



The Vietnam War

Episode Descriptions



VFP Talking Points

August 20, 2017

To VFP members:

Attached you'll find PBS' brief descriptions of the 10 episodes along with concise, documented talking points you can use when participating in local PBS panels, making public statements or doing news interviews. In addition to the brief talking points and discussion questions, we've provided excerpts from important publications that provide deeper insight and further documentation.

This paper will help you authoritatively address issues raised in the PBS series and answer fundamental questions about the war, such as:

- What was the US motive?
- What was the motive of the Vietnamese enemy?
- Did the US mistakenly stumble into the war?
- Were US intentions honorable?
- Who was most responsible for the suffering of the civilian population?
- Why did the US lose?
- What are the basic lessons of the war?

VFP's role in this national discussion is extremely important.

We need to explain that VFP, and hopefully much of the nation, is moving beyond the important but non-controversial "healing and reconciliation" suggested by Burns' and Novick's series to an understanding that we must face uncomfortable truths that will challenge the myth that America is exceptional and always on the good side. If those truths are ignored, any discussions on Vietnam will be hollow. Review VFP's *Statement of Purpose*. It will help guide your discussions.

Episode One – “Déjà Vu” (1858-1961)

After a long and brutal war, Vietnamese revolutionaries led by Ho Chi Minh end nearly a century of French colonial occupation. With the Cold War intensifying, Vietnam is divided in two at Geneva. Communists in the north aim to reunify the country, while America supports Ngo Dinh Diem’s untested regime in the south.

Points to make

1. Not just “French colonial” occupation from the mid 19th century until 1954, but the Chinese had ruled over Vietnam until 938 CE and had periodically intervened since then.
2. “Communists in the North aim to reunify the country...” Just Communists? In the North? Nationalists, north and south, wanted to reunify the country and not all were Communists. The Viet Minh, which had resisted the Japanese during WW II and the French since 1945 had Communist leadership but included nationalists of all political stripes. Other non-communist opposition groups included the [Hoa Hao](#) and [Cao Dai](#), as well as Vietnamese exiles and a variety of nationalist parties.
3. “...while America supports Diem’s untested regime in the south.” “Untested?” What about a “hand-picked” or “U.S. installed?” regime in the south?
4. Does Burns make it clear that the Geneva agreements mandated elections and that the U.S. agreed to abide by the agreement?
5. In 1955 Diem defeated Emperor Bao Dai in an election in which he gained 98.2 % of the vote, in which more voters were recorded than there were registered voters. Diem then proclaimed the formation of the Republic of Vietnam and himself as first President.
6. Ho Chi Minh was first and foremost a nationalist. In 1919 he appealed to the victorious Allies at Versailles for his country’s independence but Vietnam remained a French colony. He likewise appealed to Truman after WWII to no avail. He used the communist party to achieve his aims. See Neil Sheehan’s [“A Bright, Shining Lie,”](#) including pp. 155-169.

On Ho Chi Minh, from “A Bright, Shining Lie”

“French colonialism corrupted the Vietnamese mandarin class. In order to keep their places, the majority of the mandarin families served the French, became agents of the foreigner, and lost legitimacy of their claim to national leadership....French colonialism was highly exploitive. The mandarins who collaborated had to participate daily in crimes against their own people... After Ho had made his way to France and settled in Paris during World War I, he joined the French Socialist Party, because its more radical members were the only French political grouping that seriously advocated independence for the colonies....In 1920, the French Socialist Party became entangled in one of the most important political debates of modern French history -- whether to remain with the socialist parties allied under the Second International convened at Paris in 1889, or to join the far more revolutionary Third International (subsequently known as the Communist International or Comintern) that

Vladimir Lenin had organized in Moscow in 1919 to rally support for the Bolshevik cause.... At the Socialist Party congress in Tours in December 1920, he voted with the Radicals and became a founder of the French Communist Party.... Within five years he was in Canton in southern China founding another organization that was the forerunner of the Vietnamese Communist Party -- the Vietnam Revolutionary Youth League.... Through his lessons on Leninist revolutionary strategy and tactics (young Vietnamese) heard the message he had heard -- that while a Communist society was the ultimate salvation, the way to it lay through the achievement of national independence.... By the end of 1944, the Viet Minh were able to claim half a million adherents, three quarters of them in North and Central Vietnam. These half million were directed by a Vietnamese Communist Party of no more than 5,000 members. The appeal was always to nationalism and to tactical social grievances that would arouse the peasantry.... From 1950 onward... the Vietnamese were confronted with three alternatives: to join the Communists to win the liberation of their country, as many did; to collaborate with the French for a variety of reasons, as many others did; or to avoid participating in the most important moral and political conflict of their time, as a minority, including Ngo Dinh Diem, did. The war made Ho the father of modern Vietnam and defined a Vietnamese patriot as a Communist or someone who fought with the Communists.... The leaders of the United States were unable to accept these Vietnamese realities.... Dean Acheson and Truman and other American figures like them in both political parties assumed that all Communist movements were pawns of a centralized superstate directed from the Kremlin.... they could not believe that a Communist leader might have as his basic goal the independence of his country...." (pp 155-169)

On Diem, from BACKFIRE: VIETNAM --THE MYTHS THAT MADE US FIGHT, THE ILLUSIONS THAT HELPED US LOSE, THE LEGACY THAT HAUNTS US TODAY.

Loren Baritz

"(Diem) was a devout Catholic from a Buddhist country who had, in 1950, lived at Maryknoll seminaries in New Jersey and New York, and was sponsored by Francis Cardinal Spellman. His Catholic anti-Communism appealed to Senators John Kennedy and Mike Mansfield." (p. 76)

Episode Two – “Riding the Tiger” (1961-1963)

President Kennedy inspires idealistic young Americans to serve their country and wrestles with how deeply to get involved in South Vietnam. As the increasingly autocratic Diem regime faces a growing communist insurgency and widespread Buddhist protests, a grave political crisis unfolds.

Points to make

1. “...Diem regime faces a growing communist insurgency...” Again, no mention of nationalists. Significant, non-communist opposition groups included the [Hoa Hao](#) and [Cao Dai](#).
2. The North thought it could win by political struggle. They did not endorse armed resistance until well after it was clear that the elections called for in the Geneva Accords would not happen, responding to pressure from southern activists who were being decimated. It was Diem's repression that resulted in armed resistance--not asked aggression from the North.

On Diem, from “A Bright, Shining Lie”

“Diem was an anti-Viet Minh politician.... Once in power, Diem would tolerate no potentially independent sources of authority. He was so morbidly suspicious that he could share real authority only with his family....Ngo Dinh Nhu, Diem's younger brother, bore the title of counselor to the president.... Totalitarianism fascinated him....Nhu had become an admirer of Hitler....Nhu's wife, Madame Nhu, or Madame Ngo as she preferred to be called for its more regal sound, dominated her husband and her brother-in-law. (She) appointed herself arbiter of South Vietnam's morals....The resentment she aroused often expressed itself in scurrilous rumors....The Ngo Dinhs proceeded to impose on South Vietnam what amounted to their own alien sect of Catholics, Northern Tories, and Central Vietnamese from their home region. (Once in the South, many of the non-Catholic northerners who had fought with the French quickly allied themselves with the Catholics as the group with access to the regime and the new foreigner.) Diem and his family filled the officer corps of the army and the civil administration and the police with Catholics, Northerners, and Central Vietnamese they trusted. The peasants of the Mekong Delta found themselves being governed by province and district chiefs, and by civil servants on the province and district administrative staffs, who were outsiders and usually haughty and corrupt men. Diem intruded further. He did away with the village oligarchies of prominent peasants who had traditionally dominated the village councils....The family's alien sect of outsiders started penetrating right down to the village level, subjecting the Southern peasants to abuses and exactions in their daily lives which they had never known before....Diem turned next to the land....The Viet Minh had seized French rice plantations and the holdings of 'Vietnamese traitors' who sided with the colonial regime. These lands had been distributed to tenant farmers....With 85 percent of the population living in the countryside and drawing a livelihood from agriculture, it was difficult to find a single issue of more profound social, economic, and political sensitivity than land....(Diem) wanted to return to the landlords of the South as much of their land as was practical and have them act as a buttress to his regime. He wanted the peasants to

remain peasants....Diem took away all of the land that the Viet Minh had distributed to tenant farmers by invalidating the land titles these peasants had been given....By 1958, Diem attained his objective. Through unstinting resort to the armed forces and the police, he reversed the pattern of land ownership in the Mekong Delta back toward one resembling the prewar pattern, where 2 percent of the owners had held about forty-five percent of the land and approximately half of the farmers had been landless.... Disorder came with the loss of land....(Diem) allowed the forces that were supposed to provide local security to become instead the principal source of insecurity for the inhabitants of the countryside, a daily manifestation of the 'capricious lawlessness' of Diem's regime....The militiamen caused most rural crime. They were constantly robbing and raping and beating up farmers who dared to protest....Diem did not understand that if he persecuted the Viet Minh he would be persecuting a great mass of non-Communist Vietnamese who looked back on what they had done with emotions of patriotism. Nor did he realize that he would be arousing revulsion in still other Vietnamese who had come to regard the Viet Minh as patriots. He had sat out the war in hiding or in exile, and he and his family did not share these emotions. In his loathing of Communism, Diem regarded all Viet Minh as evil....The Ngo Dinh were not content to imprison, torture, and murder the living veterans of the Resistance in the South. Their persecution reached out to the dead. In the most severe insult possible in Vietnamese culture, Diem ordered the desecration of all Viet Minh war memorials and cemeteries....The vilest scorn one can pour upon a Vietnamese is to deliberately violate the graves of his ancestors.... The dissident Southern cadres who decided to fight back discovered that the Ngo Dinh and the Americans had made the South ripe for revolution. They went to non-Communists who had been their Viet Minh comrades in the Resistance War and found these comrades willing to join them in a new resistance because they too were being hounded by Diem's campaign. The guerrilla-band remnants of the armies of the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao were ready to forget the past and make common cause. Most important of all, much of the peasantry was so angry that the farmers were prepared to face the agony of another war to rid the country of this foreigner who had replaced the French. This regime that the Americans had imposed on them was more than they could bear.... The Southern cadres, with their old comrades from the Resistance and their newfound allies from the sects, first began striking back at the Ngo Dinh and the Americans in early 1957.... By late 1958 the dissident cadres had succeeded in presenting the Party leadership in Hanoi with a fait accompli -- a major guerrilla revolt in South Vietnam. Ho and his disciples in Hanoi were prepared to assume control of it...." (pp 178 to 193)

Episode Three – “The River Styx” (January 1964-December 1965)

With South Vietnam in chaos, hardliners in Hanoi seize the initiative and send combat troops to the south, accelerating the insurgency. Fearing Saigon’s collapse, President Johnson escalates America’s military commitment, authorizing sustained bombing of the north and deploying ground troops in the south.

Points to make

1) There were two reported Gulf of Tonkin attacks: August 2 and August 4. There is much skepticism about the reality of the second. See www.pbs.org/pov/mostdangerousman/secrets2.php for Daniel Ellsberg who was on the Washington end (working for the Pentagon) of dispatches on the Gulf of Tonkin. See also www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB132/relea00012.pdf for convincing evidence that there was no August 4 attack.

From “A Bright, Shining Lie” on Tonkin Gulf

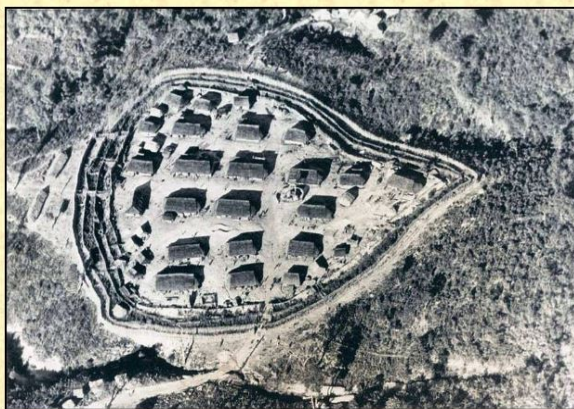
"The plan for the major campaign of clandestine warfare, code-named Operation Plan 34A, was presented to the president at the beginning of January 1964 in a memorandum from Krulak. He referred to the raids as 'destructive undertakings,' and said they were designed 'to result in substantial destruction, economic loss and harassment.' Their tempo and magnitude were intended to rise in three phases through 1964 to 'targets identified with North Vietnam's economic and industrial well-being.' The raids were to be prepared and controlled by Harkins's headquarters rather than the Saigon regime. Johnson approved, and the strikes began on February 1, 1964, using Vietnamese, Chinese, and Filipino mercenaries. As the attacks unfolded, fast PT boats bombarded radar sites and other coastal installations, commandos were landed by sea to blow up rail and highway bridges near the coast, and teams of saboteurs were parachuted to try to destroy targets farther inland. Groups of Vietnamese trained in psychological warfare were also dropped into the night to attempt to undermine the confidence of the population in Hanoi's rule.... The 34A raids provoked the Tonkin Gulf incident of August, 1964, the clashes between torpedo boats of Hanoi's navy and U.S. Navy destroyers, which Johnson used to trick the Senate into giving him an advance declaration of war for the higher level of force he had decided by then he was probably going to have to employ to bend Hanoi to his will. McNamara and Rusk helped him by deceiving the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations about the clandestine attacks in secret testimony before the committee. The president thought that his deception was in the best interests of the nation, as did McNamara and Rusk in misleading the senators." (pp 376 to 379).

Episode Four – “Resolve” (January 1966-June 1967)

Defying American airpower, North Vietnamese troops and materiel stream down the Ho Chi Minh Trail into the south, while Saigon struggles to “pacify the countryside.” As an antiwar movement builds back home, hundreds of thousands of soldiers and Marines discover that the war they are being asked to fight in Vietnam is nothing like their fathers’ war.

Points to make:

- 1) “...Saigon struggles to pacify the countryside...” See the link below this photo for a description of the “Strategic Hamlet.”



An aerial view of a fortified Vietnamese hamlet

This 1963 photograph from the Associated Press had the accompanying caption:

A Lab for war. A strategic hamlet, surrounded by barricades and engulfed by the jungle of South Vietnam, is one of the new concepts of community defense developed during the guerrilla war in the Southeast Asia nation. By gathering scattered families and residents of small living units into a better fortified village, the government is better able to protect peasants from night attack by the Viet Cong.

Photo: <http://www.psywarrior.com/VNHamletPSYOP.html>

- 2) “...nothing like their fathers’ war.” One big difference was the U.S. was not threatened. What *was* threatened was the U.S. Empire’s control of a resource-rich part of the world and the interests of corporations waiting to capitalize on those resources. See Howard Zinn’s [“A People’s History of American Empire”](#) video at 3:42 to 4:20.
- 3) Doubtless the domino theory will come up. Maybe the political/military leadership convinced themselves there was really something to it, perhaps it was a convenient rationale for intervention, perhaps both, but the main worry for U.S. policymakers was that important areas and resources would remain outside imperial control if Vietnam was “lost.”
- 4) King's public opposition to the war in April 1967 is a big moment.

Episode Five – “This Is What We Do” (July 1967-December 1967)

American casualties and enemy body counts mount as Marines face deadly North Vietnamese ambushes and artillery south of the DMZ and Army units chase an elusive enemy in the central highlands. Hanoi lays plans for a massive surprise offensive, and the Johnson Administration reassures the American public that victory is in sight.

Points to make:

- 1) “At the most basic level, though everything came down to the ‘body count’ – the preeminent statistic that served in those years as both the military’s scorecard and its raison d’etre. How else could you tell if the crossover point [when American soldiers would be killing more enemies than their Vietnamese opponents could replace] was within reach unless you tallied the enemy dead? The war managers, of course, gave little thought to what this strategy – basing the entire military effort on such an indicator as Vietnamese corpses – might mean for Vietnamese civilians.” ***Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam***. (New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt and Co., 2013), pp. pp. 42-3).

Episode Six – “Things Fall Apart” (January 1968-July 1968)

On the eve of the Tet holiday, North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces launch surprise attacks on cities and military bases throughout the south, suffering devastating losses but casting grave doubt on Johnson’s promise that there is “light at the end of the tunnel.” The president decides not to run again and the country is staggered by assassinations and unrest.

Points to make:

- 1) “Things Fall Apart” for whom? What does the title of this episode tell us about the point of view of the filmmakers?
- 2) There is a good deal of controversy about the effectiveness of the Tet (Tết) Offensive. Who won the Tet (Tết) offensive – and what exactly winning consisted of – is still a matter of intense debate. See for instance, David Hunt, Ngô Vĩnh Long: (“Remembering the Tet Offensive,” By David Hunt, 359-377 in Marvin E. Gettleman, Jane Franklin, Marilyn B. Young, H. Bruce Franklin, *Vietnam and America: A Documented History* (NY: Grove Press, 1995) and Long, Ngô Vĩnh, “The Tet Offensive and its aftermath”, pp. 23-45. (An updated and detached version of the realities of the Tet offensive in J. Werner and D. Hunt, eds. *The American war in Vietnam (1993)*. The first piece vividly describes the shock and power of the 1968 Tet (Tết) offensive, which many see as the key turning point in the war, especially for American public opinion. The second describes its multiple and contradictory impacts on the National Liberation Front as well as on the Americans and ARVN. In any case, the impact on the American public was powerful, demonstrating that there was no imminent ‘light at the end of the tunnel’, no imminent victory, in sharp contrast to General Westmoreland’s November, 1967 assurance. And a reassessment of American strategy was forthcoming. The NLF, especially in the second and, more so, third phases in May and August 1968 did take heavy losses. There are also differences as to the goals of the offensive; some American historians see the political impact on American consciousness as an unintended consequence. A stated goal of the offensive was a general uprising and overthrow of the Saigon government; this did not happen. Again sources differ on how and if the NLF recovered from these losses. For the standard US view, see Don Oberdorfer, *Tet!: The Turning Point in the Vietnam War*.

Episode Seven – “The Veneer of Civilization” (June 1968-May 1969)

Public support for the war declines, and American men of draft age face difficult decisions and wrenching moral choices. After police battle with demonstrators in the streets of Chicago, Richard Nixon wins the presidency, promising law and order at home and peace overseas. In Vietnam, the war goes on and soldiers on all sides witness terrible savagery and unflinching courage.

Points to make:

1. Nixon’s treasonous torpedoing of the Paris peace talks resulted in [4 more years and over 21,000 more U.S. deaths](#). His “secret plan” was a lie.
2. It's important to note that the law and order campaign was in response to the civil rights and black power movements.

Episode Eight – “The History of the World” (April 1969-May 1970)

With morale plummeting in Vietnam, President Nixon begins withdrawing American troops. As news breaks of an unthinkable massacre committed by American soldiers, the public debates the rectitude of the war, while an incursion into Cambodia reignites antiwar protests with tragic consequences.

Points to make:

1. My Lai was not the only “unthinkable massacre,” others were the ones committed by [Tiger Force](#), plus some [43 My Lais](#) reported by Chomsky carried out by S. Korean mercenaries.
2. Be sure the shootings of Black students at [Jackson State](#) are noted as well as the shooting of white students at Kent State.
3. “...incursion into Cambodia reignites antiwar protests with tragic consequences.” Why is this called an ‘incursion’ rather than the invasion it was? Is there a thorough discussion of the following? **March 18-May 26, 1970** Operation Menu – the secret bombing of Cambodia and Laos -- the codename of a [covert United States Strategic Air Command](#) (SAC) bombing campaign conducted in eastern [Cambodia](#) and [Laos](#) -- is launched. Operation Menu was succeeded by Operation Freedom Deal, which lasted until August, 1973. Operation Menu marked an illegal invasion of neutral countries which had not attacked the US and with which the US was not at war, setting a dangerous precedent for future preemptive military actions. Eventually more bombs were dropped on Laos and Cambodia than combined on Germany and Japan in World War II. Laos became the most bombed country in history. Agent Orange was also widely sprayed. The targets of these attacks were presumed sanctuaries and base areas of the [People's Army of Vietnam](#) (PAVN) and forces of the NLF, which Nixon and Kissinger thought, utilized them for resupply, training, and resting between campaigns across the border in the [Republic of Vietnam](#) (South Vietnam). The US also built up General Vang Pao’s Hmong forces in the northern and southern regions of Laos. The impact of the bombing campaign on the [Khmer Rouge](#) guerrillas, the PAVN, and Cambodian civilians in the bombed areas is disputed by historians, though undoubtedly it led to the collapse of a neutralist Cambodia.
4. This bombing campaign was carried on in extreme secrecy was closely supervised by Kissinger with the help of Air Force Colonel Claude Sitton. A dual reporting system (to circumvent the Strategic Air Command’s normal command and control system) was set up to pretend that South Vietnam was the target of the Cambodia and Laos bombings. The real documentation was destroyed (in a special furnace) while false documentation was created to justify expenditures.
5. The simultaneous rise of the Khmer Rouge and the increase in area and intensity of U.S. bombing between 1969 and 1973 incited speculation as to the relationship between the two events. [Ben Kiernan](#), Director of the Genocide Studies Program at [Yale University](#), argues: “Apart from the large human toll, perhaps the most powerful and direct impact of the bombing was the political backlash it caused...The [CIA's](#) Directorate of Operations, after investigations south of [Phnom Penh](#), reported in May 1973 that the communists there were successfully 'using damage caused by B-52 strikes as the main theme of their propaganda'... The U.S. [carpet bombing](#) of Cambodia was partly responsible for the rise of what had been a small-scale Khmer Rouge insurgency, which now grew capable of overthrowing the Lon Nol government”

Episode Nine – “A Disrespectful Loyalty” (May 1970-March 1973)

South Vietnamese forces fighting on their own in Laos suffer a terrible defeat. Massive U.S. airpower makes the difference in halting an unprecedented North Vietnamese offensive. After being re-elected in a landslide, Nixon announces Hanoi has agreed to a peace deal. American prisoners of war will finally come home – to a bitterly divided country.

Points to make:

1. “Massive U.S. airpower...” Everything up to nuclear weapons was used in Vietnam, refuting the “we had to fight with one hand tied behind our back” argument. [Laos](#): 2.5 million tons, more than on Japan and Germany in WWII; [Cambodia](#): 2.75 million tons; [Vietnam](#): 7 million tons.
2. The Christmas bombings or Operation Linebacker II (December 18-29, 1972) was a brutal assault on North Vietnam (DRV) (742 B-52 sorties) with the rationale of forcing the Vietnamese enemy back to the negotiating table. It provoked worldwide condemnation. In fact, the January 1973 Peace Accords were virtually the same as those already agreed upon in October 1972.
3. Jerry Lembcke’s *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam*. New York: New York University Press, 1998 effectively refutes the mythology of the antiwar movement’s attacks on US veterans. See also his article at <http://vietnamfulldisclosure.org/index.php/home-war-war-stories-myth-media-ken-burns-vietnam-series/>

Episode Ten – “The Weight of Memory” (March 1973-Onward)

While the Watergate scandal rivets Americans’ attention and forces President Nixon to resign, the Vietnamese continue to savage one another in a brutal civil war. When hundreds of thousands of North Vietnamese troops pour into the south, Saigon descends rapidly into chaos and collapses. For the next 40 years, Americans and Vietnamese from all sides search for healing and reconciliation.

Points to make:

1. The publication of the Pentagon Papers (exposing the US government’s long-term aggressive policy toward Vietnam) infuriated President Nixon and led to the creation of the White House Plumbers in July. 1971 Members of the Plumbers included E. Howard Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy. Its goal was to stop the leaking of classified information, such as the *Pentagon Papers*, to the news media. Its members engaged in illegal activities while working for the Committee to Re-elect the President (CREEP), including the Watergate break-in. It is important to connect the Watergate scandal to the movement against the Vietnam War.
2. No reparations ever made. “[Postwar reconstruction](#)” agreed to in Paris Peace Accords art. 21. [Nixon’s Feb. 1, 1973 letter to Pham Van Dong](#) promising over \$4 billion in aid.
3. Agent Orange: [24 million gallons](#) sprayed on [4.8 million people, 2.5 million acres](#), 1961-71.
4. Unexploded Ordnance (UO): [Laos](#) 78 million cluster “bomblets,” 34,000 people killed or injured since bombing stopped in 1973, 300 more/year. In [Vietnam](#) there have been over 100,000 injuries and fatalities from UO since the end of the war.
5. [Massive U.S. bombing of Cambodia](#) (see Episodes 8 & 9) destabilized Cambodia, making it easier for rebels under Pol Pot to conduct a coup. His Khmer Rouge movement was supported for many years by the U.S. and China.
6. The below points are paraphrased from a [7/26/17 article in Common Dreams](#) by Jerry Lembcke, author of “The Spitting Image.” The following arguments from Lembcke that are solid:
 - The accuracy of hostile-homecoming stories is questioned by a 1971 survey by Harris Associates conducted for the U.S. Senate that reported 94% of the veterans polled saying their reception from their age-group peers was friendly.
 - The “spat on” stories have the power to displace a more meaningful public memory of the war and the nature of the opposition to it; they present an irresistible story line of veteran-as-victim; vilify the anti-war movement and discredit veterans who joined it; provide a platform for conservative politicians that campus radicals and liberals in Congress lost the war.
7. We are searching for more than “healing and reconciliation.” We are [searching for the truth](#) about that war.