

A comment on the WSWS review of Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* and a reply by David Walsh

1 September 1998

To the WSWS editor,

I generally consider myself a liberal/socialist, but I was ashamed to read your review of this movie. It reinforced every stereotype of the liberal ivory tower ideologue who needs to talk about his issue regardless of the topic at hand, and who pisses all over the people who sacrificed everything for the people of this country, simply because utopia isn't here yet.

Your casual dismissal of the Omaha beach sequence as 'something [the viewer] already knew or suspected' is baffling to me. I don't know a single person apart from combat veterans who didn't have their view of infantry combat fundamentally altered by that piece of film. The way you neglect to talk about the human cost of combat in favor of a historical analysis of German vs. Russian vs. American troop strength is equally disturbing, as though you can't get off your political high horse for long enough to think about what those people went through and what they accomplished. Your palpable disdain for those American soldiers, whom you seem to think are fighting for American world hegemony and the propagation of class divisions, is the worst kind of arrogance--the arrogance of someone who wasn't there, doesn't know, and thinks he can badmouth people who braved more and sacrificed more than he ever will.

I don't necessarily agree with everything this country did in World War II. I certainly disagree with almost everything this country did in Vietnam. But the soldiers who fought and died and braved the furious insanity of the battlefield, whatever the politics, have my highest respect and I would astonish myself if I ever displayed that kind of courage. It is their story that Spielberg is telling; the story of men who fight because that is their job, because to not fight means that your friends will die, and for whom the experience is so intense and personal that when they look back, they don't think about the politics, but wonder whether they have personally led lives that justified the sacrifices of their comrades.

I would like to see you read your review to these men, and be able to look them in the eye.

Sincerely,

AC

David Walsh replies

Dear AC,

I read with interest your response to the review of *Saving Private Ryan*, but I must admit that, for the most part, I found it troubling.

You indicate that you 'generally' consider yourself a 'liberal/socialist.' First, aside from noting that liberalism is an ideology that inevitably betrays itself, I'm tempted to ask what you consider yourself the rest of the time, and which hat you were wearing when you wrote the letter to our web site. I won't conceal from you the fact that I find in your response very little of what I would characterize as left-wing or radical thinking.

Let me first make a few additional points about *Saving Private Ryan*.

I think it's clear that Steven Spielberg wants to direct important films. I don't believe he has the grasp of historical and social issues that would permit him to do that successfully. If I were forced to compare his more substantial films, I would say that *Schindler's List* is the best of them. He began in that instance with an intelligently written script, a remarkable historical figure and more of a 'feel' for the subject. Even in that case, I think the film fell apart halfway through, because he was not capable intellectually and artistically of dealing with the problems posed by the Holocaust, its sources and its consequences. *Amistad* was a disaster, in my view. I would place *Private Ryan* somewhere between the two.

I don't believe the problems posed by making a film about the Second World War are worked out in any serious fashion in *Saving Private Ryan*. My gravest accusation against the film would not be that it is consumed with patriotism or American nationalism--I don't believe it is, in that sense--but that it fails to present credible characters and an emotionally compelling story.

Concretely, World War II soldiers were creatures of the stormy events of the Depression years. Is there any sense of that in the film? Without idealizing for a moment the level of consciousness that existed at that time, I think it is clear that such a group of soldiers would have had some political views, expressed with different degrees of sophistication. A common concern among the soldiers, for example, was whether or not they would have jobs when they returned from the war.

Spielberg's soldiers have no social identity, or any kind of real existence. His characters are not men of the 1940s, or even the 1970s (Vietnam); Spielberg and his screenwriter have created figures in conformity with prevailing attitudes. In fact, they are cardboard figures.

I think if one views certain war films or Westerns by John Ford, on the other hand, the historical quality is definitely present, as part of a more unified artistic effort. Ford believed fervently in American capitalism as the land of opportunity and freedom, and in its military and other institutions. Obviously, I disagree with this outlook, but I believe he captured something essential about certain recurring themes and even personality traits in American history.

Spielberg and certain critics describe *Saving Private Ryan* as an anti-war film. I raised certain objections to that characterization in my original review. Let me add another.

What does the phrase 'anti-war' imply? Not simply that you are opposed to what is done to you and your country's army, but that you are opposed to what is done to the enemy *and what you yourself do to the enemy*. It implies a moral self-criticism. Consider, for example, King Vidor's *The Big Parade* (1925) and Lewis Milestone's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930). Critic Andrew Sarris describes pivotal scenes in both films: 'In the Vidor, an enraged American soldier pursues a German into a shell hole. When the American sees that the German is wounded, he is unable to finish the job, but gives his enemy a cigarette instead. In the Milestone, a German soldier bayonets a Frenchman, and then asks his victim's forgiveness.'

Is there anything comparable in *Saving Private Ryan*? The German soldier that Tom Hanks decides not to shoot comes back and brutally kills one of his men. What is the message?

An anti-war film implies a weighing up of the moral and psychological cost of waging war. What is the closest we get to that in Spielberg's film? Hanks's shaking hand and his comment that the more men he kills the farther he feels from home. That sentiment is in no way sustained by the film itself.

In regard to the content of your letter, I must say it contains a good deal of distortion, if not abuse, which you apparently feel it necessary to include to make your case. Where did I express 'palpable disdain' for American soldiers, or assert that they thought they were fighting for US world domination? This is simply playing to some imaginary crowd. I said the opposite, that the most conscious were capable of making great sacrifices precisely because they considered the war a life-and-death struggle against fascism. That many sincerely saw it as a fight for freedom, however, doesn't alter the fact that the war, from the point of view of the governments and ruling classes involved, was primarily a struggle for economic and political supremacy.

The question of the desire to fight Nazism is not a small matter. You say you respect the bravery of the soldiers 'whatever the politics.' Does that extend only to the US army? The Germans were outmanned by 1944 on many fronts; they

fought ferociously and with considerable bravery. There were no doubt SS units that fought with bravery.

Consider this: while there were numerous films in the 1920s and 1930s that denounced all sides in the 1914-18 war and treated the fate of the troops of every nation involved with compassion, there have been comparatively few films about World War II that have sought to cultivate sympathy for German forces. Why? In part at least because it has proven more difficult to overcome antipathy for the cause for which they were willingly or unwillingly fighting. If you leave 'politics' out of such a discussion, what are you left with? 'My country right or wrong....'

I repeat, in what precisely does your 'liberalism' and 'socialism' consist? As an indication of this apparently you mention that you 'disagree with almost everything this country did in Vietnam.' Pardon me if I'm not overly impressed. Even most bourgeois politicians register disagreement today with what went on in Vietnam.

When you dare me to read my review to veterans and look them in the eye, are you indicating something about your own approach to political life? Our movement is not in the habit of tailoring our views to the needs--or audiences--of the moment. Trotskyists enlisted in the US army and fought in World War II, as part of the working class, but they never dropped their opposition to what they characterized as an imperialist war. They fought for a political line within the army, including the elections of officers and other issues that soldiers could respond to. I had the privilege of knowing one such individual, who also, incidentally, saved the life of a German soldier in the course of the war.

I don't want to be offensive, but your hostility to the existing social order strikes me as fitful at best. I hope you are not, as many are currently doing, seeking to overcome a 'guilty conscience' in regard to your opposition to the Vietnam war by glorifying the US military past and present.

Sincerely,

David Walsh

See Also:

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

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