers at home."⁶⁰ Though none of the veterans expressed this directly, it seemed that they too had an expectation that they would be able to return as mature versions of their former selves and re-enter their previous lives. Part of their sense of betrayal and nonacceptance may be due to this illusion. When they were faced with direct, experiential evidence that they had changed, the distance that they felt from their former identity was reconfirmed.⁶¹

For example, Kurt's homecoming was complicated by his family's disapproval of the Vietnam war—he felt he had symbolically become the war in their eyes. "I arrived at home, my family didn't meet me at the airport, I took a taxi home. My family greeted me as if I'd been on vacation. I asked what seemed to be wrong. They said we were baby killers and dog eater[s]. I told them all to go to hell. I bought a new car and packed it with my clothes and headed west"

(Kurt.a). Kurt later said that he had not seen or communicated with his family since the day he left. Chris also came home to condemnation of his military service by his family.

It was hard because my family and I still didn't get along and my younger sister and older sister were both involved in peace movements and stood up for everything opposite of what I had just lost my young adulthood to fight for. My brother wanted to know how many gooks I had killed. My mother, she was just glad to have [me] back safe and my father and me just didn't speak at all.

Thus Ramsey, Kurt, and Chris experienced the same rebuke of their combat participation within their own family that they found within the greater society. For these men, there was no real social space to feel good about having done their duty or to have any positive images mirrored back to them.

However, for others, like Walter, David, and Larry, their tour of duty earned them a new level of esteem from their fathers; for these three veterans their military experience served as a rite of passage to the status of manhood in the eyes of their fathers. "When I came home from Vietnam," Walter recounted, "I had changed because he couldn't beat on me any more." After combat, they would no longer tolerate abuse by their fathers. "After I got out of the service," David said, in contrast with his youth, "I got along with my dad." Through violence and combat these men had become their father's symbolic equal.⁶² Larry said that his father took pride in his military service and that they were able to interact much better after he had returned from Vietnam. "After I come back from combat zone, you know, when I was wounded, you know, his [father's] pride was quite a bit then, a lot more than what it was before, 'cause I was a combat veteran in the Marines, wounded with a purple heart, you know." These men had been able to stand up to, or respond in kind to, the paternal violence that they had experienced during their youth. This confrontation, where sons proved themselves equal to, or stronger than, their fathers, provided the foundation for a relationship that was no longer based on intimidation.

John and Chris also reconciled with their fathers, although it took them much longer. For John, it was his father's decision to stop drinking that made the difference in their relationship and allowed them to begin talking. The fact that John had spent the majority of his adult life using drugs heavily and drinking a lot gave him something in common with his father. It was different for Chris. He never felt the bond of a shared experience with his father, but felt he had eventually won his approval. Chris' father died in 1987, "we was just starting to get along with each other." Chris traced the improvement in their interactions to his father's changed attitude. "I felt like he was treating me like a man," Chris recalled. For both John and Chris, the fathers' regard for their manhood provided

the basis for reducing the tension but also, more importantly, for seeing themselves finally accepted as men, if only within their fathers' eyes.

In contrast, Ramsey was still seeking his father's blessing on his manhood while also trying to get out from under his control. "See, he's the one that dominates the conversation and the only way you can get his attention is by using fuck you words and stuff," Ramsey explained, "I would like to be able to talk in an adult language without using fuck you words and everything and cause him to hear what I'm saying." Ramsey's father felt responsible for saving his son's life when his head was run over as a child and also by his prayers during Vietnam. His father's attitude robbed Ramsey of any personal accomplishments in combat and, as a result, the manhood that was supposed to be proved by it. If Ramsey had survived combat only because of his father's prayers, then he had yet to achieve his own status as an adult male. Ramsey's feelings of obligation to his father for his very life created a definite tension for him. He compared himself to his older brother, who had died years earlier from a drug overdose. "Dad respected him even though he didn't try as hard as me. That always pissed me off that Dad respected him above me whenever I was trying harder and harder and couldn't get no recognition at all, but now I'll go out of here [PTSD unit] and be my own fucking man and then I'll probably get respect from him." Ramsey was still trying to realize a sense of manhood for himself through the eyes of his father.

Similar to the stories of childhood, these veterans' narratives of family centered on their fathers' acceptance of them. For some, though, their mothers served as gauges of moral acceptance. For example, Ramsey felt too tainted by combat for his mother's hug. Mothers were also recalled as the source of affection. Larry remembered that "she was just happy to have me home safe 'cause I'm her baby." Most often, as with the childhood narratives, mothers were not mentioned at all. Siblings were only discussed in relational or peripheral ways. Narratives about their family of origin focussed primarily on their youthful quest for adulthood, which seemed to be symbolically located in the father. Everything else faded into the background.

Reluctant Husbands and Distant Fathers

Another approach to the father and achieving manhood prominent in the retellings was that of becoming a father themselves. Tommy spoke clearly of his hurry to marry after Vietnam. "I was looking for more than just marriage," Tommy disclosed, "I wanted somebody to have my babies." All of the veterans in this study chose to preface fatherhood with marriage. Yet a sizable number of their marriages were arranged in response to surprise pregnancies. This may say as much about the availability of birth control or the stigmas attached to women "planning" for sexual activity by regular contraceptive use during the 1970s, as it does about any specific interest in procreation by the veterans.⁶³ Or as Rubin suggests, pregnancy is a commonplace means of initiating a marriage for working

class youth.⁶⁴ Only Kurt did not have any children of his own, though he had briefly married a woman with two daughters from a previous marriage. Thus all of these veterans took on the role of father and husband at some point. Mangum and John had been married to their first wives during their assignment in Vietnam. Ramsey had been married briefly prior to his tour. Most of the others married soon after their return to the states.

Vietnam turned out to be a poor preparation for marriage. Relating to others through violence and aggression, internalizing sanctions against feeling or expressing emotions, and embracing notions of women learned in the combat zone gave these men a problematic model for taking on the role of husband. Their combat experience, combined with their troubled childhoods and the role models their fathers provided, had not served them well. Vietnam veterans with PTSD were “prone to resort to physical violence against others or themselves to regain control over the behavior of other family members.”⁶⁵ The veterans interpreted their need for control over their immediate surroundings as an attempt to alleviate the aftereffects of combat stress and to prevent abandonment by family members. David revealed his experience: “I taken out all of my [anger, on] my first wife, I mean I was just a wild animal, boy. I was just fresh from ‘Nam and I should never have got married, lasted nine months. We didn’t have no kids, but like I physically and verbally abused her and I did that with my second wife too, but not as bad, but enough for to where she’s scared of me.” David’s overall narrative interpreted the influence of combat in therapeutic terms to make sense of what had happened in his life. His discussion also illuminated a theme found with most accounts of marital issues—the veterans fall back into brief summary retelling statements that present a presentable, familiar gloss. Retelling marriages appeared to need little explanatory detail as the veteran’s experience fell within a common experiential realm for most people. Again, this was a contrast to the long explanatory stories with which Vietnam was narrated.

Some marital retellings were deceptively simple. Larry, for instance, began with an idealized narrative of a close, supportive family life. However, on further questioning, his story disclosed a different view. After some of the complexities were exposed, it was still hard to know if the retelling statement functioned as a self-protective mechanism or if the veteran was purposely misleading the listener. Larry initially described his family life with a statement that placed him in the father provider role. “We been married twenty years now and I have three sons and one girl. I have had a lot of jobs. But I have always tried to keep my family first in my life and my wife have always said I have put them first. We all love and care for one another and are very close” (Larry.a). Upon further questioning, however, Larry spoke of feeling like a stranger in his own home among his family. He also talked about his temper and his distant relationship with his children. Early in his marriage he had shot one of the guns he collected at his wife and though he stated that he had never “beat her up,” he was aware that his anger was intimidating.

Yeah, we've had some bad deals over that yelling [at] her thing, I never beat her up or nothing. . . . I get a real high temper rage and I have to go out and do something to release my temper . . . hit things, I bust my fingers quite a few times hitting the walls or something like that, or I tear the doors off, when I hit the door or, doors aren't made very strong anymore.

Larry's narrative initially portrays himself in the appropriate husband and father role. Like the other veterans, he depicted himself in a positive light and then, when prompted, spoke to some of the more problematic aspects of his behavior within the family. This negative behavior was usually directly correlated with his experiences in Vietnam. Chris explained why his third marriage broke up, "she don't want to try and make it work and I've hurt her so much in the past with my PTSD symptomology."

Mangum's first wife left him eight days after he returned from Vietnam. He, like Larry, began with a retelling statement.

We was happy, we traveled, we did everything together, we always laughed, and her mother and dad, all would do things together. They thought I was the greatest, but when I come back [from Vietnam], they all backed off from me. . . . One time I went home and wasn't nobody home, they left, left town. . . . She called me said "I'm afraid of you. I'm getting divorced." Just like that. . . .

We still love each other but that's as far as it goes, I blame that on Uncle Sam.

Mangum later divulged that he had been openly unfaithful to his wife when he was away and that she had a "boyfriend" when he returned. Moreover, their married life had consisted only of "when I come on leave, something like that, the rest was just letter writing." In addition, he readily admitted to having done a lot of "screaming and hollering" as well as heavy drinking right after Vietnam. Mangum and Larry, like the others, saw Vietnam as the cause of their family and marital problems. They concluded that they had been unable to fulfill their familial roles as they believed other nonveteran men had. And, in their minds, this was all because of what they learned and what they had done in Vietnam.

Chris explained the difficulties he had in maintaining the husband and father roles.

Because she works every day, she takes care of the kids every day, she takes care of the bills, the house, everything. I mean, I had little to no input in it whatsoever because I chose not to

do that [and] . . . because I did not want the responsibility. . . . I wanted to be the daddy but I didn't want to be the father. I wanted to be [the] spouse, but I didn't want to be [the] husband—if you can correlate that—because, you know, a spouse is somebody that you're married to that is in every definition of the word the person that should be your husband, but a husband, on the other hand, is somebody that shares in the responsibility, shares in the raising of the kids, shares in the upkeep of the house, and I was not a sharing, giving husband. I was a spouse and that's all.

He felt unequal to the responsibility because in Vietnam he believed he had let the rest of his team down and as a result, they had been killed. This experience left Chris unwilling to put himself in a position of accepting responsibility again.

In addition to a lack of responsibility, many of these veterans had trouble controlling their anger. Ramsey spoke of feeling justified in physically abusing his wife. In his mind, this behavior had not created any role conflict as a husband, but it had, however, seemed inappropriate to him as a father

I went back with her and she was nice for about not even two weeks, not even two weeks. And she started in working on me again and that time when she worked on me I had never hit her before but she come into me and she cut me on the elbow back here, laid it open with some kind of pan or something. Hit me with something out of the kitchen and cut it open and the first thing I did was slap her across the face and knocked her glasses off, then I kicked her in the stomach. And then when she fell over I hit her right on the top of the head and knocked her on the floor and my two little girls were behind the chair over there and they were shaking all over and crying and . . . it was just a reaction and . . . that hurt to do that in front of my children. It didn't bother me to do what I did to her because there was a lot of friends of mine that told me I should have killed her a long time ago. But I don't want to kill the mother of those little girls. They love her too, you know. But I have dreamed about it.

Not all the veterans were as candid about family violence as Ramsey was. Most of the men took the opportunity to say that they had never hit a woman. “No that's the one thing I haven't done is hit a woman” Mangum asserted, “yell, curse, but hitting, no.” Hitting women, like shooting them in combat, was not something that men were supposed to do, unless as in Ramsey's view, she deserved it. Levy pointed to this postwar paradox—Vietnam veterans, he found, were most likely to direct their violence at nominal allies, not enemies.⁶⁶ David was forthright

about his violent nature, “Through the years I would physically abuse every girl I gone with since Nam. Why? I don’t know.” Like Ramsey, David made the same distinction between physically hurting his wives or girlfriends and his children. However, when his violence spread to his children, he saw it as directed at their mother so he was able to still maintain the good father role. “Oh no, I’ve never touched my kids, I never will. I always buy them a surprise. I talk to my daughter every other day on the phone, but I never touch them, no boy.” Later, David related a different version of his behavior with his children.

Well, [I’m] a good father. Every time the kids come over, I have a surprise for them and I always play with them . . . towards the end [of his marriage], you know, I pushed Sally [his wife] and the baby was leaning against Sally when I pushed her and the baby fell over. He didn’t get hurt or nothing but I felt really bad about that and ever since then . . . I haven’t gone off or nothing. But you know, I think I’ve been a good father, I really love them and that.

Chris also made the distinction between being abusive to women and children. He felt it important to state that, “My dad told me, ‘you don’t ever hit a woman, right?’ Well I never hit my wife. I’ve broken the door and knocked a couple of holes in the wall and had to replace the glass storm door for slamming it but I never hit her.” After further reflection, he added,

I found myself being like my father. My father was real quick to take his belt off and strap us and I found myself doing that and I swore I’d never treat my kids like my father treated me, but I’d seen too much of his actions in me and I didn’t like it, but when you would get as enraged as I did at points, the black out process begins and all you see is red and in seeing red, you’ve got to expend that energy somewhere and I found myself taking it out on my kids and I didn’t like that.

Taking on the social roles of father and husband had not worked out well for these men. For the most part, the roles provided elusive ideals that, given their backgrounds, perhaps were not viable. However, trying to do something at which one was failing, especially when those around you appeared to be capable, was frustrating. Failed masculinity increases male stress levels.⁶⁷ Such failures became more “proof” of their sense of victimization due to their participation in Vietnam. Perhaps John provided the most striking example of this kind of personal conflict. He had two different perspectives on his family roles. “I thought I was doing everything that fathers did,” John recalled, “I guess during my drunken stages, I wasn’t doing as great as I thought I was.” He also thought

that his marriage was “in pretty good shape” until his wife had him committed to the VA hospital. In an even more remarkable contrast, John also spoke of having had homicidal feelings toward his current wife and their two sons.

I guess subconsciously anytime I get pissed at somebody that’s the first thing that comes to mind, is to kill. Two years ago—December [of] ’89—I had a real bad depression there. I mean holidays are bad for me anyway, I got drunk and I was just totally—I was just mentally to where I was having thoughts about killing not only me but my wife and my family, you know, and I could not come to grips with that. My most horrible nightmare is that’s what it is that [the] voice [is] telling me, to kill, and I mean not just anybody. This voice is telling me to kill my wife and my kids and I couldn’t live with that. . . . I finally had to tell her, she was trying to talk to me and I really don’t know what was bothering me. I wasn’t drinking at this time, just thoughts were going through my head. They was just coming faster and faster, and I told her, I said, “take you and the boys over to your mothers, just leave, don’t say nothing more to me, just leave, take the boys and get to your mothers. Leave me alone. I’ll call you when I feel okay, just get out of the house. Get away from me.”

John realized that the “voice” was problematic and that he did not wish to follow its directives, but since he heard it as a “voice” he was able to separate it from himself. Thus, he could still maintain the identity of the good father and husband in his own mind and perceive himself as the victim of a seemingly external “voice.”

These men were unsuccessful in achieving manhood through their roles of husband and father. “The abandoning [social] father is held to blame for incoherent male identity” as the veterans traced their difficulties back to Vietnam.⁶⁸ Thus the implied solution was the “remasculinization” of American society⁶⁹; only then would men once again claim their “traditional masculinity.”⁷⁰ This hunger for an adult masculine identity, especially in a heroic manner, provided the impetus for many in going to Vietnam. However, for a variety of reasons, the military was not able to grant this to the young recruits. Ironically, the outcome furnished them with quite the opposite result. Elaine Showalter points out in a discussion of “the Great War,” World War I, that the soldier’s role was one of powerlessness that eclipses masculinity.⁷¹ The military method of authoritative command removes the conscript’s sense of control and was, in fact, emasculating. Soldiers were controlled by their conditioning rather than by individual volition.⁷² Moreover, the anomie of Vietnamese combat, and the social rejection of the Vietnam veterans’ homecoming increased the likelihood that

these veterans felt that their masculinity was disproved through their war experience.

After returning to the United States to face public humiliation and social ostracism, these men tried to find acceptance through their fathers and by assuming the expected roles of men in our society. Their failed attempts to become the father—through work, marriage, or family pursuits—led to their recreation of other roles, such as their former soldier role, that exacerbated their emasculation—the ironic opposite of their desire. Since they were unable to achieve success in any of the traditional male roles of breadwinner, husband, or father, they were left with a renewed sense of failure. And once again, they found themselves unable to measure up to the masculine standard. Chris spoke directly about these feelings.

I don't have a job. I don't have anybody waiting for me—any person waiting for me. My kids have said that they don't want to see me and my wife has put a restraining order against me—my ex-wife has put a restraining order against me. My sixteen year old daughter says she never wants to see me again. . . I failed at three marriages, I failed at owning my own business, I failed at making a living for myself, I failed at being a parent. I failed.

Chris' summary statement, "I failed" typified these veterans' resignation about their past, their future, and their own inability to change their life course. Traditional patterns of achieving manhood created emasculating situations, replicating and reifying the disappointment of Vietnam. This left only the more destructive, less socially acceptable, toxic behaviors for seeking the status of male adulthood.

Masculinity and Betrayal

More than two decades after their return from combat in Vietnam, these veterans found themselves in a nebulous space between their youthful past and their troubled present. Many longed to return to their innocent youthful beliefs in family, religion, and community, but they have felt the ultimate betrayal of meaning structures that fall short. Their childhood notions of how the world was ordered, what would be expected of them, and how they would be rewarded shattered with Vietnam. Later, their attempts at traditional modes of male adulthood—career, marriage and family—only reinforced their growing sense of disillusionment and failure. These men were trapped between a desire for the comfort of belief, and their experiential denial of it. Their memories of combat and death were constant reminders of the lack of sense and meaning in the world. Vietnam had marked them as unique individuals who had seen and felt and done

what the rest of society could only imagine and most preferred to avoid. This distinction had destroyed any social bond between these veterans and society that may have existed during their youth. The promise of the father and their social inheritance had been denied them.

The father is thought to exemplify the requirements for masculinity within patriarchal society. His model of manhood is stamped deeply into the psyches of his young sons. “Vietnam tore away any remaining myths or innocence the generation possessed about war and warriors.”⁷³ There was never a time of such generational dissent in our history. Vietnam provided an opportunity for the discrepancies of the fathers’ war myths to be seen. This generation of veteran sons found:

that they had been lied to and used by the fathers. They, the youth, had been used by the old men who either did not go to Vietnam or who, if they went, betrayed their task of leadership; the young men had been asked in the name of a tradition that bound them to personal, national, and historical fathers to kill, to die, and to taint their souls for mystified ideals they later discovered were shrouded in political lies.⁷⁴

These men had gone to Vietnam, following their fathers’ patterns of manhood. The cultural myth that portrayed war as a “moral debt” that transcended the individual “son” and personal volition was abruptly dispelled with the ambiguity of Vietnam combat.⁷⁵ They had survived a chaotic and traumatic experience to return to a society which refused to grant them pride and heroic status. By not “winning” the Vietnam war, they became “failed sons” who were unable to live up to the ideals of the noble warrior—by failing in their economic and family roles they revealed the extent of their disillusionment. This is the psychic dynamic at play between fathers and sons that these men who fought in Vietnam find themselves attempting to resolve. These sons’ narratives illuminate the rhythms of betrayal and masculinity that mark their impossible quest for the father and the return of his myths.

The narratives of these veterans illustrate the lack of cultural resources to match their lived experiences. The social definitions of warrior, breadwinner, and family man were all modeled from the idealized “good war” and provided only unattainable images for these men. Perhaps heightening their sense of betrayal, these Vietnam veterans had grown up with fathers who had received the social rewards of World War II. The lessons and the patterns of their fathers were explicitly countered by the experience of Vietnam. These veterans found themselves in the contrary position of having been raised with one set of cultural beliefs that were shifting and being disrupted as they returned from combat. Vietnam veterans were caught between their fathers and themselves—never quite able to achieve their own sense of masculine adulthood and continuing in their desire to appropriate the father and his patriarchal position.

Thus, the return of traditional masculinity has become the goal of the social sons as illustrated within the Vietnam films as well as the goal of these individual veteran sons.⁷⁶ The patterns for achieving manhood outlined in the cultural myths of their childhood were interrupted by Vietnam. Somehow in the midst of the conflict it became more manly to feign homosexuality or mental illness to avoid the draft. While these men fought, draft dodging became honorable and war became baby killing.⁷⁷ The most masculine of pursuits had become tarnished with the moral ambiguity of Vietnam. Of the 3 million young men who went to Vietnam, nearly 58,000 veterans never came home and the remaining men returned to a land they had never known.

Notes

1. The author gratefully acknowledges the insightful comments of Norman Yetman, Carol Warren, Joane Nagel, and Gene Connelly on earlier drafts of this work. She is also appreciative of the engaging and thought-provoking observations and reflections of three anonymous reviewers. Additionally, Deborah McAferly provided much appreciated word processing support.

2. Lloyd B. Lewis, *The Tainted War: Culture and Identity in Vietnam War Narratives* (Westport, Connecticut, 1985), 50.

3. Lynda E. Boose, "Techno-Muscularity and the 'Boy Eternal': From the Quagmire to the Gulf," in Miriam Cooke and Angela Wollacott, eds., *Gendering War Talk* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1993), 88.

4. Godfrey Hodgson, *America in Our Time* (New York, 1976).

5. Lewis, *The Tainted War*.

6. Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York, 1976).

7. Veterans are referred to by pseudonyms of their own choosing and all identifying aspects of their narratives have been changed to protect their confidentiality. Also, the different forms of data utilized within this research study are denoted as follows: excerpts from my field notes are labeled (FN); veteran quotes from the interviews are cited with their pseudonym; material from their autobiographies is distinguished with an "a" after their pseudonym—for example, (Ramsey.a).

8. Using the midwestern Veteran's Administration Hospital unit as the primary research setting does have some drawbacks. The unit had never had a woman veteran apply for treatment, and the inpatient population was mostly white. Thus, I found myself approaching the common criticism of studying mainly white males. With this in mind, I have tried to avoid typifications about white men in general as well as generalizing from these respondents in any absolute manner. Rather, I utilize their narratives to illuminate themes and conceptual approaches to the Vietnam war.

Situating my research within a therapeutic community raised several additional issues. The difference between the veterans with a PTSD diagnosis included in this study from other Vietnam combat veterans can only be speculated upon and is well beyond the scope of this project because there was no comparative "control group" available. However, previous studies contended that PTSD symptoms are more prevalent among Vietnam veterans than veterans of other wars. Kulka et al. (1990) estimated that over one-third of all male Vietnam theater veterans will experience PTSD at least once in their lifetime. When the rate of PTSD is compared to combat exposure, Egendorf et al. (1981) reported that 33 percent of Vietnam veterans who saw heavy combat claim to have experienced PTSD symptoms. Even more startling was a random screening of nonpsychiatric Vietnam combat and POW veterans while inpatients for medical treatment that revealed that 46 percent experienced PTSD (Blake et al. 1990). Such frequencies of PTSD symptoms among Vietnam combat veterans suggest that the experience of the men seeking treatment at the VA may not be unique among Vietnam veterans. However, the question of why the men included in this study have voluntarily sought treatment and others do not still remains. For a further discussion, see also, Tracy X. Karner "Masculinity, Trauma, and Identity: Life Narratives of Vietnam Veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder," unpub. dissertation, University of Kansas, 1994.

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17. Boose, "Techno-Muscularity," 89.
18. Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington, 1989).
19. *Ibid.*, xi.
20. Smith, "Back Against the Wall," 125.
21. *Ibid.*, 124, emphasis in original.
22. Lewis, *The Tainted War*, 44.
23. J. William Gibson, "Paramilitary Fantasy Culture and the Cosmogonic Mythology of Primeval Chaos and Order," *Vietnam Generation* 1.3-4 (1989), 25.
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38. Gibson, "Parliamentary Fantasy Culture," 30.
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65. van der Kolk, "Trauma in Men," 180.
66. Levy, "ARVN as Faggots," 197.
67. Baffi, et al., "Gender Role Identity," 10.
68. Boose, "Techno-Muscularity," 72.
69. Jeffords, *The Remasculization of America*.
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