

THE VIETNAM WAR VETERANS' READJUSTMENT PROBLEMS TO CIVILIAN LIFE IN *BORN ON THE FOURTH OF JULY* (1989) BY OLIVER STONE

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Abstract:

*This article examines the readjustment problems veterans cope with on coming home from Vietnam. Filmmakers like Oliver Stone casts light on veterans readjusting to civilian life. They seek to tear down the cinematic notion of the triumphant war hero. Despite being the embodiment of the American identity, the soldiers are portrayed as threatening the United States military dominance. Many coming home films such as *Born on the Fourth of July* represent returning Vietnam veterans as dysfunctional because they epitomize the failure of the American cultural myths founding America. They provide deeper insights into the war at home, which is even more traumatizing than what they experience in the jungle. They contend with the antiwar protests and are called baby-killers by the US public. In Stone's film, Ron Kovic attempts to assimilate back to society, but the lingering impacts of the war on homecoming seem to destroy his life forever. This paper explores the reintegration of soldiers into civilian life while focusing, particularly, on the reception in families, the antiwar protests and the lack of hero's welcome. It also highlights the US government ignoring these military service members. The paper discloses the feeling of a spit on the back and the characterization of the scapegoat image of soldiers, resulting from the public opinion's hostilities. They find themselves increasingly in a permanent state of war and social disintegration while coming home from war.*

Key words: *Readjustment, US public, Anti-war, Veteran, Civilian Life*

Résumé :

*Cet article examine les problèmes de réinsertion auxquels les vétérans font face de leur retour du Vietnam. Les cinéastes tels que Oliver Stone mettent en lumière la situation de ces derniers, réadaptant à la vie civile. Ils cherchent à renverser la notion cinématographique du héros triomphant. Les soldats représentent une menace contre la domination militaire bien qu'ils incarnent l'identité Américaine. Les films de retour de guerre, comme *Born on the Fourth of July*, font une représentation des vétérans troublés par l'échec des mythes culturels fondant l'Amérique. Ils donnent un aperçu plus approfondi de l'expérience de la guerre qui est surtout plus traumatisante au retour que dans la jungle. Les soldats n'ont pas seulement affronté les manifestations pacifistes mais ils ont aussi été qualifiés de baby killers par le public américain. Dans le film de Stone, Ron Kovic tente de réintégrer la société, mais sa vie semble détruite pour toujours à cause des séquelles persistantes de la guerre. Cette étude explore la réinsertion des soldats dans la vie civile en insistant, particulièrement, sur leur réception dans les familles, les mouvements anti-guerre et l'accueil importun du héros. Elle souligne aussi l'ignorance du gouvernement Américain envers ces militaires. L'article dévoile la sensation d'une crache sur le visage et l'image de la caricature du bouc émissaire du soldat découlant des hostilités de l'opinion publique. Ils se*

retrouvent de plus en plus dans un état de guerre permanent et de désintégration sociale en revenant de la guerre.

Mots-clés : *Réadaptation, Public Américain, Anti-Guerre, Vétéran, Vie Civile*

Introduction

In post- Vietnam era, the films like *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) by Oliver Stone lay foundation for the American soldiers' readjustment issues, in which they try to remove themselves from the traumatic events. The cultural construction of Vietnam veterans plays a central role in shaping the remembrance of the war. The veterans' embodiments of the war and the difficult transition from military to society become a metaphor for the nation's problems in integrating the Vietnam experience into the pattern of national life. Veterans' readjustment problems refer to the difficulties that military personnel face while transitioning from active service to civilian life. These problems can be psychological, social, economic and physical, affecting their ability to reintegrate into society. Vietnam experience contextualizes the film within the interrelated history Hollywood war cinema. Actually, filmmakers like Oliver Stone delve into the reintegration of Vietnam veterans into US society and the political and medical discourses surrounding the conceptualization of PTSD. The cultural construction of Vietnam veterans plays a central role in shaping the remembrance of the war. The veterans' embodiments of the war and the difficult readjustment to civilians become a metaphor for the nation's problems in integrating the Vietnam experience into the pattern of national life. These difficulties are intensified by the controversial nature of the war.

A growing body of literature supports the notion that the relationship between experience of the war and the stand American researchers, scholars and writers have had with regard to the war. In post-Vietnam period, filmmakers stand out to find a cultural mode of dealing with readjustment problems to civilian life. *Coming Home* (1978) is a depiction of Captain Bob Hyde who faces a lack of positive welcome as a real hero. This film features the injustices many Vietnam veterans undergo on homecoming. In *The Deer Hunter* (1978), Cimino depicts Michael and Steven's returning home as tough as the war itself. The hero of the movie, Michael, especially, finds the transition difficult. In Mason's

book, *In Country* (1985), Sam goes through a similar process. Sam's reaction towards her father reflects the civilians' behavior, protesting against the veterans who return from Vietnam. In their films, Oliver Stone, Michael Cimino and Ted Kotcheff portray the vets as unable to assimilate back into society. They thus create a new ideology while taking into account the case of the veteran. He is described as the one who is powerfully affected by the viciousness of war. He returns to the US rather than a triumphant hero, but as a social outcast unable to function in society.

In post-Vietnam films, the portrayal of veterans in American cinema has often focused on either glorifying their heroism or depicting them as broken individuals and struggling with integration. Oliver Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July* does not only offer a critical perspective, but it also challenges the traditional war narratives by presenting the harsh realities of veteran readjustment. However, despite extensive academic discussion, several questions remain regarding the film's depiction of veteran struggles and its impact on public perception. This study seeks to address the following research problems. In which ways does the film challenge traditional notions of masculinity and the war hero archetype through Kovic's struggles with disability? How does the film depict the societal and familial rejection faced by returning veterans, and what does this suggest about the American response to Vietnam War veterans? What role does the film play in shaping political discourse on war, and how does Kovic's transformation into anti-war activist reflect broader cultural shifts in Post-Vietnam America? How do Oliver Stone's cinematic techniques contribute to the emotional and political impact of the film, reinforcing its critique of the war and the treatment of veterans? By analyzing these questions through psychological, sociological, and political framework, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of *Born on the Fourth of July* as a critical text in war literature and cinema, highlighting its significance in discussions of veteran trauma, identity and activism. It provides an insight into the reversal process of transitioning from military culture back to civilian culture, which is a crucial issue, going beyond their control. By investigating these issues associated with post-Vietnam reintegration problems to civilian life may help people clearly understand the aftermath of the Vietnam War on US cultural, social and political history.

Post-modernist criticism is used in this study for interpreting the meaning of a text in literature. This literary criticism seeks to delve into the fragmented identity, disillusionment and the deconstruction of dominant war veterans. The film, *Born on the Fourth of July*, challenges traditional narratives of heroism and war, subverts the patriotic myths and questions American exceptionalism. Oliver Stone gives a portrayal of characters like Ron Kovic who cope with fragmented identity and readjustment problems to society. Kovic represents the fragmented postmodern self. As a firm believer in the American ideal, he undergoes an identity crisis while realizing that the country he fights for has abandoned him. In the movie, Stone explores Kovic's return as a journey into isolation rather than celebration. In that same vein, Erving Goffman's *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963) highlights how Kovic's physical disability and anti-war mark him as an outsider. Once a symbol of patriotic duty, he becomes a marginalized figure, unwelcome in both pro-war and anti-war circles. Likewise, Paul Fussell, in his work, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975) discusses how war veterans often experience a loss of linguistic and cultural connection with civilians. Tim O'Brien, through the book, *The Things They Carried* (1990) examines similar themes of veteran isolation, depicting returning veterans soldiers who feel disconnected from those who have not experienced war. The post-modernist theory used in this study helps understand a counter-narrative of disillusionment of characters and their fragmented experience.

This study aims to investigate the Vietnam War veterans' readjustment problems to civilian life. For a well structure of this study, we divide it into three parts. The first part looks at veterans' disillusionment with the American dream, resulting from social alienation and a lack of public support. In the second part, we examine the alienation from society and the fragmented experience and the crisis of self and the last and final part investigates the deconstruction of patriotism and nationalism, deriving from the deceitfulness of the US government.

1. Social Alienation and Lack of Public Support

The readjustment problems of veterans derive mainly from social alienation and a lack of public support, intensifying the controversial nature of war. Actually, war is described as a kind of initiation-ritual for young men to obtain masculine status. Through the book, *The War*

Prayer, Mark Twain examines the ideology of masculinity and the way soldiers are welcome while returning home after the war. Twain further analyzes this phenomenon when he points out that: “*Then home from the war, bronzed heroes, welcomed, adored, submerged in golden seas of glory!*” (Twain, 1935:680). In that light, Twain takes into account the volunteers who, in *The War Prayer*, expect to be welcome back from war as bronzed heroes and true men.

The public becomes better informed as to a larger degree about what is going on at the war front. Doubts are cast on the justifiability and urgency of American military action in the name of national security. Hence, Vietnam becomes the most divisive war in American history. Society implodes, public confidence erodes and the price of humanity exceeds the limit of tolerance. The Vietnam War is perceived as a living room. Television coverage of the conflict brings it into the living rooms of Americans. This leads many to question the conflict. The tone and the content of the reports change over the years. Focusing on the media coverage of the war, Chris Hedges points out: “*only when the myth is punctured, as it eventually was in Vietnam, does the press begin to report in a sensory rather than a mythic manner*” (Hedges, 2003:22). Hedges emphasizes the impact of the media coverage on the American society. This has changed their view of war since jungles are not shown as a mythic war, but as a destruction of Vietnamese civilians.

The notion of waging a war is considered as a rite of passage, the war conditions veterans face, as Boyle notes, “*are supposed to convert a boy into a man*” (Boyle, 2011:149). Boyle highlights the importance of getting involved in the Vietnam War. American soldiers are encouraged to fight communism in Vietnam because of the ideology of masculinity. However, on their return from Vietnam, the veterans are not treated like Mark Twain’s bronzed heroes. Even if the war is frequently regarded as an initiation rite for young men, their masculine status is shattered during their homecoming. The controversial and divisive nature of the Vietnam War ensures that veterans depicted in Bobbie Ann Mason’s novel *In Country* and Oliver Stone’s film *Born on the Fourth of July* are not attributed to the masculine status. This is typically conferred upon such soldiers. Instead, these veterans are presented in these texts as humiliated and emasculated outsiders like Rambo in the Kotcheff’s movie, *First Blood*.

The ideology of masculinity consists in convincing young American males to go into combat and risk their lives for the United States. In attempting to investigate issues associated with this phenomenon, Chris Hedges states that the soldier is “*held up as the exemplar of our highest ideals, the savior of the state*” (Hedges, 2003:11). According to Hedges, fighting in a battle gives young men a chance to be meaningful and acquire a heroic status. This ideal of masculine warrior urges them to fight for their country. It is looked upon as the only initiation rite that can transform a boy into a man. This notion of masculinity is dealt with both in *Born on the Fourth of July* and in Ann Mason’s *In Country*.

Stone’s film is a portrayal of the main character Kovic who expresses his will to join the Marines. In that sense, his mother strongly agrees with him on this decision. Then, she encourages him while arguing: “*Ronnie, Ronnie, you’re doing the right thing! Communism has to be stopped!*” (Stone, 1989) His mother further illustrates this idea of masculinity when she tells Kovic to fight for American values to stop an insidious evil. Kovic also explains to his father that joining the Marines is a childhood dream. As this masculine status motivates him, Kovic goes so far as saying that “*Ever since I was a kid I’ve wanted this – I’ve wanted to serve my country – and I want to go*” (Stone, 1989). Here, Ron Kovic expresses his commitment to stand up for his country and makes his patriotic dream of manhood come true. Michael, in *The Deer Hunter*, is motivated by the same ideology of masculinity with his notion of killing a deer. Besides, a similar form of patriotism and sense of duty is expressed by Lonnie in *In Country* (1985). From this reflection, Lonnie asserts: “*But if America needs defending, then I couldn’t stand back, could I?*” (Mason, 1985:86). Lonnie highlights a feeling of obligation to defend the United States, if necessary, just like Emmet feels duty-bound to fight in Vietnam. This sense of duty and glorification are examined in *Apocalypse Now* through the characters of Willard and Kurtz.

According to John Murrin, the critical war reports do not only describe, as he notes, the “*unrelenting destruction the US troops brought upon vietnam; the social inequalities within the US were addressed as well*” (Murrin, 2011:796). By attempting to reintegrate into society, the veteran wages another war at home. For Murrin, this war involves many young people who protest against the Vietnam War. They demand social change about the way the United States conducts a war in Vietnam.

World War II veterans come home en masse to a grateful public and are honored with parades and great fanfare; however, those who fight in Vietnam return alone. While drawing on the soldiers' treatment after the warfare, D. Michael Shafer claims: *"they were reinserted into civilian life one by one as they completed their tours, just as they had been inserted into combat one by one a year earlier"* (Shafer, 1990:94). According to Michael Shafer, earlier veterans are treated with respect and honor on returning to America. Although Vietnam War veterans enter the military with glamorous ideals of manhood, patriotism and heroic sacrifice, the realities of homecomings shatter these ideals of social gratitude and honor. The way they readjust to civilian world is the same as they start fighting in Vietnam.

More importantly, Christian Appy gives deeper insights into the vets' adjustment back to society. In that sense, he asserts: *"the Veterans returned from Vietnam in virtual isolation, received no national homecoming ceremonies, and lacked adequate medical and psychological care, educational benefit, and job training"* (Appy, 1993:3). Actually, the vets are welcome without any parades and alienated from the US society. Owing to this feeling of discrimination, they often function as strangers, aliens and indigenious. They are the unwanted, wronged and helpless Americans. They lack health care and are subject to psychological problems they cannot make out with.

In *Born on the Fourth of July*, Stone uses cinematic techniques like symbolic imagery and immersive sound design to explore the readjustment problems faced by Vietnam War veterans. The film uses bright and warm colors in Kovic's prewar youth to represent innocence and patriotism. However, after the war, darker, muted tone dominate, reflecting Kovic's disillusionment and isolation from society. Through intense cinematography associated with sound design and music, Stone conveys a sense of patriotism embodied by Kovic. In fact, patriotic and contrasting music in early scenes feature triumphant patriotic music, reflecting his initial belief in American ideals. Later, melancholic and somber music underscores his sense of betrayal and loss.

Although the Vietnam War is over, the tragic consequences of it last for many years. The veterans return home, but the national warm welcome back never really happens. Focusing on these readjustment issues, Arthur G. Neil notes: *"the returning veterans were treated casually by others in*

the community as if they were away on vacation” (Neil, 2005:101). For Neil, the vets find themselves on the edge of society, and they seem as though they no longer belonged to America. They turn out to be object of ridicule and pity and face all kind of injustice. The US society takes a dim view of veterans out of disrespect, disdain and ignorance. The Vietnam War has created a number of divisions within American society. The strong anti-war protests cause social unrest and shame or stigma on soldiers. In the face of this overwhelming reception, most of Vietnam veterans soon learn to keep their war experiences to themselves and a barrier of silence grows up between them and other Americans. Then, they are sent back home with no adjustment to the lifestyle in the states, no deprogramming of what they learn from the military and no welcome home parades.

2. Alienation from Society and Fragmented Identity and Crisis of Self

Many veterans are profoundly affected by the lingering impacts of the Vietnam War. They change their sense of identity and perspective of society. The various social, moral and psychological conflicts that they encounter on the battlefield change their lives. They feel a sense of uncertainty and alienation from themselves and society on homecoming. Therefore, they question themselves pertaining to their sense of identity and own existence. When service men come back to the states, they are despised by protesters, isolated from their families, friends and dejected by society. They are victims of the worst injustice in spite of being physically and emotionally committed for their country. However, they do not receive even welcome parades.

Stone’s movie, *Born on the Fourth of July*, is a depiction of readjustment problems vets contend with. When Kovic reads about the public opinion on the Vietnam War and the anti-war demonstrations, he finds out that he and the fellow Vietnam veterans are not regarded as the masculine war-heroes they expect to be. In that sense, Stone uses cinematic techniques such a close-up and intense close up, which focus on Kovic’s face during emotional breakdown, highlighting his pain, frustration and inner turmoil. For illustrative purposes, we contend that their sacrifices for the US are ignored and they are denied of any masculine status, humiliated and treated with disrespect. Vietnam

veterans are subject to the anti-war demonstrations. Ron Kovic seems to support this reflection in *Born on the Fourth of July* when he declares: “they have no idea what’s going on over there, Mom- the men that are sacrificing their lives, people are dying every day over there, and nobody back here can seem to care” (Stone, 1989). In this statement, Kovic unveils the suffering of his fellow veterans and criticizes the attitude of the public opinion toward them. Despite making sacrifices and efforts for the US society, they find it difficult to readjust to civilian life because of the American citizens’ protest.

In his analysis of veterans’ readjustment problems, Jack E. Davis argues that the Vietnam veterans, like Ron Kovic and Emmett, are “being made to carry the burden of the still-troubled American conscience. Struggling to reconcile loss with honor, Americans needed their scapegoat” (Davis, 1998:8). Davis highlights the problems Kovic and Emmett cope with on their homecoming. They bear witness to the wounded veterans and all the suffering inflicted on them while returning from the war. The traditional masculine status of soldiers becomes the victim of the Vietnam War.

Paul Higate, in his article, “Review of ‘Masculinity in Vietnam War Narratives. A Critical Study of Fiction, Films and Nonfiction’ Writings” (2011), investigates the problems of Vietnam veterans’ reintegration to society. He focuses on the shift of American soldier’s status from the jungle warfare to homecoming. In that sense, he suggests that the image of the veteran as a masculine hero is replaced by the image of “*the ‘freak’, the amputee and the paraplegic, appearing uninvited in the back water towns of the United States*” (Higate, 2011:259). Higate explores the problem of disability that is a hindrance to re-assimilation into society. They feel alienated from society as a result of their paraplegic status. Both Ron Kovic and Emmett function as outsiders. The physically and mentally disabled Vietnam veterans become the embodiment of the failure of the United States. This is perceived as a great shame for these veterans.

In Mason’s book, *In Country*, Sam unveils the traumatic experience of American soldiers at home. From this perspective, she realizes, in her little town, that: “*anyone who survived Vietnam seemed to regard it as something personal and embarrassing*” (Mason, 1985:67). Sam underscores the trauma the war brings about and the difficulties Vets face to cope with it. This sense of failure and embarrassment is echoed by Ron Kovic who thinks

that he deserves his wounds in Vietnam. The richness of the film lies in the cinematographic techniques used by Stone. The mise-en scene of the movie contrasts two spaces. Before the war including open spaces, high colors and idealized suburban setting, which symbolize his youth optimism. However, the other space comprising after the war describes cramped hospital rooms, dingy streets and the broken-down veterans' hall, reflecting his physical and emotional confinement. That is what Kovic expresses in *Born on the Fourth of July* when he declares: "*When I was in the hospital, I thought, yeah – yeah, this makes sense*" (Stone, 1989). In his declaration, Kovic underscores that there is no sense of pride in being a Vietnam veteran. There is nothing left to feel masculine about it. Kovic's complaints result from the reception he experiences at home. When Vietnam soldiers, like Emmett and Ron Kovic, return from the battle, they expect the same glorious welcome the young volunteers dream of in *The War Prayer*. However, they are welcome with feeling of suspicion and rejection from the public opinion.

According to Gary Roush, two third of the American boys who serve in Vietnam are volunteers just like Emmett and Ron Kovic. They are convinced by rhetoric of the US government to fight in a war that the public later fails to support. An entire generation of veterans becomes both physically and mentally emasculated by the Vietnam War. Along with the jungle in Vietnam, the battle at home is another problem they have to deal with. Nixon Supports this reflection when he points out: "*Never have the consequences of their misunderstanding been so tragic*" (Roush, 2008:1). Through Nixon's words, Gary Roush assesses the impacts of the behavior of the public opinion on veterans. They receive misunderstanding and disrespect from the US society, function as outsiders and find it difficult to readjust to previous life. What distinguishes Vietnam veterans from most of their predecessors is the public's detestation of the war that seems to be directed on to them, as if it was their fault. Thus, they do not return as heroes, but as men suspected in participating in shocking cruelty and wickedness or fear to be drug addicts. The combination of society rejects them and the government ignores them. The families' misunderstanding causes the mental and physical self-destruct of Vietnam veterans.

On coming home, veterans do not know how to react, what to think, or how to feel. All they know is to risk their lives for their country and

no one appreciates their efforts and courage. Instead of being glorified, their actions and contributions are protested in their faces. The initial response of the main character, in *Born on the Fourth of July*, is to stand strong to his beliefs in honor, loyalty and pride. He is not ashamed of losing his legs for such a noble cause. In fact, he feels that the protesters of the war are simply ignorant and wrong. It seems as though all he wanted to receive from those at home is a pat on the back for his efforts. Yet, that pat on the back never comes. Kovic's frustration results from the lack of respect he receives. In that sense, he cries out: "I just want to be treated like a human being. I fought for my life like a human being. I fought for my country. I am a Vietnam War veteran" (Stone, 1989). Veterans are constantly surrounded by civilians who cannot relate to what soldiers go through or how they feel now. They begin to succumb to the beliefs and views of those who do not go to the war. Instead of remaining proud of the cultural ideology of masculinity on the basis of myth-making leading them to fight for America, the veterans, in *Born on the Fourth of July*, gradually deteriorate and weaken in their stance. They start to hate the war as well. In Oliver Stone film, Kovic admits that he trades in the morals and beliefs that he fights as to have his body back whole again. As time passes, he complains more and more openly about the Vietnam War's impact on him.

In their analysis of readjustment problems based on the movie *First Blood*, Auster and Quart declare that *First Blood* is "the ultimate revenge fantasy of every Vietnam vet who was ever humiliated by the homecoming reception he did or didn't receive" (Auster and Quart, 1988:93). In this statement, Auster and Quart highlight vets' homecoming problems when they return back from Vietnam. They face injustices from civilians who ignore what they experience in Vietnam. While this sentiment is certainly a pivotal piece of *First Blood*, the film plays an even more vital role in the genre of *coming home* films.

Oliver Stone's film, *Born on the Fourth of July*, seeks to reinforce the sense of injustice felt by many veterans over their treatment. It shows Ron Kovic's political development and the poor reception that the returning veterans are given in the Administration hospital and back home. The final section of the film opens with a long crane shot of the veterans marching to the tune of "When Johnny Comes Marching Home." (Stone, 1989) The song's lyrics: "When Johnny comes marching home again, hurrah.

We'll give him a hearty welcome then, burrah!" (Stone, 1989) This song illustrates the way Veterans are treated on homecoming from Vietnam and the lack of welcome they receive. As it is considered to be the national anthem, it reasserts the patriotism of the returning soldiers because of their protest. It is not until the Vietnam Veterans Welcome Home Parade in New York in 1985 when Vietnam veterans receive a public welcome home. The song also reflects the second civil war state many believe that the country is locked in over Vietnam.

In defiance of the public opinion because of The My Lai massacre, the veterans are seen as the symbol of all that is wrong with the war. They are constructed as corrupt and tarnished, as Dean puts it, "*instruments of mass destruction*" (Dean, 1992:60). Consequently, these cultural ideologies only reinforce the sense of betrayal and despair. Veterans are rejected by society. Media images of the Vietnam War have an impact on the public as well as on the veterans. In the face of such powerful and pervasive denunciations, veterans' strivings for acceptance are eventually abandoned and followed by resignation to defeat and withdrawal from almost all social interactions. They embody a sense of alienation and they no longer fit in society.

In his article, "The Myth of the Troubled and Scorned Vietnam Veteran," Eric Dean deals with the readjustment problems of the veterans with the purpose of drumming up sympathy for his plight. Actually, Dean points out that "*the problems of vietvets had come to be viewed as a crisis*" (Dean, 1992:65). Dean underscores the problems Vietnam veterans are confronted with on the home front. They are scorned and troubled by their wartime experience since they find it difficult to come to terms with the serious issue of readjusting to civilian life.

According to the American soldiers who fight in Vietnam War, homecoming is one of the most terrifying experiences. In fact, they are the generation of combatants that Americans try hard to cross out of their memory. These veterans are not "*the lost generation*" as William Eastlake explains, they are the "*ignored generation, the generation that was used by old people to kill young people*" (Eastlake, 1969:139). Actually, Eastlake highlights the sense of ignorance and sacrifice Vietnam vets face when they defend America. They remark that, even back home where they are supposed to find a safe shelter, the war is not over. The war at home becomes worse and worse day after day because of

civilians' negative attitudes towards veterans. They strongly feel that the communities turn out to be their enemies. It is at the American airports that threats against veterans start. These airports become places where the vets' confusion begins to mix with pain, isolation and rejection.

In his analysis of the readjustment problems resulting from protests against veterans, Paul Lyons states: "*in the popular mythology about the return home of the Vietnam Veteran there is always an ugly incident at the airport. The G.I.s confronted by anger self-righteous protesters, usually described as long-haired and scruffy. The mal hippies often seem to be performing before their girlfriends; the females seem to take great pleasure in throwing the epithet 'baby-killers' in the vet's face*" (Lyons, 1998:193). In his remark, Paul Lyons highlights the problem of the Vietnam veterans who are often met at the airports by the protesters ready to show their hostile reception. The vets are treated poorly and some of them reported being spat on, usually by the American hippies who consider the vets as losers.

Christian Appy seems to support this reflection, in his book, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam*, when he reports a veteran's experience: "*I arrived at Los Angeles International Airport... On my way to the taxis, I passed two young women in the waiting area. One of these young women approached me and, in a low voice, called me a 'baby killer' and spat on my ribbons. I was in uniform and wearing the Vietnamese Service Medal, the Vietnamese Campaign Medal, an air Force commendation Medal, and the Purple heart*" (Appy, 1993:304). Appy investigates the plight of a veteran who is treated as a criminal or murder at the American airports. He also reveals that civilians strongly disapprove of the return of vets. This typical act of receiving the veterans badly becomes part of the substance of the stories that surround this particular post-war experience.

Through the book *Born on the Fourth of July* Ron Kovic deals with the difficulties veterans face to fully adjust again to society. When Kovic and his veteran friend Eddie arrive in the United States from the Vietnam War, they are invited to join a small Memorial Day parade in their hometown. Kovic begins to feel that there is something different that affects him due to the crowd's reaction. He notes that the sense of the meaning he has about the war is not the same. As Kovic and Eddie go up to the stage parade to greet the public, people are careless. The parade hardly begins when he already feels trapped, just like in the

hospital. Instead of waving and cheering them, the crowd stands, “staring at Eddie Dugan and himself like they weren’t even there... And he couldn’t understand what was happening” (Kovic, 1976:90). Kovic evokes the lack of welcome hero and parade they face on homecoming. When they return individually from war, they lack collective reentry rituals. The US society fails to offer them the gratitude and necessary welcome to the re-establishment of a positive civilian identity.

The defeat becomes part of the Vietnam veterans’ lives, echoing in their hearts and minds the shame and guilty of losing the war. They have to carry the traumatic burden for the rest of their lives since they are the first to lose an American war. The effects of post-Vietnam traumatic stress disorder on veterans and the US public’s collective cultural view are another lens through which we examine the soldiers’ readjustment problems. In attempting to explore the case of veterans readjusting to civilian life, Neil declares:

Psychologically, the veterans were still fighting the Vietcong and dodging landmines. The veterans were also victimized by returning home to face such negative stereotype as “ruthless baby-killer”, “drug addict”, and “having fought in an immoral war.” There was a lack of appreciation both by the general public and the American government. The nation wanted to put the trauma of the war behind and get on with the business of resting normality (Neil, 2005:101).

In this declaration, Neil emphasizes the negative perception civilians have towards the American soldiers. They are responsible for smearing the image of American history. There is no government to rely on and no one understands the veterans’ pain.

Veterans manage how to gain a sense of reintegration into civilian life. In their analysis of readjustment problems, Gronke and Feaver comment on a “*latent alienation and distrust; suggesting deeper ideological and attitudinal divides between the military and the public it serves*” (Gronke and Feaver, 2001:132). In fact, Gronke and Feaver underscore the perceived differences leading the veterans to believe that they cannot relate to previous life because civilians misunderstand what they have been through. This disruption heightens the divisions between them. The shifts in attitudes and values seem to be the most problematic case

for veterans. This results in soldiers' feeling of alienation and misunderstanding, urging them to withdraw from society. The tension caused by a sense of incomprehension and disrespect is a barrier to make connections with civilians who prevent veterans from fully integrating into civilian life. The social alienation and the public opinion create a sense of fragmented identity and subversion of Ron Kovic who tries to bear witness to the American ideals of myth-making.

3. Deconstruction of Patriotism and Nationalism

The Vietnam War becomes a metaphor for American society that connotes distrust in the government and the subversion of American values and principles. The readjustment problems veterans are confronted with result from family misunderstanding, a lack of welcome and antiwar protests considering the vets as responsible for the war lost and failure in Vietnam. These feelings of suspicion and anger towards veterans do not only cause readjustment issues, but they are also the main victims of the American government's deceitfulness. As Vietnam veterans re-emerge into civilization, they struggle to establish a personal identity or a place in society because they lack the proper education and job skills. However, there are no supportive groups to help them find the way out. They feel even more isolated, unappreciated and exploited for serving their country. This scenario is similar to what many Vietnam veterans have left in their transition from battle to home.

The Vietnam War becomes a metaphor for American society that connotes distrust in the government and the subversion of American values and principles. The readjustment problems veterans come to grips with result from family misunderstanding, a lack of welcome and antiwar protests, considering the vets as responsible for the war lost and failure in Vietnam. In *Born on the Fourth of July*, Ron Kovic does not know whom to blame for his sorrows, but he believes that it is the government's fault. The film ends with the main character and many other veterans as anti-war protesters. From this outlook, they complain: "*they told us to go, we'd fight communism. This country lied to me; it told me to fight against the Vietnamese.*" "*We love America, but it stops with the government. The government is corrupt. They are killing our brothers in Vietnam*" (Stone, 1989). Actually, Vietnam veterans who return home face crucial

problems to get back into civilian life. In Vietnam, these powerful men make individuals based on what they need and want at the time. Back in the world, they find out that their status is significantly less meaningful and much less valuable than it is in the bush. They face the real deceitfulness of the American government on homecoming. It fails to keep its promise and support for those who conduct the war in Vietnam. And the transition from military service to civilian life takes a while to get them straight and back into society.

First blood by Ted Kotcheff is a portrayal of captain Trautman who attempts to convince Rambo to give himself up, stating that it is over, but Rambo has a complete mental breakdown. In this respect, he launches into a tirade beginning with the statement that nothing is over. In a moment of clarity in the film, Rambo's speech exhibits a feeling of anger through this vibrating statement: "*Nothing is over, nothing! You just don't turn it off. It wasn't my war. You asked me. I didn't ask you. And I did what I had to do to win but somebody wouldn't let us win*" (First Blood, 1982). In his declaration, Rambo shows his hatred and denounces the lack of US political will in Vietnam War. According to him, vets are not given the opportunities to win the war and they raise against the US government to make their voice heard. They fight in Vietnam for a noble cause. This statement also reveals the traumatic wartime experience John Rambo goes through in Vietnam and back home.

In his study of readjustment problems soldiers deal with when they resettle into civilian life, Cronin highlights that all of them come home in gradual stages, yet there are no actual celebrations. Cronin supports this view when he points out that: "[...] *the shedding of military identity was performed alone and without meaningful ceremonies*" (Cronin, 1991:205). According to Cronin, veterans who sacrifice their lives in Vietnam for a noble cause are dejected by the American Government. They do not even receive parade welcoming at home. Consequently, they grapple mostly with immense troubles and take refuge in narcotics or end up in jail.

By the same token, Dean examines America's lack of political will in Vietnam and the betrayal of the American soldiers by their own government. From this point of view, he provides deeper insights into this issue when he asserts that a Vietnam veteran is then interpreted as "*a frustrated patriot, betrayed by his own country that had not let him win*" (Dean,

1997:184). Actually, Vietnam veterans do not fail in Vietnam. They fulfill their duties. They have been through horrible experience and come home where they often contend with disinterest, hostility and misunderstanding. Frustration with the lost war then intensifies their mental troubles. Rambo, in *First Blood*, can be set as an example to illustrate the plight of the Vietnam veterans. Kotcheff gives a hilarious portrayal of John Rambo who, in an attempt to re-emerge into civilization, struggles for establishing a personal identity or a place in society. Yet, no one helps him find the way out. Rambo feels even more isolated, unappreciated and exploited for serving his country. This scenario conveys the experience his fellow veterans undergo in their transition from the battlefield to home.

Jimmy Carter addresses veterans' readjustment problems that result from the US government responsibility. Many of them are dejected because of "*the nation's uncertainty, lack of agreement and inner conflict about the war and its attitude of neglect toward the Vietnam veterans.*"¹ In fact, Carter investigates the veterans' transition problems from the military to civilian life. He underscores the causes of the soldier's readjustment to previous life and the unclear and purposeless policies of conducting a war in Vietnam. He lays the blame on the US government for being responsible for this attitude of neglect.

According to Ronald Reagan, the Vietnam War as a noble cause is imperfectly pursued. It is a war that US soldiers are not allowed to win. The lesson they learn from Vietnam War is thus that "*young Americans must never again be sent to fight and die unless we are prepared to let them win.*"² In his remark, Reagan complains about the conditions in which the American soldiers fight the war in Vietnam. He also highlights that they are innocent, untrained and unskilled when they are sent in the battlefield. So, the US government does not take into consideration their homecoming traumatic situation because of the war they have lost. This is a major concern for soldiers' readjustment problems. They are the victims of a deceitful US government for not backing them up.

¹ Jimmy Carter, 'Vietnam Veterans Week, 1979, Remarks at a White House Reception', (1979c), 30 May, available online at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=32409>, accessed 3 August 2010.

² Ronald Reagan, 'Remarks at the Veterans Day Ceremony at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial', (1988b), 11 November, available online at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=35155>, accessed 3 August 2010.

Cathy Caruth, in her analysis of veterans' readjustment problems, lays emphasis on the experience in the jungle warfare and back home. She strongly supports this view, in her article "Confronting Political Trauma," when she explains that:

To listen to the soldiers' voices and to see through their eyes is no simple task; however, the truth to which they have asked us to listen concerns both the horror of war – or, in particular, the horror of a war that has not been clearly justified – and also the horror of betrayal, the betrayal of the public and of the soldier themselves by a government not willing to reveal either its own motives for entering and escalating the war, or its intentions for remaining there in a stalemate (Caruth, 2006:179).

In this context, Caruth underscores the post-war traumatic symptoms of Vietnam veterans. She sheds light on their identity crisis resulting from the horror of war. According to her, the narratives produced after the Vietnam war are often based on a mix of images, memories and sufferings that usually keep haunting them. The horror of the war shocks their minds. Thus, harmful psychological effects from unpleasant traumatic experiences are established as the main characteristics of the vets' narratives in the post war period. When they return home from the Vietnam War as physical casualties with injuries such as paralysis, amputation and other forms of mutilation, they face difficulties adjusting again to society. Because of its purposeless objectives and bad policies to wage a war in Vietnam, the US government is responsible for the transition issues of vets from military service to civilian life.

Cathy Caruth provides deeper insights into the readjustment problems the American soldier is confronted with back home. Despite the veteran's breakdowns in the battlefield, the real war seems to be at home. The adversity he faces on the home front derives from the public's lack of support, let alone the betrayal of the US government. The Vietnam veteran is perceived as the embodiment of America failure in Vietnam and his voice conveys the deceitfulness of American political leaders during the conflict. The fact that America fights aimlessly in Vietnam brings about the crisis of US cultural ideology based on myths. The notion of American exceptionalism, its myth-

making and the phenomenon of masculinity that make up the American identity are under threat owing to Vietnam experience. In brief, we admit that the subversion of US identity causes a loss of confidence in the political realm of America and its mission as savior of the world is undermined. Soldiers are broken in body and mind as a result of the scars of the war.

The symbolic use of the American flag appears throughout the film. It represents initially heroism and patriotism, but it reflects, at the end of the movie, betrayal and disillusionment as Kovic realizes the government has abandoned him. In the film, Stone also delivers a raw and physically intense performance, using body language and facial expressions to show Kovic's pain, rage, and eventual transformation into an activist.

Oliver Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July* features the dreadful conditions that the returning wounded vets meet with in the Administration Hospital. As Ron Kovic complains about the medical treatment of veterans, he argues: "*why we fight for rights overseas when we ain't got no rights at home?*" and "*you ain't part of the solution, you're part of the problem*" (Stone, 1989). Although Kovic's ideological beliefs remain strong, his mental condition worsens when a shortage of medical equipment threatens to amputate his leg. A doctor tells him that despite being in Vietnam "*the government's just not giving us the money to take care of you guys*" (Stone, 1989). That is a clear statement about the repercussions of political neglect of those who fight in Vietnam. This phenomenon fuels Kovic's anguish and frustration. The government does not provide the necessary medical care they need. There is a lack of politicians' support whereas many vets suffer from serious injuries. They keep complaining of the US government to show disrespect to them. In brief, we can say that the information that is put in an insightful pattern allows us to understand that vets face the deceitfulness of America's political leaders. There is so much American public and government ignorance about this problem.

In a nutshell, we can say that this study examines the crisis state of the American soldiers in their transitions to society and the challenges they face on homecoming. After the military service, they are subject to the process of troubled social reintegration within their families and communities as civilians and the deceitfulness of the US government.

Vietnam veterans also wage another war at home; they struggle to adjust again to social life and grapple with the horror of the war and societal disconnection. These veterans are confronted with crucial homecoming problems related to the deceitful behavior of the US government, creating a sense of deconstruction of patriotism and nationalism in the mainstream politics of America.

Conclusion

In post-Vietnam War era, Oliver Stone's film, *Born on the Fourth of July*, stands out as a counter-narrative to traditional war films. Instead of glorifying combat, it exposes the cost of war on individual soldiers, making it a crucial text in Vietnam War cinema and veteran literature. By focusing on trauma, alienation and activism, the film presents a more realistic and critical perspective on veteran reintegration. Through psychological, sociological and political lenses, filmmakers like Oliver Stone, argue that the film redefines the war hero, challenges American myths of patriotism and serves as a stark reminder of the government's failure to support returning veterans. Its lasting impact lies in its ability to humanize the veteran experience while questioning the structures that send young men to war.

Oliver Stone's film, *Born on the Fourth of July*, gives a depiction of Ron Kovic as displaying a gap between himself and civilians, and this phenomenon causes a sense of isolation from society. Many Vietnam War's events lead up to the failures of assimilating back to the American society. The analysis of this movie shows that the war has changed Kovic who is mentally wounded on homecoming. The nation has essentially ignored the stressful transition undergone by the returning Vietnam veterans. The difficult task of reintegrating into a changed environment setting is explored in Stone's film. Many soldiers like Kovic, who struggle for the reunification with society and their families, fight to re-socialize. They contend with social transition problems, including the antiwar protest and the US government deceitfulness. Each filmmaker sees the issue through his own lens. The readjustment issues result in the subversion of the Kovic's journey, his own fragmented identity and the deconstruction of American patriotism and nationalism he attempts to epitomize. Through intense cinematography, fragmented editing, symbolic imagery, and immersive

sound design, Oliver stone's film portrays the readjustment problems faced by Vietnam War veterans. These techniques help the audiences experience Kovic's disillusionment, PTSD, and struggle for identity, making the film a powerful critique of war and its lasting effects on soldiers. The conceptions of the films and the interpretations of this problem also reflect the changes and atmosphere in the American society. The image of a traumatized Vietnam veteran, as provided in American cinematography, is multifaceted. The film uses post-modernist techniques by rejecting war narratives, highlighting the fragmentation of identities, questioning patriotic myths and using intertextual references. It serves as a critique of American militarism and the ways in which history and identity are constructed through media and political discourse. Analyzing Oliver Stone's film, *Born on the Fourth of July*, and its portrayal of veteran readjustment problems has significant social and cultural implications for American society. This study is important because it sheds light on critical issues that continue to affect veterans, world conflicts, public perceptions of war and broader discussions about national identity, patriotism and political activism.

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