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"We Became the Cavalry":

The Transformation of Native American Warrior Identity

During the Vietnam War

Abstract

This project explores the complicated and distinctive relationship that Native veterans had with the U.S. military-industrial complex during and after the Vietnam War. Although veterans of all racial groups were forced to witness and perhaps even participate in atrocities against the Vietnamese population, Native veterans felt a strong racial, cultural, and historical connection with the Vietnamese people, which stemmed from the recognition that the way in which the Vietnamese were being racialized and colonized by the U.S. paralleled the experiences of Native communities. Through a close reading of autobiographies, film, and other sources, this paper argues that the tribal warrior identity that Indigenous veterans embodied in tandem with their identity as U.S. soldiers became increasingly problematic as they realized that they were becoming the foot soldiers of the very imperialism that subjugated their communities: they were becoming the "cavalry." The experiences of Native soldiers in Vietnam had a profound effect on both the warriors sent to Southeast Asia and on the communities they came home to, forever changing their relationships with the U.S. government and military.

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"War is not hell...it's worse."

-Billy Walkabout, Cherokee Vietnam Veteran (1949-2007)¹

I. Introduction

During the early years of the Vietnam War, Malcolm X, who at the time was a charismatic human rights activist and objector to America's military involvement in Vietnam, infamously noted in his autobiography: "Here lies a [Yellow Man], killed by a [Black Man], fighting for the [White Man], who killed *all* the [Red Men] [emphasis added]."² Malcolm X's dark wit touched on an unpleasant irony of the Vietnam War, but his hyperbolic statement held one gaping flaw: the "Red Men" were far from vanquished. Between the years of 1960 and 1973, over 42,000 Native Americans were deployed to Southeast Asia as soldiers of the United States military.³ Moreover, Native American Vietnam veterans experienced combat at a greater proportion than their relative population. In addition, during the war Native Americans suffered wounds, received citations, and earned medals of valor in combat at exceptionally high rates.⁴ However, despite the disproportionate contribution that Indigenous soldiers had in the Vietnam War, they have been largely forgotten by the mainstream narrative. As noted by Cherokee scholar Tom Holm in his book *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls*, despite the sizable population of Natives residing in the United States, Native Americans are still absent in the contemporary American narrative and mind. Holm states that "to non-Indians, [Native Americans] are still a subcategory of a subcategory—a shadow of a shadow."⁵

¹ Winona LaDuke, *Militarization of Indian Country* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013), 33.

² Tom Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans of the Vietnam War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 10-11.

³ *Ibid*, 10-1.

⁴ *Ibid*, 18.

⁵ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls*, 11.

Although the experiences of Indigenous veterans have been largely ignored by the federal government and popular media, many Native veterans and scholars have taken it upon themselves to express, examine, and honor the experiences of Native warriors of the Vietnam War. Through a careful examination of Native texts, both primary and secondary, it is clear that the Vietnam War had a profound effect, not just on the warriors who left for the humid rainforests of Southeast Asia, but also on the communities they came home to. Although Vietnam veterans of all racial groups were forced to witness and perhaps even participate in atrocities against the indigenous Vietnamese population, the Native veterans in particular felt a strong racial, cultural, and historical connection with the Vietnamese people. The visceral connection that Native veterans shared with the Vietnamese stemmed from a subconscious recognition that the way in which the Vietnamese were being purposefully racialized and colonized by the United States paralleled the experiences of Native communities during Manifest Destiny and into the 20th century. The tribal warrior identity that Indigenous veterans had in tandem with their identity as United States soldiers became increasingly problematic as they realized that they were becoming the foot soldiers of the very imperialism that subjugated their communities: they were becoming the "cavalry."

This essay will first provide historical context by explaining the militarization of Native communities by the government in the hopes of assimilating and civilizing the "savages" by recruiting their young men into the military-industrial complex. Despite the government's best efforts, however, Indigenous communities actively fought against the marginalization of their men and the genocide of their cultures and traditions by proudly bridging the identity of U.S. soldier with Native communities' notions of tribal warriors. Secondly, this essay will show that

the United States government and media purposely reproduced the imageries and rhetoric of the American-Indian Wars to justify U.S. involvement in Vietnam. The United States government and media constructed artificial associations between the "Indian Savages" and the "Viet Cong," until the notion of "savagery" became affiliated with both Native Americans and the Vietnamese, effectively "othering" both populations.⁶ Similar to the American-Indian Wars, the process of "othering" those the United States perceived as the enemy allowed for their military to wage a war of atrocities against the Vietnamese population, "Viet Cong" or not, recreating strategies and techniques once used to colonize Native American communities. Lastly, I will argue that the identities of Indigenous veterans as both tribal warriors and U.S. soldiers became problematic once they were confronted with the reality that by being part of the military they were essentially expanding the same imperialist endeavor that was once used to harm their own Native communities. The realization by Native veterans that they were embodying the role of the "cavalry" allowed the cognitive dissonance, which Indigenous soldiers were once able to negotiate by bridging their identities as tribal warriors and U.S. soldiers, to resurface. The cognitive dissonance created during the war followed the Native soldiers back to their home communities, forever changing their relations with the federal government during a politically tumultuous time for Indigenous communities in the United States.

⁶ For the purposes of this essay, I am making the conscious stylistic decision to place quotation marks around the phrases "Viet Cong" and "Charlies," because although there were in fact Vietnamese Communists (*Việt Nam Cộng-sản*) who formed armies to fight against the Saigon government and the American forces during the Vietnam War, the American military and policy makers employed the phrases as a form of racialisation similar to how Native Americans have been referred to as "Indians." During the Vietnam War, the Vietnamese population, especially the poor and the rural, were referred to as the "Viet Cong" and "Charlies" whether or not they were affiliated with the Communist Party. Furthermore, whether the individual was a man or a woman, a child or an elder, was inconsequential. They were all "Viet Cong" or "Charlies" in the eyes of the American government.

II. Historical and Theoretical Context

The Militarization of Native Communities

Colonel Pratt's infamous quote, "save the man, kill the Indian," reflects perfectly the federal government's intention of using the military-industrial complex to assimilate and civilize the "Indian savages" by incorporating young Native men into the United States Armed Forces in the hopes of weakening tribal communities and strengthening the U.S. army. The process of militarization of Native communities did not begin with Colonel Pratt and his boarding school, rather it is a practice that has been happening for centuries across different Indigenous cultures and physical locations.⁷ However, it is important to note that military indoctrination is a "formulated federal policy," similar to "Indian removal, the reservation system, allotment, Indian reorganization, [and] termination."⁸ Military indoctrination was primarily promoted by policy makers who viewed "war as a civilizer," by incorporating the community's young men into wars that were imperialist in nature, policy makers were hoping to commit cultural genocide by distancing the rising generation from their cultural heritage.⁹ In other words, if the United States federal government could not physically vanquish Native communities, they could try to erase the values that made them culturally independent. Even today, the primary narrative by outsiders for why such a large number of Native peoples have historically entered the armed services foregrounds acceptance by, and assimilation into, contemporary American society. Native scholars have rejected such justifications. For instance, Native historian Al

⁷ For more information on the federally mandated militarization of Native communities, please refer to Winona LaDuke's *Militarization of Indian Country* (2013).

⁸ LaDuke, *Militarization of Indian Country*, 10.

⁹ Al Carroll, *Medicine Bags and Dog Tags: American Indian Veterans from Colonial Times to the Second Iraq War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 1.

Carroll argues such narratives have been falsely perpetuated by academics to marginalize Native voices. However, most historians have a tendency to privilege government documents and the words of white philanthropists without critically examining the motives and biases of "paternalistic policymakers."¹⁰ From reading testimonies of Native Vietnam veterans from a variety of tribes and nations, it becomes clear that the reason why so many Indigenous men entered the army is not due to a desire for cultural assimilation, but rather due to a yearning for cultural revival and sustenance.¹¹

Warrior Traditions: Negotiations Between Identities

Although assimilation is the mainstream justification for why such a large number of Native peoples have volunteered for military service, Indigenous scholars have gravitated towards the explanation that Native communities have employed the military as an apparatus to hold on to, modify, revive, and create new traditions to further their own cultural agendas.¹² The narrative of assimilation and cultural colonization casts Native peoples as marginalized, denying them of any agency within governmental institutions. The narrative of assimilation falsely suggests that Native Americans completely derive their own sense of self-worth from the acceptance of white society, to such an extreme that they are willing to "risk life, limb, and sanity" in order to convince "Anglo Americans in general that they are patriotic," while simultaneously denying their own cultural heritage completely.¹³

Instead of saying that Natives peoples joined the military in order to assimilate into settler society, many Indigenous scholars posit that Native warriors have actively used the

¹⁰ Carroll, *Medicine Bags & Dog Tags*, 5.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 8.

¹² *Ibid*, 1.

¹³ *Ibid*, 7.

military to fight marginalization and cultural colonization within their communities by syncretizing their identities as tribal warriors and as U.S. soldiers. In 1937, sociologist Everett Stonequist released a famous study theorizing that groups become marginalized when members "divergent in race or possessing distinct cultures attempt to adjust themselves to a dominant society."¹⁴ The "marginal [wo]man" phenomenon occurs when members of a "subordinate group" attempts to acculturate or assimilate themselves to the "dominant culture." An individual becomes ensnared on the "periphery of both societies, because he or she is neither exactly the same as the rest of the subordinate group nor completely accepted as a full-fledged member of the dominate group."¹⁵ Stonequist's theory of the "marginal [wo]man" assumes that when a marginal group undergoes acculturation it automatically undergoes complete cultural assimilation by incorporating not just the "technologies, practices, and patterns," but also the meanings that the "dominant culture" subscribes to them. Cherokee scholar Tom Holm denies such assumptions in relation to Native communities. Holm asserts that when marginalized groups adapt to particular attributes of the "dominant society's culture," these groups concurrently make "those features uniquely their own."¹⁶ Various Indigenous societies have actively fought marginalization and cultural colonization by attaching unique meanings to certain adapted attributes that are distinctly different from the original meanings.

A relevant example is the way in which Lakotas have managed to incorporate the American flag into their artwork, clothing, and warrior ceremonies. The Lakotas use the flag not

¹⁴ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls*, 116-7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

as a symbol of conventional loyalty to the federal government, but rather as a way of connecting with their warrior ancestors who have previously employed the symbol, making the warriors feel more Lakota than American. Anthropologist William Powers describes the Lakotas' use of the American flag as a "replacement, metaphor, or substitute," where it becomes "a prop, an adoption of a strategy to utilize elements of a foreign culture to enhance their own culture."¹⁷ Howard Bad Hand, a Lakota elder, agrees with Powers' assessment. Bad Hand argues that the Lakotas adopted the American flag, an important symbol of the dominant culture, in order to "maintain a sense of being and as a substitute for the older warrior tradition...not as a sign of conventional patriotism."¹⁸ Thus, the Lakota's relationship with the flag concurs with Holm's hypothesis that when a community remains oriented towards change, they cannot be considered marginal, but rather a component of a dynamic society.¹⁹

Therefore, Native American veterans cannot be regarded as "marginal, totally assimilated, or completely acculturated" because they have largely oriented their enlistment within the military towards their own tribal traditions, thus syncretizing their identities as United States soldiers with their identities as tribal warriors.²⁰ It is important to keep in mind that there is no one "Indian Tribal Warrior Tradition." It is vital to recognize that within the United States alone there is somewhere between three to four hundred Indigenous communities, tribes and nations, each with their own distinct warrior traditions and values. However, for the purposes of this research project, I must use a "short hand" as described by Dr. Steve Silver in the documentary *Shadow of the Warrior*, which describes two very broad

¹⁷ Carroll, *Medicine Bags & Dog Tags*, 4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls*, 117.

ways in which Native American societies view war. The first, is that war is a way to demonstrate "one's courage, one's manhood, one's attainment of a position of honor."²¹ The second way is to view war "as a total aberration in the law of the universe. A complete breakdown of order. Therefore, something to be avoided at all cost."²² Although those two views could not possibly be further apart, almost all Native American communities approach war in the same way. They conclude that when they must send their young men into war they must properly prepare the individual through traditional ceremonies before they depart, and then the community must bring them back into their society in the same ways.²³

By participating in traditional ceremonies that display the support of their communities, Native veterans have been able to negotiate between their identities as U.S. soldiers and tribal warriors. They do this in order to alleviate the cognitive dissonance created by enlisting in a military institution that has been historically used to actively subjugate their communities. In Leon Festinger's book *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, Festinger postulates that cognitive dissonance can occur when an individual simultaneously holds contradictory values, beliefs, or ideas, creating mental discomfort.²⁴ For instance, when Native veterans enlist in the United States military, they are also enlisting within an institution whose values, beliefs, and ideas have been used to justify the perpetuation of atrocities against Indigenous communities. When such cognitive dissonance occurs, individuals will feel the natural pressure to reduce it; for Native veterans the technique utilized has been termed "negotiation" by theorist Linda Smith.

²¹ *Shadow of the Warrior: American Indian Counseling Perspective*. Directed by N/A. Washington D.C.: Veteran Administration, 1985.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), 9-11.

In order to alleviate the cognitive dissonance created by joining the military-industrial complex, Native veterans have negotiated between being both tribal warriors and United States soldiers, in an effort to maintain their own tribal beliefs, values, and ideas while acting within an institution that represents contradictory ones. The theoretical framework of negotiation is described in Linda Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies* as being "about respect, self-respect and respect for the opposition."²⁵ The framework of negotiation is especially important for military affairs between Indigenous tribes and the federal government due to the fact that treaties often include military alliances between the two entities. By psychologically negotiating between two seemingly contradicting identities, Native veterans were able to show respect to both their beliefs and traditions, as well as those of the United States military.

The processes of cultural syncretism and psychological negotiation becomes apparent when investigating why Native veterans decide to go to war. For instance, one of the most frequently cited reasons for Native enlistment has to do with forms of Native patriotism. Forms of Native patriotism within Indigenous communities are immensely different from the mainstream concept of Anglo-American patriotism. Veteran and anthropologist George Horse Capture of the Gros Ventre peoples describes Native patriotism in this way: "Our devotion and spirit is not for mom's apple pie, but for grandma's dried meat. We are dedicated to our country, the physical land, not the country as most other groups think of it. This is our country. It makes no difference whose name is on the deed. We are the landlords."²⁶

The reasoning behind joining an American war for Native patriotism becomes clear when the U.S. rhetoric about the Vietnam War is examined. As veteran Delano Cummings

²⁵ Linda Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (New York: Zed Books, 1999), 159.

²⁶ Carroll, *Medicine Bags & Dog Tags*, 5.

recollects in his memoir *Moon Dash Warrior: The Story of an American Indian in Vietnam, a Marine from the Land of Lumbee*, he mentions that one of the few things he learned about communism in High School was that "it was bad." Cummings also remembers that he read "about how Khrushchev said he wanted to 'bury' the United States."²⁷ Khrushchev's threat is significant because it makes evident how the United States marketed the Vietnam War. The United States justified sending young men to the jungles of Southeast Asia by utilizing the notion that Americans had to fight against communism in Vietnam or else they would have to fight against communism at home. American policymakers framed what was happening in Vietnam as though it was direct threat on the American way of life; and of more significance to Native veterans, a direct threat on the land. Early on in Cumming's autobiography, the author states that one of the reasons why he enlisted with the United States Marines is because he "wanted to fight for [his] country, and help stop communism, to keep it from taking over the world."²⁸ It is noteworthy that Cummings cites the spread of communism as one of his main reasons for fighting in Vietnam, because it suggests a subconscious fear of communism as a threat to American soil. What Cummings considers to be "his country" remains unclear in the text; however, since Cummings' sub-title refers to himself as a "marine from the Land of Lumbee," one extrapolation is that he is referring to his connection to the land of his ancestors, rather than to the government of the settlers.

Delano Cummings continues to inadvertently write about the processes of cognitive negotiation and cultural syncretism in his reflections. Cummings remembers how he felt

²⁷ Cummings, Delano, *Moon Dash Warrior: The Story of an American Indian in Vietnam, a Marine from the Land of Lumbee*. Livermore: Signal Tree Publication (1998), 14.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 8.

conflicted after killing a member of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA), because Cummings made the connection that the NVA soldier "is a person just like [Cummings], fighting for what he believe[s] in."²⁹ Just as quickly, however, Cummings is able to deny such an assertion by justifying the death of a fellow human being as simply the death of "a NVA Communist gook trying to take over the world."³⁰ Furthermore, Cummings mitigates his cognitive dissonance by declaring that "if [Cummings didn't] stop [the NVA soldier] here," then we would have had "to fight him at home."³¹ Therefore, by justifying Native enlistment in U.S. military as part of a historical tradition of protecting their lands, Indigenous veterans were allowed to negotiate their cognitive dissonance by syncretizing their traditional role as tribal warriors with the identity of U.S. Marines.

The ability of Native veterans to syncretize their identities as tribal warriors and U.S. Marines was made easy by the rhetoric and imagery of the United States Armed Forces. For instance, Stan Holder, a Vietnam veteran, recalls how his mother "always spoke about the warrior societies of [their] tribe, and the different tribes around [them]."³² Holder's mother would tell him about how the warriors "had to work to gain the respect of the people around them, and how they had to live, more or less, a life dictated to them by the society that they belonged to."³³ Like many Indigenous young men in America, Holder had a lot of male relatives who had been part of the Marine Corp at one time or another, and they would always tell Holder "that the Marine Corp was the hardest to cope with physically and mentally."³⁴ Holder

²⁹ Cummings, *Moon Dash Warrior*, 93.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Hearts & Minds*. Directed by Peter Davis.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

was recorded in Peter Davis' documentary *Hearts and Minds* as saying "I always looked at...the American fighting man as being a lot like the warriors of sort....Naturally [I] wanted to be the best...and I looked at the Marine Corp as being the elite of the elite, the warrior society in the United States."³⁵

The rhetoric used by veterans and the government to describe the Marine Corp correlates with how Native communities broadly view warrior societies. Anishinaabe activist Winona LaDuke writes that:

"Since time immemorial and to the present day, Indigenous peoples have related and maintained military or warrior societies to protect our land, people, traditions, and way of life. These responsibilities were vital to the success and survival of the tribe or nation, and thus warrior society members were highly regarded, esteemed, and often attained heroic status."³⁶

Similar to Indigenous warrior societies, the Marine Corp at the start of the Vietnam War had a reputation as America's main defense against communism, which threatened to taint America's "land, people, traditions, and way of life." In addition, the Marine Corp's duties were seen as fundamental to the survival of the nation, and its members were highly revered as heroes. Thus, as Ed Yava, a Vietnam veteran of mixed Tewa, Hopi, and Navajo blood puts it: knowing that so many "members of [his] family have served in some capacity or another [in] the First World War, Second, and the Korean Conflict," as soon as he got older it felt as if it was part of

³⁵ *Hearts & Minds*. Directed by Peter Davis.

³⁶ LaDuke, *Militarization of Indian Country*, 5.

his "obligation to enter the service."³⁷ Similar to Yava, for many Native men who were surrounded by family and friends who have at one time or another experienced being both a soldier and a warrior, joining the United States Armed Forces became almost an instinctive impulse when they came of age.

III. The "Indians" and the "Charlies"

The Fight against "Savagery"/"Communism"

Throughout the Vietnam War, the imageries and rhetoric of the "savage Indians," which were encapsulated in the Western genre of film, were purposefully appropriated by the United States government in order to racialize the Vietnamese people in the hopes of justifying America's colonial endeavors in Southeast Asia. The realm of Westerns is actually a "mythical landscape" created in the psyche of the American people.³⁸ The closure of the Western frontier during the last part of the 19th century created "a lost era...an empty space in which history would become legend and men would become heroes."³⁹ The 19th century historian, Frederick Jackson Turner, stated that "the conquest of the Western frontier" created a "mythical creation period in [America's] history," it became "the era in which America's character, values, and ethos was born."⁴⁰ Turner believed that the "men who won the West—the settlers, pioneers,

³⁷ *Shadow of the Warrior: American Indian Counseling Perspective*. Directed by N/A. Washington D.C.: Veteran Administration, 1985.

³⁸ William Indick, *The Psychology of the Western: How the American Psyche Plays Out on Screen* (Jefferson: Macfarland & Company, Inc., 2008), 11.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

soldiers, and cowboys—would become the legendary heroes who would go on to become the iconic role model for generations of Americans to come."⁴¹

Psychologist William Indick hypothesizes that Western films actually provide a "psychological catharsis" for the American audience, the Western genre grants the American population a primary "creation myth."⁴² Similar to the Book of Genesis, Westerns offer America "a historical interpretation of its ancestral heritage," as well as a "set of morals and values that provide meanings for its successors."⁴³ Therefore, Westerns generated a "canon of legends" that can be continuously retold over generations.⁴⁴ The myth of the Western frontier became most prominent during the early 20th century, a period of intense nationalism. It was during that time that the United States was attempting to define itself as a new world power, and used the concept of Manifest Destiny to frame the American empire within the rhetoric of "rugged determination, supreme courage, racial superiority, and the fulfillment of God's will," reflecting the tropes of the Western genre.⁴⁵ Additionally, similar to the rhetoric of the Western frontier, American policy makers tried to frame America's involvement in Southeast Asia as a contact zone between "savagery" and "civilization."⁴⁶ Akin to the Western frontier, Vietnam became the setting for the clash of "primal forces."⁴⁷ Success for the "civilized society" was dependent upon their ability to tame the "savage elements" within the Indigenous population through martial and legal enforcement.⁴⁸

⁴¹ Indick, *The Psychology of the Western*, 11.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

Policy makers consciously harkened back to the Western creation myth during the Vietnam War, in the hopes that using the tropes of the "gallant cavalry" versus the "savage Indians" on a "new frontier" would gain popular support among the American population, who had subconsciously embraced the narrative of the mythical Western frontier as their own. For instance, the United States Military would refer to territory under the control of the "Viet Cong" as "Indian Country," and American bases as "forts." American soldiers would define themselves with imageries straight from the "Wild West."⁴⁹ American air combat units were referred to as the "cavalry," while their helicopters were designated as the "scouts" and proudly displayed the crossed swords of the cavalry.⁵⁰ Soldiers would wear old cavalry hats, and units carried nicknames such as the "Muleskinners" and the "Pony Express."⁵¹

The re-application of Western rhetoric and imageries onto the Vietnam conflict is made even more obvious in the 1968 "pro-Vietnam War propagandist" film, the *Green Beret*, directed and starred in by the legendary John Wayne. Wayne became a Hollywood legend by embodying the trope of the "gallant cavalryman" in highly profitable Westerns.⁵² In the *Green Beret*, Wayne depicts a colonel of the United States Marines who is sent to Southeast Asia to help win the war against the "Viet Cong." Although Wayne's character might be a soldier of the Marine Corp, rather than the United States cavalry, the film makes little to no distinction between the two. For all audiences familiar with the silver screen, "the myths and codes of popular fiction exerts a powerful hold on the imagination," and it takes very little cognitive reasoning to

⁴⁹ Indick, *The Psychology of the Western*, 80.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² For more information, see John Ford's "Cavalry Trilogy," which stars John Wayne as the protagonists. The trilogy includes the films *Fort Apache*, *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, and *Rio Grande*. As the names suggests, Wayne's characters in all three movies was a highly regarded cavalryman whose main job was to subdue the "savage Indians" in the Western frontier.

conclude that *The Green Beret* had made the United States Cavalry interchangeable with the Marine Corp.⁵³ In addition, the film clearly suggests through context clues that the "savage and uncivilized Indigenous warriors" had been replaced with the "sadistic and tyrannical Viet Cong."⁵⁴ Hence, similar to how Westerns regarded the American-Indian conflicts, *The Green Beret* reduces the war in Vietnam to "simple-minded Manichean antitheses," which pitches the "good guys versus bad guys," "cowboys versus Indians," and "white men versus 'natives.'" ⁵⁵ Therefore, Wayne's *The Green Beret* was attempting to retell the creation myth of the Western frontier within a new setting; however, the structure of "the civilized" versus "the savages" remained unchanged.

During the Cold War, "pro-Vietnam" policy makers used the rhetoric and imageries of the Western frontier in the Vietnam War in hopes of indoctrinating the American population with the belief that they must "defend [Anglo] civilization from [communist] enemies both foreign and domestic."⁵⁶ The purposeful overlap of "savagery" and "communism" made the "Indians" of the Western frontier interchangeable with the "Charlies" of Southeast Asia. The American government and media casted the "Viet Cong" as sadistic tyrants who, if successful in defeating American democratization of Southeast Asia, would gather their communist brethren and conquer the United States next. The conflict directly parallels the narrative of "Indian savages" who were viewed as the greatest obstacle to the civilization of the Western frontier. In both the American-Indian Wars and the Vietnam War, the American federal government justified using "U.S. military power in terms of freedom, democracy, and

⁵³ Gilbert Adair. *Vietnam on Film: From the Green Berets to Apocalypse Now* (New York: Proteus Books , 1981), 35.

⁵⁴ Indick, *The Psychology of the Western*, 47.

⁵⁵ Adair, *Vietnam on Film*, 36.

⁵⁶ Carroll, *Medicine Bags & Dog Tags*, 46.

civilization."⁵⁷ Ironically, U.S. military involvement always entails the use of anti-democratic tactics both at home and abroad.⁵⁸ The rhetoric of freedom, democracy, and civilization against savagery has always absolved the United States Military and government of any responsibility for atrocities committed on populations considered racially, culturally, and politically inferior.

"The Only Good Indian/Gook is a Dead Indian/Gook"

The paralleled "othering" of both "Indians" and "Charlies" through seemingly inconsequential semantics and representation in media manifested itself in the reproduction of dehumanizing tactics, first used on Native populations during the American-Indian Wars, and then against the Indigenous Vietnamese population. Despite America's claim of being a "civilized" nation, the United States empire is completely dependent on strategies that terrorize foreign civilians while concurrently claiming to protect them from the terrorism of "others." The United States rejects the claim that there is a relationship between the categories of "terrorist" and "American soldier," as well as the association between "American military" and "American empire."⁵⁹ However, there has always been an "inherent contradiction between the ideal[s] of democr[atic] promotion and what it often takes to sustain the U.S. imperial project."⁶⁰ The assertion by an American Vietnam veteran "that in order to save the town, it became necessary to destroy it" epitomizes the ironic contradictions between the empire's ideals and its actions.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Aaron Belkin, *Bring me Men: Military Masculinity and the Benign Facade of the American Empire, 1898-2001* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 49.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

Even though the United States government claimed that they were entering the Vietnam War in order to protect the Indigenous population from the sadistic and tyrannical "Viet Cong," in a twist of cruel irony the United States government actually conducted the war in a manner that inevitably indoctrinated United States soldiers "into a culture of violence and brutality," which perpetuated the atrocities committed in Southeast Asia.⁶² The genocidal culture of the Vietnam War is perhaps best exemplified by the government sanctioned policy of "the crossover point." The "crossover point" is described by historian Nick Turse as "the moment when American soldiers would be killing more enemies than their Vietnamese opponents could replace."⁶³ The strategy of the "crossover point" is similar to how the United States conducted the American-Indian Wars, a technique of unabashed genocide. During the war, the racialization of the Vietnamese population as "gooks" was used to dehumanize them in the eyes of American soldiers, a tactic with an eerie resemblance to the racialization of "Indians" during the American-Indian Wars.

The Anishinaabe writer Jim Northrup recognizes that the racial slur "gook," much like the racialization of distinct Native tribes as simply "Indians," "made it easier to kill Vietnamese people during the war....We didn't see them as human beings, they weren't fathers, brothers, or sons. They were just a label."⁶⁴ The testimony of another Vietnamese veteran concurs with Northrup's statement, "the colonels called them gooks, the captain called them gooks, the staff all called them gooks. They were dinks, you know, subhumans."⁶⁵ The "othering" of the Vietnamese, and the subsequent dehumanization, allowed for the "Meer Gook Rule" (MGR) to

⁶² Nick Turse, *Kill Anything that Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2013), 42.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Jim Northrup, *Walking the Rez Road: Stories* (Golden: Fulcrum Publishing, 2013), 177.

⁶⁵ Turse, *Kill Anything that Moves*, 50.

flourish during the war as a strategy of meeting the necessary body count to hit the "crossover point."

The "Meer Gook Rule" is similar to the dogma that "the only good Indian, is a dead Indian," because it helped maintained the mentality "that all Vietnamese—northern and southern, adults and children, armed enemy and innocent civilian—were little more than animals, who could be killed or abused at will."⁶⁶ Thus, one of the most prominent phrases during the war was: "If it's dead and Vietnamese, it's VC."⁶⁷ The process of "othering," of turning an entire ethnic group into "uncivilized savages," into just "Viet Cong gooks," allowed for the United States to see them as less than human. As General Westmoreland ironically told director Peter Davis in his documentary *Hearts & Minds*, Westmoreland believed that "the Oriental [didn't] put the same high price on life as does the Westerner. Life is plentiful, life is cheap in the Orient. As the philosophy of the Orient expresses it, life is not important."⁶⁸ The process of "othering" allowed the United States to wage a war of atrocities and implement a culture of impunity within its own military, "the MGR enabled soldiers to abuse children for amusement; it allowed officers sitting in judgment at courts-martial to let off murderers with little or no punishment; and it paved the way for commanders to willfully ignore rampant abuses by their troops while racking up 'kills' to win favor at the Pentagon."⁶⁹ As one marine would explain to another, committing atrocities on the Vietnamese population "shouldn't bother you at all, just some more dead gooks. The sooner *they* all die, the sooner we go back to

⁶⁶ Turse, *Kill Anything that Moves*, 50.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 47.

⁶⁸ *Hearts & Minds*. Directed by Peter Davis. Chicago, IL: Home Vision, 2002.

⁶⁹ Turse, *Kill Anything that Moves*, 50.

the World [emphasis not added]."⁷⁰ However, for many Native veterans the atrocities that they were often forced to witness and commit in Vietnam bothered them a great deal. They felt a conscious and subconscious racial, cultural, and historical connection with the Indigenous Vietnamese population, since their own Native communities once underwent the same forms of racialization and colonization at the hands of the American empire.⁷¹ Furthermore, the Native veterans felt a great deal of cognitive dissonance because as U.S. Marines in Vietnam they were the reincarnation of the United States imperial foot soldiers, historically used to subjugate their own Native communities in the U.S. They had become the "cavalry."

IV. Transformative Identities

"We Became the Cavalry"

Many Native veterans experienced a visceral empathy with the Vietnamese population as they underwent a similar brutal racialization and colonization process at the hands of the American empire. As Northrup explains in his writing, "the Native American soldier when confronted with the [Vietnamese] would actually be looking into more of a mirror than if the Native was looking at a fellow United States soldier."⁷² Native soldiers and the Indigenous population of Southeast Asia had comparable "tones and color of skin pigment."⁷³ When the Native veterans looked at the Vietnamese people, they saw their parents, siblings, cousins, and friends. The physical similarities were uncanny for both the Native soldiers and the Vietnamese people. Many Native veterans mentioned retrospectively that they would often be confused for

⁷⁰ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls*, 148

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² LaDuke, *The Militarization of Indian Country*, 17-8.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

tall Vietnamese soldiers by the Vietnamese population, and when speaking to native veterans the Vietnamese villagers would use the phrase "you...me...same-same."⁷⁴ Therefore, there was a cross-cultural recognition of interrelation, even though the two Indigenous groups originally resided on the opposite sides of the globe.

The connection felt by the Native veterans went far deeper than layers of skin. Navajo veteran Ron C. Wood recognized the Vietnamese people as "honest, hardworking, reserved country people...and [he] thought they were very similar to the rural Navajos in aspects of their lifestyle and mannerisms....The [only] major difference was they grew rice with abundant water while [the] Navajos grew corn with precious little water."⁷⁵ Furthermore, with the Civil Rights and Red Power Movements unfolding at home, the Native soldiers felt greater alienation from their Anglo-American soldiers, and great identification with the Indigenous Vietnamese population.⁷⁶ This connection was made stronger by the fact that the "Viet Cong" were a nationalistic, underdog guerilla army that was attempting to expel the United States empire from their lands, and was largely succeeding. The "Viet Cong," which the United States government established as their enemy, at times felt more like an ally for the Native veterans whose peoples were experiencing the same struggles at home.

Because the Native veterans could connect with the Indigenous Vietnamese population on such a visceral level, when many Native veterans witnessed or participated in the atrocities that were being committed on the Vietnamese by the United States government, they felt a degree of horror that was incomparable to their fellow soldiers. This horror was intensified by

⁷⁴ Holm, *Strong Minds, Wounded Souls*, 149

⁷⁵ Ron C. Wood, *Vietnam: Remembrance of a Native Soldier* (Bloomington: iUniverse, Inc., 2011), 74.

⁷⁶ Carroll, *Medicine Bags & Dog Tags*, 148.

the realization that they were essentially embodying the same role as the colonizers who once martially oppressed their own tribes. As Harold Barse, a Kiowa who has counseled many Native veterans explains, "this time they were the cavalry, and it was...like what the cavalry did to us and they had to reconcile that."⁷⁷ Dwight Birdwell, a Cherokee veteran who soon became disillusioned during his deployment, concurs with Barse's statement by saying:

"I still wanted to believe in the war—these so called gooks were the people we were fighting for!—and blended in with all of that was the thought of the cruelties inflicted upon the American Indian at the hands of the U.S. Army. Being of Cherokee heritage, I didn't want to turn around three or four generations later and perpetuate the same sort of abuse myself, especially with people who were poor farmers just like my people were poor farmers, and in some cases looked almost exactly like Indians I knew back in Oklahoma."⁷⁸

Thus, the ability of Native veterans to negotiate their cognitive dissonance by syncretizing their identities as tribal warriors and U.S. soldiers became complicated with the realization that they were now in fact the imperialistic cavalry that were being used to suppress a different Indigenous population.

The previously combined identities of tribal warrior and U.S. soldier began to unravel as the Native veterans felt increasing cognitive discomfort, and began to question whether or not participating in the Vietnam War as an American G.I. was an honorable path concurrent with their own tribal traditions. The Indigenous veterans begin to make the distinction between an honorable "war fought to defend the people and land," and a "war fought to create or sustain

⁷⁷ Carroll, *Medicine Bags & Dog Tags*, 148.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 149.

an empire, to impose colonial rule on an unwilling population."⁷⁹ This is reflected in Louis Owen's novel *The Sharpest Site*, in which his protagonist Cole McCurtain, a Mississippi Choctaw, comes to the realization that the Choctaw warrior tradition became completely distorted from its original intent by the U.S. military. McCurtain realizes that being a Choctaw warrior is no longer about honor or sacrifice, but rather the intent has been warped into the willingness to kill.⁸⁰ This coincides with Native Vietnam veteran Robin LaDue's statement about how he grew up being told that he was "destined to be a warrior as [his] father and grandfather were before [him]."⁸¹ LaDue voluntarily enlisted in the army to honor his ancestral heritage, and "got to be very good at killing" in Vietnam.⁸² LaDue remembered how a "VC prisoner," once pointed to LaDue's "skin and hair and eyes and said 'same, same,'" indicating the physical similarities between LaDue and the "Viet Cong."⁸³ After the incident, LaDue developed a deep hatred for that particular prisoner, until LaDue realized that the prisoner was right, that LaDue had become a "red man killing yellow men for the white man."⁸⁴ LaDue recognized that "there was no honor in what [he] had done" in Vietnam up to that point, and felt that he had "shamed [him]self and the gifts of courage and strength that had been given to [him]."⁸⁵ Afterwards, LaDue put down his gun and could no longer bring himself to kill. He, and many other Native warriors like him, felt there was so little honor in America's military involvement in Vietnam, and felt that being complicit in America's imperialistic endeavor were carrying him further away

⁷⁹ La Duke, *The Militarization of Indian Country*, 3.

⁸⁰ Carroll, *Medicine Bags & Dog Tags*, 33.

⁸¹ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls*, 149.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

from his own warrior traditions.⁸⁶ Therefore, the great cognitive dissonance experienced by the Indigenous veterans who represented both the identities of tribal warriors and U.S. soldiers, is echoed in the personal statements and literature that has been produced by themselves and their communities.

Anishinaabe veteran Jim Northrup notes in his writing the great irony of being a Native veteran. Northrup mentions how his "father was a Grunt in Vietnam, [his] great Uncle Calvin survived the first wave of the invasion at Normandy beach. [His] Grandfather survived his stint as a forward observer in Korea."⁸⁷ The legendary Lakota warrior Crazy Horse, however, outlasted the wave of attacks from the United States government to steal the land. Northrup goes on to mention that when a Native American enlists with the United States army, the government sees the legendary warrior Crazy Horse. However, in Vietnam the government also saw the legendary rebel Crazy Horse reflected in every "Viet Cong." It was not only the government who saw the similarities between what Crazy Horse represents and what the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) were trying to accomplish. As Northrup mentions, "guilt [was] found among [the Native men] when they searched the bodies of the fallen Crazy Horses of the Viet Cong."⁸⁸ What Northrup is expressing is the realization by Native veterans that they were actively participating in the suppression of an Indigenous group who were essentially recreating the legendary battles that the young Native men grew up hearing about and revering. Although Native men felt a subconscious sense of guilt, they still had to play the role of the cavalry if they wanted to survive in Vietnam. However, the guilt created by the cognitive

⁸⁶ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls*, 149.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ LaDuke, *The Militarization of Indian Country*, 17-8.

dissonance they carried with them throughout their tours followed them back to their Native communities once their deployment ended. The pivotal experiences of Native veterans in Vietnam would change how they interacted with each other, their communities, and the U.S. government forever.

Forgotten Warriors

When the Native warriors returned to their homelands from their tours in Southeast Asia, they would experience powerful feelings of anger, resentment, and betrayal towards the United States government. The intense emotional responses of Native veterans experienced stemmed not only from the almost complete disregard for their disproportionate involvement in the Vietnam War by the federal government, but also because they found themselves once again subjected to a governmental administration that exerted an unnatural amount of control over their social, political, cultural, and economic livelihoods.⁸⁹ The domestic colonialism that oppressed and exploited Native communities became increasingly abusive towards Indigenous populations as both the Civil Rights and Red Power movements gained greater momentum. The Indigenous Vietnam veterans returned to communities that were plagued by an "atmosphere of tension and turbulence."⁹⁰ The political turmoil between the Indigenous communities and the federal government would make many Native warriors question their own involvement in what was clearly a colonial endeavor by the United States government. An unnamed Creek-Cherokee veteran would testify that he wondered "why [he] was fighting to uphold a U.S. treaty commitment halfway around the world when the United States was violating its treaty

⁸⁹ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls*, 171.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 174-5

commitments to [his] own people and about [three hundred] other Indian nations?"⁹¹ The unnamed Creek-Cherokee warrior would end his personal statement with the powerful realization that he was "fighting the wrong people, pure and simple."⁹² Similarly, many returned Indigenous warriors concluded almost immediately that they should not have helped the American military wage a war in the rainforests of Southeast Asia; rather, if they wanted to gain honor by fighting an oppressive and tyrannical government then they should have simply stayed at home.⁹³

Although the experiences of Native warriors in Vietnam were deeply traumatic for both the individuals and the communities they returned home to, it did provide for Native communities in the United States a profound "unifying experience."⁹⁴ The unique experiences of Native Vietnam veterans not only forged strong relational bonds between warriors of differing tribes, but it also created, or recreated, inter-tribal relations in unprecedented ways. Additionally, in the wake of the Vietnam War, urban Natives whom the federal government had expected to neglect their Indigenous identities, actively worked to reconnect with tribal communities. Furthermore, the Vietnam War brought Native warriors in close contact with Indigenous communities from other parts of the world, which facilitated a recognition by Native communities that there were opportunities for cross-cultural interrelationships with other Indigenous tribes outside of the Americas, transforming how Native Americans saw themselves in a global context.⁹⁵ Therefore, the cognitive dissonance experienced by Native veterans who

⁹¹ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls*, 174-5.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Carroll, *Medicine Bags & Dog Tags*, 162.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

could no longer fully negotiate between their identities as U.S. soldiers and tribal warriors, had a deep and lasting transformative effect on the tribal communities they returned home to.

The transformative effects created by Native warriors returning home reached beyond tribal relationships, the divergence of the identity of tribal warrior from U.S. soldier also created an opportunity for Native communities to redefine what it meant to be a warrior in concurrence with their traditional tribal beliefs, values, and ideas.⁹⁶ When Native veterans returned to their communities, they found that the military that they fought alongside with against the Indigenous populations of Southeast Asia had turned against their tribal brothers and sisters at home.⁹⁷ The cognitive dissonance created during their traumatic tours in Vietnam, combined with their intense emotional responses to what they felt were a series of betrayals by the federal government that they once fought for, radicalized many of the Native veterans and spurred them into action.⁹⁸ In many ways, when the Native identity of tribal warrior diverged itself from that of U.S. soldier, it found an outlet in tribal activism against the federal government. For instance, many of the leaders of the American Indian Movement (AIM) were Vietnam veterans who had recently returned home from war.⁹⁹ Ironically, the radicalization of Native veterans and their communities were dealt with by military planners and conservative politicians in a similar fashion as the domestic Communists. Both the "Indians" and the "Commies" became the enemies of the dominant settler government, as they both

⁹⁶ Carroll, *Medicine Bags & Dog Tags*, 162.

⁹⁷ LaDuke, *The Militarization of Indian Country*, 6.

⁹⁸ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls*, 175.

⁹⁹ LaDuke, *The Militarization of Indian Country*, 6.

were viewed as the antagonistic "Reds" who had to be demolished by military means because they represented direct threats to the American way of life.¹⁰⁰

The events of Wounded Knee II in 1973, have become the quintessential example for how the Vietnam War dramatically altered how Native communities and the federal government interacted with one another. Wounded Knee II began when the members of the Lakota tribe, and followers of the American Indian Movement (AIM), occupied the Pine Ridge Reservation to "protest corruption and violence by the tribal government, ongoing poverty, and the violation of treaty rights."¹⁰¹ The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Special Operations Group (SOG) of the U.S. Marshall (USM) would arrive at Wounded Knee within the first two hours of the occupation. The standoff at Wounded Knee between the American Indian Movement and the U.S. government would last a total of seventy-one days.¹⁰² The interface between the two entities during that time would be significant in exposing how the relationships between Indigenous communities and the dominant settler government had shifted in the aftermath of the Vietnam War.

During Wounded Knee II, and other incidences of civil disobedience by Indigenous communities in the United States, many of the Native activists and federal agents involved had just recently returned from combat duty in Vietnam, and subsequently brought what they had learned from fighting a guerilla war in the jungles of Southeast Asia to the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. For the Native soldiers turned activists, there was an overwhelming sense of irony due to the fact that they were taking "up arms against the very

¹⁰⁰ Carroll, *Medicine Bags & Dog Tags*, 163.

¹⁰¹ LaDuke, *The Militarization of Indian Country*, 6.

¹⁰² Carroll, *Medicine Bags & Dog Tags*, 165.

system they had seemingly defended in war, often only a few months earlier."¹⁰³ As the *Akewesane Notes* of the Mohawk Nation would observe, many of the "young men defending Wounded Knee [were] militarily skilled and trained. Almost all [were] Vietnam veterans, and most of those were in the Special Forces—the Green Berets. In Southeast Asia they learned about guerrilla warfare, courtesy of the U.S. government, and now they are using what they learned for their people."¹⁰⁴ What the *Akewesane Notes* ultimately noticed was the shift in the identities of tribal warriors from that of U.S. soldier serving the federal government, to the identity of Native activist fighting to gain further recognition and autonomy for their tribal communities. Therefore, the cognitive dissonance that the Native veterans experienced in the Vietnam War was a catalyst for the decoupling of the identities of tribal warriors and U.S. soldier, and the emergence of new warrior traditions that were centered around Indigenous activism and disobedience against the government and military of the dominant settler state.

V. Conclusion

Although a number of historians have adhered to the notion that Native veterans joined the United States Military out of a desire to assimilate into Anglo-American culture, an analysis of Native memoirs and personal statements have demonstrated that this hypothesis is an oversimplification. Many Native scholars have noted that for the narrative of assimilation to operate, the enduring historical pattern of Native warriors appropriating and symbols of the dominant settler society must be completely disregarded. However, by appropriating the symbols of the dominant culture, Native communities are able to sustain their own cultures and express their substantial agency. Therefore, Native communities have been able to resist

¹⁰³ Carroll, *Medicine Bags & Dog Tag*, 164.

¹⁰⁴ Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls*, 178-9.

marginalization within the military by syncretizing the role of tribal warrior with the identity of United States soldier. In addition, Native warriors used the framework of negotiation to alleviate the psychological discomfort Native warriors experienced as a result of being members of two institutions with seemingly divergent beliefs, values, and ideas.

However, during the Vietnam War Native veterans witnessed firsthand the United States government's calculated strategy of using the Western tropes of the "gallant cavalry," i.e. the United States Marines, versus "savage Indians," i.e. the Viet Cong gooks, in the "new frontier" to justify America's colonial enterprise in Southeast Asia. The U.S. government reproduced the rhetoric and imageries that have been continually used to racialize Native American communities back home, in order to "other" the Indigenous Vietnamese abroad. The "othering" of the "Viet Cong gooks" allowed the United States Military to utilize revamped techniques of genocide from the American-Indian Wars to commit atrocities, with almost complete impunity, on the Vietnamese population.

During their tours in Southeast Asia, many Native warriors arrived at the conclusion that the Vietnam War was only one instance in a longer history of United States colonial endeavors at the expense of Indigenous populations who were deemed racially, culturally, and politically inferior. The genesis of America's imperial history of course, was the Native American tribes that fell under the colonial influence of the United States government. Not only did the Native veterans recognize a historical connection to the Vietnamese people, but they also noticed a physical and cultural one as well. The Native veterans of Vietnam eventually realized that by being part of the U.S. Armed Forces, they have essentially become the successors of the U.S. Cavalry, which compelled their cognitive dissonance to resurface.

The cognitive dissonance created by Native veterans' experiences in Vietnam triggered the disassociation of tribal warrior from U.S. soldier by Native veterans. When the veterans returned to their home communities, their feelings of anger, resentment, and betrayal were only intensified by the political turmoil between their Indigenous communities and the federal government. However, both the Vietnam War and the turbulent relationship between Native communities and the United States government provided the veterans and their communities with valuable opportunities. First, the Vietnam War provided the Native communities with a unifying experience; an event which changed domestic tribal interactions, and shifted how Native communities viewed themselves globally. Secondly, the decoupling of tribal warrior from U.S. soldier allowed Indigenous communities to redefine what it meant to be a tribal warrior that better represented their tribal values and beliefs. Both outcomes were catalysts for the radicalization of Native communities and social movements, which were epitomized by the events of Wounded Knee II.

As Anishinaabe writer Jim Northrup acutely noted at the end of his poem, "Walking Point":

*The shooting is over in five seconds
The shakes are over in a halfhour
The memories are over never.¹⁰⁵*

Indeed, for Native Vietnam veterans the memories of war will never leave them. Thus, how the Native warriors and their communities have chosen to honor those experiences has inevitably changed how Native veterans interact with themselves, their communities, and the United States government forever.

¹⁰⁵ Northrup, *Walking the Rez Road*, 15.

Epilogue

This project was inspired by very personal interest. As a Vietnamese-American whose family was an adamant supporter of the Saigon government during the Vietnam War, and whose paternal grandfather was enlisted in the United States Navy long before he ever became an American citizen, I had a great deal of personal stakes in this research project. For as long as I could remember, my grandfather's military service has affected how my family viewed themselves as Vietnamese-Americans.

However, in winter quarter of 2014, I enrolled in Professor Jung's junior history seminar "Race, War, and Empire," which prompted me to read Nick Turse's book *Kill Anything that Moves*, as well as watch the documentary *Winter Soldier*. For the first time in my life, I was forced to hear testimonies and view pictures that depicted the atrocities conducted at the hands of the United States government and military on the Indigenous population of Vietnam.

The images and stories I saw and heard were like punches to the gut, for a long while I felt as if I would never breathe again, that I would never fully recover from what I had heard and witnessed. Even though the majority of my family was safe in Saigon for the duration of the war, when I saw the dead bodies of Vietnamese elders stacked high, I saw my own grandparents and grand uncles and aunts. When I heard about children being torn to shreds for the amusement of the U.S. soldiers I thought of my little brother and cousins. When I heard accounts of women being brutally raped and killed to appease the murderous impulses of soldiers, I thought of my sister and mother, and, admittedly, myself.

This disturbing information placed me in direct conflict with the historical narrative that my family had created for themselves. How could my grandfather be part of a military-

industrial complex that committed such obscene atrocities against so many innocent civilians? A civilian population that was, for all intents and purposes, our people? How could my family fully embrace an empire that destroyed their country in the attempts to colonize it? How could I be both Vietnamese and an American citizen with such a history behind me? Needless to say, I experienced a great deal of cognitive dissonance and emotional turmoil that I did not know how to work through.

For months I found myself unable to verbally express my own discomfort. Although my friends lent me sympathetic ears, I found that they could not understand my personal discord because they lacked the cultural heritage that I was born with. Furthermore, I could never fully broach the subject with my parents. Due to the great trauma they experienced after the Fall of Saigon and the vicious retribution they faced at the hands of the Communist Party of Vietnam, I could not bring myself to disturb the peace they had found for themselves as Americans living in the United States.

Although I continued to live my life as I normally would, for months I felt as if there was a part of me that was left in an abyss of anger, resentment, and betrayal. I did not know it at the time, but when I began the research process for this project, I also began a journey of healing and understanding. My research brought me in direct conversation with Native American veterans that felt a cognitive dissonance akin to mine. The relational understanding that I greatly desired, and could find neither in my family nor my friends, I found in the memoirs and personal statements written by Native veterans who grappled with similar feelings and questions. By working through their stories, and trying to make sense of their cognitive dissonance and emotional turmoil, I found that I was inadvertently doing the same for myself.

Before this project, I never considered the research process as a method of healing, although before this year I never needed this sort of healing. Although I do not believe that I have fully negotiated my cognitive dissonance, nor that I should ever fully be rid of such internal conflict, I do believe I have gained a greater perspective that will help me resolve the negative feelings that have plagued and paralyzed me for so long. For this reason, and many others, I am overwhelmingly grateful that I have embarked on this research.

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