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- 1 In January 2002, five months after Nine-Eleven, the movie *Black Hawk Down* opened in theaters.<sup>ii</sup> Many saw its account of a failed Ranger mission in Somalia as a graphic warning that Third World interventions can become military nightmares. The *Times*' Nicholas Kristof, who favored humanitarian interventions elsewhere in Africa, hoped viewers would not come away thinking all such missions were bad ideas.<sup>i</sup>
- 2 Be careful what you wish for. When President George W. Bush screened *Black Hawk Down* at a White House dinner that same month, he and his advisors drew a very different lesson. As *Newsweek* later reported, “Bush . . . told his aides that America’s hasty exit from Somalia after 18 soldiers died in the 1993 raid made famous in the movie ‘Black Hawk Down’ emboldened America’s terrorist enemies” and so led directly to al Quaida’s attack on September 11.<sup>ii</sup> Bush later invited twenty Congressmen to a screening—*Black Hawk Down* was official Washington’s “must-see movie.” A few weeks later Defense Secretary Rumsfeld told the *Times* that US intervention in Afghanistan was not “Black Hawk Down in the snow,” because this time “the United States of America did not decide to withdraw and leave the field.” The administration was then planning to invade Iraq; and it hired Jerry Bruckheimer—producer of *Black Hawk Down*—to advise it on ways of controlling the Somalia metaphor going forward. Despite all that would go wrong in Iraq, three years later the President *still* read the movie as a warning that failure to persist in the use of military force is a sign of weakness and an invitation to enemy attack: “The historical analogy that is truly burned into Bush’s brain . . . is Somalia”—that is, the “Somalia” fiasco as interpreted in *Black Hawk Down*.<sup>iii</sup>
- 3 The President, Rumsfeld, and even Kristof were “thinking mythologically.” They were interpreting a crisis using symbols drawn from a work of fiction—a fiction whose persuasive power derived, not only from its own sensational imagery, but from its resonance with the larger system of symbols and historical fables which constitute

American national mythology. Moreover, the myth specifically invoked was one whose original form was established in cinema, in the genre Jeanine Basinger has properly identified as the World War II Combat Film, but which has become popularly known as the “Platoon Movie.”

- 4 To appreciate the ideological force in the symbolism of *Black Hawk Down* we need to understand the general nature and function of national myths, and their relation to the genres of mass culture narrative; and to trace (in summary) the evolution of form and content in the Platoon Movie genre through two phases: the creation of the “Good War” myth, and of an American “war imaginary,” from 1942 to 1960; and the recuperation of that myth from the disrepute into which it fell after the American defeat in Vietnam.

## National Myth and the Role of Genre

- 5 When we identify as nationals, we join what Benedict Anderson calls an “imagined community” or in Etienne Balibar’s formulation a “fictive ethnicity.” The modern nation-state is a political artifice, through which ethnically different communities are united under a regime of civil law. The varied constituents of the nation have to be taught to think of themselves as a singular “People,” and to value that identity with or above family, community, religion or dynasty. Nation-building elites have drawn on history and folklore to create plausible fictions of a common history—that is, myths—through which Bavarians and Prussians can identify as German; Bretons and Provençaux as French; people of Irish and African and German ancestry as American.<sup>iv</sup>
- 6 Like the pearl in the oyster, myths develop around points of continual irritation—the ideological conflicts that characterize a particular political and social order. Thus American myths continually agitate questions of individual freedom and political power, nature versus civilization, and above all, the conflict between civil equality and racial exclusion. Moreover, a myth is also a script for action. Its heroes model a political response to crisis which the audience is invited to emulate—or at least consent to. But every use of a myth is also a test of its validity, which may require believers to adapt their mythology in light of new experience. The history of a myth (or of the genres of expression that carry it) is therefore the account of a continuous dialogue between repetition and adaptation.<sup>v</sup>
- 7 Most national mythologies were laid down in print media, as histories, polemics and generic forms of literary narrative, reinforced by various kinds of public spectacle. But cinema provides a uniquely powerful medium, combining the authority and sensuous appeal of the visual with the sustained intellectual coherence of narrative. In twentieth century America, movies and television became the primary sources of symbolic reference and of the narrative tropes through which people—or Americans as “a People”—characterize their experience. The recurrent narrative patterns that we call “film genres” reflect persistent preoccupations of our culture; and some of these, which engage questions of national identity, national purpose, and state power, are vehicles of national mythology. No genre is more obviously engaged with these issues than the war film, for in war the power of the state is openly displayed, and citizens are at once spectators, subjects and agents of state power.<sup>vi</sup>
- 8 Historians can trace the course of change in national culture and politics by mapping changes in the genres that carry its myths. But to use this information the historian must

understand the original and normative forms of the genre, as a base-line or control against which to measure changes over time.

## Origin and Basic Form of the Platoon Movie Genre, 1917-1945

- 9 The "Platoon" type of war film developed between 1942 and 1945 was both an innovation in the cinematic treatment of war, and a radical innovation in national mythology.
- 10 Our oldest myth is the Myth of the Frontier, which "explains" American nationality as the product of two centuries of "savage" wars, through which "Americans" conquered and settled a wilderness rich in resources, undergoing a "regeneration through violence" which made them a people exceptionally prosperous, democratic, virtuous and heroic. The Frontier Myth is a complex and still potent one.<sup>vii</sup> But for purposes of this discussion the thing to bear in mind is that, in its original form, the Frontier Myth imagines America as a "White Republic," which defines itself by destroying or subjugating non-White enemies.
- 11 The Platoon Movie continues this essential story-structure: the American People is spiritually and politically regenerated through violent struggle against a savage enemy in a wild or chaotic landscape. However, in the Platoon Movie the American People is represented by a military unit that joins diverse races and ethnicities in defense of the nation.
- 12 The basic elements of this new American story were introduced during the First World War, before the Hollywood film industry was organized. The outbreak of war came at the end of a forty year period (1877-1917) during which explicitly racist ideologies had displaced the presumptions about human equality that had been the hallmark of American liberalism. The shift was marked by the establishment of Jim Crow in the South (with the consent of the North and West); and the growth of a racist anti-immigrant movement, centered in the Northeast and West Coast. Harvard President Lawrence Lowell stated the core belief that united these movements: that "Indians, Negroes, Chinese, Jews and *Americans* cannot all be free in the same society."<sup>viii</sup>
- 13 But the United States could neither recruit nor finance an army of millions without the active participation of racial and ethnic minorities. The official ideologists of America's Great War therefore offered them a new social bargain: recognition as Americans in exchange for wartime service. A wave of official publications now described the erstwhile White Republic as a "vast, polyglot community," whose democratic ideal was "higher than race loyalty, transcend[ing] mere ethnic prejudices," to which every citizen might rally "without losing hold upon the best traditions of . . . his race and the land of his nativity." Progressive or liberal aspirations to social justice were thus tied directly to war-fighting nationalism.<sup>ix</sup> Racist animosity was projected *outward* against the Germans, who were represented as ape-like Huns—imagery which drew on existing anti-Black, -Jewish and -Asian racial stereotypes.<sup>x</sup>
- 14 Once the war ended, the antipathies roused by racist war propaganda reverted to these traditional targets. Jim Crow was violently reaffirmed, and new policies of "race" based exclusion were aimed against White ethnics.<sup>xi</sup> But over the ensuing decades the politicization of the minorities, their memory of the promises made in 1917, their role in the New Deal coalition, and—as war approached—the identification of racism with the

Nazi and Japanese enemy, created the *opportunity* and the *need* for a renewal of the Great War social bargain. This was the ideological context in which the Platoon Movie was conceived.<sup>xii</sup>

- 15 The Platoon Movie was more than propaganda. It was a vision of the kind of nation that Hollywood, acting as custodian of public myth, thought we should become. American nationality is symbolized by a multi-ethnic and multi-racial military unit, pitted against an enemy figured as racially monolithic—either a “savage” non-White race (the Japanese), or an ideologically racist White nation (the Nazis). The platoon also defends helpless “natives” menaced by Japanese or Nazi aggression—America is the paternal “liberator” nation, of peoples valued primarily as objects of rescue.
- 16 These films explicitly address the central paradox of American nationality: the persistence of racial inequality and exclusion in a supposed democracy. Almost every movie platoon includes (among a range of ethnic types) a Jewish soldier from Brooklyn; but what is to us a cliché was, in 1943, an explicit rebuke of the anti-Semitism that was rampant in America through the 1930s and 40s. Even more striking was the way these movies strained to include Black soldiers in on-screen platoons. The US Army in World War II was racially segregated. Hollywood deliberately set reality aside to create allegories of racial integration. In two of the seminal works of the genre (*Bataan* and *Sahara* [1943]) Black soldiers and White not only fight together, they drink from the same canteen—this in a country where segregated theaters required separate drinking fountains, in a year when large and violent race riots occurred in Detroit, New York, Los Angeles and other cities. Hollywood’s abiding concern with color-racism persisted in films made after the war (e.g., *Home of the Brave* [1949], *Steel Helmet* [1951], *Red Ball Express* [1952]).<sup>xiii</sup>
- 17 The Platoon genre is marked by a number of formal conventions, to which Jeanine Basinger’s book is the best guide. These recurrent features create the “genre effect”: they enable later films to enrich their statements by playing upon the audience’s memory of scenes and characters from earlier films.<sup>xiv</sup> Five elements of the form are of particular importance in establishing the base-line against which important changes in symbolism and ideology can be measured.
- 18 The first is the roll-call, which frames the platoon as a microcosm of a multi-ethnic America. Over time its constituents have altered to reflect changes in the way we see the problem of inclusion: from careful representation of a range of White ethnic and regional types (with some racial color) in World War II and Korea, to post-Vietnam units in which Whites of different *social* types (hippies, red-necks, college boys) are joined with an equal or larger number of Black and Latino soldiers. Since 1986, female soldiers have been included to reflect changing gender roles.
- 19 The second convention I call “the race-face.” The paradox at the heart of the Platoon Movie is that Americans can only overcome their internal racism when attacked by an enemy who is marked as racially extreme. Racialization of the enemy has always been a prerequisite for mobilizing public opinion in support of war. That is to say: we imagine that war is *necessary* when we recognize in an enemy the stigmata of race difference—a seemingly organic, bred-in-the-bone animosity, arising from motives utterly alien to our ways of thinking, and incapable of negotiated settlement. Platoon Movies address the contradiction by having someone within the platoon who resembles the enemy testify by his words or his mere presence to our racial good will. For example, in *Bataan* (1943) a two-shot pairs a White soldier (Purckett) with a Filipino (Salazar), sharing gum and their

hatred of "Japs." In *Pork Chop Hill* (1960) the use of the Japanese-American Lt. Ohashi offsets the dehumanized depiction of the Chinese enemy; and when the issue of Black/White relations arises, the behavior of a problematic Black character is typically framed with images of well-integrated and even heroic Black soldiers.

- 20 The third convention is "the enemy's lesson": in order to defeat an enemy defined as dirty and cruel, Americans must get in touch with what Obi-wan Kenobi and Dick Cheney call "the dark side."<sup>xv</sup> Our guide in this initiation is a tough-minded veteran, usually a sergeant or junior officer—the war film equivalent of the Frontier Myth's Hawkeye or Daniel Boone, a "White Man Who Knows Indians" and fights "savages" with savage methods.
- 21 The fourth convention is "unfinished business." The viewer is enjoined—explicitly or implicitly—to finish the job the Platoon has started, to learn the enemy's lesson and win the war. In the closing shots of 1943's *Bataan* Sergeant Dane is the last living defender of the vital outpost. The enemy appears as a crawling horror in the jungle fog. Dane senses them, and screams his rage and disgust as he lays down annihilating fire. We do not see his death. Instead a rolling title summons the audience to join the war effort that will bring us "back to Bataan." Variations on this "Sergeant Dane Moment" conclude most combat films, sometimes triumphantly, sometimes as heroic sacrifice. They culminate the violence that has pervaded the film, and glorify our feeling of revulsion toward the enemy.<sup>xvi</sup>
- 22 The fifth convention is the "desperate defense." The "unfinished business" of the first Platoon Movies was to rally the nation to overcome the defeats suffered by American troops at the start of the Pacific War. They inevitably dramatized sacrificial last stands by soldiers trying to win time for the nation to fully mobilize. But even later in the war, in films dramatizing American offensives (*Guadalcanal Diary* [1943], *Objective Burma* [1945]), what begins as an offensive often ends in a desperate defense against enemy counter-attack. The predominance of defensive scenarios in the Platoon Movie symbolizes the principle that our war is ultimately *defensive* in its motives.

## Evolution of the "War Imaginary," 1945-1960

- 23 By dominating movie screens during and just after the war, the Platoon Movie shaped Americans' belief that the Second World War had been a "good war": not only necessary but inescapable, righteous in its aims and triumphant in its result. In retrospect, after the experience of Korea and Vietnam, Americans would come to think of it as *the Good War*—the standard against which all others are to be measured. This is a strange but characteristically American way to remember a war which killed outright twenty million soldiers and perhaps 40 million civilians; which devastated all of continental Europe, Japan, and most of China; which produced such innovations in human affairs as industrialized genocide and the systematic annihilation of civilian targets by fire-bombing and atomic bombs. But the American mainland was untouched by the destruction; and the nation emerged from the war as the pre-eminent world military and economic power.
- 24 Moreover, war-time patriotism, coupled with the liberal presumptions of anti-Nazi ideology, gave new life to the "social bargain" that had first been offered back in 1917. Instead of the racial and political reaction that had followed the First World War, the

post-1945 period saw a re-energizing of the New Deal campaign for social justice. The expansion of veterans' benefits under the G. I. Bill of Rights provided education, housing and health benefits on a massive scale, fostering a huge enlargement of the middle class; and a new civil rights movement asserted African-American claims to these benefits, and began the struggle to destroy Jim Crow.<sup>xvii</sup>

- 25 The political strength of Black and ethnic elements in the New Deal coalition had a lot to do with this; but they benefited from the public celebration of pluralistic nationalism by Hollywood. As Gary Gerstle observes, in *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century*, "no narrative of nation building [was] more important" than the Platoon Movie to the development of American society and politics in the post-war period.<sup>xviii</sup> Over time it would help make "diversity" a hallmark of American nationality: so that on TV police shows (for example) we always see a team of different races, ethnicities, classes and genders—*Hill Street Blues* in the 1980s, *NYPD Blue* in the 90s, *CSI* and *NCIS* and others since 2000; and similarly diverse teams appear in shows set in work-places like law firms or hospitals—although not usually in sit-coms like *Friends* or *How I Met Your Mother*.
- 26 But the Platoon Movie made the case for diversity by linking it to the idealization of The Good War. The genre created what we might call an American "war imaginary"—the political ideals and aesthetic values US-Americans have in mind when they choose war. With the start of the Cold War in 1948 the genre became a vehicle for imagining, and questioning, America's emerging role as a world power—for reconciling new wars with the Good War ideal.
- 27 The analogy was imperfect. Where World War II was a "war of necessity," the Cold War would involve "wars of choice," undertaken for reasons of policy, to forestall threats that were distant or indirect. Moreover, the new wars would require the extraordinary expense of lives and resources for goals that necessarily fell short of total victory. These difficulties were reflected in films made during the Korean War (1950-52). Although early films (*Steel Helmet*, *Fix Bayonets*, *One Minute to Zero*) followed the *Bataan* scenario of dramatizing heroic defensive stands, their imagery is pervaded (both literally and figuratively) with the "fog of war," in which neither general war aims nor tactical objectives can be clearly seen. *Retreat Hell* (1952), the most prestigious of these projects, begins by showing the Marines as rescuers of helpless Korean children. But victorious liberation gives way to desperate retreat after the Chinese attack near the Chosin Reservoir; and victory is redefined as simply getting all of our men safely home.<sup>xix</sup>
- 28 The Cold War conundrum was not successfully resolved—cinematically or politically—until 1959-60. Two excellent and important films, *All the Young Men* and *Pork Chop Hill*, explicitly linked commitment to the sometimes dubious battle against Asian Communism with the goal of racial justice at home. These films reflect the emergence of a "liberal consensus," soon to be enacted in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, which would link movements for social justice (civil rights, the War on Poverty) with a more aggressive response to Communist advances in the decolonizing Third World—particularly in Vietnam.<sup>xx</sup>
- 29 But both sides of the liberal consensus would be catastrophically discredited: the War on Poverty by urban riots (1965-69) and the Vietnam War by growing evidence of its futility, and ultimately by defeat.

## Vietnam Syndrome and Deflection of the War Imaginary, 1975-86

- 30 The Vietnam War was traumatic for American culture, in part because it violated the expectations generated by the myth of the Good War. The Good War is necessary—forced upon us, not chosen. Its aims are righteous and its methods rational—means are proportionate to ends, and they produce a good result. But Vietnam was a war of ill-choice, and there was a radical mismatch between its stated aim (to save the Vietnamese from Communist invaders) and the means used to prosecute it, as represented by the absurd explanation: “we had to destroy the city in order to save it.” The moral failure of American policy was symbolized by the My Lai massacre, in which American infantry murdered a village of women, children, and elderly non-combatants. Instead of rescuing the natives, we slaughtered them. And then the war ended in defeat.<sup>xxi</sup>
- 31 Public revulsion against these failures led to “Vietnam Syndrome”: the extreme reluctance of the people, or their representatives, to support *any* major military intervention. Vietnam Syndrome was blamed for the supposed weakening of American foreign policy in the 1970s, under Presidents Ford and Carter. The movement known as neo-conservatism began during this period, as policy intellectuals from both parties sought to revivify the American war imaginary by developing credible and appealing scenarios for the use of military force.<sup>xxii</sup>
- 32 Film-makers worked in a separate sphere, but their thinking paralleled that of the neo-cons. They tried to re-imagine the scenarios of *cinematic* heroism in the light of post-Vietnam disillusion. While it is impossible to treat all the relevant films in detail, it is possible to trace the pattern and direction of developments in the production of war films, which led to the rehabilitation of the Platoon Movie in 1986, and to the emergence of a new war imaginary that found its most complete expression in *Black Hawk Down*.
- 33 Hollywood had *refused* to imagine Vietnam. With the exception of John Wayne’s *Green Berets* (1968), Hollywood made no movies explicitly about Vietnam while the war was on. In the immediate aftermath, the industry invested in three films which tried to sum up the war and put it to rest. Two of these were artistically ambitious epics, *The Deerhunter* (1978) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979), and one an interesting low-budget Platoon Movie, *The Boys in Company C* (1978). All three agreed that American tactics were stupid or crazy, and the war itself futile. However, none dealt with the moral failure symbolized by My Lai. Most of the atrocities shown in these films are committed by the enemy (*Deerhunter*) or by our South Vietnamese allies (*Boys in Company C*). Americans also do evil or crazy things; but these are seen to arise from a perverse learning of the “enemy’s lesson,” the result of a kind of moral contagion which infects Americans and turns them to the “dark side.” Colonel Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now* seems to “go native.” In *Deerhunter* the psychological destruction of Nick is figured in his obsession with the “Russian roulette” game, which the film (falsely) presents as a vice characteristic of Vietnamese culture. But scapegoating the Vietnamese was not an adequate way of resolving the moral failure symbolized by My Lai.<sup>xxiii</sup>
- 34 Hollywood deflected its treatment of war into the realm of fantasy. One symptom of the nation’s lingering trauma was obsession with the idea that American POWs were still being held by the Vietnamese in secret camps, and that our government had knowingly



abandoned them. In 1983 the movie *Uncommon Valor* turned this obsession into a viable Platoon Movie: ten years after the war, a racially mixed group of former Green Berets rescues POWs from a hidden camp in Laos. Between 1983 and 1988 Hollywood produced a small subgenre of these rescue films including *Missing in Action* 1, 2 and 3 starring Chuck Norris, and *Rambo Part II*, starring Sylvester Stallone. In effect, these rescue-fantasies were "do-overs," in which the Americans symbolically win the war they actually lost. The rescue fantasy did offer a way of re-imagining a good war: instead of saving the Vietnamese, we are rescuing our own people—a mission to which no American could object. But the victory is not truly national, because it is won in spite of the corruption and moral cowardice of our government.<sup>xxiv</sup>

- 35 A more popular and potent version of the war-fantasy was developed (after 1977) in the new and increasingly active genre of science fiction. The *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* franchises preserved Platoon Movie formulas—and recovered the moral élan of the Good War—by disconnecting them from the troubling history of Vietnam. These films universalize and abstract the Platoon theme: the good guys are always a federation of spectacularly different races—Sulu and Uhura and the Vulcans; Wookies, Ewoks, Yoda—united against aliens who assert racial singularity and superiority (like the Klingons or the Borg in *Star Trek*) or are figurative Nazis (like the storm troopers in *Star Wars*).<sup>xxv</sup> But until *Aliens* in 1986, none of these films directly addressed the trauma of Vietnam—the race war gone *wrong*.
- 36 *Aliens* was the sequel to *Alien*, essentially a horror movie in outer space. But *Aliens* combined horror elements with the structures of the Platoon Movie. A platoon of Space Marines is sent to rescue colonists on the planet where the original *Alien* monster was discovered. With them is Ripley, a female officer who was the sole survivor in the original *Alien* film. She fills the role of the veteran who understands the Enemy. Instead of the White Man Who Knows Indians, she is the White Woman Who Knows Monsters. Platoon references begin when the Marines rise from their sleeping pods for a roll call. The mix is typical of Vietnam-era films. It includes Whites (not ethnically identified), a Black sergeant, and two Latinos—but also two female Marines, most notably Vasquez, who is physically powerful and macho in style. Gender has finally joined the platoon. The Vietnam connection is emphasized by measuring distances in "clicks"—the standard mileage unit in Vietnam—and by bits of dialogue, like the soldiers' wish for "a stand-up fight" and not another "bug hunt." The distinction recalls the complaint in Vietnam, that the enemy avoided open combat in favor of guerrilla warfare, and thereby suggests a likeness between Vietnamese guerrillas and the subhuman space aliens. As in the POW/MIA films, the mission is to rescue our own people; and the government (represented by a treacherous agent of the colony-building corporation) ultimately betrays the soldiers.
- 37 The difference between monsters and humans exaggerates the imagery of race-difference and defines the conflict as a race war. As quasi-insects the aliens are collectivist and totalitarian (like Communists), and also primitive like the "savages" of the Frontier myth. Like these enemies they are seen as lacking a moral sense and are guilty of extreme cruelty. They reproduce by immobilizing human prey and implanting eggs in their bodies, which when they hatch destroy the host. The stakes of battle are therefore racial: either they will rape and impregnate, not only our women but also our men, using our bodies to breed their kind; or we will exterminate the brutes.
- 38 The assignment of the hero's role to a woman thus has a double significance. It registers the rise of feminism, and the new role of women in the military. But it is also appropriate

that both the hero and the Queen Monster are female, because the stakes in a race war are reproduction or extermination.

- 39 This lesson from the enemy is visualized when Ripley confronts the Queen monster in her hatchery. Ripley has rescued a little girl, the last survivor of the colony. She confronts the Queen, and through gestures with her gun suggests a treaty: if the Queen lets Ripley save her child, Ripley will refrain from killing the Queen's spawn. But then the instinct of race preservation—and hatred—takes over. The monster's eggs viscously swell, provoking an enraged and disgusted Ripley to obliterate them, and then blast apart her enemy's womb. Her rage, and the way she uses her weapon, all strongly recall the "Sergeant Dane Moment" at the conclusion of *Bataan*.
- 40 The deeper significance of the turn to science-fiction is that it revived in an acceptable form the idea that racial enmity is the hallmark of the good war. The Platoon Movie reconciled racial enmity with internal brotherhood by variations on the "race face" convention: our racially marked fellow-citizens or allies are seen approving of and joining in the extermination of the racial enemy. In *Aliens* the android Bishop (as a non-human) plays that role. Similar uses of the convention operate throughout the science fiction genre; but it is most elaborately developed in the *Star Trek* series of television and movie productions. Although never as popular as the *Star Wars* franchise, *Star Trek* productions span a longer period of time (1966-present), and involve more sequels, prequels and spin-offs than any comparable series. The original TV series indicated its affiliation with the civil rights movement by fielding a racially integrated crew. Among the enemies that unite them are the Klingons, a ruthless warrior race visually modeled on such stereotyped movie villains as the Apache or the Mongols, and usually played by actors of color. Other similarly intractable and physiologically marked enemies would emerge in later versions of the series (the Romulans, the Borg, the Cardassians, the Founders). After 1979, as the writers became more aware of the racism implicit in this plot structure, they developed scripts in which individuals from these enemy peoples (Klingon, Borg, Cardassian) become part of the Federation "platoon." Yet new race enemies always appear to threaten the Federation—as if to say that race wars are intrinsic to the natural order.<sup>xxvi</sup>

## Bad Wars Made Good: From Platoon to the First Gulf War 1986-2000

- 41 1986—the year of *Aliens*—also saw the most significant real-war film of the period: Oliver Stone's *Platoon*. Stone's title tries to assimilate Vietnam—the bad war, the unimaginable war—to the Platoon Movie and the Good War. He follows classic form in the use of devices like the roll call, though his mix emphasizes race and social class rather than the ethnicity of White soldiers.<sup>xxvii</sup>
- 42 The protagonist is Chris, an earnest young soldier, who is troubled by the conflict between the moral and patriotic idealism that led him to enlist, and the cruelty that seems intrinsic to the military mission. The conflict is embodied in two sergeants: Barnes (who is physically deformed, macho and morally evil) and Elias—who is handsome, slightly effeminate and Christ-like. The two are framed as representatives of larger cultural divisions in US society. Barnes's supporters are bigots, red-necks and boot-lickers—they drink whiskey. Elias's people are counter-culture types, racially integrated rebels

who wear peace medals and smoke dope. Barnes represents the dark side of America's intervention in Vietnam: he and his cohorts are more than willing to kill women and children—to perpetrate My Lai. Elias represents the idealism that led America to intervene, chastened by a war gone tragically wrong.

- 43 Stone takes up the most challenging element of the Vietnam story, by staging a village invasion that nearly escalates into another My-Lai massacre—a brilliant and disturbing sequence which shows how the rage and fear generated by guerrilla war can make American boys (including our hero) capable of committing such atrocities. Stone speaks to the real trauma of Vietnam by identifying the evil intrinsic to *our* side of the war. But he embodies it in Barnes, a character marked by conjoined (and repellent) physical and cultural differences, which are the stigmata of the science-fiction monster and the hallmarks of racial difference. And having powerfully evoked the dark side of American heroism, Stone purges it by a symbolic *exorcism* of the "monster." Barnes kills Elias, and Chris kills Barnes in the wake of an apocalyptic napalm fire-storm (the "Sergeant Dane Moment").
- 44 The success of Stone's exorcism made it possible for Hollywood to make new films about Vietnam, including *Hamburger Hill* and Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (both 1987). There was also a TV series, "Tour of Duty." The platoons in these films follow Stone's pattern: White ethnic differences are no longer emphasized, and Blacks and Latinos make up nearly half the unit. Race has completely replaced ethnicity as the source of significant internal division; and the enemy is still marked by an "inhuman" ferocity and fanaticism.
- 45 Hollywood's essays in the war imaginary were increasingly responsive to the renewed militancy in American policy promulgated by the Reagan administration. Echoes of *Star Wars* informed Reagan's identification of the USSR as the "Evil Empire," and his "Space Defense Initiative," nicknamed "Star Wars," was as much fiction as science. Reagan was determined to expand the armed forces and to persuade Congress and the public to accept a wider scope for military action. But his military actions were tentative essays in war-making, constrained by Vietnam Syndrome. These included covert operations in Central America, limited interventions in Grenada and Lebanon, which mixed small successes and embarrassing setbacks. Nevertheless, the administrations of Reagan and of his successor, George H. W. Bush, did substantially advance the recuperation of the war imaginary.
- 46 Hollywood assisted them. As John Bacevich shows in *The New American Militarism*, after 1985 there was a significant amount of direct contact, conversation, and consultation between policy makers and film makers. Hollywood began to glorify the new military—especially the Top Guns of air power and the special-ops professionals of Delta Force—and to pit them against a new enemy: the Islamic terrorist, usually identified as "Libyans" (in response to the Gadhafi regime's sponsorship of airline sabotage) or Iranians (in response to the hostage-taking of 1979-80). Here was an enemy Hollywood could readily imagine: non-White and "savage" (like the Apaches, the Japanese, the Red Chinese), ideologically fanatical (like Communists or Nazis); an implacable enemy who can't be negotiated with, only killed. *Delta Force* (1985) was the first of several films to depict imaginary commando raids against Muslim terrorists holding US hostages. The third Rambo film took its hero from rescuing POWs in Vietnam to rescuing Americans in Afghanistan (1988). *Navy SEALs* followed the pattern in 1990. These films linked the rescue theme of the MIA movies to the newly identified Muslim enemy. But while they were naturalistic in style, like *Aliens* they depicted fantasy operations.<sup>xxviii</sup>

- 47 The opportunity for translating the fantasy into real-world military action would come with the fall of the Iron Curtain (1989) and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. With the US seemingly triumphant in the Cold War, American neoconservatives began to project a wider field for the use of military power to further American interests and political ideals. Between 1989 and 1991, they developed a strategic doctrine which called for the United States to achieve and maintain a military pre-eminence "so overwhelming that no country would dream of ever becoming a rival...Thus the United States would be the world's lone superpower not just today or ten years from now but permanently." That power should be used not only to maintain international order, but to shape it according to American principles, transforming and regenerating the politics and economics of former adversaries like Russia, and of failed, failing or "rogue" states in Latin America, Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Moreover, the political and moral constraints that had limited the scope of US military action no longer applied. The new superpower was now free—and must *feel* free—to act unilaterally, outside of and even in spite of the United Nations or our formal alliances.<sup>xxix</sup>
- 48 The neoconservatives' way of imagining the conflicts we might face in this new world order reflected the same paradox that had informed the imaginary race-wars in 1977-90 movies: the unity of a racially and ethnically diverse America was dependent on the menace of a racially defined Other. Movies could ameliorate the contradiction symbolically, or hold it in balance, through such devices as the "race face" convention. But the exigencies of real-world politics required a more rigorous and consistent ideology; and the neoconservatives who would shape that ideology joined with Republican Party polemicists to shift the balance toward racialism.
- 49 Although opposition to racial and gender discrimination was nominally a consensus position, since the 1980s the Republican Party had built its electoral strength by exploiting the so-called White Backlash against civil rights and the War on Poverty. The 1990s saw a movement among conservative intellectuals to recuperate the intellectual foundations of racism, in order to justify dismantling the War on Poverty and re-imposing racial restrictions on immigration. For example: in 1994 sociologist Charles Murray's *Bell Curve* became a bestseller, and center of a national debate, by arguing that differences in White and Black academic performance were biologically based. In 1996 Peter Brimelow, editor of *Forbes* magazine, published *Alien Nation* (also a best-seller), which urged a ban on non-White immigrants, on the ground that they could never be fully Americanized.<sup>xxx</sup>
- 50 As in 1920 the exacerbation of domestic racism and xenophobia went hand in hand with the racialization of foreign enemies. Samuel Huntington's *Conflict of Civilizations* (1993) developed a geo-strategic theory in which differences in national culture are effectively immutable, like the differences attributed to racial biology. In Fouad Ajami's phrase, Huntington's "civilizations" are always "whole and intact, watertight under an eternal sky." Huntington theorizes that those differences must inevitably pit the West against the civilizations of Islam, the Slavic nations, and the Orient. His work would become the bible of neo-conservative geopolitics. Huntington's work also reflects the foreign/domestic feedback loop in racist thinking: in *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* (2005) he would urge an end to Latino immigration, on the ground that Latino culture is inimical to American civilization.<sup>xxxi</sup>

- 51 But the war imaginary requires not only the sense of an enemy, but belief in the efficacy of heroic (i.e. military) action. Fantasy wars might prepare the public mind for the possibility of action, but validation of the war imaginary requires real-world testing.
- 52 The first President Bush used military force to overthrow the Noriega regime in Panama in 1989, intervened in Somalia in 1992 and—above all—organized the first Gulf War in 1991. The latter was the largest US military action since Vietnam, and it was framed to meet all the criteria of the Good War: the enemy a brutal dictator, guilty of aggression; the United States part of a multi-national (multi-racial) coalition; a stand-up fight and *not* a bug-hunt. At the end the administration explicitly declared that with this victory the United States had cured itself of Vietnam Syndrome, and regained its faith in the regenerative moral and political effects of warfare.<sup>xxxii</sup>
- 53 The change in attitude was enduring. Neoconservatives considered Clinton's foreign policy "weak," largely because of his decision to withdraw US troops from Somalia after the "Black Hawk Down" incident. Nevertheless, his administration was also assertive about the efficacy of military force. It was Clinton's push (over European objections) for intervention in the Balkan civil wars that produced the sci-fi inflected nostrum that "Americans are from Mars, Europeans from Venus."<sup>xxxiii</sup>
- 54 Neo-conservative doctrine would be most fully and dramatically asserted by President George W. Bush and his administration—their beliefs caricatured by Karl Rove's infamous assertion that criticism of the Iraq War by "the reality-based community" was irrelevant, because "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality." Yet similar thinking had prevailed in the Clinton administration, as evidenced by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's 1998 statement: "If we have to use force, it is because we are America! We are the indispensable nation. We stand tall, we see further into the future."<sup>xxxiv</sup> The hubristic spirit of this world-view is perhaps best captured by the science-fiction epic, *Independence Day* (1996), in which the US leads an international military alliance against alien space invaders. The defeat of the aliens produces a new world order of peace, under American auspices, and the fourth of July becomes Independence Day for the entire human race.
- 55 The recovery of the war imaginary by policy makers was paralleled and reinforced by the revival of the "Good War" myth in its most literal form.<sup>xxxv</sup> This development was marked by the publication of Tom Brokaw's best-seller, *The Greatest Generation*, and Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*, both in 1998. Brokaw's book celebrates the heroic achievements of the generation that survived the Depression, carried out the New Deal, won the Second World War, created a broad-based middle-class society, and extended civil rights across the color line. The film reduces this list of achievements to the symbolic shorthand of the Platoon Movie—a vague notion of fighting for the good American life, which includes modest prosperity, family, tolerance, "democracy."
- 56 The movie centers on a rescue mission—the kind sanctified by the POW-rescue films. It also returns us to the racially segregated army of the 1940s: the American platoon is all-White, though ethnically mixed. And though it deals with an old victory, the movie ends with "unfinished business"—the Greatest Generation has set a standard of service and sacrifice that those who come after must aspire to and struggle to meet, by being willing to fight a Good War when their country calls. That summons was implicit in the wave of Good War films the followed *Ryan*, over the next decade, including (for example) the HBO series *Band of Brothers*, *Windtalkers*, and *Flags of Our Fathers*.

- 57 The other new element in 1990s cinema was treatment of the Gulf War itself. *Courage Under Fire* (1996) follows through on the premise of *Aliens*: after ethnic and racial integration, women join the platoon. More interesting is *Three Kings* (1999), in which cynical American commandos learn sympathy for the Iraqi Shiites, who were abandoned to Saddam Hussein when Bush, Sr. refused to seek total victory in the Gulf war. This “unfinished business” is bequeathed to Bush’s successors; and it reappears in the thinking of neoconservatives within the George W. Bush administration—led by Dick Cheney and Paul Wolfowitz—who were seeking a pretext for invading Iraq in 2002.<sup>xxxvi</sup>
- 58 Their preparation for that invasion included the viewing of *Black Hawk Down*.

## Black Hawk Down: The Enemy’s Lesson

- 59 All of the major tendencies in post-Vietnam war films reach a consummation in *Black Hawk Down*. By invoking the conventions developed in these films, *Black Hawk* arouses and satisfies a set of expectations that enable the American viewer of 2002 to identify with the story, and to accept its message. Moreover, the film presents itself not as fiction, but as reproduction of actual events—which gives its interpretation great authority.
- 60 The film begins by describing the Somalia mission as a humanitarian effort to rescue starving Black people from a cruel warlord, Muhammad Farah Aidid. In this it follows the ideological premises laid down in *Bataan* back in 1943, in Cold War era films set in Korea, in *Aliens* and *Star Trek*, and echoed most recently in *Three Kings*: that the United States acts to protect “natives” from monstrous dictators. The action begins with a successful commando raid (as in the 1980s *Delta Force* and *Navy SEALs*); but when a helicopter is shot down, the mission changes to a last stand defense, and the film becomes a detailed account of the desperate effort to rescue the besieged Americans. This *shift to the defensive* was also used in World War II era films like *Guadalcanal Diary* (1943) and *Objective Burma* (1945), or Korean War films like *Retreat, Hell!* (1952) and *All the Young Men* (1960), to show that even when Americans take the offensive, their war is ultimately a defensive one. Now, after Vietnam, the shift more strongly references the premise of the POW rescue films—that the most immaculate mission is the rescue of one’s own people.
- 61 The corollary is, “and the natives be damned.” To achieve the rescue, the Americans will have to shoot their way through streets crowded with civilians as well as armed enemies. The film enables us to accept or consent to that kind of violence by treating Somalis in general as an alien race.
- 62 We first see the Somalis as victims: a mob of starving Somalis swarm the trucks delivering food, only to have it brazenly stolen by armed thugs of the warlord Aidid. These are the people the Americans and their allies have come to rescue. However, the film also distances the Somalis from their benefactors, visually and emotionally: no Americans are present when the food is delivered, the encounter is Black-on-Black; and the Americans also refer to the Somalis as “the Skinnies,” an implicitly mocking reference to their starving condition and to their characteristically tall, lean physiques.
- 63 That emotional distancing proves justified as the Somali crowds seem to morph, without warning or transition, into ferocious assailants of the American Rangers—as if their apparent victimhood was a snare to draw us into an ambush. Like the enemy in the anti-terrorist films of the 80s, Somalis are Muslim. Like the Comanches or Apaches in a Western, they are seen as hyper-violent primitives. Like the Asian enemies of WW II and Korea, and

the “bugs” in *Aliens*, they are mono-racial and fanatical in attacking—careless of their own losses. Like the enemy in Vietnam films, even their women and children try to kill Americans. But most strikingly, the enemy are all Blacks, whereas the opening roll calls show that the American units are all but exclusively White—just as they were in *Private Ryan*. There are only two Black soldiers in all the American units represented in the film, only one in an important role—a ratio far smaller than was attempted back in 1943 in *Bataan* (when the army was segregated) or in *Pork Chop Hill* in 1960.

- 64 This casting decision has been justified on the ground that there were in fact only two African-Americans in the units that fought in Mogadishu—a proportion not typical of Ranger units in general. But the movie is not a documentary. Like *Bataan* and *Pork Chop Hill* it is a historical fiction. Decisions about how to represent race in such films are artistic—and ideological—decisions. In *Pork Chop Hill*, for example, several Black characters appear, in both major and secondary roles, although the book on which the movie was based never mentions the presence of Black soldiers. This reflects the producers’ deliberate intention to use Cold War conflict to frame a reconsideration of racial discrimination.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Director Ridley Scott’s decisions reflect a different set of priorities. He is defining the terms of a new kind of war against Islamic terrorism. The menace of that war is conveyed by the aesthetic force inherent in the stark visual opposition of Blacks and Whites, which (intentionally or not) also exploits the emotional charge of racial stereotyping.
- 65 It is critical to note that *Black Hawk Down* does not use the race-face device to moderate racial distinctions. On the contrary, late in the film the lone Black infantryman in the American unit freezes instead of shooting when a Black Somali woman runs toward the troops’ position—despite the evidence, given throughout the film, that she is likely to be an armed enemy. Indeed, the woman does pull a rifle from her dress, and a White soldier has to shoot her. This scene is one invented for the movie—it is a fiction and not the re-enactment of a particular event. If one reads it allegorically, the film is dramatizing the idea that the Black man can’t be trusted in war against a Black enemy. Put that together with the decision to minimize the number of Blacks on the American side and the film seems to be reverting to the vision of America as a White Republic.<sup>xxxviii</sup>
- 66 The movie also dehumanizes the enemy by visually associating them with the monsters in *Aliens*. (Scott directed the first movie in the *Alien* series.) The Somalis in *Black Hawk Down* swarm in masses through the narrow streets and alleys, just as the monsters swarmed through the tunnels of the space colony in *Aliens*. In both films, the enemy’s final attack on the American defenses is first detected by the swarming of blips on a radar screen. So when the moment of berserk killing comes—the Sergeant Dane moment—the audience accepts the firestorm as an appropriate response to the massed monsters.
- 67 However, the firestorm in Mogadishu does not complete the mission. It only allows the troops to escape. By the conventions of the genre, the film’s “unfinished business” would be to avenge the defeat, and destroy the warlord. This idea is reinforced by a scene in which one of the warlord’s men articulates the conventional “enemy’s lesson”:
- In Somalia, *killing* is negotiation. Do you really think if you get General Aidid, we will simply put down our weapons and adopt American democracy? That the killing will stop? We know this: without victory there can be no peace. There will always be killing.
- 68 The enemy’s lesson—as always—is that victory can only be achieved through merciless violence.

- 69 Instead, the violence which might have produced a "regeneration" of America's commitment to making the world safe for democracy is rendered pointless by the Clinton administration's decision to withdraw from Somalia. The expectations roused by the use of Platoon Movie conventions are frustrated. The viewers will leave the theater haunted and angered by a humiliating defeat, so reminiscent of Vietnam—denied the prospect that defeat will be revenged, the loss made good. Which is, of course, just another way of entailing "unfinished business" on the audience.
- 70 Bush's wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and our embrace of Dick Cheney's "dark side" in the Global War on Terror, would provide the sequel in which *Black Hawk Down* would get a proper symbolic resolution.

## Conclusion

- 71 If I am right in thinking that the Platoon Movie formula embodies an operative American mythology, then in the decades since Vietnam, American films have done the ideological work of the neo-conservatives, by developing a symbolism that is capable of winning public consent to military intervention. The recuperation of the war imaginary, and of belief in the morally and politically regenerative power of military violence required, at every stage, the racializing of the enemy to represent them as by *nature* hostile to our "civilization," and beyond an appeal to reason. Bush may have psyched himself up for war by replaying the White-against-Black scenario of *Black Hawk Down*; but he, and Americans in general, had been educated to recognize and respond to the new Islamic enemy by *Delta Force* and *Aliens* and *Three Kings* and *Independence Day*.
- 72 The racialization of the external enemy draws on, and revivifies, the racist ideas and antipathies that are endemic to American culture. In the aftermath of World War I, that feedback loop led to a decade of intensified racial discrimination. World War II was exceptional because it reversed the pattern, using anti-Nazi ideology to foster the movement for racial civil rights. Since the Reagan administration, our political culture has turned on the contradiction between two aspects of the Platoon Movie Myth. On the one hand, it is now expected that political and cultural spokespersons will affirm the principle that racial and ethnic inclusion, and fair play for all, is the American Way. On the other, the Republican Party has built its considerable power at both the state and the national level by exploiting the racial prejudices and xenophobia of anxious working- and middle-class Whites, especially in the Southern and Great Plains states.
- 73 It is still an open question whether the failure of our latest wars will break the feedback loop or intensify it. Indeed, the current (2016) presidential campaign suggests that the contradictions reconciled in the Platoon Movie Myth are breaking apart. Within the Republican Party we see the re-emergence of overt racism and xenophobia as motivators of a new populist hyper-nationalism; while the Democratic Party presents itself as a "platoon" of ethnic, racial and identity groups, banded together in defense of civil rights and cultural liberalism—though not necessarily for the achievement of a national "mission," whether war or its moral equivalent in a New Deal or Great Society. Neither tendency can, by itself, restore the link between social justice and nationalism that once shaped American ideology.<sup>xxxix</sup>



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NOTES

❧. Earlier versions of this study were presented as the Ernst Fraenkel Lecture & Seminar, JFK Institute, Free University of Berlin, May 24-25, 2012; and the Richard Slotkin Lecture, Wesleyan University, April 24, 2014. My thanks to all those who commented on these presentations.

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- xxvii. Chris Salewicz, *Oliver Stone: The Making of His Movies* (New York: Thunders Mouth Press, 1998), ch. 4.
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xxxviii. *Black Hawk Down*, scene beginning at 2:06.0.

xxxix. Michael Lind, "This Is What the Future of American Politics Looks Like," *Politico* (May 22, 2016); Thomas B. Edsall, "Is Trump Wrecking Both Parties?" *New York Times* (August 11, 2016), p. 23; Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, pp. 100-1.

## ABSTRACTS

While preparing the 2003 invasion of Iraq, President Bush invited his advisors to screenings of *Black Hawk Down* (2002). "Bush . . . told his aides that America's hasty exit from Somalia after 18 soldiers died in the 1993 raid made famous in the movie . . . emboldened America's terrorist enemies" to attack us on September 11. This study explains the ideological force of *Black Hawk Down* by framing it as the culmination of developments in American national mythology, and the mass culture genres that carry it. The "Platoon Movie" developed during WW II propagated a new myth of multi-ethnic American nationality, and a "war imaginary" which figures WW II as the "Good War." That myth was discredited by defeat in Vietnam; but starting in 1980, American war films, and war-themed science fiction films, seconded the work of neo-conservative policy makers to recuperate the "war imaginary." This entailed a sharpening of racialist interpretations of international conflict, and tension between the multicultural symbolism of the "platoon" and the idealization of Whites as "real Americans."

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Myth, American national mythology, Myth of the Frontier, (racialist) ideology, platoon movie, combat film, "good war," "regeneration through violence," September 11, Vietnam, World War II, George W. Bush, neoconservatives, science-fiction, Black Hawk Down