

Spike Lee's *Da 5 Bloods*: A lifetime of war

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Directed by Spike Lee; written by Lee, Danny Bilson, Paul De Meo and Kevin Willmott

In Spike Lee's latest film *Da 5 Bloods*, currently available on Netflix, four African-American veterans of the Vietnam War return to present-day Vietnam to recover the remains of a fallen comrade. Buried with him is a cache of gold bars worth millions, which the vets plan to divide equally. Paranoia and violence disrupt their plans, as does the intervention of other interested parties.

Taken as a whole, *Da 5 Bloods* is one of Spike Lee's more interesting and serious efforts. It is also something of a departure. Lee (*Do the Right Thing*, *Malcolm X*, *He Got Game*, *Summer of Sam*) long ago established his commitment to a racist worldview, which has led him to vulgarize the human relations depicted in his films, lending a crude and dishonest character to far too much of his work.

Da 5 Bloods has been marketed in racial-patriotic terms as a film that, finally, tells the story of black troops in Vietnam. Netflix offers the work as part of its new "Black Lives Matter Collection." But *Da 5 Bloods* is more than that. Without ignoring its weaker moments, one is pleasantly surprised to find Lee expanding his conception of things. He offers a critical look at a group of men whose own racist understanding of the world has left them horribly disoriented in the decades since the war ended.

The film is also anti-war in that it acknowledges not only the damage done to American soldiers, but also the damage inflicted on the Vietnamese people. In one disturbing scene set during the war, the American troops open fire on a group of North Vietnamese fighters who are distracted by reciting poetry and talking about their girlfriends back home.

Lee's characters feel historically rooted this time—also a change of pace for the director. The viewer feels the burden of the past and present churning away within the veteran soldiers and others they encounter. This is expressed in various ways.

Da 5 Bloods opens with a montage of archival footage from tumultuous events spanning the early 1960s through the mid-1970s. Viewers will find included scenes of the Civil Rights and anti-war movements; film and photographs from the National Guard and police shootings of students at

Kent State and Jackson State University in 1970; the brutal police riot outside the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago; the execution of Nguyen Van Lem by General Nguyen Ngoc Loan; the resignation of Richard Nixon; the Fall of Saigon in 1975 and the first wave of the Vietnamese refugees who came to be known as "boat people."

With all of this history in the minds of the characters and the viewers, Paul (Delroy Lindo), Otis (Clarke Peters), Eddie (Norm Lewis) and Melvin (Isiah Whitlock Jr) arrive at their hotel in modern-day Ho Chi Minh City. They are later joined by Paul's son David (Jonathan Majors).

As the old friends, who call themselves "Da 5 Bloods," catch up, the others are shocked to learn that Paul has become an avid Donald Trump supporter. He wears a red MAGA (Make America Great Again) cap for much of the film and complains bitterly about immigrants entering the US. Of all the bloods, he is the most haunted and disturbed by his memories of the war. "I see ghosts," he tells the others at one point. Paul was closest to Norm (Chadwick Boseman), the bloods' squad leader who was killed in action and whose remains they now must find in the jungle where he died.

Otis soon contacts an old flame who puts him in touch with a French smuggler, Desroche (Jean Reno), who, in turn, agrees to move the gold buried with Norm out of the country for them. Then the veterans' journey to their former battleground begins. They travel along rivers, through jungles and over hillsides in search of Norm and the loot. They will encounter literal and figurative minefields along the way. They will double-cross each other and be double-crossed by others.

Complicating things is the presence of a team of landmine removal activists led by a young Frenchwoman named Hedy (Mélanie Thierry), who hopes to atone for sins committed by her family. They made "several fortunes" from rubber plantations where they "exploited the shit out of the Vietnamese people," she explains to David.

An unidentified group of Vietnamese mercenaries, police or soldiers also intervenes, confronting the black US veterans about the atrocities committed during the 1968 My Lai Massacre. This becomes their justification for seizing the

gold.

The past continues to intrude. Present-day scenes are interrupted by memories and flashbacks of the war. Lee made the wise decision to have the older actors from the contemporary sequences play the younger versions of themselves as well, without using any effects to make them appear younger. With Boseman's Norm the only truly young soldier among them, the sense of his loss is reinforced. It also communicates the extent to which the older men still live with and suffer from these experiences.

A few moments from the past stand out.

In April 1968, the soldiers learn of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination during a radio broadcast by Hanoi Hannah (Van Veronica Ngo). She directs her remarks to "black GIs," and tells them of the attempt to repress the riots then taking place in more than 120 US cities. "They kill them [protesters] while you fight against us, so far away from where you are needed," she says. She notes that African Americans are 11 percent of the US population but make up 32 percent of the troops serving in Vietnam. The bloods consider turning their weapons on white soldiers, but Norm talks them out of it.

A born leader, Norm was "our Malcolm and our Martin," Otis later explains. He taught "black history" to his fellow soldiers and warned them against the anticommunism of the official war propaganda. A racialized sense of solidarity develops among the soldiers. It is the same solidarity that we watch unravel in present day, as competition for the gold escalates inside and outside the group.

The gold was originally recovered by the men from a downed CIA plane. It had been intended as payment to members of the Lahu ethnic group for their support against North Vietnam. The bloods decide to keep and bury the gold and tell their superiors it was captured by the Vietcong. They will come back for it when the time is right. "We give this gold to our people," Norm says. It will be "reparations." Norm is killed not long after, and it will be decades before the others return.

When these "reparations" are divided up years later, it is accompanied by the worst forms of selfishness and tribalism.

None of this is expressed better than in the character of Paul, the paranoid and resentful Trump supporter. Lindo's performance is the film's greatest strength. As *Da 5 Bloods* unfolds and the conflict over the gold intensifies, Paul descends into madness. His life has been one long act of dying, and now he has embraced this death, running toward it with open arms and sharing it with as many as he can. As he becomes more and more desperate, he delivers his disturbing lines as soliloquies to the camera in close-up shots, reflecting his deep isolation.

How is it that Paul, once committed to "black liberation,"

now solidarizes himself with the fascists in the White House? His character suggests something about the right-wing character of all forms of racial politics.

While there is much to recommend in *Da 5 Bloods*, some of Lee's weaknesses come forward as well. The writer-director is still a little too slick for his own good. Some of the plot points are too convenient and contrived.

References to other films abound. Some are explicit to the point of becoming a distraction, including tributes to *Apocalypse Now*, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* and *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, while others—*Kelley's Heroes*, *Three Kings* and perhaps *Three Steps North*—lurk in the background.

Lee's most famous, and often brash, filmmaking techniques are shoehorned into *Da 5 Bloods*, including the director's signature dolly shot, which makes characters appear to float toward the camera as the background recedes. Here such an effect appears near the end of the movie and has an obligatory character. The end result is a bit of a mess, as the film wavers between the remarkable and the merely clever.

Viewers are also left with a suggestion near the end of the film that the middle-class Black Lives Matter organization is the modern-day equivalent of the "black liberation" movements that Norm and the others spoke of in the 1960s.

Without endorsing uncritically the political orientation of figures such as Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and Fred Hampton of the Black Panthers, it must be said that these earlier figures associated with the struggle for racial equality—none of whom (like Norm) survived the 1960s—have nothing in common with the selfish middle-class layers directing Black Lives Matter.

For Spike Lee, old habits die hard. However, none of the confusion and wrongheadedness undoes the film completely. Above all, the wonderful performance by Delroy Lindo remains.

There's something to *Da 5 Bloods*. More than usual.



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