Spielberg's Saving Private Ryan: Small truths at the expense of big ones

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"Of course every war movie, good or bad, is an antiwar movie. Saving Private Ryan *will always be that, but I took a very personal approach in telling this particular war story. The film is based on a number of true stories from the second world war and even from the Civil War about brothers who have died in combat.... What first attracted me to the story was its obvious human interest. This was a mission of mercy, not the charge up San Juan Hill. At its core, it is also a morality play. I was intrigued with what makes any of these working-class guys heroes. I think when we fight, war is no longer about a greater good but becomes intensely personal. Kids in combat are simply fighting to survive, fighting to save the guys next to them.... When they became heroes it wasn't because they wanted to be like John Wayne, it was because they were not thinking at all. They were acting instinctively, from the gut. These dogfaces who freed the world were a bunch of decent guys. It's their story that now should be told."— Steven Spielberg in an essay published in* Newsweek *magazine*

I would say that Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* is a film that is truthful about small or obvious things and untruthful about big or complex ones.

The film consists of a brief prologue, three acts and an epilogue. In the opening scene set in the present an older American man, accompanied by his family, makes his way to a Normandy battlefield memorial, obviously deeply moved. A title then flashes on the screen, *June 6, 1944*, and we watch, in the first act, as a group of US soldiers takes part in the D-Day landing, suffering terrible casualties. In the second, the remains of this unit make their way across the French countryside, encountering the enemy at various points, in search of a Private Ryan, whom they are to remove from the fighting. His three brothers have fallen in battle and the army high command means to get him out of harm's way. Having found Ryan, the unit is obliged to participate, in the final act, in the defense of a river crossing against a sustained German attack. In the film's epilogue the older American, whose identity we have already guessed, asks his wife whether the sacrifices made half a century before were worthwhile.

One has to consider *Saving Private Ryan* from at least two points of view, that of history and specifically the history of the Second World War, and that of film history, and specifically war films.

Much has been made of the Omaha Beach landing sequence. It seems to me a legitimate effort, taken as a thing in itself, to recreate as accurately as possible such an operation. It is both a remarkable technical achievement and a horrifying reminder of the consequences of going to war. Nonetheless, its value seems limited. A spectator will learn more about something he or she already knew or suspected, that war is hell, but is there anything qualitatively new here? Moreover, one must judge the sequence in relation to the film as a whole. It seems to me that Spielberg is demystifying one reality which, frankly, is hardly a secret to any thinking person, all the better, in the rest of the film, to reinforce much more deep-seated illusions and myths.

Many of Spielberg's historical starting points are simply wrong. To suggest that American soldiers "freed the world" is inaccurate, even if one assumes that the defeat of Nazism by Allied, not simply US, forces represented such a thing. By June 1944 the fate of Hitler's regime had already been largely sealed by defeat at the hands of the Red Army; first, outside Stalingrad in January 1943, and second, in the massive tank battle at Kursk in July of that year.

Beginning in 1941 Soviet forces faced 75 percent of German troops, with only one-quarter of Hitler's forces deployed on all other fronts. This had dropped to 58 percent by D-Day, but Axis troops fighting against the USSR still outnumbered those arrayed against a cross-Channel invasion by nearly three to one (157 divisions to 58). In all, 13.6 million Soviet military personnel and 8.2 million civilians lost their lives in World War II, compared to 292,000 US soldiers. The Soviet population, despite the crimes and blunders of the Stalin bureaucracy, played a critical role in defeating Nazism. One would not gather from Spielberg's film that any forces other than American were engaged in the struggle against Hitler's armies.

There is considerable evidence to suggest that one of the factors motivating Allied preparations for an invasion of northern France in 1944 was the fear that the Red Army would roll across eastern Europe and occupy all of Germany. Washington felt the urgent need to intervene and assert its domination over the European continent. It dictated the terms of the invasion to Britain and placed a US commander, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, at its head.

Nor can one agree with Spielberg's contention that ordinary soldiers "became heroes ... because they were not thinking at all. They were acting instinctively, from the gut." Such instinct, unaltered by ideological conviction at some level or other, would rather tend to make the average solider avoid battle at all costs. To tens of thousands of American soldiers and officers World War II was a crusade against fascism. It was only on this basis, indeed, that the US government was able to truly popularize the war effort and overcome resistance to intervention. Frank Capra's propaganda film series *Why We Fight*, which included segments entitled *The Nazis Strike*, *The Battle of Russia* and *The Battle of China*, among others, was shown to every US serviceman going to fight overseas.

James McPherson, the eminent historian, has argued quite persuasively against this conception in relation to the Civil War. He has demonstrated, on the basis of an exhaustive study of letters and diaries, that Civil War soldiers' "belief in what they continued to call 'the glorious Cause' was what kept many of them going. If anything, their searing experiences refined ideology into a purer, tougher product."

The Second World War had a different social character than the Civil War, despite Spielberg's efforts to draw a parallel between the two. Presented to the American population as a struggle for democracy and freedom and against fascism, the war found its real source in the conflicts between different groups of major capitalist countries for supremacy. Germany, late arriving on the historical scene as an imperialist nation, challenged the old, declining European powers, France and England, for

hegemony over that continent and control of colonies and world markets. The US, having become the foremost power in the period following World War I, was seeking to establish its own global dominance.

Did the true character of the war, in some fashion or other, communicate itself to the troops in the field? Or, perhaps more to the point, was the American soldier of the 1940s—generally a worker, professional or small farmer who had considerable and bitter experience with big business and its political representatives, who had just passed through, after all, the misery of the Great Depression—able or willing to make the same sort of politically conscious, all-out commitment to a war effort as the Union soldier 80 years before, engaged in a struggle for republican democracy and against the slavocracy? One suspects not.

Nonetheless, Spielberg's denigration of the "greater good" in favor of the "personal" seems impermissible, and at its heart, profoundly undemocratic. The implicit stance taken by the film is that only the authorities in Washington concerned themselves with ideological matters, while the men in the field were unthinkingly doing the dirty work. This certainly speaks to Spielberg's own privileged social position and outlook, and to the contemporary gulf between those who operate the political system and the overwhelming majority who are excluded from it, but such an absolute division would have been unthinkable in the atmosphere of the Depression and war years.

While the ordinary soldiers in Spielberg's film are by and large a crude and backward lot, acting at best on instinct, the officers are quite a remarkable group of bright, thoughtful and self-sacrificing individuals. The film adopts a positively hagiographic attitude toward Gen. George Marshall, the man who sets in motion the project of saving Private Ryan.

This raises another question. Which previous self-proclaimed "anti-war" film has depicted the military chiefs as the embodiment of rationality and humanity? There have been openly *pro-war* films that have portrayed the high command in a less flattering light. (Even major studio films made in the immediate post-World War II period allowed themselves more critical latitude. One has only to think of the titles of two, John Ford's elegiac *They Were Expendable* and William Wyler's ironically named *The Best Years of Our Lives*.) The use of "anti-war" by Spielberg seems almost Orwellian. The term applies, for better or worse, to such works as Lewis Milestone's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Stanley Kubrick's *Paths of Glory*, or black comedies such as Richard Lester's *How I Won the War* and Mike Nichols's *Catch-22*, films in which the army brass is portrayed as either malevolent, stupid or incompetent. Legitimately enough, I think, "anti-war" has always implied "anti-militaristic" and, more generally, "anti-establishment." Spielberg has invented a new category, the thoroughly conformist, pro-government "anti-war" film.

In my view, Steven Spielberg is too pleased with the world and his place in it to be a serious artist. If he had taken his own supposed theme half-seriously—has America lived up to the enormous sacrifices that were made by the country's soldiers during World War II?—he would have made a very different, more critical film. But he didn't. He began convinced of the rightness and righteousness of American middle class existence, made possible by the war, and worked backward from there.

As an artistic effort, *Saving Private Ryan* is also poor. Tom Hanks, the commander of the unit, is the contemporary and perfectly likable American Everyman, but he is no James Stewart as a performer or personality, and Forrest Gump hardly rises to the not-so-lofty level of Jefferson Smith. The Hanks character, we learn at a crucial juncture, is an English teacher, who has become, as a result of the war, a hardened leader of men and a proficient killer. His hand shakes, a symptom of the transformation. "I've changed some," he says. "Every man I kill, the farther away from home I feel." These are interesting and legitimate ideas, but, in all honesty, Hanks remains too pleasant a figure throughout and never truly threatens.

Tom Sizemore makes an impression as a gruff sergeant. For the most part, the group of soldiers is a predictable batch of ethnic and regional clichés: an Italian, a Jew, a Brooklynite, a hillbilly sharpshooter, a cowardly bookworm, etc.

The interplay between the characters struck me as cliched and contrived. Furthermore, I found one of the plot's central threads unconvincing. Hanks's unit has just passed through the meat-grinder of the D-Day landing; their numbers have been decimated. Yet when assigned the task of finding and removing Ryan from the fighting, a relatively light responsibility by comparison, Hanks's men complain bitterly. At one point, in fact, a near-mutiny occurs. This is necessary, of course, from the point of view of giving Hanks the opportunity to expound one of the film's themes: saving Ryan becomes the meaning of their war, i.e., again, human beings do not fight for a great cause, but only for particular and immediate aims.

Spielberg has obvious skills. He is one of the few contemporary studio directors who has absorbed from the classical Hollywood cinema the ability to tell a story coherently. But in his hands this ability all too often has a merely soporific, soothing effect on an audience; one knows, above all else, that there will be no loose ends, no ambiguities. The German soldier released by Hanks's men halfway through the film is bound to reappear in the final, climactic battle. Character traits will fatalistically have their consequences. The impetuous Italian will pay for his impetuosity. The intellectual's lack of battle toughness, we know for certain, will cost someone his life. Likewise, the question as to whether the mission to save Ryan was worthwhile will be decisively settled by the appearance of the rescued man 50 years later as a revered and dignified *pater familias*.

I am not an expert on war films, many of which are fairly empty jingoistic exercises. One enterprising group of researchers has put together a list of *581* films dealing with, in one way or another, the Second World War. *Air Force* by Howard Hawks is one American film on the list that stands out. Ford's *They Were Expendable* is certainly another. *Objective Burma*, directed by Raoul Walsh, is a very energetic and muscular work. Allan Dwan's *Sands of Iwo Jima* is a highly patriotic, but also remarkably executed film. Don Siegel's *Hell Is For Heroes* is one of the more anarchistic and unsentimental war movies. About the German army, based on Erich Maria Remarque's novel, *A Time to Love and a Time to Die* (Douglas Sirk), is another valuable work. Among more recent films, Samuel Fuller's *The Big Red One* comes to mind.

Men in War, directed by Anthony Mann, a film about the Korean War with Robert Ryan and Aldo Ray, is a more disturbing and convincing consideration of the personal consequences of war than *Saving Private Ryan*.

All those films have this much in common: they are first and foremost dramatic stories about human relationships, which happen to take place under the specific and extraordinary conditions of war. Perhaps the fact that the directors lived through the war years, as adults in most cases, contributed to their approach. The war was an element in their lives that they had to confront as artists and human beings. Spielberg, on the other hand, has set out to make a grand movie about the War, and he has chosen a set of human beings to embody his relatively meager themes. Rather than beginning with behavior that interested them, the director and his screenwriter, Robert Rodat, have attempted to mold behavior to fit their conceptions. The shallowness and contrived character of the goings-on stem principally from this.

It is not difficult to read the worst into this film. The American military has been attempting to get over the Vietnam debacle for two decades. The end of the Cold War, ironically, has made the world a less stable place. It does not require extraordinary insight to grasp how vital military might has become for the US ruling elite. There will be more reckless interventions, whether in the Middle East, the Balkans or elsewhere. That the armed forces have a bright and democratic gleam is not a small matter.

Spielberg has contributed his part to this refurbishing process. One should not gloss over the fact that the film begins and ends with the same image: the contemporary American flag filling the screen.

Spielberg makes popular films. Many people believe more in his films than they do official political life. He is probably more decent and more honorable than the politicians. His vague, limp liberalism, however, is of very little use. His films for the most part are life preservers for illusions. They appeal in large measure to nostalgia and inertia. In his films America often looks the way many people imagine or wish it once looked, except that it never did. (As evidence: the breathtakingly unreal image of the Iowa farm where Ryan's mother lives.) The illusions he offers are powerful because they are sincere—Spielberg is sincerely thankful to America for having made him famous and successful—but they are shallow. They are not passions. They do not even flow from the old beliefs held by film directors like Ford and Hawks that the USA was the land of freedom and justice for everyone. And, as *Saving Private Ryan* attests to, they cannot sustain serious artistic work.

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