

## HOW TO WIN THE VIETNAM WAR: MORE RAMBO

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### ABSTRACT

*Despite rhetoric promoting freedom, democracy and peace, the United States has been engaged in military action nearly every year since its inception in 1776. Many of these conflicts are best understood as wars that symbolically reprise the nation's creation story as embodied in the frontier myth. My paper explores how Sylvester Stallone's Rambo film franchise reenacts and revisions the Vietnam war as a kind of captivity narrative that prefigures the frontier myth. In this way, Rambo is allowed to win the war that the United States lost.*

“Art knows us better than we know ourselves.” Theodore Adorno

The narrative of the Vietnam war bears close resemblance to America's frontier myth, which scholars have identified as the country's “founding myth,” its creation story.<sup>1</sup> After all, Vietnam featured imagined cowboys fighting imagined Indians. As ever, the cowboys, while invading and occupying and pillaging, fought defensively for democracy and freedom; whereas, the Indians/Vietcong fought an offensive war against goodness and decency and everything America imagined itself to represent. In short, as with the frontier myth in Vietnam, civilization grappled with barbarism all over again. And the stakes were dire because the United States also fought in Vietnam to contain the growth of communism, which was hell bent on world domination, according to American presidents across the twentieth century. Thus, again like the frontier myth, America was fighting for its very survival. In this way, by defeating the yellow-tinged red communism in Vietnam, America could rebirth itself by planting seeds of itself.

And that is precisely how the myth works, according to its most famous evocation, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” penned by Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893.<sup>2</sup> Turner brilliantly channeled the imprinting effects of three hundred years of war against Indians.<sup>3</sup> Those wars, mixed with the most influential religious ideas of the earliest settlers, fashioned a sense of America's birth and growth as fulfilling God's plan.<sup>4</sup> They felt God had chosen them for the task because he favored them.<sup>5</sup> In this way, early American imperialism—that is,

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<sup>1</sup> Eldon Kenworthy, *America/Américas, Myth in the Making of U.S. Policy Toward Latin*

*America* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995) 16.

<sup>2</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, *Frontier and Section. Selected Essays of Frederick Jackson Turner.*

(New York: Prentice-Hall, [1893] 1961).

<sup>3</sup> See Fredrick Pike, *The United States and Latin America: Myths and Stereotypes of Civilization and Nature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> Greg Grandin, *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (New York: Holt, 2007) 149.

<sup>5</sup> Richard T. Hughes, *Myths America Lives By* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004) 23.

the ongoing conquest of Native lands—was imagined as divinely inspired. Indians were viewed as allies of Satan.<sup>6</sup> Thus, Indians, who were plainly struggling to defend themselves could be cast as vicious savages while Americans saw themselves as innocent, fighting a defensive war.

The famous Turner thesis argued that the experience of westward expansion then gave rise to the American Adam/Jesus, a new man or, more accurately, a man born anew on the wild and violent frontier. First, the man was stripped of corrupted urban or effete European cultural baggage, then reborn as prototypically American in the west. This story has played over several centuries in American popular culture, in particular for the last hundred years in Hollywood film.<sup>7</sup>

Like many American conflicts, the Vietnam war was rested upon a flagrant and purposeful mendacity, that in an act of war an American patrol boat had been attacked in international waters at the Gulf of Tonkin by the North Vietnamese navy. A brazen attack in international waters? The United States had every right to defend itself.

Yet it raises questions. Was the death of nearly 60,000 American boys and as many as three million Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians, an appropriate response to a minor incident at sea 10,000 miles from America's shores? Then, to make matters worse, the United States proceeded to lose the war, even though the criminal president, Richard Nixon, would later declare victory in retreat. So, further, was that minor incident at sea worth the political cost, when the war overtook the political system, of electing Nixon in 1968, in part because he claimed to have a secret strategy to win the war, when he did not?

More than that. What if it the confrontation at the Gulf of Tonkin provocation had never happened? How would that change things? Well, in fact, it was a lie and, in the words of Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense at the time, "It never happened."<sup>8</sup> It was a deliberate prevarication (only revealed publically years later) so as to gain the Lyndon Johnson administration sufficient political leverage to launch an undeclared war. (It worked brilliantly and he waged the war like a good old boy from Texas.)

Probably the key unanticipated side effect of the war, unanticipated because the United States did not expect to lose, is what became known as the Vietnam syndrome. The loss shook the United States to its core. It had never lost a war before (battles, yes, as with George Armstrong Custer in 1876, but not war), and certainly not to a ragtag bunch of surrogate Indians.<sup>9</sup> Thus the country seemed adrift in the wake of the war as the struggle for civil rights raged and the Watergate scandal that forced Nixon to resign in disgrace. Conservatives, in particular, took an almost perverse delight in laying the blame on liberals, that is, mostly the media and the Democratic party. These liberals, the story went, were weak, soft on communism and had forced the United States to effectively fight with one hand tied behind its back. As Rambo famously put it, "Somebody wouldn't let us win," and he did not mean North Vietnam. This malaise, to borrow a Jimmy Carter-esque phrase, was home grown. Basically, it was the liberals who had prevented the United States from being allowed to win.

And the results are well known. The syndrome in due course contributed to the sharp rightward turn in American politics.<sup>10</sup> Especially among conservatives, politics became overtly religious all over again as Republican country experienced its own sort of new Great Awakening. Witness Ronald Reagan invoking God with righteous and relentless aw-shucks geniality and later George W. Bush claiming without blush that God had chosen him to rule and to fight. But the fights after Vietnam that the nation picked, like a sore that will not heal so long as you continue to pick at it—Grenada, Iraq, bombing Libya, meddling in Central America to prop up feverishly violent military dictatorships, and such, were, despite the rhetoric, easy targets, significantly very much about winning, returning to form so as to demonstrate that Vietnam was an aberration, not because it was a bad idea, but because big bad government and hippies and feminists and such had made America lose. Culture wars after the sixties consequently took center stage, each coalition angling for dominance and, once in the White House, prophesying foolishly that W. Bush or Obama election victories heralded in the arrival of new coalitions that would govern for decades.

<sup>6</sup> Hughes, 30-31.

<sup>7</sup> Ronald H. Carpenter, "America's Tragic Metaphor: Our Twentieth-Century Combatants as Frontiersmen." *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 76: 1 (February 1990) 1-22.

<sup>8</sup> See an interview with McNamara, available on Youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HODxnUrFX6k> (accessed April 3, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Geoff Simmons, *Vietnam Syndrome: The Impact on U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 1998) 3-24.

<sup>10</sup> Gail E. S. Yoshitani, *Reagan on War, A Reappraisal of the Weinberger Doctrine, 1980-1984*. (Houston: Texas A and M Press, 2012) 140-141.

**“Nothing is over!”**

Hollywood embraced the Vietnam syndrome avidly enough after the hostilities ceased in 1975. However, during the conflict only a single major motion picture tackled the war, John Wayne’s hawkish and tacky 1968 *Green Berets*. Later followed a handful of films that struggled, in varying degrees of nuance, with deeper ideas—the *Deer Hunter*, *Coming Home*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon*, and *Full Metal Jacket*. But it was the widely popular *Rambo* series, in particular, that spoke most directly to the heartland, both mythically and at the box office.<sup>11</sup>

Each in its own way, these star vehicles for Sylvester Stallone were nestled deeply in the primordial mists of the frontier myth. Each in its way tears a page from Turner’s thesis but each, significantly, also narrates a captivity narrative, which prefigure yet importantly influenced Turner.<sup>12</sup> Captivity narratives feature the abduction of American innocence, typically in the form of a white female kidnapped by savages on the frontier, in what John Tirman calls the “deepest scar on the national psyche.”<sup>13</sup> Cobb terms them a narrative “descent into hell” and stresses that “the purpose of the captivity was symbolic ‘regeneration.’”<sup>14</sup> The frontiersman, standing in for a virile and masculine America, saves her and kills the savage. The violence is wholesomely regenerative.

Early on, the savages were of course Indians. And, in reality, on occasion American females were taken in war (but it also cut both ways as Aboriginal females were often also taken). Perhaps the most famous historical case, fictionalized in the based-on-a-true story kind of way, is that of Cynthia Anne Parker, captured at the age of nine, mother of Quanah Parker, the last great Comanche chief. Parker’s father was Comanche, his mother white. She had been captured in east Texas in 1836 and, in contradistinction to the grisly captivity stories that so enflamed passions during the colonial period, she had assimilated, married, and bore children happily in her new life. When she was liberated, “redeemed,” in adult life in 1860 she was overcome by grief and longed to return to her family, though she never got the chance.<sup>15</sup>

More provocative were the wholly and unabashedly fictional captivity narratives that flourished throughout the colonial and early national decades, from James Fenimore Cooper’s *Last of the Mohicans* to the story of politician John McCain, from the *Tarzan* series to Patty Hearst, from the Iran Hostage Crisis (think: *Argo*) to Nintendo’s Super Mario, from John Ford’s classic film *The Searchers* to Jessica Lynch (whom the *New York Times* called “a 19-year old female Rambo”).<sup>16</sup> And to *Rambo*.<sup>17</sup> Rambo fights in each of the 1980s franchise films to have the innocence taken captive by the Vietnam War redeemed. Violence naturally, inexorably occurs and mythical rebirth beckons.

**“Smells like an animal.”**

*Rambo, First Blood*, released in 1982, performed extremely well at the box office, earning \$125 million while costing only \$14 million to create. Yet the film is an oddity. From any traditional vantage point it is poorly acted, poorly directed, and poorly written. It is embarrassingly vapid, just plain lousy, barely watchable. And yet. It is at the same time a brilliant and timely evocation of the myth tangled up with the Vietnam syndrome. It strives gamely and with success, I believe, to reconcile them in ways not unlike Hitler’s infamous stab-in-the-back theory that homosexuals, Jews, and other alleged deviants were responsible for Germany’s loss in World War One. Together, they had conspired, the idea ran wild, to stab Germany in the back. Likewise, America had been stabbed in the back. Wielding his lethal phallus, Rambo sets the record straight, rights the wrong. “Rambo redeems the MISs and American manhood.”<sup>18</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Linda Dittmar, Gene Michaud, eds., *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990).

<sup>12</sup> See Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000); Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> John Tirman, *The Deaths of Others: The Fate of Civilians in America’s Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) 184.

<sup>14</sup> Cobb, 11.

<sup>15</sup> S.C. Gwynne, *Empire of the Summer Moon: Quanah Parker and the Rise and Fall of the Comanches, the Most Powerful Indian Tribe in American History* (New York: Scribner, 2011). Also see Jonathon Demos, *The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story from Early America* (New York: Vintage, 1995).

<sup>16</sup> Frank Rich, *New York Times*, 09 November 2003. [Newyorktimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com) (last accessed May 1 2013).

<sup>17</sup> Gaylyn Studlar and David Desser, “Never Having to Say You’re Sorry: Rambo’s *Rewriting the Vietnam War*,” in Dittmar and Michaud, eds., 107-108.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

Like Hollywood's Shane, played by Alan Ladd, Rambo appears as if from mythical nowhere, wandering down from the mountain. He enters our suspended disbelief ambling along and rounding a curve on an old gravel road, not unlike Henry Fonda in the *Oxbow Incident*. He comes at you with everything he has and is on his person, not unlike Hondo, played by John Wayne, in *Hondo*. And he comes at you with a relentless narcissistic bent.<sup>19</sup> We know right away that he is potentially explosive, clad in an army jacket and blue jeans, bedroll slung over his shoulder, hair reminiscent of Kevin Costner in *Dances with Wolves*. He is a lone wolf peacefully minding his own business in the rural west. Nothing wrong with that. He quite simply represents what all American men dream of—youth, freedom, muscles, and lots of hair.

As the first three minutes of the movie develop we get kids laughing and playing in an unfenced yard, we learn that Rambo is not a racist (he is in search of a black war buddy, and he had had at least one Latino war friend), and we glimpse the majesty of snow capped mountains behind him—in a mythical sense, they have got his back. But his buddy has died. So he wanders into “Hope,” anytown U.S.A. And this is where the complication occurs. The setup is wonderful because we get only what we see—a handsome and youthful laconic man drifting in from a mythical scape carrying a burden (and it shows in Stallone, not normally considered much of an actor) with enormous potential. His clothes mark him as dangerous, clad in the reminder of a valiant and violent recent past.

Rambo, as you may well recall, is then accosted in progressively more belligerent tones by the local sheriff, played with a certain tenacious aplomb by Brian Dennehy. And here we meet the Turnerian nemesis of the bloated, corrupted, selfish, and morally indifferent government. It is the untainted fodder for Ronald Reagan's speeches in the 1980s and Tea Partiers today.

The sheriff wants to know if Rambo is, by virtue of his existence, “asking for trouble.” Like any frontiersman John Rambo is taciturn, restless, not at ease in society, and he is also clearly bottled up with potentially lethal and unrequited anger. What follows is cartoonish, of course, but capably drawn.

“Why are you pushing me?” Rambo asks the sheriff, in one of his longer spoken lines.

“We don't want guys like you in this town,” the sheriff goads him. “If you want some friendly advice, get a haircut and take a bath.”

And then the sheriff drops Rambo off well north of town, on the other side of a bridge. But it is a bridge too far, after all, and Rambo turns about and heads straight back to Hope. This is America. He will go anywhere he damn well pleases.

So the sheriff arrests him, now physically pushing Rambo. Then he discovers a huge “hunting” knife, “a concealed weapon,” on Rambo, which tells us that he is even more lethal than we may have suspected. But it is an elemental, essential manliness revealed here, not the man of guns but the man as an extension of his phallus. At the most basic Freudian level, he does not need to ejaculate to kill you (i.e., shooting a gun), he can kill you just by fucking you (i.e., stabbing with a knife). This is effectively how the narrative develops, too. As if the early confrontations, dustups provide the foreplay, the knife work begins the violent sexual act of redemptive rape, and consummation occurs when Rambo later takes out the big guns and fuck-shoots till he is spent, laid out on his back. Meanwhile, Rambo is cuffed and taken to jail. Then he is roughed up a little, mocked a little. He is told he “smells like an animal.” But this is not really an insult, it is foreshadowing because the narrative strips Rambo to nearer animal savagery, à la Turner.

The “pushing” continues apace. Rambo is forced to strip, mirroring Turner's assertion that men are stripped of culture before rebirth can occur on the frontier. And so he is beaten and then violently hosed down. Then, for reasons that make little sense, they attempt to shave him with a straight razor. Rambo, by the way, also suffers from PTSD. He has flashbacks. And the razor sets one off. Nobody understands him. Nobody tries to understand him. Nobody understands the sacrifice he made for America. Like the old martial (Lon Chaney) says to Will Kane (Gary Cooper) in *High Noon*, “They don't care. They just don't care.” In this way, the Vietnam syndrome is repackaged as a corrupted effete establishment sellout, and Rambo throws it down at the feet of an ungrateful liberal America.

And then he takes action against the immoral and crooked authorities who have pushed him too far. Here the film launches into a decidedly ungainly turn. Rambo beats up the cops and steals a semiotic horse/motor cycle. But it is accomplished in a too-clumsy manner. Put it this way, the fight scenes are no *Bourne Identity*. And not just because of the time period in which it was made. It does not even come close to the artfully manicured fisticuffs in *Shane* or the famous barn fight (with Gary Cooper suffering from a bad back) in *High Noon*.

At any rate, Rambo speeds away on the motorcycle and is pursued by the sheriff in his cop car. It culminates with the police car wrecking and Rambo ditching the bike on a steep rock hillside. He then takes to the mountain and fashions a kind of primordial sack shirt from an old tarp, looking very much the primitive man—man

<sup>19</sup> Barbara A. Mortimer, *Hollywood's Frontier Captives: Cultural Anxiety and the Captivity Plot in American Film* (New York: Routledge, 1999) 155. Also see Studlar and Desser.

at first-principles we are meant to understand—Indian-like. He even goes pre-literate in the sense that he ceases to speak. Stallone mostly grunts—“monosyllabic simplicity,” offers Barry Langford<sup>20</sup> and simply huffs and puffs through long sections of the film. He is now fully operational and off the grid, off the reservation, running low to the ground. Meanwhile, the sheriff gets organized and shortly a posse and dogs are closing in on our mountain man.

As the tension builds and the characters prepare themselves for the confrontation to come, we have time to consider the obstacles Rambo now faces. And they are formidable. The sheriff, and all that he personifies in mythical terms, stands in the way of Rambo’s decency, honor, and truth. The real America that Rambo signifies, we realize, has been snatched away while he was off fighting for the very dear virtues America represents. And appropriately, suddenly our mountain man has, well, not exactly miscalculated, but nevertheless he has arrived at a metaphorical and yet very real precipice—not of his own making, of course, because nothing is his fault any more than a two-year old child accepts responsibility, anymore than the myth ever squares responsibility for its embellishments and urgings-on, that is, squares itself fully with reality.

Even Rambo’s three-day beard will not save him now. To make matters worse, a chopper appears above, its passenger a crazed deputy determined to shoot Rambo off the face of the cliff. He tries. He shoots and misses, shoots and misses, Stallone whipping his head sideways to avoid rifle bullets, like Charlie Chaplin dodging bullets in the jail scene from *Modern Times*, except this time it would be unintentionally, absurdly funny if not for Stallone’s uncannily humorless portrayal.

Finally, Rambo tosses a rock at the helicopter, forcing it to sway, the shooter stumbles and falls to his death, and Rambo leaps for safety. The forest gods save him from certain death as a cedar tree buffets his fall. He injures his arm. He grunts. He bleeds. He runs like a cro magnon. He gets the deputy’s rifle. He wants to make peace but they insist in shooting at him from the top of the cliff.

By this point, the film as cartoon has taken over. We know that Rambo has been forced to do what has to be done: make war to redeem himself but also to redeem America from the defilement it has suffered. If America’s innocence was taken captive while he was away at war defending it, and if those who sent him to fight were corrupted government folks who stabbed the nation in the back, he’s going to get some payback. It was inevitable. New rules.

As the one deputy who recognized something special about him from the start, the same one who thought the sheriff’s was taking the matter too far, says, “I knew there was something about that guy.” Or, moments later, delivering to the audience a classic feel-good line, another deputy says that now, “he’s hunting us.” And so it goes. Yet still Rambo chooses only to wound but not kill. Somewhat inelegantly, he explains, laying down a higher-road frontier gambit. He says to the sheriff, “I coulda killed them all. I coulda killed you. In town you’re the law. Out here it’s me. Don’t push it or I’ll give you a war you won’t believe.” Spitting a diction that Ben Stiller would later ape to great comedic effect in *Tropic Thunder*, he adds thickly, “Let it go. Let it go.”

But they do not believe and they keep pushing him. So he gives them the war he promises.

Along the way Rambo’s Green Berets commander, Colonel Trautman, shows up. But he does not get any respect. He warns the sheriff: “I didn’t come to rescue Rambo from you. I came to rescue you from Rambo...A man who’s the best with guns, with knives, with his bare hands. A man who’s been trained to ignore pain, ignore weather. To live off the land.” But to no avail. The pursuit continues.

“They drew first blood, not me,” Rambo grunts out to Trautman later, after the fighting is done and he has blown up about half of the town and at length shot but not, importantly, killed the sheriff. But come on, Trautman reasons. “It’s over. It’s over, Johnny,” not clearly indicating whether he means Vietnam is over or the conflict in the town is over or, perhaps, both.

Rambo erupts as he breaks down shortly into great sobs, spluttering out a kind of soliloquy. “Nothing is over,” he roars. “Nothing. You just don’t turn it off. It wasn’t my war. You asked me. I didn’t ask you. And I did what I had to do to win. But somebody wouldn’t let us win. And then I come back to the world and I see all those maggots at the airport protesting me, spitting, calling me baby killer and all kinds of vile crap.” He demands, “Who are they to protest me?”

He collapses and he cries some more. And suddenly you realize at this moment you have witnessed an epochal turn, a point of cultural demarcation that nobody could have predicted. But there it is. Rambo breaks down and he sobs like a baby. And in so doing it is not that he vents and releases some pent up mythical rage so much as in his tears he regresses again to the level of a child, sobbing principally because he did not get his way and things did not turn out the way he wanted them to. He did not get his way and now he has the right to blame them, the liberals et alia. You have just witnessed how his frontier credentials, if allowed free rein, ultimately prevail. He is a fucking

<sup>20</sup> Barry Langford, *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006) 125.

winner. And he could have won Vietnam if only we had let him, and so the guilt is thrown back at the un-reborn. Manly tears, standing in for baptismal water, wash him clean.

And can you blame Rambo for any of it? Of course not. They kept pushing and pushing and pushing him. He had to fight back. And to fight back he had to strip down. Keep in mind, always the Jesus, he is sacrificing for us. And so if he wells up and breaks down, these tears are shed on our behalf as well. And this is entirely appropriate, given that the myth is at its most mature a juvenile fantasy. It is often said that it was Bill Clinton's ability to feel your pain that made it possible for Bob Dole to cry publicly and without shame at Richard Nixon's funeral. This important cultural turn resonates in a variety of ways. For example, recall that at the height of the Vietnam War in 1968 tears shed by Democratic nominee Ed Muskie ended his run for the Oval Office (ironically, because the moment occurred as a result of Nixonian "dirty tricks"). Back in the day, real men did not cry openly, ever. But how times change. Watch *First Blood* again and you understand now that it was not Bill Clinton who granted the gift of tears to Dole, it was Rambo who granted the gift to America. If Rambo could cry, anybody could cry at the loss of innocence. And it begs the serious mythical question: can Rambo get it back for us or is he all cock, no action?

### **"Do we get to win this time?"**

Some things are inevitable—death, taxes, and sequels. In 1985 Stallone returned in *Rambo, First Blood Part Two*. He is still Rambo, of course, but somewhat more so. More jacked. This time his veins veritably pop. And this time he is more homo-sexy, though he gets the girl (and she is promptly killed within seconds of their first and only dry kiss). He is more deadly. This time the body counts rockets from one to 58 or 67 or 69, depending on who is counting.<sup>21</sup> More captivity. This time it is not just American innocence taken hostage but also includes MIAs and, egad, Rambo for a time. In short, it is more frontier and more manlier Rambo. And far more regenerative violence. More revised Vietnam.

The story picks up where it left off. Rambo wound up in jail, pounding rocks, we are meant understand from *First Blood*. Then Trautman appears and offers Rambo a chance to have his sentence expunged if he agrees to a mission that would drop him beyond the frontier and deep Nam, in-country, where he would recon to determine whether or not persistent rumors of those MIAs being held against their will were true. If so, Rambo is to take pictures to verify their existence and then report to Trautman who will in turn lead a rescue and extraction mission. Of course, you are meant to scoff at this—Rambo taking pictures? That is unnatural and we all know it. But he agrees. It is the better option. And you just know he is going to go rogue.

The MIA plot gambit was both clever and timely for this film. Chatter about MIAs garnered a lot of media attention in the 1980s and early 1990s as the country spontaneously endorsed and even seemed to take comfort in the proto-mythical allegation that Vietnamese savages were doing what once Indians were believed to have done by nature, kidnap innocent Americans and hold them against their will in deplorable conditions. Despite the Gulf of Tonkin lie upon which the war had been predicated, the captivity narrative coughed up a culturally appropriate justification for the war, after the fact of course, but nonetheless paradigmatically heartfelt. Ronald Reagan talked openly the MIAs in the 1980s<sup>22</sup> and Texas billionaire Ross Perot, who had pursued the matter since the 1970s, made political hay with the idea during his two runs for the presidency in 1992 (he earned 19 percent of the popular vote, impressive for a third-party candidate) and 1996 (8 percent).

To say that Perot was passionate on the topic understates his expressed concern. For example, he took issue with Senator John McCain, who had himself spent five-plus years in a Hanoi jail and sat on the Congressional committee that from 1991 to 1993 investigated the issue. According to the *Daily Beast*, Perot was convinced that "the senator hushed up evidence that live POWs were left behind in Vietnam and even transferred to the Soviet Union for human experimentation."<sup>23</sup> He is not the only one. Among a wide variety of authors, Bill Hendon and Elizabeth A. Stewart have identified and sought to document a massive ongoing coverup of the MIA issue in a book that made it to the *New York Times* bestseller list in 2008.<sup>24</sup> Then there is the matter of those MIA/captives who were ultimately released but, like McCain, spent long years in captivity, detailed in such books as Frank Anton and

<sup>21</sup> To arrive at these figures I Googled "Rambo body count." Flowingdata.com registered 58 kills, Moviebodycounts.com and Geekstir .com espied 67 kills, and Darkhorizons.com counted 69 kills (last accessed May 9, 2013).

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Ronald Reagan, "Remarks Honoring the Vietnam War's Unknown Soldier," 28 May 1984.

<sup>23</sup> See <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2008/01/15/when-ross-perot-calls.html> (last accessed May 7, 2013).

<sup>24</sup> Bill Hendon and Elizabeth A. Stewart, *An Enormous Crime: The Definitive Account of American POWs Abandoned in Southeast Asia* (New York: St. Martin's, 2008).

Tommy Denton's *Why Didn't You Get Me Out? A POW's Nightmare in Vietnam*.<sup>25</sup> Perot was sometimes dismissed as kooky and even a little bit bizarre. Perhaps the weirdest moment came when Admiral James Stockdale, his vice-presidential running mate and survivor of seven years captivity in Vietnam, turned off his hearing aide during the vice-presidential debate. Nonetheless, despite Perot's near obsession with MIAs it is worth noting, to be fair, that allegations of alien abduction are also not uncommon.<sup>26</sup>

At any rate, *Rambo II*, the top-grossing film of 1985, conjures up a trifecta of captivity narratives. Rambo gets straight to it, pointedly and famously asking Trautman, "Sir, this time do we get to win?" Well, yes, kind of, Trautman says, "This time it's up to you." In short, according to one scholar, this is how "Rambo redeems the MIAs and American manhood."<sup>27</sup> Moreover, "it derives from...skillful retelling of an archetypal narrative that has always exerted a powerful grip on our collective imagination."<sup>28</sup> According to Ronald Carpenter, Americans saw many of its twentieth-century conflicts as frontier wars.<sup>29</sup>

But, first, the film gives us a gift in the form of Rambo's back story, in a script written by Stallone and James Cameron (of *Titanic* and *Avatar* fame), which further cements his frontier credentials. We learn that he is a half-breed of Indian-German descent from Arizona, a "hell of a combination," which plots him from the mythically primordial mists of Americana, blessing him with the deep savage nature (with a dollop of Hun cunning)—the goods necessary to reorient and win the Vietnam War once and for all, after all. Yes, and in Nam he recorded, we learn, not that Rambo would deign to count such things, dozens of bonafide kills, earned two silver stars, four bronze stars, two purple hearts, a Distinguished Service Cross, and the Congressional Medal of Honor. Kapow! And we hear in an aside that he is the "chosen one." Are you convinced now? If not, just watch him kill 58 to 69 baddies. Quite rightly, Trautman dispels the doubters, "Rambo is...a pure fighting machine with only a desire to win a war that somebody else lost." Moreover, "What you choose to call hell, he calls home," Trautman zaps the softies sitting behind computer screens who obviously know nothing of real manliness.

Next up, in a tender moment we catch our narcissist aridly masturbating. In this intimate scene the camera pans against the darkness of night, beginning with and highlighting Rambo's throbbing muscly shoulder as it tracks teasingly down his veiny, glistening ropey arm to where he strokes his knife methodically back and forth, back and forth, on the sharpening stone. As the old saying goes, a good man is hard to find, but Rambo is a hard man good to find. He is hot, yet brittle, all man, yet metallic. "Rambo is nothing more nor less than a trendy incarnation of the traditional frontier hero—Leatherstocking on steroids...with Reds substituting for redskins."<sup>30</sup>

And he has got only 36 hours. Nobody really expects him to find any MIAs—except the audience.

As he is dropped from the aircraft, he gets hung up and is forced to cut himself free of most of his equipment in order to survive. So he is forced into battle with only his Bowie-like knife, a bow and arrow, and some explosive-tipped arrows. This must have surprised audiences about as much as the fact that, guess what, he finds MIAs! They are worked like slaves, scrawny and half-starved, penned up in a bamboo-shuttered cave teeming with spiders and rats. Rambo gets to them quickly enough, dashing along a stream, scrambling over rocks, running through jungle ferns, bandana fluttering. He knows where they are because, senses keen, he hears them moaning quietly.

The location is a classic frontier setting—mostly untamed, dangerous nature, well beyond the pale of civilization. Rambo bursts into a small clearing to pause beneath a tree. A dangling fat snake menaces him from behind, ready to strike. Unperturbed, he snatches it by the throat, scoffs, and carries on. It is cool because he only kills when it is called for. The Vietnamese, meanwhile, exemplify pure savage idiocy, so much fodder for his revenging. Violating every cherished nineteenth-century Protestant precept, they are by turns filthy (even their teeth), treacherous, delight in the company of whores, dishonest, lacking vitality and discipline, and they are heavy drinkers. Their Russian overlords are naturally more cunning and, obviously white, but are also more dangerous and conniving and, crucially, Godless.

Apart from grunting a lot Stallone's principal approach to acting is to move his eyes sideways. And to flex, at which he excels. The plot and the acting, in sum, to say the least, is hackneyed. But then, given the expectation

<sup>25</sup> Frank Anton and Tommy Denton, *Why Didn't You Get Me Out?: A POW's Nightmare in Vietnam* (New York: St. Martin's, 2000).

<sup>26</sup> See Amazon.com where you find nearly 3,000 titles on the topic.

<sup>27</sup> Studlar and Desser, 109.

<sup>28</sup> Harold Schechter and Jonna G. Semeiks, "Leatherstocking in 'Nam: Rambo, Platoon, and the American Frontier Myth." *Journal of Popular Culture* 24: 4 (Spring, 1991) 18.

<sup>29</sup> Carpenter, *passim*.

<sup>30</sup> Schechter and Semeiks, 23.

established for us by *Rambo I*, something unusual happens. And who would have predicted it: narcissistic boy meets girl. His contact is a female named Co and she is also a half-breed. She is pretty, good at killing, and also longs for America. They are a perfect match. They can communicate. She speaks Hollywood Indian, too.

Rambo spills his guts to her. He tells her that after he returned from Nam to America he discovered “there’s another war going on.” She queries, “What war?” He tells her it is a war against goodness and everything that the returning soldiers stood for while fighting for America. But what about her? What’s she going to do? “Maybe go America,” she explains with prosaic economy. “Live the quiet life.” (She obviously had not seen *Rambo I*.) She asks him, “What bring you good luck?” He brandishes, boing, his big knife. “I guess this.” Later, what really sets the mood for love is when she expresses her feelings for him, “Rambo, you’re not expendable.” It’s a magical moment, to which he appropriately nods his head in a way that might easily be mistaken for a burp.

Next, once he relays his news about the MIAs back to headquarters, euphoria erupts. But the callow and deceitful civilian commander, Murdock, orders the mission terminated because Congress cannot handle the pressure of reality. The mission was nothing more than a cynical political exercise. Rambo was set up as a patsy. “It was a lie,” Trautman decries to Murdock. “Just like the whole damn war.” Well, yes, the war was a lie; but Trautman is not invoking empirical reality, he is channeling Rambo’s “do-we-get-to-win-this-time” frontier revisionist delusion. And, appropriately, Murdock was just a “stinking bureaucrat trying to cover his ass,” Trautman launches a homophobic taunt. Murdock responds forcefully, and with ironic truth, “No, not just mine, a nation’s.” In this way, the actual coverup for the lie of Tonkin is neatly replaced by the covering of the ass. This recasting of the narrative—and even vice-presidential candidate Stockdale knew of the Tonkin deception when he was an admiral but says he was ordered to keep it secret—is what allows Rambo to “win this time.”

This is a dark time in the film, then, because Rambo has been sold out and suddenly taken prisoner when the chopper that was to have rescued him with his lone MIA instead abandons him. Argh! Curse that rotten bureaucrat and those spineless tax collectors in Congress! Next thing Rambo is strapped Christ-like, arms tethered across a yoke, covered in leeches, dangling torso-deep in a pit filled with the effluent from a pig sty. Then he is taken for questioning by the “Russians” and, predictably, treated to a little torture to smarten him up. The devious Russians are merciless with electric shocks administered by a mean bastard turning a big dial. Rambo screams yet does not really flinch.

They cannot believe he can endure so much torture. Then, conjuring a bit of trickery worthy of Mel Brooks’ *Get Smart*, Rambo agrees, if they unshackle him, to send a message via radio that tells the folks back at HQ that there are no MIAs after all. You can guess the rest. He fights his way free, again saving the same emaciated MIA that he drags around like a rag doll. Unexpectedly voluble, “Fuck you,” he denounces them. To Murdock he issues a warning: “I’m coming to get you.”

Meanwhile, Rambo’s Pocahontas has returned to help her man, disguised as a whore, and they escape, kiss, agree to move to America, and abruptly she is killed seconds later—“You not forget me,” she implores her dying words prettily, prostrate in his arms. He snuffles a moment and then Rambo goes full Rambo on the village and its savage occupants. One by one he picks off the Russians, dispensing lethal justice from the mud, the water, the air, from tall grasses, by fire, by arrow, by exploding arrow, hand-to-hand combat, and, most improbably—no, excuse me, nothing is improbable with Rambo—chopper-to-chopper. He returns to HQ to and receives a hero’s welcome, but he eschews all praise and deflects it to the MIAs. Then he confronts Murdock, menaces him with the great knife but does not kill him, and warns, “You know there’s more men out there. You know where they are. Find them or I’ll find you.” And that’s about it.

To argue that the film is dopey and more than slightly ridiculous—and here I plead guilty—is ultimately unfair because it misses the point. *Rambo II* works for the same reason that *Rambo I* worked and *Rambo I* worked because it channels America’s creation story in its most elemental form, the captivity narrative. *Rambo II* is slightly more charged because it is also more ambitious—three captivity narratives for the price of one, plus the love interest. Both films fittingly go over the top, in part because the production values are awkward to the point that they simply stink. On the other hand, over-the-topness is called for because the frontiersman draws from a well of fantasy, denial, and illusion. *Rambo* is no more over the top, in this sense, than Moses was when he parted the waters, or Jesus was when he healed a leper, or Rose of Lima was when she achieved sainthood when she really suffered from mental illness.<sup>31</sup> If you want to bash *Rambo* for stretching credulity, then all religion becomes fair game, at least insofar as

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<sup>31</sup> See Frank Graziano, *Wounds of Love: The Mystical Marriage of Saint Rose of Lima* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

the narratives are logically absurd and empirically nonsensical. And, while you are at it, you might as well fault all those who masturbate.

**“Come to terms with what you are”**

At the same time the United States was arming and training the Taliban (yes, that Taliban, of Osama bin Laden notoriety) to resist invading Soviet forces in Afghanistan beginning in 1979, many Americans took pleasure in saying that it was the Soviets’ Vietnam. In *Rambo III* Colonel Trautman lambastes the Rusksies for having ignored the lessons of history (not that “history” has ever stopped the United States from repeating the similar imperial behavior. “We already had our Vietnam. Now you’re gonna have yours,” he says.

*Rambo III* is more Rambo than ever. It is tempting to say that it is too much Rambo, in fact, and in so becoming it transgresses the thin lines separating farce from cartoon and cartoon from propaganda. But, to be fair, all the *Rambo* flicks are cartoonish and amount to frontier propaganda insofar as they reek of the culture that made Sylvester Stallone a very rich man.

*Rambo, First Blood* excused America from the debacle of Vietnam because it had been sold out, kidnapped and cheated by “somebody” who “wouldn’t let us win.” Hence a captivity narrative. *Rambo, First Blood Part II* offered no more excuses but instead symbolically reenacted America’s birth thrice—by redeeming American innocence that had been stolen by savagery, unkidnapping MIAs and thereby reinstating American manhood as well as erasing American culpability for the war, and finally, setting Rambo free and thereby laying out the welcoming mat for future preemptive aggression, like having earned a kind of imperial rain check, redeemable, in the other sense of the word, whenever, wherever.

The story, again co-written by Stallone, begins with an image of the American flag. Then we encounter Rambo earning money in an Asian martial arts contest, “stick fighting.” This is rough homosocialism as spectacle, as the two nearer-naked brutes slash at each other with their rods, until Rambo beats his mate into submission and then suddenly they are friends. Rambo donates the money he wins to the monks at the monastery where he works as a kind of tin smith. He is contented.

But America needs him because its foreign policy cannot succeed without the frontiersman, we learn. Well, we already know that, but we are reminded of it again. This is crucial because it is important that we be reminded that the myth operates precisely as religion, based on faith. So a doubting Thomas—in this case a skeptical and unmanly embassy employee—serves the purpose well of reminding us to keep faith, too. Rambo’s success depends entirely upon it. It is the suspension of disbelief twice—in the role of movies as fiction and in the power of the myth as religion.

Anyway, Afghanistan has been terrorized by Soviets who have killed “over two million civilians.” These innocents were “systematically slaughtered by Russian armies” who employed every means at their disposal, including chemical weapons, the embassy guy says. But now, after nine years, with a little help the Afghans have begun to take back their country except for one region ruled by a notorious Soviet beast. Trautman wants to take him down and he wants Rambo to help. Rambo declines. He says, no thanks, his war is over.

Trautman appeals to him by comparing Rambo to a great work of art. “We didn’t make you this fighting machine, we just chipped away the rough edges.” Nonetheless, thanks, but no, says Rambo. “You’re always going to be tearing away at yourself until you come to terms with what you are,” Trautman counsels. No, go away, says Rambo politely.

Ultimately, there is no escaping captivity in the *Rambo* series. Trautman crosses the frontier with his team and all are killed in a few seconds except Trautman and he then is taken prisoner at that notorious Soviet commander’s fort. At once, Rambo is drawn back into the game. He prefers peace but he will fight if something noble and true and decent and white and male is at risk of becoming diminished. And he will do it all by himself. Reasonably, America’s Mujahadeen allies are unwilling to risk it all to save one American who will only up and leave when his mission is completed. But this is a plot device. Rambo is a lone wolf whose agency will enable and augur in full Afghan redemption.

In another way, too, Rambo is now more Rambo. He is now even more jacked. Where *Rambo II* found him bulked up, muscles upon muscles, veins popping from his arms, Stallone found another level for *Rambo III*. The muscles are bigger than ever and the veins bulge not only across his arms but also his chest and pecs. He struts (he gave up merely walking *Rambo II*), like George W. Bush often did, arms flared slightly as the chest is flexed. It is reminiscent of how you can hear in John Wayne’s voice attempt to lower the register so as to ramp his masculinity, as in, say, the early scenes from *Red River* or when he is barking orders in *True Grit*.

Feeling the heat from Arnold Schwarzenegger’s growing popularity in the late 1980s, *Rambo III* also attempts to inject levity into the script. It does not work. For example, early on, when asked to explain his presence, he tries to joke, “I’m no tourist.” Or, when his guide says it is pure folly for Rambo to go in alone against the Russian

fort and that he will “accept no responsibility,” in an inside joke Rambo ruefully guffaws, “Sounds familiar.” Another attempt occurs later when Trautman introduces this gambit, “How’s the wound?” Rambo reminds him, setting up the joke, “You taught us to ignore pain.” Trautman delivering the straight line: “Is it working?” Rambo flubbing it: “Not really.” Or, fourth, in case the audience has not caught on to the newly jokey Rambo, when they are at last surrounded by Soviets, with no chance of escape, and certain death awaits them, Trautman presents a jocular silver platter: “You got any ideas?” Rambo: “Surrounding them’s out.” Trautman: “Hell of a time for humor, John.” He is almost on the mark here because the attempt at humor is embarrassingly unfunny.

In *Rambo III* the frontier is redrawn slightly, more reminiscent of the American west with desert-like scapes and Indians—oops, I mean Afghans—and their weird customs, on horseback and living in tents. The Soviet commander is pure bully. “Out here I have no superiors,” he crows, not unlike the scene in the gorgeous and vastly superior film *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* where Valance (Lee Marvin) announces venomously, as he prepares to beat Ransom Stoddard (Jimmy Stewart) nearly to death for trying to protect an old lady from hooligans, “You want law? I’ll teach you western law.” And the beating commences.

Trautman challenges the commander and seeks to reveal his, and thereby then-contemporary Soviet, hypocrisy, with words. “You talk peace and disarmament to the world and here you are wiping out a race of people.” Never mind that this is precisely what the United States did to grow from 13 to 50 states over 150 years, “ethnic cleansing against Native American peoples,” as one scholar describes it.<sup>32</sup> Picking up and miming President Reagan, Trautman claims that the “freedom fighters” have turned the corner in Afghanistan, they just need a little Rambo help to get rid of this last Soviet creep. “They’d rather die than to be slaves to an invading army,” Trautman zings the commander, again apparently unaware of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the United States west. “You can’t defeat a people like that.”

The coarse stereotypical homoerotic onanism of *Rambo II* also surfaces again here but primarily as the projection of homophobia. Apart from the camera’s utter fixation with Rambo’s torso, probably the best evocation is offered by Trautman’s challenge to anal rape. In a deep, dark dungeon where Trautman is strung up, in itself a thinly disguised symbolic anal cavity, the Soviet commander menaces the American colonel and demands to know, apropos of nothing, where the Stinger missiles are. Trautman says they are “close.” This gives the commander pause. He moves in. While you are not exactly on the edge of your seat at this point, it begs the question, is Trautman really going to give them away? “How close,” rasps the commander. “In your ass!” Trautman verbally smacks him down. Right, my exploding missiles are in your ass, now hit me some more! In turn, not so subtly the commander shoves his pistol against Trautman’s mouth. This scene is really a kind of dance. The disagreement among the two men, as with the superpowers they represent, lies not in regard to the substance of the tune they follow but rather with who gets to lead and who has to play the role of bitch. But not to worry. The commander is a polymorphous whore whereas Trautman, we know, only has eyes for “Johnny.”

Making no effort to shy away from enhanced mythical obviousness *Rambo III* also ramps up the religious undertones that undergird the *Rambo* series. This cuts two ways. First, by heaping ever greater invective upon the Russian *qua* Other, we come better to know evil. This helps prepare us—as if we need it—for the second coming. What I mean is that Rambo in a muddy way is compared both to God (“Who do you think this man is? God?”), which he is not, of course, but also as the “chosen one,” all of which speaks to long-ago Puritan notions, but in a sloppy manner. Yet it serves the point well enough: on behalf of America Rambo fights the old frontier battle. One Afghan leader explains it this way: “Holy warriors. To us this is a holy war. And there is no death for the Mujahadeen because we have taken our last rites and consider ourselves dead already.” Last rites? That is Catholic and these are Muslims.

The captivity narrative in which innocence redeemed is also more complicated here. Sure, we know that Soviet forces exterminate, rape, pillage, and sucker children to early deaths with booby-trapped bombs disguised as kids’ toys. All that is innocent and good, the Soviets contaminate and defile, yes, we get that. But Rambo is also dogged by a brave Afghan boy who has lost his parents and brother to the war. It is the oldest trick in the book, of course, but it works well enough, too. The boy will not go away and we know that deep down, because Rambo’s face is incapable of showing emotion and/or Stallone’s face is incapable of acting, that Rambo loves the kid. The male line must continue, after all.

The kid complicates things because we know full well that the horrors of war are no place for a boy. Predictably the kid, we see, is brave. But he is just a kid and this is a theatre of men, so the boy is injured and Rambo has to drop everything and ensure his escape and removal to a safe place and then return to de-captivate Trautman.

<sup>32</sup> Brian Loveman, *No Higher Law: American Foreign Policy and the Western Hemisphere since 1776* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012) 6, 83.

And then, as Rambo and Trautman are surrounded and all is lost, the boy figures prominently as the Mujahadeen come riding in to save the day.

Yes, you heard that right. The cavalry ride in at the last moment to save our hero and his sidekick. Rambo takes to a horse, too, as he effectively saves them all from Soviet destruction. Studlar and Desser write that “Attempting to deliver its audience from the anxiety of the present, Rambo would seek to restore an unreflective lost Eden of primitive masculine power.”<sup>33</sup> This holds true for the series as whole. The nod to Eden is particularly insightful because Rambo is in fact a religious figure inasmuch as the frontiersman invariably acts like Adam, Jesus and/or Moses. In fact, he’s much like Kevin Costner’s John J. Dunbar in *Dances With Wolves*. Both characters are stripped down, reborn (in Rambo’s case, again and again), the natives are redeemed (well, at least in *Rambo III*), he gets the girl (in *Rambo II*), he saves innocence (always), he redeems captives (always), and he becomes a better Indian/Vietnamese/Afghan fighter than the Natives (always). This is because he is the essential man for his times, “he fits right in there,” as the voice-over narrator says of the Dude in the Coen Brothers’ *Big Lebowski*.

## CONCLUSION

The *Rambo* films work so well because they are caught up in and reinforce a self-referential loop. Any creation myth has an internal logic of its own and it is because Rambo so articulately and closely adheres to the frontier myth that makes the wildly implausible believable, the idiotic conceivable, and the imperial invisible. We cheer for Rambo even as some of us dismiss the film as lightweight, even puerile. The point is, Rambo gets America, he really gets it. And we get how he gets us and we are grateful to him, too, at a deep level. He is nature’s man in just the way that Henry Nash-Smith noted: “The idea of nature suggested to Turner a poetic account of the influence of free land as a rebirth, a regeneration, a rejuvenation of man and society constantly recurring where civilization came into contact with the wilderness along the frontier.”<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, the *Rambo* series provided a means for America to take a war it lost, reframe the conflict as a captivity narrative, and win. In so doing the loss becomes pinned on the effete, the feminine, the corrupted and over-civilized city/eastern/European types. It is, in short, unadulterated frontier myth. In this way, the myth endures and prospers even as technology changes (though phallic weaponry remains a constant), the geographic setting changes (though the line separating civilization from savagery remains), the faceless face changes (Mexican, Nicaraguan, Vietnamese, Soviet...they are all Indian), and so on. In other words, the myth abides in spite of significant historical change and in the face of empirical reality for precisely the same sorts of reasons that Christianity or Islam or Sioux belief has endured. They endure because people continue to believe. And people believe because, once adopted, signs and wonders abound everywhere for true believers. In this way, Rambo completes the circle and brings America homeward. He tells a story that Americans already know to be true. Like all true frontiersmen, he is America’s avatar of creation.

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<sup>33</sup> Studlar and Desser, 111.

<sup>34</sup> Nash Smith, 253.

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