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## tom cruise movie star The festering Vietnam culture war

Posted by Earl Evleth - 2009/12/10 20:27

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I have always like Rich's comments. He publishes regularly in the NYT and his items also appear here in Paris. The festering Vietnam culture war Frank Rich NYT NEW YORK When George W. Bush's handlers had him dress up as the 1986 Tom Cruise of Top Gun to dance a victory jig on an aircraft carrier, they didn't stop to think that he might soon face an opponent who could be type-cast more persuasively in his own Tom Cruise role. John Kerry was in real life a comrade of Ron Kovic, whom Cruise played to great acclaim in the 1989 Born on the Fourth of July. Kerry, like the movie's hero, was a decorated Vietnam soldier who became a star activist for Vietnam Veterans Against the War upon returning home. In a pivotal scene in the film, delegates at the 1972 Republican National Convention in Miami Beach eject Kovic and his fellow protesting veterans from the hall, call him a traitor and spit on him. If that incident has a certain angry passion, it may be because the director was Oliver Stone. Like both Bush and Kerry, Stone was a son of privilege who attended Yale University in the mid-1960s. Like Kerry but unlike Bush, he went on to combat in Vietnam, won a bronze star and then turned against the war. But just where was Bush during that convention fracas dramatized in Born on the Fourth of July? We still don't know. The summer of '72 is midway through the missing months in the president's résumé - a time when, in the still undocumented White House account, the young Bush was supposedly completing his National Guard service while campaigning for a senatorial hopeful in Alabama. Whatever he was up to, it is not inconceivable that he accompanied his candidate to Miami Beach, where he watched from afar as Kovic and his fellow veterans were dispersed in a paroxysm of tear gas and rage. Cut to 2004. One wants to believe that the wounds of Vietnam have long since been anesthetized by the panacea we call closure. And yet, even as the actual war fades in memory, Vietnam still looms as a festering culture war, a permanent fixture of the American collective unconscious, always on tap for fresh hostilities. Whether before Sept. 11, 2001, or since, more Americans visit the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington each year than they do the White House, the Washington Monument and the Jefferson Memorial combined; no wonder it's the only aesthetic standard against which the ground zero memorial in New York is measured. This year no fewer than two Oscar-nominated documentaries, The Fog of War and The Weather Underground, take us back to Vietnam in all its anguish. And now, of all unlikely developments, the actress Jane Fonda has been roped into a comeback. A movie star who hasn't been seen in a Hollywood feature in almost 15 years has been drafted into a political attack on Kerry: He appears as a blurred extra sitting several rows behind her in a photo of an antiwar protest held two years before her famous, self-immolating trip to Hanoi in 1972. This is guilt by association so loony that even the perpetrators of the Hollywood blacklist might have found it a stretch. Kerry and his fellow members of Vietnam Veterans Against the War are now being attacked by Republicans as vociferously as Kovic's band of brothers were at the party's '72 convention. The head of a group called Vietnam Veterans Against John Kerry, which helped disseminate the Fonda picture, portrays him as a radical, a traitor and, worst of all, hippielike. The Weekly Standard characterizes the antiwar Vietnam veterans of that time as hairy men, many with 'Easy Rider' mustaches. There's a method to this archaic culture-war language. It's meant to complement the ubiquitous Vietnam-era photo of a decidedly clean-shaven, unhippielike Bush at the moment he is joining the Texas Air National Guard. The tableau shows Bush's beaming father, then a congressman, as he prepares to pin second lieutenant's bars to his son's uniform. But there's something wrong with this picture. It all too potently raises the unanswered question of just how the young Bush got into the National Guard, in those days a haven from combat duty, ahead of 100,000 others on the national waiting list. At the time, 250 Americans a week were dying in Vietnam. Those in Washington who view Vietnam only through a political lens say none of this should matter today. As Bush and his surrogates point out repeatedly, his service record is old news and died as a campaign issue in both his '94 governor's race and in 2000, when he faced two Vietnam veterans, John McCain and Al Gore. Others note how Bill Clinton, a notorious draft-avoider, vanquished both a Vietnam vet, Bob Kerrey, and two World War II heroes in the '92 and '96 elections. End of story, end of culture war. I don't think the Democrats really want to rerun Vietnam, is how one Republican consultant's wishful thinking put it on ABC television, just as the story of the president's National Guard service ignited once again. But we're not in '92, '96 or 2000 anymore. American troops are once again fighting a war of choice - and this time the National Guard is seeing combat, lethally so. Bush's Tom Cruise pose of May, so fetishized among his partisans that an ad in The National Review hawks a bronze replica at \$1,995 a pop, makes an unexpectedly striking visual contrast with Kerry's Tom Cruise role of 30-some years earlier. In the Kerry Vietnam flashback we hear his most famous line as a protester, How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake? While few Americans believe that it was a mistake to overthrow Saddam Hussein, the question hangs in the air anyway in 2004. It hangs over those American soldiers who have died since his overthrow, who have died since the triumphal Bush Top Gun remake declared mission accomplished. In this cultural battlefield, Kerry is a unique figure as a presidential candidate. Unlike Bush, Gore or McCain, he is the first in either party to have been both a leader in combat in Vietnam and a leader in the antiwar movement; he represents both the establishment that fueled our misadventure in Southeast Asia and the counterculture that changed America, for better and for worse, in revolt against it. To his critics he's hypocritical, but to many others he may be prototypical. It took years of body bags and falsely optimistic White House predictions for an American majority to turn against the war. Once America did change its mind, however, it stayed changed. To argue now that antiwar protesters were traitors, especially those who took bullets for their country in the Mekong Delta and saved their buddies' lives, could be a tough sell.

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