

Flags of Our Fathers: not what we might have expected

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Flags of Our Fathers, directed by Clint Eastwood, screenplay by William Broyles Jr. and Paul Haggis

The battle for Iwo Jima, a Pacific island no more than five miles wide and approximately 660 miles south of Tokyo, took the lives of 28,000 soldiers, 7,000 of them American, toward the end of World War II. The conquest of the island was necessary in order for US forces to control the Pacific and bring the war to an end. From a purely tactical point of view, the small island would serve as an emergency landing strip. Furthermore, it would help put out of commission Japan's warning system against American bombers.

On February 23, 1945, on the blood-soaked fifth day of battle, the men of Easy Company, 2nd Battalion, planted the US flag atop the island's Mount Suribachi. The extinct volcano, which rose 550 feet above the island, dominated its topography. The thousands of soldiers in control of the black-sand beachhead below cheered long and tumultuously. A few moments later, a top Navy official expressed his desire to obtain that flag as trophy. It was promptly taken down and replaced with another. There was no fanfare for the second flag; it was not the flag of conquest, but a snapshot of it was taken.

Within a matter of days, Joe Rosenthal's iconic second photograph became a symbol of American patriotism and bravery. It appeared in all the major newspapers, won the Pulitzer Prize and later became a staple in history books. It formed the model for the gargantuan statue adjacent to the Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia near Washington, DC.

The Battle of Iwo Jima continued for about four more weeks. Three of the men who raised the second flag died in the fighting. Thanks to government propaganda back home, the three who survived became instant heroes. The government purposely ignored the truth: that these men were not the ones who had raised the original flag, but it used them anyway in a public relations campaign to sell war bonds.

Director Clint Eastwood's somber *Flags of Our Fathers*, based on a book by James Bradley (the son of one of the flag raisers at Iwo Jima) published in 2000, tells the story of the effects of this campaign on the three flag-raising soldiers who survived: Navy corpsman Bradley (Ryan Phillippe) and Marines Ira Hayes (Adam Beach) and Rene Gagnon (Jesse Bradford).

On this occasion Eastwood's usual laconic style, devoid of hysteria or cheap emotions, works in his favor, allowing him to achieve a certain intensity that does not seem labored. He thus

manages, without being preachy or pedantic, to make a statement not only against war, but against governmental hypocrisy and manipulation in manufacturing heroes for its own ends.

In the film, the men at first are happy to participate in the bogus campaign because it is for a good cause. For a while, they also enjoy the adulation and adoration of the crowds. But the more the government pushes them into its orgiastic campaign of patriotism, the more the men retreat into themselves. Their enjoyment soon turns to disillusionment and, unable to continue living a lie, they become uncomfortable and bitter.

They know their actions weren't at all heroic, that planting that second flag on Mount Suribachi took hardly any effort at all and that the mythic photograph was at best serendipitous. Bradley, the medic who had risked his life in the field of battle innumerable times, becomes more taciturn and haunted by the memories of the bloody battles on the island. Marine paratrooper Ira Hayes, the Pima Native American who becomes the moral conscience of the story, turns into an alcoholic, or his alcoholism takes a turn for the worse. Despite the adoring crowds, he encounters racism everywhere he goes. He sinks further and further into despair and dies tragically at a relatively young age. At first, Gagnon is happy to play the hero, but eventually he becomes uneasy in his role.

There is no doubt that with *Flags of Our Fathers* Clint Eastwood, known in Hollywood as a political conservative, has made a statement against war. Moreover, he has severely criticized the government's manipulation of soldiers' sacrifices and their families' expectations and emotions for its own crass ends. More importantly, perhaps, he has taken on the government's manufactured patriotism and its tragic influence on people.

With *Flags of Our Fathers*, Eastwood has created an elegant, elegiac mood piece. It is steadily somber from beginning to end. Some sequences are memorable. In one, the government bureaucrats ask our three protagonists to climb atop a papier-mâché replica of Mount Suribachi erected at Chicago's Soldier Field. They are to recreate the planting of the flag at Iwo Jima before thousands of fans cheering to the hoopla of patriotic John Phillip Sousa marches and an extravagant fireworks display. When confronted with their task, the soldiers show their disgust at having to perform such a task. After all, as one of them later says, "All I was trying to do was not to get shot."

The recreation of Mount Suribachi has the effect of making the men retreat more into themselves as it reminds them of the horrible carnage that took place on Iwo Jima. So, while campaigning as

“heroes” amidst all the kitsch, the men are forced to relive, time and time again, the horrors of their war experiences. The film seems to ask, “What is a hero?” By extension, how many of our heroes have been manufactured to manipulate public opinion to win favor for the war and goad people into emptying their pockets to finance it? It’s a question that has much resonance for us today, though it is not necessarily the director’s intention.

In the battle sequences, as in most antiwar films, Eastwood shows us the horrors of war and how it ruins men’s lives and psyches. His camera almost wipes the screen of all color and leaves us with the dark hues of Iwo Jima’s black sand, almost as if to symbolize how all life is drained out of the place. Bodies fly; some are sliced to pieces. We see dismemberments and decapitations. Toward the end of the film, the American soldiers enter a Japanese bunker and, to their horror, find that many of the Japanese soldiers have chosen ritual suicide by their own grenades. This sequence is not for the squeamish, but it is not gratuitous either. The American soldiers’ expressions say it all. There is no glee in their faces, no expression of triumph.

Though the events portrayed in this film took place more than 60 years ago, one gets the feeling that *Flag of Our Fathers* is trying to say much more about contemporary affairs than is obvious. But if it does, it doesn’t force the issue. In any event, Eastwood has said elsewhere that there are no parallels between what’s happening today in Iraq and the World War II he portrays in this film.

“As for today, war is war whenever you are in there,” he says.” If you are in the front lines, there are always various problems you have to deal with that are hard for us to understand who are in a non-combatant situation unfortunately. The country seemed much more unified than it is today, because the war we’re in today ... is a different kind of war, incorporating ideology and religion ... World War II was more cut and dried.”

The film has more than a few problems. Although it is clearly antiwar and criticizes the government for its insensitivity and manipulation of the truth and the emotions, its center feels too soft, almost insubstantial, as if Eastwood were pulling his punches and didn’t want to insult anybody. Sure, all war is hell. What else is new? Who is to blame? Might the war have been the result of imperialist rivalry? Might the manipulation of the men be the result of the elite’s need to continue the war for its own ends? Eastwood and his screenplay never tell us or even hint at an answer. It’s a war that just happened.

This theme—how imperialist wars are rooted in very definite systems of class and property relations—has been the subject of excellent antiwar films in the past. *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *Grand Illusion*, *Paths of Glory* and *The Thin Red Line* come immediately and memorably to mind. Also, all these films were populated by strong characters one could care for, characters who were at once strong individuals, yet could stand for all of humanity.

Perhaps the insubstantial quality of *Flags of Our Fathers* also stems from having characters who, with one exception, just don’t register much. By failing to probe them in more psychological depth, Eastwood can only provide us with surface impressions of their disillusionment, sense of betrayal, and tragedy.

For example, two of the three soldier heroes are haunted by

shame and guilt. Ira Hayes, the Pima Indian, sensitively portrayed by Beach, is overwhelmed by both; he survived and his buddies didn’t, and he has allowed himself to be falsely used as a hero. But apparently he also feels profoundly guilty and ashamed of other things. When he breaks down in a very powerful and moving scene, he tells his military handler that “some things I saw, *things I did ... They weren’t things to be proud of.*” But we are never witness to those deeds he wasn’t “proud of,” so we never come to fully understand why he behaves the way he does or why he embarks on the path to self-destruction.

Perhaps the story goes in too many directions, which, when combined with several flashbacks, prevents the drama from having characters with richer psychological depth. Ryan Phillippe’s Bradley, so central to the story, almost disappears and becomes a non-factor in the overall telling of the story.

Or is it maybe that *Flags of Our Fathers* tries to cover too much and therefore loses focus? It goes back and forth between the 35-day battle on the sands of Iwo Jima, to the propaganda tour of our three hero soldiers, to modern day scenes in which the son of one of the flag raisers interviews his late father’s soldier friend. The flashbacks complicate the narrative even more. This can easily create confusion in the viewer, making it difficult to examine the characters’ lives in any depth after they have left the field of battle.

The film tackles another subject: the nature of heroism. *Flags of Our Fathers* seems to say that heroism is totally subjective; that true heroes do not need to impress upon anyone their valorous deeds. They do what they do and then pull back, unnoticed. ‘Heroism’ is the tool of the powers that be to fool and control the population. Well, that could very well be, but not necessarily under all conditions. There are genuine popular heroes who have elevated and inspired millions. There’s nothing wrong per se with the recognition of heroism as long as it is honest and lacking in self-interest.

On another note, the Japanese soldiers are never individualized in the film. One barely sees them; they are little more than shadows. For the most part they remain hidden throughout the entire battle. That might have been the way the American soldiers saw them. But at least Eastwood, to his credit, has refused to demonize them in any way.

Eastwood’s next film, *Letters from Iwo Jima*, promises to tell more or less the same story about the same battle, but from the Japanese soldiers’ perspective and in Japanese! A rather unusual, not to say courageous, enterprise from an American director. He has told one interviewer that he wants the American audience to walk away from that movie thinking that “they [the Japanese] are the good guys.”



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