

Hollywood's ideological war

Two films: Collateral Damage and We Were Soldiers

By Joseph Kay
23 March 2002

For the past several months, the American and world population has been subject to a stream of war films coming out of Hollywood. For the most part, these are not so much works of art as propaganda whose essential purpose is, in one form or another, to legitimize or glorify American militarism.

The phenomenon of the propaganda war movie has some precedent, and Hollywood has always had close ties with the American government. Nevertheless, the trend has picked up markedly over the past decade, coinciding with the escalation of American militarism that has taken place after the fall of the Soviet Union. Past films like *Rules of Engagement*, *Rising Sun* and *True Lies* were striking in the extent to which they carried chauvinism, racism and vulgar patriotism into mainstream mass entertainment.

The growing integration of Hollywood with the propaganda department of the American government shows no sign of slowing down, but has rather accelerated since the attacks in September. Late last year, major film executives held a meeting with Karl Rove, President Bush's chief political advisor, to demonstrate Hollywood's support for the American war drive and outline some basic principles. These principles—that the war drive is directed against terrorism and “evil,” that US troops and families should be supported, and the like—will, presumably, form the basis for future products.

However, most of the films that are being released now or have been released over the past several months were planned or produced before September 11. *Collateral Damage*, which came out in February, was actually scheduled to be released last autumn, but was postponed after September 11 because producers decided that the parallels with that event were too uncomfortable. That Hollywood should be putting out a series of war films coincident with an enormous escalation of American militarism is a further demonstration that the idea that “September 11 changed everything” is false. Plans for intervention, as well as interventions themselves, have long been in the works, and have found their ideological expression in these works.

When one says that these films are essentially propaganda, this is not to imply that there is some sort of direct control or influence on the part of the American government, though this may in fact be the case for certain works. One of the defining characteristics of the American media is that it is largely self-policed. The individuals who create Hollywood films—the directors, for the most part, the major actors and, of course, the studio executives—come from an extremely privileged social layer that shares the perspective of the American ruling elite.

One of the most characteristic of these works, *Black Hawk Down*, a film about American intervention in Somalia, has been reviewed separately by the WWS. This review deals with two recent films: *Collateral Damage* and *We Were Soldiers*.

Although *Collateral Damage* is not technically a war film, it has the effect of justifying or encouraging military action and, due to its plot and perspective, has a particular relevance in the aftermath of September 11.

The film is directed by Andrew Davis (*The Fugitive*) and stars Arnold Schwarzenegger as Gordon Brewer, a revenge-hungry fireman who has been spurred into action by a politically motivated terrorist bombing carried out by a Colombian guerrilla leader. The bombing fails to hit its targets—a Colombian government official and a CIA agent—but does kill Brewer's wife and son. A sympathizer of the bomber later excuses these deaths as unfortunate accidents, or “collateral damage.” The term is dripping with unintended irony given that the American government generally uses it to excuse the thousands of civilian casualties that invariably follow American bombing campaigns.

So we are presented with the improbable story of a hulky American with a heavy Austrian accent making his way by foot into the guerrilla strongholds of South Colombia in order to exact revenge against the man who killed his family: Claudio (a.k.a., “El Lobo” or “The Wolf,” played by Cliff Curtis). If is, of course, badly acted and in general poorly done—a significant characteristic of many of these films. There is a clear connection between serious art—which these films definitely are not—and the ability to grasp and depict historical and social truth—which these films don't.

Brewer is driven to undertake his one-man campaign by the inaction of the American government, which is more interested in preserving the fragile peace talks between the Colombian government and the guerrillas than in supporting Brewer's crusade for justice. This is a common feature in many of these films: to the extent that criticisms are raised of the American government, it is generally from the right. Liberals or the government bureaucracy hamper the pursuit of justice by holding back intervention. In *Behind Enemy Lines*, another recent war film, this criticism is directed at the United Nations and NATO and the constraints these international institutions allegedly place on the actions of the American military with regard to intervention in Yugoslavia.

The defining characteristic of *Collateral Damage*, however, is its promotion of revenge and killing as the appropriate responses to terrorist attacks that kill American civilians. In light of recent events, this has the effect of justifying the current US military campaign, in which the killing of alleged terrorists is presented as one of the principle aims of American military intervention. The mass slaughter of a largely defenseless—and in the case of the massacre at the Mazar-i-Sharif prison, entirely defenseless—enemy is implicitly or explicitly justified as the appropriate fate of alleged terrorists bent on killing any or all Americans.

Violent revenge is by any measure a barbaric principle upon which to base individual or state actions. However, the American government lacks any serious ability to appeal to democratic or progressive instincts because its policies are themselves without any democratic or progressive content. It increasingly resorts to the basest of emotional appeals, and *Collateral Damage* expresses this tendency in its most naked form.

On the way to the final scene of brutal death, the movie plays at dealing with some of the complexities of the situation in Columbia. The CIA official (Brandt, played by Elias Koteas), who was one of the targets of

“The Wolf’s” bomb, is portrayed as a right-winger allied with violent paramilitary groups associated with the Colombian government. El Lobo and his wife Selena (Francesca Neri) are presented as victims as well, having lost their daughter due to the violent actions of the Colombian government aided by the United States.

Three-quarters of the way through the movie, we seem to be presented with the following somewhat trite theme: violence is bad if it hurts innocent civilians, and both the Colombian government (in alliance with the American government and the paramilitaries) as well as the guerrillas and El Lobo are guilty of perpetuating this cycle.

But in the end, Brandt is clearly not as evil as the Wolf, and Selena winds up on Arnold’s hit list. The twist at the end of the film that transforms Selena from a character that the audience is led to sympathize with into a brutal villain is significant because it leads to the following moral: civilians can’t be trusted to be civilians; every Colombian is a potential terrorist. This is strikingly similar to the rationale presented by the American government for its killing of the family members of alleged “Taliban” and “Al Qaeda.” Everyone associated with supposed terrorists are also terrorists and deserve the same fate: death. This can logically be extended beyond immediate family members to the population as a whole.

More could be said about this film: its uncritical portrayal of American intervention in Colombia as a war on drugs; its picture of the Colombian population as a largely undifferentiated mass that would just as soon kidnap and ransom you as look at you (in this it is similar to the presentation of the Serbian population in *Behind Enemy Lines* and the Somali population in *Black Hawk Down*); the undercurrent of anticommunism present in its portrayal of the Wolf as an admirer of Lenin (he has a photograph of the leader of the Russian Revolution on his wall next to Ché). The essential element, however, is its promotion of violent revenge as the appropriate response to terrorist attacks.

We Were Soldiers, directed by Randall Wallace (*The Man with the Iron Mask*, screenwriter of *Pearl Harbor*), is a different sort of movie. It is, first of all, an historical work, based upon an early battle in the Vietnam War.

In November 1965, American troops under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Harold Moore (played in the movie by Mel Gibson) were sent into Ia Drang Valley, Vietnam to track down North Vietnamese forces. This precipitated the first major encounter between the two armies and began a conflict that was to become one of the most brutal in American military history.

The film aims to tell the story of this battle but fails miserably. After watching two hours of the film, of which three-quarters consists of a protracted battle scene (hundreds of people on both sides being gunned down, burnt alive, stabbed to death in hand to hand combat, blown up by grenades, incinerated by bombs and napalm), the viewer is left with several overriding questions: What happened? What was the cause of all of this bloodshed and gore? Why were American troops in Vietnam? To the extent that the film actually provides answers, they are uniformly trite and shallow.

From the film notes, we learn that “‘We Were Soldiers’ is a tribute to the nobility and uncommon valor of those men under fire. It honors their loyalty to their country and to each other, and it brings to light the heroism and unimaginable sacrifice of men and women both at home and abroad.” At the end of the film, we are told that the men fought not so much for country or flag, but for each other.

As an explanation for war, this is hardly adequate. If they were fighting only for each other, one wonders, why wouldn’t they simply stop fighting all together so that none of them would get killed? This would certainly be the most satisfactory result if all that was at stake were the soldiers themselves, that is, if there were no broader objective.

The other explanations present in the film are equally absurd, and one gets the sense that the director realized this to be the case. At one point

Moore’s daughter asks the colonel why wars happen. His answer: war shouldn’t happen but it does. Some people in another country try to take the lives of other people. We have to go in to stop it. This, in general, is the justification routinely given by the American government for its military interventions. As an explanation that is in reality an attempt to avoid an explanation, it is somehow appropriate that this rationale should be expressed in the form of a conversation with a child.

The film provides no real account of the war because the people who created it are incapable of dealing objectively with the event. It is based on a book co-written by the real Harold Moore, who obviously has an interest in portraying the battle in a certain light. The director, as is evident in his contribution to the thoroughly stupid *Pearl Harbor*, is not really capable of understanding much of anything.

Certain features of what the Vietnam War represented nevertheless find expression in the film. *We Were Soldiers* is, after all, an historical recreation, and is thus forced to reflect something of what happened, even if at a very immediate and direct level. What does take place during the course of this film? Several hundred American troops are transported by helicopter into a region where they are not welcome. They proceed to kill thousands of Vietnamese, while being themselves killed in large numbers. Then they depart, leaving chaos and death in their wake. This, in a nutshell—with quantities increased appropriately—was the Vietnam War, an entirely morally bankrupt operation carried out by an imperialist American state, a brutal invasion by a government bent on projecting its power into the distant regions of the world.

The film cannot get around the fact that the American soldiers were invaders and oppressors. Even those with only very limited knowledge of the war cannot fail to recognize that it is the Vietnamese who are waging a fight against really desperate odds, with great courage and self-sacrifice. This is the objective character of the war, upon which the creators attempt to superimpose a patriotic message, or at least one that glorifies the American military. They are attempting to use red paint to create the impression of a blue sky—a project that is bound to fail unless one counts on the complete blindness of the viewer.

The essential contradiction between the objective reality of the war and the message that the creators attempt to force upon it comes into relief toward the end of the film. “Tell the American people what we did here,” Moore says to a reporter who had also fought in the battle. What Moore means is, tell them how bravely we fought and how honorably we died for a just cause. To the extent, however, that the American people found out what *really* happened, to that extent they turned against the war and demanded its end.

The film might have been salvaged if it was sensitive to the essential moral paradox and made it the center of the film: brave men dying in a bad and ignoble cause. This is a legitimate theme, and could have formed the basis for creating real characters capable of generating real sympathy. But the successful working out of such a theme would require a far more intellectually honest and creative group of artists.

Instead, in order to generate an artificial sympathy for the Americans, the film resorts to unconvincing constructions that attempt to make them into heroes. First there is the role of religion. At one point early in the film, the young star, Lieutenant Jack Geoghegan (Chris Klein), suggests to Moore that he has some doubts about war. Just recently Jack’s wife Barbara (Keri Russell) gave birth to a child, and Jack expresses some concern that in the coming battle he might make orphans of other children by killing their fathers. His doubts are left unanswered, and are instead drowned out by Moore’s prayer, in which he asks God, in his “infinite wisdom,” to watch out for the young American soldiers but “ignore the heathen prayers of our enemies and let us blow those little bastards straight to hell.”

This is only the most glaring example of a religious sensibility that pervades the film and tends to lend to the battle the aura of a crusade.

There are prayers for the dead and prayers for the still living, prayers for souls to make it to heaven and prayers that other souls will make it home alive. The prospect of a supposedly infinitely wise and just God sanctioning such senseless slaughter is somewhat incongruous, to say the least. Regardless, in the end it is not prayers that determine the outcome, but the overwhelming firepower of the American military, which allows it to defeat an enemy of vastly greater numbers (the Americans are outnumbered five to one).

The other major theme of the film is the unity of the American military—its honor, valor and the like already mentioned above. The army is portrayed as a refuge from a divided society, a place where all men are equal, all men are brothers. (The gender here is significant. The movie makes no apology or criticism of the clear gender inequalities: the man as soldier, the woman as devoted wife and homemaker.) There is a scene in which all the wives are gathered around and it is revealed—to everyone’s apparent surprise and disgust—that the one black woman amongst them is not treated as an equal in Georgia during the mid-1960s. The black woman says that she can get through it, because she knows what her husband is fighting for. We are never let in on the secret of what exactly this is.

The idea that the American military is some sort of haven of brotherhood and equality is a patent falsehood. Discrimination against blacks during the Vietnam War was pervasive. And this is in addition to the traditional class inequalities that have always divided the common infantryman from the officer. It is nevertheless a useful falsehood for the American ruling class, and has been promoted by historians such as Stephen Ambrose as well as others.

In the end, the film, despite the apparent brutality of the war it depicts, ends by justifying it. In certain circles, *We Were Soldiers* is seen as an important step in ending the Vietnam Syndrome—the tendency of the American population to refuse to accept American casualties. People died, sure, but that’s war. The army acted bravely and honorably. The truth about the brutality and inhumanity of one of the most aggressive and criminal assertions of American imperial might is conveniently dropped into the memory hole.

Brendan Minitier, an assistant editor for the *Wall Street Journal*, wrote in a piece entitled “We Were Soldiers, Not Baby Killers” that the movie “smashes most of the stock images of Vietnam that Hollywood has created over the years. The GIs never criticize the war or ask why they’re fighting. Some are even happy to be there—the first American killed in battle dies saying, ‘I’m glad I can die for my country.’... They’re God fearing, devoted husbands who fight with courage and honor.... Even the wives don’t question the justness of the war. When they start receiving telegrams breaking the news their husbands are dead, they don’t ask, ‘Why are we fighting?’ Instead they say, we all knew this could happen and we accepted it.” Minitier and the rest of the American ruling class hope that such films might also help viewers accept “it”—that is, American casualties and brutal wars—in the future as well.

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