

# H-Net Reviews

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Jerry Lembcke. *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam*. New York: New York University Press, 1998. xi + 217 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-5146-6.

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Etched into the memories of most Americans of an age to remember the 1960s is the poor treatment accorded returning Vietnam veterans. One recalls those returning veterans as being reviled, called names, even spit upon. There is one problem with those memories, according to Lembcke: Such treatment never happened.

Lembcke, a sociologist and a Vietnam veteran himself, has written a very serious book challenging the widely-held belief that Vietnam veterans were spit upon by anti-war activists when the veterans returned to the United States. His thesis is that such spitting incidents are part of a modern myth, used initially by the Nixon Administration as means to separate "good" veterans from the Vietnam Veterans Against the War and later by the Bush Administration to discredit opposition during the Gulf War. And, in between those two periods, the myth was perpetuated by motion pictures, which seized upon this myth as a dramatic device.

The basic theme underlying this modern myth is that the Vietnam veterans were poorly treated by an unappreciative nation, specifically by anti-war groups. But one of the points that Lembcke comes back to again and again in his book is that anti-war activists were engaged in recruiting Vietnam veterans into their ranks; why would anti-war activists treat potential colleagues in a manner that might alienate them? It should be noted that Lembcke has some experience in this relationship; when he returned from Vietnam he became a member of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War. An uncharitable reader might see a certain amount of apology here for the anti-war movement. Nonetheless, the author's arguments seem quite logical. In support of his thesis, Lembcke has examined thoroughly available materials of this period of time and has failed to find any documentary evidence of

the spat-upon Vietnam veteran.

Lembcke begins his book by looking at the justification offered by the Bush administration for the 1990 Gulf War. Calling the dispatching of troops to the Gulf an "exercise in what is sometimes called 'armed propaganda'" (p. 24), the author then calls the image of the spat-upon Vietnam veteran a "perfecting myth" which served to reinforce the support for the Gulf War by a American public which still retained bad memories of Vietnam (p. 25). With this latter-day use of the "myth" thus laid out, Lembcke spends the balance of the book examining the anti-war movement, concentrating on anti-war activities of veterans, on the lack of evidence for spat-upon veterans, on the mental labeling of Vietnam veterans, and on the role of the motion picture in reinforcing the concept of the spat-upon veteran in the public mind.

Along the way the reader is treated to some quite interesting discussions in support of the author's thesis. In Chapter Six, "From Odysseus to Rambo," the author discusses receptions for other returning twentieth-century veterans, such as the "Dolchstoss Legend" or the "stab in the back" of German soldiers following World War I and the scorn felt by returning French soldiers after the 1954 defeat at Dien Bien Phu in Indochina. Lembcke writes, "The fact that we seldom, if ever, hear stories about soldiers in winning armies returning home to abuse suggests that these tales function specifically as alibis for why a war was lost" (p. 89). In Chapter Eight, "Women, Wetness, and Warrior Dreams," the author paints a dark picture of myths unexamined. He writes, "The image of warriors betrayed and then forgotten has been the centerpiece of paramilitary cultures throughout the twentieth century....Unless it is laid to rest, the myth of the spat-upon Vietnam veteran will continue to feed the politics



of division and violence” (pp. 142-43).

In Chapter Nine, “Myth, Spit, and the Flicks; Coming Home to Hollywood,” the author writes of some of the approximately 120 films he viewed which portray relations between Vietnam veterans and the anti-war movement. Much of this chapter is devoted to *Coming Home*, the 1978 motion picture which Lembcke describes as “a keystone” in the building of popular conceptions about the treatment of returning Vietnam veterans (p. 162). And did the films he examined present an accurate picture? Not exactly. Lembcke writes, “Anti-war GIs and veterans made it to the screen in very small numbers and then almost always as characters whose mental and physical disabilities overshadowed their political identity” (p. 180). In short, films served to perpetuate the “myth” which lies at

the core of this study.

Lembcke has written an important book which should be read by anyone with an interest in the Vietnam War or in the recent social history of the United States, regardless of what one believes about the treatment of returning Vietnam veterans. One may not agree initially with his thesis, but his argument is surely compelling.

This review was commissioned for H-Pol by Lex Renda <renlex@uwm.edu>.

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