

Roger Stahl discusses *Theaters of War: How the Pentagon and CIA Took Hollywood with WSWS*

Richard Phillips
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Roger Stahl recently spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about his new documentary *Theaters of War: How the Pentagon and CIA Took Hollywood*.

Stahl is a professor of communication studies at the University of Georgia and the author of *Militainment, Inc.* and other documentary films on the military-entertainment complex, including *Returning Fire* and *Through the Crosshairs*. The following is an edited version of the conversation.

Richard Phillips: Military involvement in Hollywood film productions has a long history. How did it all start?

Roger Stahl: It goes all the way back to films like *The Birth of a Nation*. The army assisted the film, which gave them some leverage over the story. This was the early model for what became a massive public relations operation.

By 1927 the US military was advertising its air power with the World War I film *Wings*, which exaggerated its role in the air conflict. It supplied an enormous amount of military equipment from multiple bases—more than 3,000 infantrymen, hundreds of planes. There were lots of accidents and injuries.

To give you a sense of the level of military commitment, a cadet died in one of the many staged plane crashes, and the Army ruled that he was killed in the line of duty. Absurd but true. The film went on to win the first ever Academy Award, so it paid off in terms of military publicity.

By World War II, the Office of War Information [OWI] as it was called then had made further inroads with Hollywood. After the war, in 1949, the military formally established what was then known as the Motion Picture Production Office, which brought together all individual branches of the Defense Department at the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. It's now called the Entertainment Media Office.

We could get into the weeds here, but it mainly worked with Hollywood film producers before ramping up its operations with television in the '70s. The number skyrocketed, however, during 1990s and in the 2000s, with perhaps the majority happening in the post-2000 period. In broad strokes, that's the history of the operation. We can currently confirm Pentagon and CIA cooperation on over 2,500 films and television shows. This means script control.

RP: What is the Entertainment Media Office's budget?

RS: If we're just talking about the office itself, there's not much money involved, and in terms of manpower it's not a big operation. But it has so much materiel at its disposal—access to billions of dollars of equipment, military bases, people, and things like that—so it acts as gatekeeper. This is what gives it leverage.

And it's keen to maximize that leverage. Producers are supposed to pay for what they use, which is a rule the office always mentions in public statements. What they don't say is that the military has a history of low-

balling and shaving costs. They want producers to come back again and again. They'd give it all away for free if they could.

In fact, they did do it for free up until 1964, when Congress forced them to start charging. There was a controversy around the production of *The Longest Day* [1962]. The military pulled a bunch of people from a base in Germany to work on the Normandy beaches in France as extras, which meant there were not many troops around to deal with the Berlin Crisis which was unfolding at that same time. This hit the papers, Congress talked about it and there was a lot of airtime spent about how much the taxpayer was paying to make Hollywood movies. So now there's a rule to appease the public. Nominally, help is supposed to come at no cost to the taxpayer, but the entertainment office always seems to be looking for ways around the rule.

RP: *Theaters of War* draws on material from the book *Operation Hollywood*, but you were able to get additional material via Freedom of Information Act [FOIA] requests. What were the most surprising things that you discovered? By the way, I thought the animation and graphics in the documentary are very good.

RS: Thanks. It was a challenge to make a film that's so document-driven. I didn't have the budget to pay for all the graphics work, so I had to learn it myself. It took three years to get it right.

You asked about *Operation Hollywood*, which David Robb put out in 2004. That was a huge inspiration for all of us working on this project, a true work of investigative journalism. He had access to documents dealing with about 90 to 100 films. And he worked for *Variety*, so he was able to interview filmmakers who were miffed that the Pentagon had changed their scripts or prevented their films from getting made.

Robb eventually turned all his documentation over to my crew and was happy that someone else could "take up the torch" as he put it. His book was ground-breaking and got everyone's attention, but the number of documents that he got pales in comparison to what we have now.

Robb was mainly working in the '70s, '80s and '90s, when the Entertainment Media Office was mainly dealing with feature films. My colleagues, Matt Alford and Tom Secker, started doing FOIA requests and they got about 10,000 to 15,000 pages of documents—notes, letters, script-change requests, that sort of stuff—covering productions from 2004 to 2016 or thereabouts. Feature films were now being eclipsed by other media ventures. That kicked off another wave of research and their book *National Security Cinema*. Since then, we've been able to bump that number up to about 40,000 through new FOIA requests and by getting access to new archives.

A good bit of what the Entertainment Media Office was doing in the late 2000s was Reality TV and talk shows, but by the time you're into the

2010s it is getting into YouTube territory, games and all sorts of other media platforms.

The biggest surprise was just how much stuff—how many different kinds of media that they’re working with. To call it the military-Hollywood complex now is really a misnomer because you’re dealing with almost every kind of media activity—sporting events and parades, in fact, anything that shows up on TV, video games, social media, you name it. The military are involved in things that you would not recognize as military productions. They do an astonishing number of cooking and cake shows, for example.

All this signaled a shift away from the war film to working within a story-telling realm that is designed to do something else. This is not only to justify military policy but to pull emotional strings and get people acclimated to the presence of military personnel, military bases, military operations, and weapons. They’re injecting this stuff into all the crevices of everyday life, normalizing the omnipresence of the military. That’s the basic strategy. It’s geared around massaging the political attitudes of the American body politic so that the military funding keeps flowing.

RP: Your documentary exposes the intimate collaboration between the Entertainment Media Office and *Top Gun* and *Top Gun: Maverick* as military recruitment vehicles. Could you speak about *Zero Dark Thirty*, which was hailed by many critics as an intelligent film and nominated for six Academy Awards?

RS: Yes, that one was by Katherine Bigelow. She had established a prior relationship with the Entertainment Media Office with *The Hurt Locker*. There were some issues with that production, and the military pulled its support. It ended up costing the producers a lot more and they barely broke even. Bigelow learnt a lesson from that and decided to do a “cap in hand” approach to the military with the script for *Zero Dark Thirty*. The Pentagon met early on in the process along with the White House and CIA.

There’s indication that the Pentagon felt that they were being shouldered out by the CIA and they weren’t interested in playing second fiddle. It ultimately became a CIA/White House film. The basic storyline was that the CIA was able to investigate and figure out Osama bin Laden’s whereabouts by using enhanced interrogation—torture.

The film was a coup for the CIA and the White House in the sense that it was able to represent these techniques not as abhorrent but as saving American lives and leading to the elimination of Osama bin Laden. This was the exact opposite of what actually happened. They did not learn anything about his location from so-called enhanced interrogation techniques.

There was a huge uproar amongst progressives in the US and folks like Senator John McCain, who had been tortured in Vietnam. Die-hard Republicans critical of the Obama administration also said this was overstepping the bounds and described it as propaganda. They weren’t worried about the depictions of torture so much as concerned that the film would boost the Obama administration’s reputation.

So these two very different groups joined ranks and protested the film. When it went up for an Oscar, it became a bit of a political hot potato and ultimately did not win Best Picture. You’re right though, it was presented as a respectable, high quality, high concept film that could very well have gone the distance had there not been the political controversy.

One of the by-products of the controversy though, and this has only happened a few times, was that it forced people to acknowledge the existence of the Pentagon’s Entertainment Media Office.

RP: Could you speak about the movie *Godzilla* and how the original version, which was conceived of as a warning about the dangers of nuclear war, and what the latest version of this film has now been transformed into?

RS: It is useful to step back and look at how nuclear weapon proliferation and stockpiling has been normalized by Hollywood and the

Pentagon over the years. *Godzilla* is a good example. You’re right that since the first movie in the ’50s, the franchise has been a critique of the bomb and nuclear proliferation, which is one reason why there has been no Pentagon support all the way through to 2014.

It’s not the only reason. There was a version made in 1998, which starred Matthew Broderick. In that movie the military are a bit like the Keystone Cops. They fire missiles at *Godzilla* but miss and take down the Chrysler Building. The military don’t look good and so the entertainment office objected and denied assistance.

The military did fully support the 2014 version of *Godzilla*, though, which showed them in a heroic light. More importantly, it turned the anti-nuclear narrative on its head. The military took out references to Hiroshima, and suddenly nuclear weapons are part of the solution to the monster problem. This was a huge PR victory for those intent on holding us all hostage to an accidental Armageddon.

The military denied help to the producers of the next version of the film in 2019. We don’t know the exact reason—maybe there was less of a heroic role—but the tragic thing is that the narrative of “nukes save the day” persisted. That’s after just one intervention by the DoD.

RP: I remember the shooting of Stanley Kubrick’s anti-nuclear film *On the Beach* in Melbourne, which is about US sailors stationed in Australia following a devastating nuclear war between the US and the Soviet Union. How did the DoD react to that film?

RS: We didn’t deal with *On the Beach* in the documentary, but I’m glad you bring it up. The Navy did not have a problem with the portrayal of the military or the officer corps per se, but they hated the suggestion that the US was on a hair trigger and potentially responsible for a nuclear war. The military explicitly said that the film would weaken American domestic support for building up its nuclear arsenal. If they were going to help the film, they wanted it to be clear that the Soviets started the war. The filmmakers balked, so the DoD ultimately denied support to *On the Beach*. There are other movies like this. *The Day After* in the ’80s was rejected by the DoD for almost exactly the same reasons.

RP: What was the DoD’s reaction to *Dr. Strangelove*?

RS: Kubrick and his producers didn’t approach the Pentagon because they didn’t think they would get any help. And they were right. This meant the Pentagon had no influence on *Dr. Strangelove*, but after it was made, they successfully pressured the studio to add a disclaimer at the beginning of the film. You might remember it starts with white print across a black screen that says all the things depicted in this film are fictional and the military has safeguards in place to prevent such events—accidental nuclear war—from happening.

Stanley Kubrick had no idea that this was being done and was not happy that the studio had pulled this fast one on him. The studios caved to that kind of thing because they wanted to maintain good relations with the military.

RP: Your documentary deals with *The Long Road Home* mini-series. Could you speak about that?

RS: That’s a relatively recent show about a 2004 ambush and rescue of US soldiers in Iraq. The whole thing was filmed at Fort Hood with tons of DoD help. I became interested in it because we had 400 pages of internal emails that we were able to pry loose via FOIA.

The emails revealed that the army at Fort Hood were shaving costs to get the production company the best possible deal they could. The original bill came in at \$500,000, which is a pittance to begin with, and it was shaved down after that by more than \$100,000. The word that kept coming back from the entertainment office to the folks at Fort Hood was, “Call all of it training if you can.” That’s not unusual. It’s an aspect of the game that we didn’t get into in the documentary.

The show is also partly about the peace movement at home, which we did get into. And here you see in the documents that the DoD even vetted all the signs carried by the anti-war protesters portrayed in the show. A list

of the slogans was sent to the DoD for approval.

As we were looking into these documents, I noticed that Duncan Koebrich, a veteran who was wounded in the Sadr City ambush, had been posting on social media about how much he hated the show.

I got in touch with him and wanted to know why. Was it just aesthetics or did they screw up the story? He hooked me up with other friends from the unit who also had similar reservations. One of those was Travis Walker. My initial idea was for all of us to visit the site at Fort Hood where they filmed the show, a repurposed urban combat training facility. Crazy enough, this is where the vets had trained before they shipped out to Iraq. Now it was being used to restage their story. But alas, Fort Hood wouldn't let us in without permission from—guess who?—the entertainment office.

The vets said that the ambush had been an embarrassment to the leadership for a long time, a strategic blunder and also a sign of blatant disregard for their own troops. The higher-ups made decisions that antagonized the local population, for example, and at the same time made little attempt to provide soldiers with basic body armor and armored vehicles. After the ambush, the military leadership was so anxious about the public reaction at home that it instituted a communications lockdown. Wounded and dying soldiers could not call their families.

The show ignores all of this and instead presents its own counter-narrative. There's an entire scene of wounded veterans calling their loved ones at home right away. That's not a discrepancy that we included in the documentary, but it was an indicator to me that something was up.

The doc does tell the story of Lieutenant Colonel Gary Volesky, though. He was in charge when the ambush went down. In real life, he stayed at headquarters. In the show, though, he's on the front line heroically fighting for his men. The vets couldn't believe their eyes when they saw this on TV. One of them called it a blatant cover-up. I would say that it's a lot like how *Black Hawk Down* rehabilitated the debacle in Somalia.

RP: You say in the documentary that Tomas Young is portrayed as being weak and cowardly, etc., which Koebrich and Walker were angry about.

RS: Yes, Young was their friend. He was wounded, paralyzed in the battle. He later became involved the anti-war movement, along with Cindy Sheehan, whose son was killed in the same incident. They both were part of the protests outside Bush's ranch in Texas and a thorn in the side of the administration.

So this is the other DoD angle in addition to covering up an embarrassing episode—discredit the peace movement. According to the vets, Young was a cool guy, but the series presents him as kind of out-to-lunch idiot who had visions of grandeur but lacked the skills to back it up. The series blames him for getting wounded. He's under attack, and because he's such a peacenik, he can't pull the trigger to defend himself. He's angry about it for the rest of his life. This was not the case, according to the vets.

Young's real story for a decade and a half is one of heroism—of being wounded, and then, against all odds, surviving long enough to devote his life to peace and making sure other tragedies like his don't happen again. Apparently, his message was threatening to the powers that be. The public relations machine turned his story into one of incompetence, resentment and bitterness.

RP: Your documentary concludes with a powerful description of the decades of post-war US imperialist interventions around the world and the horrendous human cost. It then argues for audiences to be told, via a warning title, when films or entertainment products are made with DoD or CIA assistance. How is this to happen given that you're dealing with a massive and ruthless apparatus?

RS: Good question. Well, short of abolishing the office, the least we can do is mandate that filmmakers put such a notice at the beginning of the film. And in our dreams, we'd love a policy that forces the automatic

release of the documents.

Of course, your skepticism is warranted. Even if Congress enacted such a policy, the DoD and CIA would likely find some loophole or a way of dealing in the backroom and not putting anything in writing. You're absolutely right about that. They're already pulling legal tricks to exempt themselves from having to make these documents available. Quite often, they'll block access, supposedly to protect trade secrets in the film and television industry.

Some things could be done in the courts. With decent legal representation, we could fight the stonewalling and get our hands on more documents. Also, it would be great if someone brought a case against the entertainment office for censorship or propaganda. There are DoD and Defense appropriations provisions that explicitly prohibit both. They could be tested. Any pro bono attorneys out there want to take it on?

If I sound optimistic, it's because I am. One of the things that intrigues those of us who study this is how hard the office has worked to keep the lid on over the years. You see it in the documents. And that means that letting in even a little sunlight can set off big changes.



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