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PATRIOTIC MEDIA AND THE CONSEQUENCES OF NATIONALISM

by

Nicholas Knappenburger

B.A., Southern Illinois University, 2020

A Research Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Master of Science

School of Media Arts
In the Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
May 2022

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RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

PATRIOTIC MEDIA AND THE CONSEQUENCES OF NATIONALISM

by

Nicholas Knappenburger

A Research Paper Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Science

in the field of Professional Media and Media Management

Approved by:

Robert Spahr, Chair

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
April 1, 2022

AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PAPER OF

Nicholas Knappenburger, for the Master of Science degree in Professional Media and Media Management, presented on April 1, 2022, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: PATRIOTIC MEDIA AND THE CONSEQUENCES OF NATIONALISM

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Robert Spahr

The topic of this paper will be patriotic media (specifically American blockbuster movies) that propagate the narrative of inherent goodness in the United States, its armed forces, and its foreign policy. Through examination of texts on nationalism, propaganda, and its influence on the twentieth century, I aim to draw parallels to modern-day patriotism in the media. The goal being to discover if the patriotic media the American populace consumes is making them more supportive of American armed forces and our international impact. I will also examine what factors found in patriotic media are elements most likely to cause this relationship.

Patriotic media exists as a form of soft power to keep citizens from questioning their government. Using semiotics that resonate with so-called American values, these pieces of media make it harder to separate ideologies and passion for one's country. Calling something "unpatriotic" has long been used as a deflection for government criticism. In this project, I wish to examine several examples of patriotic media and analyze how they act as both propaganda and consumable media. I will be focusing primarily on the military-entertainment complex and its relationship between the Department of Defense and the movies we watch, as it is much more cooperative than we may think.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This research is important if we are to address any atrocities committed by the American Government or by its military. From burning villages in Vietnam to invading entire countries after 9/11, the military has been involved in some unsavory controversies. However, these do not seem to get nearly as much representation in the media after September 11th. Since then, we have seen countless war movies that perpetuate the stereotype of America being a savior that liberates countries from oppressive despots. The reality is much more complicated than that.

However, America's fetishization of its military and soldiers has made it near impossible to criticize these actions. To criticize the military is to "disrespect our troops". When NFL players began kneeling at games during the National Anthem to protest police brutality and racial inequality, it caused a large uproar for not showing respect to those that served (Mather 2019). However, I find this argument erroneous in nature. How are we supposed to make change for the better when any retaliation towards the system is seen as disrespectful? Let us not forget we are also the same country that pressures our children to pledge their unyielding loyalty to America at the beginning every day in school. With this in mind, we can see why protesting something many of us were indoctrinated into at a very young age is seen as unpatriotic. The issue is very deeply rooted in American identity and heavily in conservative politics.

We should start with a working definition of patriotism. Philosophy professor Stephen Nathanson assigns four tenets to patriotism: Affection, personal identification, concern, and willingness to sacrifice for one's country (1993, 34–35). In his 1993 essay *In Defense of "Modern Patriotism"*, Nathanson evokes Leo Tolstoy, quoting Tolstoy's

Patriotism. “The root of war . . . [is] the exclusive desire for the well-being of one's own people; it is patriotism. Therefore, to destroy war, destroy patriotism” (p. 106-7). In comparison to nationalism, George Orwell compared the two concepts by declaring patriotism as defensive and nationalism as offensive (Orwell 1968, p. 362). While the two ideas can be seen as two sides of the same coin, they are rather mere extensions of each other. Both rely on a sense of heretical and cultural sense of identity; a sense of identity to be preserved and protected. They are simple tools of control for a ruling class to maintain a status quo and ethnocentric preconceptions of change or progress.

The larger issue is having a population that sees its military as selfless heroes rather than an armed wing of the state. This also leans on a new brand of American Exceptionalism propaganda that we have been seeing since the Cold War (Garson and Kegley, p. 174). The outcome of these campaigns is that there is a sentiment that America is actually “the best country”. While the idea of empirically measuring which is the best country is seemingly ridiculous, the campaign worked. The result is that a lot of citizens either do not think that the American government can do any wrong when it comes to armed conflict, or that anything morally objectionable they do perpetrate is for the greater good. America is the action hero invading other countries to save the people from an oppressive dictator, and not for said country's oil reserves.

The result of years of this conditioning throughout movies, TV, and music is that America could devolve into a nationalist state. This conjures to mind the horrors of other nationalist countries like Germany and Italy in World War II. These states took immense pride in their heritage and country. Nazi leaders promised a prosperous Germany while simultaneously scapegoating minority groups and eventually committing genocide. America might be on a similar track. Think of the propaganda films produced by Joseph Goebbels like

Triumph of the Will (Riefenstahl, 1935). While comparing it to a movie like *American Sniper* (Eastwood, 2014) might seem far-fetched, it is not. Both films manipulate facts and pawn themselves off as true stories about real patriots. These films present their respective countries as altruistic and lean heavily on nationalistic symbols. The goal in both is to use pathos to persuade the audience to side with its nationalistic goals. Through manipulation of imagery and real-life events, both convince the audience of how proud and supportive they should be of their country. If we want to avoid repeating history, we must have some acknowledgement.

The subsidizing of studio films through the Department of Defense-also known as the DoD- means that those films will be altered to fit the agenda the DoD wants to push. This is not even really a secret. The name of Ewan McGregor's character in *Black Hawk Down* (Scott, 2001) was changed during the making of the film as the real-life soldier had been charged with molesting children (The Guardian, 2001). This might not seem like the biggest deal; they did not want a sex offender tied to the film. However, the number of changes to the film depends completely on the Hollywood Liaison Office to the Pentagon. They have the power to shut down a script and not help with production if they do not like how the military is portrayed. This even happens if the film portrays real-life events. They have the power to rewrite history for the masses to make war seem fashionable. America is always the hero and is always justified no matter how many people we kill.

There is a significant financial advantage to playing ball with Hollywood Liaison Office when it comes to their script changes. Big blockbuster films require large budgets, so any cash that can be saved by cooperating with them is in a studio's best interest. Lawrence Suid put it best in a 1976 piece he wrote for the New York Times called *What Part Does The Pentagon Play?* In it he writes,

To stage these battles realistically, Hollywood needed military cooperation to get

planes, tanks and ships which only the Government could afford to build. Since extras could rarely be turned into convincing “soldiers,” filmmakers were also eager to use actual service members whenever possible. In addition to guaranteeing an authentic military ambiance, such assistance made it possible to produce large-scale war movies without the film industry's expending vast sums of money. And, according to the Pentagon, in keeping with regulations, assistance was given at no cost to the taxpayer since the filming was done during regular training maneuvers. (Suid, 1976)

Suid goes on in the article to explain how Francis Ford Coppola was denied assistance for his film *Apocalypse Now* due to the film's anti-military sentiment, forcing him to ask the Filipino government for help instead. Those at the Pentagon, who decide which films will receive assistance or not, are mostly concerned with preserving a pristine view of the American armed forces. They essentially hold the keys to how the American public perceives the military most of the time when they watch a war film.

This consistent tirade of propaganda serves two roles. Firstly, it benefits those who have profited the most from the outcomes of neoliberalism. Those with a heavy financial interest in the status quo seek only to preserve it. This ranges from grifters, corporations, and career politicians who have only benefited from the deregulation of the markets. Secondly, it exists to reinforce the said status quo and protect it from criticism. By using patriotism as a defense mechanism, it conflates love of one's country with love of capitalism. It becomes socially unacceptable to criticize the system and its proponents by hiding them behind the veil of patriotism. Hollow words of patriotism come to mind when hearing this. Infamous linguist and philosopher Noam Chomsky once said of such defenses

The point of public relations slogans like “Support our troops” is that they don't mean anything. They mean as much as whether you support the people in Iowa. Of course,

there was an issue. The issue was ‘Do you support our policy?’ But you don’t want people to think about that issue. That’s the whole point of good propaganda. You want to create a slogan that nobody’s going to be against, and everybody’s going to be for. Nobody knows what it means, because it doesn’t mean anything. Its crucial value is that it diverts your attention from a question that does mean something: Do you support our policy? (*Media Control: The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda* p. 15)

Over fifty years of conditioning is going to be hard to break. However, we can start by acknowledging that American wars, and most wars, are not fought with spreading freedom and democracy in mind. They are fought to eliminate threats to the status quo or to take over resources. Everything else is just set dressing to make it seem less imperialistic. If we want to change this course and avoid becoming the next totalitarian regime, we must at the very least acknowledge and accept this. That our cultural and social reality, our sense of being is a government-issued sense of purpose. We must discard these notions; that service and praise to our government and sovereignty are what makes a model citizen. Instead, we must search for our own meaning outside of institutions and cliques.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

I will be using the theoretical framework of Stuart Hall's three hypothetical readings of audience decoding. This will be from his seminal 1973 essay *Encoding/Decoding*. I will be particularly interested in the first of his decoding positions; the dominant-hegemonic position. This position argues that one of the ways an audience interprets a piece of media is to "decode the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded" (Hall, p. 57). This can be applied to patriotic media that functions to preserve the status quo of American values concerning the military. The dominant hegemonic position, as well as the negotiated and oppositional positions, will be appropriate for examining how patriotic media affects our society and culture.

On page number one of his 2009 book *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Mark Fisher writes "The war on terror has prepared us for such a Development: the normalization of crisis produces a situation in which the repealing of measures brought in to deal with an emergency becomes unimaginable." It is not hard to come up with examples. The Patriot Act and other surveillance state occurrences come to mind. Increasing border security, spying on citizens, and even more mundanities like the Real I.D. Act show the breadth of how 9/11 changed domestic operations.

Mark Fisher goes on page two to explain his concept of 'Capitalist Realism'; the sense that capitalism is the only viable system, and that it is impossible to conceive of an alternative. He draws on the Jameson and Žižek quote that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism (Fisher p. 02). Applying this to the values regurgitated in American propaganda, these films reinstate these artificial principles like "American exceptionalism" and our "spreading" of democracy to other countries. Shows like *24* and

films like *American Sniper* only reaffirm the fear and anxiety we experienced after 9/11. The Bush administration used this fear to push its expansion of executive power, which partly manifested in the Patriot Act, while using the New York attacks to justify such actions (Carlisle 2021).

Interestingly, Fisher's 2014 book *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* explore a similar idea in the field of hauntology. While a somewhat vast concept, in its most simple form hauntology, to Fisher, is recurring or constant societal or cultural aspects. Examples include the retro-future aesthetic or pop culture's obsession with 80's nostalgia. This is an attempt of contemporary culture to visualize a lost future, past, or present that became incompatible with modernity and neoliberalism. Applying this to contemporary films like *Argo* or *American Sniper*, we see something more insidious. To preserve power consolidated in the wake of 9/11, culture makers are forced to recreate or return to a time of crisis. For *Argo* it was the turbulence of the Iranian hostage crisis, and for *American Sniper* it is the early days of the Iraq war. The goal is the same for both. Keep times of crisis and anxiety within the public zeitgeist to the point where instances of government overreach, like the Patriot Act, can be easily justified. Even films that retell triumphant stories of military action and the American spirit achieve a similar goal by reaffirming wartime actions and military interventionism as morally correct options.

Rounding out the theories, I will be using political philosopher Hannah Arendt. Being a survivor of the Holocaust, Arendt's observations on the rise of nationalistic and fascist regimes can be taken with sincerity. Arendt's first book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* describes the historical context that led to the Nazi's, and later into in Stalinism. Arendt writes "The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and

the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist.” (The Origins of Totalitarianism p. 474). In this context, banal deviations from real life become much more deceptive, especially with films like *Argo* that purports to tell the real story of an American hero in one of our darkest moments. Arendt’s distinction of fact and fiction is already broken. The contemporary film becomes the lens of the event, facts, and fiction together, to form a new perception that only benefits those with a stake in maintaining that worldview. When propaganda becomes the accepted version of events, for some the lies and the myths become fact. This is the danger of mainstream blockbuster films, with financial support of the DoD, that simply conform to the accepted role of soldiers and other service members. It feeds the lie that capitalism, our military, and our American values are the best and only solution. As Mark Fisher might put it, after so many years of propaganda and indoctrination, any alternatives become unimaginable.

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEWS

The Military-Entertainment Complex, and US Imperialism by Tanner Mirrlees

Think of the newest action movie you just watched? Did it feature tanks and planes, or maybe US soldiers in uniform? If so, that film more than likely received some amount of funding and assistance from the Department of Defense (DoD). The DoD helps fund these big Hollywood blockbusters through the Special Assistant for Entertainment Media (DODSAEM).

In his paper *The Military-Entertainment Complex, and US Imperialism*, Tanner Mirrlees synthesizes the relationship that the DoD, and by extension the armed forces of the United States, have a comfortable relationship with Hollywood. Mirrlees contextualizes it with the history of the Military-Entertainment Complex (MEC), from its roots in the Cold War to the post-9/11 world we live in now. This is essential for my thesis project as it highlights and gives historical context to issues of propaganda and how deep the ties between our government and our media go.

Mirrlees begins his paper by giving a historical timeline for the MEC. It began as a way to keep ahead of the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The Defense Department began heavily investing in the research and development of communications technology. A lot of the technology we use daily has its roots here. Even the internet itself and the age of information were based on military research for communication systems. All these factors were to enable America to be more advanced than our foes, real or imagined. Obviously, this spending is costing billions over time. What better way to justify the spending than to preach the need to be one step ahead of the enemy? So, the Pentagon, and within the DoD, began a

propaganda wing. Its goal was to convince Americans that the spending was useful since it helped America win wars. This mindset was especially helpful when the Gulf War rolled around in the 1990's. By this point, spending from the DoD was in enough companies' pockets. Aircraft, Telecoms, and consumer electronics were all partly being funded with government money; by that Mirrlees means taxpayer money. “. . . news media corporations participated in the DoD's 1990 Gulf War propaganda campaign, rolling out militaristic media products whose frame of reference was derived from two official sources: the Pentagon and the White House” (Mirrlees, p. 05). The propaganda was even being pushed through what we would consider trusted journalism sources, forced to get their stories through government sources.

If you were around then, you might remember the video news releases showing up on your local evening news. These were prepackaged videos from the DoD sent to news channels to effectively convince you that war is worth fighting, and America needs to win this war.

Since 1948, the DoD has had its own Hollywood Liaison office, called the Motion Picture Production Office, (MPPO). The MPPO receives scripts from Hollywood and approves them for a partnership to use military equipment and personnel for filming and production. The catch is you must represent the military and its goals positively. The MPPO can and will rewrite your script to better fit their agenda. If you do not like the rewrites, good luck getting funding. On page 10 Mirrlees writes,

The MPPO denied assistance to critically acclaimed Vietnam War films such as *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola, 1979) and *The Deer Hunter* (Cimino, 1978), but after brief falling out in the 1970s, the DoD and Hollywood reunited in the 1980s, making films like *Top Gun* (Scott, 1986).

This would mark the explosion of funding and assistance from the DoD for bigger

Hollywood tent pole movies. After the success of *Top Gun*, the following decades would prove even more lucrative. With assistance from the DoD, movie producers were under less financial strain. The DoD in turn was spreading their message of American hegemony and dominance. Now that violence could be commodified into an entertainment spectacle, the uncomfortable reality of war from the times of Vietnam was a memory. Between 1911 and 2007, the DoD and Hollywood produced 814 films (Mirrless pg. 14). Many of these promote the violence America perpetuates as necessary and for the greater good. These messages conflict with the reality of war and the suffering America has caused on a global scale by perpetuating these conflicts. We just might not notice it as the news and film have continually told us it's the right thing to do.

Overall, Mirrless's paper is a brisk read full of relevant information for anyone looking into the relationship between media and government. His bibliography is also full of terrific sources if one wants to dig deeper into the subject. By providing a historical background, Mirrless contextualizes the issue we face and will continue to face when we talk about entertainment and how we view war.

Propaganda by Edward Bernays

Considered one of the most influential books of its time, Edward Bernays's *Propaganda* is still as relevant today as it was when published in 1928. In his book, Bernays lays out how propaganda works on an individual and macro level for society. He draws on a lot of social science, public communication, and manipulation to explore how to be convinced to do and think certain ways. This is important to my research as it is an early example of the same types of mass manipulation going on between Hollywood and the Department of Defense today.

Bernays's theory is that a small group can control the masses by finding hidden desires. These desires combined with more binary choices can create very quick and passionate reactions from people. Bernays does have a more positive outlook on how to utilize such propaganda. One

of Bernays's most famous advertising campaigns was to brand cigarettes as inherently feminist to get more women smoking. While using cigarettes as a mode of social change does not seem all too altruistic, this was in 1929 when women smoking was seen as not "lady-like". Classifying Bernays as progressive is halfway true. He wanted to advance gender equality and education. However, his means of achieving this come down to mass manipulation. Whether or not this is considered a positive or not is up for debate.

What is not up for debate was the impact of Bernays's work in the following decades. Bernays may have been, somewhat at least, motivated by social progress. The modern-day version not so much. Propaganda nowadays, in the United States, takes the form of iconography. This can be as simple as a red, white, and blue color combination. It also takes the form of recruiting advertisements, both subliminal and not. *Top Gun*, which received a lot of assistance from the DoD, is basically an ad for the Navy fighter pilot program. Tom Cruise driving a motorcycle while fighter jets take off behind him might not seem as conspicuous as a shot of a flag waving in the wind. However, the results are the same. We the audience have been conditioned to react positively to the symbols of America. The flag in the wind, the F-15's swooping through the air; it is all there to make us feel good about our country.

The same way Bernays used cigarettes as a symbol of gender equality, the military and DoD have used these patriotic symbols to manipulate a positive association for the actions of the military. These were especially useful in the early 2000's after the shock of 9/11. They helped President Bush wage a war that killed between 185,632 and 208,716 Iraqi civilians (Iraq body count) alone.

Bernays's work is considered one of the most influential books of the twentieth century. I would argue the effects of his work have left a lasting impact on the communication between population and government. The tool book Bernays left behind has

been used to lie to the public and cover up war crimes. This has all been in the name of keeping America “free.”

CHAPTER 4 THE RISE OF NATIONALISTIC MEDIA IN THE 20TH CENTURY

After the failure of military success in Vietnam, political elites within America began forming a plan to keep history from repeating (Herring). According to George C. Herring, author of the essay *Reflecting the Last War: The Persian Gulf and the "Vietnam Syndrome"*, asserts that we lost Vietnam abroad and at home. In order to preserve America's place in the global hierarchy, changes were put in place over the rest of the century to curb any future anti-war sentiments. Manifestations of this propaganda can be seen in news coverage during the Persian Gulf War. News publications had all their reporting filtered through the pentagon, embedded journalists were kept at arm's length from the conflict, and videos news releases demonstrating war technology were shown to Americans every day on TV (Mirrlees, p. 05). War on TV became a spectacle to be marveled at.

With the success of *Top Gun*, the DoD and Pentagon saw another opportunity to massage the sense of national identity into popular media. By holding popular blockbuster movies financially hostage until the scripts met the demands of the MPPO, the government was able to gain soft power over the audiences of these films. Combined with the effect images of the Gulf War had, the government had a hold of the American national identity. No longer did this perception bring shame and protest like during Vietnam. Again, patriotism became the banner under which any conflict could be justified.

CHAPTER 5 CASE STUDIES: THE GREEN BERETS AND TOP GUN

THE GREEN BERETS (1968)

The Green Berets is a strange case of blatant propaganda backfiring. Based on Robin Moore's 1965 novel of the same name, the 1968 film follows John Wayne leading a team of Green Berets and South Vietnamese troops against the Viet Cong. Famously the film was bankrolled by the Department of Defense with support from President Johnson (Von Tunzelmann 2018). This could not be more obvious to viewers.

John Wayne wrote a letter to President Johnson asking for funding, citing his concern in the anti-war movement. Presidential advisor Jack Valenti said about the film "If he made the picture, he would be saying the things we want said." (Von Tunzelmann 2018). It was undeniably a propaganda film meant to justify the Vietnam War. Nothing screams this louder than one of the film's opening scenes. In it, Wayne's Kirby watches as reporter's question his Green Berets on the necessity of the war. They respond with many false accusations about the need to stop the spread of communism and the brutality of the Viet Cong. None of these justifications are remotely based in reality.

Later in the film, the Green Berets come across a village pillaged by the Viet Cong. With no factual basis, the scene eerily mirrors Daniel Lang's 1969 *Now Yorker* article *Casualties of War*, as noted by Von Tunzelmann in a *Guardian* article about the film. Lang's article details the murder and rape of a Vietnamese woman at the hands of American Soldiers, not the Viet Cong like the film pretends.

Unsurprisingly, the film had the opposite of its intended reaction. It was critically panned for its propagandic nature and distortion of facts. Part of this was because the war portrayed was already deeply unpopular. It was a reactionary film; it wore its intentions on its sleeve. This lack of subtlety, and luckily it could not hide behind the veneer of true events, was the film's

downfall.

The Green Berets does not simply function as propaganda, but as an indictment of anything remotely anti-capitalist. By conflating communism with imagined war crimes committed by the North Vietnamese, the movie plants the seeds making it impossible to critique neoliberalism and free-market capitalism. The result is mass persuasion against any form of socialism or progressiveness. As Mark Fisher might put it, we become unable to imagine an alternative as it has become the enemy like the North Vietnamese. Obscuring of the facts causes us to become the convinced Nazi Arendt foretold.

Top Gun (1986)

Top Gun would not fall into the same trappings as Green Berets. It was not a reaction to any movements, and the US was in between large-scale conflicts at the time. It was also a competent action film highlighted with great aerial footage of fighter planes. Top Gun boasted a cast of Hollywood hot items like Tom Cruise and Val Kilmer. The film had a much more cinematic feel to it. The propaganda was lighter, relying on images and sound rather than dialogue to convey nationalistic values.

As Mirrless stated earlier, Top Gun showed the DoD that patriotic media need not be a reaction to politics. Instead, images of military power and technology do the heavy lifting. There is also a lack of human antagonists. Only enemy planes of unspecified origin ever cause our characters problems. This has the further effect of making the audience focus on the aerial technology on display.

Top Gun was an excuse to show off how advanced military technology had become. Other than being an advertisement for the military-industrial complex, masquerading as an action movie, all political implications were seemingly left at the door. That was the intention to deflect any criticisms by remaining neutral. However, that is not the most helpful reading. It is

an advertisement in the style of a parody of Bernays. By flagrantly pushing the Navy fighter pilots as “just normal guys” we lose the impact that aerial warfare has caused. While taking place before drone warfare would bring up ever further moral ambiguities, fighter pilots still face these gray areas. All of that is thrown out in favor of action and a pop soundtrack.

The aesthetic choice to shift *Top Gun* from any sort of gritty reality is also important. This was a deliberate choice to reframe and shift away from the actual horrors of war. It instead appeals to baser instincts of masculinity without ever crossing into any uncomfortable realms. While the *Green Berets* maintained a mostly light atmosphere, it did contain several mature scenes. *Top Gun* instead elects to compare being a Navy fighter pilot with a rebel-biker persona. Calling back to the iconic shot of Cruise riding his bike next to a jet taking off, the direction implies the two vehicles offer the same freedom and sense of masculine pride. Tom Cruise and company have several light-hearted gaffs they play on their boss, meet pretty ladies at the bar, and most importantly are framed as the coolest guys on base. It treats them like high school sports stars, the snazzy guys everyone likes. This was a key factor as to why the film caused such a spike in military recruitment. It serves to do away with preconceptions from the Vietnam era to redo what the *Green Berets* dropped the ball on.

As discussed, the film was a financial blockbuster. Without too many moral quandaries present, the film is fondly remembered as a fun plane flick. This showed the DoD that simplifying how patriotic values can lead to greater audience turnout and less of a fuss about distorting facts, which *Green Berets* was subject to. This film’s blueprints would be a roadmap to success until the events of 9/11, when audiences would seek a different catharsis.

CHAPTER 6

2001-2021 AND THE CONSEQUENCES OF NATIONALISM

On January 6, 2021, we experienced an insurgency on our US Capital. The goal of this insurrection was to overturn the election results in favor of Donald Trump. Trump was known during his presidency for playing into the rhetoric of nationalists, white supremacists, and other fringe radical groups. This event is a direct result of years of conditioning towards a nationalist mindset. This brand of nationalism is disguised as “patriotism”; Trump's campaign slogan was even “Make America Great Again”; a call to return to the past.

This was just one example of the manifestations of nationalism. It bears an eerie resemblance to the Beer Hall Putsch in 1923. While there are plenty more examples, the insurrection is important as it gained national attention, yet few legal ramifications. Unlike the Beer Hall Putsch, leaders of the movement did not receive anywhere near the same punishment Hitler and his cohorts did.

These manifestations of nationalism can be traced directly back to the events of 9/11. This tragedy served a useful purpose in unifying national identity and patriotism, as well as anger. Now twenty years later, this combination of anger and patriotic tribalism has become weaponized against other Americans. This should not be a surprise, however. By analyzing these two post-9/11 films, both of which tout patriotic narratives and support for the military, we can begin to see how this weaponization is sustained.

CHAPTER 7

CASE STUDIES: CLINT EASTWOOD'S AMERICAN SNIPER AND BEN AFFLECK'S ARGO

Both films are terrific examples of patriotic media. They alter facts from real life events and received financial assistance from the US government. The effect being to mythologize a military figure to the point where any criticisms can be deflected as unpatriotic, in the case of American Sniper. In the case of Argo, the historical context of the Iran Hostage Crisis is reframed, and the role Canada played in The Canadian Caper is minimized. By analyzing these two films through Hall's dominant-hegemonic position, keeping in mind the facts that have been changed, we can explore the role popular media has in maintaining soft power.

American Sniper and Argo both exemplify how patriotic media operates in a post-9/11 America. Stylistically, both ground themselves using a cinema verité approach. Lots of eye level camera placement, realistic dialogue and jargon, and less dramatic lighting. This style was popularized through media in the early 2000's like 24 and the Bourne movies, having its origins in another piece of patriotic media; 2001's Black Hawk Down. These stylistic choices were purposeful, however. Unlike action films from the 80's and 90's, destruction was no longer a spectacle. With the events of September 11th still in the public zeitgeist, the spectacle instead became the dramatic. Shootouts and explosions and the like were now means of narrative and dramatic tension instead of a cathartic release. Argo uses this dramatic tension rather well as a storytelling device to keep the audience invested. The tension of the situation propels the drama and characters. American Sniper, being a biography with different temporal logic, instead positions the dramatic tension to solidify one character, Chris Kyle, and his sniper skills. The next two sections will cover in-depth how these two films used post-9/11 stylistic choices to enhance their place in the public consciousness and maintain the status quo

of a post-9/11 America.

Argo (2012)

Coming out in October 2012, *Argo* was released to critical acclaim. Winning three academy awards and five Golden Globes (Serjeant 2013), the film was seen as a critical and financial success. Written by Chris Terrio, the film was adapted from real life CIA agent Antonio “Tony” Mendez’s book *The Master of Disguise* and Wired article *The Great Escape: How the CIA Used a Fake Sci-Fi Flick to Rescue Americans from Tehran* by Joshua Bearman.

The plot concerns the 1979 Iran Hostage Crisis and subsequent Canadian Caper. The Canadian Caper was a joint US and Canadian operation to extract six US embassy workers out of Tehran after the Islamic Iranian Revolution and storming of the US embassy in November 1979. Six embassy workers fled before the compound was overrun and took shelter at the residence of then Canadian Ambassador Ken Taylor. As cover to get into Iran and back out again with the six, Tony created a fake movie production with a script for a b-movie called *Argo*.

Director Ben Affleck also stars as a fictional version of CIA agent Tony Mendez, who, along with a partner only known as ‘Julio’ snuck the six diplomats out of Tehran’s Mehrabad airport in January 1980 (Bearman 2007). The film instead depicts Affleck as the sole man on the ground.

To the film's credit, it does somewhat try to explain the tensions between Iran and the US by opening with a short, animated segment mixed with archival footage. This segment narrates to us how the US installed dictator Mohammad Reza Shah, also called “The Shah,” as Iran’s leader in the 1950’s. The Shah’s brutal human rights abuses eventually led to the revolution. When The Shah developed cancer, President Jimmy Carter allowed him into the

US for treatment, sparking the protests and storming of the US embassy. While acknowledging the role the US foreign policy had in causing this mess, it is not ever brought up again, save for one scene later. The use of animation is also an interesting one, as it serves to further separate the audience from any guilt they might feel upon learning that American interference is mostly to blame for the entire predicament.

The most interesting aspect of *Argo* comes in its finale. Tony and the embassy workers must get to the airport while maintaining their cover, all while the revolutionary guard is hot on their trail. This culminates in a chase at the airport where the plane barely manages to take off at the last second and characters rejoice as they leave Iranian airspace. Except none of that happened. In reality, they went to the airport early in the morning to attract less attention, and then got on the plane like normal and had an uneventful flight. There was no chase, no time when they almost got caught at the airport like in the film. All of this was added for drama.

This is where *Argo* really flexes its nationalistic intentions. By upping the stakes, Affleck and company are using the dramatic tension as the spectacle of the film. This is sold to an audience as the real-life story of an impossible mission. It makes our American characters seem as thorough as they are in danger from an external force bent on killing them. In real life, it was the citizens of a country our government had meddled with; they simply were pushing back after years of our interference. These dramatic addictions serve to enforce a hegemonic reading of the country of Iran and its people. Instead, the audience is worried if Tony can complete the mission, not how all of it is our fault in the first place.

Another hit for historical accuracy against *Argo* was how it portrayed the Canadians. Ken Taylor and his embassy staff were key to the mission's success. For years, the CIA did not even announce its involvement and let the Canadians take most of the credit (Bearman 2007). In

the film, however, their roles are all diminished. After the film's release, Jimmy Carter even stated “90% of the contributions to the ideas and the consummation of the plan was Canadian. And the movie gives almost full credit to the American CIA (McDevitt 2013). What we got was an American-washed and American-centric version of a real event in which we were mostly the villains; and were later bailed out by the Canadians.

This was all done with purpose. The release of *Argo* came at a time of ongoing tensions between the US and Iran and had participation in production from the CIA (Oliveira, p.19). While a well-made tense thriller, *Argo* in no way accurately represents the real event. If anything, it serves to further perpetuate Islamophobia and American nationalism. It does this by distorting facts to give more Americans the point of view that paints Iranians as monsters.

Through the lens of Hauntology, *Argo* has a much more sinister intention. It becomes the ghost of a past that did not happen. Instead of the ghost of a lost future, it becomes a lie we can tell ourselves about the inherent bravery and quick-thinking of our service members and intelligence agencies. This is all to recontextualize the present, in this case 2012, and preserve conservative values. History itself becomes distorted in the crossfire.

American Sniper (2014)

Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper* is another example of a strictly hegemonic view of the Iraq war from an American's perspective. Starring Bradley Cooper as real-life Navy SEAL Chris Kyle, the most lethal sniper so far in US military history. While nominated for six academy awards, it only won for Best Sound Editing: quite different from *Argo*'s Oscar sweep. Nevertheless, it was financially successful. Based on Kyle's autobiography, written with Scott McEwen and Jim DeFelice.

Before talking about the film, a little bit about the real-life Kyle is necessary. While a decorated veteran, Kyle was also a notorious charlatan. Kyle claimed he was in a bar fight with

former wrestler and politician Jesse Ventura (which he faced a defamation suit for), shooting looters during Hurricane Katrina, and doubling his number of confirmed kills contrary to the Department of Defense (Raymond 2015). None of these events have been confirmed by anyone except Kyle. With the movie based on his autobiography, it should go to say we should not take anything he said at face value.

The film is the life story of Kyle, from his training to death. It has a habit of changing historical events to suit Kyle's personal narrative. His first sniper kill in the movie is a young boy about to bomb an American tank. This never happened (Von Tunzelmann 2015). To keep this from being a list of the things that are and are not historically accurate, this first sniper kill can serve as a metaphor for the rest of the film.

Using Hall's hegemonic reading, all these historical fallacies begin to coalesce into something more sinister. This film was created to quell anti-war sentiments about the Iraq conflict. By focusing on one character, all the morally gray areas become less important. By building a fictional version of a real man, it gives the audience something to attach themselves to. Except this is not about Kyle's life, most of the film's events are fictional or changed to suit the narrative. Kyle represents all the soldiers in the war, giving us a more personal look at the conflict and how someone reacts to it. Kyle is morphed into the embodiment of patriotic and nationalistic values. This mono-mythic Kyle shoots children to protect his fellow soldiers, even if that situation was fictional and created to add depth to a real person. A real person who had problems and acted both selfless and selfish.

Portraying a real-life complicated and morally compromised Kyle would be too much for the version of patriotic machismo Eastwood wanted to display. In the film, Kyle's main character flaw is his PTSD. He is such a great soldier and sniper that it is also his only character flaw. We do not get a realistic version of PTSD either, it is movie PTSD that Kyle

eventually recovers from rather easily and does not cause him to question his role in the war or as a weapon of the state.

There is also the question of why people looked up to Chris Kyle in the first place. Why out of all the real soldiers was he the one who deserved the Clint Eastwood treatment? The dismal answer is that he has killed the most people. The culture makers over at the Pentagon want the audience to equate masculinity, combat efficiency, and ability to take lives as measures of one's character and one's patriotism. That way, war crimes and other less savory aspects of war and conflict get swept under the rug because movie violence is entertaining. This is not a dig at violence as entertainment either, but the violence on-screen in *American Sniper* is meant to depict a real conflict from within the last ten years. Normalizing this specific type of on-screen killing reinforces the images we saw on TV during the Gulf and Iraq wars. It has the added effect of making us less likely to ask if those people Kyle killed needed to die in the first place.

American Sniper is a classic example of mass media propaganda that seeks to simplify the events of the Iraq War. By focusing on a singular character, then altering events and leaving out any problematic traits, we get a very boring and problematic account of one of America's deadliest and most controversial figures. This film was a blatant attempt to show the patriotic values of the military. Much like the actual military, this involved lying and altering history to fit within the established values of America.

CHAPTER 8

ABSURDITY AS A CURE FOR NATIONALISM

In his 1942 essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, philosopher and author Albert Camus laid out his philosophy of the absurd. Camus wrote the work while he was an editor for the French Resistance against the Nazi Occupation of France in World War II (Hayden p. 23). Camus defines absurdity as humans seeking meaning in a meaningless existence. “For this apparent paradox is also an apologue. There is a moral to it. It teaches that a man defines himself by his make-believe as well as by his sincere impulses.” (Camus, 1942, p. 04) This two-part paradox is what the essay is built on. If humans did not seek any meaning in life, or life had a preordained purpose, we would not live such an absurd existence. Camus’s antidote to this paradox is to create our own individual meanings for existence, first by accepting our meaningless existence and attempting to live it to the fullest. He illustrates this with the Greek myth of Sisyphus, who was cursed to push a boulder up a hill everyday only for it to roll back to the bottom once he had. Camus likens this Greek myth to our lives under post-industrial capitalism, where we toil away at our jobs in hope of something greater. Camus imagines Sisyphus as a happy man who has accepted his condition, yet, realizing how absurd his situation and existence are, strives to stay content and derives meaning from his boulder pushing labor.

Patriotic media, propaganda, and for some life within the military provide a much-needed purpose in the face of an existential crisis. The problem is these purposes are institutions, not self-manifested means of deriving meaning from our lives. They instead seek to replace our self-actualization with their own agenda. Propaganda uses one half of Camus’s equation, that people inherently seek some sort of meaning, to indoctrinate us and keep us subordinate. One

might argue this has the same purpose as religion. In its current contemporary form, national identity and patriotism have become like a religion for some. It erases Camus's answer and replaces it with an existence serving the upper class and those who benefit from constant conflict, the military, and neoliberalism.

If one is to not fall into these trappings, we must embrace the second part of Camus's proposition and create your own meaning. One must shed all preconceived notions of identity politics and national heritage. John Lennon might have been on to something when he sang "Imagine there's no countries. It isn't hard to do". This massively popular song is just one example of pop culture striving to shed the shackles of national identity and strive for something greater. While John Lennon's vision may not, if ever, have come to fruition, it is a comfort to know that even in the homogenized world of popular music, these themes resonate with artists and culture makers within the system.

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

Due to the events of the last fifty or so years, Americans are in a difficult spot. Years of patriotic symbols are held in front of us every day so much so that we do not stop and take stock of what it really means. Being proud of one's country is one thing, but blind patriotism and loyalty are another. Whether or not we want to admit it, the idea of the land of the home and the brave is an advertising campaign. It has worked so well that to question or go against it is seen as unpatriotic. The hard truth is that the American Government and its military have committed atrocities and perpetuated war in the name of power and dominance. They cover this up by cultivating a meaning behind the symbols of our country and our armed forces. It makes it much more difficult to acknowledge and make right on these atrocities. Patriotic media is just one way to convince the public that wars are necessary, and America is always justified.

These forms of propaganda have been deeply entrenched in our culture. Any likely answers involve shedding our preconceived notions of what it means to be an American. The answer can be found in the writings of Albert Camus, who proposed we must first accept our absurd existence and create our own meanings. National identity and our views on patriotism and the military are only a temporary answer created by those in power to maintain that said power. Their agenda becomes your meaning. To achieve this, we must fully realize and come to terms with ourselves and our place in society and under capitalism.

Until we can accept that America is not always going to be a good guy, it will be a long road ahead. I believe testing whether certain media we consume is affecting us in this way is important. If we do not, we risk moving closer to a nationalistic state like pre-WWII Germany. Looking at how this media informs our assumptions and biases is a first step towards discussing

what our values are.

CHAPTER 10

EPILOGUE

While writing this paper, Russian President Vladimir Putin began his invasion of Ukraine. A former bloc of the Soviet Union, Putin is attempting to regain the territory as not only a buffer between Russia and NATO countries but a sense of pride. Putin cannot imagine a different future for Russia, he can only envision a past, which may not even exist, in which the Soviet Union returns as a major superpower in competition with Western ideology. Many Ukrainians are and will continue to be killed and subjugated, as well as anti-war Russians, while Putin attempts to dig up a long dead status quo he and other oligarchs personally benefited from.

I have no way of knowing just how this conflict will end; if interventionism should or should not occur, and what the cultural and financial consequences will be. While not nearly as effective, Putin is evoking the same nationalistic rhetoric to defend his position. We, as Americans, should heed this as a warning. So many of the victims of neoliberalism see a return to a previous status quo as the answer. “Make America Great Again” is an obvious example.

When was America supposedly great? The answer is different depending on who is asked, but the connotations are always the same. There is a sense that we must move backward, not forward. While the methods and outcomes are different, Putin and the more conservative crowds of America who parrot a need to return to the past have the same sentiment.

Any meaningful changes to our systems, institutions, and even cultural identity must rely on forwarding progress. Returning to the past, a past in which America was “great” for only certain groups, is a dangerous notion. A notion that Putin uses to defend his invasion. If there is a solution to our woes, it is not found in the past. Making progressive changes requires

forward- thinking individuals not tied to a notion of identity. We must look towards the future instead of being stuck in a past of rose-colored glasses.

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Bachelor of Arts in Radio, Television and Digital Media, May 2020

Research Paper Title:
Patriotic Media and The Consequences of Nationalism

Major Professor: Robert Spahr