

Introduction

The Thin White Line

The morning headlines strained to describe what the Supreme Court had ruled. On June 29, 1978, the *New York Times* announced, above the fold, “High Court Backs Some Affirmative Action by Colleges, but Orders Bakke Admitted.” The *Washington Post* declared, “Affirmative Action Upheld: Court Orders School to Admit Bakke, Curbs Racial Quotas.” The *Los Angeles Times* determined, “Bakke Wins but Justices Uphold Affirmative Action.” The *Amsterdam News*, the nation’s largest Black newspaper, reached a different conclusion. It didn’t mince words: “Bakke—We Lose.”

The court had issued a ruling in *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, a case that originated in 1974 when Allan Bakke, a white mechanical engineer and Vietnam veteran, contested the decision of the medical school of the University of California, Davis, to turn him down for a second time. His legal team had argued that the school’s affirmative action program violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, that the medical school had “discriminated against” Bakke, a white man, “by reason of his race.” The court, though divided, agreed.¹

Associate Justice Lewis Powell, the court’s swing vote, announcing the judgment of the court, ruled Davis’s “special admissions program”—the medical school set aside sixteen out of one hundred seats for students of color—unconstitutional but maintained that race could be considered in admissions decisions where it served “the interest of a university in a diverse student body,” an interest, he insisted, “not limited to ethnic

diversity.”² That decision, the highest court’s most significant statement on race since *Brown v. Board of Education*, shifted the ethic of affirmative action from a moderate form of redress for Black and brown communities (more medical students leading to more doctors leading to better health, higher incomes, and greater wealth) to a call to construct diverse learning environments for all students, including, most of all, white students. The court, reflecting a wider debate about race in the United States after civil rights, determined that white people could also suffer for their race and could also contribute to a diverse environment, a racial hurt and a white cultural difference embodied in the trials of a Vietnam vet.

Anti-affirmative action activists recognized Bakke as the ideal standard-bearer through whom to make a case for “reverse discrimination,” to argue that the racial reforms of the 1960s had overcorrected and now functioned to harm white people for their skin color. Bakke had graduated in 1962 from the University of Minnesota, where he had enrolled in ROTC. He served in the marines for four years, including a seven-month tour in Vietnam, before settling in Los Altos, California, and building a career as a NASA research engineer. His interest in medicine arose in Southeast Asia, where he watched medics care for wounded marines, and followed him home. Bakke took night classes. He volunteered at a local clinic. In 1972, at thirty-two, he sought admission to eleven medical schools, including Davis’s. He didn’t get in. In 1973, he tried again without success. News media described him as a “Vietnam veteran, aerospace engineer, and a man with a strong commitment to medicine,” a “stocky, baldish Vietnam veteran” and “hard-working aerospace engineer who decided late in life that he’d rather be a doctor.”³ Bakke, who refused to be interviewed and didn’t attend the decision announcement, offered activists and news media a blank slate. Who was Allan Bakke? A white Vietnam vet who worked hard. That was it. “If, as some people might say, this is a case where one man is carrying the ball for all white males,” the *New York Times* observed of Bakke, “they could not have picked a more representative specimen.”⁴

The Supreme Court ordered Bakke, the marine vet, admitted to medical school as moviegoers met a cast of downtrodden white men who had served in Vietnam: Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro) in *Taxi Driver*, Luke Martin (Jon Voight) in *Coming Home*, and Mike Vronsky (De Niro again) and Nick Chevotarevich (Christopher Walken) in *The Deer Hunter*. In the late 1970s, white men, some who had served and more who had not, learned to channel their grievances and entitlements through the Vietnam vet, in the courtroom and on the big screen.

The end of the Vietnam War coincided with a cascade of economic crises that halted and then reversed decades of middle-class growth that had most benefited white men and their families. The oil shock, the offshoring of manufacturing, attacks on labor unions, the stagnation of real wages, the hollowing out of social services—all contributed to a sense of loss among white men, whose fathers had found a foothold in a middle class that now felt out of reach to their sons. The economic turmoil also struck Black and brown communities, and harder, but stories of hard-luck white vets encouraged white men to see themselves as the new have-nots of a nation that, they felt, the antiracist, feminist, and antiwar movements had turned upside down. White men, including men who had neither served in the war nor lost their jobs to offshoring or union busting, came to see their struggles in the Vietnam veteran, a racial identification that had less to do with real vets than with the *image* of the combat veteran, from which nonvet elites gained far more than the often working-class men and women who did serve in the war.

The treatment of the white vet as an embodiment of cultural difference, as a *veteran American*, modeled for white men how they might refashion themselves as minorities in their own right, undermining arguments for racial redistribution and, from *Bakke* on, facilitating the rollback of affirmative action and other civil rights reforms. The wounded white warrior, forming a rare site of consensus in the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, acted as a bridge between color-blind conservatives and liberal multiculturalists who could see him either as a deracinated universal (an American veteran) or a minoritized outsider (a veteran American). That consensus allowed Sylvester Stallone, the conservative movie star, and Bruce Springsteen, the liberal rock star, to fill theaters and stadiums with some of the same fans, fans who had come to hear stories about white men “down in the shadow of the penitentiary / out by the gas fires of the refinery” whose American dream had turned into a white nightmare in Vietnam.⁵

The transformation of the Vietnam vet into a vessel for white racial interests took some historical revision. Hundreds of thousands of American Indian, Black, and Latino soldiers, marines, sailors, and airmen fought and died in Southeast Asia, often receiving more dangerous and less desirable assignments than their white comrades. Women served as nurses and in near-combat roles. Millions of Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians lost their lives, their families, and their homes, some resettling in the United States. But the self-searching white soldier, a naive but well-meaning man who struggles with feelings of

alienation in Vietnam and long after, emerged, almost without fail, as the protagonist of the war in literature, music, film, and news media. War stories of a different kind faced resistance or banishment to another genre, Viet Nguyen, the scholar and novelist, writes, because audiences “believe that war stories are about soldiers, men, machines, and killing,” that they star a white man in uniform, hero or antihero.⁶

Stallone, Springsteen, Tim O’Brien, and Oliver Stone did not invent the whiteness of war culture, of course. Yusef Komunyakaa, the poet and the rare Black Vietnam vet to make a name for himself as an author of war literature, reflecting in 1993 on the career of the Black Arts Movement poet Etheridge Knight, wondered why Knight, who had done a tour in the Korean War, had never written more than a poem or two about it. “Perhaps there is an answer [in what he endured in the army] as to why Knight didn’t write more war-related poems,” Komunyakaa wrote. “I still wish he had. He could have filled a missing space in our literary history.”⁷ Komunyakaa, who won the 1994 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, didn’t offer an answer, but he identified a hard-to-ignore truth of war lit: against the facts on the ground, it remained a white genre. He did not write about his own tour in Vietnam until his forties, in his fifth book. O’Brien wrote his first book about Vietnam, a memoir, in his midtwenties, before the war had ended.

More than a few scholars have noted the whiteness of war culture, but most treat it as an effect rather than a source of white racial dominance.⁸ This book argues otherwise, showing how a broad contingent of white men—conservative and liberal, rich and poor, vet and nonvet—transformed the Vietnam War into a staging ground for a post-civil rights white racial reunion. The first Black Reconstruction ended with a white reunion, with white southerners and white northerners agreeing that, whatever their differences, they shared a martial sacrifice and a racial brotherhood. Historians of the era suggest that the end of American apartheid wouldn’t arrive until the second Reconstruction, the civil rights movement.⁹ But that second Reconstruction ended with another white reconciliation. While the whiteness of Vietnam War culture in the late 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s can be attributed, like so much else, to who controlled the cultural industries, white men also needed that culture, as an instrument for asserting their hurt and their rights, to remain white. War stories bind whiteness to Americanness, white skin to green uniforms—a whiteness ever more distressed after civil rights but no less unified.

The overwhelming whiteness of war culture turned *veteran* into another word for *white*, allowing white men to talk about their racial

identities without acknowledging it. Although, as historian Kathleen Belew argues, a shared belief that the government had abandoned white vets in Vietnam unified sometimes divergent white supremacist factions into a “coherent social movement” of Klansmen, neo-Nazis, and skin-heads, that belief did not belong to the fringe but formed a broad consensus among conservatives and liberals.¹⁰ This book, while mindful that wars overseas have often fueled self-declared white supremacist movements at home, identifies how stories about the Vietnam War organized a more subtle white racial movement, a movement so mainstream that most Americans didn’t see it as either racial or as a movement at all.¹¹ The strange career of the veteran American reveals how white men resecured their dominant status after civil rights and feminism through a racial grievance and sense of entitlement that looked, on the surface, color blind and race neutral. It accounts for how, when presidential candidate Donald Trump declared in 2016 that “our veterans” are “treated worse than illegal immigrants,” we all knew what he meant.¹²

James Baldwin, the most discerning critic of white consciousness since W. E. B. Du Bois, identified war and nationalism as the basic ingredients of modern whiteness. In 1985, introducing his last book, *The Price of the Ticket*, a collection of his writing from the late 1940s to the 1980s, Baldwin returned to World War II. His father had died of tuberculosis in 1943, and Baldwin’s older brother had returned home from the war on furlough to attend the funeral. Baldwin remembers being struck at the sight of his brother and his army buddies, all Black men, in their uniforms. “One wondered—as one could not fail to wonder—what *nation* they represented,” he wrote. “My brother, describing his life in uniform, did not seem to be representing the America his uniform was meant to represent—: he had never seen the America his uniform was meant to represent. Had anyone? Did he know, had he met, anyone who had? Did anyone *live* there?”¹³ Baldwin, then nineteen, sensed something strange about Black men in army green, not because Black men didn’t serve—they did, and in large numbers—but because the nation they served didn’t serve them. Baldwin’s brother had never seen that America. Neither had Baldwin in 1985, then sixty-one. “The price of the ticket,” Baldwin concluded, describing the cost of national belonging, “was to become white,” to invest in the belief that whiteness constituted a condition for full inclusion within the nation.¹⁴ No one knew that better than the Black vet, who bought a ticket he never received. Baldwin reflected on seeing his older brother return from combat as Stallone’s second Rambo film led the summer box office and

Springsteen’s “Born in the U.S.A.” dominated FM radio. War culture continued to tie whiteness to Americanness through stories of good white men in uniform, but something had changed. This book tells the story of that change, of how the Vietnam War remade whiteness for an age of color blindness and multiculturalism.

WHITENESS AFTER CIVIL RIGHTS

In the mid-1940s, the developmental psychologist Erik Erikson, then a research associate and lecturer at the University of California, Berkeley, interviewed former soldiers and marines at the Mt. Zion Veterans Rehabilitation Clinic in San Francisco. The interviews with the men, undergoing short-term treatment for “nervous instability” and “shell shock,” moved Erikson to write his first book, *Childhood and Society*, in which he introduced the modern use of the term *identity*—as he defined it, an “ego identity” anchored in a “cultural identity.” The war had, he thought, dislodged that anchor for the men, who struggled to resituate their sense of self (their egos) in communal belonging (their culture, the nation). “What impressed me most was the loss in these men of a sense of identity,” Erikson wrote of the vets. “There was a central disturbance of what I then started to call ego identity,” or “the ability to experience one’s self as something that has continuity and sameness, and to act accordingly.”¹⁵ Their time at war had shaken the men, severing their ego identities from the culture that gave them coherence. Erikson called that disturbance an *identity crisis*.

Millions of college students read *Childhood and Society* as the anti-racist, feminist, and antiwar movements took off. “If there’s one book you can be sure undergraduates have read, it is Erikson’s first one,” a sociologist at Berkeley remarked in 1970. “You can’t always be sure they’ve read Shakespeare, but you know they’ve read Erikson.”¹⁶ Historians often credit Erikson with having invented the terms on which the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s mobilized racial, gender, and sexual identities as instruments for coalition building and change making. His biographer declared him “identity’s architect.”¹⁷ Identities, Erikson believed, arose from the recognition of a self that conformed to and sometimes conflicted with learned cultural values. That self could secure dominant values or, as anti-racist and feminist movements discovered, unsettle and change them. Although commentators on the right and the left would later dismiss radicals for engaging in “identity politics,” accusing them of oversensitive naval gazing, that idea—of the self

as a horizon for social belonging, crisis, and change—originated with a few white men at a veterans' rehabilitation clinic, whose crises Erikson, identity's architect, diagnosed as a national crisis.

The American Indian, Asian American, Black Power, and Chicano movements inverted that national identitarianism, defining themselves against a state and nation that had colonized, enslaved, and excluded their ancestors and them and that now sought to subvert Asian self-government in Vietnam. Throwing off the racial liberal dream—and, they argued, illusion—of integration, radicals fought instead for their communities and sometimes allied themselves with the state's declared enemies in Southeast Asia. Huey Newton, cofounder and “minister of defense” of the Black Panthers, offered “an undetermined number of troops” to North Vietnam and the National Liberation Front to assist their “fight against American imperialism.”¹⁸ The Chicano movement, bucking a long-standing tradition of Mexican American service, called for Chicanos to refuse induction and fight at home for their *raza*. (Hundreds of thousands did serve in the war, of course, some of whom marched with the movement after returning.) Emma Gee, a cofounder of the Asian American Political Alliance, the first national organization to use the term *Asian American* to unite Americans of diverse Asian backgrounds, identified two interrelated sources of the Asian American movement. “The struggles of the Afro-Americans to achieve equality revealed how racism is still embedded in national attitudes and established institutions,” she wrote, and “The brutal intervention in Southeast Asia raised disturbing questions about our foreign policy and its relationship to domestic politics permeated by that racism.”¹⁹ Erikson thought that racism had fragmented American Indian, Asian American, Black, and Chicano identities. Activists disagreed, embracing their difference from a national culture founded in settler colonialism and the slave trade and driving an anti-anticolonial war in Southeast Asia.

White Americans answered with declarations of their own difference, announcing themselves as not a homogenous mass, not “the man,” but a nation of immigrants—Irish, Italian, and Polish Americans with their own tales of exclusion and hardscrabble self-making. When the mini-series *Roots* aired on ABC in 1977, as the Burger court weighed whether to hear *Bakke*, millions of Americans tuned in, including millions of white Americans with a new interest in their own genealogies.²⁰ That sudden investment in white immigrant roots and white ethnic identities functioned as a rebuttal to the demands of Black radicals. “A lot of things went wrong for us, you know, for the Jewish people,” a resident

of Canarsie, Brooklyn, where the children and grandchildren of Italian and Jewish immigrants mounted a vicious campaign against racial busing, told a sociologist in the late 1970s. “What happened to the blacks happened to us too. We had to push hard in the beginning too.”²¹ Pixie Palladino, an Italian American activist who fought busing in Boston in the 1970s, accused white Anglo-Saxon Protestants of looking down on “people of color like me.”²²

The antiracist movements had blamed a white federal and business establishment for the horrors of the Vietnam War. The government’s disregard for Vietnamese life looked all too familiar to Black and brown communities in the United States. White ethnics followed suit, distancing themselves from that white establishment and comparing the obstacles that their immigrant families had faced to anti-Black racism. The cultural historian Eric Lott refers to the desire of white people to see themselves reflected in a distorted image of Blackness as “black mirroring,” a mirroring, he writes, shot through with “cultural and economic value, the capitalizing on which, whenever racial imaging comes into play, is the bedrock of white cultural dominance.”²³ Palladino’s and other white ethnics’ swift embrace of minoritized identities after civil rights should, Lott suggests, make us wonder what cultural and economic value may be at stake in that move, how white people may be guarding their racial dominance through a claim to the reverse, insisting that they have never been either white or dominant. The white ethnic revival undercut arguments for racial redistribution, including affirmative action, and restored white Americans’ belief in their own innocence, a belief that they and their immigrant forefathers had made it on their own, without government intervention or the wages of whiteness.²⁴

The white ethnic revival fractured white America. The saga of the veteran American reunited it. Neoconservative intellectuals, including Peter Berger, Nathan Glazer, Irving Kristol, Michael Novak, and Norman Podhoretz, all hailing from immigrant families, led that roots revival in the 1970s and then translated it into the new nationalism of the 1980s. Berger, Glazer, Kristol, Novak, and Podhoretz launched their careers as racial liberals—anticommunist integrationists, antiredistributive reformers—and then drifted rightward amid the rise of the radical antiracist and feminist movements of the late 1960s and 1970s. The countermovement they built cohered around a subtle correlation of the white ethnic with the vet, Ellis Island with Vietnam, immigrant struggle with racial nationalism.

Novak, a Catholic philosopher and self-identified Slovak American, argued that immigrants earned their national belonging with a “blood

test”: “Die for us and we’ll give you a chance.” Polish, Italian, Greek, and Slovak Americans—to whom he gave the unflattering shorthand PIGS—laid claim to the nation through the sacrifice of their sons and brothers. “When my father saw my youngest brother in officer’s uniform, it was one of the proudest days of his life,” he wrote in *The Rise of the Unmelt-able Ethnics*, “even though it (sickeningly) meant Vietnam.”²⁵ Novak, who did not serve, earning a graduate degree from Harvard during the war, did not acknowledge that Black and brown Americans had also taken that blood test and worn that uniform, including with his brother in Vietnam.

Novak and the neocons tied white ethnics to Vietnam vets as activists, novelists, musicians, filmmakers, and memoirists—conservative and liberal, a few radical, most white—revisited and reimagined the war. When National Park Service historian Ross Holland described the significance of the Ellis Island restoration, a restoration launched at the height of the white ethnic revival, he turned to the Vietnam War. “A patriotic effort that most Americans could rally around,” he wrote, the restoration of the former immigrant station “marked the nation’s emergence from the shadow of the Vietnam experience.”²⁶ The ethnicization of white America turned white people into minorities, innocent and self-made. The ethnicization of veteran America—the transference of a white ethnic hurt to a white American nationalism—reunited them, dressing their ethnic identities in red, white, and blue, and army green.

Ethnicity, a racial paradigm that arose in the 1940s as a liberal answer to the eugenics movement and the Third Reich, detached differences in skin color from differences in culture, including national and religious culture, stressing the constructedness of racial meaning while consolidating whiteness as an intelligible race. (“Aryans, Jews, Italians are *not* races,” a 1943 educational pamphlet instructed.)²⁷ That paradigm, as white ethnic revivalists found, endowed white people with mutable identities through which they could fashion themselves as ethnic outsiders when it served them and deracinated Americans when it didn’t. Ethnicity enabled them to attribute the material barriers that Black and brown Americans faced in education, health services, housing, law enforcement, and wealth accumulation to culture and choice, while making a claim to their own histories of struggle as white ethnics. The ethnicization of veteran America reunited white ethnics and WASPs as a white nation that felt entitled to what it had but also, after sacrificing in Vietnam or binding their identities to men who had, believed it deserved more.

The self-made white ethnic and the forgotten Vietnam vet starred in conservative intellectual circles, at tourist destinations, and in the movies, where a new generation of filmmakers, including Hal Ashby, Michael Cimino, Francis Ford Coppola, Brian De Palma, Mike Nichols, and Martin Scorsese, made dark films about white outsiders—first Ellis Island immigrants, then Vietnam vets. For years, film studios wouldn't touch the war. "Vietnam is awkward, everybody knows how awkward," Michael Herr wrote in the mid-1970s, "and if people don't even want to hear about it, you know they're not going to pay money to sit there in the dark and have it brought up."²⁸ That changed in 1978 with the critical and commercial success of Ashby's *Coming Home*, a liberal film about a housewife's life-altering affair with a wounded vet, and Cimino's *The Deer Hunter*, a conservative film about three Russian American steelworkers' devastating tours and tragic homecomings. Ashby's film won three Oscars, Cimino's five, including Best Picture. The critic Peter Biskind later called that year's Academy Awards "the Vietnam Oscars."²⁹

Ashby and Cimino showed studios that the war could sell if they used it as the setting for stories about alienated white men. Cimino took the white ethnic revivalism of *Fiddler on the Roof* and *The Godfather* and moved it to Vietnam. Ashby, though making a WASPier film than Cimino, felt that "the role of the paralyzed enlisted man called for a working-class or ethnic actor like Jack Nicholson or Al Pacino" and offered it to Stallone, then coming off the success of *Rocky*, before settling on Jon Voight.³⁰ From Erikson to the white ethnic revival to Vietnam War revisionism, white men learned to remake their racial identities for an age of civil rights and feminism with ethnic hurt and war trauma. Allan Bakke learned that lesson, or at least the white men brandishing his image did. The Burger court ordered him admitted to medical school as *Coming Home* and *The Deer Hunter* reframed the Vietnam War, his war, as a white man's wound, his claim to affirmative action.

THE DIVERSITY OF ALLAN BAKKE

In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson delivered the commencement address at Howard University, declaring his commitment to affirmative action, a term that he borrowed from John F. Kennedy but that he made his own that day. The president enumerated his administration's achievements, including the Civil Rights Act and a then-pending voting rights bill. "But freedom is not enough," Johnson, dressed in full regalia, told the graduates. "You do not take a person who, for years, has