Universal Pictures' *The Deer Hunter* is not about the Vietnam war. The film makes no statement about the justice or prudence of our participation in that conflict. Instead, it dares to remind us that most Americans—soldiers and civilians alike—gave little thought to the great questions of foreign policy raised at the time. And it dares to suggest that they are not to be damned for that.

This seeming indifference to large issues of political morality probably accounts for much of the hostility that critics have expressed towards the film. But if we refuse either to disregard this indifference or to be prejudiced by it, we can find our way through the film's deeper exploration of the grounds of political morality.

Though *The Deer Hunter* is set in an era that most of us remember vividly, we see in it almost nothing of what that era recalls to us. The film begins by focusing on three young Americans as they prepare to serve in the Army during the late 1960s; it shows a few startling scenes from their experiences in Vietnam; and it examines the aftermath of their service. But the fall of Saigon is the only historic event that plays a part in the film: no politicians appear or are mentioned; we hear nothing of the anti-war protests or other civil disturbances of the time; and the film's notorious Russian roulette sequences have no known basis in fact.

*The Deer Hunter* makes us think about politics and war and our country. But because it addresses these issues only indirectly, and because of its odd juxtaposition of wrenching violence and unfashionable sentiment, the film is apt to leave the viewer shocked and disoriented. As I hope to show, the film can lead us beyond this painful confusion to an uncommonly true and useful view of ourselves and our society.

The film's protagonist, the deer hunter, is named for the Archangel Michael, who guards the gates of hell, brings to man the gift of prudence, and will in the final judgment weigh the souls of the risen dead. The Archangel is the leader of the army of heaven, and is traditionally pictured bearing both sword and shield. As we shall see, the deer hunter's name suits him well.

At many points in the film, Michael reminds us of the most typically American hero, who is perhaps most familiar from the film *Casablanca*. The everyday manners of this figure are cynical, independent, and somewhat disreputable. In fact, as we know, he lives by principles of decency and is prepared in extraordinary circumstances to sacrifice his own pursuits for the common good. Reluctant to become the hero of others, he always becomes the guardian of decent people when they truly need him.

Most American art presents this character in his maturity and reveals enough of him to provoke our admiration and respect. *The Deer Hunter* is unusual because it examines the difficulties of his genesis, and thus brings a special clarity to the complexities of his relations with the people who rely on his virtues. Its most valuable effect is

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to help us add a new understanding to our old admiration and respect.

*When we first meet Michael, we are confronted with a natural leader. He is more talented than those around him, and more reckless. But the skill and daring with which he drives his magnificent '59 Coupe de Ville show us that his talents and his inclinations have few outlets better than those he can find at the wheel of his automobile. He lives in a rather ordinary working-class community in Clairton, Pennsylvania; most of the men work in the steel mills, most of the women stay in the background.*

The mills themselves appear as a kind of earthly hell. The flames, the roaring noise, and the men's protective garments convey a little of the sense of modern warfare. But while war is the true earthly hell, life in the mills is routine, depressing, and without the fascination that real violence and sudden death can bring.

In the background, the steeple of the Russian Orthodox Church soars above the residential part of town with cool, distant grace. Early in the film, we enter the church to watch a wedding that is truly majestic in its setting and forms; but the magnificence of the ceremony appears slightly comic because religion is so small a part of the lives of the participants. The bride is pregnant, the bridegroom's mother is distraught, the priest is a cipher. Michael himself is openly amused by the rituals of piety, and he appears truly interested only in the maid of honor, Linda, who is also his best friend's girl.

Young and restless, Michael is eager to escape the suffocating life that Clairton and the mills impose. But he lacks the licentious and childish impatience for which so many of his contemporaries of the 1960s are still remembered. In the past he has lived for his occasional hunting trips to the mountains, and now he has enlisted in the Army. He wants adventure and challenge, but he betrays no desire to rebel against Clairton or to cut his ties with the town. The Army promises him a recognizable way out of his dreary and grimy home.

Michael's maintenance of his ties with Clairton is emphasized by the fact that two of his friends have enlisted with him for the war. Like him, they seem motivated by restlessness. This desire for adventure is a private passion, and to pursue it is to risk the protection and supports that we find in social life. These men hope to reduce that risk by leaving Clairton together and maintaining their friendship in the Army. In this they are doing nothing unusual or hard to explain; but they encounter unforeseen troubles in the war.

Can men form friendships that allow them to pursue their private passions while preserving the benefits of cooperation and social dependence? The Deer Hunter shows us difficulties that are easy to overlook; and it suggests that the solution is hard to accept and harder yet to bring about. The film's attention to this great question gives it a significance beyond the obvious issues that are raised by our country's experience in Vietnam or even in war generally.

II

*The film opens on the wedding day of Stevie, one of the enlistees. That morning, Michael proposes that he and his friends go on one last deer hunt before the departure for Vietnam; and he gives an odd reason for the proposal. Upon noticing an atmospheric phenomenon in which a kind of halo appears around the sun, he says: "Holy shit! You know what that is? Those are sun dogs . . . It means a blessing on the hunter sent by the Great Wolf to his children . . . It's an old Indian thing." This casual paganism is the first sign of how very different Michael is from those around him.*

That afternoon, Michael talks about the hunt with his roommate Nick; Nick, who has also enlisted in the Army, appears a little scandalized that they are discussing the hunt just before Stevie's wedding. In the course of the conversation, Michael makes a serious attempt to state who he is. He firmly asserts his preference for the mountains over the town; and he vehemently asserts the importance of killing a deer with one shot. According to Michael, this is the right way to take a deer, and the failure to accept the principle indicates a lack of human stature: "Two is pussy . . . 'One shot' is what it's all about. A deer has to be taken with one shot. I try to tell people that, but they don't listen." Nick indicates that his own interest in the "one shot" ethic has declined and that he has grown fonder of the natural beauties of the mountains.

Nevertheless, Michael insists that their other hunting companions are defective: "They're all assholes. I mean, I love 'em, they're great guys, but without you, I'd hunt alone. Seriously, that's what I'd do." Nick calls Michael a "control freak," without explaining how Michael's desire for control is excessive; Michael responds by saying, "I just don't like any surprises."

This scene foreshadows two of the major themes of the film: the ambiguity of Michael's relationships to his friends and the question of his own being. Quite clearly, he does think of his hunting companions as friends, but it seems that only his relationship with Nick makes his friendships with the others possible. Michael treats Nick as an equal because Nick has accepted the "one shot" ethic. And yet, Nick is apparently not content that just the two of them should hunt together, so Michael tolerates the presence of the inferior hunters for Nick's sake. Though Michael wishes to treat Nick as his equal, Nick is less committed than Michael to the "one shot" ethic and more emotionally dependent on those who do not accept it at all. Michael seeks to overlook this difference between himself and Nick; he apparently believes that they are or can be
equals in friendship if they maintain their allegiance to a common principle. Only later do we discover how crucial the dissimilarity between them is; but we are enabled here at the beginning of the film to see that it exists.

As Michael originally states the "one shot" principle, it appears to be a statement of the right way to hunt; his commitment to it appears as a striving for excellence, here for the hunter’s excellence. His vehement statement of the principle suggests that only ignorance or self-indulgence could account for the failure to adhere to it. If this is so, Nick's characterization of Michael as a "control freak" is misleading because it tends to confound excellence with power, self-control with control over other beings. Nevertheless, Michael shows that he shares Nick's confusion when he replies: "I just don't like no surprises."

Here Michael is obviously wrong about himself. One who dislikes surprises does not find his greatest satisfactions hunting wild game in the mountains; such activity is anything but routine. And one who wants to avoid surprises surely does not volunteer for hunting’s great counterpart, war. Michael may believe that he wants to do away with surprises, he may believe that he seeks power or control in the broadest sense. But if what he is truly seeking is excellence, he is a better man than he knows and so should prove able to learn. Before the film ends, Michael learns a great deal indeed.

During the subsequent hunting trip, Michael shows that his commitment to a standard of excellence is no mere private passion. A small base person named Stanley has forgotten to bring some essential piece of gear; he now expects to borrow Michael's spare. Stanley has a long history of such irresponsibility, and Michael refuses to lend him the gear. Stanley gets out a small revolver and insults Michael's manhood by commenting on his unaggressive behavior towards women. Michael, who happens to be holding his rifle, takes a cartridge from his pocket and very forcefully says: "Stanley, see this? This is this, This ain't something else. This is this. From now on you're on your own." Michael slams the round into its chamber, and the conflict continues until finally Nick intervenes; he chides Michael for his stubbornness and gives Stanley Michael's spare equipment. Michael angrily raises his rifle and fires into the distance. Just before the argument, Michael had noticed a deer running through the brush; no one else was watching.

"This is this" means first that weapons have purposes. They have their proper uses, for example in hunting deer; and they have their typical abuses, as Stanley's behavior vividly illustrates. Michael must sense that this does not apply only to weapons. Perhaps he sees it most clearly in weapons because they are men's most necessary tools; the way he drove his fancy Cadillac is enough to remind us that an instrument's proper use is not always so easy to see. Unlike most people, Michael insists on this standard of what is proper when he can discern it and seeks it when he cannot. The insistence is shown to us here at the beginning of the film; his seeking will be the spring of his later education.

Michael's speech to Stanley has a further meaning implied in the conclusion, "From now on you're on your own." Those who are too ignorant or self-indulgent to confront the world as it is become irresponsible. Like Stanley, they tend to become derelict and apt to do unintended damage to themselves and others; as a result, such people force others to take responsibility for them. Michael would refuse to tolerate Stanley's excess, but Nick interferes: to prevent the group from breaking into factions, Nick has to deflect Michael from the natural course of his principled intolerance. In frustration, Michael appears to violate his own principle by firing his rifle without a target. Were it not for his friendship with Nick, Michael might become a solitary hunter; as we shall see, it will be hard for him to become anything else.

During the film, Michael becomes larger; by the end, he would no longer insist so harshly on the "one shot" ethic and he would not make such truthful but difficult assertions as "this is this." But though he does undergo an education, the film presents no educator: nowhere in The Deer Hunter is there any man better than Michael or any indication that such a man could exist. His great triumph lies in his later mastery or education of himself, but the film leaves no doubt that he is superior to ordinary men from the beginning.

From the first, Michael is highly spirited; he is eager for war, sure of his strength, and remarkably capable of doing without the company of women. But in addition to this raw virtue, Michael has a drive to understand what he sees and hears.

An example of this drive occurs when Michael and the other enlisted men, fairly drunk and full of bravado, encounter a Green Beret at the wedding reception. Michael inquires about Vietnam and Nick expresses his eagerness for danger; Stevie echoes Nick's sentiments. When the soldier snubs them by refusing to say anything but "Fuck it," Michael begins repeating the formulation in different tones of voice, as though he is trying to discover what it means: "Fuck it...Fuck it." Finally, in a simultaneously challenging and curious tone, he asks: "Fuck who?" While Nick and Stevie seem surprised and worried, Michael seems almost intrigued. He is sufficiently eager and indelicate to interrogate a veteran about his experiences, so he must have some of the illusions common to spirited men who have not seen combat. We would expect someone as combative as Michael to respond to the man's rebuff with mere anger or perhaps with awe. But Michael wonders about the meaning of the man's behavior.

It is very rare to find a man as self-assertive as Michael and also so ready to learn. The film offers no explanation for the cause of this superiority and so encourages us to infer that it has come about by nature. By calling atten-
tion in this way to the natural inequalities among men, the film commits a breach of the etiquette of our time. Eventually the film suggests that these inequalities result in a politically relevant hierarchy of human types; this challenge to one of the deepest prejudices of our time has probably caused much of the misinterpretation to which the film has been subjected. That challenge, however, is neither idle nor gratuitous. Events have made it necessary, and the film is careful to remind us of that fact.

Stevie, the boy who marries just before leaving for war, is the most ordinary of the three main characters. He has no great strengths or failings, no burning passions or remarkable idiosyncracies. He is decent, but ineffectual—a natural follower and indeed a natural loser. He loves his fiancée and insists that she loves him. However sincere he may be, his hopes seem preposterous since he has never slept with this girl who he knows is pregnant. Stevie appears to be her dupe and perhaps also the dupe of the child’s father; later we learn that the father is almost certainly Nick. In war, Stevie proves incompetent, unlucky, and weak. Michael repeatedly must save his life; and at least once, he has to take a terrible risk with his own life in order to rescue Stevie. Stevie loses an arm and both legs in the war; and even after they return to America, Michael has to carry him from the deadening comfort of the V.A. hospital and force him to rejoin the town. Time after time we are reminded that merely decent people cannot take care of themselves.

Someone might protest against the harshness of this view. But though the film does expose Stevie’s shortcomings, it leads the viewer to see a problem rather than an indictment. We might not have to emphasize Stevie’s weakness if his decency had sufficient support in the institutions of his community. The weakness of those institutions is the great problem raised by the film’s treatment of Stevie.

The film opens with a tanker-truck rolling into Clairton at dawn, reminding us that the towns of this country are connected to one another by close ties of economic interdependence. But besides this, what signs of a national community can we find in the film? We see a football game on television and we hear popular music on jukeboxes; and there is a veterans’ organization, whose only role in the film is to provide the ball where the wedding reception is held. These shared amusements mark the people of Clairton as typically American; they are typical, too, in their lack of curiosity about the nation’s public affairs. Working people, without much schooling, they do not have much leisure or incentive to enlighten themselves about the world beyond their city. Certainly America’s political institutions encourage this insularity. With our complicated federal system and our traditions of local independence, we have always inclined towards the sort of provincialism that we see in Clairton. The fact that this narrowness so often seems benign does not imply that the nation as a whole is either unified or well-ordered. Our own recollections of the late 1960s should be enough to remind us that the strength of this country’s social fabric cannot be taken for granted.

Despite the lack of interest in public affairs, Clairton is supplying three volunteers for the government’s war. Obviously, then, the people here must feel that they belong to the nation and that they owe her their allegiance. But the United States has always been too large and too diverse and too young to draw its greatest strength from patriotic sentiment. At the wedding reception, the bandleader introduces the three young men who are leaving “to proudly serve their country”; everyone listens in respectful silence, and afterwards they cheer. But none of the volunteers ever indicates that his enlistment has been motivated by a sense of duty or political responsibility. Patriotism lives in Clairton, but the people seem not to be formed by it any more than by discussion of the affairs of the day. And again, we can easily remind ourselves that patriotism did not flourish during the 1960s in America’s more enlightened and vainly cosmopolitan cities.

Our political tradition, of course, has never sought the sort of national enthusiasm to whose absence the film directs our attention. In this country, we have expected political liberty to bring the greatest possible freedom from government intrusion into our private affairs and voluntary social activities. This proud tradition of individuality and local independence has always acknowledged that direct national needs are the rightful concern of the central government; accordingly, we hear of no draft-dodging in Clairton. But the cultivation of citizens and decent human beings like Stevie has not been regarded as the necessary or proper concern of the government, except through the local public schools. Moral education has been left largely to the church and family; it is there that we must look for the institutional underpinnings of the decency that Stevie represents.

The looming presence of the Russian Church in Clairton reminds us that Christianity is a religion with universal claims. It addresses us from beyond all political horizons and promises to provide a framework for human decency that is both lofter and more solid than that provided by any merely political order. But the church in Clairton fails miserably at its first task: helping its adherents to see the world as coherent and ultimately benign. Stevie’s mother is extremely distraught about the behavior of her son, who is marrying a pregnant girl and volunteering for war. Just before the wedding the church approaches her priest as he mechanically prepares the altar for the service, and tearfully appeals to him: “I do not understand, Father. I understand nothing anymore. Nothing. Can you explain? Can anyone explain?” The priest stiffly embraces her but he has nothing to say. When priests can no longer even attempt to answer the most pressing questions of an ordinary middle-aged woman, the church can
hardly be thought to play a significant part in the moral education of the young. A church that cannot even articulate a defense of Stevie’s conduct can hardly provide the basis for cultivating and protecting the kind of human character that he displays. And one would have trouble showing that any major church has recently been doing better than this one does in Clairton.

What little family life we see in The Deer Hunter is a mess. Stevie and his mother are without a common ground of discourse, so they only quarrel; Nick’s girlfriend is beaten by her drunken father; Stevie’s wife goes quietly mad while he is away in the Army. Neither Nick nor Michael seems to have any family at all.

Early in the film we see Stevie instinctively reaching for the stability of family life: deprived of the psychological protection that a strong home offers, he anxiously tries to establish a family of his own. But his attempt is doomed. He seems to believe that a ceremony is sufficient to establish a marriage, for he foolishly leaves for war a day or so after the wedding. But even without this fantastic misjudgment, the prognosis for his marriage would be very bleak. His bride’s pregnancy directs our attention to the disorder in the social institutions that surround and affect the family. A leading purpose of the institution of marriage is to fix responsibility for the care of children. When we see as decent a man as Stevie reduced to undertaking responsibility for some other man’s child, we have to conclude that the private behavior of women has broken loose from the restraints that are needed in any political community. We might believe that he is just being generous if we were given any indication that he had much chance of finding a more respectable wife. Since we are not, we have to see his marriage as a pathetic, futile gesture against the social disintegration that began to become evident in the nation at large during the years when this story takes place. Because it points so clearly at the weaknesses of the family, church, and government, the film implies that those institutions are not likely sources of the social re-integration that is so obviously desirable. And the film certainly does not suggest that men like Stevie are plausible agents of improvement.

Unlike Stevie, Nick is neither ineffectual nor very decent. And unlike Stevie, he is quite handsome and graceful. We have seen that he is not as emotionally self-sufficient as Michael. Neither is he as competent. Michael accomplishes feats with his car that Nick did not think possible; Nick loses to Michael at pool, and Michael takes the buck that we see them tracking together. But more important, and despite his admiration for Michael, Nick is more irresponsible than his friend. We can see this most clearly in their relations with Linda, Nick’s girl.

As we observed earlier, Michael’s attention at the wedding is directed most forcefully at Linda. His face shows neither lust nor flirtation: he looks intently and thoughtfully at her, as though he is powerfully aware of some ignorance or other defect in himself. This expression comes to his face again when he sees her at the reception. To their surprise and embarrassment, Nick encourages them to dance together. We see right afterwards that Nick did this in order to free himself to pursue a sad and lonely looking girl nearby; and then we see him repulse an earnest male friend in order to toy with this vulnerable girl. While Michael is with Linda, he seems uneasy with himself in a way we have not seen before; he appears caught between his attraction to her and his loyalty to Nick. He has been drinking, and just as his attraction to Linda seems about to win out, Nick interrupts them and she hurries out of the room.

Unlike Michael, Nick treats Linda carelessly, as though she is merely one of several goods that he wants but by which he does not want to be confined. After the disturbing encounter with the Green Beret, he proposes marriage to her; when she eagerly accepts, he qualifies the proposal so severely that it becomes merely hypothetical. Disappointed, she remarks: “Anything that goes through your mind comes out your mouth.” After the reception, Nick tells Michael of his attachment to Clairton and his fear of not being able to return there from the war. We can guess that his attitude towards Linda is similar. He wants what she offers and he fears losing her forever, but he desperately wants something more; and he senses that Michael can lead him to a better life than Clairton and Linda promise. Were it not for Michael, Nick might attempt, like Stevie, to arrange for a comfortable and regular existence; but in the presence of Michael, even Stevie is drawn away from Clairton to the war.

Though Nick’s behavior towards women is more obviously blameworthy than Stevie’s, Nick also senses more clearly the real difficulties of doing well. We saw before that Stevie’s decency is bound up with his weakness and blindness. Nick, on the contrary, is strongly aware of the dangers of leaving Clairton and Linda. While alone with Michael after the reception, he proclaims his love for Clairton and asks Michael to promise not to leave him in Vietnam. In order to permit Nick to keep his pride after such a humbling request, Michael replies with a casual formulation; but his tone of voice is quite solemn: “Hey Nicky, you got it.”

At this moment, Michael’s dilemma becomes more clear. As we know from Stanley’s insults on the hunting trip, Michael does not pursue women in the careless way that Clairton’s customs encourage. But his reluctance to pursue Linda stems mainly from the conflicting claim of his friendship with Nick. This suggests that Michael has a normal male attraction to women, and that he restrains it for the sake of his friendships with men. When we recall that he would rather hunt alone than with men he disdains, it appears that he is seeking in human relationships primarily the equality that might foster sharing of the best
experiences. The experiences that now seem most important to him are hunting and its great brother, war. Michael knows that his attraction to these pursuits is essentially male; hence he rather reasonably sets his attraction to women aside for the sake of his friendships with men, and especially with Nick. And as his promise to Nick reveals, Michael is ready to commit himself to those friendships as firmly as one would commit oneself to marriage.

But Nick's need to hear Michael make the promise reveals the difficulty with Michael's reasoning. Nick shows here that he is very dependent on Michael's strength, so it is unlikely that they will prove equal in war or able truly to share its experiences. In view of that, it might make sense for Michael to reconsider the subordination of his interest in women. By the end of the film, he does so. But it is a mark of his nobility that he refuses to accept the implications of Nick's inferiority as easily as our argument suggests that he might.

III

AT THE END OF THE HUNTING TRIP, the men return to a tavern that one of them owns. The hour is late, they are tired and alone with each other. The tavern owner, who sings in the church choir and regrets being too unhealthy for military service, plays a Chopin nocturne at the piano. The music soothes the men and provides a moment of peace between the hunt and the coming trip to war. With an unforgettable rudeness, the film cuts suddenly to a deafening, fiery helicopter assault on a Vietnamese village. This transition vividly suggests the painful and exhilarating shift that soldiers experience when they truly leave civilized life by going into battle. Michael's education begins here in Vietnam.

At the scene of the assault, we find Michael lying amid the rubble and corpses; apparently there has been a firefight, he has been injured, and is just now regaining consciousness. As he comes to, he sees a solitary enemy soldier hunting for survivors. Finding some civilians hiding in a bunker, the soldier throws a grenade in among them. By chance, one woman survives and emerges with a child in her arms; the enemy coolly machine-guns her and the child as she runs from the bunker. While this is happening, Michael grabs a flamethrower and charges him. Though too late to save any of the civilians, Michael sets the killer afire. And though the soldier has just signaled to some other troops, Michael pays no attention to his own safety; now in a frenzy he shoots the enemy again and again, even after the monster is obviously dead. Michael's anger and disgust seem to have taken control of his conduct; but though his act itself is neither moderate nor beautiful, he is obviously moved by a deep revulsion at the shamefully unnecessary violence.

As in the scene where he responds to Stanley's misuse of weapons, Michael loses some of his own self-control when faced with an abysmally indecent man. But here the goodness of Michael's anger is more clear. Michael is not one of those eerie aficionados who are fascinated with war, but neither does he seek to retain the equanimity and outward dignity appropriate to most civilian situations. In this scene, Michael seems very disturbed—even slightly deranged—but the cool efficiency of the enemy soldier indicates the danger of carelessly importing moral standards from one world to another.

While Michael is engaged with the murderer, more American troops arrive by helicopter. The group includes Nick and Stevie, and they are all taken prisoner shortly thereafter. We now watch the Viet Cong torture American and South Vietnamese P.O.W.s by forcing them to play Russian roulette against each other; the captors amuse themselves by placing bets on the matches. While waiting their turns, Stevie and Nick both lose their composure. Stevie becomes hysterical and Michael tries to calm him; Nick also needs Michael's help but he cannot speak loudly enough to ask for it. When Michael and Stevie are made to play against each other, Stevie flinches and his cowardice saves him from destroying himself; but the Viet Cong just throw him into a pit to die. Perceiving the hopelessness of allowing the games to continue as they have been arranged, Michael conceives a bold but very dangerous scheme. He persuades Nick that they should play against each other with extra cartridges in the revolver; he hopes to clear two of the chambers, and then use the gun against the captors. Quite against the odds, the trick works. But Nick has to be coaxed and bullied through the game: though it is his only chance of surviving, he does not have the strength to put his life so clearly in the hands of an unfavorable chance. Michael is at least as averse to dying as Stevie or Nick, but he can play if he has to; and he can arrange an even more dangerous version for the sake of overcoming the game.

Russian roulette will become the movie's most insistent and memorable metaphor, and through it we can discover some of what Michael learns. In an obvious way, the game begins as an image of the experience of modern battle. Nearly all articulate combat veterans speak of the terrible disorientation caused by living where men die frequently, violently, and with seeming total randomness. Some men go mad, most become superstitious, and virtually all become cynical about the moral standards that regulate peacetime life. The horror of this experience seems to arise largely from the fact that other human beings are intentionally causing all this random death—and perhaps too from the soldiers' awareness of their own active role in maintaining the hostilities that make war what it is. Russian roulette is an especially rich image because it emphasizes the participation of the victims in an activity that makes little sense in terms of their most basic self-interest.
Through this metaphor, the film turns our attention away from the grand sweep of battle to the great psychological demands of combat. Here we find the basis of the film's statements about human excellence and its bearing on our political life.

Since war cannot be done away with, there have to be men who play that form of Russian roulette. The most common way to play is probably Stevie's. Men like him can be lured or pressed into the arena, and they can be pressed and coaxed to participate up to a certain point. But once they have to face what warfare brings, they instinctively recoil and seek to escape it as quickly as possible. In the terrifying moments before he has to play, Stevie screams: "I don't belong here... I want to go home." Though one's sense of natural justice grants his proposition and makes one wish that his desire be satisfied, the conditions of battle usually allow very little scope for acting on such sentiments. At least in part, Stevie's manifest unfitness for war must account for the extraordinary risks that Michael later takes for his sake; but after Stevie has been thrown into the pit, Michael orders Nick to forget about him and concentrate on the requirements of his own survival. Nick thinks that Michael is playing God, but his command has to be obeyed if Stevie himself is to have any chance of survival.

Nick seems less weak than Stevie and he has a closer friendship with Michael, so Michael chooses him to play the more difficult form of the game. In order to enable himself to go through with his plan, Michael deliberately generates a terrific, concentrated hatred towards the captors. This hatred is not petty, but it is necessary, as we can see by contrasting it with Nick's paralysis. Though Michael tries to bring out courage in his friend, Nick's attention is too focused on himself to allow him either to hate or to respond calmly to the demands of the situation; even with Michael's encouragement, he almost fails to act. Michael's hatred gives him the detachment from himself that is needed to perform the unnatural act required in Russian roulette.

As in the earlier combat scene, Michael's anger is the engine of an appropriate though ugly action. Under Michael's governance, Nick also manages to perform the necessary act, but he is obviously acting beyond his own capacities: without Michael and the inhuman ferocity that he calls out of himself, Nick would be as helpless as Stevie. Here Michael's spiritedness—his violent and even savage self-assertion—is irrefutably justified. It should not diminish our sense of that justification to point out that Michael's hatred is not autonomous. His intelligence is responsible for the plan that he executes, and his savage anger is therefore directed by a superior principle; but only through his brute courage does Michael's intelligence come to rule him. Nick too can understand what needs to be done; only Michael's stronger reserves of self-assertiveness and even brutality save him from falling into Nick's confusion, self-absorption, and impotence. And lest we think that Nick is somehow finer or more human, the film shows him furiously beating one of the Viet Cong corpses after the danger is past.

After their escape, the three soldiers get separated. A helicopter tries to pick them all up, but Stevie falls into a river and Michael jumps off after him. Stevie's legs are badly injured; Michael carries him out of the jungle and turns him over to some South Vietnamese troops who have a jeep. At this point we lose sight of them, and the film shifts to Nick's experiences in Saigon. Several scenes take place in which Nick shows signs of intense inner disturbance—he speaks only with difficulty, weeps easily, looks twice at Linda's picture, and imagines once that he sees Michael in a Saigon bar. Finally an urban Frenchman lures him into a house where people amuse themselves by betting on Russian roulette matches between men who play for money. Though Nick does not see him, Michael is there watching the games. Unlike most of the other people present, Michael seems neither excited nor indifferent; his face reveals an intelligent, concentrated, absolutely serious-looking. At this moment we know that he has been trying since we last saw him to understand what he has been through. As soon as he sees Nick, his concentration vanishes and he reaches towards his friend.

When Nick sees the game, he frantically interrupts it; after grabbing the revolver, he dry-fires at one of the players, dry-fires at himself, and rushes out of the building. Michael chases after, only to see the Frenchman driving Nick away in a car; with a gesture of final hopeless abandon, Nick throws a fistful of money into the air above the crowded street.

After what Nick has gone through, the sight of men taking these risks without compulsion is too much to bear. Nick's character has always been ambiguous or undefined: in Clairton he was discontented with the goods within his reach, and yet unable to find principles or direction for himself. Like most people whose finest gift is a longing for the good, Nick has tended to be dominated by the most fascinating influence in his surroundings. So long as that influence was Michael, Nick might safely have sought the noble life; but once he faces Russian roulette without Michael's help, Nick cannot resist its gruesome magnetism. That magnetism is founded in war's tantalizing suggestion that nothing good can stand up in the violent onslaught of brute chance; when Nick sees Russian roulette played voluntarily in the midst of civilization, he cannot resist the implication that human life is no more than warfare, that everything is permitted, that nothing is of enduring worth. The film later confirms this scene's suggestion that Nick has just given himself over to a career as a Russian roulette player; from now on he will play for money and for love of the game. Like other men who become enthralled by the spirit of war, Nick will live
on for awhile, but only as a kind of ghost. He becomes indifferent to his own life and his own good; he moves in our world but his eyes are open only to the incoherencies that we all naturally resist. As a human being, Nick is now dead.

Unlike Nick, who is captivated by Russian roulette, Michael appears here as a student of the game. In its first use in the film, Russian roulette was a metaphor for war as experienced by ordinary men in battle. Most soldiers experience combat as something for which they are drafted or for which they find that they have imprudently volunteered. The sight of war has its charms, but these are accessible chiefly to its observers, just as the pleasures of Russian roulette are available to the spectators who bet on the games. Seen from a distance, both follow fairly regular patterns or rules and hence have a kind of coherence. But these patterns so threaten the self-preservation of the participants that voluntary acceptance of life under them appears to most men in combat as prima facie evidence of insanity. This should not be surprising since the love of living there is indeed conclusive evidence of insanity.

In Saigon, Michael returns to Russian roulette as a spectator, but we do not see him betting on the outcome and we see him no love for the game he is watching. Since he has not simply turned away from the game, he must know that he may play again. Since he betrays no desire to do so, he must also believe that playing can be justified without reference to maxims of insanity. To see war as necessary and yet not as an end in itself is easy for those who have little experience of it; it is not anticipating too much to say that Michael's special excellence is to live as a warrior without ceasing to govern himself. He differs from enthusiastic mercenaries because he does not love war; he differs from merely dutiful soldiers because he does not take his bearings from the goals offered in civilian life. We saw Michael exercising the warrior's courage almost by nature in the first Russian roulette scene; his looks in the Saigon scene indicate how difficult it is for him to include such activity in his way of life; the moderation he displays here enables him to appear in the film's third and final section as the man whom justice would require to rule in Clairton.

IV

When Michael returns to Clairton, he goes on a hunting trip with his old friends; Stevie is too crippled to come along and Nick is missing in Vietnam. During the trip, Stanley begins stupidly threatening another man with a revolver that he seems to believe is unloaded. At the sight of this, Michael becomes very angry; he takes the pistol away, discovers that it is loaded, fires a bullet into the ceiling of the cabin, and removes the cartridges from the gun. He then chambers one round, spins the cylinder, points the gun at Stanley's head, and pulls the trigger. The gun does not discharge.

By our usual standards, Michael's conduct in this third Russian roulette scene is unreasonable. For how could the attempt to educate a person as vile as Stanley be worth the risk of committing murder? In part, Michael's action may be an unthinking passionate objection to Stanley's carelessness with human life; to the extent that this is so, his conduct would resemble Nick's interruption of the game in Saigon. But what Michael does is more measured and purposeful. Unlike the players in the Saigon house, Stanley is a danger primarily to innocent people; further, Michael is tied to most of Stanley's potential victims, and even to Stanley himself, by some ties of friendship; and unlike Nick, Michael does not turn the gun on himself. Above all, Michael's act is not a gesture, as Nick's is; it certainly is dramatic, but the drama points very clearly to a simple and important lesson. After Stanley survives—and the odds were quite high that he would—it is very unlikely that he will forget what Michael has taught. At least he will probably stop playing with guns, and he may even be moved to begin living in a generally more subdued and responsible way. At the end of the film, his careful treatment of Stevie's wife suggests that he may be rising a little from his habitual petty vanity and self-absorption.

To whatever extent Stanley is improved, we can attribute it to Michael's deliberate extra-legal coercion on the hunting trip. Michael has stepped outside the law to exercise a rule that justly belongs to him; the film clearly and correctly implies that unless men like Michael rule, there will be no rest from the ills occasioned by the base and irresponsible. Since American institutions make little provision for such rule, private justice like Michael's can be seen as a beneficial supplement to our officially political life. But the unlawfulness and riskiness of Michael's open assertion of rule over Stanley remind us not to expect that such rule will ever play a powerful part in our government; and the dangers of trying to institute such domination should be obvious to us all. At the end of the film, we shall be able to discover Michael's substitute for open rule. But in order to appreciate that conclusion, we need to re-examine Michael himself.

Let us recall that the insanity of war is most evident when one considers the threat war poses to the combatants' self-preservation. Any justification of war requires the introduction of considerations beyond the preservation of the combatants' lives. For them to accept such a justification, they have to see their self-interest in broader terms than those comprehended in self-preservation; and rarely, if ever, can their motives for fighting be quite the same as those of the army or nation as a whole. The same difficulty arises in explaining Michael's participation in the game of Russian roulette with Stanley. From the narrow perspective of self-interest his behavior is senseless, even demented: he has very little to fear from Stanley, and much to lose if Stanley dies by his hand. When we examine Michael's conduct in the light of the common interest
of Stanley and his potential victims, we can see the good in what he does. But why should Michael risk himself for these others? The fact that he displays such strong anger in this scene suggests that something of his own is at stake. In order to see what that might be, we have to look once again at Michael as he is alone.

Just before the Russian roulette scene with Stanley, we watch Michael in solitary pursuit of a handsome buck. After some time, the animal stops at the edge of a clearing. Michael draws a bead on it, and we expect to see his “one shot” virtue reconfirmed. But just as he seems about to take the shot, he jerks the rifle up, and shoots over the deer. He appears agitated, and he asks in a strained voice: “Okay?” Though he seems to be talking to the deer, the question must really be addressed to himself because we then hear him answer in a long drawn-out shout: “Okay.”

While the answer is being given, we do not see Michael himself but look instead at the surrounding landscape. As it sometimes happens in the mountains, the shot echoes back: “Okay.” This echo suggests that Michael finds himself in accord with nature.

Throughout the film, Michael has been a laconic man. The fact of the film’s title establishes the importance of this scene in which Michael chooses not to slay his deer; but the one word he utters offers little indication of his motive for throwing away the shot. The significance of the scene lies partly in its mystery. From this point forward, Michael’s motives are not explained to the other characters and they have to remain somewhat obscure to us, too. Fully to overcome this obscurity would require knowing all that Michael knows, and perhaps more; the film does not pretend to provide the viewer with that knowledge, even for a moment. But we can attempt to see why this obscurity is necessary.

If we think back to the first section of the film, we can see Michael has a kind of prisoner of his natural superiority. His dominant impulse was the masculine love of hunting and war; his superiority emerged in his great competence at those activities. Had he pursued his passion for the development of his masculine superiority, he might have become a solitary hunter or a mercenary soldier; had he pursued this passion in his relations with his friends, he would have tended to become a despot of one kind or another. At times his speech suggested that masculine self-sacrificing superiority is what he most desired: “Two is pussy; ‘one shot’ is what it’s all about . . . This is this. From now on you’re on your own.” But we never see him live as though he completely accepts his own principles. He is prevented from doing so by a different, and not specifically masculine, impulse: the desire for friendship, the desire to share the best activities with other human beings.

Michael set aside his interest in women in order to pursue that friendship with Nick in which he hoped to share the most masculine activities. This project stopped when Nick broke under the pressure of war. One might think that this merely proves Nick’s inferiority, and that Michael should wait for friendship until he meets a man truly like himself. His failure to do so indicates that he no longer thinks that the exercise of masculine virtue is an activity that can be shared among equals.

Is friendship then impossible? Michael relaxes his “one shot” ethic when he spares the deer, and he spends most of the rest of the film caring for the people of Clairton. His masculine virtue enables him to help them; but that same virtue conflicts with his decision to care for them rather than to despise or try to dominate them. The echo in the hunting scene vaguely hints that nature supports his decision, but the decision is also clearly a difficult one for him to make. And we simply do not know why he makes it. From this point forward, we must confine ourselves largely to examining the effects of Michael’s activities in his new role as guardian-hero.

When Michael puts himself into a position to kill the deer and then spares it, he enters into a peculiar relationship with the animal. While it had previously been merely a natural being, it now owes its freedom to Michael’s choice. Despite the deer’s ignorance of Michael’s responsibility for its future existence and activity, Michael now rules it more nobly than he would have had he chosen to destroy it. Similarly, Michael’s rule over his decent Clairton friends will be much less visible to them than his direct but temporary domination over Stanley. For that reason he will be able to begin establishing a community rather than a mere reflection of the natural hierarchy among human beings.

This change in Michael’s relation to the people of Clairton first emerges through the replacement of Nick by Linda as the link between Michael and the others. When Michael first returns to his hometown, he avoids a party at his house arranged in his honor. Linda has been living in the house, and he goes there after the others have left in the morning. When the two meet, there are moments of awkwardness, just as one would expect. During this first meeting, Linda brings out a sweater she has made for Nick, and she tries to see whether it could fit Michael; it is not the right size, but she is tearfully confident that she can alter it. Very clearly, Linda has little notion of the important and unalterable differences between the two men; since she cannot truly appreciate what Michael is, her present urge to give up Nick does not indicate that any great change has taken place in her since the beginning of the film. When Michael offers to escort her to her place of employment, she reveals both her appreciation of his outward appearance and her inability to understand what lies below his surface: “Mike, you’re so weird. You’re always such a gentleman.”

Like Nick, Michael has been attracted to Linda from the start. Nick carried a picture of her to Vietnam, and we saw him look at it twice just before his breakdown. Michael carried the same picture, but we do not see him
look at it until just before he returns to see her. With Nick missing and probably dead, Michael now tentatively begins to reopen his own relationship with her. Though we might have expected him to be offended by her confusion in the scene with the sweater, he soon chooses to offer a most generous and helpful interpretation of her ambivalence: “Linda, I just wanted to say how sorry I am about Nick. I know how much you love him; I know it could never have been the same....” We can be sure that if Nick were to return, Michael would try gracefully to avoid standing between him and Linda. By paying such respect to the prior claims of the old relationship between Nick and Linda, Michael acts to preserve Linda’s sense of the worth of such claims. We know enough about Nick and Linda to know that they are not the source of whatever strength such claims might have; we saw before that Nick’s commitment to her was less than wholehearted, and the film hints that she has not been faithful during his absence. But Michael knows enough about the fragility of the bonds among human beings to be careful with those that exist; he is opposed to overturning them for the sake of what might be a specious improvement.

Because Linda is a woman and understands little about Michael, she is impatient to feel the security that she hopes he can offer: very soon, she desperately proposes that they comfort each other by sleeping together. He seems unoffended, but he only reluctantly allows her to accompany him to his motel room; and we are permitted to infer that he tries to comfort her without accepting her offer of sex. Besides the problems that he must so clearly recognize in establishing intimate ties with people who cannot adequately understand him, Michael has just learned that Stevie is alive and back in the United States. Just as Michael seeks to help Linda preserve a healthy respect for her past love, he must recognize the possibility that she could undermine his loyalties to the friends who followed him to war.

After the hunting trip and the encounter with the deer, Michael returns to Linda and offers himself without his previous reluctance; he now takes her for the first time to his own bed at home. After she falls asleep, he looks at the hunting trophies in his room and at the mills in the distance; now, finally, he goes out to visit Stevie. In war, Michael was Stevie’s protector. But in civilian life, friendships between men require that the natural distinctions among them be very much obscured; this is what made his relations with other men so difficult before he went to war. Michael’s new friendship with Linda, which is based on the clear and acknowledged natural distinction between the sexes, allows him to begin taking care of Stevie in the artificial circumstances of civilized life. There is order in Michael’s relationships with the people of Clairton, an order made possible by his decision to relax his insistence on the primacy of his masculine, self-serving virtue.

When he visits Stevie in the hospital, Michael learns that Stevie’s wife has been receiving small carved elephants and large amounts of cash from Saigon; she forwards the souvenirs and money to her crippled husband, maliciously enclosing it all in socks. Michael immediately knows that Nick must still be alive; though he does not tell Stevie or anyone else, he also knows that Nick must be getting the money by playing Russian roulette. Nick’s sudden intrusion disrupts the order of Michael’s relationships in Clairton.

Saigon is about to fall to the Communists and the city is afire with the frenzy of America’s final evacuation. Bombardment by enemy artillery provides the flames that light the nights; the harsh light of day exposes the desperate fever to escape among those who sense what the victors from the north will bring. Somewhere in this doomed city Nick, or what is left of him, continues to pursue his private obsession. Michael is intent on finding him, and by some miracle of cunning and daring, gets into this earthly hell. He appears as resolute—almost as monomaniacal—as a man in Nick’s occupation would have to be.

In the course of tracking Nick, Michael encounters the Frenchman who seduced him into his present career. During their first conversation, Michael says that he wants to find Nick in order to play Russian roulette against him. Since we know that he has no such desire, we have to wonder why he expresses it. He could as plausibly have said that he wanted to see the famous American play the game; in fact, one would think that the European could more easily have understood such a motive. But Michael must know more about Russian roulette than we do. The first time he played, he not only won but he overcame the game itself. We have seen him studying its mercenary variety, and we have seen him use the game as a tool of education in the United States. What began as a metaphor for war has been subtly expanded so that it points towards greater questions about the responsibilities of human beings to themselves and one another. By so mastering the game that he can play it usefully in civilian life, Michael revealed that his own relation to it is one of aversion and attachment. He never shows any love for this purest form of exposing one’s own well-being to dark and uncontrollable forces. In this way he has shown that his early statement about his aversion to surprises has a core of truth: in his heart, Michael has remained more a deer hunter than a warrior. At the same time, he appears to have concluded that bravery and skill in Russian roulette are conditions of the excellence he has always sought. He plays it not only when it is obviously necessary, but also—as with Stanley—when he judges that it can bring some important good. In the last deer-hunting scene, Michael appeared to turn away from the solitary pursuit of his own excellence; he is a member of the Army’s elite Rangers, and the film gives no indication that he intends to leave the military now that the war is over.
Knowing so much about Russian roulette, or war broadly conceived, Michael has to know that Nick's life since he disappeared will have put a great deal of distance between the two of them. We see him taking great risks to find Nick; he must know that he will have to take greater risks to bring Nick back. Michael has gone into hell after his friend and he must somehow foresee that he is going to have to play yet another round of Russian roulette before he returns.

When Michael finds him, Nick shows no recognition. He is intent on the present; except for the strange fact that he sends elephants and his winnings to Stevie's wife, he seems to have lost all touch with his past. In a desperate attempt to give Nick back his memory—to bring this ghost back to human life—Michael arranges to play the next game against him.

When he first came into the house where Nick plays, Michael had been visibly distressed to see another player kill himself. Now, at the table with Nick, Michael begins urgently trying to talk him back to himself: "We don't have much time.... Don't do it." When the spectators have finished placing their bets, Nick still has not heard Michael. Nick takes the first turn; the hammer drops on an empty chamber. Since more speech has failed, Michael picks up the pistol and asks, "Is this what you want?" After saying sadly, "I love you, Nick," Michael's face twists up with a terrible dread that we have seen in no professional Russian roulette player. He puts the revolver to his head and pulls the trigger; again, the weapon fails to discharge. But Nick remains oblivious to Michael's efforts to reach him. As Nick picks up the gun again, Michael grabs his wrist, sees track marks on his arm, and begins talking urgently of home, of their friendship, of the mountains. Now at last, what Nick would most remember about Michael returns to him: he says, "One instant," laughs softly, and blows his brains out. Screaming with grief, Michael grabs the corpse and starts shaking it in an instinctive effort to bring it back to life.

This scene invites us to interpret it in terms of Michael's love for Nick. That love is surely what enables him to risk himself in the game. But what is the basis and framework of the love? Michael must know how small are the chances that Nick could be retrieved from the living death in which he finds him. By virtue of what principle did he take upon himself with no visible hesitation this illicit 12,000-mile trip to hell in search of a man who is not sane enough to return from there by his own will? And by virtue of what principle does Michael risk Nick's life in the round of Russian roulette they play?

In this scene, love is the passion that carries Michael through the hardest part of the game, just as hatred or anger carried him through the previous games he played. But in no case do these passions simply rule Michael's conduct. In the other games, Michael was ruled by his insight into the justification for his participation. Here the only visible justification for the risks he takes is the old promise he made to Nick not to leave him in Vietnam. By holding himself and Nick to that promise, Michael affirms the gravity of a human relationship to which he has committed the word of his honor; he thus establishes the superiority of the relationship implied by a promise over either of the human beings who participate in that relationship. We see in this last Russian roulette scene how much Michael dislikes what he has to do; not once does he seem tempted to protect his own human feelings with callous notions about imperatives of abstract duty. Still, he does set the authority of his promise above himself and others, and he thereby brings that authority into being. The Deer Hunter correctly teaches us that love and decency would not exist as goods were it not for this harsh—and painful—insistence on self-respect.

As we saw before, Michael's earliest and highest hopes have not been met: he has not found his equal and has not found perfected friendship. Nor has his struggle against the rule of chance in human affairs been wholly successful. It would be hard to imagine a man who takes firmer responsibility for himself and for his own activity; because of this he can be said to have done as much as one can do to prevent chance from living within oneself. But in order to achieve this victory, he has had to live where chance does virtually rule: he has had to face enemies out beyond the protecting conventions and institutions of civil society. In the film this is presented through his experience of war; but the contrast between him and the other two soldiers shows that what truly distinguishes him is his understanding of what war reveals about himself and others. To reach that just estimation of men, Michael has had to take enormous risks and exercise great courage and moderation. Men with his natural talents and inclinations are rare to begin with, and they are more likely than most others to die in battle. The blessing of his survival will enable him to help others more than they can fully appreciate.

The story ends in Clarks. After Nick's funeral, his friends go to the old tavern to have breakfast alone together. The scene is similar to the one just before the first transition to Vietnam. But this time it is day, now there are women present, and one of the group is very conspicuous by his absence. While in the kitchen preparing the food, the tavern owner tries to chide back his tears by humming and singing a little of "God Bless America." In the earlier tavern scene, the orderly motion of his music helped provide a brief but satisfying relief from struggle; now, however, the pain that Nick's death has brought seems as likely to break out in violent weeping as in the reconciliation of song. Sensing that a critical moment is at hand, Linda begins to sing with a shaking voice: "God bless America/Land that I love...." Nick has lost his life, Linda and the others have lost him; this prayer, with its patriotism and its assumption about the cosmic supports for patriotism, might allow those present to

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believe that these sacrifices were worthwhile. But their hesitation to join in the singing betrays their doubts about the song’s credibility.

One man can ease those doubts. Michael once said that these others were “assholes”; there is nothing to indicate that they have changed much during the film. Michael has always been skeptical of piety, adhering to a pagan hunting religion if to any at all; nothing in the film indicates that he has found in the world the coherence that could make this song even remotely plausible. Whatever Michael may once have felt towards the others, and whatever he may now believe about the world, he joins in the singing. As he is thereby ratifying their belief in the comforting words, his attention seems directed mainly at Linda; but he performs the function of a priest for them all. Michael has always had a natural air of authority, and now his credentials are strengthened by the fact that he has been with open eyes where none of them could go. Without Michael’s assent the singing would be ludicrous—by joining in, he protects the others from having to admit how much reason there may be for despair. And he protects them, too, from having to admit how dependent they are on him for protection from the horrors he has survived. He bestows on them what freedom they are capable of, much as he did for the deer he spared in the mountains. The image of the deer should remind us that one of the dangers he protects them from is his own urge to dominate them by force.

At the last moment, Michael reminds his friends—and us—that the reconciliation provided by the song is a little too easy. The edifying words of “God Bless America” could not be said to foster bad beliefs, but by themselves they are empty. So at the conclusion of the singing, Michael raises his glass and says: “Here’s to Nick.” By reminding the others of the importance of keeping the memory of the friend who died, Michael tries to prevent them from going too far into the refuge of comforting sentiment: he imposes on them at least a little of the difficult work of cultivating the grounds in which a noble sense of freedom and community can grow. They respond by repeating the toast in unison, and the film ends. Michael knows how costly this communion has been, and how fragile are the supports that make it possible; his work has only begun, and may never be completed. But if we have gained a greater understanding of the deer hunter and of his place in our community, the film has achieved its principal purpose.