Arkansas Senator J. William Fulbright directly connects the southern response to the Vietnam War to the southern cultural memory of the Civil War, suggesting that “perhaps we Southerners have a sensitivity to this sort of thing [stalemate in Vietnam] that other Americans cannot fully share. We—or our forefathers—experienced both the hot-headed romanticism that led to Fort Sumter and the bitter humiliation of defeat and a vindictive Reconstruction.” Fort Sumter, Currier & Ives, ca. 1860, Library of Congress.
In *Vietnam and the Southern Imagination*, Owen W. Gilman Jr. writes that “Southerners have an affinity for history, and thus Vietnam has been joined frequently to the long span of history cultivated in the South.” One of the more vocal critics of the American war in Vietnam, Arkansas Senator J. William Fulbright, directly connects the southern response to the Vietnam War to the southern cultural memory of the Civil War, suggesting that “perhaps we Southerners have a sensitivity to this sort of thing [stalemate in Vietnam] that other Americans cannot fully share. We—or our forefathers—experienced both the hot-headed romanticism that led to Fort Sumter and the bitter humiliation of defeat and a vindictive Reconstruction.” This historical sensitivity to the echoes of the Civil War, coupled with the relatively large proportion of southern soldiers to serve during the war, may explain why certain literature of the Vietnam War contains a distinctly southern note. Historian Joseph Fry notes that:

> As they had done in every foreign war since 1865, southerners rallied to the cause. The eleven states of the former Confederacy provided nearly one-third of the soldiers who served in Vietnam, even though the South was home to only 22 percent of the nation’s population. Approximately 28 percent of the military personnel who died in Vietnam were southern (15,437 of 55,622) and 27 percent of the Medal of Honor winners hailed from Dixie. Themes of honor, duty, patriotism, and anticommunism predominated in postwar interviews with southern veterans.

Fry goes on to argue that following the U.S. withdrawal from Saigon, Dixie’s response to the U.S. loss in Vietnam reflected the South’s previous experience with “coming to terms with defeat. As had been the case following the Civil War, southern leaders and most southern warriors were convinced that their cause had been honorable and patriotic.” However, this would not prove to be the case for southern veterans of the war with literary ambitions. Between 1978–1979, two authors and Vietnam veterans from strong southern backgrounds published their first novels: James Webb’s *Fields of Fire* came out in 1978, followed by Gustav Hasford’s *The Short-Timers* in 1979. Each man would attempt to reconcile his experiences in Vietnam with the southern identity he was raised to value and each would turn to the Civil War to contextualize his own service, albeit from strikingly different perspectives.

Webb represents a relative rarity amongst Vietnam War authors, southern or otherwise, in that he remained “convinced that [his] cause had been honorable and patriotic” long after his return from Southeast Asia. This likely explains why his novel provides the more straightforward treatment of this uniquely southern historical sense. *Fields of Fire* is notable for being one of the few literary works to emerge from the Vietnam War that maintains a hawkish stance on the conflict. In
it, Webb, a Naval Academy graduate and recipient of the Navy Cross for valor in combat, “rages defiantly against anyone who would question the value of valorous service to the nation, even when that service took place in the moral nightmare that was Vietnam.” Webb singles out Robert E. Lee Hodges Jr., a Kentucky boy raised on legends of his ancestors’ proud service to their country, “to show how, at least in the South, present-day persons are linked to patterns larger than the individual self.” Besides the obvious connection to General Robert E. Lee, Hodges’s name also links him to another notable literary example of southern honor, From Here to Eternity’s Robert E. Lee Prewitt. Like Prewitt, Hodges’s father died young, killed in action in World War II four months before he was born. The only memories he has of Robert E. Lee Hodges Sr. are stored in a dusty footlocker that contains two old uniforms and a scrapbook filled with photos “of his father in an ill-fitting uniform, wearing a defiant solemn bold glare copied from some rebel ancestor, his cap cocked to the side of his head.”

The adolescent Bob Hodges need not wonder who that “rebel ancestor” might have been, as his grandmother, who can trace the family’s military history back to Abednego Hodges, a private in the Revolutionary War, has regaled him with tales of the Hodges family’s military history all his life. Hearing her stories, Hodges imagines that he can feel the presence of his ancestors’ ghosts right there on his grandmother’s porch. His familial connections to southern history were so strong that “it became a religion to him. He believed in God but most of all he believed in his father and the other Ghosts. God was all the way up in heaven, but the Ghosts were with him everywhere he walked.” Of all the ghosts that Hodges’ grandmother teaches him about, the most important are the three “Hodges boys” who fell in Pickett’s Charge at Gettysburg. Webb’s choice of battle is significant, as Pickett’s Charge has become synonymous with “the High Water Mark of the Confederacy,” the point from which every subsequent action in the war represented one step further away from Confederate victory. His grandmother’s voice fills with pride when she recounts how the three “Hodges boys” were cut down before they “even got to fire their guns,” and how afterwards “General Lee himself came out” to apologize to the survivors:

They all said he was crying, riding on his white horse from group to group, that white beard of his just soaked with tears. Told them he was sorry. Told them they were God’s bravest creatures, that they’d earned a glory spot in heaven. Told them it was himself who lost the battle. That’s the kind of man our General Lee was, son. That’s why you and your daddy both were named for General Lee. He was a man of honor and he cried the day three Hodges died on the glory field.²

Like his namesake, Robert E. Lee Hodges Jr. grows up to become a “man of honor” and a leader of men into battle. His service in Vietnam represents one more noble entry in the long history of Hodges who have volunteered to fight for their

Haunted by the Ghosts of Pickett’s Charge   69
country, and provides him with a palpable link back to “those old ghosts who had come alive each Sunday in his grandma’s kitchen.” Some nights, when the perimeter is quiet, he can feel them “visit[ing] him” in his foxhole and he feels happy that “he had joined them” by virtue of his own service. One night, he muses:

All my life I’ve waited for this . . . now I’ve joined you and your losses are a strength to me . . . I breathe the dust and yet I know that Grandpa breathed the gas that made a hero out of Pershing. I flinch when bullets tear the air in angry rents and yet I know that Father, and three farmer boys at Pickett’s charge, felt a cutting edge that dropped them dead. How can I be bitter? You are my strength, you ghosts (205).

Undoubtedly, those same “ghosts” play a large part in Hodges’s decision to return to the field after being wounded in combat. Though a sympathetic Major offers him a safe billet as a Recreation Officer on Okinawa, Hodges declines the position because he feels that in comparison to his time as a platoon leader, “the rest of his life would be anticlimax.” Rejecting the offer makes Hodges feel “su-
perior to the Major, [like] a creature apart, capable of absorbing combat’s horror without asking for quarter” (310). He returns to his platoon swelling with pride and feeling closer than ever to the ghosts of his ancestors. Following his return he soon experiences a “timeless vision” of the “eternal” nature of conflict while out on patrol. Though he is in Vietnam, he feels that his platoon “could have been anywhere—in a jungle clearing on Saipan, a quarter-century before. In the sweet spring grass of Shiloh. No matter. These were his people, passed down by time to fill a warrior’s conduit, and this was where he belonged” (351). Not long afterward Robert E. Lee. Hodges Jr. is killed in action, fated like his father and the three Hodges boys at Pickett’s charge before him to die on the battlefield.

Webb, however, does not depict Hodges’s death in Vietnam as a particularly sad fate since it allows him to join with the pantheon of ghosts that he has felt a kinship with his entire life and that will inspire future generations of “Hodges boys” to battlefield glory. Hodges’s story ends with his son, born of a liaison with a local Okinawan girl, being told stories of the father he has never known. When told that his father had voluntarily returned to the front lines the boy asks his mother “is it good to be so brave? To fight for your country like that? Was it a good thing that my father did?” His mother, “anxious to fan this first spark of identity,” answers as any good Hodges woman would: “Yes! It was a very good thing your father did!” Having received this first glimpse into the family legacy, the boy pronounces that he “too will be a warrior” (389), with Webb clearly implying that the cycle of Hodges honorably serving—and sometimes dying for—their country will continue. Though the novel hints that America’s involvement in Vietnam is essentially immoral, Webb makes clear that, in his conception, the issue of whether or not the war in Vietnam can be justified has no bearing on the nature of Hodges’s service. Webb’s view of the matter was so strong, he felt compelled to state it twice: “it was the fight that mattered, not the cause.” Robert E. Lee Hodges Jr.’s service, which represents an unbroken line of valor from Abednego Hodges’s service in the Revolutionary War to his son’s service in a future war; the cause does not matter so much as the fact that “he was serving, offering himself on the altar of his culture” (33–34). Webb closes Fields of Fire with the clear implication that any military service that does not end in personal disgrace stands as a reflection of the honorable tradition established by men like the three Hodges boys who fell in Pickett’s Charge. When Webb looks to the Civil War, he sees the definitive blueprint for noble military service, a shining example that, if followed, will ensure the individual soldier maintains his honor whether he serves in a “good” war like World War II or a morally murky affair like Vietnam. Though Webb stands completely confident in this judgment, it is an issue his fellow Vietnam War authors from southern backgrounds will spend much more time wrestling over.

Gustav Hasford lies at the opposite end of the spectrum from Webb, representing perhaps the most complex (and conflicted) example of a southern author
attempting to reconcile his service in Vietnam with his strong southern identity. Hasford was raised in Alabama on family legends of Civil War glory, such as that of his great-great-grandfather, James Curtis, who was

imprisoned in Jasper because he refused to join the Confederate Army. A group of friends came down from Winston County, burned the jail, shot a couple of Confederate soldiers, and freed Curtis. In retaliation, the Confederates, who were members of the home guard, killed three of Curtis’s brothers. Curtis, according to legend, tracked down each of the guardsmen after the war ended and killed them in revenge.

Curtis’s civil disobedience was typical of the residents of Winston County, which was often referred to as “the Free State of Winston.” Hasford proudly recounts in The Phantom Blooper how Winston had a history of freedom-minded contrariness that resulted in its refusal to join Alabama’s secession from the Union. Despite his great-great-grandfather’s (and Winston County’s) refusal to participate in what he would later refer to as “the War for Southern Independence,” the area’s history inspired in Hasford a lifelong interest in the Civil War that sometimes bordered, as Hasford’s interests often did, on obsession.

Hasford served in Vietnam as a combat correspondent attached to the 1st Marine Division. In an interview years after the war, he said of his service that “we were public relations men for the war and the Marine Corps . . . we appeared to be journalists but we were simply promoting the war and promoting the Marine Corps.” Writing positive story after positive story wore on Hasford. Every day “he saw the spilling of blood and the mangling of hearts and minds, but when he wrote them all down, they were just G.I. Joe stories. He had wanted the real thing.” He found an outlet for his frustrations through fiction, and began work on an early draft of what would eventually become his first novel and the basis for the film Full Metal Jacket.

At that time in his career, Hasford “was very infatuated with the techniques of Donald Barthelme, who often dispensed with plot and basically deconstructed the fiction form.” What would eventually become The Short-Timers began life with the working title “The Tattooed Chicken” and focused not on Vietnam but on “a series of surreal vignettes about the Civil War.” Hasford’s plan grew to include three chapters set during the Vietnam War, and it was one of those chapters that drew rave reviews from Robert Silverburg when Hasford submitted it to a Clarion Writer’s Workshop in 1972. After reading one manuscript version, his friends and fellow authors Art Cover and David Wise told him that “he really had two different books, The Tattooed Chicken and this Vietnam thing.” Hasford gradually began to shift focus away from the Civil War, eventually setting the novel completely in Vietnam and cutting out the Civil War sections entirely. In fact, Hasford was so thorough in his elimination of the original Civil War themes that The Short-Timers fails to make even a single reference to its protagonist Private Joker’s southern background. Owen
Gilman suggests that at that point in Hasford’s career, it must “not . . . have been important for Hasford to link Joker with any place apart from the pervading ethos of Vietnam,” a suggestion that is borne out in the text. A blink-and-you’ll-miss-it reference to Joker’s given name, James T. Davis (a possible allusion to Jefferson T. Davis), and a brief description of a Confederate flag painted ironically on a tank provide the novel’s only clues that Joker, or Hasford, might hail from the South. All told, *The Short-Timers* took Hasford seven years to write and went through at least twenty-five drafts before taking its final shape. But even if Hasford let himself be talked into excising the Civil War from his first novel, he was unable to completely shake the connection he saw between his own experiences in the Vietnam War and his great-great-grandfather’s experiences in the Civil War a century prior.4

Following the publication of *The Short-Timers*, Hasford returned his focus to the Civil War. He stockpiled hundreds of books on the subject in the course of his research, which would eventually lead to a six-month incarceration for library book theft (though Hasford insisted he was merely “borrowing” them for an extremely long term). Among the projects he attempted were “a southern version of...
Red Badge of Courage” with the tentative title “The Undefeated” and a biography of Ambrose Bierce. The biography eventually morphed into a planned novel about “Sherman’s siege of Atlanta, seen through the eyes of Ambrose Bierce,” that Hasford envisioned as “Gone With the Wind from the Yankee point of view, minus the weepy Valley Girls,” but they all stalled out. With the successful adaptation of The Short-Timers into Stanley Kubrick’s Full Metal Jacket, Hasford eventually dropped his Civil War projects to pen a sequel to his first novel, but with one key difference. Where he had allowed himself to be talked into cutting out nearly all of the Civil War material in The Short-Timers, its success gave Hasford the confidence to make his opinion of the parallels between the Vietnam War and the Civil War a major component of its sequel, The Phantom Blooper.5

Early in The Phantom Blooper, Hasford introduces “Confederacy” as an abstract symbol of rebellion against participation in an unjust war. Instead of voicing this concept through the novel’s protagonist, James “Joker” Davis, Hasford brings in a new character dubbed Black John Wayne for his battlefield prowess. Black John Wayne discusses the notion of a “Black Confederacy” with Joker, inspired by its members’ growing dissatisfaction with the disproportionately high number of African Americans drafted to serve in Vietnam. Statistically speaking, Black John Wayne has good reasons to be upset. According to Joseph Fry, though African Americans only “constituted just over 11 percent” of draft-eligible men from 1965–1970, they were drafted at a consistently higher rate than other racial demographics during that period; Fry notes that “at the height of the war in 1967, 64 percent of eligible blacks were drafted, compared to 31 percent of eligible whites” (280).

Black John Wayne views this imbalance as symptomatic of a larger system of institutional racism that entitled the “Black Confederacy [to] secede[e] from [mainstream America’s] Vietnam death trip” and become “tin-starred marshals of revolutionary justice” upon their return to the states. Joker initially disagrees with Black John Wayne, and, foreshadowing the character’s general blind spot regarding complex racial issues, tells him to “belay all this Black Confederacy bullshit.” Their discussion follows the only appearance in The Phantom Blooper of Joker’s satirical John Wayne impression, which he employed frequently in The Short-Timers as a coping mechanism when feeling particularly anxious or uncomfortable. While mortar shells rattle their bunker, Joker tells “the true story of the War for Southern Independence” in the guise of his John Wayne persona. In it, he posits that the Civil War was really fought because “all the good marijuana plantations were in the Deep South” and closes with Joker struggling to come up with an appropriate end to his story. Lacking any better ideas, Joker concludes his tale of “the true story of the War for Southern Independence” by abruptly declaring that “the Civil War soldiers all got hammered out of their minds together and then the war was over and everybody got laid. Of course, the Damnyankees lied about it and told Walter Cronkite that they won and so that’s what they put on tv.”6
Haunted by the Ghosts of Pickett’s Charge

Shortly thereafter, the Khe Sahn base where the Marines are stationed undergoes a raid that results in the death of Black John Wayne and Joker’s capture by the Vietcong. In a deliberate tweaking of the stereotype of the “inscrutable oriental,” the Vietcong keep Joker alive because they consider “the Americans . . . a mystery” and hope that they can use him to “see into the hearts of [their] enemy” and learn “why . . . the Americans fight” (72). During his time as a prisoner in the village of Hoa Binh, Joker’s daily contact with Vietnamese rice farmers makes them seem no more alien than the Alabama watermelon farmers he grew up with, “because [both] had the same war, grow to eat, eat to live” (75). Hasford employs a number of similes linking Joker’s Vietnamese captors to the kinds of people he knew growing up in the South. Everywhere Joker looks, he begins to see parallels to Alabama: a lunch break in the rice paddies reminds him of the lunches he and his father used to eat “after a long morning of plowing with a mean mule” (77), an ancient but well-cared for printing press used for communist propaganda re-
minds him of his father’s decrepit John Deere tractor (115), a Vietnamese wedding reminds him of “Decoration Day back in Alabama” (139–40), and even a vc grandmother crafting homemade grenades comes to look “like a chamber of commerce volunteer dipping candy apples at the county fair” (162). Joker eventually comes to admire the Vietcong openly, stating that

When I first came to the village over a year ago I said to myself: *These are not reservation Indians.* These Vietcong people are not Asian mutants like the Vietnamese I saw as a Marine, not those sad, pathetic people with a cloned culture and no self-respect, greedy and corrupt, ragged shameless beggars and whores—Tijuana Mexicans. These Vietcong people are an entirely different race. They are proud, gentle, fearless, ruthless, and painfully polite (63).

Though Hasford does not say so directly, it seems clear that Joker’s admiration for the Vietcong develops out of his having come to associate them with what he considers the most positive aspects of the southern culture he grew up in—a shared cultural identity emphasizing familial pride and dignity, a tight-knit sense of community, and a willingness to fight for their ideals against a far-off and oppressive government. In effect, he comes to view the Vietcong as the true inheritors of the best attributes of southern culture. Of course, it must be noted that this newfound admiration is somewhat tainted by the character’s problematic habit of classifying non-white peoples along the lines of the “model minority” stereotype, describing the “good” Vietnamese he has come to know as quite literally “an entirely different race” from the “Asian mutants,” “reservation Indians,” and “Tijuana Mexicans” he continues to disdain.

While Joker pats himself on the back for what he clearly considers to be a revelatory outbreak of open-mindedness, Hasford misses the opportunity to comment further on Joker’s latent racial prejudices, ironically drawing attention to the limits of Joker’s tolerance in his attempt to highlight its expansion. Still, despite these problematic elements, by the time Joker is forcibly rescued from Hoa Binh (a process that involves U.S. and A.R.V.N. troops slaughtering most of the village and desecrating the corpse of his Vietnamese love interest), he credits his now (relatively) progressive attitude towards the Vietcong in his decision to reverse his earlier position and adopt Black John Wayne’s belief that the federal government of the United States no longer deserves his loyalty. Inspired by the “southern spirit” displayed by his Vietcong captors, he returns to the States determined to embark on a one-man rebellion against his country’s entanglement in an unjust war.

Following his unwanted rescue from Hoa Binh, Joker is interviewed by a Navy psychiatrist as a precursor to release. After first renouncing and belittling communism, he admits that “if the federal government of the United States died, I’d dance on its grave” and claims that he has “joined the side of people against the side of governments.” When asked to justify accompanying the Vietcong as an
unarmed observer on raids against American soldiers, Joker retorts, “how can I morally justify trying to kill anybody of any country . . . The War for Southern Independence proved that you don’t have to hate people to fight and kill them . . . I’ve been loyal to what’s right and been betrayed by my country” (190–91). These statements lead to Joker’s interrogation by agents from the Naval Investigative Service, whose accusations of treason and threats of possible execution spur Joker to expand even further upon his newfound Confederate thesis. When asked if he confesses to betraying his country, Joker draws a clear distinction between country and government in his reply:

I confess that I’m a traitor to the federal government. The federal government is not the country. It likes to think it is, and it damned sure wants honest citizens to think it is, but it’s not. I believe in America more and have risked more for America than any incestuous nest of parasites who call themselves Regulators. Thomas Jefferson never dropped napalm on peasants. Benjamin Franklin did not shoot students for protesting an illegal war. George Washington could not tell a lie. My government of self-righteous gangsters makes me ashamed to be an American (196).
He then ends his speech with an affirmation of Black John Wayne’s earlier statement, declaring “I secede from your Vietnam death trip” (196), apparently blind to the irony involved in his choice to couch his dissent in language appropriated from a black militant who had himself appropriated it as a form of protest against the very culture Joker was attempting to defend.

The novel’s last section describes Joker’s return home to Russellville, Alabama, and is filtered heavily through the lens of Joker’s newfound Confederate sentiments regarding his time in Vietnam. On the bus ride home, Joker deliberates over his newfound belief that “the South is a big Indian reservation populated by ex-Confederates who are bred like cattle to die in Yankee wars.” He reiterates this connection on the next page, musing “that the Greyhound bus is rolling along a black strip of asphalt laid down over the graves of a defeated race of people who lived in a stillborn nation . . . it’s Vietnam, Alabama.” He then expands on the notion of the South as a defeated vassal of the northern federal government, describing it as “the American Empire’s first subjugated nation” and lamenting that “[southerners] are a defeated people. Our conquerors have cured us of our quaint customs, quilting parties, barn raisings and hog killings, and have bombed us with revisionist history books and Sears catalogs and have made us over into a homogenized replica of the North” (215–16). He now sees Russellville as “a town that fears God and raises yearly crops of cotton, corn, and boys willing to die for the President” (220) and military service “like being put onto a chain gang for the crime of patriotism, except that on a chain gang you get shot if you run away and in the military you get shot if you stay” (200). As before, it is worth noting that Joker seems oblivious to the racial undertones of a number of his metaphors, seemingly unable to find the language to convey the metaphorical subjugation of southern people without leaning on imagery tied to the literal subjugation of non-white southerners, or to complicate his idealized image of the South to include the experiences of non-white people.

Joker’s disappointment with the defeated state of his hometown is exemplified in his mother’s new husband, a tobacco-spitting good ol’ boy caricature by the name of Obrey Beasley. Beasley embodies every negative trait Joker grew to hate about “pogues,” military personnel who seek non-combatant roles to avoid danger and take advantage of front-line soldiers at every opportunity. Joker’s real father had volunteered to serve in the Navy during World War II, upholding the proud tradition of “Grandpa Davis[, who] was a scout for Bedford Forrest . . . [and] died in the middle of the Jazz age with a grapeshot the size of an iron golf ball still inside his chest” (239). By contrast, his new stepfather escaped service in World War II by faking a back injury that the draft board couldn’t disprove. After falsely boasting, “I wish I could kill me some of them Communists,” Beasley compliments Joker about how “it was real smart of you to get that job that let you sneak out of the fighting, the writing job.” While Joker’s younger sister plays with
his Silver Star (given for valor in combat), Beasley criticizes Joker’s failure to “get out of going some other way” if he “wasn’t smart enough to get into a college of some kind.” Joker endures Beasley’s jabs in silence until his mother tells him how proud they all are about his “being a hero,” at which point Joker finally speaks out. “I’m not a hero, Ma. The war is wrong . . . it’s a sin, Ma. The war in Viet Nam is a mortal sin.” Her response, “I only know what President Nixon says on the television. And I guess he must know what he’s doing, or he wouldn’t be President” (227–31), sums up his hometown’s failure to live up to the Confederate spirit he saw every day when he was a prisoner of the Vietcong. In Joker’s eyes, a Russellville populated by people like Obrey Beasley comes off poorly when compared to Hoa Binh, whose people have shown a dignity and willingness to stand up against injustice that Russellville now lacks. “Walking the streets of the town [he] grew up in, [Joker] marvel[s] at” what he now considers “Black John Wayne’s relentlessly perceptive vision of reality . . . a vision” that Joker “had to struggle to attain in the Vietnam war, but which Black John Wayne seemed to have been born with” (220). In Joker’s eyes, Vietnam has essentially become more “southern” in character than the Alabama that he had returned to.

The bitterness Joker feels over what he sees as the South’s failure to live up to its history informs his final act in the novel. Declaring himself “an unreconstructed
Vietnam veteran” (215), Joker decides to reject Russellville in favor of returning to Hoa Binh, thus completing his “secession” from the Vietnam War in a way that allows him to come to terms with his own involvement in it. Joker’s decision to secede from the Vietnam War is not presented as a rejection of America, but a rejection of an American government that failed its citizens and a hometown that has lost sight of the values it instilled in him as a child. Even then, it is less a rejection than an embracing of Joker’s idealized view of “the Confederate Dream, a desperate and heroic attempt to preserve from federal tyrants the liberty bequeathed to us by Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin” (217).

Like Robert E. Lee Hodges Jr., Joker has been raised on tales of his ancestors’ Civil War glory and served in combat as a member of the United States Marine Corps. But where Hodges dies confident that his service has been honorable, even if the war he fought in is not, Joker leaves Vietnam feeling like “the only time I ever felt like I was being what an American should be and doing what an American should be doing was when I was a prisoner of the Vietcong.” It is only upon his return home to Alabama that he discovers that his sense of history provides the perfect metaphor to articulate his moral revulsion. The “ghosts” of the Civil War that Webb writes of are alive and well in the Vietnam War fiction of both authors. For Robert E. Lee Hodges Jr., they are a source of strength, a model of honorable service that sustains him as he fights, and dies, in his own war. For Joker, those Confederate ghosts are more troublesome, as the honorable service they represent throws the moral nature of his own service into doubt—and yet, those “stubborn sinews of the Confederate Dream [that] live on, deep in our genes” provide him with an example of how he might redeem his participation in a war he has grown to consider irredeemable. Although those sinews may drive him from the home he grew up in, they allow him to exit with a newfound sense of purpose and a clear conscience.

No discussion of the Civil War’s presence in the literature of the Vietnam War would be complete without pausing to consider why the Civil War’s legacy resonates so strongly with southern authors of the Vietnam War but not with authors from other backgrounds. Of the more well-regarded American authors of Vietnam War literature, Tim O’Brien, Larry Heinemann, Philip Caputo, and Stephen Wright, all hail from the Midwest. Michael Herr is a New Yorker, while Karl Marlantes and Kent Anderson come from the west coast. Though all of these authors produced works that contemplated the same moral issues that Webb and Hasford did, none constructed thematic parallels linking Vietnam to the Civil War. Even authors who did not spend their formative years living in the South but who had southern ties seem to have little interest in examining the war from a uniquely southern perspective. Under this heading I include Tobias Wolff, who was born in Birmingham but whose family made a number of stops before eventually settling in Washington state, and Walter Dean Myers, who was born in West Virginia but
raised in Harlem. Richard Currey was born and raised in West Virginia, a rural state with southern ties that broke off from Virginia to join the Union in the Civil War. His novel *Fatal Light* certainly examines its unnamed narrator’s war experiences through the lens of his small-town upbringing, but the novel downplays West Virginia’s southern ties, with its narrator specifically detailing how his grandfather’s house was situated near the Ohio border and how he fell in love in Maryland.

Stephen Wright, a New York–based author who grew up in Cleveland, wrote a historical novel about the Civil War two decades after his Maxwell Perkins Prize–winning Vietnam novel, *Meditations in Green*, which made no mention of the earlier conflict. In an interview with Patrick Ambrose, Wright traced the origins of his Civil War novel back to a childhood trip to Antietam, “which made an incredible impression on [him]” because he “had never heard of” it before. Though the Antietam National Battlefield may have impressed Wright enough to inspire a Civil War novel, evidently it did not spur Wright to connect the Civil War to his own service in Vietnam. Wright’s background seems to have been a significant factor in his decision to write about each war separately despite his firsthand experience in Vietnam. The Antietam National Battlefield made such an “incredible
expression” on Wright precisely because of his unfamiliarity with the Civil War; it is difficult to imagine that the same could be said of Wright had he grown up in Russellville, Alabama, like Gustav Hasford.⁸

If the literary record suggests that the Civil War’s cultural legacy in Vietnam tended to interest only authors from southern backgrounds, any study of this trend is limited by the number of Vietnam War novelists who grew up in the South. Despite the South’s large representation amongst the war’s service personnel, it remains relatively underrepresented in the war’s literary output. In addition to Webb and Hasford, only Winston Groom wrote his Vietnam novels (Better Times Than These, Gone the Sun, and Forrest Gump) from a distinctly southern perspective. While Groom’s novels touch upon the Civil War in places, he does so only as a tangential way of establishing his characters’ Alabama roots. Beau Gunn, the protagonist of Gone the Sun, marches with the other children of the Singer Military Academy to salute the gravestones of Confederate soldiers once a year, and Forrest Gump opens his narrative by explaining the significance of having been named for Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest. However, though Groom depicts the Civil War as a natural influence in any southern upbringing, it does not haunt his characters as aggressively as it does Webb’s and Hasford’s. Other southern authors, including Bobbie Ann Mason, James Dickey, and Robert Olen Butler, have touched on issues related to Vietnam in their work, but not on frontline depictions of combat. In addition to boasting a relatively low number of southern novelists, Vietnam War literature as a whole is plagued by a general lack of diversity. Walter Dean Myers is probably the best-known African American novelist of the Vietnam War, and many critics (mistakenly) dismiss Fallen Angels as mere young adult literature undeserving of serious consideration. There are several excellent novels by authors of Vietnamese origin, like Bao Ninh’s The Sorrow of War and Duong Thu Huong’s Novel Without a Name, and ‘second generation’ authors like Tatjana Solis and Denis Johnson have recently begun to explore the Vietnam War from feminist and postcolonial perspectives. On the whole, however, Vietnam War literature does not tend to offer a multiplicity of viewpoints, which makes the few novels that do approach the war from a unique perspective all the more worthy of study.⁹

James Webb, Gustav Hasford, and Winston Groom represent the three most significant Vietnam War authors to come from a southern background. Two of those three men looked to the Civil War to provide the historical event that best defines their characters’ cultural background while providing a measuring stick against which they can frame the nature of their own war, while the third depicted it as a natural backdrop in any southern upbringing. The fact that the three most prominent southern authors to emerge from the Vietnam War all looked, to varying degrees, to the Civil War as the cultural cornerstone that would provide context for their own war experiences is worth highlighting because of what it says about the Civil War’s unique and enduring place in the southern imagination.
Webb’s Bob Hodges and Hasford’s Joker Davis both have fathers who fought in World War II, yet when they struggle to come to grips with their own experiences, neither looks to their fathers’ war to provide context for their own, nor do they look to their grandfathers’. Bob Hodges views the Civil War’s legacy as a reminder that “it was the fight that mattered, not the cause,” and that military service brought honor whether it was rendered in a “good” war or not. James “Joker” Davis, on the other hand, came to view the Civil War’s ultimate legacy as a lesson on the importance of abiding by one’s morals at all costs, even if they conflict with one’s government—or one’s family. Though each author exhibits a unique response to the “ghosts” of the Civil War, their continued presence “haunting” the novels of James Webb and Gustav Hasford clearly shows that though the men who fought in the Civil War may be gone, within the literature of the Vietnam War they are far from being forgotten.

NOTES


5. It is difficult to know precisely how many books Hasford stole/“borrowed” since many of the books seized by police belonged to his private collection. Early sensationalistic news stories alleged the number of stolen books was 10,000, but the final number cited by Superior Court Judge Warren Conklin in Hasford’s sentencing was 749. See Jason Aaron, “Mangling Frail Civilian Sensibilities,” *Viet Nam War Generation Journal* 2, no. 1 (2002), accessed March 13, 2009; Jason Aaron, “Unpublished Works by Gustav Hasford,” *Gustavhasford.com*, May 25, 2012.


9. Winston Groom, *Gone the Sun* (New York: Pocket Star Books 1988), 45; *Forrest Gump* (New York: Pocket Books, 1988), 2; Though I include Butler because many of his short stories reflect a southern setting, it is worth noting that Butler grew up in the Midwest before settling in Louisiana as an adult.