

## “The Accounting is Scrupulous”: *No Country for Old Men* and the Specter of the Vietnam War

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「その論理に間違いはない」  
—『血と暴力の国』とベトナム戦争の亡霊

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### Abstract

This essay argues that Cormac McCarthy, in his novel, *No Country for Old Men* (2005), presents readers, however obliquely, with the dangerous legacy of American militarism and the doomed struggle to maintain one's belief in “American exceptionalism” in the face of such bloodshed. I address three clusters or groupings of textual echoes of the Vietnam War that appear prominently in *No Country for Old Men* while discussing their significance. I conclude by reflecting upon the absence of almost all of these references in the Coen brothers' otherwise superb, Academy Award-winning film adaptation (2007), particularly in light of the recent withdrawal from Afghanistan, and briefly consider the significance of that erasure.

**Keywords:** Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men*, the Vietnam War, the “War on Terror”

“And, by God, we've kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all.”<sup>1)</sup>

“Americans today are confident of our country, confident of our future and most of all, confident about you. We promised you'd be given the means to fight. We promised not to

look over your shoulder. We promised this would not be another Vietnam. And we kept that promise. The specter of Vietnam has been buried forever in the desert sands of the Arabian Peninsula.”<sup>2)</sup>

Before the chaotic and calamitous withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, with its obvious, heart-wrenching parallels to what Americans (and many overseas Vietnamese) call the “Fall of Saigon” (April 30, 1975, officially known as “Liberation Day” by the Vietnamese government), the brutal American war in Vietnam (roughly 1965-75) was easy to put out of mind for many ordinary Americans. When it appeared in mainstream culture, particularly during the Reagan and George H.W. Bush Administrations of the 1980s and early 1990s, the war was often presented by revisionist Hollywood films such as *First Blood* (1982, the first of the “Rambo” movies), which blamed the loss of the war on protestors, the media, and politicians in Washington (“But somebody wouldn't let us win! [...] Who are they to protest me, huh? Who are they?” John Rambo screams at Colonel Trautman near the end of the film, with the rather ambiguous “somebody” almost certainly referring to civilian opponents of the war). As it turns out, blaming politicians and the

media never really went out of style. If we fast forward, so to speak, to the second Clinton Administration, we find H.R. McMaster, in his book *Dereliction of Duty* (1997), claiming that Vietnam was a war that “was lost in Washington, D.C.” (qtd. in Spector). McMaster would then, two decades later, serve as National Security Adviser (NSA) to Donald Trump, from 2017-18, during which time he reportedly talked Trump out of leaving Afghanistan (according to Bob Woodward, as recounted in Davis). Recently, just before the “Fall of Kabul,” McMaster tweeted that “US media is finally reporting on the transformation of Afghanistan after their disinterest and defeatism helped set conditions for capitulation and a humanitarian catastrophe” (qtd. in Turse, “Who Lost Afghanistan?”). As we can see, history truly—and tragically—repeats itself.

The following essay will not attempt to examine the many ways in which the war has been willfully forgotten or (mis)represented by films, retired generals or political pundits, its painful lessons unlearned or brushed aside, but will instead engage some examples of how one writer, Cormac McCarthy, has tried to retrieve in his work—particularly in the novels *Blood Meridian* (1985) and *No Country for Old Men* (2005; hereafter abbreviated as *No Country*)—what former President George H.W. Bush, among others, has called “the specter of Vietnam.” *No Country* was adapted into a film that, perhaps not incidentally, managed to win the Academy Award for Best Movie in 2007 while, at the same time, erase almost all of the timely, politically resonant references to Vietnam and to war that are scattered throughout the novel. I would like to briefly reflect upon this point in the conclusion to this essay, raising the question of how this erasure may be symptomatic of a larger amnesiac cultural momentum that has now been shattered in the wake of defeat in Afghanistan.

Until the publication of *No Country*, the

“Vietnam experience,” as Vince Brewton notes, “never appear[ed] directly” in McCarthy’s novels, yet “nevertheless left a deep imprint on his work” (123). Brewton’s essay examines how the novels leading up to *Blood Meridian* bear “the influence of imagery and ideas issuing from the military-political experience of Vietnam” in the 1960s and 1970s, before arguing that the so-called “Border Trilogy,” which brought McCarthy to fame, is marked by “significant traces of both popular cultural discourse in the 1980s [in terms of Reagan-era nostalgia and desire to erase the memory of ‘Vietnam’] as well as the imaginative legacy of the 1991 Gulf War” (132). That war, according to former President George H.W. Bush, allowed the US to “kick” the “Vietnam syndrome once and for all” (see n. 1, above). As Brewton illustrates, however—and as I concur and support by pointing toward *No Country*, published one year after Brewton’s essay—this amnesiac momentum, jingoistic atmosphere and re-gathering of “confidence” in militarist aggression is subtly critiqued in McCarthy’s work, which is, itself, “fundamentally characterized by ambiguity rather than certitude” or anything approaching confidence or optimism, as any reader of McCarthy knows.

This connection between the American experience of “Vietnam” and McCarthy’s fiction has not escaped critical notice. Due to spatial constraints, this essay will not discuss directly or cover the secondary literature on *Blood Meridian*, which was published during the second Reagan administration, in the immediate aftermath of several bloody forays into Central America (Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala, for example). Instead, I will turn directly to *No Country*, which appeared at the start of the second Bush administration and in the immediate wake of the disastrous invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. All of the main characters of *No Country* have a relation to Vietnam or to war: the protagonist and one of the dueling antagonists are decorated combat

veterans of that war, and the "moral center" of the film, Sheriff Bell, continually ponders the meaning of "Vietnam," especially in relation to his own conduct under fire in WW II. The war in Southeast Asia, with its psycho-social reverberations (in terms of American society), is a constant presence in this novel—so much so that I would describe it as a haunting presence, a specter. And it is not by chance that McCarthy once again sets his story in the mythical "American Frontier," as he did with *Blood Meridian*, particularly when we consider the ways in which George W. Bush portrayed himself as a "backwoods" frontiersman and cowboy, much like Reagan before him.

The text itself has received very little serious critical attention, mainly due to what critics and scholars consider its technical failings. It is largely seen as McCarthy's weakest literary effort, and it reads more like a Hollywood screenplay than as a novel (hence the speed with which it was adapted as a film, unlike his other work). It has been described as an exercise in genre or even sub-genre experimentation, a reworking of the classic hardboiled, pulp fiction of James M. Cain or Jim Thompson, the crime novel that Walter Kirn described in his New York Times review of *No Country* as "aim[ing] its cheap handgun at the heart of America's most prized beliefs about its destiny: that the loot we've scooped up will belong to us forever and that history allows clean getaways." *No Country* has been described as "melodramatic," "mechanistic," "formulaic," "spiritually claustrophobic" and (by Kirn) as "sinister high hokum."

Regardless of what one thinks of the style, the references to (and subtext of) Vietnam are unmistakable and, I will argue, deeply significant. For this brief essay, I have grouped the references to Vietnam that pervade *No Country* into three broad, interrelated or fluid categories. The first concerns passages where Vietnam is mentioned, either directly or

indirectly, as "another country" or "over there." Here, in the interest of space, I will focus upon three that I think are significant. The first is perhaps the key to the entire system of references, in fact one of the few places in the novel where McCarthy provides readers with precise dates, the two years in which the protagonist, Llewellyn Moss, served in the US Army in Vietnam:

[Border guard]: Are you in the service?

[Llewellyn]: No sir. I'm a veteran.

[Border Guard]: What branch of the service[?]

[Llewellyn]: United States Army.

[Border guard]: Were you in Nam?

[Llewellyn]: Yessir. Two tours.

[Border guard]: What outfit[?]

[Llewellyn]: Twelfth Infantry.

[Border guard]: What were your dates of tour duty[?]

[Llewellyn]: August seventh nineteen and sixty-six to September second nineteen and sixty-eight. (188)

Looking ahead to my conclusion, allow me to pause here to note that the entry on the American war in Vietnam that appears in *A New Literary History of America* is an essay entitled "The Eye of Vietnam" and dated "1969, November 12." This is the date when investigative reporter Seymour Hersh first broke the story regarding what has come to be known as the "My Lai Massacre," in which somewhere between 300 and 500 unarmed civilians were butchered by "Charlie Company" of the 20th Infantry (on March 16, 1968, nineteen months earlier). The author of this entry, Thi Phuong-Lan Bui of Hanoi University, brilliantly places that horrendous war crime in the larger context of the American quest for, even obsession with, visibility. The dates provided by McCarthy in the dialogue quoted above place Llewellyn in Vietnam at precisely the same time

as My Lai, which, according to a shocking book by journalist Nick Turse, entitled *Kill Anything That Moves*, was not an aberration but instead part of a widespread campaign of brutality directed against Vietnamese civilians.

The 12th Infantry served alongside the better-known 25th Infantry in the area known to US forces as “Pinkville,” a Viet Cong stronghold in which the My Lai massacre was conducted, during the years of Llewellyn’s fictional tours, and though they were not directly involved in the My Lai massacre itself, if the overwhelming majority of scholars and firsthand witnesses are to be believed (including director Oliver Stone, who served in Vietnam with the 25th Infantry and drew upon his experiences in *Platoon* [1986] and other films)—namely, that My Lai was not an aberration or anomaly, the work of “a few bad apples,” but rather a widespread campaign of terror—then it would be hard to imagine that Llewellyn did not see and perhaps even participate in similar crimes against humanity. I would argue that this is precisely the historical context in which McCarthy wants us to place the references to Vietnam and to war that appear throughout the novel, including the above-quoted, seemingly superfluous exchange regarding Llewellyn’s service in “Nam,” which was one of the few references to the war that was actually used in the Coen brothers’ film.

The next two quotations that I want to mention support this assertion and yet were not included in the film adaptation. In the first, the hit man Carson Wells, himself an “ex-Army colonel” who was in Vietnam, is shot and killed by the unstoppable killer Anton Chigurh. The two seem to know each other very well, perhaps from Vietnam, though this is not by any means clear: there is no direct mention of Chigurh ever being in Vietnam, though his age [“mid thirties”], his relationship with Wells, and his knowledge of weaponry and first aid all lend credence to the idea of him having fought in Vietnam. The

scene is described as follows:

Chigurh shot him in the face. Everything that Wells had ever known or thought or loved drained slowly down the wall behind him. His mother’s face, his First Communion, women he had known [...] The body of a child dead in a roadside ravine in another country. (178)

This quotation establishes a connection between Wells’ (and, by extension, Llewellyn Moss’) time in Vietnam and atrocities such as My Lai, where the bodies of victims, many of them women and children, were (infamously) thrown into ditches or “roadside ravines” such as the one in Wells’ memory, quoted above.

The final quotation in this group comes from Llewellyn’s father, who tells Sheriff Bell that “they’d [Vietnam veterans] all done things over there that they’d just as soon left over there [...] He [Llewellyn] smacked the tar out of one or two of them hippies. Spittin on him. Callin him a babykiller. A lot of them boys that come back, they’re still havin problems” (294). McCarthy does not tell us, precisely, what those “things over there” are, but from the context and the historical record, it is not difficult to guess. When we move on to the second group of related references, those I’ve clustered around the idea of accounting or of being held accountable for one’s actions, then we can perhaps see how McCarthy is suggesting that the violence of the war in Vietnam has now come back home, as it were, and that Chigurh is, in fact, less an ahistorical symbol of Fate or Death, as the Coen brothers would have it, but instead a representation of the brutality of the war, settling accounts or rebalancing the scale, and then some, back “home.” He is, in this reading, the embodiment of My Lai, in the guise of the pitiless “Indian killer” who has been reborn through a violent ordeal on the “frontier,” but who has now turned his “savage” skills back

on his own people, much like the John Rambo character in *First Blood*. Significantly, Chigurh—like Rambo or the Viet Cong, from whom Rambo learned about guerilla warfare—is repeatedly referred to as a "ghost," which was a common complaint about the enemy, referring to their "invisibility," which infuriated American military strategists and combatants, fueling the mania for visibility and the horrific logic of the "body count" and the disastrous policy of deforestation, something that the admirable essay in *A New Literary History of America* makes abundantly clear.

Again, I would like to focus upon three to illustrate my point. The first is spoken by Sheriff Bell, who says the following: "the dead have more claims on you than what you might want to admit or even what you might know about and them claims can be very strong indeed. Very strong indeed" (124). There are several variations of this concept of the "claims" of the dead upon the living, but perhaps the most powerful—and chilling—is spoken by Chigurh himself, who, like Wells the hit man, "settles accounts for people" for a living. Before killing Llewellyn's widow, Carla Jean, Chigurh has the following exchange with her:

[Chigurh]: We're at the mercy of the dead here [...]

[Carla Jean]: You don't owe nothin to dead people.

Chigurh cocked his head slightly. No? he said.

[Carla Jean]: How can you?

[Chigurh]: How can you not? (255)

He then flips a coin and asks her to "call it" in order to determine if he will kill her. When she loses, she says to him, "You wouldnt of let me off noway." Chigurh then tells her "I had no say in the matter. Every moment in your life is a turning and every one is a choosing. Somewhere you made a choice. All followed to this. *The*

*accounting is scrupulous*. The shape is drawn. No line can be erased" (259; emphasis added). Here, we can see how Chigurh is drawing a strong connection among past actions, future consequences, and himself (as a hit man, one whose job it is to "settle accounts"). As Wells (also a hit man, like Chigurh) reveals to Moss, when asked about what he does for a living, "I find people. Settle accounts. That sort of thing" (156). In other words, these hit men are killers whose role, as they see it, is to render the consequences of past actions on behalf of others, including the dead.

In the Coen brothers' film, this exchange and others like it, which all involve the notion of accounting or being held accountable—for example, the powerful coin-flip scene at a gas station—are made to seem more like the amoral workings of Fate, of which Chigurh is merely the messenger, almost like the classical Greek tradition of the Furies, rebalancing the scale and punishing transgression. They are, in other words, de-historicized.

However, and this is a crucial point that I would like to underscore, in the novel, there are multiple references to American militarism and war that historicize, contextualize, ground or support Chigurh's actions and his seemingly ahistorical, almost mythical or metaphysical words. To take one example, Uncle Ellis speaks with Sheriff Bell in a long, crucial conversation covering not only the "Indian wars" on the frontier, but also World War II and Vietnam, in a scene that is greatly edited in the film. "This country was hard on people," he says, "[b]ut they never seemed to hold it to account. In a way that seems peculiar. That they didnt." He then asks, "How come people dont feel like this country has a lot to answer for?" (271). This idea of being "held to account" or to be "held accountable" is echoed in another group of quotations, which I will now move on to before concluding.

To build upon this attempt to historicize or

re-historicize the numerous references to Vietnam and to the concept of “settling accounts,” I’d like to now turn to this third and final cluster of quotations running throughout *No Country*, which are, like almost all of the others I have identified, missing from the film. This last group refers to the ways in which the American legacy of militarism and war has succeeded in “stealing the lives” of an untold number of people: combatants, noncombatants, and their families. In the first one, Llewellyn is ostensibly speaking to a young hitchhiker he has picked up, but as we soon see, he is speaking from his own bitter experience about himself—not only concerning his recent actions, in taking a bag full of money from the scene of a drug deal gone horribly wrong, but also, I submit, his experience in Vietnam, as in the following:

[Llewellyn]: It’s not about knowin where you are. It’s about thinking you got there without takin anything with you. Your notions about starting over. Or anybody’s. You dont start over. That’s what it’s about. Every step you take is forever. You cant make it go away. None of it. You understand what I’m sayin?

[Female hitchhiker]: I think so.

[Llewellyn]: I know you dont but let me try it one more time. You think when you wake up in the mornin yesterday dont count. But yesterday is all that does count. What else is there? Your life is made out of the days it’s made out of. Nothin else. You might think you could run away and change your name and I dont know what all. Start over. And then one mornin you wake up and look at the ceiling and guess who’s layin there? (227)

This idea of taking the past along with you, of not being able to escape History and “start over”—which is the lesson that Jay Gatsby learns, for example, and is a motif in American literature in general—can likewise be seen in

the following passage, spoken by Uncle Ellis to Sheriff Bell about the death in prison of the man who shot and paralyzed him (Uncle Ellis): “All the time you spend tryin to get back what’s been took from you there’s more goin out the door. After a while you just try and get a tourniquet on it.” The previous lines were used in the film, but what follows, a crucial passage referring to Sheriff Bell’s survivor guilt stemming from WWII, is not:

I was too young for one war and too old for the next one. But I seen what come out of it. You can be patriotic and still believe that some things cost more than they’re worth. Ask them Gold Star mothers what they paid and what they got for it. You always pay too much. Particularly for promises. There aint no such thing as a bargain promise. You’ll see. Maybe you done have. Bell didn’t answer. (267)

This entire dialogue, concerning Bell’s “war hero” status and Ellis’ crucial comments on how the specifically American legacy of violence and war has exacted too high a toll, was not included in the film. However, it helps support an entire web of references concerning the consequences of militarism and violence that contextualize and historicize the “psychopathic killer,” Anton Chigurh, and the novel as a whole. I will mention one more quotation, this one from Sheriff Bell on his memories of WWII, before concluding. Once again, it is from the climactic scene quoted above, which was greatly altered in the film adaptation, and it never made it into the Coen brothers’ screenplay. It runs as follows (and I will quote it in full):

[Sheriff Bell]: Did you ever do anything you was ashamed of to the point where you never would tell nobody? [...] It’s about being a war hero.

[Uncle Ellis]: All right. Would that be you?



[Sheriff Bell]: Yeah. That'd be me [...]

[Uncle Ellis]: What did you do?

[Sheriff Bell]: I cut and run [...] I thought after so many years it would go away. I dont know why I thought that. Then I thought that maybe I could make up for it and I reckon that's what I have tried to do.

They sat. After a while the old man [Uncle Ellis] said: Well, in all honesty I cant see it bein all that bad. Maybe you ought to ease up on yourself.

[Sheriff Bell]: Maybe. But if you go into battle it's a blood oath to look after the men with you and I dont know why I didnt. I wanted to. When you're called on like that you have to make up your mind that you'll live with the consequences. But you dont know what the consequences will be. You end up layin a lot of things at your own door that you didnt plan on. If I was supposed to die over there doin what I'd give my word to do then that's what I should have done. You can tell it any way you want but that's the way it is. I should of done it but I didnt. And some part of me never quit wishin I could go back. And I cant. I didnt know you could steal your own life. And I didnt know that it would bring you no more benefit than about anything else you might steal. I think I done the best with it I knew how but it still wasnt mine. It never has been. (278)

This idea, of "stealing (one's) own life" or of "paying too much" for something, of not being able to "start over," but instead of living with the consequences of one's actions—including the idea of giving up, "cutting and running," a favorite phrase of advocates of the invasion and occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, used to describe the end of the Vietnam war—builds nicely upon the aforementioned references to war, specifically to WWII and Vietnam, which are often compared and contrasted (WWII being

thought of as the "good war," Vietnam being the "bad war"), and they lend a very specific layer of meaning to Chigurh's words and actions that are otherwise devoid of historical or political context in the film version of the story.

I would like to conclude by briefly looking at three of the "old men" of this novel, who seem to be unfit for living in Reagan Era America (hence the title, *No Country for Old Men*). They are roughly of the WWII generation and their words regarding the legacy of war or the burdens of history never made it into the film. Let's first look again at Uncle Ellis' words, quoted earlier, which I'd now like to underscore: "How come people dont feel like this country has a lot to answer for?" This is a sentiment echoed by Sheriff Bell a few scenes later, when he says:

I've still got that medal [for being a war hero] of course. It come in a fancy purple box with a ribbon and all [...] Harold [his cousin, who died in WWI] didnt get no medal. He just come home in a wooden box [...] I still keep thinkin maybe it is somethin about the country. Sort of the way Ellis said [...] it just seemed to me that this country has got a strange kind of history and a damned bloody one too. About anywhere you care to look. (284-5)

Llewellyn's father hints at this long history of American violence and militarism when he tells Sheriff Bell that "[p]eople will tell you it was Vietnam brought this country to its knees. But I never believed that. It was already in bad shape. Vietnam was just the icin on the cake" (295). This, in turn, brings me back full circle to the aforementioned *New Literary History of America* project, specifically the entry on the American war in Vietnam through the lens of its most famous massacre. The long history of "Indian Hating" and "savage wars" on the frontier, vividly brought to life in *Blood Meridian*, reach

their terminus in what one reviewer of that work called the “bloodlands of the West,” meaning the far West, the very edge of the continent where it faces the Pacific Ocean and gazes toward Asia. McCarthy’s timing in publishing these two novels, *Blood Meridian* at the beginning of the second Reagan administration and *No Country* at the start of the second Bush administration, underscores the manner in which this history, half visible, half buried, almost forgotten but always threatening to return from the grave like the seemingly immortal killer Anton Chigurh, has transformed American foreign policy, the concept of “military intervention,” and the very manner in which American wars are conducted. I will go so far as to say that the erasure of Vietnam, what George H.W. Bush called “kicking the Vietnam Syndrome,” begun under Reagan and brought to a desperate climax under the two Bush presidents, helped enable the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan and continued to subtend the so-called “War on Terror” under Presidents Obama, Trump and Biden.

As we have seen, dramatically spelled out recently in Afghanistan, the specter of Vietnam has not been exorcised, just as Chigurh cannot be killed in *No Country*, and presumably will continue to haunt the American imaginary for a long time to come. Perhaps by honestly assessing the human cost of American military intervention abroad, including the spectacular foreign policy failure in Afghanistan, we might be able to avoid repeating the same tragic mistakes again and again. This would of course entail summoning that specter, the ghost of the American war in Vietnam, which was triumphantly and, as it turns out, prematurely declared dead and buried a generation ago. McCarthy’s work is but one example of what this summoning or retrieval might look like. In the end, however, one point is painfully clear: if the memory of the war in Vietnam is buried or willfully forgotten, then we will be doomed to

repeat the past, witnessing the ways in which the repressed returns and the dead haunt the living, pressing their claims and calling for an “accounting.”

## Notes

1. George H. W. Bush, “Remarks to the American Legislative Exchange Council,” March 1, 1991, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1991*, Book I: January 1 to June 30, 1991 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office) 1992: 197.
2. George H. W. Bush, “Radio Address to the United States Armed Forces Stationed in the Persian Gulf Region,” March 2, 1991, *Ibid.*: 207.

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