Robert J. McMahon, "Contested Memory: The Vietnam War and American Society, 1975-2001" (SHAFR Presidential Address), *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Spring 2002): 159-184.

Commentary by **Mark Philip Bradley,** University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Published by H-Diplo on 23 June 2002

Robert McMahon's elegant and incisive essay on contested American memories of the war in Vietnam opens up a series of critical questions surrounding remembrance of the Vietnam War and the place of diplomatic historians in addressing them. How, McMahon asks, has the war "been explained, rationalized, memorialized, represented, understood?" And how can the study of war memory, now largely the province of cultural historians, be advanced by scholars of American foreign relations? McMahon's impressive efforts to grapple with these questions are important both for what they reveal about American memorializing practices and the challenges the study of memory poses for diplomatic historians.

McMahon focuses his essay on three sites that exemplify what he terms the "ongoing struggle within American culture and society over the meaning and significance of the Vietnam war" since 1975: presidential rhetoric, the writings of political commentators and policy elites and representations of the war in popular culture. His discussion of the latter two sites of memory provides a lucid summary of the contestatory nature of postwar American discourse. One the one hand, what McMahon terms the vindicationists -largely in McMahon's telling conservative and neo-conservative elites- seek to defend the nobility of American anticommunist aims in Vietnam and conduct of U.S. troops in the field. Some argue that the U.S. in fact won the war, by giving time for noncommunist states in Southeast Asia to firmly establish their political legitimacy and economic viability. Other vindicationists attribute American defeat to poor leadership or the disloyalty of the antiwar movement, the media and Congress. Against these claims, McMahon argues, is a broader popular consensus on the war in Vietnam as an instrumental and moral failure, one reflected in public opinion polling and the writings of liberal political elites. McMahon also gives sustained attention to the ways in which popular cultural forms, including film, television, music, theater, mass-market fiction and nonfiction, have reflected and reinforced larger societal misgivings about the war in Vietnam.

Perhaps the most surprising dimension of his analysis, however, is McMahon's discussion of presidential rhetoric and the interpretative continuities he detects in the major presidential speeches on Vietnam given by American presidents since 1975. We tend to take Ronald Reagan's 1980 address before the Veterans of Foreign Wars convention in Chicago (in which he argued "ours was a noble cause") as a turning point in official memories about the war, marking a shift through which the more troubling dimensions of the war were swept away by a heroic and sometimes triumphalist narrative that both valorized American soldiers and U.S. war aims. But as McMahon ably demonstrates, presidential rhetoric from the Ford through Clinton Administrations varied quite little. With the brief exception of Jimmy Carter's 1976 campaign

speeches in which Carter portrayed the war as a disastrous example of American hubris, McMahon argues that presidential memorialization, Democratic and Republican alike, has celebrated the Americans who fought in Vietnam by transforming the war into heroic equivalent of World War II.

Usefully, McMahon historicizes these official American memorializing practices through comparative analysis, one that draws in part on David Blight's recent *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001) but also on the cases of Germany and Japan after World War II. McMahon suggests American presidential rhetoric on Vietnam mirrors "the common historical trend toward state-sponsored triumphalism in official memories of past travails." The emphasis on Vietnam veterans and appeals to a highly selective patriotic memory, he argues, recall a similar process following the American Civil War in which both Confederate and Northern veterans came to be honored and respected for their valor and an official discourse of reunion and reconciliation came to mask the ideological differences over slavery and postwar visions of emancipation that had so divided North and South during the war. This historical and comparative frame is an especially welcome one. Too often, studies of the American war in Vietnam operate in a vacuum without reference to wider political, economic, social and cultural developments in American society and beyond its borders. By contextualizing American war memory of Vietnam in this manner, McMahon points to a critical analytical means of enlarging and enriching our discussion of the war and its aftermath.

McMahon's approach, however, leaves open important questions about how these official state narratives are constructed and received, and their relationship to other forms of societal war remembrance. If state-sponsored triumphalism is, as he suggests, a "common historical trend," McMahon's explanation for it in the case of Vietnam memory seems to me a partial one. He argues that because American global power remained "fully intact" after the fall of Saigon in 1975, unlike the crushing defeats experienced by Germany and Japan after World War II, U.S. political elites did not feel the need to undertake a deeper reckoning of American aims and means in Vietnam. Instead, through the "discourses of heroic sacrifice, reconciliation, and healing" they could selectively elide the societal discord the war produced at home as well as American culpability for the death and devastation that took place in Indochina during the war.

And yet, as McMahon himself suggests, public opinion polling reveals a continuing unease about the efficacy and morality of American intervention in Vietnam. How do we explain the paradox between these quite different points of view? After all, American presidents act not only as agents of external American power but also as politicians fully aware of the views of their domestic constituencies. Surely, some aspect of the triumphalist vision must resonate with voters if American presidents over the last twenty-five odd years continued to articulate versions of it.

One way of probing this apparent disjuncture might be to disaggregate out the dual elements that emerge in McMahon's discussion of presidential rhetoric on Vietnam. On the one hand, presidents from Ford to Clinton have urged the nation to accord special gratitude to the heroism of Vietnam era veterans who in Jimmy Carter's words were "no less brave because our Nation was divided about that war." The emphasis here is on healing and reconciliation at both the state

and private level. At the same time, presidential rhetoric also sought to couch this message in a defense of American aims in Vietnam; in Clinton's words "the brave Americans who fought and died there had noble motives. They fought for freedom and the independence of the Vietnamese people."

In examining public reception of these distinct if intertwined official memorializing discourses, an admittedly difficult task but one that McMahon does not fully take on, one can imagine an acceptance of the rhetoric of valor and healing without a similar embrace of the nobility of American aims in Vietnam. Aspects of this disparate response are present in some of the popular cultural forms McMahon discusses in his essay. Fiction, nonfiction and film on the war, for instance, often render soldiers and veterans in a sympathetic and humanizing light even when sharply critical of official American policy in Vietnam. A particularly revealing instance of these divided sensibilities is the Vietnam Veterans Memorial itself in which the Maya Lin's dark and mournful evocation of the American experience now uneasily coexists with considerably more traditional and heroic figurative sculptures depicting the men and women who served in Vietnam. This visual juxtaposition conveys an incongruous sensibility of ignoble valor that may capture some of the ambiguities of American memory of the war.

An understanding of the complexity of these responses, and the possible motivations that underlie them, requires a somewhat broader canvass than the largely elite responses McMahon takes as the focus of his essay. It also requires a willingness by diplomatic historians to further blur the disciplinary lines between diplomatic and cultural history and an increased receptivity to conceptual and methodological tools derived from anthropology, sociology and cultural studies. How, for instance, as historians can we understand the almost unfathomable grief of the more than 57,000 American families who lost sons and daughters in the Vietnam War? Or the memories of the war for the Vietnam era generation who either fought and survived in Vietnam or remained at home as supporters or opponents of the war? What "social frames" of memory, to borrow from the sociologist Maurice Halbwach's still seminal 1925 Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire, mediate these more private memories of the war in Vietnam? Given the disproportionate numbers of African-Americans, Latinos, Native-Americans and working class whites who served in Vietnam, socially constructed categories such as race, ethnicity and class seem essential to better appreciating the polyphonic character of Vietnam war remembrance. Similarly, in what ways does gender, particularly conceptualizations of masculinity and war, inform memories of war? And ultimately, what is the relationship between these more private forms of war memory and the master narratives constructed by the state?

A comparative historiographical perspective helpfully reinforces the potential utility of such an expansive and interdisciplinary approach. Perhaps the richest site of war and memory studies deals with the aftermath of World War I in Europe. Here scholars such as Jay Winter, Adrian Gregory, Daniel J. Sherman and Annette Becker have explored in particularly innovative ways the often contestatory processes through which individuals, groups and states in interwar Europe sought to give meaning to the collective grief and bereavement produced by World War I. To take just one example, Adrian Gregory's The Silence of Memory (Oxford: Berg, 1994) examines the commemoration of Armistice Day by the British government and the dialogical ways in which these memorializing practices both shaped and were shaped by various segments of British popular opinion. Because Gregory's central aim is to analyze the diverse meanings

accorded to silence (a two-minute silence formed the basis of official British commemoration of Armistice Day), his account is an especially suggestive one for potential efforts to recover the articulation of private and localized sites of memory and their interpenetration, tensions and contradictions with state memorialization of the war in Vietnam.

McMahon's essay raises two other critical issues for our understanding of Vietnam war memory. Both are forms of silence. The first are the silences implicit in memories of war and their larger analytical significance. As McMahon carefully points out, official memorial discourse on Vietnam renders invisible key dimensions of the war: ignored is any discussion of My Lai and other American atrocities, free fire zones, the savagery of American bombing campaigns, the suffering of Vietnamese, Lao and Khmer victims and the fraying of the social fabric at home. To McMahon's list, one might add the impact of Vietnam policy on popular faith in government and the broader cultural hubris that underlay U.S. perceptions and policy toward Vietnam. Such silences are not, however, restricted to state memory. As the defensive reactions to recent allegations of war crimes against Bob Kerrey suggest, many remain quite reticent to ascribe moral culpability to American actions in Vietnam. As McMahon provocatively asks toward the close of his essay, what do these silences "suggest about who Americans are, what they are capable of, and what they stand for?" The practices of remembering to forget, which McMahon reminds us are not uncommon in other cases of state-sponsored memory, and what they suggest about the relationship between memory and historical narratives of American history clearly requires deeper study as diplomatic historians and others seek to probe and contextualize memories of the war in Vietnam.

A second form of silence involves the nature of Vietnamese memories of war. McMahon makes passing reference to them in a footnote, but the comparative cases he employs in the body of his essay make no reference to Vietnam at all. This is unfortunate, I think, at a number of levels. First, many of the patterns he detects in American memorializing practices, official and otherwise, display real continuities with those in Vietnam including the tendency of Vietnamese state narratives to elide the problematics of Vietnam's own prosecution of the war and the similarities between Vietnamese and American memorializing practices that challenge these official efforts (this is particularly true in fiction written by Vietnamese and American veterans of the war). Second, the absence of a Vietnamese presence in McMahon's essay unintentionally reinscribes patterns common during the war and its aftermath by policymakers and scholars alike in which the Vietnamese themselves are virtually invisible in their own history. But perhaps most unfortunately, the absence of a discussion of Vietnamese memories of war leaves us without a necessary yardstick for further contextualizing American memories of the war. If the war claimed the lives of more than 57,000 Americans, between one and three million Vietnamese were killed. Moreover, as the war took place on Vietnamese soil, few if any segments of Vietnamese society were untouched by it. These differences in the Vietnamese and American experiences of war, and their inevitable impact on both private and official memory, received particularly powerful articulation in Barbara Sonneborn's recent prize-winning film "Regret to Inform." The film chronicles Sonneborn's journey to Vietnam to visit the place where her husband had been killed. At the same time, it features a series of arresting and moving interviews with war widows, both Vietnamese and American. Perhaps the most striking of them is with a northern Vietnamese women who acknowledges the grief of Americans who lost their husbands and sons in the war but gracefully if firmly reminds her interviewer that the war

consumed Vietnamese society -northern and southern, urban and rural, communist and non-communist, rich and poor, men and women- in ways that remain difficult for Americans to imagine.

As McMahon I am sure would be the first to admit, no single essay can do justice to the multiple strands of Vietnam war memory. Indeed among the great strengths of his essay is its ability to eloquently pose so many of the critical questions that lie ahead of diplomatic historians who will undertake the study of this complex phenomenon. McMahon himself I understand is engaged on a book length manuscript on war memory. Like many who admire his rigorous and thought provoking scholarship, I look forward to its speedy completion.

Mark Philip Bradley is associate professor of history at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. He is the author of Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Post Colonial Vietnam, 1919-1950, which won the 2002 Harry J. Benda Prize from the Association of Asian Studies, and is working on a global history of the Vietnam wars.

Copyright © 2002-2004 by H-Diplo, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the H-Diplo Article Discussion Co-ordinator, George Fujii, gfujii@umail.ucsb.edu.