

Military interference in American film production

Operation Hollywood: How the Pentagon shapes and censors the movies by David L. Robb

Mile Klindo, Richard Phillips
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Operation Hollywood: How the Pentagon shapes and censors the movies by David L. Robb, a former journalist for *Daily Variety* and the *Hollywood Reporter*, is a timely work. Published in 2004, a year after the US-led occupation of Iraq, it exposes one of the dark secrets of American movies—military interference in film production and Hollywood’s acquiescence to it.

While collaboration between the US military and Hollywood, of course, is not a new phenomenon, few moviegoers realise how much control the Pentagon has over the American film industry. Citing letters, internal memos and interviews with producers, writers and directors, Robb’s book contains valuable information about its insidious and destructive influence on American cinema.

When the US entered World War I, Washington established the Committee of Public Information, which formulated guidelines for all media to promote domestic support for the war. The small but growing movie industry readily offered its support, with the *Motion Picture News* proclaiming in a 1917 editorial, “[E]very individual at work in this industry” has promised to provide “slides, film leaders and trailers, posters ... to spread that propaganda so necessary to the immediate mobilisation of the country’s great resources.”

While this support diminished when the war ended, directors such as D.W. Griffiths, King Vidor and others still sought, and were provided with, assistance from the US army on several films during the 1920s and 30s.

With America’s entry into World War II in 1941, this collaboration expanded to an unprecedented level. Hollywood studios, working in association with the Pentagon, rapidly churned out scores of war dramas and documentaries to boost the American war effort. Military officials provided equipment, personnel and advice on numerous American movies. Director Frank Capra’s *Why We Fight* (1943-44), six powerful documentaries, are perhaps the best known of these films.

After the war, the Pentagon formally established its “film approval” process and then, in 1948, set up a special movie liaison office, as part of the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs. With the onset of the Cold War, the US military demanded even greater control over the movies it “assisted”.

Producers and directors wanting access to military equipment, locations or personnel, or even Department of Defense (DOD) archival footage—which was always very costly—were required to have their work vetted by the Pentagon. Those prepared to reshape their movies in line with Pentagon directives were given substantial financial and technical help; those unwilling to accept its dictates were denied any assistance.

Since then, plot and character changes and outright historical

falsification have been the most common demands made by the military, its stated aim being to encourage movies that boost “recruitment and retention programs”. Filmmakers are told that excessive foul language, alcohol and drug use, sexism, racism and other bigotry in the armed forces must be toned down and replaced with “positive” portrayals. Nor is it unusual for the Pentagon to demand entire scenes, even central characters, be deleted.

Special military “advisers” are appointed to ensure that filmmakers do not attempt to introduce non-scripted innovations that depart from Pentagon directives. As Major David Georgi, the military adviser to *Clear and Present Danger*, told Robb: “Always, somewhere in the mind of the producers, they’d try and turn the picture in the direction that they had originally presented to us.... It would be my job as a technical advisor to make sure that the movie did not stray substantially from the original approved version” (*Operation Hollywood*, p. 38).

Today this interference is such a commonplace that the military and other agencies do not even attempt to disguise their operations. The Air Force Entertainment Liaison Office, for example, now boasts its own web site—Wings over Hollywood—and in 2001, the CIA appointed its own film industry liaison officer. His role is to give “advice and guidance” to authors, screenwriters, directors and producers and encourage a “better understanding of and appreciation for the Agency”.

The list of post-war films subjected to military interference and cited in *Operation Hollywood* is too long to include in this review. Phil Stub, the civilian head of the film liaison office since 1989, for example, has demanded changes to more than 100 films and television programs in the course of his tenure.

Some of the better-known movies refused help because their directors would not agree to Pentagon demands include: *The Last Detail* (1973), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *An Officer and a Gentleman* (1982), *Born on the Fourth of the July* (1989) and *Forrest Gump* (1994).

According to Army Major Ray Smith from the film liaison office, *Apocalypse Now*’s central story line—a CIA mission to assassinate Colonel Kurtz (Marlon Brando), a rebel US military officer in Vietnam—was “not realistic”. Smith falsely claimed: “The army does not lend officers to the CIA to execute or murder other army officers. And even if we did, we wouldn’t help you make it.” He refused all assistance, forcing director Francis Ford Coppola to shoot his film in the Philippines.

A few years later, *An Officer and a Gentleman* was denied all access to military equipment and locations, because the Pentagon claimed that the movie’s depiction of a navy officers’ training program was “inaccurate”. The navy wanted a soldier who makes a Filipino girl pregnant out of wedlock removed from the story, as well as an attack on a US soldier by a

Filipino gang, on the grounds that both would harm US-Philippines relations.

The military also objected to the rhyming boot camp chants, or “Jody calls”, by the jogging soldiers in the film. “Flyin’ low and feelin’ mean, Find a family by the stream. Pick off a pair and hear’em scream, Cause napalm stick to kids...” was one of the chants the Pentagon wanted deleted. But Douglas Day Stewart, the film’s screenwriter and associate producer, knew the cadets were still singing this dehumanising chant when he researched the story, and refused to remove it.

Thirteen Days (2000) and John Woo’s *Windtalkers* (2002) are two of the more recent films cited in Robb’s book.

Thirteen Days dramatises the conflict between John F. Kennedy and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, particularly Generals Curtis E. LeMay and Maxwell Taylor, during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. LeMay, a notorious war hawk, wanted Kennedy to immediately attack Cuba and risk a direct nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union. (See: “The Cuban missile crisis in historical perspective: some thoughts on the film *Thirteen Days*”).

Strub refused access to US air force jets and other equipment unless LeMay was portrayed in a less bellicose manner. He also wanted a scene involving the shooting down of an American U2 reconnaissance pilot over Cuba removed. The Pentagon maintained this demand in defiance of the historical record: LeMay’s belligerence and military aggression were well-known and extensively documented, and the U2 pilot had been posthumously awarded an Air Force Cross for the Cuban mission, his wife receiving a letter of condolence from JFK himself.

Thirteen Days’ producers correctly refused to compromise and consequently were forced to shoot their jet footage in the Philippines, use digital effects, and spend far more on the production than they had planned.

As producer Peter Almond explained in *Operation Hollywood*: “There’s a kind of devil’s brew. The problem ... with these big-scale projects that involve military assets is that we’re kind of dependent on them for comparatively inexpensive use of the assets in making our stories. So they have us kind of over a barrel” (p. 56).

Windtalkers also ran into trouble with the Pentagon over its portrayal of the Code Talkers story. Code Talkers were Navajo Indians who joined the US Marines during WWII and used their native language as a code that the Japanese were unable to break.

Marine sergeant Joe Enders (Nicolas Cage) is assigned to protect a Code Talker, with orders to kill him in the event of his capture by the Japanese. This became a major point of contention with the Pentagon.

Captain Matt Morgan of the Marine film liaison office claimed that the movie’s portrayals were “un-Marine” and demanded changes. He claimed that the orders to Enders “to take your guy out” were a “fiction” and had to be removed. Contrary to Morgan’s claims, however, Marines were given just such orders. This has been verified by surviving Code Talkers and the US Congress.

In contrast to *Thirteen Days*, however, the producers of *Windtalkers* agreed to change this aspect of the script. But this was not enough; Strub and Morgan wanted an entire character, The Dentist, deleted. The Dentist was a deranged and brutalised soldier who removed gold teeth from dead Japanese soldiers. Morgan claimed the portrayal was “un-Marine”.

The military also demanded another scene, where Cage kills a surrendering Japanese soldier with a flamethrower, be excised. Director John Woo shamelessly caved in to all these demands, despite the fact that the original script was based on the historical record. When *Windtalkers* was finally released, a Marine Corp news release triumphantly claimed that Woo’s movie, not only “has it all” but is “accurate down to the smallest detail”.

Pentagon interference has not been limited to war movies. Screwball comedy *Stripes* (1981), starring Bill Murray as a misfit army recruit, was drastically changed in pre-production, and children’s television shows

such as “Lassie” and “The Mickey Mouse Club” had some of their scripts rewritten in order to make the US armed forces more palatable to children.

Dan Goldberg, the producer and co-writer of *Stripes*, assured the Pentagon that he planned to make a comedy with “patriotic overtones that would hopefully have a positive effect on Army recruiting”. But the Army ordered *Stripes* to be rewritten from beginning to end.

Lieutenant Colonel Richard Griffiths, chief of the army’s Policy and Plans Division, did not agree with the depiction of drug use in the barracks and Drill Sergeant Hulka (Warren Oates), he claimed, was too sadistic. In fact, Hulka was a relatively mild practitioner of the brutal methods used in army boot camps.

On Pentagon orders, all references to the US Army deployments in Latin America or Mexico were scrapped; jokes about rape and pillage deleted; and various characters toned down or eliminated entirely. In exchange for access to a Fort Knox location and permission to use tanks and a C-140 transport plane, Goldberg capitulated to every Pentagon demand.

Producers of the mindless blockbuster *Independence Day* (1996) bent over backwards to gain access to Department of Defense heavy equipment. The Pentagon rejected these overtures, claiming that the movie did not contain any “true military heroes” and that Captain Steve Hiller (Will Smith) was too irresponsible to be cast as a Marine leader (he dates a stripper). Moreover, the invading aliens were thwarted not by the Marines, but by civilians. While Dean Devlin, the scriptwriter, agreed to rectify these “flaws”, *Independence Day* was given no assistance.

Jurassic Park III (2001), on the other hand, was given two navy Seahawk helicopters, four amphibious assault vehicles and 80 Marines to storm the beach at the end of the movie. These were provided after filmmakers agreed to a military “product placement”—a clearly visible Navy logo on a helicopter which rescues stranded protagonists, and a line of dialogue by little Eric (Trevor Morgan): “You have to thank her now. She sent the Navy and the Marines.” In the original script, it was not the Navy but the State Department that arranged for a helicopter.

It is well known that overtly militaristic and patriotic films with Rambo-like heroes boost military recruitment. According to the navy, recruitment of young men into naval aviation increased by 500 percent after the release of *Top Gun*. Such was the military’s enthusiasm for *Top Gun* that it even established recruitment booths inside some of the cinemas screening the movie. “These kids came out of the movie with eyes as big as saucers and said, ‘Where do I sign up?’” declared Major David Georgi.

In one of the more contemptible examples cited in *Operation Hollywood*, Paramount executive Jeffrey A. Coleman offered the Department of Defense (DOD) advertising space on the video releases of two blockbusters—*The Hunt for the Red October* and *Flight of the Intruder*—in exchange for the scrapping of several million dollars in production costs owed to the navy.

Robb cites a March 1990 letter to Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney in which Coleman argues that military recruitment advertising in the home-video market, with its large 15- to 19-year-old age group, would bring major gains. “[T]he recruiting benefits for the video release will be of major significance, with particular emphasis on the high priority targets concerning recruits for nuclear power and aviation roles in the Navy,” Coleman wrote.

While the DOD initially warmed to the idea, it eventually rejected the “offer” after advice from Grey Advertising, which concluded that both movies were “already wonderful recruiting tools”. Adding a commercial at the beginning of “what is already a two-hour recruiting commercial,” Grey Advertising suggested, was unnecessary and “redundant”.

While *Operation Hollywood* provides numerous examples of Pentagon censorship and the subservience of an assortment of film industry executives, directors and writers over the past five decades, it does not examine the historical context in which this occurred or the underlying

political reasons. Most importantly, it fails to provide any analysis of the anti-communist witch-hunts in the late 1940s and 50s and the inherent connection between these events and the Pentagon's "Operation Hollywood".

As is well-known, studio chiefs, in collaboration with Washington, not only established the notorious blacklist in 1947 to purge scores of left-wing directors, writers and actors from the industry but also produced a string of anti-communist films, including *The Red Menace* (1949), *I Married a Communist* (1950), *I Was a Communist for the FBI* (1951) *Trial* (1952) and others, to promote Cold War hysteria. This environment laid the foundations for the high-level military interference in the American movie industry that followed.

Nor does Robb review the vast monopolisation of the entertainment and media corporations over the past three decades, and the economic roots of their political support for Washington's increasingly reckless military ambitions.

Today a handful of giant companies, Disney, AOL-Time Warner, Sony, General Electric, Murdoch's News Corporation and Seagram, dominate all aspects of the American film, television and entertainment industry. While their multi-billion dollar interests are not identical to those of the Pentagon, there is a clear recognition that their profits are bound up with Washington's attempts to seize control of strategic resources in the Middle East and elsewhere. As Rupert Murdoch declared in the lead up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, a successful American occupation would lower oil prices and benefit the world economy. "This would be bigger than any tax cut in any country," he said.

Operation Hollywood ignores these issues and fails to even mention the highly publicised meeting between Karl Rove, President Bush's chief political advisor, and the film and television chiefs and the industry's union bosses straight after the September 11 terrorist attack on the US. Rove called on those assembled to assist in Washington's so-called "war on terror". Predictably the entertainment industry chiefs promised to do all they could to help.

The omission of these and countless other examples of the deepening collaboration between the entertainment and media corporations is bound up with Robb's underlying political perspective—that military meddling and censorship of the movie industry can be overcome with a bit of pressure and a few minor reforms.

Congress, Robb writes, must launch a "complete investigation into the Pentagon's role in the filmmaking process" while the Writers Guild of America (WGA) should insist that the employers cannot show writers' scripts to the military. These actions, combined with consumer boycotts and class action lawsuits, should be initiated, he says, to force Washington to establish a transparent tendering process and a "schedule of uniform fees" for film producers wanting access to military equipment.

These lame appeals seriously underestimate the political power of the US military-industrial complex and promote dangerous illusions in the very institutions that have legislated and funded the largest expansion of the military budget in US history, and sanctioned the most wide-ranging attacks on democratic rights, including freedom of expression.

As *Operation Hollywood* itself demonstrates, neither Congress nor the WGA have ever done anything to stop Pentagon interference in the film industry. In fact, as the book reports, in the almost 60 years since the DOD film liaison office was established, there have been only two government hearings into Pentagon interference in the movie industry. Both resulted in whitewashes, clearing the military of any wrongdoing.

As for the WGA, it has never even issued a public statement opposing Pentagon censorship of scripts. WGA West president Charles Holland, a former army officer, told Robb: "If you want people to go into firefights, you've got to romanticise it."

Operation Hollywood contains a wealth of detailed evidence about Pentagon censorship and makes it available to a wide audience. Access to

this basic information is certainly important in order to challenge increasing censorship and the escalating attacks on democratic rights. But Robb's refusal to state what is—that the defence of freedom of expression is bound up with a political struggle against the Bush administration and the US ruling elite as a whole—is a critical flaw.



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