II

Empire of the Gun

*Steven Spielberg's Saving Private Ryan and American Chauvinism*

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The cinema, as the world's storyteller *par excellence*, [is] ideally suited to project narratives of nations and empires. National self-consciousness ... [is] broadly linked to cinematic fiction.

--Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, *Multiculturalism and the Media*

AS THEY HAVE throughout literary and cinematic history, nationalistic and patriotic sentiments persist in today's historical dramas--particularly in the Hollywood spectacles of the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, the war movie and action-adventure genres underwent a resurgence in that era, paralleling and epitomizing the "America First" and "U.S.A.! U.S.A.!!" ethos of the Ronald Reagan-George Bush era and its immediate aftermath. Despite Steven Spielberg's early reputation as a "popcorn" director of "kidult" movies and his more recent incarnation as a "serious" filmmaker and liberal "FOB" (Friend of Bill [Clinton]), his oeuvre stands as one of the chief cinematic purveyors of American exceptionalism and triumphalism in contemporary filmmod. He could rightly be called the American Kipling.² Six of the top twenty box office hits of all time have been Steven Spielberg films. In addition, eight of his seventeen features to date have dealt with the World War II epoch.³ In most of Spielberg's feature films, the Americans win the day--either
through their quick wits or superior firepower—a resolution that the Pentagon could be proud of. Thus, in most of his movies, as in most Hollywood films of the 1980s and 1990s, the United States is the empire of the gun.

Even Spielberg’s flops contain the seeds of a chauvinistic and possibly racist worldview. In *1941* (1979), for instance, the focus is on the possibility that a Japanese submarine is going to attack the coastline of California. Though Americans had no actual fear of a Japanese military invasion in 1979, there was popular hysteria over the much-reported Japanese economic invasion of U.S. markets for automobiles, electronic equipment, cameras, and other consumer goods, not to mention the purchase of landmark U.S. buildings, corporations, and motion picture studios. In that context, *1941* became a disguised national allegory about the perils of globalization and world trade that tapped into a putative mood of economic xenophobia.

**SAVING PRIVATE RYAN**

As Spielberg’s first major contribution to the DreamWorks SKG company, in which he is a partner, *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) grossed more than $30 million domestic in its opening weekend. Within a year, domestic gross receipts reached $216 million and more than $224 million in the rest of the world. When one factors in the various videocassette, DVD, and other ancillary merchandising commodities (including the soundtrack album, the novelization, the "making of" book, and the ever-popular "G.I. Joe" action figure), the movie’s profitability was impressive, even against the backdrop of its $70 million production budget. In addition to its box office success—but linked to it—*Saving Private Ryan* garnered a number of critical kudos and prestigious nominations and awards: Oscars for best director, best cinematography, best film editing, best sound, and best sound effects editing; Academy Award nominations for best actor, best picture, art direction, makeup, music, and screenplay; the Directors Guild of America Award for best picture; the Golden Globes for best picture and best director; a Grammy for best instrumental movie score; the New York Film Critics Circle Award for best film; the Chicago Film Critics Association Award for best picture; among many others.
**AMERICAN VALUES**

*Saving Private Ryan* begins—and ends—with a close-up shot of a translucent American flag blowing in the breeze, an image and narrative positioning that suggest that the United States is the alpha and omega, the be-all and end-all, of human civilization. To say that the film is a sentimental "flag-waver" may therefore be stating the obvious. Nonetheless, the visual transparency of the "Stars and Stripes" used in the opening and closing images may just reflect Spielberg's transparent and obvious propagandistic meaning: in the Second World War, America saved the world, pretty much unassisted, and emerged victorious despite great sacrifices. As a first point to consider, we never see any other nation's troops, even though a realistic depiction of the D-Day invasion on June 6, 1944, should have focused on the collective Allied military effort. Rather, as presented in the film, D-Day is an all-American operation.

The modern-day framing episode, used at the start and again at the end of the movie, shows an unidentified older man and his family wandering in the military cemetery above Omaha Beach. The camera isolates on the elderly gentleman as he drifts away from his relatives, pauses an American flag, and scans a veritable field of identical crosses and an occasional Star of David. As the man drops to his knees and begins to sob, Spielberg cuts to three separate shots of crosses before zooming in slowly on the man's eyes. The sound of the sea lapping against the shore triggers the flashback memory that constitutes the rest of the three-hour movie. The calmness and serenity of the elegiac setting, the measured pace of the editing, and the steadiness of the camera are in marked contrast to the chaotic scene that follows: the landing on Omaha Beach. Suddenly, the camera is handheld and shaky, several soldiers vomit in fear, and explosions get louder and louder as the landing crafts approach the shore. Instead of the stately crosses above the beach, we see one G.I. kissing the crucifix around his neck for luck; and instead of the serene grassy site on the bluff, we view pandemonium as men jump into the water in full battle gear, swimming for their lives amid slow-motion blood and horror.

These fictional cinematic images—of the contemporary scene in the cemetery and of the 1944 assault—serve to recall two images that were broadcast far and wide: Ronald Reagan's fortieth anniversary speech at that very cemetery on June 6, 1984, and Bill Clinton's fifthtieth anniversary address at the same locale on June 6, 1994. Two other cultural events are worth noting in this context, namely, the rise to best-seller status of *The Greatest Generation* NBC broadcaster Tom Brokaw's book about World War II veterans; and former U.S. senator Bob Dole's efforts to build a National World War II Memorial on the Mall in Washington, D.C., an endeavor that actor Tom Hanks has endorsed. Spielberg was clearly not alone in harking back to those thrilling days of yesteryear when American hegemony was undisputed. With the tepid end of the Cold War, the natural place to turn to for enemies was the "Good War," with its sadistic Nazi enemies typecast in the role of evil villains.

As in the Indiana Jones cycle and *Schindler's List* (1993), the Germans in *Saving Private Ryan* are depicted as depraved monsters. The much-celebrated opening montage, for instance, shows waves of G.I.s being mowed down by Nazi machine guns, blown out of the water by powerful enemy mortar fire, and shot through their helmets, incinerated, dismembered, or disemboweled by unseen enemy ordinance. Although we occasionally see a shot from the physical point of view of the Axis gunners, we are clearly not in their moral viewpoint; the POVs shot from behind the German troops preserves their anonymity, prevents any identification with their predicament, and leaves them faceless automatons, no more human than their weapons. The opening battle scene thus establishes empathy for the "underdog" U.S. forces, who are far below the enemy stronghold on the cliffs of Normandy and hardly able to wrest a foothold on the heavily fortified Omaha Beach without suffering intense carnage and massive casualties. Both the film's narrative structure, which opens on a gore-filled and ostensibly antiwar scene of death and destruction, and the natural geography of space—the "Huns" above, the Yanks below—create an immediate sense of epic heroism amid despair. Private Caparzo emphasizes this underdog status when he says, "We don't have a frickin'chance and that ain't fair."

The opening battle scene is thus a setup for the Americans' counteroffensive as they begin to advance on the Germans' positions. In short, twenty-five minutes of seeing and identifying with Americans killed and maimed as cannon fodder in an apparently futile assault paves the way for their eventual brutal and merciless retaliation against their adversaries—even if they do not play by the accepted international rules of engagement or the code of conduct Americans usually expect of their screen heroes.
"THEN EVERY SOLDIER KILL HIS PRISONERS"

King Henry V's pre-battle speeches to his outnumbered army in Shakespeare's famous history play are well known for their clarion rhetoric about patriotic duty and honor on the battlefield. ("Once more upon the breach, dear friends, once more."14 "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers; for he today who sheds his blood with me shall be my brother.")15 Less well known is the scene that occurs after the defeat of the superior French forces at the Battle of Agincourt. In victory, Henry orders the cold-blooded murder of all French prisoners.16 The first person to speak after Henry's brutal edict, Captain Fluellen, states, "'Tis expressly against the law of arms. Tis as arrant a piece of knavery, mark you now, as can offert."17 Now, as then, the wanton killing of prisoners of war is considered a violation of the "laws" of combat. In Henry's time, the unwritten rules of medieval chivalry provided the norms by which to treat prisoners, civilians, and the slain; today, nations rely on more formal documents, specifically the Geneva Conventions and the international legal principles laid down at the Nuremberg war crimes trials.

It is therefore interesting-and instructive--that in Saving Private Ryan the "heroic" Americans violate the rules of the Geneva Conventions on several occasions by killing surrendering combatants and prisoners of war in cold blood. The first such instance occurs when the platoon under the command of Captain John H. Miller (Tom Hanks) fires point-blank at surrendering German machine gunners. Hand grenades and a flamethrower are then used against those who remain inside a machine-gun nest; one G.I. sadistically suggests, "Don't shoot. Let 'em burn!" As more Nazis surrender to the advancing U.S. forces, they are routinely shot in cold blood in or around their foxholes, while the Americans make fun of the German prisoners' palms-up gestures of submission ("Look, I washed for zupper") or pretend not to comprehend the unarmed Germans' verbal pleas for compassion ("I'm sorry, I can't understand you"). The "good guys" even summarily execute a surrendering Nazi officer, whose hands are in the air. How does the film get audiences to identify with these acts of "barbarity," even in the context of an inhuman war and the brutality of the Nazi regime?

Part of the explanation can be found in a scene toward the beginning of the film. Miller's special squadron approaches a radar site and spots an enemy machine-gun post nearby. One of the men suggests detouring around the position: "This isn't our mission ... an unnecessary risk." But Miller insists on checking it out: "Our mission is to win the war." Private Reiben, the platoon's Brooklyn-born chronic griper spouts the clichéd line from so many war movies: "I just don't have a good feel about this." But Miller insists they proceed: "When was the last time you felt good about anything?" The unit does engage in a brief battle with some German troops, and they lose their medic, Wade, in the process. His anguished death, filmed in handheld close-up as he begs for his mother, angers one G.I. so much that he bashes a wounded German soldier with his rifle butt. Again, the death of an "innocent" American provides the provocation and justification for retaliation.

One German prisoner is taken in the action, and he is ordered to dig graves for the dead. The expectation is that he will be executed and tossed into the hole he has dug; but Corporal Upham, the unit's interpreter, challenges Miller's unspoken order: "Sir, you're gonna let them kill him? This is not right!" While digging his own grave, the enemy captive tries to ingratiate himself with his captors and would-be executioners by spouting what little English he knows, a smattering of popular culture: "I like America!" "Fancy, schmancy," "Steamboat Willie," "Betty Boop--what a dish," "Betty Grable--nice gams," "Oh, say can you sink," and even "Fuck Hitler!" Upham, the translator, once again makes his case to take the German as a prisoner of war: "He says he is sorry about Wade. It's not right! He surrendered to us." Miller finally relents and reluctantly agrees to release the German: "He's a POW. We can't take him with us." Despite a near-mutinous reaction from most of the men, the German is blindfolded and set free with the assumption that he will be captured by advancing Allied forces.

That one act of "kindness" comes back to haunt Miller's detail--and the audience--at the end of the film. That same prisoner (referred to in the cast list as "Steamboat Willie") returns to action and ends up killing Captain Miller. Later, Private Mellish, the Jewish G.I., who had earlier relished taunting enemy prisoners by waving his Star of David and shouting "Juden" as they marched past. Mellish is stabbed to death by another German soldier in a strangely sexualized--almost tender--yet grueling and excruciating hand-to-hand struggle in a bombed-out building. In her review of the film for Film Quarterly, Karen Jaehne suggested that this mano a mano contest shows the German in a nonsadistic, humanized light. According to Jaehne, the Nazi says, "Lass uns es beenden" (Let's just end it all), offering Mellish an easy death, but that dialogue--which is lost
on non-German-speaking viewers—can also be regarded as a verbal tactic by the Nazi to get his rival to surrender without further struggle. Rather than showing mercy to the unarmed Mellis (as the Americans did to Steamboat Willie), the German plunges a knife into his heart. Worse yet, as noted briefly above, in the final battle scene at the bridge in Ramelle, Steamboat Willie kills Captain Miller (after spotting the man who had freed him earlier and shouting, “I know that guy!”). The moral is not lost on the cowardly Corporal Upham, who had interceded earlier on behalf of the “Americanized” German POW. At the end of the film, when his knowledge of German allows him to take control of a group of Wehrmacht captives, Upham spots “Steamboat Willie” and shoots him dead in cold blood. The niceties of the “Good (and moral) War” are soon forgotten; bloodlust and vengeance trump honor and esprit de combat. Although Captain Miller had earlier mused, “If God’s on our side, who’s on theirs?” such ephemeral ethical speculation is abandoned when Americans are clearly in the right.

“THIS TIME THE MISSION IS THE MAN”

Captain Miller’s quixotic mission is clearly established at the outset. Once the U.S. forces take the plateau above Omaha Beach and begin to mop up, the scene shifts suddenly to a stateside locale. On the home front, army secretaries type up death notices while a voice-over narrator reads the KIA announcements aloud. Eventually, we learn that three such telegrams are being sent to the same address in Iowa, to the home of “blue star” mother Mrs. Ryan, who now has only one surviving son left, Private James Francis Ryan (Matt Damon). As a car containing an officer and a minister approaches her pastoral Norman Rockwell-like farmhouse, Mrs. Ryan senses the bad news. These sepia-toned and redolent images of down-home Americana segue to army chief of staff George C. Marshall, a revered patriarchal figure in U.S. military history, as well as the author of the Marshall Plan to rebuild postwar Europe (and thus prevent communists from gaining a foothold there). Marshall’s compassion is evident as he recites from memory a letter of condolence written by Abraham Lincoln to a mother whose five sons had been slain during the Civil War. The invocation of Lincoln, with solemn, almost ecclesiastical, musical accompaniment, is punctuated by a zoom in on Marshall’s face as he emphatically states, “We’re going to get him the hell out of there!”
This scene sets up the "point of attack," the hermeneutic of the narrative: will Private Ryan be saved and returned to the safety of his mother's bosom? It also demonstrates what the boys are fighting and dying for on Omaha Beach: their beloved mothers, their beloved country, their beloved religion, and their beloved superior officers. There are frequent reminders throughout the narrative that these things are worth fighting for, despite an occasional cynical remark from the troops. But patriotism is taken for granted here, not extolled in fancy speeches.

The mission is set: find Private Ryan and "get him the hell out of there." Despite some griping by Private Jackson about the "serious misallocation of valuable military resources," Miller rounds up a squad and they march together, their silhouettes set against a scenic horizon filled with dramatic storm clouds ahead. A similar use of the percussive explosions of grenades and bombshells, and they march together, their silhouettes set against a scenic horizon filled with dramatic storm clouds ahead. A similar use of the percussive explosions of grenades and bombshells. The omen is fulfilled as the detail finally encoun...
appearing at the eleventh hour, the *deus ex machina* arrives in the form of U.S. P-51 warplanes, which strafe and bomb the Panzer tanks and Nazi troops into submission.\(^{22}\) Unfortunately, the reinforcements are too late to save Miller, but the strategic bridge is held. In the final skirmish, the battle-weary captain loses his character-revealing hand tremor in death and his "thousand-mile stare" becomes frozen in premature rigor mortis. Although the film has been praised for its gritty "realism," it also contains oodles of melodrama, particularly in its tear-jerker climax. Perhaps there is a fine line-in real life and in cinema-between legitimate human sentiment and bathetic sentimentality, but Miller's stoic death scene seems to cross the line into pathos. Miller's demise in the service of a larger cause makes him another in a series of sacrificial "Spielbergian Christ surrogate[s]."\(^{23}\) So, in the end, back at the Normandy cemetery, the elder Private Ryan salutes the crucifix that marks the grave of his savior, the reluctant warrior, Miller. And Spielberg dissolves from the cross to Old Glory, the star-spangled banner, still gallantly streaming "o'er the ramparts we watched." This retrospective cinematic linking of God and Country in *Saving Private Ryan* closely parallels the coupling of deity and nation in the fourth stanza of the American national anthem: "Blest with victory and peace, may the heav'n rescued land / Praise the Power that hath made and preserved us a nation. / Then conquer we must, when our cause it is just, / And this be our motto: 'In God is our trust.'"

**CONCLUSION**

Every individual and social group, including nation-states, seems to need an enemy against whom to define itself. If those enemies do not exist in reality at any particular historical conjuncture, they are often invented or created by a process akin to psychological projection. Because all history is, ultimately, contemporary history, mainstream movies often draw on the past to comment on the present episteme. In a post-Vietnam and post-Cold War epoch, the Hollywood cinema of the 1990s used both current and past historical events to re-create and conciliate a collective delusion that reflected—as well as displaced—real social problems and contradictions. Mainstream American cinema of the 1990s resolved those antinomies by invoking a filmic legitimation of the U.S. military and the state war apparatus after the real-life recla-

mation of those forces during the invasions of Panama and the Persian Gulf War.

In particular, even though *Saving Private Ryan* is set in the glorious past, when the U.S. army saved the world and extended America's economic and cultural hegemony/dominion over Europe and the Third World, its contemporary moral and political effectivity seems clear: to hark back to those "days of yesteryear" in order to renew and revivify America's mythic rightness as a nation, particularly as U.S. and NATO forces bombed Serbia and ground troops were sent into Kosovo. Although set in the past, Spielberg's "antivar" film has ideological ramifications that affect spectators now and in the future, and provide the self-perpetuating jingoistic justifications for future unilateral military invasions, incursions, and interventions.

**NOTES**


2. Tomasulo, "The Gospel according to Spielberg."

3. World War II is the subject of two of Spielberg's earliest efforts: *Fight Squadron* (1960), an 8mm. tribute to Castle Films documentaries about the 1940: and *Escape to Nowhere* (1-62), an award-winning forty-minute-long movie, made when the budding director was only sixteen.

4. In *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), Indiana Jones (Harrison Ford) nonchalantly shoots an Arab brandishing an immense scimitar in the streets of Cairo. Although played for comedy, the incident conveys the implicit message *the* the United States', superior gun power can and should be used against foreign enemies, even if it is not a fair fight. Furthermore, given the release date of *Raiders*, the slaying of this Arab can be linked allegorically to the Iranian hostage crisis of 1980-81, the OPEC oil embargo, and the failed "rescue mission" of the American embassy hostages in Tehran. Tomasulo "Mr. Jones Goes to Washington," 335.

5. Unfortunately for Spielberg, the American public apparently was *not* as distressed over Japanese gains in the global marketplace; after all, American: were frantically purchasing Japanese products, and the United States relied heavily on overseas investment to sustain its economic growth. In this case
then, patriotic appeal did not translate into box office success. Indeed, 19~1
grossed only $23.2 million (domestic) on a production budget of $35 mil-
These figures come from the Internet Movie Database, better known as <imdb.com>, an Amazon.com company.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Many other Allied nations participated in the D-Day invasion, including
England, France, Canada, and Australia. In addition, segregated African Amer-
ican units also landed on Omaha Beach, although there is no evidence of any
black soldiers in Spielberg's epic.
9. Spielberg allegedly witnessed just such a scene during a visit to France
Comment 34, no. 5 (September-October 1998): 23.
10. We later learn that the man is the grown-up title character, but, al-
though we are led to believe the flashback is from his perspective: he had no di-
rect knowledge of the events we witness until he enters the narrative as a young
man two hours later.
11. Ironically, architect Frederick St. Florian's monumental design for the
proposed memorial is reminiscent of the work of Albert Speer, the chief archi-
tect of the Nazis. It features a sunken stone plaza ringed by fifty-six stone pil-
ars each seventeen feet high, and a pair of triumphal arches as tall as a four-
story building. See Paul Goldberger, "Not in Our Front Yard," New Yorker,
12. The film's gut-wrenching (and gut-spilling) opening battle sequence
has been praised for the stark "antiwar" realism of its representation of the
calamitous contingency of combat-s-an \textit{é du reel} enhanced by the ~se of de-
saturated film stock that conveys the look of old 1940s black and white news-
reel footage. In addition to the visual "realism," \textit{Private Ryan} revealed in "the
period authenticity in arms, vehicles, uniforms, and insignia\textendash; , as well as
"wartime vernacular and military lingo." Thomas Doherty, \textit{Projections of War:}
\textit{Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II}, rev. ed. (New York: Columbia
University Press, 1999), 303.

Just as important to this realism effect is the presentation of supposedly
random acts. For instance, when one soldier is struck in the helmet by a bullet,
he miraculously survives and removes his helmet in disbelief; a nearby soldier,
equally amazed, says, "Lucky bastard." Just then, another (digitally animated)
German bullet hits the G.I. square in the forehead, killing him instantly. Al-
though meant to suggest the accidental nature of life and death on the battle-
field and to portray the jeopardy of the innocent G.I.s, the scene is highly ca-
dulated to demonstrate the precision of the German sharpshooter and the long
odds of taking the beach from the Teutonic hordes on the bluff above.

13. In this regard, \textit{Saving Private Ryan} is not an isolated instance of a co
temporary Hollywood film in which the "virtuous" protagonists break all the
classical ethical laws of fairness by killing unarmed, albeit villainous, people..
Kathryn Bigelow's \textit{Blue Steel} (1990), for instance, the policewoman hero-
(Jamie Lee Curtis) shoots her male nemesis (Ron Silver) point-blank in the head
rather than arrest him, even though, as Linda Miziejskiw notes, "he is out of
ammunition, wounded, and barely able to stand up." See Miziejskiw, "Pictur-
ing the Female Dick: The Silence of the Lambs and Blue Steel," \textit{Journal of Film and
Video} 45, nos. 2-3 (summer-fall 1993): 16. Similarly, in Curtis Hanson's \textit{L.A.
Confidential} (1997), the self-righteous, "goody-goody," by-the-book detective (Guy
Pearce) shoots his disarmed rogue captain (James Cromwell) in cold blood, just
as a slew of other officers arrive on the scene to sort things out. Finally, in Joel
Schumacher's \textit{8mm} (1999), a private investigator (Nicolas Cage) goes on a ver-
table killing spree to avenge the murder of one young woman who ended up in
a pornographic "snuff" film. The vigilante hero captures one of the accom-
plishes (James Gandolfini), pistol-whips him unmercifully, soaks him in gas-
cline, and incinerates him, rather than turn the sleazebag over to the proper
authorities.

in the section heading is from \textit{Henry V}, IV, vi, 37.
15. Ibid., IV, iii, 60-62.
16. At the real-life battle, however, the king's knights hesitated and Henry
had to call in archers to carry out his barbarous order.

19. World War II newsreel footage was always shot silent because existing
sound recording equipment was cumbersome to carry around in combat situa-
tions. Spielberg's use of three-dimensional digital THX sound effects is, there-
fore, anachronistic and inauthentic, even though its goal is "realism." Bill
20. Jackson's religiosity, Old Testament locutions, and hillbilly roots are
reminiscent of another famed movie sharpshooter, World War I Medal of
Honor-Winner Alvin York (Gary Cooper) in Howard Hawk's \textit{Sergeant York}
(1941). \textit{Sergeant York} was a propagandistic film made on the eve of World War II
that suggested that the United States had to give up its pacifistic, isolationist
ways (York was a Quaker) to defeat the Huns in a second outing.
21. This scene raises a significant military question: Who destroyed this
small French village? At the beginning of the war, Paris fell after a six-week
campaign in 1940 and the Germans occupied France thereafter. There was no
need for the Nazis to obliterate a small village in the far West during the D-Day
invasion. Although unstated in the film, Allied bombers probably "took out" the town (and possibly its civilian population) as part of their assault on re-treating Axis forces--"destroying the village in order to save it."

22. Initially, before seeing--and hearing--the bombers, we are confused by the sudden explosion of the approaching German tank. The dying Captain Miller, here behaving more like an underdog David to the Nazi Goliath (or an outmanned Davy Crockett to Santa Ana's Mexican forces at the Alamo), fires his .45 at the menacing Panzer, only to see it blow up.