Conclusion
True War Stories
Of the many novels and memoirs about the Vietnam War, whether juvenile potboilers, realistic autobiographies, or highly wrought experimental fictions, almost all have been concerned with historical accuracy. From depictions of U.S.-sponsored terrorism during the French-Indochina War to considerations of how the war is misremembered by contemporary generations, these texts have been preoccupied with telling the truth. Graham Greene opens The Quiet American with an apology for taking the name Phuong from an acquaintance in Saigon and for using her apartment as Fowler's apartment. He also declares The Quiet American "not a piece of history" but "a story about a few imaginary characters." Ironically, Greene's apology and his disclaimer that he is merely writing a story had the effect of foregrounding his novel's roots in contemporary history, as was evidenced by reviewers' passionate denunciations of his anti-Americanism. Writing 25 years later in his autobiographical Ways of Escape, Greene was far less apologetic about his reliance upon contemporary history, declaring "there is more direct reportage in The Quiet American than any other [novel] I have written" (203). Covering a press conference in Hanoi, accompanying a French dive-bomber pilot on a mission, patrolling alongside Foreign Legion troops, seeing a dead child in a ditch, Greene reported on events he witnessed firsthand.

Similarly, in their "factual epilogue" William Lederer and Eugene Burdick declare the many incidents in The Ugly American to be barely fictionalized accounts of real episodes involving American foreign service officials. They claim to "have taken part in the events which have inspired this book, and in both the records and in the fields [to] have studied the Communist way to power" (271). Robin Moore too claims that he took part in or witnessed the actions he recounts. He opens his novel by declaring The Green Berets "a book of truth" (9). These claims to factual accuracy led to the Pentagon's forcing Moore to concede that The Green Berets was fiction. Likewise, John Clark Pratt's The Laotian Fragments upset the Air Force, which delayed the novel's publication. But whereas Moore's problem was asserting fiction to be fact, Pratt's was including too much fact in his fiction. His very aesthetic, with its repeated use of
official documents and news reports, is an attempt to ground his text in the reality of war in Indochina. To the Air Force, *The Laotian Fragments* suffered from too much verisimilitude. *Dispatches*, Michael Herr's nonfiction account of his year in Vietnam, uses a self-conscious style and fragmented narrative to render the war more truthfully. Herr intends to document the true stories of grunts in their own idiom, thereby conveying a reality that could not be conveyed through documentary realism or conventional journalism. Sam Hughes in Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country* searches as well for the truth about Vietnam. In her passionate desire to know what Vietnam was really like, Sam struggles against a commercial culture that has obscured, distorted, and erased the war. And in *The Things They Carried* Tim O'Brien incessantly remembers and revises his experiences in Vietnam, approaching these from various angles and foregrounding his imaginative reconstruction in an attempt to record as faithfully as possible the truth about Vietnam; he even titles one of his stories "How to Tell a True War Story." Given Vietnam War authors' preoccupation with telling the truth about the war, one might expect that reviewers and critics would have looked closely at these texts' historical backgrounds. But this background seems to have been strenuously avoided by American literary culture.

Initially, critical appraisals of Vietnam War literature concentrated on traditional "literary" elements and read these texts as examinations of a general, transhistorical human condition. In writing about *The Quiet American*, for instance, critics transformed Thomas Fowler's neutralism in the face of anticolonial and anticomunist violence into an existential dilemma. Saigon became a microcosm of twentieth-century politics, Fowler a twentieth-century Everyman. And French Indochina circa 1952 became a metaphorical landscape on which were played out the complexities and moral uncertainties of human existence. From its publication in 1956 until the mid-1970s, critics ignored the specific history Greene documented. The historical figures and incidents Greene wrote about—General The, the Cao Dai sect, French use of Foreign Legionnaires and American-supplied napalm, U.S. involvement in terrorism, the sexual exploitation of Vietnamese women—were almost completely ignored by literary critics for the sake of discussions of Greene's Christian suffering and existential despair.

Published eleven years later, Victor Kolpacoff's *The Prisoners of Quai Dong* received a comparable critical treatment. Praised for what it revealed about men in a moral crisis and about the horror of all wars, *The
Prisoners of Quai Dong was not examined for what it revealed about the behavior of U.S. troops and the nature of U.S. policy in Vietnam in 1967. No one asked whether Kolpacoff's depiction of the torture of a Vietnamese prisoner who may or may not have been Viet Cong accurately documented the treatment of prisoners by the U.S. military and its allies. There was no discussion as to whether this torture was a common practice or whether such practices were sanctioned by the U.S. military. And no critic read Kreuger's imprisonment for refusal to follow orders as a moral response to an immoral war or as evidence of a growing dissension within the military. At the height of the war, no one seemed to consider it appropriate to read The Prisoners of Quai Dong against the very war it sought to document—on the contrary, it was praised for transcending such ephemera.

This ahistoricism did not last, however. As literary culture became politicized (partly in response to the war), critics began to consider how these texts functioned ideologically, as well as how they critiqued dominant ideological belief. This criticism has tended toward one of two focuses—cultural myth or postmodernism. The former approach is premised on a belief that societies are organized around a set of governing myths or defining narratives. According to this view, Americans have perceived their society as different from others, as a city on the hill, a working out of providence. Unlike other nations, whose territorial expansion and violent conquest have been motivated by the quest for riches and power, America has perceived its expansion as nobly motivated—an errand into the wilderness that tests character, a beacon of democracy that shines into benighted lands. Although challenged by historical events, this narrative persists within much popular entertainment, political rhetoric, and mass media discourse. Recent controversies over national history standards, the 500th anniversary of Columbus's arrival in the New World, and the Smithsonian's Enola Gay exhibit derive in part from an unwillingness to question this founding national narrative. For most academics, however, this myth is perceived as having a direct ideological function. Much of their work, therefore, has been aimed at explaining the continuity and the revising of this myth—and revealing the history it has distorted, a history of economic exploitation, racial intolerance, and racist violence.

Critics have placed The Ugly American within this tradition of racist justifications for American expansion. The belief that the Vietnamese are easily manipulated by superior Americans, that Americans know (and
do) what is right for them, and that Vietnamese desires should be subjugated to American foreign policy goals is seen as a continuation of the objectification of Indians that has been an integral part of the American character since Puritans viewed Indians as animals, objects, agents of the devil—as obstacles to their righteous taming of a new land. Critics have repeatedly read the Vietnam War as a continuation of this racism and violence and as a demonstration of the persistent disorder within the American psyche.

The Green Berets has been read as a variant of this same cultural myth. American guerrilla forces have been perceived as versions of the frontier hero—Natty Bumppo, Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett. Possessing the wilderness skills of Indians, the Green Berets, in Moore's account, have superior intellects, more refined moral sensibilities, and access to the latest Western technologies. Thus they can defeat the natives on their own terms and in their own land and can do so while maintaining the moral high ground that Americans automatically inhabit. To most critics, however, this mythic evocation serves merely as a crude justification for America's violent expansion.

If critics see Lederer & Burdick and Moore as crudely and uncritically reformulating traditional cultural myth to fit the American mission against communism in southeast Asia, later Vietnam War authors are seen to foreground these myths in order to critique them. Most of these authors are said to demonstrate the pernicious effects of traditional nationalist myth, especially as it has been conventionalized by American popular culture in war movies and westerns. In Vietnam War literature, the young men sent to fight are shown again and again to have had their impressions of war, bravery, masculinity, nationality, and self-identity shaped by the fantasies of the culture industry, by the celluloid heroin of John Wayne, Errol Flynn, Audie Murphy, and so on.

This attack upon the kinds of nationalist myths conveyed in The Ugly American and The Green Berets is necessary, according to Vietnam War veterans, because their own eagerness to fight in Vietnam was shaped by popular culture. That this myth was influential in shaping the attitudes of many young Americans who went to war seems undeniable. That government and military officials and business executives who determined American policy in Indochina also had their attitudes shaped by the myth of a noble, providential America, however, seems less certain. I believe it is unlikely that those making, financing, and implementing American militarism in Indochina and elsewhere were so deheded by cultural...
myth that they perceived their efforts to be a continuation of the phenomenon of U.S. goodwill. And even if they were so deluded, their actions were motivated not by
myth but by the need to perpetuate capitalist hegemony.

Yet for many critics cultural myth has just this sort of determining power. America's war in Vietnam is seen as motivated and justified by, and conducted according to,
such mythic national beliefs. This focus on the shaping power of American cultural myth has obscured recognition of the cold-hearted calculation behind U.S. policy. Much has been written to show how Vietnam War literature either continues a traditional myth that stretches back to the Puritans or critiques this myth. However well-intentioned, this focus on the centrality of the frontier myth has served as a mystification, a means of shifting blame and obscuring the real causes of the war. I do not
mean to imply that material conditions alone influence people's actions and shape their consciousness. As a form of ideology, cultural myths are undoubtedly influential. The problem as I see it is that cultural and literary critics too often merely identify the continuity of these myths, focusing excessively on their literary and historical roots, rather than on their connection to contemporary material conditions. They do not adequately examine how these mythic narratives are created and distributed nor how information that counters these narratives is institutionally marginalized. And in seeing myths as semi-autonomous transhistorical narratives, literary and cultural critics tend to overemphasize the collective national psyche and to overlook the force of capitalist institutions. To put it another way, critics preoccupy themselves with
culture as superstructural expression and ignore the economic base that influences these expressions.

The other main thread in critical discussions of Vietnam War literature is postmodernism. Both Dispatches and The Things They Carried have been championed as
brilliant evocations of postmodernity. A critical consensus has developed that the war was postmodern, particularly because it eroded belief in an essential connection
between language and experience, between representations of reality and reality itself. This skepticism developed out of a recognition that official discourses—whether
military press briefings, conventional reporting, political speeches, fact-finding missions, position papers, even documentary footage—were woefully inadequate, were
nothing short of fabrication. Such epistemological skepticism was influenced as well by the sense-shattering nature of combat. Its chaos and confusion, its
unpredictability, its sheer exhilaration and terror
seemed to overwhelm conventional forms of literary representation. The unreality of this war in particular, with its high-tech weaponry arrayed against a nearly medieval culture, its seemingly invisible enemy, its frequently entangling landscape and its absurd and labyrinthine military and political logic was seen as defying realist and positivist conventions, resulting in a belief that standard literary representations falsify the war and that, consequently, only postmodern literary aesthetics approximate a truthful rendering of the war.

To cultural myth and postmodernism can be added a third critical approach: gender critique. In many essays and one book—Susan Jeffords's Remasculinization of America—critics have begun to examine Vietnam War literature through the framework of gender. Whereas earlier approaches tended to praise this literature, gender-centered critiques have been far more critical. Formalists praised Vietnam War narratives' complexity and ambiguity; cultural critics, while attacking unsophisticated, propagandistic novels like The Ugly American and The Green Berets, praised the self-conscious critique of American cultural myth made in later Vietnam War narratives; and postmodernists praised these texts' emphasis on the surrealism, linguistic indeterminacy, and fundamental unknowability of the war. But gender critics have read against these texts, identifying their frequent misogyny, their insensitive depictions of prostitution and rape, their uncritical endorsement of "male" and repudiation of "female" virtues, and their complicity in remasculinizing American culture.

Critics have also begun to read the depictions of Vietnamese in these texts against common Western stereotypes of Asians. This approach, too, tends to critique rather than praise, to see that Vietnamese are depicted stereotypically as cruel, inscrutable, mysterious, exotic, natural, and sensual—when, that is, they are individualized at all. Often Vietnamese exist merely as a threatening background noise and local color, barely separable from village dogs and water buffaloes. These Western perceptions of Asians are read in the context of a colonial discourse that seeks to justify its enterprise by asserting Western superiority. Both gender and postcolonial critiques offer important insights into how dominant discourses have shaped perceptions and furthered male and Western hegemony.

However, despite their differences, these approaches, with their varying degrees of critique, are united by a lack of historicizing. Traditional literary critics see these texts in terms of literary history—forms, types, themes, and so forth—rather than in terms of a larger world history, and
they fail to consider the specific relation of these literary topoi to a material history. Cultural critics, on the other hand, allude to history—but it is an amorphous, discursive, nonmaterialist history. By tracing the continuity of the rhetorical conventions and mythic narratives that have accompanied and been used to justify American westward expansion, these critics frequently displace a focus on the construction and implementation of military strategies and official policies with a focus on transhistorical discourse. In this analysis, anticomunism becomes an extension of Puritan Manicheanism, the strategy of attrition becomes a variant of Indian-hating. Although feminists and postcolonialists have been more willing to refer to contemporary history, their focuses on gender and race have similarly caused them to overlook the political economy of the Vietnam War, the connections between America's (and the West's) economic interests and an anticomunist war in Indochina.

Every literary text—and the reception of literary texts—takes place within a society in which a dominant ideology (and its proponents) fights to maintain legitimacy against other ideologies (and their proponents). It is a struggle for the right to be perceived as common sense, as a society's defining belief system. All literary texts (and all cultural products) are marked by ideological struggle. A novel's ideology can be ascertained by examining its character system, its aesthetic, and its choice of details—the very world it constructs—and by seeing how this fictional world works, what it defines as normative and deviant. I believe it important, therefore, that this fictional world be contrasted with the history and culture and social relations it represents. The point of doing so is not merely to show inaccuracies, since literary texts inevitably collapse and distort. The point is to ask, why these specific inaccuracies and distortions? Why in *The Quiet American* is Pyle so ludicrously inexperienced and unintuitive? What understanding can be derived from the psychedelic mosaic of *Dispatches*? Why does Mason have Sam, Emmett, and Marnaw come together at the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial?

Whether a polemical work of social realism or an experimental fiction, literary texts are implicated in a war over the meaning of events. The ideology of a given text may be unfocused, contradictory, and difficult to state definitively, but it is there nonetheless. Yet despite the politicization of the humanities, materialist critique, which situates a literary text in its historical context and examines how the text itself functions as ideology, how it disguises or reveals the operations of power and the systematic reproduction
of inequality and exploitation, is made infrequently and incompletely by critics, commercial and academic.

This has been especially true for critical analyses of Vietnam War literature. In examining this literature, critics have focused on literary devices and American cultural discourses but have ignored these texts' bases in historical reality. Critics look at the representations of this historical background and connect these representations to earlier American culture, but they rarely consider the reality that underpins both these representations and the process of literary reception. No incident in recent American history has created a more contentious ideological struggle than the Vietnam War. Literary texts about the war, regardless of their assertions of neutrality or uncertainty, are inevitably implicated in this struggle. Yet, by and large, critics have ignored the demystifying potential of materialist analysis. The lack of this critique, I believe, is evidence of a literary culture facing significant institutional pressures to adhere to an unacknowledged but unavoidable ideological consensus. These pressures have promoted a critical practice that has consistently aestheticized and thus depoliticized literary texts, particularly those concerned with still divisive social issues such as the Vietnam War. Thus while examining a centuries-old British imperialism in innumerable articles, books, and conferences, literary culture has ignored American imperialism of the last few decades. Indeed, for American literary culture it is as if there were no such thing as U.S. imperialism.

In overlooking a materialist critique, literary scholars have had little to say about the systematic terror the United States inflicted upon Vietnam, about how Vietnam War authors' concerns for the individual experiences of G.I.s have obscured this terror, or about how this mystification coheres with the dominant culture's rewriting of the war. Reading Vietnam War literature and critical appraisals of it, one would scarcely be aware that the United States dropped eight million tons of bombs and 400,000 tons of napalm; used death squads to assassinate more than 20,000 alleged members of the NLF; sprayed 18 million gallons of chemical defoliants, with an ongoing legacy of cancer, miscarriages, birth defects, and poisoned agricultural lands; relied upon a staggering arsenal of sophisticated weaponry, including AC-47 gunships (which fired 18,000 rounds per minute), B-52 bombers (which carried 150 tons of bombs), portable heaters (which raised the temperature inside Viet Cong tunnels to 1,000 degrees), and cluster bombs (which released 180,000 metal
"fleshettes"—and which were redesigned in fiberglass so as to be undetectable to X-rays)—all of which resulted in the killing of two million Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians, the wounding of another three million, and the displacement of more than 14 million people in southeast Asia (Parenti, Sword and the Dollar, 43–45; Young, 191).

Nor would one learn that an important motivation for fighting this cruel war was to demonstrate to other nations the cost of attempted abdication from the capitalist sphere. Having removed itself from the capitalist sphere after a 20-year war, Vietnam faced a worldwide economic boycott (not lifted until 1989). With massive debts as a consequence of the war, Vietnam was forced to accede to the International Monetary Fund's (IMF's) draconian structural reforms, which entailed (in the IMF's words) "lowering real labor costs, cutting back or eliminating subsidies to consumers and state enterprises, and reducing capital outlays" (quoted in Kolko, Vietnam: Anatomy of a Peace, 34). The results of these market reforms have been sadly predictable: increased foreign investment, growing disparity between rich and poor, restrictions on labor organizing, sharp deterioration in education and health services, and increases in prostitution, drug addiction, and unemployment (Kolko, Vietnam: Anatomy of a Peace, 102–111).

As I write this, U.S. Secretary of State Madeline Albright has concluded a trip to Vietnam—the first by a senior U.S. official in more than two decades—in preparation for normalizing relations between the two countries. At the same time, American corporations are exploiting Vietnam's vast pool of cheap labor. Nike, for example, with factories in several locations, including Ho Chi Minh City (the former Saigon), pays its laborers an average of 20 cents per hour, which amounts to a daily wage of $1.60. Vietnam Labor Watch reports this sum to be less than the cost of three simple meals, and it describes workers as saying "they literally have to make a daily choice between eating a balanced meal and paying rent for [their] single room." While Nike's laborers are earning less than two dollars per day, its CEO, Philip Knight, is receiving more than $2,000 per day in salary, and nearly that much in bonus pay. Pitchman and sometime basketball player Michael Jordan is paid $40 million annually by Nike—about double the combined income of Nike's entire workforce in southeast Asia. Given this background, it is more than a little ironic that Albright scolded the Vietnamese for human rights violations while saying nothing about working conditions and salaries in U.S.-owned factories. She made certain that Vietnam agreed to abide by
international copyright law, while ignoring its violations of international labor standards. For Albright and for capitalist elites, intellectual property rights far outweigh human rights concerns. Indeed, the exploitation of cheap labor to maximize the profits of CEOs, boards of directors, and large shareholders is precisely why the war was fought in the first place—to further global capitalist hegemony. Yet this understanding has seemed beyond the pale of respectable consideration for American literary culture when examining novels and memoirs of the Vietnam War.