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### **Books Question Two Vietnam Clichés**

**Soldiers' addiction and junior officers' failings are both exaggerated, scholars say**

*By Thomas Bartlett*

The story of how drugs corrupted American soldiers in Vietnam was useful. For those who supported the war, it was an excuse for the failure to defeat the Viet Cong. For those opposed, it was yet another argument in favor of withdrawal. For journalists and movie directors, the grunt-turned-junkie narrative was morbidly irresistible, providing grist for investigative articles and inspiration for dramatic characters.

The only hitch is that it wasn't true.

So argues Jeremy Kuzmarov in **The Myth of the Addicted Army: Vietnam and the Modern War on Drugs** (University of Massachusetts Press). Kuzmarov, an assistant professor of history at the University of Tulsa, documents how the notion that huge numbers of troops were heavy drug users was repeated so often and so emphatically that it became common wisdom. As with other attractive myths, the evidence for widespread addiction in the military was largely anecdotal. In fact, as Kuzmarov writes, a 1971 survey of 36,000 GI's by the U.S. Army Research Office found that fewer than a third of soldiers had even tried marijuana, while other surveys showed that the majority of drug use in Vietnam was casual and infrequent.

But breathless press reports told a more troubling tale. "The United States is now waging two wars in Vietnam," one journalist wrote, "one against the VC and the other against Mary Jane." Drug hysteria provided a handy way to excuse war crimes. Sen. Thomas J. Dodd declared that smoking marijuana could cause a soldier to "retaliate in a furious and vengeful manner." The senator implied that the My Lai massacre, in which hundreds of unarmed Vietnamese civilians were slaughtered by American soldiers, could be explained by drug use—despite the Army's own conclusion that drugs had not played a role in the atrocity.

Even more frightening was the idea that these dope-crazed soldiers would soon be returning to U.S. soil, where they would wreak unspeakable havoc. Congressman Seymour Halpern warned that

"The American GI is as liable to die from the needle, as the bullet. ... What is so scary is that soldiers are bringing back the festering of their contagion to the United States." The New York Times quoted a military officer in the drug field saying that tens of thousands of soldiers would be returning to the United States as "walking time bombs."

The image of the addicted soldier became embedded in popular culture. The back cover of *Mad* magazine featured a returning GI with an enormous needle. Television shows like *The Streets of San Francisco* portrayed veterans as drug dealers and murderers. In the 1978 film *Go Tell the Spartans*, a wounded American soldier is told by his superior, "Get up you doped-up bastard—we've got gooks on our hands." In the classic film *Apocalypse Now*, the character Lance, while tripping on acid, causes the death of another soldier. In a different scene, stoned soldiers shoot at fellow Americans.

Bizarrely, as Kuzmarov details, there were calls for the United States to withdraw from Vietnam not because Americans were dying by the thousands, or because Vietnamese were dying in even greater numbers, or because it was a feckless war with no end in sight, but because soldiers might be getting high. One mother complained in a letter to President Nixon that she could "not rest a minute knowing that my son is subjected to drugs as well as the enemy. Mr. President, please get him away from the drug experiment that is corrupting him so much."

The prospect of addicts returning from Vietnam en masse helped ramp up another war—the war on drugs. Kuzmarov contends that the story of narcotics use in Vietnam was an underlying, if never spoken, justification for the get-tough drug policies of the 1980s. Even in the 1990s, Gen. Barry R. McCaffrey, President Clinton's chief federal drug-policy adviser, was pushing the addicted-soldier line. "The U.S. Army that I was a part of and so loved was almost destroyed by illegal drugs in the 70s," McCaffrey said. "Up to two thirds of our battalion were using drugs all the time or some of the time, and the impact on our discipline, on rape, violence, spiritual loss of focus, physical health was just atrocious."

Along with its debunking of drugs-in-Vietnam hype, *The Myth of the Addicted Army* is a reminder of how a sufficiently compelling narrative, one that reinforces dearly held opinions, can overtake the national conversation even if it's overblown.

**In Not a Gentleman's War: An Inside View of Junior Officers in the Vietnam War**, (University of North Carolina

Press) Ron Milam is also interested in rescuing Vietnam veterans from stereotypes. Specifically, he wants to salvage the reputations of junior officers, who were often disparaged as shiftless, undisciplined, and amoral. They were blamed for atrocities and, by some, for losing the war. But Milam, an assistant professor of military history at Texas Tech University, contends that, on the whole, they performed valiantly in extremely difficult circumstances.

The figure at the center of Milam's book is the war's most notorious criminal, Lt. William Calley. It was Calley who led the men responsible for the My Lai massacre, and personally killed dozens of civilians himself. Calley was convicted of 22 counts of murder and sentenced to life in prison, though he served only a few years. (At a Kiwanis Club meeting in Columbus, Ga., this year, Calley apologized for the first time in public, telling those gathered that "there is not a day that goes by that I do not feel remorse for what happened. I am very sorry.")

Milam insists that Calley's shameful legacy has been used to unfairly besmirch the honor of fellow junior officers. "The infantry junior officers in the Vietnam War were the protectors of their men," Milam writes, "because they were grunts like their men, and they absorbed the pain and suffering of each soldier." Milam, himself a Vietnam veteran, comes to the topic with plenty of passion and a desire to right the record.

He describes Calley's actions in gruesome detail, including the casual murder of a young child crying for its mother. Curiously, though, he concludes one paragraph by stating that Calley "was not mad or out of control. He was doing what he thought was necessary to handle the situation." That assertion, perhaps unintentionally, is the most controversial in the book. If Calley indeed was only doing what he thought was necessary, then that casts his horrific deeds in a more sympathetic light. Just two pages later, however, Milam writes that what Calley did "cannot be condoned under any circumstances, whether in a just or an unjust war" and that Nixon's commutation "was a travesty of justice that denigrated the sacrifices of all who served honorably in combat roles. ..."

The common wisdom is that, because of draft deferments, some of the brightest potential officers were permitted to sit out Vietnam, forcing the military to promote unqualified soldiers. Milam quotes Gen. William Westmoreland referring to these supposedly lesser service members as "crud." Much of the blame for the U.S. loss in Vietnam, Milam writes, was assigned to junior officers, 4,000 of

whom didn't come home. That, he argues, like so much else we thought we knew about Vietnam, is simply wrong.

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