

Films de ficció *Feature Films*

FEATURE FILMS OF WORLD WAR II AND VIETNAM

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My original topic was entitled «Feature Films of World War II and Vietnam,» but I noticed that most presentations and papers in this conference focus on World War II, so I will say just a few words about World War II, and place my emphasis on Vietnam.

World War II was the «good» war. It really *was* a clear-cut case of good against evil. Winston Churchill did not exaggerate when he said that Hitler was a danger to civilization, and would usher in a new Dark Age. The Japanese, with their brand of Oriental fascism, posed a similar threat in Asia.

The attack on Pearl Harbor, 7 December 1941, galvanized America into action. Admiral Yamamoto, the Japanese Commander who planned the attack on Pearl Harbor, made a prophetic statement after the attack when he said, «I fear that all we have done is awakened a sleeping giant, and filled him with a terrible resolve.»

All debate about the rightness of American involvement ceased. The political parties, the public and the film industry were of one mind and one purpose.

The World War II movies reflected the values of 1940 America; a moralistic view of America's special place in the world; a clear-cut portrayal of the good Allies fighting against the evil Nazis and Japanese. The view was correct but the movie characters were often simplistic stereotypes.

Similarly, the propaganda enfolded throughout the films appealed to the trusting, rather innocent American public of the 1940s. These films also reflected the racial stereotypes accepted by a country which, in its values and leadership, was overwhelmingly white, Anglo-Saxon and Protestant. I don't mention this as an apology or an indictment, just as an historical fact.

Early World War II movies, particularly those made during the war were vehicles of propaganda, designed to bolster the fighting spirit of the American people. The propagandist theme continued in the early years of the Cold War. The uns subtle message was that we would fight against aggression from Communist Russia as fervently as we fought against Nazi Germany.

World War II was a just war which the United States fought in an efficient and honorable manner. These themes are central to World War II movies. Even in the height of the anti-military 1970s, films on World War II, such as *Patton* (1970), *Midway* (1976), or the Comic book-style *Dirty Dozen* movies did not try to take a revisionist approach to history. The technical accuracy improved throughout the decades, the characters became more complex and, although a certain anti-hero cult was manifested from time to time, the basic theme of the «good» war endured.

With the Vietnam War, we have a different type of war, in a different era, which generated a completely different approach by the movie industry. As a military historian, let me take a few minutes to look at Vietnam as an historical event and analyze some important features of the war. Then we'll discuss how this historical event was interpreted in movies.

For the United States, Vietnam was a great national trauma, as emotional and divisive as the Spanish Civil War was for Spain. The war lasted more than 12 years; it cost 58,000 Americans killed in action; 300,000 wounded; 200 billion dollars; and in the end the wrong flag was flying over Saigon.

Why did the United States get involved in Vietnam? Our involvement should be understood in the context of World History. Periodically in history, the world stage is dominated by a struggle between two great powers: Rome against Carthage; Ancient Greece against Ancient Persia; in the sixteenth century the Spanish Empire fought against the British empire; and since 1945 the main struggle has been between the American empire and the Soviet empire.

The conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union was an old-fashioned power struggle between competing empires. It was also an ideological conflict between the Soviet brand of communism and the American brand of capitalism.

Since 1945, that struggle has taken place on many different battlefields; Berlin, Greece, Turkey, Iran, China, Korea, Cuba, Laos, Nicaragua, Grenada, and Vietnam. On a strategic level each of those battlefields was a test of American willpower. Sometimes we won, sometimes we lost, sometimes the struggle ended in a tie.

We should also not overlook the obvious, that it was a struggle between good and evil. The United States, for all its faults is basically a decent system. On the other hand, when Ronald Reagan referred to the Soviet Union as an «Evil Empire,» it was a great understatement. The system established by Lenin and Stalin turned out to be one of the most murderous regimes in history, a real gangster empire. No one knows this better, now, than the people of Russia—and eastern Europe. The key point is that it was

right and just for the United States to make a great effort in Vietnam to prevent the Soviet Union, either directly or indirectly, from spreading its influence and system over another area of the world and another group of people. It was in our own national interest, and also in the long range interest of the Vietnamese people to prevent a communist system from taking hold.

What went wrong? While the purpose of the war was sound, the American political and military leaders executed the war in an inefficient manner, and made horrendous mistakes.

What were these mistakes?

1. We underestimated the willpower of the North Vietnamese. They were motivated by a ferocious combination of communism, nationalism and revolutionary fervor. At its most fundamental level, war is a clash of wills. North Vietnamese willpower was stronger than America's.

2. The American leaders did not understand the North Vietnamese strategy of protracted war, and made no effort to understand their strategy.

3. We did not isolate the battlefield and cut off supplies to North Vietnam from Russia and China. Therefore, we never had a chance to get the war under control and bring it down to a manageable level.

4. We did not send enough troops. In a guerrilla war conventional forces need about a 10 to 1 superiority over the guerrilla troops. In Vietnam, we barely had a 2 to 1 superiority in fighting strength.

5. Our technological superiority was negated by the jungle terrain. Tanks and armored vehicles were relatively useless. The bombing campaign was poorly conceived and executed. Even helicopters, which looked spectacular, were only moderately helpful.

6. Our South Vietnamese allies were corrupt and inefficient, and alienated the very people they were suppose to protect.

7. Our overall strategy of gradual escalation was fundamentally flawed. Gradual escalation allowed a weaker, smaller power to keep up with a more powerful opponent. The United States was fighting a limited war while North Vietnam fought a total war.

8. Needless to say, the American political leadership, and American military leadership, was appalling—perhaps the worst leadership in American military history. The problem started at the top. President Johnson took a consensus-oriented political approach to strategy in Vietnam.

Instead of making the hard decisions to either win or get out, he tried to take a middle road which would alienate the least number of voters. His civilian advisors, like Robert MacNamara, were economists, business managers and systems analysts who did not understand military history and strategy. The American generals of Vietnam were not of the same caliber as the great military commanders of World War II.

In Vietnam we had no one like Generals Marshall, Eisenhower, MacArthur or Patton. The top ranking generals of the Vietnam War tended to be weak-willed commanders who were particularly deferential to civilian authority and had little real influence on strategic policy. Additionally, the Vietnam War generals received their military training in the conventional war of World War II. They did not understand or study guerrilla war.

9. After the war, the American military tended to blame the press. The press had a negative impact, but the main problem was faulty strategy and poor political and military leadership at the national level.

Military historians have grappled with the question of how the United States could have won the war. There are two schools of thought on this; the Counterinsurgency school and the Conventional War school. The Counterinsurgency school of analysis believes that the war was an insurgency, and that the main enemy was the Viet Cong in South Vietnam. To win the war the United States should have emphasized land reform, nation building, ending corruption and protecting the population centers. Regarding military tactics the United States should have concentrated on small unit operations and «out-guerrilled the guerrillas,» as the British did in Malaya.

But there is a problem with this thesis. Vietnam was not just an insurgency. Instead of 5,000 guerrillas, as in Malaya, there were 300,000 to 600,000 guerrillas in South Vietnam, with unlimited sources of supplies and replacements coming down the Ho Chi Minh trail from North Vietnam. Without first sealing off the borders and providing security, nation building was hopeless.

The other school of analysis is the Conventional War school which believes that the main enemy was North Vietnam, not just the Viet Cong. To win the war we should have hit North Vietnam with mass destruction in 1965, blockaded the port of Haiphong, destroyed the railroads coming from China, invaded Laos and Cambodia to sever the Ho Chi Minh trail, mobilized our Reserves and National Guard, declared war, and invaded North Vietnam.

Critics of this strategy state that it would not have completely ended a guerrilla war. That is true, but it would have gotten the war down to a manageable level and would have made South Vietnam secure. As it was, the Vietnam War was completely out of control, and was never even close to being under control.

To understand Vietnam War films we should also keep the *chronology* of the war and its aftermath in perspective. Let me briefly outline the main points in the chronology of Vietnam War: From 1961 to 1965, the war had remained an advisory effort on the part of the United States. President Johnson made the decision to escalate the war in 1965. From 1965 to 1967 the Americans gradually built up strength to 500,000 and followed the tactics of search and destroy, depicted in the movie *Platoon*.

General Westmoreland, the American commander sought to bring the big American battalions, with their massive firepower, into contact with the elusive

guerrilla units. By late 1967, the war seemed to be going well and General Westmoreland confidently announced that he could see the «light at the end of the tunnel».

The decisive year in the Vietnam War was 1968, and the decisive battle -the only decisive battle- was the Tet offensive. The Tet offensive shattered all the illusions. On 31 January, a massive enemy offensive hit all over Vietnam, in a hundred cities and districts. The attack demonstrated to most Americans that Westmoreland was wrong, the war was out of control, the strategy was bankrupt, and there was no end in sight.

The political effects were stunning. President Johnson was defeated psychologically and decided not to run again for President. The other three presidential candidates in that year, Richard Nixon, Hubert Humphrey, and Bobby Kennedy, all ran on an anti-war platform. Riots erupted all over the country, fueled by the assassination of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King. The Americans stopped bombing North Vietnam and unilaterally began withdrawing our forces and turning the war over to the South Vietnamese, in a policy known as Vietnamization. After the Tet offensive, the North Vietnamese knew they would win this protracted war and were not particularly anxious to negotiate. The Peace talks in Paris dragged on for five years, from 1968 to 1973.

American soldiers were out of Vietnam by 1973. The final phase of the drama occurred in 1975, when the North Vietnamese, with 600 tanks simply roared into Saigon, thus bringing this so-called «guerrilla war» to a close. The United States sent no help, because we were distracted and paralyzed by the Watergate scandal, the resignation of President Nixon, and a general feeling of self-doubt known as the «Vietnam syndrome».

How well did American soldiers perform in Vietnam? From 1965 to 1968, American military units had been well-disciplined, tactically-proficient, and well-motivated; some of the finest soldiers and units in American military history. But, during the period of withdrawal from 1969 to 1973 the American Army declined as a fighting force. I saw this process personally, having served in Vietnam as an advisor from 1968 to 1969.

By 1969 it was obvious to those of us in Vietnam that we were involved in a «no-win war». With the start of negotiations in Paris, American units switched over to a defensive mission. As any military historian knows, a defensive strategy lowers the morale of your troops and surrenders the initiative to the enemy. By 1969, the lowering of morale was evidenced by a breakdown of discipline in the American Army. Instances of AWOL, desertion, drug use, alcohol abuse, and even attacks on officers, called «ragging», began to increase. By 1970 the American Army in Vietnam had become an undisciplined military force.

The immediate effect of the Vietnam War, in the 1970s, was characterized politically by a wave of disappointment and frustration by both the right and left; the right because we did not go all out and win the war; the left because they believed the war was a mistake in the first place and conducted in an immoral fashion.

The recriminations about losing Vietnam began immediately. Whose fault was it? To the right wing, the initial reaction was that we had ruined ourselves with a no-win strategy. We had also been sabotaged by weak willed-politicians, a disloyal press and anti-war protesters.

To the left we lost the war because we were involved in an immoral effort and were allied with a corrupt government which did not represent the Vietnamese people. Our strategy and tactics, and our overwhelming firepower was unnecessary and inappropriate.

The American military, to their credit, analyzed the war honestly, and learned the lessons of Vietnam. The strategic lesson is that, if you elect to use military force, use overwhelming military force; the psychological shock is as important as the physical shock. Accomplish your objective quickly and get out.

The American military commanders in the recent Gulf War were mid-level commanders in Vietnam. They exhibited a collective determination not to repeat the mistakes of Vietnam. They learned so well, and prepared so thoroughly that the Gulf War turned out to be one of the most lopsided victories in military history. Because the American military did everything right in the Gulf War, the victory seemed easy in retrospect.

With this historical background, let's see how the movies interpreted this historical event. The first important movie on Vietnam was **The Green Berets**, starring John Wayne. It took an old-fashioned World War II-type approach to this complicated guerrilla war, complete with all the simplistic cliches and stereotypes of that genre of movies. The movie was made during 1967, when most Americans still accepted a World War II-type interpretation of the Vietnam conflict. It was released in 1968, just as the complexities and disillusionments of Vietnam were becoming obvious. Notice that **The Green Berets** was the only successful movie actually released during the Vietnam War. It was almost a decade later before another significant movie was released.

So, the first point is that Vietnam movies did not influence the way we fought the war, or the outcome of the war. The media which did influence the war to some degree, of course, was television.

While Vietnam movies did not influence the course of the war, or the outcome of the war, the movies did influence how we remember the war. In fact Vietnam movies influenced how America interpreted events and how Americans saw their role in the world.

The wave of anti-war movies began with a series of films that don't even mention Vietnam! These movies used the American Indian Wars of the 19th century as a metaphor to foster an anti-military, anti-Vietnam theme. In movies such as **Soldier Blue** (1970) and **Little Big Man** (1970), the native American Indians are the Vietnamese; happy, peaceful, inoffensive people, close to nature. The cavalrymen are the racist baby

killers, led by psychotic generals, who use their search and destroy tactics to commit genocide against the Indians.

An example of this revisionist history is particularly well-illustrated in the way movies have interpreted one famous American General, George Armstrong Custer, killed at the Battle of the Little Big Horn against the Sioux Indians in 1876. Historically, Custer was very much like General Patton; aggressive, fanatically brave and extremely competent. He was promoted to general at the age of 23 for his spectacularly successful battles during the American Civil War. Like Patton, General Custer was controversial, the kind of public personality about whom no one is neutral, he is either worshiped or despised.

In the Indian movies of the 1930s or 40s, like *They Died with Their Boots On*, Custer is the gallant dashing patriot played by Errol Flynn or the likable young officer played by Ronald Reagan in the movie *Santa Fe Trail*. But in the movie, *Soldier Blue* (1970), the peaceful plains Indians are massacred by a Custer look-alike who revels in the slaughter. In a most outrageous affront to history, the movie *Little Big Man* (1970), depicts General Custer as an absolute psychotic, standing up, making a speech to an invisible Congress as the Indians ride around and shoot at him.

The movie *M.A.S.H.* (1970), and the follow-up television show is another example of an anti-Vietnam War, anti-military production which doesn't even mention Vietnam. Indeed, *M.A.S.H.* is supposed to be set in the Korean War (1950-1953), but the characters are confronted with all the issues of the Vietnam War. The heroes are the ones who don't want to be there, who want to get out any way they can, or at least subvert the system. The messages that come screaming out, particularly in the weekly television series, concern the futility of war, the foolishness of military systems, and that in war there are no good guys or bad guys, we're all guilty.

In fact, the Korean War was launched by a bold, unprovoked attack by the North Korean Army, trained by Russian advisors and equipped with 250 new Soviet tanks. The South Koreans had no tanks and American forces had withdrawn the year before. The North Koreans gambled that they could conquer South Korea in 50 days.

Like the Japanese in World War II, and like Saddam Hussein in the Gulf, the North Koreans believed that the American system of democracy would be too disorganized to be able to respond forcefully and quickly. They also believed that America would not have the willpower to commit its soldiers to a bloody confrontation, and see the crisis through. Throughout history, dictators have repeatedly misunderstood democratic systems and the latent power engendered by a collective sense of moral outrage. The rightness of the American cause in Korea was ignored in the *M.A.S.H.* movie and TV series. But again, *M.A.S.H.* was about Vietnam, not Korea.

Vietnam movies made in the 1970s had a decidedly left wing flavor. The war is depicted as an exercise in genocide and American soldiers are shown as psychotics and murderers. The heroes are psychologically destroyed by the war, or come to realize

the wrongness of their cause. These are the messages in movies like **Taxi Driver** (1976), **The Deer Hunter** (1978), **Coming Home** (1978), or **Apocalypse Now** (1979).

These movies have great appeal because they are so well made, but they present a distorted view. **Apocalypse Now** is a good example. As a movie, **Apocalypse Now** is intriguing, thoroughly entertaining, with great actors, great music and wonderful cinematography. But it is like an impressionist painting which captures only an illusion of the mood and flavor of Vietnam. As a historical vehicle the plot is absurd, and the characters are grotesque caricatures. Francis Ford Coppola is a director at work with no historical perspective or understanding of the United States military officer system, the CIA, or how combat operations are really conducted. It is good entertainment but lacks authenticity.

An important part of culture is mythology, and it only takes a few well-made movies to create a myth. These early movies perpetrated several myths about American soldiers in Vietnam; namely that they routinely committed atrocities and that they had unusual psychological problems.

Regarding atrocities, the American army went to great lengths to control its soldiers and to avoid alienating the South Vietnamese. In fact, our self-imposed «rules of engagement» were so extensive that they severely hampered American military operations. All sorts of targets were off limits, leaflets had to be dropped and villages warned of impending attacks. A joke among American pilots at the time was that each plane needed two pilots; one to fly the plane and one to read the «rules of engagement.»

Moral considerations aside, the military chain of command understood that, if American soldiers abused the Vietnamese, it would simply create more recruits for the enemy and thereby make our job of winning «hearts and minds» more difficult. It was also understood that the American *press* was everywhere in Vietnam. At one point, over 700 reporters were in Vietnam; in the base areas, out in the bush, in the Officers Clubs, traveling everywhere with no restrictions, all of them looking for a story. For very pragmatic, as well as moral reasons, officers tried to exercise strict control over their men.

The dictionary defines atrocity as «the cruel killing of a large number of people.» In that sense there was only one atrocity in Vietnam—the My Lai massacre, referred to in many Vietnam movies or TV programs. Not surprisingly, Elia Kazan made My Lai the subject of one of the first post-Vietnam War movies, **The Visitors** (1972).

What made the My Lai massacre possible was that the officer in charge, Lt. Calley, actually led the massacre instead of controlling his troops. Testimony at his trial showed that he gave the order and personally shot several children. Lt. Calley's lawyer tried to portray him as a scapegoat and a victim of the system. Other American officers were charged in the Calley case, not for condoning the massacre, but for trying to cover it up and save their careers.

The main point is that after more than 20 years of historical research we can document only one classic atrocity in Vietnam. If atrocities had been commonplace, there is no doubt the ever-present, ever-vigilant reporters would have uncovered them—or remorseful or outraged soldiers would have let the press know by now.

At the same time, about 300 American soldiers were charged with individual war crimes, the kind depicted in the movie **Casualties of War**.

Individual war crimes are a part of most wars. Any time you give millions of weapons to millions of men, and put them in a dangerous situation, you have the makings of disaster. War is a nasty business, and a guerrilla war is particularly nasty.

About 3 million Americans went to Vietnam during the course of the war. Our peak strength was reached in 1968, when 540,000 Americans were in Vietnam. Most soldiers were fine young men who served honorably and responsibly. But there is always an element in any Army who were thugs in civilian life and continued to be thugs in the Army. My personal observation, having supervised the training of thousands of troops, is that one's basic character is formed by the time one enters the Army. The Army does not turn morally good people into morally bad people, nor can it turn a bad person into a good person. The Army will only force you to follow the rules.

Those 300 war crimes invariably occurred as individual violations, not as the result of a policy. Even the most rabid anti-war movie, like **Casualties of War**, takes care to show that the officers and the chain of command were not involved.

In World War II, the «good war,» about 250 American soldiers were charged with individual war crimes against civilians or captured enemy soldiers. The way movies have treated the subject of war crimes indicates the difference between the Hollywood view of World War II and Vietnam. Theoretically, Hollywood could have made 250 movies on every single war crime in World War II. Instead the subject is not even addressed in World War II movies.

In Vietnam movies, a war crime, or allusion to war crimes, is a mandatory part of most movies or TV programs. The culmination of this theme is **Casualties of War** where an entire 23 million dollar movie is devoted to one of those 300 war crimes. But what is the most honest interpretation, that some 500,000 Americans were serving honorably in Vietnam at the time, or that several soldiers broke down, got out of hand, took advantage of their power and situation, and committed a crime.

Another common ingredient of Vietnam movies is the theme of the psychotic Vietnam veteran, portrayed by the star or co-stars in movies like **Taxi Driver**, **The Deer Hunter**, **Apocalypse Now** and **Coming Home**.

Adjusting from a war time situation is always difficult for veterans. The National Academy of Sciences estimated that about 25 percent of *World War II* veterans had emotional difficulties upon returning. Those difficulties were portrayed sympathetically in post-World War II movies such as **The Best Years of Our Lives** which won the Academy Award for the best picture in 1946. A few other movies

covered the problem of readjustment but then the theme quickly disappeared from movies about World War II.

By contrast the problems of returning veterans have been, and continue to be a dominant theme in Vietnam movies.

In fact, Vietnam veterans as a group are remarkably well-adjusted. In a Harris Survey of 1980, 91 percent of those veterans surveyed said they were «glad they served their country». And 72 percent strongly agreed with the statement «The trouble in the Vietnam War was our troops were asked to fight in a war which our political leaders in Washington would not let them win.»

In 1985, a Washington Post/NBC news poll indicated Vietnam veterans were more likely to have gone to College, own a home or earn \$30,000 a year, than others in their age group. The image of the psychotic Vietnam veterans is, at best, misleading. The suicide rate for Vietnam veterans is also lower than their peers, mainly because the military recruiting process and Basic Training screen out individuals who have obvious psychological problems. Psychotics are a danger to everyone in a military unit.

On a personal note, based on my own experience in Vietnam and a career in the infantry, there is no doubt that this concept of the Vietnam veterans syndrome and the psychotic Vietnam veteran is overdone. The people I knew, or have known since, did not agonize over their experiences in Vietnam. It was a dangerous assignment, against a murderous enemy, in a kill-or-be-killed situation.

Vietnam movies and TV films tend to depict men who fought in Vietnam as typically unwilling draftees, with blacks taking a disproportionate number of casualties. In fact, 66% of those who *served* in Vietnam were volunteers; 73% of those who *died* were volunteers, and 12.5 % of those who died were black, who comprised 13 1/2% of the American male population.

Vietnam movies have continued another popular theme in American war movies; the American soldier as «anti-hero.» The anti-hero is the one who rebels against the system, tries to avoid responsibility until he is forced by circumstances to act like a hero.

This was a popular theme even in World War II movies like *Stalag 17* or *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. The Vietnam era movies of the 1970s perpetuated this theme, in movies like *The Dirty Dozen*. In *The Dirty Dozen*, the commander has to recruit people for a dangerous mission behind enemy lines and, of course, goes to the stockade to recruit a motley crew of deviants. Somehow, we are to believe, that at a critical time, these convicts will find honor, rise to the occasion, and suddenly become heroes.

The truth is that you would never send convicts on an important mission. They were probably in the stockade to begin with because they were undisciplined, undependable and couldn't follow simple instructions.

In a real war, to paraphrase General Patton, if troops don't look like soldiers, and don't act like soldiers, they won't fight like soldiers. General Patton would have

left the Dirty Dozen in the stockade. He also would have tossed the entire cast of **M.A.S.H.** into the stockade with them.

The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 was a reaction to the Vietnam syndrome. This same reaction carried over into a series of 1980 films which typify the frustrations of the right wing. These movies expound a «stab in the back theory» and the betrayal of Vietnam veterans. The **Rambo** and **Missing in Action** movies are typical.

But throughout the 1980s, while right wing movies appeared, the left was still represented.

The movie **Casualties of War**, is a throwback; it should have been made in 1970, not 1989. **The Killing Fields** (1984) takes the interpretation that somehow the genocide inflicted on the Cambodians by the Communist Khmer Rouge, was the fault of the United States government. And Stanley Kubrick, who made his initial anti-war statement in **Paths of Glory** (1957), reproduced the same theme with his interpretation of sadistic Marine Basic Training in **Full Metal Jacket** (1987).

The two recent movies that have had considerable impact were **Platoon** (1986), and **Born on the Fourth of July** (1990), both directed by Oliver Stone. Stone brings a certain authenticity to his Vietnam movies because, unlike other directors, he actually served in Vietnam for 15 months. In **Platoon**, he paid unusual attention to detail in creating the world of the infantryman in Vietnam, right down to soldiers carrying little bottles of tabasco sauce to make the C rations taste better.

Oliver Stone is a brilliant film maker. He wrote the scripts for **Midnight Express**, **Scarface**, **Year of the Dragon**, **8 Million Ways to Die**. His credits include **Wall Street**, **The Doors**, **Born on the Fourth of July** and **Platoon**. He is a great writer and director, and his films are provocative and entertaining.

But Oliver Stone presents us with a problem. His films purport to cover historical themes, but he knowingly disregards historical facts. His latest movie **JFK**, released two months ago, illustrates the problem.

JFK is about the assassination of President Kennedy, in Dallas, in 1963. The normally liberal American media, to its credit, has condemned the historical inaccuracies of **JFK** in front page articles in **Newsweek**, **Time**, **Esquire** and **Life**. The cover of **Newsweek** is typical. It reads «The Twisted Truth of JFK—Why Oliver Stone's new Movie Can't Be Trusted.» His movie recreates old black and white news footage and intersperses staged news footage with actual news footage, so that the casual observer can't tell the difference. The movie blatantly disregards or falsifies so many proven facts that I don't have time to address them all here.

The hero of the movie, Jim Garrison, is played appealingly by Kevin Costner. In real life Jim Garrison had the reputation of being an eccentric lawyer with a new conspiracy theory each week, yet Costner plays him as a clean-cut, all-American hero in search of truth.

Oliver Stone was aware of this intellectual dishonesty when he made the movie. When asked about his characterization of Garrison in the movie, Oliver Stone

replied «I made Garrison better than he is for a larger purpose». The audience must keep that statement in mind whenever they watch one of the Stone's movies.

Another characteristic of Stone's historical movies is to draw on all the legends and cliches associated with his subject. One film critic of *JFK* summarized his review by saying the movie «encompasses a little bit of every conspiracy theory ever invented». The films of Oliver Stone seem to take extraordinary measures to achieve authenticity. But Stone's concern for authenticity is only superficial; in fact his movies are great fiction, which should in no way be interpreted as history.

His movies on Vietnam reflect his propensity to portray fiction and myth as history. In the movie, *Born on the Fourth of July*, for example, the hero, Ron Kovac, finally achieves his spiritual and political awakening, and at the climax of the movie, attends the 1972 Democratic Convention. In fact, Ron Kovac was nowhere near the Democratic Convention in 1972.

The movie *Platoon* reflects all the genius and flaws of Oliver Stone. It won the Academy Award for best picture, and seemed to be the most authentic movie on the subject. But in truth, Stone included every cliché of the Vietnam war; the drug addict, the psychotic killer, the green lieutenant who can't read a map and calls in artillery fire on his own troops, and the blameless peasants caught in the middle.

Second, Oliver Stone served in Vietnam from 1966 to 1967, when discipline in the Army was good; yet he portrays the Army as it was in 1970 when discipline broke down and a drug subculture had developed.

Third, the climactic battle in the movie is suspect. Supposedly he based it on a battle his unit fought on the Cambodian border, of which there is no historical unit record. Instead the script recreates a famous platoon level action in the Ashau valley in 1965, written up in a book called *Seven Firefights*. He also includes in his script another famous incident in which a Captain Carpenter called in napalm on his own position during an attack. The point is, while the film seems to be authentic, it has pulled together all the legends of the Vietnam War into what seems to be a history of Stone's platoon in combat.

Lastly, Oliver Stone was a private in the infantry and writes from that perspective. The Army private is the lowest ranking member of a military organization. To the Army private all is chaos and confusion; there is no strategy or fancy maneuvering, every attack is a frontal attack. To the infantry private, the war seems to be controlled by junior sergeants; officers are distant figures; the lieutenant is remote, while the infantry captain is in another world. In summary, his view of the war is very narrow.

Vietnam films tend to reinforce this narrow view of the war. World War II spawned films on strategy or the world of the generals, such as *Command Decisions* (1948), *Twelve O'Clock High* (1949), *Patton* (1970) or *Midway* (1976). Vietnam films have remained in the isolated world of the infantry squad or platoon. As a military historian, I have some reservations about *Platoon*. On the other hand, Oliver Stone has

made an important statement about service in Vietnam. The movie demonstrated the real bravery and dedication of men who tried to do their duty under very difficult circumstances. It also made the point, intended or not, that those Americans who fled to Canada or otherwise avoided the physical and moral danger of Vietnam have no right to criticize the soldiers who went.

Oliver Stone's recent movies also reflect the progressive alienation of the director himself from American government and institutions. *Platoon* (1986) is politically neutral; soldiers are called by their country and do their best, even though they do not understand the purpose of the war. In *Born on the Fourth of July* (1990), the soldiers who go to Vietnam are victimized and betrayed by the government, and by some sort of conspiracy which they are only beginning to understand by the end of the movie.

In *JFK* (1992), Stone lets his obsession with conspiracy and betrayal reach hysterical proportions. President Kennedy is killed and a whole generation of Americans are thrust into the Vietnam war by a conspiracy involving Vice-President Johnson, the CIA, the Pentagon, the Army, the Navy, the FBI, the Dallas police department, Congress, the Mafia and even the liberal TV and News media! Even Stone's most ardent film admirers are exasperated with the ridiculous interpretation and irresponsible disregard of known historical facts. In an interview, *Newsweek Magazine* asked Oliver Stone «What's your responsibility to history?» He replied: «I think the artists' obligations are to interpret history and reinterpret it as he sees fit.... Film makers make myths. They take the true meaning of events and shape them». So when you see an Oliver Stone movie you are seeing events as Oliver Stone wants you to see them, historical facts notwithstanding.

Let me finish with some observations on war, film and society. First, let's talk about the nature of war. The most important philosopher of war is the Prussian, Karl von Clausewitz. Although he died in 1831, his book *On War* is one of the first subjects covered at American War Colleges. His writings define what war is all about. At its essence, war is a clash of wills. As Clausewitz noted, «War is a trial of moral and physical forces». Moral forces are the ultimate determinant. By moral forces he means psychological forces, and the most important psychological force is willpower. Indeed, Napoleon was fond of saying «The moral is to the physical as three is to one».

On a superficial level there are many factors which affect the outcome of wars and battle: strategy, tactics, logistics, technology, intelligence, leadership, training, unit cohesion, force ratio, weather, terrain and luck. But the most important factor is willpower.

In World War II, Allied willpower was a match for the willpower of the fanatical Germans and Japanese. It was willpower, not just material superiority, which was decisive. In Vietnam, North Vietnam's willpower was stronger than America's. For years America *did* exhibit remarkably strong willpower for a democracy, but it could not match North Vietnam in a protracted war.

This concept of willpower applies to Cold Wars as well as Hot Wars. The Cold War was won, more than anything else, by a collapse of Russian willpower. Ronald Reagan, with his trillion dollar military buildup, and expensive initiatives like star wars, pushed the Russian system, and the willpower of the Russian leaders and people to the breaking point—and they broke.

Willpower is a reflection of the spirit of the people, and as Hegel noted, the spirit of the people derives from the culture of the nation. And what is culture? In his work, *An Essay on Man*, Ernest Cassirer tells us that culture is the synthesis of art, myth, history, language, religion and science, which he calls the «circle of humanity».

For better or for worse, movies are the art form of the 20th century. In the Renaissance, Michelangelo and Leonardo DaVinci took the technology of that time, and combined it with their own creativity to portray the cultural aspects of the 16th century. Today a great director, supported by the technology of this age, creates this most complex art form we call the movies.

But there is a danger in this powerful art form. Some movies presume to combine many aspects of culture, particularly myth and history, into art. And that art form, if it is well done, influences our culture and affects our national spirit.

It is our national culture and spirit that tell us what kind of people we are, where we have come from and what we are capable of accomplishing. They give us the willpower to pursue our goals.

Are we taking films too seriously and overestimating their influence? I think not. Many young people, unfortunately, learn much of their history from this art form we call the movies. It is a frightening thought that a whole generation of Americans, and a whole generation outside America are learning about the Vietnam War by watching the myths, cliches and historical inaccuracies of *Coming Home*, *Apocalypse Now*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Rambo*, *Missing in Action*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Platoon* and *JFK*.

I suppose they will never make a movie which will completely satisfy my historical sensibilities. And if they did make such a movie, it would probably be boring. And it would probably be a flop because I wouldn't want Oliver Stone directing it, or Kevin Costner starring in it.

All we can do is remind our students that movies are not history, and directors are not historians. And controversial subjects like Vietnam or the Spanish Civil War will never be covered with complete objectivity.

Movies are great entertainment, but on historical topics like World War II and Vietnam they are often impressionistic and superficial. A real understanding of a historical subject, if it can be acquired at all, can only be acquired through disciplined study and research. There is no short cut.