How Tim O'Brien's The Things They Carried Runs Concurrently with the First Fractures in the American Exceptionalist Mindset

Item Type	Senior Project
Authors	Reilly, Martyn
Accessibility Statement	Purchase College - State University of New York (PC) is committed to ensuring that people with disabilities have an opportunity equal to that of their nondisabled peers to participate in the College's programs, benefits, and services, including those delivered through electronic and information technology. If you encounter an access barrier with a specific item and have a remediation request, please contact lib.ir@purchase.edu.
Download date	02/03/2024 17:42:50
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12648/14045

How Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* Runs Concurrently with the First Fractures in the American Exceptionalist Mindset

by

Martyn Reilly

Submitted to the Department of English and Global Literatures
School of Humanities
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College
State University of New York

December 2023

Sponsor: Dr. Kerry Manzo

Second Reader: Dr. Samuel Galloway

Table of Contents

Table of Contents.. 2

Introduction..3

Part I..10

Part II.. 25

Part III.. 34

Conclusion.. 40

Works Cited.. 41

Introduction

At the zenith of the American government's involvement in the Vietnam War in 1968, a 22-year-old Tim O'Brien was drafted by the United States Army as a foot soldier. He was then deployed into combat in 1969, shortly after obtaining a Bachelor's Degree in Political Science from Macalester College. Serving in the same unit that perpetrated the My Lai Massacre mere months before his arrival, O'Brien rose to the rank of sergeant, sustained two injuries, and was eventually sent home in 1970 with a Purple Heart medal and his mind abuzz with tales inspired by his time in active service. After pursuing graduate school at Harvard University, his writing career debuted in 1973 with *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*: an autobiographical account of his military tour. He then published *Going After Cacciato* in 1978, a narrative of a traumatized soldier going AWOL. Then, his arguably most prevalent and widely-regarded work, *The Things They Carried*, was released in 1990, to mass critical acclaim. A metafictional series of short stories depicting a wide scope of characters navigating Vietnam and its consequences firsthand, the novel is semi-autobiographical in nature, serving as another rough retelling of O'Brien's year as a combatant. The protagonist even shares O'Brien's name identically, verifying to the reader that this character is a self-insert.[1] From this, one can gather that this particular novel was just as special to O'Brien as his 1973 nonfiction retelling, with its content holding just as much merit, meaning, and authenticity. Within each short story, the heavy implementation of verisimilitude can be recognized, rendering it all the more hyperreal.

Psychologists claim that there were "two types of war [in Vietnam]. The first was considered the 'good' war which took place from 1964-1968. The second was the 'bad' war

---

[1] For clarity, the author will henceforth be referred to as O'Brien, and the character as Tim.

which occurred from 1968-1972" (qtd. in Mahini 1284). The "good" Vietnam War precedes the year 1968, when morale was high among soldiers and the American populace alike. The desire to stop communism boosted the spirits and egos of a very large group of very young men who wanted to do what they believed was the right thing and subsequently pose as heroes for their patriotic, world-saving efforts. Many of these young men had been born during the post-World War II baby boom, when the American Dream was rapidly gaining speed and nearing its peak. While nowadays the American Dream evokes images of pink and teal cars, milkshakes and diners, movie stars and teen idols, and cowboys and Elvis Presley, the existence of these tropes are much obliged to thank the massive American victory in World War II. One can even argue this triumph was the sole root cause for the success of such an idea as the American Dream; after all, winning appointed us as one of the largest global superpowers of the time, and led to otherworldly economic and social flourishes within the nation. A correlation was inevitable to be manufactured. With the United States on top of the world in every way imaginable at this juncture, the upcoming "boomer" generation was born into an America that bred them to fervently engage in ultra-nationalism and never believe otherwise.

The "bad" Vietnam War began in the later months of 1968 and became a solidified concept when President Nixon first hailed for the return of all American soldiers from Vietnam beginning in the spring of 1969. With even the president of the country seeing no point as to why any Americans were stationed to perish halfway across the world—despite a continued ardent support for the non-communist South Vietnam—soldiers still stationed there in spite of this sentiment felt an even deeper listlessness and lack of meaning. From this moment on, it could be argued that any subsequent American soldier's death in Vietnam was both pointless, in vain, and solely in the selfish interests of their home country. The "bad" war continued to be fought until

1973, when the last American soldiers were recovered from South Vietnam and returned to the states; this marked the very end of Nixon's "Vietnamization" project, which had aimed to gradually taper American involvement in Vietnam. At this point, the desire to end all conflict was almost unanimously heralded by American noncombatants, and the renowned peace movement was at the height of its popularity. With these calls and cries for retrieval of our troops came a brand-new lens for Americans to view their home soil through, most of which for the very first time in history: an *anti*-American exceptionalist lens.

Prior to this, however, in the 20th century—most particularly after World War II—the American exceptionalist mindset had reached its apogee: "In the aftermath of World War II, the Marshall Plan underscored America's political, military and economic strength . . . which reaffirmed the Americans' belief that only they had the resources and capability of defeating the global threat of socialism" (Griffin 336). This was the very framework that the United States' foreign policy would adhere to throughout the mid-20th century, including when it came to the western global superpower's stance against Vietnam. While the war remained cold against fellow superpower the Soviet Union, the United States found smaller, weaker post-colonial rule countries in Southeast Asia and Latin America appealing as they supposed it would be fairly easy to achieve their goal in quelling any hint of communism there.

Though it is uncertain exactly where the concept of American exceptionalism was first conceived, it did not suddenly materialize out of thin air at the cessation of the Second World War. In terms of ideology, its origins predate it as a whole: "The idea of American Exceptionalism can be traced back to Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1835) . . . [Tocqueville], after a 9-month exploration of American society, noted elements that distinguished it from other societies. Such elements included individualism, a focus on idea over form, the

separation of church and state, people coming together by their interests and not their ideas, and freedom" (Ramratten and Szenberg 223). Nearly a century later in 1929, the term "American exceptionalism" was fleshed out verbatim when it was hurled at American communist leader Jay Lovestone by none other than Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, who condemned "the heresy of American exceptionalism" after Lovestone put forward to his comrades that the United States's social, historical, and economical conditions were "unique" in contrast to Europe.

Soon after, American exceptionalism began to take shape as a legitimate object of scholarly study in the 1930s, when a wing of American communists utilized it as a means to "explain the failure of Marxian socialism" (Rogin 275) in the US. Simultaneously, scholarly figureheads founding American studies as an academic discipline at the time "reappropriated the term . . . in an effort to portray the United States as destined to perform a special role in the world of nations" (Pease, "Exceptionalism", 108). Shortly thereafter, scholars such as Richard Hofstadter and Louis Hartz offered American exceptionalism as the "consensus interpretation of American politics . . . [attributing] American distinctiveness to such factors as material abundance . . . liberal individualism, social and geographic mobility, ethnic conflict, and a pluralist political tradition" (Rogin 275).

American exceptionalism then took a dip in popularity of academic usage in the decades following, but had a great resurgence very shortly after the termination of the Vietnam War. In 1975, sociologist Daniel Bell posed the argument that the end of American exceptionalism was presently happening before the nation's eyes, with "The American Century", a theme multi-magazine magnate Henry Luce introduced in a 1942 essay, having been proven unsuccessful in the wake of Vietnam. Luce had claimed that the United States' emergence on the world scene necessitated an international vision of their nation that showed them off as an

"authentically American" superpower. Furthermore, he had claimed that the 20th century was America's century to establish itself as "the dynamic center of ever-widening spheres of enterprise . . . the training center of the skillful servants of mankind . . . the Good Samaritan . . . that it is more blessed to give than to receive, and . . . the powerhouse of the ideals of Freedom and Justice" (qtd. in Bell 203). Bell responded to Luce's claim arguing that "The American Century lasted scarcely 30 years. It foundered on the shoals of Vietnam . . . We have not been immune to the corruption of power. We have not been the exception" (Bell 204-205). He posited multiple explanations for American involvement in Vietnam, from the left-wing assertion that Vietnam was another extension of American imperialism to the idea of a "power vacuum", or the handing over of power over a "client state" from one western power to another. In the specific case of Vietnam, this was France to the United States. But Bell does not select a single proposition as gospel, preferring to highlight the overarching message behind America's exceptionalist mindset. "Whatever the truth . . . what is clear is that none of these explanations deal with . . . the national style and character which shaped the American actions . . . the 'egoistic corruption' which expressed itself in the belief that America was now the guardian of the world order . . . [with a] 'rightful' position as leader of the free world" (Bell 204).

Nearly forty years after the end of the Vietnam War, Donald Pease's *The New American Exceptionalism* offered an amended 21st-century take on the definition of American exceptionalism, further bolstering it as a scholarly term as opposed to a simple and ostensible ideology. Pease's take now not only serves as a leading contemporary denotation, but a leading contemporary denotation that retrospectively takes into account the nation's recent past: "American exceptionalism has been taken to mean that America is "distinctive" (meaning different), or "unique" (meaning anomalous), or "exemplary" (meaning a model for other nations

to follow), or that it is "exempt" from the laws of historical progress (meaning that it is an "exception" to the laws and rules governing the development of other nations)" (Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism*, 9). Academic Thomas Ross Griffin states that, more clearly, Pease's definition argues that "America's exceptionalism signifies that as a nation, America believes itself to be different and better than other nations, and most importantly, not beholden to the laws and rules that the rest have to obey" (Griffin 344). In believing such, Americans had and still have the ability to excuse themselves for their actions overseas—perhaps sometimes even patting themselves on the back for it, finding it objectively morally righteous—whether they were a direct participant in the violence or an at-home observer concerned with the preservation of capitalism, democracy, and other classic liberal values. Regardless, it is widely believed that "America's revolutionary origins, its transformation into a global power, and its absence of a colonial history meant that it was ideally placed to provide the social and moral blueprint for these young nations to follow" (Griffin 338). These ideals aided in furbishing a boiling concoction for contention in countries where the United States felt a ceaseless desire to intervene on global affairs—even if it meant suiting up for yet another war.

The "bad" Vietnam War may very well be why American exceptionalism was uncovered as such a major issue over half a century ago, as well as why it continues to be an incredibly pervasive topic of discussion in political circles to this very day. It is entitled the "bad" Vietnam War for good reason; it demonstrated on a cosmopolitan level that the United States cannot always be trusted to take on the role of a leader, a hero, or both synchronously, while also generating a double entendre—as it was also "bad" since the Americans were facing some of the greatest defeats since the inception of the conflict. The North Vietnamese had reoriented their combat style from guerrilla warfare to gruesome offensives, booby traps, and mines, decisively

demolishing Yankee morale once and for all. By weak and discouraged means of retaliation, American soldiers resolved that all Vietnamese peoples were to be attacked, sans distinction, regardless of which side of the war they were on. This thought pattern stemmed from the idea that all Vietnamese were "enemies and racially inferior" (Mahini 1284). In turn, this gave troopers of the west a perceived justification and rationale to regularly engage in "abusive violence toward [these] noncombatants . . . mutilation of enemy corpses, or senseless animal or civilian killings . . . Several of the actions and conduct of the soldiers . . . could be deemed illegal based on the US military Law of War" (qtd. in Mahini 1286-1287).

While O'Brien never remarks on the term "American exceptionalism" verbatim in *The Things They Carried,* every short story from the novel featured in this essay is laden with nods and references to the mindset. Whether it be a character, symbol, or theme contributing to the representation of American exceptionalism, the timeline of O'Brien's narrative runs concurrently with the very first fractures in the long-winded attitudes of radical patriotism and zealous nationalism in America. Thus, this essay will explore and analyze how Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* portrays the beginning of the end of the American Dream, the earliest interrogations of American exceptionalism among the country's civilians and soldiers alike, and how the United States's countless blunders in Vietnam lit the initial fuse.

Part I

O'Brien's novel opens with an eponymous chapter that describes what each soldier in Tim's company carries with them, whether it be tangible or intangible. Twenty-four-year-old First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross carries letters from a girl back home named Martha and partakes in a daily ritual where he unpackages them, rereads them, and daydreams about going on dates with her. Sometimes, he even "taste[s] the envelope flaps, knowing her tongue had been there" (O'Brien 1). He spends a notable amount of time wondering whether Martha is a virgin, a thought pattern commonly associated with young men due to their naturally increased interest in sexual activities within that age bracket. He especially ponders this about her when he secures the perimeter and goes on night watch when his troops settle down to rest. This dichotomy exhibits Cross's youth in the face of him taking on such a grave and mature adult task as being sent to war. Despite even being the Alpha Company's First Lieutenant, he is still but an average young man whose main concern is the woman he's in love with—just like many other young men. O'Brien continues to elucidate on this theme a few pages later: "[Cross] had difficulty keeping his attention on the war . . . he would slip away into daydreams, just pretending . . . with Martha, carrying nothing" (O'Brien 9). From this, one can analyze that Cross dreams of returning home and to be free of the physical and mental and emotional weight of the war, and despite his relatively high status in the military as well as his company.

Other items carried by Tim's fellow soldiers are listed, notably chewing gum, candy, and packets of Kool-Aid. This further drives the point to the reader that these men are very young, illustrating a gruesome mental imagery of boyish soldiers eating sweets in the midst of digging foxholes, enduring enemy crossfire, or trudging across rice paddies. These items are also listed in

tandem with pocket knives, their identification dog tag necklaces, their food rations, and their water: all supplies necessary for combat and survival. The juxtaposition of these two sets of items—one associated with childhood or young adulthood, or being an American, and the other with death and slaughter and sustenance—is one of O'Brien's many subtle nudges at the reader to recognize the juvenile and unsophisticated nature of the company.

A less subtle nudge, on the other hand, is when O'Brien shares how, at times, the company would fall prey to panic and disarray in the throes of action, allowing their masks of already-feigned bravado to slip. "For the most part they carried themselves with poise, a kind of dignity. Now and then, however, there were times of panic . . ." (O'Brien 19). He lists examples: how they'd wish they could scream with fear at times where they could not, how they'd cry out for the noise to stop, how they'd pray to God, how they'd sob while making promises to their parents, how they'd beg aloud not to die. While any human being in such a position is rational to react in this manner, the phraseology behind some of these examples is almost childlike in nature. In particular, a soldier calling out for one's mother is very commonly seen and depicted in countless forms of war media unlimited to books such as O'Brien's—but is also a behavior attributed to a distraught and frightened child. In addition, the aforementioned promises they make to their parents could be conjectured to follow a similar youthful theme.

Later in the chapter, one of the company's soldiers, Lee Strunk is selected to destroy one of the many tunnel complexes created by the North Vietnamese in Than Khe. Cross begins to fantasize about being crushed in the tunnel with Martha, connecting the thought to his perpetual curiosity about her virginity or lack thereof. Distracted, he nearly forgets about Strunk being in the tunnel until the latter returns to the surprise of his fellow soldiers, who feared him dead. The moment Strunk pops out from the tunnel, however, another soldier named Ted Lavender is shot

in the head and killed whilst urinating. Cross instructs his company to enter Than Khe, where they aimlessly and pointlessly burn everything, shoot chickens and dogs, trash the village well, and call in artillery fire just to spectate the destruction; a common pastime for soldiers during the aforementioned "bad" era of the Vietnam War. Cross finds himself full of self-loathing, blaming himself for Lavender's death to due his obsession with thinking about Martha: "He felt shame. He hated himself. He had loved Martha more than his men, and as a consequence Lavender was now dead, and this was something he would have to carry like a stone in his stomach for the rest of the war" (O'Brien 16). Here, Cross expresses his grief for Lavender and it becomes another intangible thing he must carry for the remainder of his time in Vietnam: a metaphorical stone in his stomach, with the stone signifying a heavy analogous weight. Yet in the same breath, Cross also thinks: "In part, he was grieving for Ted Lavender, but mostly it was for Martha, and for himself, because she belonged to another world, which was not quite real, and because she was a junior at Mount Sebastian College in New Jersey, a poet and a virgin and uninvolved, and because he realized she did not love him and never would" (O'Brien 17).

Cross displays a drastic disconnect with his emotions in this part of the text, but it also provides more context for the greater notion that these are but young men. Unable to process the greater implications behind Lavender's death, as well as what Lavender's death will mean for his family and friends back home, Cross instead redirects its meaning to how it affects *himself*. He thinks about how Lavender's death is because of him, and then connects this thought to how he feels his own life is full of the same amount of pain and misfortune due to being unable to physically be with Martha. His obsessive tirade as to whether Martha is a virgin continues, only consolidating to a greater extent the idea that these men are not equipped for what they are

facing. In a greater sense, this demonstrates how utterly unequipped they are to understand the more sinister aspects of their forced involvement in the war from the American government.

Cross's previously mentioned initial reaction and commanded response to Lavender's death can additionally be used to justify the legitimacy of these ideas. He has his troops completely demolish the neighboring village of Than Khe by needlessly slaughtering animals, devastating their water supply, and ordering backup artillery fire as a means of entertainment. It is clear that he and his company are bored and traumatized, lack direction, and feel no morale nor purpose in their travels. This can be seen in a subsequent excerpt from the chapter: "They moved like mules . . . it was just the endless march, village to village, without purpose, nothing won or lost . . . no volition, no will, because it was automatic, it was anatomy . . . a dullness of desire and intellect and conscience and hope and human sensibility" (O'Brien 15).

This passage evokes Ramtin Noor-Tehrani Mahini's message in his article "Tim O'Brien's "Bad" Vietnam War: The Things They Carried & Its Historical Perspective". In the article, Mahini unpacks how emotional trauma sustained by American troops in Vietnam during the latter half of the war led to their corrupt behavior, which O'Brien also showcases: "They had no sense of strategy or mission. They searched the villages without knowing what to look for, not caring . . . frisking children and old men, blowing tunnels, sometimes setting fires . . . then forming up and moving on to the next village, then other villages, where it would always be the same" (O'Brien 15). Just as in nonfiction retellings of the Vietnam War, the Alpha Company is spiritless, devoid of bearings, and abusive to the land and its people. A few pages on, O'Brien further supports the idea of an apathetic routine where every last part of their existence is dispensable and easy to replace: "They would often discard things along the route of march . . . no matter, because by nightfall the resupply choppers would arrive with more of the same . . . it

was the great American war chest" (O'Brien 15, 16). Mahini's article backs up and supports O'Brien's metafictional retelling: "O'Brien uses diverse settings, vivid imagery, and repetition to illustrate the American perspectives during this immoral and unpopular war . . . meaningless death[s] of troops, abusive violence toward Vietnamese noncombatants . . . senseless mutilation of animals and enemy/civilian bodies and corpses." (Mahini 1291).

At the end of the chapter, Cross decides to burn the pictures of Martha, renounce his love for her, and give up on his quest for deducing her virginity status, exasperated by her lack of reciprocation or care for his circumstances. He instead opts to be the Lieutenant he was assigned as—all while realizing that he "can't burn the blame" (O'Brien 23) of Lavender's death—and makes it his new mission to be a strong leader that supports his men. "Lieutenant Jimmy Cross reminded himself that his obligation was not to be loved but to lead . . . And if anyone quarreled or complained, he would simply tighten his lips and arrange his shoulders in the correct command posture" (O'Brien 25-26) With this comes what is symbolically the end of Jimmy Cross's boyish naivete. The war he has been thrust into has hardened him irrevocably. No longer is he preoccupied with what young men like him should find to be the most difficult hurdles in that stage of their lives—such as courting women, or coping with unrequited love for the first time—but rather things that young men like him should not ever have to experience: the gory deaths of their friends, severe mental and emotional trauma, and perpetually life-altering warfare.

It can be argued in this right that Jimmy Cross has fallen victim to the machine of American exceptionalism. He is giving up the typical facets of youth and coming of age, namely his all-consuming love for Martha, in exchange for serving his country; at first resentfully, now willingly. While, in part, it is a direct response to Lavender's death leading him to come face-to-face once more with his loss of youthful innocence in Vietnam, the omniscient narration

makes multiple references in Cross's chapter to how the men feel the war is a failure. Despite this, however, they continue to fight anyway—finding it to be the right thing to do: "Men killed, and died, because they were embarrassed not to. It was what had brought them to the war in the first place, nothing positive, no dreams of glory or honor, just to avoid the blush of dishonor. They died so as not to die of embarrassment" (O'Brien 21).

While the platoon's consensus outlook on the war was begrudging despite Cross's concurrent individual desire to become a better leader for his men, the aforementioned quote could be perceived as a false consciousness. Cross is simultaneously oppositional to his place in the conflict while being, as previously said, a cog in the machine spurring on the American exceptionalist approach to it or, more clearly, a not just patriotic, but *imperialistic* approach to it. This becomes especially apparent when Cross himself orders the demolition of the aforestated Than Khe, which generates a startling parallel to the forceful removal of Native Americans from their own lands during the Manifest Destiny throughout the 19th century in the United States. This only drives this point further, as along with imperialism, the Manifest Destiny has been attributed as a leading example of a 'missionary' subtype of American exceptionalism by scholar Trevor McCrisken: "Two main strands of exceptionalist thought have influenced US foreign policy . . . [the] more dominant strand is that of the missionary nation, as represented by the ideas of 'manifest destiny' . . . [and] 'imperialism'" (McCrisken 2).

Additionally, while the other men recognize there is no glory or honor in their actions, they continue to engage in them regardless, even if objectively immoral. This can be seen when the men voluntarily adhere to Cross's vexatious order to retaliate against Lavender's death by imposing animal death, destruction to the environment, obstruction of access to water and shelter, and the subsequent displacement of innocent Vietnamese civilians in Than Khe. As such,

they, too have fallen victims to the American exceptionalist machine, despite the standing false consciousness they experience in feeling no coinciding prestige in their conduct.

Not only does this support both McCrisken's historically imperialistic framing of American exceptionalism, but it additionally gives credence to Griffin's extrapolation of Pease's modernized definition of American exceptionalism that supposes the United States does not believe the same rules apply to them as they do to other nations since the former is exceptional. In their rage toward Lavender's death and desire to prove themselves out of fear of embarrassment, perceived dishonor, or insecurity, Cross and the other members of the Alpha Company blatantly violate their own country's military's laws of war.

In "On the Rainy River", Tim recalls attempting to dodge the draft after graduating college in 1968. He opens the chapter by confessing he has never told this story to anyone in the twenty-plus years he's held onto it, including his mother and father, his siblings, and his wife. He shares that he hated the war at the time, finding its point uncertain and the bloodshed contentious. Then, he retells the day he received his draft letter, and how he instantly began to mentally rattle off reasons why he didn't belong in Vietnam—most of which having to do with his distaste for the outdoors and fear of blood—as well as his academic future, which chiefly consisted of him continuing his studies at Harvard for graduate school. Most interestingly, however, Tim says: "There should be a law, I thought. If you support a war, if you think it's worth the price, that's fine, but you have to . . . head for the front and hook up with an infantry unit and help spill the blood. And you have to bring along your wife, or your kids, or your lover" (O'Brien 42). Here, he is referring to how the war-supporting elite and their families were often exempt from the draft despite being its spearheading supporters and jingoists. This became such a well-known and supported idea by the national public that it was adopted as a major talking

point for early anti-war movements, with the added popularity of Creedence Clearwater Revival's 1969 track "Fortunate Son" shedding a light that non-liberal or -pacifist American civilians may not have otherwise seen without the help of something as simple and universally agreed by humans as enjoyable as music, movies and television, and pop culture.

Tim divulges that he's "a *liberal*, for Christ sake" (O'Brien 42) and that he would've been willing to join the battle if it were for an obvious and objective evil such as Hitler. From this, it can be argued that even before experiencing the Vietnam War as a primary source, Tim already believed the Vietnam War was unnecessary and already was positioned against it before he was even drafted. With the turning point of "good" to "bad" in relation to branding the Vietnam War being the same year of 1968, it had become no secret to Americans back home that the initial goal to put an end to communism was growing more and more unsuccessful, which consequently begged the question as to why the United States still had their men stationed and actively fighting overseas. But as Tim starts to consider escaping across the border to Canada in order to avoid military service, he contemplates the reactions of his family, friends, neighbors, and fellow townsfolk. He remarks that they are conservative, and that he would become a certain target for ridicule if he were to flee: "I detested their blind, thoughtless, automatic acquiescence to it all, their simple-minded patriotism, their prideful ignorance, their love-it-or-leave-it platitudes, how they were sending me off to fight a war they didn't understand and didn't want to understand" (O'Brien 45). Tim is acutely aware that the average American is a world away from the war in Vietnam, leading their attitudes toward it to skew from supportive to complacent to wholly removed. In 1968, the public consciousness of America's wrongdoings was limited, with news having little means to travel quickly let alone with much skepticism or nuance. Tim then follows this up with a tongue-in-cheek perspective on how Americans believed the Vietnam War

had one clear and morally upstanding objective, which meant any naysayer could be considered a weakling or a patsy: “But no matter, it was a war to stop the Communists, plain and simple, which was how they liked things, and you were a treasonous pussy if you had second thoughts about killing or dying for plain and simple reasons” (O’Brien 45).

In conveying this, Tim completely shatters the expectations and acceptance of traditions that were required from young American men at the time by their elders. His anti-American exceptionalist stance in the face of post-World War II Americana mania becomes firmly rooted. He reminds the reader, once again, that all proponents of the war and an American exceptionalist mindset—from the gentry to the blue-collars—were utterly ignorant to and removed from its true nature and reality, as they did not bear physical witness to any of the war’s true realities. He even criticizes his local VFW (“I held them personally and individually responsible . . . the Veterans of Foreign Wars” (O’Brien 45)), a nod to his aforementioned postulation that not all wars are just, and that a nation being the unarguable hero in one war does not necessarily mean that a nation will continue to be the unarguable hero in every war.

One morning, Tim decides on a whim to leave. After hours of driving, he reaches the Rainy River that separates his home state of Minnesota from Canada. He reaches a lodge near the border and is taken care of by the owner, a man named Elroy Berdahl. Tim remains at the lodge for six days, where the two eat meals together, go on hikes, play tabletop games, and listen to records. Tim believes Berdahl is already well aware of the circumstances that brought him there, but retrospectively observes that he never once asked. It is then explicitly revealed to him when, over dinner one night, Berdahl offers to pay him for helping out around the lodge, eventually leaving an envelope taped to Tim’s door that is labeled as an emergency fund. Furthermore, on Tim’s last day, Berdahl takes him fishing, conveniently bringing them upstream

over the Canadian border before cutting the engine—tacitly implying that he is helping Tim escape. Tim begins to cry before eventually submitting and turning back home: "I would go to the war—I would kill and maybe die—because I was embarrassed not to" (O'Brien 59).

Tim's embarrassment portrays how despite his knowledge and awareness, American exceptionalism has still been groomed into him to the point where he is too afraid not to go to Vietnam. As he weighs the consequences of jumping off of Berdahl's boat and taking off toward Canada, he looks back at Minnesota and envisions a series of all-American people, places, and things before him on the shore. He sees younger versions of himself, people from his town, the ambience of football games and stadium fanfare, his family, various American presidents and senators, American political activists, American pop culture icons, his future wife and kids, dead soldiers, and the man he later kills in Vietnam. "All those eyes on me—the town, the whole universe—and I couldn't risk the embarrassment . . . the patriotic ridicule" (O'Brien 59). Thus, despite his antiwar passion and previously established viewpoint against American exceptionalism, he states he "was a coward. [He] went to the war" (O'Brien 61)—not because he wanted to go, but because the opinions and hypothetical reactions of the people around him had convinced him to. The United States' zealous anti-communist stance among its citizens gave little room for any interrogation of American exceptionalism—even if this interrogation was fully unrelated to communism itself—which in turn had duly persuaded Tim not to let his country down. Despite his fears and political awareness, he instead chose to appear as the "good" American that his compatriots all expected him to be.

In "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong", Alpha Company medic Rat Kiley tells his platoon a story of how one of his fellow medics in his old detachment near the village of Tra Bong, Mark Fossie, was able to ship his girlfriend over to Vietnam. Tim reveals to the reader that Kiley is an

exaggerated storyteller, but that Kiley insists this is the one true tale he tells, nothing added or subtracted or embellished. Fossie's girlfriend shows up with a pink sweater, white culottes, and a suitcase and makeup bag. She is the clean, prim, and proper stereotype of an educated and preppy blonde middle-class American girl. The girl, Mary Anne, was explained by Kiley to be friendly, likable by all the men, and crucial in boosting their morale. She shows curiosity and interest in what the men do on their day-to-day; she asks questions, listens with genuine intent, and even picks up on a few of the soldiers' skills for herself. As time goes on, she begins to explore outside of the detachment, enamored with the lives of the Vietnamese people. The medics are skeptical, but permit her to do as she pleases. She learns to take care of wounded American soldiers, unafraid to get her hands dirty, and slowly begins to assimilate into real soldier life. She rejects makeup, removes her jewelry, cuts her hair short, decks herself out in a bush hat and green fatigues, and familiarizes herself with the intricacies of an M-16 rifle.

Eventually, Mary Anne stops coming back to the detachment at night. Panicked, Fossie initiates a search for her with Kiley. Soon, the two discover that Mary Anne is out on ambush with the six American Green Berets—or members of the United States Army Special Forces—that dwell in a hootch at the edge of the compound. Now enraged, Fossie has her cleaned up and put back into civilian clothes. Mary Anne appears distraught at dinner and while the couple become engaged, Kiley observes tension and feigned togetherness. Fossie plans to have Mary Anne sent home to Cleveland, much to Mary Anne's dismay. She disappears, once again, with the Green Berets the next morning—this time for three weeks. When she returns, Kiley notes her eyes "shine in the dark—not blue, though, but a bright glowing jungle green" (O'Brien 106), signifying her full assimilation into the American culture of the war. She enters the Green Berets' hootch and Fossie spends the entire day waiting for her. Finally, at night, he

hears her chant-singing and approaches the hootch. The room echoes with "tribal music", the walls and ceiling clad with animal heads and skin and bones of all kinds. While clad in a necklace of tongues, Mary Anne tells Fossie he is in a place where he does not belong—referring to Vietnam—and admonishes him for spending all his time hiding in the compound instead of discovering what the war is truly "about", which is going out to fight and physically experience it: "'Sometimes I want to eat this place. Vietnam. I want to swallow the whole country—the dirt, the death—I just want to eat it and have it there inside me. That's how I feel . . . I feel close to myself . . . You can't feel like that anywhere else'" (O'Brien 111).

Scholar Michael Tavel Clarke argues that the aforementioned quote is imperialistic and self-absorbed in nature: "Mary Anne herself suggests the way this delving into the self is fundamentally tied to violence against the Vietnamese" (Clarke 138). He also refers to the necklace of human tongues Mary Anne eventually dons herself with, calling it the "ultimate symbol of that solipsism and its attendant violence" (Clark 138). Elucidating further, Clarke states that the necklace represents not only the violence perpetuated by Mary Anne to the Vietnamese, but also the voicelessness it has caused—both literally and figuratively. While Mary Anne first enters Vietnam with a love for the land and its people, in time her pink-sweatered innocence had shed to reveal the wild imperialistic beast within her: "Mary Anne's desire to swallow Vietnam is evocative of the processes of imperialism, the swallowing of a people, a nation, and a land by another nation" (Clarke 139). In the overarching message of the story, the representation of American exceptionalism can be inserted due to the excessive focus on the American "national self" in contrast to the suppressed, silent Vietnamese self. American soldiers and characters and their narratives take precedence over the brutality they incite on the faceless

Vietnamese people. This solipsistic method of storytelling on O'Brien's part, according to Clarke, intentionally "takes such precedence that all other voices are suppressed" (Clarke 139).

In "Speaking of Courage", one of Tim's fellow company members, Norman Bowker, returns home from war and feels lost. He drives around the seven-mile loop of the lake in his hometown and takes in the sights, sounds, and feelings of a stereotypical American summer day, though it is markedly the Fourth of July. The town he once knew has changed in his absence, though not in appearance; he mostly refers to the people in it. He references how his high school crush, Sally Kramer, is now married, and how he wishes he could impress her with what he learned in Vietnam. This is the first time he speaks of almost winning a Silver Star for valor, which becomes a recurring theme throughout the chapter.

The chapter then shifts to a hypothetical conversation between Bowker and his father, where Bowker once again thinks about telling hypothetical people around his hometown about how he almost won the Silver Star—but not quite. He thinks about the seven medals he did win, but laments over the one medal he did not by claiming the former medals were for "common valor" rather than "uncommon valor". Continuing the imaginary conversation between him and his father, Bowker shares why he did not receive the Silver Star: while camping in a field filled with feces, heavy rain as well as enemy gunfire had begun to fall upon the company which led one of the members, Kiowa, to drown in the muck. Bowker made repeated attempts to save him, but then himself began to drown and subsequently retreated in favor of his life: "I had the chance and I blew it. The stink, that's what got to me . . . If things had gone right, if it hadn't been for that smell, I could've won the Silver Star . . . The truth . . . is I let the guy go.'" (O'Brien 142-143, 150, 153) In Bowker's mind his father tries to reassure him, reminding him of the seven medals he did win, but Bowker simply cannot let go of the Silver Star. It becomes clear

that he associates the medal with Kiowa's death—perhaps even substituting the idea of not winning it for the memory of his fellow platoon member's demise—and finds it too painful to directly face, let alone process without blaming himself.

With these two ideas conjoined, however, not only does Bowker feel like a failure of the American Dream's perception of a man in combat—a glamorous hero committing selfless acts of valor—but also believes he has fallen short of the image and traits that American exceptionalism generates and expects of American soldiers: strong, capable, confident, victorious and, of course, valorous. It is glaringly clear that Bowker has been severely traumatized in his time of service, blaming himself rather than the system that has groomed him to do such.

Bowker's trauma continues to manifest as the chapter carries on. Despite being home, he feels like a stranger that cannot relate to any of the townspeople he spent his whole life around before being sent to Vietnam. He wishes he could ask people if they'd like to hear about the war, but figures they do not as he knows his town would rather subsist in blissful ignorance. "The town could not talk, and would not listen . . . The taxes got paid and the votes got counted and the agencies of government did their work briskly and politely. It was a brisk, polite town. It did not know shit about shit, and did not care to know." (O'Brien 143) This exhibits that Bowker is aware of the incompetence of his fellow Americans as well as their blind following in the mindset of American exceptionalism, which is something he appears to be aware of at least in vague and nondescript concept. Still, he vies for any sort of validation or approval, feeling forgotten by his compatriots after all he endured in the name of their country. But his hometown is utterly content in its bubble of unworldliness, and with the war being over and not experienced by the majority of its population, his efforts render fruitless. There is no one he can relate to or leave such an effect on that they could fully empathize.

In one last attempt in vain to reach out, Bowker orders food from a local burger joint and tries to spark up a conversation about his service in Vietnam with the worker by coming around the drive through a second time after eating his meal. The worker, impatient and unaware of neither Bowker's story nor his detached disillusionment, leads Bowker to give up and drive away instead. "There was nothing to say. He could not talk about it and never would . . . He was folded in with the war; he was part of the waste" (O'Brien 153).

Later, in the sister chapter "Notes", it is revealed that Bowker hanged himself in 1975. Tim shares how he came up with "Speaking of Courage". He'd received a letter from Bowker, shortly before his death, that detailed the latter's inability to find any meaning to his life after the war: "'There's no place to go. Not just in this lousy little town. In general. My life, I mean . . . It's almost like I got killed over in Nam . . . That night when Kiowa got wasted, I sort of sank down into the sewage with him" (O'Brien 156). From this, it is evident that Bowker never forgave himself for his self-supposed blame in the death of Kiowa. He represents the countless Vietnam veterans that died by suicide as a result of the trauma and mental health issues they experienced during and after fighting a war they did not belong in.

In the subsequent section, other themes within the narrative of *The Things They Carried* will be presented and dissected in tandem with the most common themes of American exceptionalism seen in scholarly literature. In doing so, it will be revealed how O'Brien's novel not only conforms to American exceptionalism, but also serves as an example for how the attitudes of the American and Vietnamese characters in the story pioneered in fracturing it.

Part II

As stated in previous sections, scholarly definitions and themes of American exceptionalism range from Pease's proposition of America being a nation that is a better, most unique model for the rest of the world (that, as a result, is exempt from the laws that apply to many other nations) to McCrisken's proposition of America being a nation that is an imperialistic, ethnocentric, almost missionary-like figure obliged to instill its own values in other nations, even if by aggressive, warmongering force. When joined together, the former definition enables the latter. In both not being beholden to the same punishments other countries face for their international wrongdoings, as well as a granted ability to assume the position of a missionary under the guise of appearing as morally upstanding saviors, the representation of American exceptionalism exhibits that the United States has largely been able to get away with what other countries have been historically penalized for. This section will hone in on the actions committed by the American government and its soldiers during the Vietnam War, utilizing in-text examples and themes from and interpreted from O'Brien's stories, that can be viewed through the lens of American exceptionalism's own themes.

In the novel, depictions of the Vietnamese people are sparse, lack depth, and typically involve death or other forms of tragedy. It has been argued that this has been done intentionally by O'Brien; Amar A. Aqeeli claims that "[O'Brien's] representation of the Vietnamese people enhances [the novel's] oppositional voice of the war" (Aqeeli 21) by engaging in a narrative of "ethnocentric solipsism" (Aqeeli 20) on purpose, as "their presence shows the degree of the power imbalance between Vietnam and America" (Aqeeli 20) despite their voicelessness and utter lack of power of the Vietnamese. With O'Brien bringing American characters, specifically

the soldiers of Tim's platoon, to the forefront to be cast in a constant light of suffering and misfortune while rendering Vietnamese characters as silent, subservient onlookers whose marginally darker adversities receive little screen time, the theme of "ethnocentric solipsism"—or, more clearly, a sort of self-absorbed nationalism that takes no heed of other cultures' and countries' needs and desires—leads to a complete dehumanization of the Vietnamese people as well as an utter devaluation of the trauma they suffered from the war.

Additionally, O'Brien's mode of storytelling exhibits how the suppression of Vietnamese voices and the centralization of American voices in the narrative can be perceived as a critique of "the American imperial ideology that is usually practiced during wartime" (Aqeeli 24). This critique is apparent in his suppression and silencing of Vietnamese characters' voices as well as giving almost every Vietnamese character a tragic or perturbing end. Thus, this deliberate amalgamation of ethnocentrism and imperialism in the novel fits McCrisken's representation of American exceptionalism. The American soldiers are bolstered as do-gooders that—despite their prevalent moral crises and vivid delineations of trauma due to the atrocities they commit—are active agents for their exemplary nation's missionary approach to foreign policy and stopping communism. Meanwhile, the Vietnamese are illustrated as utterly impotent to this imperialistic attack cloaked in a foreign policy mission to "save" them.

In the text, O'Brien portrays the silence and suppression of the Vietnamese people across multiple short stories. This is first seen in "Church", when Tim and the other men of his company settle in a pagoda where two Vietnamese monks reside. This occupation of a sacred, peaceful landmark—where these American soldiers take it over and transform it into a combat shelter, digging foxholes and "turning the pagoda into a little fortress" (O'Brien 119)—represents not only a complete disregard for the cultures, customs, and religion of the Vietnamese people,

but also serves as a metaphor for imperialism or, more specifically, "the US army presence in Vietnam as an imperial mission" (Aqeeli 24). The desire for domination and instilling values of the west, particularly the United States, consequently exhibits that Tim and his men have not just been sent to Vietnam to stop communism, but ingrain their taught supremacy of American culture into Vietnamese life. The uprooting of the pagoda to incorporate it as a warzone, as well as the careless overlooking of the pagoda as a consecrate place of worship, both present that the men do not pay any credence to religions of the east. This is further backed up by platoon members Kiowa and Henry Robbins, who regard the pagoda as a church; a word exclusively reserved for where members of the Christian faiths congregate. Put together, this short story positions the United States and the occupying soldier characters as "condescending and racist" (Aqeeli 24) imperialists carrying out American exceptionalism through believing western values are a model the rest of the world must follow—a key part of Pease's definition.

In "The Man I Killed" and "Ambush", which are sister chapters, Tim looks back to a young Vietnamese man he killed during the war. With the man being dead, he does not have a voice; rather, it is Tim's voice that speaks for him. In describing the Vietnamese man's corpse, Tim assumes his entire life: "His chest was sunken and poorly muscled—a scholar, maybe . . . He had been born, maybe, in 1946 . . . His health was poor, his body small and frail . . . He wanted someday to be a teacher of mathematics" (O'Brien 124-125).

Tim puts together a complete life story for the young man; it includes what his parents and extended family may have been like, what his upbringing could have consisted of as a result of the prior French colonial rule over Vietnam, and how perhaps he never wanted to be a soldier pitted against the Americans because of his small, frail stature and peaceful nature. Tim even makes up a fake bullying narrative where the man may have been teased as a boy at school

because some of his features appeared feminine to him. “His life is now a constellation of possibilities” (O’Brien 128) Tim says to the reader in an attempt to justify his reasoning behind developing what could be an entirely false background.

Delving deeper, however, Tim’s rationale behind his justification in crafting this tale has a darker implication that is far more explicit in the text than any information given about the Vietnamese man. In assuming the man’s story for him to soothe his moral crisis and burgeoning trauma from killing him, Tim’s attitude parallels how the policies imposed in Vietnam by the United States were implemented to work best for America’s own interests. He is putting together a narrative that makes him feel better about himself and what he has done by humanizing the man and giving him a comprehensive backstory. While he decides the man was not a communist, did not want to participate in the war, and was a pacifist and a scholar—recognizing that the Vietnamese people are not an evil Marxist hivemind, which sets him apart from many of his compatriots—Tim is still acting imperialistically in his storytelling as he, the American, is speaking for the Vietnamese man he silenced himself. Hence, by doing something as trivial as giving the man a personality and history, Tim engages in American exceptionalism.

It can even be argued that Tim becomes a victim of American exceptionalism’s imperialistic themes himself as he is tortured by the fact that he killed this man whilst knowing this killing directly benefits his country’s proclivity to conquer and spread western values—even if it warrants war and death. Moreover, in being a vessel for wartime slaughter for the United States government, Tim renders himself even further of a victim by engaging in an action he regrets and would not have otherwise normally done in life—which, in turn, has likely caused him trauma and will continue to traumatize him throughout his future. Despite his knowledge of the former, however—as seen in “On the Rainy River”, when he is drafted—he kills the man

anyway, later admitting in "Ambush" that he did not know why he did it: "I did not hate the young man; I did not see him as the enemy; I did not ponder issues of morality or politics or military duty . . . I wanted to warn him. There was no real peril. Almost certainly the young man would have passed by" (O'Brien 132-133). In this quote, Tim recognizes that not only could he have let the young Vietnamese man survive, but also that it is unlikely the day would have panned out any differently if he had simply granted the man that mercy; more specifically, Tim believes he would have just kept walking and never disturbed any of them. As such, he observes there was no imminent danger to himself or anyone else in the Alpha Company as a direct result of the man passing through their area—"no real peril".

Furthermore, Tim knows he and the other man hold no grudge against one another as human beings outside of the nationality labels that designate their place in the conflict. If there was no Vietnam War—no war between these two countries—they would not harbor any personal ill will nor perceive any sort of individual battle against or between one another. To conclude, had they both never been drafted and instructed to kill the enemy by their respective nations, they never would have conjured any thoughts of wanting an American or a Vietnamese person, such as one another, murdered by their own hand.

While O'Brien makes it clear that characters such as Tim are affected by the deaths of Vietnamese characters in the novel, he also shows the mental and emotional deterioration of the other soldiers in the platoon, in different situations, as a result of their forced involvement in the war. For example, in the chapter "Night Life", Alpha Company medic Rat Kiley breaks down and tells his fellow soldiers that over time he has developed anxiety due to how long he has been in Vietnam; he also believes that even though he has spent a large chunk of time as a trained medic, he feels unfit for the job as he cannot stand the sheer amount of death and gore around

him anymore. He stops sleeping, begins to hallucinate, and nonsensically rambles on to the other men about his own mortality. These occurrences culminate in Kiley purposefully shooting himself in the foot to remove himself from the war and be sent away to Japan. Before he leaves, however, he tells them: "'This whole war . . . You know what it is? Just one big banquet. Meat, man. You and me. Everybody. Meat for the bugs'" (O'Brien 223**)**. Clearly, Kiley has been deeply mentally disturbed and damaged in his time serving. In a sense, in his deluded state he draws a comparison between the "meat" and the "bugs" to him and his fellow soldiers and the American government, respectively, with the "banquet" being the Vietnam War. While American politicians and other elites get to safely sit back at home in the United States, everyday young men like Kiley and the rest of the Alpha Company must engage in a conflict that a large number of them do not even support. This includes Kiley; after all, the distress he experiences as a result of all he has witnessed climaxes in him deliberately mutilating himself in order to escape.

A second example is the aforementioned Norman Bowker. While he serves his post through to the end in Vietnam, his personal war—or, more specifically, the war against himself and his mind—continues on, relentlessly, until his death. Even when he returns home to the safe and warm familiarity of his family and his hometown, Bowker never finds any closure and is unable to move on from the horrors he beheld as a soldier. He believes that not only have the people and places in his town become unrecognizable, but that he has as well. Irreparably heartbroken and contrite at the traumatic memory of his perceived involvement in Kiowa's death, he dies by suicide a decade after the end of his service. Bowker's story is shared by Tim at the former's behest; in the same letter, sent in the spring of 1975, Bowker admits to Tim that he has not been able to find any meaning in his life since the cessation of the war. He struggles to find and keep a job, he still lives with his parents, and feels anger toward civilians who celebrate

Vietnam veterans, as well as Vietnam veterans who whine about their time as servicemen or ask for commemorative parades. He writes: "Who . . . wants a *parade*? Or getting his back clapped by a bunch of patriotic idiots who don't know jack about . . . [killing] people . . . or [getting] shot at . . . or [watching] your buddy go down beneath the mud?" (O'Brien 156). Here, Bowker scoffs at the ignorance of his compatriots—who see him as a hero—and reminds the reader of the grisly and melancholic aspects of war that should not be glamorized nor romanticized.

Later on in his letter, Bowker rehashes the story of Kiowa's death to Tim, once again maintaining his blame, and the latter realizes just how much the war has affected the other man. Tim reflects and realizes that he himself had been coping by putting together stories and staying busy in going to graduate school, but that people like Bowker existed and were still stuck and struggling with no help or recognition of their mental agony. He finds that being able to write about the war nonstop rather than talking about it nonstop to others was what helped him channel his catharsis in a healthier way and that while he feels he didn't endure any serious trauma that he can use his firsthand experiences to tell American civilians what his and others' time in combat had been like: "Telling stories seemed a natural . . . process . . . it was a way of grabbing people by the shirt and explaining what had happened to me, how I'd allowed myself to get dragged into a wrong war . . . all the terrible things I had seen and done" (O'Brien 157-158). In the midst of highlighting Bowker's struggle, Tim concurs that informing the American people of the true realities of armed conflict—especially in the case of this "wrong war"—is crucial.

Though Bowker died a decade before the final copy of "Speaking of Courage" was published, Tim holds onto the idea that his writings will resonate deeper and remain in one's memory longer than a brief conversation and uses it to immortalize Bowker through telling his story to the world. The story is not glamorous nor romantic, just as Bowker hoped his fellow

Americans would someday realize, and he is not put on a pedestal to assume the role of a hero—rather, Tim describes him as a bitter, tortured, and disoriented man to further assert the damage thrust upon them by being forced to serve in this "wrong war".

Thus, in depicting the endless tragedies suffered by American and Vietnamese characters alike—mental or physical, acute or long-term—O'Brien carves a pathway to a narrative that deduces that the Vietnam War was a useless and depraved conflict, with no winner, that arbitrarily divides two groups of men who are in reality on two sides of the same coin. Both the Vietnamese characters and the American characters in the book suffer mentally and physically and face mass casualties at the hands of the American government, though the latter group is initially unaware of just how much brainwashing they have endured. But when Vietnamese characters are killed in the novel, the American characters responsible for their deaths go on to realize the sheer immorality of the war and, subsequently, face profuse and long-lasting mental anguish for the roles they played in all the death and destruction. Only toward the end of the conflict and shortly thereafter do these men fully recognize that they were not only essentially hired as hitmen for the American government's imperialistic desires, but were also covertly viewed and utilized by the latter as dispensable proxies and cannon fodder needed to successfully complete such a mission. This, along with the anti-war movement for peace that took over mainstream conversations in and about America in the early 1970s, led a large number of the soldiers to turn away from any previous American exceptionalist mindset they may have held in favor of a more critical view of the country and its ways of carrying out foreign policy.

Although O'Brien is diligent and thoughtful in his awareness and purposeful portrayal of the silencing of the Vietnamese people in his stories, it is crucial to, however, ponder whether his intentional mode of storytelling is contradictory to the message he hopes to deliver to the reader.

By inserting themes of censorship and suppression while also critiquing and claiming to be fervently against them, it can be argued that his contribution to furthering cognizance about the lack of perspective from the Vietnamese is counterintuitive, as he does not provide them a direct voice either. Simply put, their only voice in the narrative is through his own; while speaking in support of them, he simultaneously speaks *for* and *over* them. As such, one can pose that despite his retrospective recognition of American exceptionalism, imperialism, and Orientalism, O'Brien is still yet to fully rid himself of these socialized patriotic and ultra-nationalistic values—but since this is likely unconscious, it proves just how deeply ingrained these beliefs are wedged into the psyches of American citizens such as himself. Furthermore, it demonstrates how difficult it is to remove oneself from these beliefs in entirety, even if they are aware of them. For instance, while O'Brien knows these problems exist and subsequently desires to platform the Vietnamese perspective in this work, his style of writing in the novel can still be interpreted as him inadvertently overstepping in a manner that is paradoxically imperialistic. Most of all, however, it begs the question as to whether an aggressor—even a complacent and, later on, dissenting one such as himself—cannot only ever fully understand what his victims had endured, but wholly unlearn and altruistically disbelieve what he was taught in the first place about them.

In the following penultimate section of this essay, the bigger picture pertaining to this investigation of American exceptionalism within O'Brien's novel will be examined and expounded upon through how O'Brien looks back at the war after its end.

Part III

Due to *The Things They Carried* being published in 1990 and written by O'Brien in the late 1980s, much of the narration, due to its omniscient nature, comes from a retrospective viewpoint. This creates an intriguing dynamic; not only has his viewpoint from 1990 become outdated in the three-plus decades following the book's initial release, but so has his viewpoint from the 1960s as an early-twenties college student and soldier to the late eighties and early nineties as a middle-aged military novel author. Over these multiple separate spans of time, O'Brien's knowledge and perspective, as well as the knowledge and perspective of the American public, have inevitably changed. Recent developments in academic opinions and scholarly breakthroughs on topics such as the Vietnam War, American exceptionalism, and even O'Brien's own novel have come forward and assertively led the nation's consciousness to look back and reflect with a much different mindset than in the past, no matter how painful or uncomfortable.

As a result, *The Things They Carried* is a multifaceted time capsule that captures multiple iterations of the Vietnam War and its reverberating consequences over a span of several decades. It exhibits what O'Brien and other Americans were then most comfortable sharing and consuming, respectively, in terms of knowledge on the Vietnam War as well as American exceptionalism and imperialism in general. Additionally, it demonstrates to scholars and other academics just how much veterans like O'Brien and other Americans were cognizant of in relation to the conflict and its themes at the time these stories were written, as well as the newfangled attitudes of former soldiers after having witnessed the war firsthand.

Directly in the novel—or, more specifically, O'Brien's retrospective outlook on his time as a soldier during the late sixties, albeit from a postwar mindset—chapters such as the

aforementioned "Speaking of Courage" and "Notes", which are about Norman Bowker's experiences and eventual suicide after the war, "Field Trip", which touches on Tim revisiting Vietnam and specifically the site of Kiowa's death twenty years later with his daughter Kathleen, and "The Lives of the Dead", which is the closing chapter of the book, are all examples of O'Brien's retrospective style of commentary dispersed throughout the narrative.

In "Field Trip", as stated above, Tim returns to Vietnam with his daughter in the eighties and visits the area where Kiowa died. He finds it to be bizarrely peaceful compared to the last time he was there, complete with a sunny blue sky and butterflies. He observes that neither his daughter nor the interpreter can figure out why he wanted to go to an empty field two hours away from the nearest city. This is a reminder that only he and his fellow platoon members can ever understand the significance of what any other person would find to be an unassuming spot.

Kathleen then asks her father why the war happened; Tim replies that both sides wanted different things. She asks what Tim wanted; he replies nothing, and that he simply wished to stay alive. This back-and-forth continues with Kathleen growing curious of why Tim had to be in Vietnam in the first place. Tim says he was obligated to; then, he admits he isn't sure (O'Brien 183). Twenty years later, Tim still cannot point to how he belongs to the war despite his clear involvement; he was an American soldier. He only knows how it affected him and his perception of his home country and the world, as well as how the trauma of losing his friends and nearly dying on multiple occasions himself has changed him irrevocably. When looking out into the now ordinary-appearing field, Tim is not met with any pride in himself or the other members of the Alpha Company for their painstaking efforts; rather, he experiences a series of discomfiting flashbacks to Kiowa's death as well as how the mud that swallowed his friend had also swallowed his own pride, any propensity to believe in himself, and his ability to feel emotion the

way he did before his service (O'Brien 184-185). Retrospectively, he blames his forced involvement in the Vietnam War for "what [he] had become, and . . . for taking away the person [he] had once been" (O'Brien 185). He then calls the Vietnam War a "waste", with the field being an example that "embodied . . . all the vulgarity and horror" (O'Brien 185) that was the suffering of American soldiers and the Vietnamese soldiers and civilians alike.

In making these remarks, this version of Tim is shown to fully recognize the failure and uselessness of the war when looking back upon its events by revisiting the sites where he exhaustedly fought under harsh conditions only to end up losing everything regardless. While his daughter Kathleen and the interpreter distractedly giggle with one another from their vehicle and play games, utterly unaffected by what they perceive to be a random, boring field, Tim is left on his lonesome to lament over the "waste" of a war he'd been required to participate in (O'Brien 185). Several dark memories are triggered as a result of him revisiting this key setting that is repeatedly written about over the course of the novel; this is likely done with intention on Tim's part due to how much it still affects him, even though he attempts to unreliably narrate about how it does not. His words betray him when he simultaneously claims to feel a "coldness" in relation to his ability to process his emotions about the war while also clearly mourning his past self and his old ambitions to an extent he may not even yet recognize the sheer depth of, even twenty years later, after the end of the war, as a forty-three-year-old man.

"The Lives of the Dead" is the final chapter in O'Brien's novel. Tim uses it to reflect and stress the power of telling stories to not only make the world aware of what tribulations he and others experienced in battle, but to freeze in time and memorialize all those lost in the fruitless struggle that was the Vietnam War—whether American or Vietnamese: "Even still . . . I keep dreaming [that] . . . Ted Lavender, and Kiowa . . . and a slim young man I killed [are alive]"

(O'Brien 225), he says, denoting how his writing immortalizes them all by sharing them and their stories with readers who would have never otherwise known that they ever existed.

Tim also uses this chapter to further elucidate on his concurrent fascination and trauma surrounding the concept of death by making it the prevailing subject in more ways than one. He reveals that in Vietnam, he and the other members of the Alpha Company had to trivialize and joke about the most gruesome of deaths to soften the blow it made to all their mental states. This often led to soldiers reframing situations surrounding death—chiefly by dehumanizing all the dead bodies they encountered. As a result, "corpses" became "kicked buckets", Viet Cong nurses were renamed "crispy critters", and babies were not only called "roasted peanuts" but also, according to Rat Kiley, "crunchie munchies" (O'Brien 238-239). While jarring to the average civilian, Tim clarifies that the mass loss of life they were faced with on a daily basis gave them no choice but to maladaptively cope in such a grotesque and appalling manner: "By slighting death, by acting, we pretended it was not the terrible thing it was" (O'Brien 238). He informs the reader that while he and the others knew that their behavior was shocking and inappropriate, it was the trauma response they could come up with without sacrificing the feigned valiance, patriotism, and ultra-masculine aura they all try to constantly exhibit on the outside.

In the end, "The Lives of the Dead" is a disturbed pastiche of Tim's various encounters with mortality, whether it be his own or someone else's, and presents his new coping mechanism: turning every death into a lively story. While he attempts to remain hopeful, it is clear that his various experiences with death have had a profound impact on him and often still leave him feeling desultory and hopeless. At a few points in the chapter he also mentions the death of childhood crush named Linda that died of a brain tumor, her innocent nature and melancholic story providing a drastic dichotomy with Tim's vivid descriptions of gore and bloodshed as a

young man in Vietnam. In referencing her innocence he looks back to his own bygone naivete, imagining his childhood self, then his soldier self, and finally his present adulthood self (O'Brien 236). Here, Tim cuts his life into thirds—three major defining periods—but one does not belong; poignantly, this reveals that he feels an entire era of his existence belongs to Vietnam.

In an NPR interview in 2010 to commemorate twenty years since the publishing of *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien says he still carries parts of his writing from twenty years after the book's release and forty years after his time in the war: "I carry the memories or the ghosts of a place called Vietnam, the people of Vietnam, my fellow soldiers . . . the weight of responsibility and a sense of abiding guilt . . . The wars don't end when you sign peace treaties or when the years go by. They will echo on until I'm gone and all the widows and orphans are gone" (O'Brien). In this updated reflection, O'Brien adds to what he already mentions he carries in the book, which are the "ghosts" of American soldiers and the Vietnamese people. He then solidly outlines his culpability and self-reproach—which, two decades prior in "Field Trip", is a more nebulous and uncertain concept to the character of Tim. He asserts that the waste that is the Vietnam War will remain with him and everyone else involved for eternity, and in mentioning "widows" and "orphans", he nods to how many Vietnamese families were torn apart.

Where O'Brien's postulations of contrition and guilt and death and trauma intersect with American exceptionalism and imperialism are all surprisingly simple. Whenever he steps back to retrospectively contemplate Vietnam as his postwar, adult self, there is no overarching glamorization of the war nor heroism to his deeds from his own behalf that "rescues" the narrative from its gloominess to give it a "happy ending"—as there is no "happy ending" to this "bad", "wrong", "waste" of a war. He is not proud of his soldier self; rather, he is only content about surviving combat because it granted him the ability to share his and others' stories. When

reflecting on his own life, however, there perpetually remains an unyielding listlessness that stems from what began as an obligation to serve his country in order to avoid embarrassment. This is exactly where the narrative fractures American exceptionalism; there is no bravery, no glory, and certainly no romanticization of the imperialist mission he was made to embark on. Instead, he endlessly grieves for his fellow soldiers and the Vietnamese people through narrative.

Conclusion

If nothing else, the single most crucial point one should take away from O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* is that it provides a concurrent narrative to the real-life historical event that was the first wide-scale interrogation of American exceptionalism. While it is incredibly difficult for a civilian to comprehend the experiences of characters like Norman Bowker, Rat Kiley, several nameless Vietnamese soldiers and noncombatants, and O'Brien's metafictional self-insert Tim, their stories and interactions give critical context for and information about the attitudes and beliefs of the era. The collective suffering of the Americans and the Vietnamese in Vietnam throughout the novel as two entities on different sides of the same coin—with the one true enemy being the United States government—help illustrate how and why the ongoing critique of American exceptionalism was first given air in real life to begin with.

Due to the ample assistance of this literary pushback and rallying cry against Vietnam and US imperialism during a time where scholarly study on the particular topic was still rather sparse and unpopular, we are now presently able to compare and contrast the atrocities of the Vietnam War on the American government's behalf with other, similar instances. Whether recent, such as in Iraq, or even more historical, such as during the Manifest Destiny, O'Brien's narrative and other, similar pieces of literature aid in drawing similarities and putting together a more comprehensive chronology of our nation's exhaustive list of wrongdoings in foreign and domestic policy alike. In closing, Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* is a truly pioneering anti-American exceptionalist novel that encapsulates where both his and his character's bravery shine the brightest: by sharing stories that fracture the system that tried to swallow them.

Works Cited

Aqeeli, Ammar A. "Tim O'Brien's representation of the subjugated other's voice against war in *The Things They Carried*." *Ars Aeterna*, vol. 12, no. 2, 29 Dec. 2020, pp. 20–33, https://doi.org/10.2478/aa-2020-0008.

Bell, Daniel. "The End of American Exceptionalism." *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1980, https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723.1202.

Burgett, Bruce, and Glenn Hendler. *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*. New York University Press, 2020.

Clarke, Michael Tavel. "'I Feel Close to Myself': Solipsism and US Imperialism in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*." *College Literature*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2013, pp. 130–154, https://doi.org/10.1353/lit.2013.0018.

Griffin, Thomas Ross. "'God save us always from the innocent and the good': American versus European Exceptionalism in Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*." *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2021, pp. 335–349, https://doi.org/10.1057/s42738-021-00075-0.

Mahini, Ramtin Noor-Tehrani. "Tim O'Brien's 'Bad' Vietnam War: The Things They Carried & Its Historical Perspective." *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, vol. 8, no. 10, Oct. 2018, pp. 1283–1293, https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.0810.05.

McCrisken, Trevor B. *American Exceptionalism and the Legacy of Vietnam: US Foreign Policy since 1974*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

O’Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried*. Broadway Books, 1998.

O’Brien, Tim. “‘The Things They Carried,’ 20 Years On.” Interview by Neal Conan. *National Public Radio*, 24 Mar. 2010, https://www.npr.org/2010/03/24/125128156/the-things-they-carried-20-years-on.

Pease, Donald E. *The New American Exceptionalism*. University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

Pease, Donald. “Exceptionalism.” *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, edited by Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler, New York University Press, New York, NY, 2014.

Ramrattan, Lall B., and Michael Szenberg. “American Exceptionalism: An Appraisal—Political, Economic, Qualitative, and Quantitative.” *The American Economist*, vol. 62, no. 2, 11 Nov. 2016, pp. 222–246, https://doi.org/10.1177/0569434516672793.

Rogin, Michael Paul. *Ronald Reagan, the Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology*. University of California Press, 1988.