

American militarism through a somewhat paranoid prism

By Joanne Laurier
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Spartan, written and directed by David Mamet

The story has often been told, to illustrate the Spartan code of self-discipline, stoicism and unquestioning devotion to duty, of the boy in the ancient Greek city-state who, in order to conceal the theft of a fox, hid the animal in his cloak and allowed it to gnaw him to death rather than utter a sound. The disgrace, as the account has it, would not have been in the stealing, but in allowing the act to be detected.

From the moment of his birth, everything was organized to making each Spartan boy an exceptional and unwaveringly loyal soldier. “For nobody was free to live as he wished, but the city was like a military camp, and they had a set way of life and routine in the public service. They were fully convinced that they were the property not of themselves but of the state,” according to one historical account.

David Mamet’s *Spartan* is a political thriller which raises questions about the Spartanesque qualities of the training and mindset of the American soldier. The film is Mamet’s ninth film as writer/director.

Known for its staccato and often mannered language, Mamet’s best work includes the screenplay for the 1997 film *Wag the Dog*. His films often criticize, with varying degrees of irony and insight, American socio-cultural experience, ranging from the small-time con of the desperate salesman to the big-time con of Hollywood and the American political establishment. Targets include institutions such as the military and intelligence apparatus—the focus of his latest movie.

Val Kilmer plays Robert Scott, a highly skilled government operative who supervises the training of an elite military unit. Boot camp involves a grueling psychological and physical battering (recalling the harshness of the ancient Spartan training), culminating in gladiatorial-type processes of selection for the squad. By way of encouragement, Scott tells his most promising

protégé, Curtis (Derek Luke): “It’s all in the mind—that’s where the battle is won.”

Despite its obvious implication, Scott’s statement is not referring to the mind’s critical capacities. On the contrary, the soldier describes himself a “worker bee,” a mindless instrument of his superiors. “I ain’t a planner. I ain’t a thinker. I never wanted to be.”

In the film’s production notes, Mamet explains: “Scott has been told ‘If you stop thinking and simply follow these tasks, you will be rewarded, and you will be accepted into this elite warrior class, but you must never question the rectitude of your superiors or the worth of the tasks.’ Then he’s put in a position where he has to question his assignment and redefine himself as a warrior.”

The process of redefinition takes place when Scott and Derek are summoned for a mission in league with the Secret Service, the FBI and CIA to investigate the disappearance of the president’s daughter, Laura Newton (Kristen Bell). Scott, the ultimate automaton, stops at nothing, certainly not the murder of innocent civilians, to execute his orders and “bring home the girl”—thought to be in the clutches of white slave-traders in the Middle East.

Scott’s wanton wasting of human lives does not accomplish the girl’s rescue. The bodies of Laura and one of her Harvard professors are found off the shore of Massachusetts, apparently the victims of a sailboat accident. Questioning the authenticity of the discovery, Scott asks, “How can you fake DNA?” “You don’t fake DNA,” replies an impatient Secret Service agent. “You issue a press release.”

When Curtis convinces Scott that the girl is not dead, the two become involved in a rogue mission that pits them against the most sinister and murderous government agents. As the film twists and twists again, it becomes apparent that an unruly offspring had been considered a

potential liability in an upcoming presidential election.

“Curtis represents the conscience of the hero, because he’s so new to this warrior class, he keeps asking the questions that have been eradicated from Scott’s conscience. Curtis makes Scott realize that he has become what he beheld. That in his own quest for personal power, he has put his conscience on hold to serve those whom he’s elected to believe. In so doing, he has become just like them,” states Mamet in the film’s production notes.

Scott finds that he must subvert the apparatus to which he has devoted his life in order to discover the truth. The pivotal decision of this one-man death squad sets off a chain reaction that disrupts the plans of the mother ship.

Despite the seriousness of the film’s theme, the work has many weaknesses. The scenes set in Dubai are completely disconnected from the main body of the film, in both style and content. They appear to be hastily thrown together in an otherwise carefully constructed project. The dialogue between Scott and Laura, as she whines about her parents while both rescuer and rescued are running for their lives, is ludicrous.

The sequence meant to shed some light on Laura’s childhood (and to add much needed dimension to her character) concerns a female Secret Service agent who filled the maternal void in the girl’s early life, dominated as it was by a loveless relationship with her biological parents. It is unconvincing and essentially extraneous material. In general, the “human interest” elements of the film are like undissolved lumps that block the narrative flow and detract from its purpose.

On the positive side, *Spartan*, with a flashy-dark cinematography, viscerally brings to life the atmosphere and subterfuge of police-state operations. In the persona of Burch, the head of operations, actor Ed O’Neill creates a chilling presence—a being without a molecule of humanity. Other characters reference loosely identifiable political figures: the wild, bar-hopping, Ivy-league First Daughter (the First Twins); the Clintonesque presidential womanizer and the alcoholic Betty Fordian First Lady. More politically focused than these elements is the movie’s message: under the present circumstances, US soldiers and the population at large are obliged to rethink their military allegiances and patriotic prejudices.

In an interview with *BBC World*, actor Val Kilmer elaborates on Scott: “Well, he’s a sincere seeker of the truth and the truth ends up being something that people around the president in this story keep from the public. It’s a very worthy story, it invites the audience to question what is presented as news, whether it really it

news, particularly these days when there’s a lot of questionable events represented in the news.”

This is a “very worthy story.” Unfortunately, the storyteller/director evinces more than an acceptable (or healthy) fascination with the Machiavellian carryings-on of the armed forces-security apparatus, as well as its peculiar and unpleasant “military-speak.” (The misanthropic Mamet generally exhibits this sort of “love-hate” for the institutions or social processes he is ostensibly criticizing.) The movie’s psychic pendulum swings between attraction to and paranoia about the trappings of the capitalist state—“bodies of armed men” (Engels).

Perhaps more significantly, one must point out that it is not the lone, expertly trained Spartan who can defeat the authoritarian tendencies increasingly emerging within the state—and here the filmmaker reveals the asses’ ears of American “rugged individualism,” albeit with a radical touch—but the politically enlightened population. This is a vital historic truth that Mamet apparently does not begin to grasp.

The military’s culture of brutality and mindlessness has helped spawn the likes of Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh and Washington DC sniper John Allen Muhammad. No doubt the colonial invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan will produce other disoriented and tragic casualties of the US war machine. But these same historic events are also creating a massive, global opposition, not the least important of whose elements will include many soldiers of the US occupation forces and their families. In a circuitous and inadequate manner, Mamet is responding to this state of affairs.

“What’s more important to you? To hold onto your feeling of purpose, or to hold onto a sense of honor which transcends that,” the filmmaker rhetorically asked in an interview. Although a seriously defective work, *Spartan* raises some legitimate questions.

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