

Deceit and Disappointment In *Born On the Fourth of July* By Ron Kovic

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Abstract

This article aims at exploring the themes of deceit and disappointment in Ron Kovic's autobiographical novel entitled *Born on the Fourth of July* which deals with the horrible consequences of the Vietnam war in America, and more particularly in the lives of Vietnam veterans both physically and psychologically. The novel gives an account of Ron Kovic's journey from an enthusiastic Marine, to a disillusioned veteran, putting the emphasis on how society and his illusion led to his disappointment. *Born on the Fourth of July* is an outstanding autobiographical novel, a best-seller that was turned into a 1989 film starring Tom Cruise and directed by Oliver Stone. In this novel, Kovic describes his transformation from a gung-ho soldier into an ardent dissenter.

However, through a psychological analysis, we will delve deep into the impact of the Vietnam War on the American society in general, and in particular on Kovic's identity and mental health after having been betrayed by the country for which he fought with commitment and pride.

Keywords: Psychological shock, patriotism, sacrifice, disappointment, betrayal, traumas.

Résumé

Cet article vise à explorer les thèmes de la tromperie et de la déception dans le roman autobiographique de Ron Kovic intitulé *Born on the Fourth of July* qui traite des horribles conséquences de la guerre du Vietnam en Amérique, et plus particulièrement dans la vie des vétérans du Vietnam, tant sur le plan physique que psychologique. Le roman raconte le parcours de Ron Kovic, qui est passé d'un soldat enthousiaste à un vétéran désabusé, en mettant l'accent sur la façon dont la société et ses illusions ont conduit à sa déception. *Born on the Fourth of July* est un roman autobiographique exceptionnel, un best-seller qui a fait l'objet d'un film en 1989 avec Tom Cruise et réalisé par Oliver Stone. Dans ce roman, Kovic décrit sa transformation d'un soldat enthousiaste en un ardent dissident.

Cependant, à travers une analyse psychologique, nous approfondirons l'impact de la guerre du Vietnam sur la société américaine en général, et en particulier sur l'identité et la santé mentale de Kovic après avoir été trahi par le pays pour lequel il s'est battu avec détermination et fierté.

Mots-clés : Choc psychologique, patriotisme, sacrifice, déception, trahison, traumatismes.

Introduction

As a top athlete, an idealist, a patriot who strongly believes in the American Dream, Ron Kovic, the protagonist of *Born on the Fourth of July*, was drafted by the American Marine Corps in order to defend America in the Vietnam War. The main character, Ron Kovic, says that the call to serve all started for him when he was born on the Fourth of July, 1946. When he was young, he would play violent war games with his friends and admired the heroes of war movies. He states that he wanted to enlist in the Marines in order to serve his country, but also become a hero.

On the night before he joins the Marine Corps in 1964, Kovic is described standing rigid at attention with his hand over his heart in his darkened living room as "The Star-Spangled Banner" plays on his television as described in the novel: "*feeling very patriotic, chills running up and down my spine.*" (Ron Kovic, 1976, p. 62) This strong sense of patriotism pushes him to willingly put his life at stake, because he

believes that America's interest was in jeopardy. This leads him to horrible experience in the Vietnam battlefield as described from his own voice:

The blood is still rolling off my flak jacket from the hole in my shoulder and there are bullets cracking into the sand all around me. I keep trying to move my legs but I cannot feel them. I try to breathe but it is difficult. I have to get out of this place, make it out of here somehow. Someone shouts from my left now, screaming for me to get up. Again and again he screams, but I am trapped in the sand. *Oh get me out of here, get me out of here, please someone help me! Oh help me, please help me. Oh God oh Jesus!* "Is there a corpsman?" I cry. "Can you get a corpsman?" (Ron Kovic, 1976, p. 1)

Kovic's unquestionable patriotism is what takes him to Vietnam, and unfortunately brings him back home paralyzed from the chest down, and burdened with the guilt of having accidentally killed a fellow soldier in combat and poor innocent children.

The protagonist's perception of the American Dream and the military service shows a broader societal deception. Campaigns in the United States paint a glorified image of the Vietnam War, which many young American men and women, including Kovic himself deeply believed in. This utopia often masks the brutal truth of combat and its psychological impact.

This novel deals with the harrowing experience of Ron Kovic as a Vietnam war veteran by exposing the way idealized narratives of American heroism and military glory are used to manipulate American youths in the image of Kovic into enlisting.

However, for a good analysis of this topic, we will first deal with the psychological impact of the War on Ron Kovic, secondly probe into the societal betrayal before ending up with the disillusion of Americans expressed through anti-war messages.

I. Psychological Impact of the War

The protagonist's journey serves as a case study for understanding the short and long-term effects of the Vietnam War both physically and psychologically on the Vietnam veterans. In fact, it reveals the struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder syndromes (PTSD), and identity crises after having experienced betrayal on multiple levels. The intertwining of deceit and disappointment has significant psychological implications.

As the longest war that America has ever known, the Vietnam War changed the social and political landscape of the United States of America. It was marked by intense military engagement and widespread protests against the involvement of the US in Vietnam.

During that period, many young American men in the image of Ron Kovic were drafted into service, which led to a generation deeply affected by the trauma of the war. Instead of being welcomed in a heroic way, veterans' return in the US was often met with indifference and hostility contrary to the celebrations of returning soldiers from previous conflicts. These traumas can be read through Kovic's following statement:

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (P.T.S.D.), which afflicted so many of us after Vietnam, is just now beginning to appear among soldiers recently returned from the current war. For some, the agony and suffering, the sleepless nights, anxiety attacks, and awful bouts of insomnia, loneliness, alienation, anger, and rage, will last for decades, if not their whole lives. They will be trapped in a permanent nightmare of that war, of killing another man, a child, watching a friend die ... fighting against an enemy that can never be seen, while at any moment someone—a child, a woman, an old man, *anyone*—might kill you. These traumas return home with us and we carry them, sometimes hidden, for agonizing decades. They deeply impact our daily lives, and the lives of those closest to us. (Ron Kovic, 1976, p. 8)

This quotation is the proof that Vietnam veterans in the image of Ron Kovic were living in extremely deplorable conditions when they came back home from Vietnam. For instance, we can see through the protagonist's eyes, that the America he comes home to in 1967 is much more different from the one than he left just three years before. His deceit can be further read through the start of the speech he gave at the Democratic National Convention when he states:

I am the living death
the memorial day on wheels

I am your yankee doodle dandy
your john wayne come home
your fourth of july firecracker
exploding in the grave. (Ron Kovic, 1976, p. 6)

Kovic's attitude toward his lovely country, America and its leaders starts changing when he returns home wounded from the war, a journey that completely changes the protagonist as confirmed by Dr. Mary Ann Wynkoop, who states that Kovic changes from "*an idealistic, patriotic young American into a paralyzed, disillusioned veteran of the Vietnam war.*" (Dr. Mary Ann Wynkoop, 20203). His unbearable disappointment eventually leads him to the 1972 Republican National convention where he shouts:

Stop the bombing, stop the war, stop the bombing, stop the war," as loud and as hard as we could, looking directly at Nixon. The security agents immediately threw up their arms, trying to hide us from the cameras and the president. "Stop the bombing, stop the bombing," I screamed. (Ron Kovic, 1976, p. 48)

These are the words that Ron Kovic states in a loud and clear voice as Richard Nixon gives his acceptance speech for his party's nomination for "Four More Years" as President of the United States of America.

The psychological burden of the Vietnam War can be further read through the sad and heartbreaking testimonies of the protagonist upon his return home: "*The paraplegics, amputees, burn victims, the blinded and maimed, shocked and stunned, brain damaged and psychologically stressed, now fill our veterans hospitals.*" (Ron Kovic, 1976, p. 8) In addition to that, Kovic keeps being hunted by the burdensome memories of the men, women and children he killed during the Vietnam War, including his own friend whom he accidentally shot dead. He is psychologically shocked by these incidences:

To kill another human being, to take another life out of this world with one pull of a trigger, is something that never leaves you. It is as if a part of you dies with them. If you choose to keep on living, there may be a healing, and even hope and happiness again—but that scar and memory and sorrow will be with you forever. (Ron Kovic, 1976, p. 8)

The protagonist is not only hunted by these heartbreaking memories, but he seems to lose hope about his most cherished dreams. Dreams such as being the best Marine, winning all kinds of medals and so on all seems to crash, gone forever. He is now compelled to live along with these repressed memories given that he cannot put the clock back. He knows that the man he killed with one shot along with the men and women killed in the war and half-dead body are all gone forever, and will never be retrieved.

II. Societal Betrayal

Beyond the psychological burden caused by the battlefield, the veterans' homecoming is also characterized with a complete lack of respect from the country's leaders and their fellow American citizens. Some of these veterans showed up at homeless shelters in the country, while others courageously started speaking out against the senselessness and insanity of this war and the leaders who sent them there. In fact, once at home, they live in a hellish situation after having made lot of sacrifices for their lovely country. This can be read through the protagonist's voice who is speaking from the V.A hospital where they were admitted and ill-treated when they came back home, wounded from the war:

I'm a Vietnam veteran. I gave America my all, and the leaders of this government threw me and the others away to rot in their V.A. hospitals. What's happening in Vietnam is a crime against humanity, and I just want the American people to know that we have come all the way across this country...to let the American people see for themselves the men who fought their war and have come to oppose it. If you can't believe the veteran who fought the war and was wounded in the war, who can you believe? (Ron Kovic, 1976, p. 47)

While in the V.A. hospital, Kovic is isolated and labeled a troublemaker because he "*asked for a bath. I asked for the vomit to be wiped up from the floor. I asked to be treated like a human being.*" (Ron Kovic, 1976, p. 34) Kovic spends six months in that hospital during which he feels an uncontrollable rage as he puts it: "*The anger is building up in me. It has become a force I cannot control. I push the call button again and again. No one comes. I am lying in my own excrement and no one comes.*" (Ron Kovic, 1976, p. 34) When an

aide eventually walks by an hour later, *“he sticks his head in the door, taunting me and laughing. I’m a Vietnam veteran, I tell him. I fought in Vietnam and I’ve got a right to be treated decently.”* *‘Vietnam,’ the aide says loudly. ‘Vietnam don’t mean nothin’ to me or any of these other people. You can take your Vietnam and shove it up your ass.”* (Ron Kovic, 1976, p. 34) The aide’s attitude sadly reflects that of many Americans at that time because they were adamantly against the war.

This lack of respect pushes the protagonist, Kovic, to start drinking heavily in order to forget the loss of his legs and sexuality due to the war, but also the fact that he will have to wear a urine bag for the rest of his life. The ill-treatment inflicted upon him is what pushes him to start wondering the interest of taking part in the Vietnam War as he states: *“But the hospital had changed all of that. It was the end of whatever belief I’d still had in what I’d done in Vietnam. Now I wanted to know what I had lost my legs for, why I and the others had gone at all.”* (Ron Kovic, 1976, p. 36) Thus, Kovic describes his life as purposeless and full of depression, and drinks as he longs for the touch of a woman and anything that may remind him of his life before the war. He becomes then enraged at the ill-treatment inflicted upon him and the Vietnam veterans upon their arrival in the American soil.

Kovic fortunately receives support for his Dad who builds a ramp in the house and refits a special bathroom for him:

The two boys pushed him up the wooden ramp his father had built with his own hands. He had put it all together just before he came home from the hospital. His old man had worked long and hard on the ramp to make it just right for his son who had just come home from the war. It was a piece of art, just like the special room with the shower. Every piece had been cut to fit and there were two long smooth handrails. The whole thing was painted red like the house. The old man had worked hard on the ramp, like he had worked hard in food store for twenty-five years, like he worked hard at everything he ever did in his life. (Ron Kovic, 1976, p. 30)

His lovely Dad takes great care of him, cleaning him up and carefully putting him to bed whenever he returns home drunk without any claim. One day, after having been on a trip to Mexico for the first time after his injury, Kovic pushes himself too hard and breaks his leg so severely they want to amputate because he was determined to walk again.

It is from there on that Ron Kovic starts questioning what he eventually considers as a dead-end war. Contrary to what he thought at the beginning, Kovic eventually began to put into question the value of the war and his chauvinism: *“I lived with a torment and nightmarish pain that is hard to describe”* (Ron Kovic, 1976, p. 38) Kovic states remembering the excruciating pain which only went away when he wrote his book. But recalling his experience of the bloody war in print was not an easy task.

III. Americans’ disillusion expressed through anti-war messages

The Vietnam War is the longest and the most divisive war that America has ever known. It lasted over fifteen years, more precisely from 1950 to 1965, and was triggered by Americans’ constant efforts to balance world peace and defeat communism. On the one hand, there were many Americans who adamantly opposed the war, because they believe that they had the obligation of preventing their soldiers from fighting in what they believed was an unjust and senseless war. And on the other hand, there were those who believed that once America is at war, patriots should follow their flag and leaders anywhere without any question. These contradictory feelings were what split the country as it had never been divided since the Civil War.

Many American families were divided because of the contradictory perception they had of the Vietnam War. Leaders, students on campuses across the country, children and many Americans began protesting against the war. The University of Michigan for example was growing increasingly uneasy with the bombing, and started looking for a way to voice their opposition to the bombing. They held symposiums, seminars, lectures, discussions, and a protest rally to draw people’s attentions on the war, its drawbacks, and ways to stop it.

In addition, important political figures such as Senator William Fullbright were also part of the antiwar voices who fiercely criticized the American administration on Vietnam. Moreover, we also note the growing of antiwar sentiment among the cultural elites as apolitical events such as a White House Festival of the Arts became political when artists refused to attend them because they opposed the President’s Vietnam policy.

In fact, antiwar sentiment was spreading, but the authorities were not well organized to manage the movement on the national scale. General unpreparedness for the realities of the war caused bitter disappointment and frustration both within the public and military.

We can most importantly note antiwar voices such as Martin Luther King Junior who, through a Howard University audience held on 2 March 1965, stated that the war in Vietnam was “*accomplishing nothing*” and called for a negotiated settlement (King, 12 August 1965). While he was speaking out against the Vietnam War, King also understood that his relationship with President Lyndon B. Johnson could be damaged even though he played a significant role in passing civil rights legislations. Though he avoided condemning the war outright, at the annual Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) convention held on August 1965, King called for a halt to bombing in North Vietnam, urging that the United Nations be empowered to mediate the conflict. He told the crowd that “*what is required is a small first step that may establish a new spirit of mutual confidence ... a step capable of breaking the cycle of mistrust, violence and war.*” (King, 12 August 1965) He added in this regard: “*I consider war an evil. I must cry out when I see war escalated at any point*” (King, 12 August 1965)

However, rising pressures across America angered Vietnam veterans in the image of Kovic whose patriotism constitutes a blind spot that keeps him from seeing the brutalities caused by the bombing in Vietnam. Ron Kovic’s anger pushes him to bury himself in his books as he puts it: “*cutting myself off from the other students. It was as if they threatened me – particularly the activists, the radicals.*” (Ron Kovic, 1976, p. 38) Kovic still have difficulties bearing the illusion he had of the Vietnam War, in other words, he still finds it difficult to accept that he was wrong by fighting in Vietnam. This can be seen through his following statement:

I was in Vietnam when I first heard about the thousands of people protesting the war in the streets of America. I didn’t want to believe it at first – people protesting against *us* when we were putting our lives on the line for our country. The men in my outfit used to talk about it a lot. How could they do this to us? Many of us would not be coming back and many others would be wounded or maimed. We swore they would pay, the hippies and draftcard burners. They would pay if we ever ran into them. (Ron Kovic, 1976, p. 36)

Vietnam veterans in the image of Kovic cannot bear the fact of being pointed an accusing finger at, meaning being accused of torturers and killers of women and children while they were putting their lives in jeopardy in the battlefield for American interest. But when they regained consciousness of their evil deeds in Vietnam and the senselessness of the war, they started taking actions against it. Just like Kovic, many veterans took parts in demonstrations that occurred all across America in order to speak out against the brutalities caused by the American soldiers in Vietnam and the necessity to stop the war.

However, it is important to note that those brutalities would meet with horrible repressions from the police forces. The shooting of four students in Kent State in the spring of 1970 can serve as an illustration. As he was listening to the radio, Kovic learns the sad news about students who got shot dead in Kent State during a demonstration against the invasion of Cambodia: “*Four students had just been shot in a demonstration against the invasion of Cambodia. For a moment there was a shock through my body. I felt like crying. The last time I had felt like that was the day Kennedy was killed.*” (Ron Kovic, 1976, p. 36) The escalation of police brutality is what actually pushes Kovic to stop being an observer, and he thus becomes a fully enraged and committed demonstrator. He says in this regard that the demonstration:

had stirred something in my mind that would be there from now on. It was so very different from boot camp and fighting in the war. There was a togetherness, just as there had been in Vietnam, but it was a togetherness of a different kind of people and for a much different reason. In the war we were killing and maiming people. In Washington on that Saturday afternoon in May we were trying to heal them and set them free. (Ron Kovic, 1976, p. 37)

Kovic is accompanied by one of his best friends and cousin named Skip, who would pay him a visit quite too often when he was back from the war interned at the hospital. The latter accepts to take him company to the demonstrations as he could not make it alone with his wheelchair. Contrary to Kovic, Skip has always been against the war in Vietnam. That is the reason why when Kovic asked him to go and take part in the demonstration in Washington, he accepted. Through the following words, Kovic gives a description of the demonstration in Washington:

The New Jersey Turnpike was packed with cars painted with flags and signs, and everywhere there were people hitching, holding up big cardboard peace symbols. You didn't have to ask where anyone was going. We were all going to the same place. Washington was a madhouse with buses and trucks and cars coming in from all directions. (Ron Kovic, 1976, p. 36)

That demonstration, which was supposed to be peaceful, unfortunately ended up in a violent confrontation between the police forces and demonstrators. There was a total mess in Washington as thousands of demonstrators took to the street asking for the war to end:

the blue legion had decided to attack. And they did wading their horses into the pool, flailing their clubs, smashing skulls. People were running everywhere as gas canisters began to pop. I couldn't understand why this was happening, why the police would attack the people, running them into the grass with their horses and beating them with their clubs. Two or three horses charged into the crowd at full gallop, driving the invading army into retreat toward the Lincoln Memorial. A girl was crying and screaming, trying to help her bleeding friend. She was yelling something about the pigs and kept stepping backward away from the horses and the flying clubs. (Ron Kovic, 1976, p. 37)

These tensions deepened the protagonist's commitment in putting an end to the war. He was all the more engaged when he learns that a group of Vietnam veterans had gone to Washington and thrown away their medal. Thus, he has the idea of joining forces with his fellow veterans, and begins being in the front, appearing on television. He says: *"I think I honestly believed that if only I could speak out to enough people I could stop the war myself. I honestly believed people would listen to me because of who I was, a wounded American veteran."* (Ron Kovic, 1976, p. 40) But despite their unwavering efforts, the war kept going on.

In Los Angeles, Ron Kovic and many of his fellow veterans and protestors attended President Nixon's campaign, shouting out loud against the war. He once again got brutalized before being arrested. We can read through the following words the ill-treatment inflicted upon his half-dead body:

Kicking me and hitting me with their fists, they begin dragging me along. They tear the medals I have won in the war from my chest and throw me back into the chair, my hands still cuffed behind me. I feel myself falling forward because I cannot balance and the red-headed man keeps pushing me back against the chair, yelling and cursing at me to stay put.

"I have no stomach muscles, don't you understand?"

"Shut up you sonofabitch!"... I am feeling hurt all over and I can hardly breathe. I lie bleeding... They have just beaten up a half-dead man, and they know it (Ron Kovic, 1976, p. 41)

After having realized that they have beaten a half-dead body, they take him to the hospital for treatment. Following his treatment, Kovic realizes through a conversation he has with one of his torturers that the latter is also against the Vietnam War: *"I was in Vietnam, too, the redheaded man says, hesitating. 'We don't want the war either,' the other cop says. 'Noone wants war.'"* (Ron Kovic, 1976, p. 41) This shows once again the extent to which the Vietnam War divided the American people. Authorities, cops and many soldiers consider anyone who is against the war as a traitor. This can be confirmed through Kovic's conversation with a cop following his ill-treatment. When the latter asks him his name, Kovic replies: *"Ron Kovic, I say, Occupation, Vietnam veteran against the war."* The policeman replies in disgust. *"You should have died over there. He turns to his assistant. 'I'd like to take this guy and throw him off the roof.'"* (Ron Kovic, 1976, p. 41)

Conclusion

In a nutshell, it becomes obvious that the Vietnam War has left an indelible ink in the American history; it divided the country as it had never been before since the civil war. Considered as a means of stopping the spread of communism by the American leaders at that time, the involvement of the US in Vietnam was rather seen as a total madness that needed to get stopped at all costs.

However, the war brought about a sizeable number of human losses, paraplegias, psychological shocks, material damages to name but these. Thus, in order to avoid further damages, many demonstrations were organized by Americans all across the country, and above all by veterans who had been sent to the

battlefield. Despite the threats of American leaders, Vietnam veterans in the image of Kovic became even more committed in the fight against what they consider as a crime against humanity in Vietnam as he puts it:

Instead of being intimidated or frightened, many of us became more outraged and more determined than ever to stop these ignorant, arrogant men and women who never saw the things we saw, never had to grieve over the loss of their bodies or the bodies of their sons and daughters, never had to watch as so many friends and fellow veterans were destroyed by alcoholism and drugs, homelessness, imprisonment, neglect and rejection, torture, abandonment and betrayal, in the painful aftermath of the war. These leaders have never experienced the tears, the dread and rage, the feeling that there is no God, no country, nothing but the wound, the horrifying memories, the shock, the guilt, the shame, the terrible injustice that took the lives of more than 58,000 Americans and over two million Vietnamese. We had to act. We had to speak. (Ron Kovic, 1976, p. 8)

Even if Kovic understands that the pain and the horror of his past will keep hunting him, he has learned to forgive himself for having blindly been in favor of the war. He has found it difficult to heal from the war in America while trying to cope with the ill-treatment inflicted upon him on a regular basis by those who were supposed to treat him as a hero. Kovic's commitment against the war, his struggle for peace can be seen as a therapy to his deceit and disappointment as he states:

I have been given an opportunity to move through that dark night of the soul to a new shore, to gain an understanding, a knowledge, an entirely different vision. I now believe I have suffered for a reason, and in many ways I have found that reason in my commitment to peace and nonviolence. My life has been a blessing in disguise, even with the pain and great difficulty that my physical disability continues to bring. It is a blessing to be able to speak on behalf of peace, to be able to reach such a great number of people. (Ron Kovic, 1976, p. 8)

Thus, Kovic becomes a messenger, an advocate for peace, a living symbol, a reference, a non-violent campaigner, a man who reconciles the souls by teaching that love and forgiveness are more powerful than hatred, who learns to embrace all men and women as brothers and sisters. Kovic considers his horrendous experience of the war as a necessary evil which has given him the opportunity of "*lighting a lantern, ringing a bell, shouting from the highest rooftops, warning the American people and citizens everywhere of the deep immorality ... pleading for an alternative to this chaos and madness, this insanity and brutality.*" (Ron Kovic, 1976, p. 8) Kovic takes his horrible and painful experience of the war with too much philosophy; he sees it from a positive angle, and remains grateful to God for being still alive after what he has gone through: "*I truly feel that this beautiful world has given me back so much more than it has taken from me. So many others that I knew are gone, and gone way too young. I am grateful to be alive after all these years and all that I've been through.*" (Ron Kovic, 1976, p. 8)

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