

JERRY LEMBCKE'S *THE SPITTING IMAGE:
MYTH, MEMORY, AND THE LEGACY OF VIETNAM*¹

Lembcke's book, subtitled *Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam*, asserts proof of something that he believes did not happen, i.e., antiwar demonstrators spitting on Vietnam War veterans as they returned to the United States. He acknowledges existence of and cites testimony to the contrary, but he dismisses this evidence as not only irrelevant but flawed. His concern lies not in the literal occurrence of spitting on Vietnam veterans (VVs) but on the metaphorical use of the image itself or its mythological formation.

Lembcke apparently does little or no work toward a critical analysis of the eyewitness accounts of the veterans themselves either in favor of or against the historical validity of spitting on VVs, as this potentially would undermine his thesis. He chooses instead to reconstruct a plausible context for the genesis and evolution of the myth. But his reconstruction fails to persuade for several reasons. First, his working definition of myth is never clear. Second, his historical reconstruction of administration policies toward veterans in both Vietnam and Gulf War eras is one-sided. Third, his insistence, that the alignment of VVs with the antiwar movement proves his point, assumes too much. Fourth, he wrongly depicts the Vietnam War as a totally negative experience (cf. Lewis Sorley's *A Better War: the Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam*). Fifth, he ascertains the myth of spitting on VVs exclusive of any literal occurrence (i.e., either/or instead of both/and). Sixth, he includes

¹New York, NY: New York University Press, 2000.

David W Fletcher, Fall 2002

All Rights Reserved / Unauthorized Electronic Publishing Prohibited / www.davidwfletcher.com

only psychological interpretations that support his thesis. Seventh, he situates the phenomena of spitting in a broad, universal context rather than its twentieth-century American milieu, and this weakens his argument. Eighth, he offers a salient point about the role of media (i.e., the movies) and myth-making, but he seems to dismiss its validity.

While an interesting book, *The Spitting Image* does not convince. In order to make his point, Lembcke should take a serious look at the testimony of VVs, define myth explicitly and consistently, treat administrative policies fairly and fully, and establish a phenomenological context for the meaning of negative spitting in twentieth-century America.