MYRA MENDIBLE

Saving Face Humiliation, Shame, and the Affective Economy of War

"I'm talking about having looked over the brink and seen the bottom of the pit and realized the truth of that linchpin of Stoic thought: that the thing that brings down a man is not *pain* but *shame*!"

—James B. Stockdale, *Courage under Fire*

In the opening scene of the 1970 film, *Patton*, the General (played by George C. Scott) stands before a huge American flag and speaks to his men: "Americans love a winner and will not tolerate a loser.… That's why Americans have never lost, and will never lose a war: because the very thought of losing is hateful to Americans." It is of course ironic that this film was playing in theaters as Americans were indeed losing a war, a time when thousands of soldiers were dying in a conflict that would never earn them the love reserved for winners nor the legacy of the "good war." When Allied troops landed on Normandy's beaches on June 6, 1944 on their way to liberating Europe, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower made it clear that Americans would "accept nothing less than full victory." But unlike veterans of

World War II, subsequent generations of American warriors have not experienced an all-out "win" in any war since. America's postmodern wars have ended in stalemates, compromises, and negotiated settlements, in messy and anti-climactic "agreements" without clear winners, enduring heroes, or spectacular victory parades. World War II thus casts a long shadow over those who have waged wars of attrition, counter-insurgency, and "low-intensity conflict," wars with undeclared beginnings and uncertain ends. It looms large as an impossible standard: an almost mythic American tale of legendary battles culminating in a glorious victory, yanks defeating evil incarnate and saving the free world. While leaders still pepper their speeches with the language of salvation bequeathed, in part, by this version of history, American Wars from Korea and Vietnam to Iraq and Afghanistan have been fueled and sustained by a far less noble and altruistic vernacular of salvation: the need to "save face." It is with this need—with what it produces and how it is exploited—that this essay is concerned.

Face often refers to the "sense of favorable social self-worth and/or projected other-worth in a public situation."[1] "Saving face" involves the need to avoid the negative judgment we identify with shame and on the "loss of face" experienced when a weakness, flaw, or failure is publicly exposed. It is my contention that the need to avoid or compensate for the loss of face—for being seen as weak, cowardly, or deficient in the eyes of others, sustains a system of debt and obligation that can motivate foreign policy decisions, influence soldiers' behavior in the field, and justify military interventions and war. Despite the political capital invested in the concept of honor, I aim to suggest that it is the flip side of this coin—shame—that pays real dividends. A series of gestures and transactions in the process of war-making involve shame-avoidance or "face-maintenance": "the desire to project an image of strength and capability, or conversely, to avoid projecting an image of incapability, weakness, or foolishness."[2] This desire also shapes memory—the ways that individual soldiers reflect on their experience of war and how a nation judges its significance. Military memoirs offer an important and often missing perspective on the emotional dynamics that can underlie both heroism and atrocity in the conduct of war. My approach in this essay draws on evaluative theories that understand emotions as moral evaluations or judgments and thus central to our ethical reasoning and decision-making processes. Focusing on the Vietnam War, I begin by commenting on some of the ways American foreign policy before and after the War involved "face saving" maneuvers, appeals, and gestures, often drawing on

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1 Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, "Facework Competence, 187.
2 Ibid., 80..

America's victory in World War II. I then consider three veterans' memoirs as case studies, Phillip Caputo's *Rumor of War*, Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone,* and Tobias Wolff's *In Pharaoh's Army* to suggest the role that "saving face" plays during the enlistment, training, and deployment of soldiers. In my view, military memoirs such as these have been an oft neglected aspect of the study of war and its legacies. Through these soldiers' lived experiences and judgments, we gain valuable insights into the underside of pride and patriotism—into the forces that can motivate and perpetuate war-making. After all, America's post-World War II military reflects the nation's idealized self-image as superpower, world policeman, and good guy; the higher the standard one is expected to maintain, the more compelling is the need to save face.

While political and historical analyses tend to apply rationalistic, structural, and organizational approaches to the study of war, the "reasons" given to justify war and the policies enacted in waging it are often secondary, cognitive responses to emotional cues. Rational choice theories cannot account for the often irrational, emotional roots of human action and decision-making. Yet as a basis of national feeling, the experience or dread of shame and humiliation, in particular, can exacerbate feelings of vulnerability, powerlessness, and inferiority in the citizenry and set the stage for brutal "paybacks" or cycles of retaliatory violence. It can exact its toll by disrupting moral orientations and triggering a pursuit of revenge and punishment that may persist for generations. Researchers have proposed a compelling causal relationship between shame and violence. Thomas Scheff and Suzanne Retzinger, for example, argue that a shame-rage sequence underlies most destructive aggression, including war: shame is evoked, which leads to rage and then to violence.[3] James Gilligan considers shame "the primary or ultimate cause of violence....whether toward individuals or entire populations."[4] As a result, the need to avoid or to compensate for a loss of face—for the shame of being seen as weak, cowardly, or deficient in the eyes of others—works to sustain a system of debt and obligation that can motivate foreign policy decisions, influence soldiers' behavior in the field, and justify military interventions and war.

Emotions can be considered mechanisms for linking identities with foreign policy choices. National identity is a dynamic system of social relations that implies the dissolution of a boundary between self and nation, an expansion of the individual ego into an "imagined community." Since emotions involve the "constant construction, repair and destruction of boundaries around each image of

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3 Thomas Scheff and Suzanne M. Retzinger, *Emotions and Violence: Shame and Rage in Destructive Conflicts* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1991).

4 James Gilligan, *Violence: Reflections on a National Epidemic* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 110-11.

self" they enable us to negotiate our identities and relationships with others.[5] Sara Ahmed's concept of affective economies proposes that emotions function as a form of capital that circulates to "align individuals with communities." Rather than seeing emotions as psychological dispositions, Ahmed explores how they "mediate the relationships between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective."[6] Ahmed's claim extends beyond simply noting that emotions are psychological *and* social, individual *and* collective. Instead, Ahmed theorizes emotions as "crucial to the very constitution of the psychic and the social as objects, a process which suggests that the 'objectivity' of the psychic and social is an effect rather than a cause."[7] Emotions are not "in" the individual or the social, they are an effect that allows us to distinguish an "inside" and an "outside" in the first place, to "produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects."[8] These transactions of displacement and difference mediate the boundaries between bodily and social space, for "it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the 'I' and the 'we' are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others."[9]

In an affective economy of war, shame and humiliation work to ensnare individuals and nations in a system of debt and obligation. As William Ian Miller points out, shame and humiliation "carry out the…rough work of punishing moral and social failure."[10] As motive and impetus for mass violence, humiliation is intimately bound to the vestiges of honor societies—male-dominated hierarchies in which the grand narratives of masculinity are consistently re-enacted through both symbolic and bodily transactions. Honor marks degree of status or prestige attached to one's position in society. Social stratification is tied to the individual's ability to live up to some set of ideals or principles regarded as important by the society or some social group within it. Social and economic roles are distinguished and accorded differential status in accordance with what a society or culture deems valuable. In these social settings, male honor must be consistently won, reclaimed, and displayed. Miller's study of Icelandic sagas, for example, argues that honor societies were rigidly enforced male-hierarchies; his analysis reveals a people who

5 Diane Margolis, *The Fabric of Self: A Theory of Ethics and Emotions* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1998), 133.

6 Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies," *Social Text* 79, no. 22.2 (2004): 119.

7 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 10.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 William Ian Miller, *Humiliation and Other Essays on Honor, Social Discomfort, and Violence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), x-xi.

cared "with the totality of their being about the figure they cut and about the respect they elicited."[11]

It seems logical to assume that more individualistic cultures would produce subjectivities less susceptible to the approval or opprobrium of others, less concerned with maintaining a prescribed "public face" at all costs. Underlying this assumption is the understanding that in "traditional" societies, where rigid hierarchies and honor codes are a central feature of social and political life, the dread of public exposure is more acute than in "modern" individualistic nations like the United States. Traditional societies are presumably more likely to be governed by dictates or judgments of others and thus more concerned with "face maintenance." Most Americans would explicitly reject the notion that what others think or say about us is worth killing or dying for. But even the most "modern" nations endorse or commit acts of violence to save face, attributing "irrational" behaviors to their enemies while judging their own actions as necessary and just. In these settings, Miller reminds us, honor has "hidden its face, moved to the back regions of consciousness," though it remains "available for use by nation-states to justify hostility."[12]

Of particular interest for an affective economy of war is Miller's claim that humiliation is a "negative gift" that demands repayment. Elaborating on norms of reciprocity, he explains that "Gifts are obligation creating, more viscerally so than contracts" and that "honor, humiliation, and the obligation to pay back what one owes" are "inextricably bound up with violence."[13] Our refusal or inability to reciprocate the "negative gift" that is public humiliation poses a threat to face: it signals a loss of sovereignty and agency, burdening us with shame. In terms of political capital, the real or perceived humiliation of one nation by another is indeed the gift that keeps on giving. A nation's perceived or actual loss of face on the international stage can be exploited to garner support for military interventions and war: the desire for reciprocity is tendered as means to replenish the nation or group's bankrupt ego. In this exchange, cultural citizenship means that we "are liable for the debits and credits of our national heritage."[14]

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11 Ibid.
12 Ibid., x.
13 Ibid., xi
14 Robert Leicht, "Only by Facing the Past can we be Free," in *Forever in the Shadow of Hitler? The Dispute about the Germans' Understanding of History. Original Documents of the Historikerstreit, the Controversy Concerning the Singularity of the Holocaust*, trans. James Knowlton and Truett Cates (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1993), 247.

De/Facing History: Vietnam and the Legacy of Loss

> "Here dead we lie/Because we did not choose/To live and shame the land/
> From which we sprung." —A. E. Housman

The Vietnam War is still one of the most debated events in American culture. It has been referred to as "a bone stuck in our throats,"[15] a "deep wound in the American psyche"[16] and a "humiliating defeat for one of the world's superpowers."[17] Reference to the war is invoked with every subsequent military engagement, often accompanied by the promise that *this* war is "not going to be another Vietnam."[18] The fractious and contentious nature of the War has thus produced little or no consensus. Historians, military analysts, and political scientists still dispute the ideological roots of the conflict (communism, nationalism), assess various logistical and military tactics (Nixon's "Vietnamization," Westmoreland's strategy of attrition, Kissinger's peace accords), and debate why the war was lost (media coverage, war protestors, civilian policymakers). Perhaps the only conclusion that goes unchallenged is that Americans suffered a "humiliating" defeat. Thus the editors of the *Weekly Standard* can claim that "virtually all Americans agree" that Vietnam was "a national humiliation."[19]

The assumption that America's image was tarnished and defaced on the world stage forms a kind of conventional wisdom about the War's emotional legacy. Iconic images of horror and defeat—body bags and Zippo raids and massacred civilians--frame collective memories. The nation's loss of face is reified in the Hollywood film stereotype of the Vietnam veteran, whose wounded body and psyche sign for the nation's humiliation. Spat upon by ungrateful anti-war protestors, shackled by the policies of civilian whiz kids in Washington, America's protagonists in these tales form a sad cast of dishonored warriors. In this iconography of defeat, the soldier's body bears the burden of a shame deflected and disavowed by their leaders. As the affect of indignity, defeat, and inferiority, shame

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15 Walter Capps, "Postscript," in *Vietnam: A Reader*, ed. Walter Capps (New York: Routledge, 1991), 318.
16 James G. Blight and Janet M. Lang, "Prologue," in *The Fog of War: Lessons from the Life of Robert McNamara* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 22.
17 Patricia Smith, "Why the Vietnam War still matters 35 years after it ended," *New York Times Upfront* Vol. 142, April 5, 2010.
18 President George Bush Announcing War against Iraq, January 16, 1991. *The History Place: Great Speeches Collection*. http://www.historyplace.com/speeches/bush-war.htm
19 David Gelernter, "Another Vietnam?" *Weekly Standard*, October 11, 2004.
http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/004/713dawas.asp.

turns the self against the self.[20] That is, we believe we deserve our shame because of some moral failing, inadequacy, or lapse in judgment.

Vietnam veterans' memoirs chronicle the traumatic effects of losing face, bearing witness to the dishonor that haunts warriors from a mighty nation who lost a war "against a lot of little men in black pajamas."[21] These stories, myths and stereotypes shape the nation's popular memory and become emotional fodder for its war machinery. Positioning the American spectator as the subject of compelling tales of national humiliation, political leaders can deflect accountability for poor outcomes. In this version of history "we" are the victims—not of carpet bombings, chemical warfare, or the tangible wages of war—but because of the resulting loss of face. Although the Vietnam War cost over 58,000 American and 2-3 million Vietnamese lives, the project of restoring national pride takes center stage in the politics of face, deflecting the shame that may otherwise take root. As Thomas Scheff demonstrates, the denial of shame in a community leads to its coded expression, in which shame conceptions emerge as narratives of honor, humiliation, and revenge.[22] The narrative of America's "spoiled identity"[23] circulates to create a kind of ego-deficit, a debt that we seem unable to pay down. The theme that America's image was "defaced" by its loss in Vietnam re-emerges in the nation's political rhetoric whenever leaders seek to rally militaristic strains in the American character. US presidents from Richard Nixon to George W. Bush each relied on face-maintenance themes when garnering support for embarking on or prolonging military ventures abroad.

Over and over again, America's alleged deficit after Vietnam serves to exact more blood and treasure. As Ben Mor points out, "Discredited performances (such as military failures) call for facework, and the subsequent use of force then becomes, at least partly, a means of impression management to reclaim an identity, legitimate a role, and regain self-esteem."[24] Political leaders rarely acknowledge the prominent role that ego plays in their decision-making. By playing on the national ego, leaders

20 Gershen Kaufman, *Shame: The Power of Caring* (Rochester, Vermont: Schenkman Books, 1999), vii.
21 The traditional peasant dress of the area worn by the Viet Cong became the guerrillas' trademark among US soldiers. It also served as object of disdain, ridicule, or prejudice. In 1971, reporter Tom Braden wrote that "It was Robert Kennedy who encouraged McNamara to leave behind him an objective record of the decision-making process which led his country from a game of bluff against a lot of little men in black pajamas to a devastating and terrible war." See Tom Braden, "An Odd Fact about the Vietnam 'Record'" in WP 22 June 1971: A19.
22 Thomas Scheff, *Bloody Revenge: Emotions, Nationalism, and War* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1994).
23 Erving Goffman, Stigma: *Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963).
24 Ben D. Mor, "Using Force to Save Face: The Performative Side of War," *Peace and Change* 37, no. 1 (2012): 95.

exploit the myth of war as curative. The recovery or maintenance of face thus serves as a valuable and stable currency in American politics. In 1975, as a bloody battle was raging and Saigon was being overrun, President Gerald Ford delivered a speech aimed at restoring "the sense of pride that existed before Vietnam."[25] Harking back to the War of 1812, Ford reminded us that "We had suffered humiliation" but "the illustrious victory in the battle of New Orleans" was "a powerful restorative to national pride." Thus by implication the next war could help pay down the "debt" imposed by our defeat in Vietnam. President Reagan collected interest on this debt, drawing on the memory of America's humiliation in Vietnam to justify military interventions. "America is back, standing tall," Reagan told us after America's invasion of the tiny island of Grenada.[26] Also consider how this theme played out in Richard Nixon's, *No More Vietnams* where he praises Reagan for exorcizing the "ghost of Vietnam," claiming that "Since President Reagan took office in 1981, America's first international losing streak has been halted."[27]

Several wars later it seemed the debt would be paid off as we got the "clean war" we presumably needed. Thus in his 1991 Gulf War victory speech, President George H. W. Bush credited the War with burying the specter of Vietnam forever "in the desert sands of the Arabian Peninsula."[28] But alas, in 2007, when pressured about a timeline for withdrawing troops from Iraq, President George W. Bush resurrected that old IOU: we needed to "stay the course" to avoid repeating the upheaval of our retreat from Vietnam.[29] Such dissociation invokes a strategic movement away from past indignity and towards a mutual recovery of pride. The revitalized subject that this narrative hails into being is forged in the distance between these imagined selves: one mired in self-doubt, the other aligned with agency and power. Two framing emotions, humiliation and pride, align this subject with the national self: "we" are invited to feel the sting of our humiliation, to recall the memory of our dishonor—only to further enhance the experience of pride that leaders aim to evoke.

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25 Speech delivered at Tulane University, April 23, 1975, *Public Papers of the Presidents: Gerald R. Ford, 1975, Book I* (Washington, DC, 1977): 568-72.

26 Ronald Reagan, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union," January 25, 1984. The American Presidency Project, March 21, 2014. http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=40205.

27 Richard Nixon, *No More Vietnams* (New York: Arbor House, 1985), 212.

28 George H. W. Bush, "Remarks to the American Legislative Exchange Council," March 1, 1991, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1991, Book I:* January 1 to June 30, 1991 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1992): 197.

29 "Bush in Vietnam Warning over Iraq," BBC News, August 22, 2007. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/6958824.stm.

The more that a group or nation overvalues pride as a sign of self-respect and worthiness the more dreaded is the stigma of public humiliation. The more that we regard our "superior" status as normative and justified the more likely we are to endorse violent retaliation as a means to restore our "rightful" place in the world. Americans have traditionally enjoyed a very high degree of national status. This correlates with the high degree of patriotic pride that Americans express as a people.[30] We take pride in the supremacy of our democratic system of government, conceive of ourselves as a fair-minded, egalitarian people, and assume that the "American way of life" has almost universal appeal. Our enabling fictions preserve and warrant this collective self-image, extolling the virtues of our uniqueness, superiority, and moral authority. An asymmetrical power relationship framed foreign policy before and during the Vietnam War, shaping attitudes and predispositions in the military and civilian leadership. As David Kaiser points out, "In the early 1960s, the government of the United States probably enjoyed more prestige than at any time during the twentieth century."[31] This high degree of status not only informed popular attitudes towards the enemy, but also shaped decision-making at the highest levels of our government. America's prestige, which then Secretary of State Dean Acheson called "the shadow cast by power," had substantive effects.[32] The need to save face forced Kennedy's, Johnson's, and Nixon's hand, as each grappled with the options available to a great nation facing an adversary deemed "inferior."

Face-maintenance tactics informed US foreign policy-making in the lead up to the War. Although Thomas Schelling described "face" as a "country's reputation for action," he also referred to it as a kind of false pride that "often tempts a government's officials to take irrational risks or to do undignified things—to bully some small country that insults them, for example."[33]

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30 A University of Chicago National Opinion Research Center survey of 34 countries, released June 27, 2006, found that the US ranked first in terms of overall national pride. See Marni Goldberg, "National Pride Survey," *Chicago Tribune News*, June 28, 2006, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2006-06-28/news/0606280130_1_american-flag-28th-amendment-senate-on-tuesday-night/2.

31 David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Boston, MA: Belknap Press, 2002), 1.

32 Quoted in Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 443.

33 Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 124.

In March of 1965, John McNaughton, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's top aide during the Vietnam War, summarized the administration's view in a memo quantifying the reasons why the US should go to war in Vietnam. The main reasons for escalating the war were weighted as follows: 10% to bring the people of South Vietnam a better, freer way of life; 20% to keep the area from China; 70% to avoid a humiliating blow to our reputation.[34] After Johnson's massive bombing campaign, Operation Rolling Thunder, failed to subdue North Vietnam, McNaughton made the administration's primary objective clear: "The important aim now," he wrote, "is to avoid a humiliating U.S. defeat."[35] At the 1960 Republican National Convention, Nixon had remarked, "America will not tolerate being pushed around by anybody, anyplace."[36] Years later, in a 1970 speech justifying the escalation of the war into Cambodia, Nixon implied that by failing to act aggressively, America would be seen as "a second rate power" and "all other nations will be on notice that despite its overwhelming power the United States, when a real crisis comes, will be found wanting." Thus he assured us, "[W]e will not be humiliated. We will not be defeated."[37] The emotional incentive driving such remarks was not lost on Senator J. William Fulbright when he wrote, "When President Johnson used to declare that he would not be the first American President to lose a war, and when President Nixon warns, as he did on November 3, against 'this first defeat in American history,' they are not talking about the national interest but about the national ego and their own standings in history."[38] We should note that Johnson had referred to Vietnam as "a raggedy-ass fourth-rate country." Declarations of this sort only made losing face all the more painful. Historian Fredrik Logevall contends that "what [Johnson] really feared was the personal humiliation that he believed would come with failure in Vietnam. He saw the war as a test of his own manliness."[39] (p. 393). Similarly, as late as 1972, President Nixon's decision to mine the harbors of North Viet Nam and cut off the flow of supplies to Hanoi (which *Time* called the "most

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34 Ibid., 535.
35 Ibid.
36 Richard M. Nixon, "Republican National Convention Acceptance Address," July 28, 1960, International Amphitheatre, Chicago, IL. American Rhetoric Online Speech Project, http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/richardnixon1960rnc.htm.
37 Richard M. Nixon, "Speech on Cambodia," April 30, 1970 (Washington, D.C.: *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Richard Nixon, 1970*): 405-409.
38 J. William Fulbright, "Vietnam: the Crucial Issue," *The Progressive*, February 1970. https://progressive.org/Archive/1970/feb/thecrucialissue.
39 Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 393.

momentous military decision" of his presidency), was said to have grown "out of an almost obsessive fear of national and personal humiliation in Viet Nam."[40]

Blema Steinberg's *Shame and Humiliation: Presidential Decision Making on Vietnam* is the only extended study of Vietnam to date that focuses attention on the emotional dynamics involved in policy-making. Steinberg's analysis argues for the critical role that the dread of losing face played in motivating both the Johnson and Nixon. In her view, both leaders exhibited narcissistic personalities that made them highly susceptible to shame and humiliation. "Since the personality of political leaders can have such a profound impact upon the policies of their states," Steinberg contends, "we need to pay much greater attention to that factor. Cognitive abilities may be important, but, if highly charged emotional states color leaders' perception of their environment, the outcome will be policies that reflect that bias to the detriment of more reasoned choices."[41] Describing the men's personal and professional backgrounds in some detail, Steinberg goes on to suggest how their conduct of the War reflected the need to restore self-worth, seek a "vindictive triumph" and avoid "losing face" at all costs. As Steinberg points out, "Narcissistic personalities may favor aggressive foreign policies to avoid shame and humiliation for failing to act (Johnson in 1965) or after they have been shamed and humiliated (Nixon 1969-70).[42] Steinberg's analysis of personal memoirs, letters, declassified documents and memos offers compelling evidence of both men's extreme vulnerability to humiliation.

The loss of face on the world stage—prestige, status, or sovereignty—influences subsequent moral appraisals and judgments, eliciting certain emotional responses and precluding others. Not surprisingly, leadership decisions made in retaliation for real or imagined humiliations produce disastrous results, sometimes prompting government actions that do not serve national interests. Further, the effects of a damaged national identity can persist for generations, as leaders sow memories of humiliation whenever they seek to impose their will, justify foreign interventions or quell dissent at home. This historical memory grounded in the loss of face entraps Americans in a cyclical tale of compensatory violence, fueling nationalistic enmity through time.

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40 "Nixon at the Brink over Viet Nam." *Time*, May. 22, 1972.
http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,879069,00.html.
41 Blema S. Steinberg, *Shame and Humiliation: Presidential Decision Making on Vietnam* (Montreal: Mcgill-Queens University Press, 1996), 309.
42 Ibid. 308.

A Fate Worse than Death: Face and the Call to Arms

> "The terror of being judged sharpens the memory: it sends an inevitable glare over that long-unvisited past which has been habitually recalled only in general phrases.... Intense memory forces a man to own his blameworthy past. With memory set smarting like a reopened wound, a man's past is not simply a dead history...it is a still quivering part of himself, bringing shudders and bitter flavors and the tinglings of a merited shame."
> —George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

In the currency of war, honor is the payment we earn for transacting certain versions of masculinity, courage, or heroism; shame is the price we pay for not paying the debt we presumably owe our nation, right or wrong. Failure to meet these terms ruptures the social bond, estranging individuals from their community. Caputo admits early in *A Rumor of War* that he enlisted in the Marines with the same motive that had "pushed young men into armies ever since armies were invented: I needed to prove something—my courage, my toughness, my manhood."[43] This desire to prove his worth in accordance with a particular set of gendered expectations was further fueled by watching John Wayne heroics on film. Commenting on some of the factors that drove young men to enlist, Caputo recognizes the need for a "guaranteed annual income, free medical care, free clothing."[44] But he also believes that "something else, less tangible but just as valuable" was at stake: "self-respect."[45]

It is important to note the critical role that gender plays in the social dynamics of "saving face." Founded on a basic binary opposition, masculine and feminine, gender differentiates and divides men and women, drawing its boundaries through polarized categories, such as mind/body and culture/nature, which relegate the female body (and by extension, racial or ethnic others) to a contingent, inferior status position. It can even be said that the primary ideological effect of gender is the normalizing of female subordination: binary oppositions are deeply imbricated in a patriarchal value system, as these enforce a hierarchical partitioning whereby the "feminine"' side corresponds to the inferior or powerless position.[46] Gender

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43 Philip Caputo, *Rumor of War* (NY: Henry Holt, 1996), 6.
44 Ibid. 28.
45 Ibid. 28.
46 See Toril Moi, "Feminist, Female, Feminine" in *The Feminist Studies Reader*, 2nd ed. Eds. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 110.

both produces and restricts subjectivity; its dualisms inform not just our social interactions and values, but also our emotional responses. In a social and cultural ambiance in which females occupy a lower status position and hold an unequal share of power, humiliation, like violence, is "gendered masculine in the dishing out but feminine on the receiving end" (I. Miller 55). Deployed as objectification and dehumanization, humiliation is implicitly rendered an act of feminization. This threat of being "made woman" is the subtext that underscores the primacy of "saving face" in narratives of war.

Pride is the lingua franca of military cultures: the coveted reward promised by those recruitment posters hailing young men into an exclusive fraternity of manhood. The pride associated with belonging to the world's most powerful military is always tinged with the dread of not living up to this highest standard. Military training capitalizes on this economy of through disciplinary processes involving pride and humiliation, reward and punishment, ascription and differentiation. Paul Gilbert distinguishes guilt, which evolves in contexts where violence is discouraged, from shame, which stems from a "social threat system related to competitive behavior and the need to prove oneself acceptable/desirable to others."[47] As Erika Carlsen points out, military culture "reinforces, supports, and recreates patriarchal gender relations" and "in its enforcement of state and nonstate hierarchies, [it] legitimates violence as an accepted conflict solving method"[48] (474). Reflecting on his marine training, Caputo notes that the rigorous, often painful psychological and physical trials they endured were meant to separate the honorable from the shameful. The latter—"collectively known as 'unsats,' for unsatisfactory"—were often shunned because they carried "the virus of weakness."[49] What terrified him most was to be "found wanting"[50] "We were shouted at, kicked, humiliated and harassed constantly" Caputo writes. "I endured these torments because I was driven by an overwhelming desire to succeed, no matter what. That awful word- *unsat*- haunted me. I was more afraid of it than I was of Sergeant McClellan. Nothing...could be as bad as having to...admit to my family that I had failed."[51] In the series of rebukes and reprimands he received throughout his training, Caputo recognizes an affective economy of debits and credits: "They instilled in me a lasting fear of

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47 Paul Gilbert, "Evolution, Social Roles, and the Differences in Shame and Guilt," *Social Research* 70, no. 3 (2003): 1205.
48 Erika Carlsen, "Rape and War in the Democratic Republic of the Congo," *Peace Review 21.4* (2009): 474-483.
49 *Caputo*, *Rumor*, 11.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid., 10.

criticism and, conversely, a hunger for praise."⁵² By the end of his training Caputo realizes that while "Napoleon once said he could make men die for little pieces of ribbon," he was "ready to die for considerably less, for a few favorable remarks...."⁵³

Those who survive these trials—who meet the expectations demanded of them—emerge from training as a disciplined, coherent *corps* or body. While this serves to align and fortify them in combat, it also marks their investment in the ongoing system of debits and credits that will shape their behavior on the field. Any hint of passivity, helplessness, or vulnerability can register as weakness and thus evoke shame, a deficit that prompts compensatory displays of power meant to restore agency and control. These compensatory acts can take the form of violent retaliations. Shamed by their inability to either predict or prevent the deaths of their friends, the soldiers displace their anger and sorrow. Ben Kilborne explains one distinction between shame and guilt in terms of the threat these pose to internal orientation: "With guilt, there is a sense of who is doing what to whom; one feels guilty for having done something to someone. By contrast, shame draws more directly on the wellspring of human helplessness; consequently, shame is characterized by an inability to locate 'the enemy' except as a sense of defectiveness of the self or in the form of splitting."⁵⁴ Thus when Caputo and his men are ambushed, they burn a nearby village to the ground—exacting a toll on the villagers and achieving no military gains. But Caputo realizes that the destruction was "more than an act of madness committed in the heat of battle. It was an act of retribution as well."⁵⁵ On another occasion, pushed to the brink of endurance, the platoon explodes in a "collective emotional detonation" that leaves behind "a long swath of smoldering ashes, charred tree trunks."⁵⁶ Caputo notes the calmness, the "inner quietude" that followed after they had exacted their payback in a cathartic release of pent up rage. "We had relieved out pain by inflicting it on others. But that sense of relief was inextricably mingled with guilt and shame. Being men again, we again felt human emotions. We were ashamed of what we had done."⁵⁷ As debt collectors, the soldiers are able to score a few credits on the official balance sheet, particularly in an accounting system run on "body counts." But this system exacts a heavy emotional toll on the soldiers, who pay for it in a deficit of emotion, or as

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52 Ibid., 35.
53 Ibid.
54 Benjamin Kilborne, "Superego Dilemmas," *Psychoanalytic Inquiry 24,* no. 2 (2004): 179.
55 Caputo, Rumor, 110.
56 Ibid., 304.
57 Ibid., 305.

Caputo puts it, "a callus began to grow around our hearts, a kind of emotional flak jacket that blunter the blows and stings of pity."[58]

In his Postscript, Caputo notes the "cartoonish" view that prevailed by "the time Saigon fell in 1975" of the Vietnam veteran "as a drug-addicted, undisciplined loser, the tattered standard-bearer of America's first defeat."[59] He concludes that America's loss of face had left Americans struggling to "integrate the war or its consequences into our collective and individual consciousness."[60] Having served in Vietnam 1965-1966 then returned as a journalist at the war's conclusion a decade later, Caputo is struck by "the humiliation of our exit" compared to "the high confidence with which we had entered."[61]

Tim O'Brien's notions towards the Vietnam War are evident in the opening pages of *If I Die in a Combat Zone*. He believed the war was wrongly conceived and poorly justified.[62] Unlike Caputo, O'Brien was drafted. But planning his escape to Canada, O'Brien comes to the realization that he cannot run away. He could not face his parents, for one, both of whom served in WWII. His concern for what his family, friends and hometown neighbors would think of him trumps his aversion to and opposition to the War. "More," he writes, "I owed the prairie something. For twenty-one years I'd lived under its laws, accepted its education, eaten its food...."[63] His need to save face in the eyes of his family and hometown is even greater than his fear of dying in battle.

O'Brien arrives in Vietnam in 1969 and faces intense combat with Alpha Company. He struggles to make sense of what he sees as a senseless war. O'Brien asks to speak with the battalion commander to express his opposition to the war but he orders him to see the chaplain first because, "The chaplain weeds out the pussies from men with real problems...seems this year.... [i]t's all coming up pussies, and the poor chaplain...is busy as hell, trying to weed out the pussies. Good Lord ought to take pity on the chaplain, ought to stop manufacturing so damn many pussies up there."[64] When he finally meets with the chaplain to express his moral qualms, he is reminded of the debt he owes: "If you accept...that America is one hellava great country, well, then, you follow what she tells you."[65] O'Brien

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58 Ibid., 96.
59 Ibid. 349.
60 Ibid., 354.
61 Ibid., xiii.
62 Tim O'Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box me up and Ship me Home* (NY: Broadway Books, 1975), 18.
63 Ibid., 18
64 Ibid., 55.
65 Ibid., 58.

concludes that "we come to war afraid to admit we are not Achilles, that we are not brave, not heroes...fear of weakness, fear that to avoid war is to avoid manhood."[66]

James Gilligan explains that "violence 'speaks' of an intolerable condition of human shame and rage, blinding rage that speaks through the body."[67] Violent acts arise in this context as a means to "diminish the intensity of shame."[68] In the chapter "My Lai in May," O'Brien describes the moral and physical breakdown of Alpha Company; witnessing the death of fellow soldiers and weighed down by grief, loss, and rage, the men feel increasingly powerless. Diminished in their own eyes by their inability to protect or save their own, their unacknowledged shame triggers what Thomas Scheff identifies as a shame/rage cycle of humiliated fury. On a mission to "payback" the debt imposed by their losses, O'Brien offers this sobering description: "In the next days it took little provocation for us to flick the flint of our Zippo lighters.... and on bad days the hamlets of Pinkville burned, taking our revenge in fire. It was good to walk from Pinkville and to see fire behind Alpha Company. It was good, just as pure hate is good."[69]

The soldiers' ability to feel compassion deteriorates with each act of violence, and many succumb to a bitter loathing of the Vietnamese. Research affirms that, "In an effort to escape painful feeling of shame, shamed individuals are apt to defensively 'turn the tables,' externalizing blame and anger outward onto a convenient scapegoat."[70] Robert Solomon reminds us that revenge plays on metaphors of debt, balance, and pollution. The debt metaphor requires a "paying back" of like for like.[71] Thus when two popular soldiers are blown up the men exact payment from the nearest Vietnamese: "Men put their fists into the faces of the...two frightened women living in the guilty hamlet, and when the troops were through with them, they hacked off chunks of thick black hair. The men were crying, doing this."[72]

Miller notes that "shame bears a close connection with courageous motivation" and may indeed "be its chief motivator."[73] Though O'Brien disagreed with the war, he answered the call to arms because he could not bear the shame that his refusal

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66 Ibid., 38.

67 Gilligan, *Violence*, 55.

68 Ibid., 111.

69 O'Brien, *If I Die*, 119.

70 Juno Price Tangney, Jeffrey Stuewig, and Debra Mashek, "What's Moral about Self-Conscious Emotions?" in *The Self-Conscious Emotions: Theory and Research*, eds. Jessica L. Tracy, Richard W. Robins, & Juno Price Tangney (NY: Guilford Press 2007), 27.

71 R. C. Solomon, "Justice v. Vengeance: On Law and the Satisfaction of Emotion," in *The Passions of Law*, ed. Susan Bandes (NY: New York UP, 1999), 141.

72 O'Brien, If I Die, 119.

73 William Ian Miller, The Mystery of Courage (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2000), 70.

would reap; he had to save face—his own, his family's, and his nation's; this debt was greater than his obligation to his own moral conviction. Throughout his tour of duty, O'Brien grapples with the meaning of courage and comes to see his decision to save face as an act of cowardice; "proper courage" he concludes, is "acting wisely when fear would have a man act otherwise."[74] He writes, "I had reasons to oppose the war in Vietnam….The conviction seemed right. And, if right, was my apparent courage in enduring merely a well-disguised cowardice? When my father wrote that at least his son was discovering how much he could take and still go on, was he ignoring his son's failure to utter a dramatic and courageous no to the war?"[75]

Tobias Wolff's *In Pharaoh's Army* offers a somewhat different take on the need to save face as obligation and impetus. Unlike Caputo and O'Brien, Wolff maintains an ironic distance throughout his narrative, sprinkling his memoir with humorous accounts of his wartime antics (such as stealing a television set from an officers' lounge so he could watch the *Bonanza* Thanksgiving special) and consistently proclaiming his lack of military skills, bravery, and credibility. More concerned than Caputo or O'Brien with aspects of his personal life before and after the war, Wolff's narrative seems bent on undermining any illusion of honorable motives or heroic causes. Instead, we learn about his con-man father, his dysfunctional relationships with women, his "lousy grades and fatuous contempt" for rules as a teen, and his drunken exploits. Unlike Caputo or O'Brien, Wolff has no romantic illusions about the military or desire for glory on the battlefield. He even admits that despite serving as an officer with the Special Forces, he "was completely incompetent to lead a Special Forces team."[76] But while he maintains this self-deprecating, sardonic tone throughout much of the narrative, his impudence masks the same need for external validation that has compelled men to march into wars throughout history. Wolff's enlistment is ostensibly prompted by what he calls the need for "legitimacy"—a need that he links to his desire to be a writer. Experience, Wolff contends, seemed the "radical source of authority in the writers whose company [he] wanted to join."[77] Aspiring to "the most bankable" experiences of all—those borne of war—he emulates writers like Norman Mailer, Ernest Hemingway, Erich Maria Remarque and others shaped by their wartime experiences. But perhaps most compelling is Wolff's need to make up for his father's deficiencies, to burnish a family name sullied by his father's disastrously poor choices. As Michael Carr explains, the "nearest English synonyms of the apt

74 O'Brien, *If I Die*, 136.
75 Ibid., 139.
76 Tobias Wolff, *In Pharaoh's Army: Memories of a Lost War* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 8.
77 Ibid., 44.

figurative *face* are *prestige*, *honor*, *respect*, *dignity*, *status*, *reputation*, *social acceptance*, or *good name*."[78] Wolff admits that his "father's unflinching devolution from ace airplane designer to welsher, grifter, convict—appalled me."[79] For all his admitted "bohemian posturing," he did not see his father "as some kind of hero or saint of defiance against bourgeois proprieties. He had ruined his good name, which happened to be my name as well."[80] Through his petty crimes and peccadillos, Wolff's father had accrued a debt that Wolff needed to pay off. By enlisting in the military and just as importantly, serving in combat, he could balance his accounts "among respectable men."[81] Wolff confesses that he "wanted to be a man of honor" unlike his father, and that military service seemed "the indisputable certificate of citizenship and probity."[82]

Wolff undergoes the familiar hazing that characterizes military training: when a recruit in another company dies of heatstroke, the drill sergeant asks his men, "Shitbirds, why did that troop croak?" and the men duly answer, "Because he was a pussy, Sergeant."[83] He finds himself growing stronger, and he claims that part of his "strength came from contempt for weakness"[84] Like Caputo and O'Brien, Wolff learns quickly to dissociate himself from those who can't pull their own weight, to mark his "progress by their humiliations. Upon his arrival in Vietnam, Wolff is assigned to a South Vietnamese artillery battalion as an advisor though he speaks Vietnamese "like a seven-year-old child with a freakish military vocabulary."[85] Wolff sees the assignment as "a reprieve" since he won't be sent into the heart of the action with the Special Forces and because his own incompetence makes him "scared stiff" to lead men into combat.[86] Yet he admits: "I lacked the courage to confess my incompetence as the price of getting out. I was ready to be killed, even, perhaps, get others killed, to avoid that humiliation."[87] Though the transfer gives him a way out of this predicament, he asks to be sent back to the Special Forces, "to wherever the latest disaster had created an opening" because "it was honor itself that [he] wanted, true honor, not some passable counterfeit."[88]

78 Michael Carr, "Chinese 'Face' in Japanese and English," *The Review of Liberal Arts 85* (1993): 87-8.
79 Wolff, *In Pharaoh's Army*, 45.
80 Ibid.
81 Ibid.
82 Ibid., 46.
83 Ibid., 47.
84 Ibid., 48.
85 Ibid., 8.
86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
88 Ibid., 9.

Face maintenance demands keen attention to performance, as the point is not so much being honorable or brave or powerful, but appearing to be so before others. While Wolff claims disdain for the "counterfeit" he also admits that as part of the Special Forces team he could do a fair impersonation of a man who knew his stuff" but that "the act wouldn't hold up forever" because he didn't believe it himself.[89] No longer inhabiting his "pose" Wolff distances himself from the "outrageous fraud" the men enact in their "performance."[90] When one of the instructors receives orders shipping him back for another combat tour in Vietnam, Wolff is struck by the extent to which the performance dissolves to expose the man's fear. More intriguing perhaps is that the instructor doesn't lose face because he admits his fear, as the men seem to share a knowledge that allows them to accept a truth masked by their performance. Wolff asks, "And if this sergeant, who was the real thing, had reason to be afraid, what about me? What would happen when my account came due and I had to be in truth the wily, nerveless killer I pretended to be?"[91]

In an interview years later, Wolff would reflect on the moral quality of his literary work, noting that "it has to do with will and the exercise of choice within one's will. The choices we make tend to narrow down a myriad of opportunities to just a few, and those choices tend to reinforce themselves in whatever direction we've started to go, including the wrong direction."[92] Certainly Wolff's initial choice to enlist, driven as it was by the desire to earn "true honor," would bind him to other choices along the way. During his tour of duty he participates in and witnesses acts that challenge his conception of honor and the legitimacy of the war itself. This seems to make the search for some affirmation of their truth and value more compelling. But Wolff recognizes the futility and folly of such wrong-headed tenacity. Referring to President George W. Bush's choice to invade Iraq, Wolff remarks: "Our present government likes to lecture us on the virtue of *staying the course.* Well, maybe it's not such a good idea to stay the course if you're headed toward the rocks. There's something to be said for changing course if you're about to drive your ship onto the shoals."[93]

Face maintenance can compel us to act, even if wrongly, to avoid exposing our own flawed decisions or human folly. In a conflict or war situation, it can also make conciliation unlikely since neither side can seek nonviolent solutions to

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89 Ibid., 53.
90 Ibid. 49.
91 Ibid., 55.
92 Interview, *The Believer*, May 2005. http://www.believermag.com/issues/200505/?read=interview_wolff.
93 Ibid.

their conflict for fear of appearing "weak" or "wrong." Thus t*he dread of losing face also curtails the potential to negotiate a peace. Research shows that among the most troublesome obstacles confronted in negotiations involve "the intangible issues related to loss of face. In some instances, protecting against loss of face becomes so central an issue that it swamps the importance of the tangible issues at stake and generates intense conflicts that can impede progress toward agreement and increase substantially the costs of conflict resolution."*[94] This dynamic was in evidence in the early lead up to the Vietnam War, as President Kennedy's attempts to seek compromise in the "dangerous mess" he inherited were immediately decried as "appeasement."[95] Further, Michael Lind argues that "in the aftermath of the humiliations in Cuba and Germany, the Kennedy administration felt compelled to demonstrate U.S. resolve in the Indochina theater of the Cold War."[96]

It would seem that not much has changed in this system of debits and credits, as saving face still trumps saving lives. For example, in ongoing efforts to negotiate peace between Israel and the Palestinians, James Kirbow argues, "radicals are willing to remain engaged in a state of perpetual conflict and unending hardship, even if only to save face and avoid the appearance of 'weakness.'"[97] Similarly, Neil Altman reminds us that people throughout history have been "willing and even eager to fight, kill, and die to protect their honor and sense of self-respect." Psychologically, people fight to avoid "the humiliation of being crushed, overwhelmed by force, and threatened with psychological annihilation." The affective economy I have outlined here also finances the broader dynamics of the "global war on terror" and undermines attempts at conciliation or negotiation. As one reporter points out, "the story of how a superpower looks for a dignified way out of a messy and often unpopular foreign conflict has become a historical genre of sorts."[98] Given the high costs of these transactions, we would do well to consider how much more we are willing to pay to save face. This begins by challenging the notion that war-making is more honorable than peace-making—and that America's power in the world resides in the former and not the latter.

94 Bert Brown, "Face Saving and Face Restoration in Negotiation," in *Negotiations: Social-Psychological Perspectives*, ed. D. Druckman (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1977), 275.
95 David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000), 101.
96 Michael Lind, *Vietnam: The Necessary War* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2002), 13.
97 James Kirbow, "The Problem of Face-Saving and Posturing in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," Examiner.com, March 20, 2013. http://www.examiner.com/article/the-problem-of-face-saving-and-posturing-the-israelian-palestinian-conflict.
98 Jmes Glantz, "Saving Face and How to Say Farewell," *New York Times*, Nov. 27, 2005

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MYRA MENDIBLE is Professor and Honors College Fellow at Florida Gulf Coast University, where she teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in comparative lit and American Studies. Her most recent book is *American Shame: Stigma and the Body Politic* (Indiana UP) and she is currently working on monograph, *American War Stories: Memory, Politics and Soldiers' Memoirs*.