In the explosion of public patriotism that accompanied the 1991 Gulf War, the most visible symbol of troop support was not the Stars and Stripes—although flags were profusely evident—but a recently invented tradition, the yellow ribbon. The practice of tying these mini-banners around trees had first surfaced during the 1979–81 hostage crisis as a sign of sympathy for embassy victims of the Iranian revolution. Its resuscitation ten years later, as nearly half a million troops flew to the Middle East, symbolically linked U.S. civilian and military personnel not only to each other, but to a home front that viewed their endeavors with pride and foreboding.

Ribbon display during the Iran crisis can be traced to a Maryland woman, Penne Laingen, whose husband Bruce had been charge d’affaires at the Teheran embassy and who, after its capture, edited a newsletter for hostage families. In the 1973 pop song “Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree” a beribboned tree had symbolized a woman’s fidelity to her absent husband, and Laingen promoted the idea in speeches and newsletter columns. Ribbons quickly sprouted around the country, and the song itself acquired a patriotic sheen. As commiserative emblems, the ribbons amply illustrated Hobsbawm
and Ranger’s observation that traditions are invented, in many
instances, as salves for cries.¹

But if it was the hostage crisis that sparked the instant tradition, it
took a more elaborate and desperate crisis—the war against Saddam
Hussein—to develop its potential. Even before the first bombs
began to drop on Baghdad in January of 1991, yellow ribbons were
being touted as symbols of national resolve, and the country was
awash in a virtual “blizzard of satin and acetate.”² Lassoed trees
weren’t the half of it. Homeowners hung ribbons on fences, flag-
poles, and doors, often in concert with seasonal emblems as “folk
assemblages.”³ The business community, which had rallied to a
national cause in the 1930s by displaying blue eagles, now featured
yellow bows in their windows and advertisements. Supermarkets
decorated their coupon inserts with the supportive emblems and
adopted yellow register tapes. Newspapers and magazines ran the
ribbons up their mastheads. Local governments sprinkled them
throughout municipal buildings and public spaces. Churches
expressed their sympathy with Desert Storm troops, if not with their
mission, by adding satin bows to seasonal wreaths. Florists incorpo-
rated yellow ribbons into their arrangements. Novelty companies
produced yellow ribbon bumper stickers, decals, buttons, pins,
gimme hats, t-shirts, and coffee mugs. One need not be unduly cyn-
ical to observe that, on the home front, the six-week war was a small-
business bonanza.⁴

Nor did the yellowing of America come to a halt with the February
cease-fire. As Desert Storm troops began to trickle home, the ribbons
continued to advertise national solidarity. The tenor of bumper stick-
er philosophy moved from “Kick ass” to “Welcome home,” but the
yellow symbols remained as prominent as ever. An “Archie” comic
book featuring the story “When Johnny and Jenny Come Marching
Home Again” was littered equally with yellow bows and traditional
bunting. The United States Postal Service issued a stamp honoring
“those who served” with a slender ribbon snaking decoratively
through its ads. Troops disembarking at air force bases were “decorat-
ed” with citizens’ versions of the campaign ribbon.⁵ In Austin, Texas,
a July 4 salute to Texas troops—sponsored by mogul Ross Perot and
billed modestly as “the biggest celebration in history”—included a
Figure 1. Popular support for the troops of Desert Storm was reflected by yellow ribbons on individual homes as well as government-sponsored displays. This ribbon adorned a tree on a Massachusetts community’s town common as well as the cover of its 1990 annual budget report. Photo by Jim Gambaro.
project that would have turned artist Christo green: A San Antonio engineer wrapped the capitol building in yellow metal as part of a Texas-sized “Operation Yellow Ribbon.” Twelve months after Saddam Hussein surrendered, a million ribbons still fluttered in the breeze of a “reborn” America.

That this occurred is an empirical fact. Why it occurred, to what extent it was a homogeneous phenomenon, and what symbolic capital was being expended during the yellowing of America—these still open questions are the subject of this essay.

A Homogeneity of Mood?
The establishment view was that yellow ribbons reflected national solidarity—a mood that, however beset it may have been with apprehension, was overwhelmingly one of support for the “liberation of Kuwait.” Not only the ubiquity of ribbons themselves but George
Bush’s eighty-three percent approval rating suggested that ribbon display, like flag display, was a sign of unity. According to this “bottom up” interpretation of the symbol, it rose up—naturally and spontaneously—out of a deep well of national pride and love of country.

Critics of Bush’s Gulf policy saw this equation between ribbons and unity as facile and tendentious. Reflecting Hobsbawm and Ranger’s view of traditions as state-manufactured and state-serving formulations, they saw the yellow ribbon phenomenon as a hegemonic stratagem, imposed “top down” and designed to generate, in Raymond Williams’s phrase, a “structure of feeling” that was as unnatural as it was nonreflective. According to this reading, yellow ribbons were an obscurationist cover—a principal means by which the power bloc concealed dissent.

While these two interpretations of the ribbon phenomenon may seem mutually exclusive, they actually share a conceptually critical assumption: the belief in congruence between such “dominant symbols” and “collective consciousness.” Neither the president’s supporters, who applauded the ribbons as expressions of pride, nor his detractors, who derided them as flickers of false consciousness, doubted the consensual mood they were said to represent. Eighty-three percent is an impressive figure after all, and for at least as long as the war lasted, most observers agreed, there was a virtual homogeneity of mood in support of the president. The fluttering ribbons were merely its objective correlate.

It would be fruitless to deny that Desert Storm generated some kind of national mood swing or that yellow ribbons were, by and large, expressions of resolve. Yet “homogeneity” puts too simple a cast on a complex picture. It glosses over the unresolved features of symbol formation, and it ignores the sensibilities of millions of Americans—including many ribbon wearers themselves—who read the patriotic symbol as anything but totalizing. Such discordant sensibilities come to the foreground in this essay. The success of yellow ribbons as an instant tradition, I will try to show, ultimately had less to do with national oneness—either top down or bottom up—than with contestation.

That the meaning of symbols may be publicly contested has been noted frequently, most articulately perhaps in the works of Victor
Turner. Public symbols, Turner wrote, are best examined as “positive forces” in an “activity field.” Far from evoking only one set of responses, they are “dynamic entities” continually being negotiated and redefined. Even the milk tree, which Turner calls “at its highest level of abstraction” a symbol of “the unity and continuity of Ndembu society,” represents at another level “aspects of social differential and even opposition between the components of a society which it is supposed to symbolize as a harmonious whole.”

Other students of symbolism have drawn similar conclusions. Cohen, for example, suggests that it may be the “very essence of the symbolic process to perform a multiplicity of functions with economy of symbolic formation.” Similarly, “The expressive value of what is called a collective symbol may lie in fact in a set of variations on a common theme rather than in any uniform conceptualization.”

Seeing public symbols, then, as icons of unity—whether naturally upwelling or imposed—misreads their dynamic availability to parties in conflict.

This is important to keep in mind with regard to Desert Storm, for throughout that conflict, both the variations and the common theme were continually contested. Debate over subtexts supposedly inscribed in the “homogenizing” ribbons not only reflected the multivocality common to all symbols. It also dramatized an ongoing debate about the meaning of America—about what it means, in the twentieth century, to be an American. That dramatization was staged simultaneously in two historical moments—the past of Vietnam and the present of Desert Storm—so that the semantic debate became a conflicted assessment of history itself.

Evolution and Ambiguity

That yellow ribbons should have served as touchstones for this debate might have been predicted from their own conflicted history. From their first appearance in the nineteenth century as signs of affection for U.S. cavalrymen, their semantic load had been charged with ambiguity. As Turner, Firth, and Cohen agree, this is true to a great extent of virtually all symbols. It becomes particularly salient when a symbol is noniconic—when, to use Saussure’s famous term, its “arbitrariness” invites a multitude of interpretations. This is certainly the case with
regard to color, and the inherent openness of yellow ribbons rests in part on the historical fact that “yellow” itself is connotatively fluid.

Countless examples of this can be found in dictionaries of symbolism, but consider only the valences of yellow in American popular culture. The dominant (one is tempted to say hegemonic) sense is that of cowardice (“yellow streak,” “yellow belly”), but depending on context the term can also connote sensationalism (“yellow journalism”), anti-unionism (“yellow dog contract”), regional pride (“yellow rose of Texas”), or racial typing (“high yellow,” “yellow peril,” and George “Yellowhair” Custer). The symbolic burden is as undecided as it is rich.

Connotative variation also attends the yellow ribbon’s more iconic “half”: the knotting or tying that anchors the symbol to its display site. Throughout the world, knotting symbolizes both danger and protection. Ambivalence is so embedded in this symbol that only the conceptual stance of the knotter toward the power of binding can reveal whether a given knot is aggressive or apotropaic.

When you fuse these two malleable elements into a single symbol, you get, not surprisingly, more rather than less malleability. As Soens shows in an excellent historical survey, a resulting ambivalence has informed yellow ribbon wearing from the very beginning. When U.S. cavalymen’s sweethearts wore ribbons around their necks in the nineteenth century, the symbolic signal was not simply one of affection. The yellow band also served as a combined property tag and off-limits sign—a signal to other service branches that the girl was “cavalry goods” and also possibly infectious (yellow being the color of the quarantine flag). This nicely supplements Eliade’s observation about the ambivalence of “protection.”

By the turn of the century, soldiers—reflecting this somewhat bawdy tradition—had adopted a music hall ballad called “She Wore a Yellow Ribbon,” which found its way into the twentieth century’s first reshaping of the custom, John Ford’s 1949 cavalry drama She Wore a Yellow Ribbon. Here, as in the Tin Pan Alley song, the negative resonances of ribbon wearing (“hands off” and VD) were submerged, and the custom became sanitized enough to provide an emblematic flourish to the movie’s romantic subplot. Shorn of its sexual connotations, the theme song went on to become a Hit
Parade favorite, first for the Andrews Sisters and then, in 1961, for Mitch Miller.

The next recasting of the cavalry custom came in 1973, when Tony Orlando and Dawn recorded a sentimental ballad, “Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree,” which became, obliquely enough, the year’s biggest hit. I say obliquely because while the song’s lump-in-the-throat message—stand by your man even if he’s done wrong—framed the story of a released convict’s homecoming, the encoded referent for the prison scenario was clearly Vietnam. In 1973, with “Vietnamization” virtually complete and the Paris Accords signed, those returning home after having “done their time” were not convicts but conscripts. That they were being repatriated to something less than open arms lent the ballad a poignant undertone that explains its success. The song functioned as metaphorical expiation at a time when straightforward gratitude was still politically unfashionable.

The yellow ribbon custom’s burgeoning political valence next made itself felt in 1979, after the fall of Teheran created a new crop of American scapegoats. During the Iranian hostage crisis, the Tony Orlando vehicle resurfaced on mainstream radio, both reflecting and actively encouraging the display of ribbons as a sign of support for the civilian victims of militant Islam. By that time, as we have seen, the custom had already acquired a sedimented history of quasi-patriotic affect, and its enlistment as an emblem of support for “prisoners of policy” must be viewed against that gradually evolving, and consistently contestable, symbolic backdrop.

But with a difference. What Penne Laingen’s modification of the custom did was to, blatantly and precisely, nationalize its affect. The link between returning Vietnam veterans and the prisoner of the 1973 song may have been indistinct; not so the fusion of embassy hostages and yellow ribbons. And, since the hostages were cast as victims whose only crime was American citizenship, they and “their” ribbons came to represent not just a foreign policy, but the nation itself—the nation as an embodiment of what Lawrence has nicely called the “moral hegemony of victimization.” During the 444 days of the hostage crisis, it was not they who were being held captive, but the United States. Time, Newsweek, and their sister magazines made
the point explicit. The ongoing story ran under the banner “America Held Hostage.”

Given this background, it was practically inevitable that the next time the nation went to war, yellow ribbons would be trotted out as the “traditional” emblem of homefront solidarity. It was also inevitable, however, that the administration’s attempt to freeze its meaning would be incomplete and that the debate about who owned America would rumble on.

“Just Another Battleground”

Political symbols resonate at three levels: the cognitive, the affective, and the behavioral. To nurture commonality, they must work at all these levels simultaneously, and with the same saliency for at least a majority in the polity involved. But because symbols typically condense both ideas and images, the fusion of the three levels is seldom complete. Turner’s distinction between the ideological and sensory “poles” of ritual activity suggests an uneasy alliance that is also present in symbol formation.16 Firth makes the related point that semantic loading can as easily disrupt as reinforce commonality. Condensation, he notes, may actually “hamper communication by clogging the channels—by providing too many alternatives for interpretation.”17

If those alternatives do not cohere—if political leaders cannot make them cohere—then the resultant clogging may hamper more than communication. If the manipulation of symbols by those in power is successful, writes Kertzer, public ritual “creates an emotional state that makes the message uncontestable. . . . It presents a picture of the world that is so emotionally compelling that it is beyond debate.”18 But when it does not work that neatly, we get a rhetorical firestorm of “nomadic subjectivities.”19 For political leaders attempting to enhance solidarity through symbolic messages, then, “there is always the danger that ambiguity gives way to open conflict about the meaning of the rites. In such cases, rather than producing political unity, the rites can become just another battleground.”20 This was exactly what happened during Desert Storm.

Not that the battle over meaning was terribly visible. To judge from network and CNN coverage of the war, Bush’s eighty-three
percent approval rating was a timid estimate. Commentators made almost as much of “national consensus” as did the administration itself, and the depiction of war protestors consistently stressed their isolation. Thus the yellow ribbon was effectively colonized by administration supporters; concern for the troops was represented as support for policy; dissent was defined as crankiness, if not outright disloyalty; and being American was comfortably defined as “standing with the president.” Precisely the same techniques had marginalized dissenters during the long ordeal of Vietnam.

But the polls and the acetate blizzard aside, this patriotic fix did not entirely take. A few examples from the liberal wilds of Massachusetts, where I was living when the “liberation of Kuwait” was under way.

- In February of 1991, journalist Monica Collins, after interviewing ribbon wearers in a Boston suburb, found that the patriotic symbols revealed not universal support for the administration master plan, but rather a “rainbow of messages.” “Do yellow ribbons signal support for the troops?” she asked. “Support for the war? Support for peace? Support for President Bush? Support for smart bombs? Do yellow ribbons unite us in nationalism? Or divide us?” The answer, she found, was, “All and none of the above.”

- Later that month, ninety miles to the west, students debated the meaning of the ribbons in the University of Massachusetts paper, the Daily Collegian. Student columnist Gayle Long, countering the consensus view that wearing a ribbon was pro war, said that her ribbon expressed her hope for a swift conclusion—for “the thought of life and peace in the Middle East and the rest of the world.” Linda Babcock, responding under the headline “Bloody, Yellow Ribbons,” condemned Long’s “naiveté about the symbolism of war.” “For most who wear ribbons, support for the troops necessarily means supporting the soldiers’ duty: to enforce American foreign policy. . . Life? Peace? You’ve got to be kidding.”

- On February 18, while Desert Storm troops were preparing for a ground offensive, a war protestor named Gregory Levey
burned himself to death on the Amherst common. An
impromptu shrine grew up on the site where he died, sympa-
thizers set up a round-the-clock vigil, and the ground was
showered for the following month with memorial offerings.
Among the gifts presented to the young man’s spirit were
numerous peace poems, sheaves of flowers—and yellow rib-
bons.  

Such counterhegemonic displays were hardly surprising in
Amherst, an enclave of gentrified hippies whose largest institution of
higher learning is known locally as “UMarx.” But a similar display of
disparate meanings also obtained eleven miles down the road, in the
more conservative, working-class community of Belchertown.
Officially, the town was so committed to yellow ribbons—whatever
they meant—that public buildings and the common itself displayed
them prominently. So of course did many homes. But the knee-jerk
patriotism that cynics might have seen in this display was not borne
out in my interviews with Belchertown homeowners.

To my initial query about the meaning of their ribbons, the home-
owners’ virtually unanimous response was “support for our troops.”
Yet, this affective concord was not matched cognitively or behavioral-
ly—that is, in terms of political understanding or desired action. A
few ribbon displayers had friends or relatives in the Gulf, although
most did not, and their linkage of the troops with policy was anything
but uniform. Some endorsed our military actions uncritically, but
others equated “support for the troops” with the less aggressive desire
to “bring them home safely.” Still others expressed confusion or igno-
rance about “what’s going on over there.” One man, when I asked his
opinion of our Middle East policy, gave a frustrated reply: “What
policy?” Another criticized the American role of “world policeman.”
One woman, the wife of a disabled Vietnam veteran, called their yel-
low ribbon a traditional “symbol of peace.” Some people, she said,
were planting “peace gardens” of yellow flowers.

Clearly, the meaning of yellow ribbons in this conservative com-
munity was no more frozen than in yuppie, leftist Amherst. In
both communities, the symbol—open and negotiable by defini-
tion—became a social text that people manipulated for private
purposes. Probably it is going too far to imagine that such manipulation, in the majority of cases, was oppositional. Yet, none of the ribbon wearers I encountered was supinely deferential either. Perhaps Fiske comes closest to defining what was going on. Building on de Certaeau’s idea that popular “poaching” raids can disrupt the hegemonic, Fiske stresses the “contra” in the contradictions of popular culture and insists that “producerly” remakings of the culture’s givens hint at opposition. Placing a yellow ribbon on a peace martyr’s grave is not revolutionary activity, to be sure. But perhaps, with Fiske’s “optimistic skepticism,” we might call it “protopolitical”: It displays what Foley, acknowledging the ambivalence of adolescent ritual, calls “the potential of popular culture practices to be progressive.”
However dimly realized that potential may have been, surely something like producerly behavior occurred during Desert Storm. The dreams of White House flacks notwithstanding, yellow ribbons were not fully “appropriated by any particular group.” Instead the nation engaged in a communicative display of “capture the ribbon,” fighting over symbolic capital in a rainbow of stances toward the war. The ribbons meant neither war nor hope nor peace—and they meant all of these things. The fluttering indices of a “solidarity without consensus,” they proved the Gramscian point that the struggle for hegemony is never-ending—a dialectical, “open-ended process of contestation.”

“Burying Vietnam”

So much for homogeneity of mood with regard to the ribbons’ immediate valence. But the immediate valence was not the only one; nor, I believe, was it the most important one. What was really at stake in the game of “capture the ribbon” was Americans’ relation not to the present, but to the past. I have said that in the negotiation of symbolic capital that attended Desert Storm, there were two arenas of political conflict under siege. I want to conclude by examining the older, and more conflicted arena—the war in Vietnam, which Desert Storm was supposed to “resolve.”

The ghosts of Vietnam, our national revenants, haunted the Gulf engagement even before it became Desert Storm. The entire January debate about moving from a defensive posture into open war could be seen as a public airing of two enmeshed fears: “another Munich” versus “another Vietnam.” Even though the Munich card took the trick, that did not allay public apprehension about a possible replay of the Asian debacle. If one recalls the constantly reiterated promise, before the first sorties began on January 16, that this incursion would be decisive, fully supported, and most of all brief, one realizes how essential the administration felt it was to discount comparisons. Mr. Bush himself promised it bluntly: “This will not be another Vietnam.”

But Desert Storm was to be not only unlike Vietnam; it was to redeem the old war’s failings, not only by restoring America’s status as
a world power, but also by extending the thanks of a grateful nation to the “boys abroad” who, a generation ago, had undertaken its thwarted mission. Vietnam veterans would not be thanked directly, of course, but they could still bask in the gratitude extended to their Gulf War counterparts. Thus, by the time-honored process of “regeneration through violence,” the nation would finally make up for what had “gone wrong” in Southeast Asia.

This positioning of Desert Storm as a redemptive effort was not simply a collusive pipe dream of the nation’s leaders. Making up for the past was a dominant theme in discussions of the war from start to finish, and it became a recurrent leitmotif in analyses of yellow ribbons. Penne Laingen herself acknowledged that the public “this time is making amends for neglecting Vietnam veterans.”

A Maine veteran, recalling how he was spit upon when he returned from Vietnam, commented, “We feel we need to make up for the wrongs of the past. I know I wish I could have been greeted like this.” My Belchertown neighbors, with extraordinary frequency, echoed this sentiment. They displayed ribbons to show that “I don’t want these guys to go through the same thing as the Vietnam vets,” because “I felt sorry for the fellows and hope it doesn’t happen again,” and because the Vietnam vets “got a dirty, rotten deal.” The most pointed, and richly ambiguous, comment came from a middle-aged man who had tied his ribbon to the pole of a front porch Old Glory: “Maybe we’ll finally bury Vietnam.”

Burying can mean confronting and getting it behind you, or it can mean sweeping it under the rug. Desert Storm, I suggest, helped us to do the latter. The episode’s semantic tragedy, ritually masked in the nationwide triumph, was that it decoratively disguised, rather than coming to terms with, the wounds of the past. Because yellow ribbons allowed us to “correct” a mistake without identifying or taking responsibility for it, they enabled us to bury Vietnam before it was really dead. Rather than serving to recall and “re-member” a savaged past, then, Desert Storm actually encouraged us to forget.

The decorative disguise was evident throughout the conflict, but it reached its full potential upon Saddam’s surrender, as the nation mounted a victory celebration of Roman proportions. Journalists were blithely confident that this triumph would bury Vietnam by
giving our new heroes the beribboned plaudits that the others had missed. Lance Morrow, writing in *Time*, proclaimed “the end of the old American depression called the Vietnam syndrome—the compulsive pessimism, the need to look for downsides and dooms.” In the same magazine, two women issued a generic “Dear Soldier” letter, explaining to Desert Storm veterans what they would find upon their return: “You will find signs that you’re returning to a different country than the one you left in August: proud, resolute, united and overwhelmed with national purpose. You will be lavished with honors, medals and ribbons, streets named after you, Desert Storm ice cream flavors. You who wrote to us of your fears of coming home should not worry. No one will spit on you. You will not be called baby killers, and we promise that you will not grow old holding a sign in a subway station: I’m a veteran. Can you spare some change?” The undercurrent here speaks louder than the surface calm, as the writers’ exuberance merely highlights the country’s anguish. Perhaps in some Durkheimian paradise yet to be discovered the American people will be “proud, resolute, united, and overwhelmed with national purpose.” That was certainly not the sense of the streets in 1991, as the writers’ shrill palliatives ironically implied. “You will not be called baby killers.” Indeed. When the nation truly comes to terms with the “hurts of history,” we will no longer require such grotesque assurances.

“Coming Full Circle”

To come to terms, however, would require a feat of memory for which the American people have thus far shown meager aptitude. Many students of history and memory have already noted this. Lipsitz defines as “the constitutive problem of our time” a “crisis of historical memory” that turns away from the painful. Thelen suggests that a national unwillingness to recall and talk through (rather than around) our checkered past dooms us, Sisyphuslike, to an “endless conversation.” Most vividly, Frisch quotes a Nigerian friend who claims that Americans are simply uninterested in recalling history; what we want—and what our historians typically give us—is “a pretty carpet that can be rolled out on ceremonial occasions to cover
all those bloodstains on the stairs.” The predictable result is “a present that seems to float in time—unencumbered, unconstrained, and uninstructed by any active sense of how it came to be.”

A less scholarly, but no less apposite, gloss on our unremembered (and thus unusable) past comes from Vietnam veteran and newsletter editor Greg Kleven. “Why are Vietnam veterans still talking about the war?” he asks in *Vietnam Echoes*. “Because America didn’t go to Vietnam, and never had to come home. . . . We are still talking about the war because the war isn’t over and won’t be until this society, led by veterans, goes full circle.”

Indeed, no one seems more aware of how far we are from closing the circle than Vietnam veterans. Veterans who were involved in Austin’s “Operation Yellow Ribbon” could not escape being reminded of that fact. The promoters of the “Capitol Salute to the Troops” did afford them a special reviewing stand; a Vietnam float joined the victory parade; and the capitol grounds contained a “Moving Wall” replica of the Vietnam Memorial. Yet, if these symbolic gestures were designed to incorporate the Vietnam experience into the national back-patting, they succeeded only ironically, by displaying a dramatic difference in representational scale and public attendance. “By sponsoring the Moving Wall,” a local radio station wrote in the Capitol Salute program, “B93 hopes to complete the circle in honoring a group for which the proper recognition is long overdue—our Vietnam Veterans. We hope you will spend a few moments at the Memorial remembering.” In fact, the number of people who spent those moments was minuscule compared to the thousands who lined Congress Avenue to cheer on the tanks. The hope of a memorial to Austin’s Asian war vets remained a dream. The loss of 58,000 young men and women in the Asian quagmire receded into the shadows of the live oaks, while the eyes of the town, and of the nation, were on the heroes of Kuwait.

Because yellow ribbons tried so hard, and failed so significantly, to tie up the loose ends of the past, it may be useful to see the custom as a gesture not of celebration but of desperate, unfulfilled compensation. “A society continually threatened with disintegration,” writes Kertzer, “is continually performing reintegrative ritual”—acts of
symbolic no less than moral compensation in which the demons of fissure may be temporarily contained.\textsuperscript{42} Military adventures can be especially productive in this regard, since they facilitate the muting of personal skepticism by collective action.\textsuperscript{43} Popular entertainment can also play a part, as in the “suturing” provided a wounded body politic by the Rambo films.\textsuperscript{44} On the home front, ritual dramas such as ribbon display and (on a grander scale) Operation Yellow Ribbon help us to “do something about situations otherwise felt to be unendurable.” Such collective wish fulfillments utilize social fantasy as “an attempt to bridge a felt gap between means and ends by imaginative construction.”\textsuperscript{45}

I have tried to show in this essay that in the case of yellow ribbons, the construction remained incomplete for three reasons: the inherent openness of symbolism in general, public misgivings about administration policy in the Persian Gulf, and—most of all—a national failure to identify clearly, and thus to exorcise, the demons of Vietnam.

Those demons had, and still have, much to do with the nation’s rejection of its Vietnam veterans, a marginalized cadre long scapegoated for the “wrongs of the past.” Resolving our ambivalence about those warriors, and helping them to heal, would be a first, essential step in putting the ghosts to rest. But there is more, and more painful, work to be done. To truly “come full circle,” as Kleven notes, the nation would have to confront the “hurts” not only of our own people, but also of those countless Southeast Asians whom American military policy left shattered and gasping. This would mean, for example, normalizing relations with our former enemy—a process that has finally been started by the Clinton presidency—supporting veterans who want to return to the site of their travail and, not least of all, acknowledging that our presence in Vietnam cost the lives not only of 58,000 Americans but of more Vietnamese (including children) than could possibly be numbered. It would mean seeing that all of us were simultaneously victims and victimizers. “Like it or not,” writes Kleven, “Vietnam is part of the medicine that American society needs in order to get over its self-inflicted wounds.”\textsuperscript{46} It was this hard fact that the yellowing of America (almost) concealed.
Epilogue: Poaching Redux

That the yellow ribbon tradition obscured dissent seems obvious enough, given the acetate blizzard and Mr. Bush's eighty-three percent approval rating. That the symbol remained open to interpretation may have been less obvious, but it was no less true. Three postwar examples, unrelated to the conflict, make the point.

- Several days after the Persian Gulf cease-fire, an Exeter, New Hampshire, jury convicted schoolteacher Pamela Smart of manipulating her student boyfriend into killing her husband. Smart’s mother, during the trial, had worn a yellow ribbon, “symbolizing her belief that her daughter [was] a hostage of the judicial system.”

- Six months later, in Killeen, Texas, a man killed twenty-four patrons of a Luby’s cafeteria in the worst nonmilitary mass murder in U.S. history. Television news reports of the incident mentioned two signs of mourning: flags flown at half-mast and yellow ribbons.

- More recently, young Vashon McQueen of Bryan, Texas, became the hapless victim of a drive-by shooting. Friends of the slain teenager attended his funeral wearing yellow ribbons inscribed, “In Loving Memory.”

As counterculture kids of the 1960s “poached” on one dominant symbol, the American flag, by unpatriotically reassembling it into clothing, so the grieving citizens of Exeter, Killeen, and Bryan transformed the recently nationalized yellow ribbons, lifting them into their own worlds of private meaning. Such “producerly” responses should keep us alert to how variously evocative—and how impervious to fixing—traditions can be.
Notes

6. History’s “biggest celebration,” described by Governor Ann Richards as “one giant Texas-size party,” was announced exuberantly in the flyer *Parade Line*, produced by the ad hoc Governor’s Committee to Salute the Troops. Perot was its finance chairman.
9. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
43. Firth, *Symbols*, 78.
45. Firth, *Symbols*, 200n.