

Adam Wingard's *Onslaught*: Military “super soldiers” on a rampage

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Onslaught is a new film directed and co-written by Adam Wingard. It concerns itself with a plot by fascist elements in the US military high command to unleash surgically enhanced “super soldiers” upon the domestic population.

The film opens with a chaotic montage of US military operations around the world. Decades of carnage and criminality—Border Patrol raids, Abu Ghraib’s torture cells, mass destruction in Iraq, Vietnam, etc.—are juxtaposed against hollow “anti-war” statements by US presidents, Democrat and Republican alike.

The montage places particular emphasis on “Operation Paperclip,” an initiative authorized by President Harry Truman in 1945 to recruit former Nazi scientists into the US military-intelligence apparatus. An estimated 1,600 scientists, engineers, technicians and counterintelligence officers were recruited under the program, including former high-ranking members of the Nazi SS. Despite their complicity in the crimes of the Nazi regime, the Paperclip recruits were shielded from prosecution by the US government, which was rapidly ramping up war production at the onset of the Cold War against the Soviet Union.

In the film, Nazi admirer and “third-generation Paperclip” scientist Hans Kammler (Dan Stevens) oversees a top-secret program to produce enhanced “super soldiers” capable of killing without hesitation or remorse. Three soldiers, “promoted” for their war crimes against civilians, have been outfitted with various enhancements: night vision, resistance to physical damage, enhanced strength, etc. As Kammler puts it, “once they begin killing, they will not stop until their programming is deactivated or until there is no one left in their path alive. They are the human equivalent of a heat-seeking missile.”

During a “live fire” demonstration for US

government agents and Kammler’s private investors, the soldiers escape containment and massacre everyone in the facility. Cyrus (Drew Starkey), a “cleaner” for an undisclosed government agency, is tasked with tracking down the soldiers and containing the fallout from their escape. Kammler’s wife (Rebecca Hall) assumes control of the operation and orders Cyrus and his crew to stand down and merely observe the super soldiers’ rampage.

Frau Kammler: “We set out to create a military faction without conscience, to be deployed against the domestic populace. The average infantry soldier may hesitate to kill his own countrymen, but these men are conditioned to kill until they are stopped...We have the unexpected opportunity to observe these subjects outside the boundaries of our control.”

Meanwhile, Celeste Cross (Adria Arjona), a former US Army sniper, manages a New Mexico trailer park. She struggles with post-traumatic stress disorder from her deployment and has difficulty managing both her tenants and her own personal life. Along with trailer park resident Josiah (Reginald VelJohnson), she speculates, with contempt and suspicion, about what could be happening at Kammler’s secret base. As Josiah puts it, “They just can’t stop f—ing with us vets.”

In the film’s most disturbing scene, the super soldiers attack a rural truck stop and massacre dozens. The imagery—masked gunmen opening fire on terrified and defenseless civilians—evokes not only the countless atrocities committed by US forces throughout the world, but also the phenomenon of domestic mass shootings, itself a product of decades of unending war.

The soldiers arrive at the trailer park and unleash havoc. Celeste, determined to protect her daughter, battles both the soldiers and her own personal demons.

The latter portion of the film proceeds along the lines of conventional action and horror films.

In an interview with *Variety*, Wingard (*You're Next*, *The Guest*) stated that “[A] lot of this film really does carry a heightened version of...the underground mechanisms of the military-industrial complex and secret programs...Even the lineage of us bringing Nazi scientists over from Project Paperclip from World War Two. I mean, those are all things that I believe in and are real.”

He also noted the similarity between the film’s masked “super soldiers” and the Trump administration’s ICE Gestapo: “We were in post, and I remember one of the headlines: there’s this picture of four ICE agents. They’re all geared up with masks on, and they’re standing in front of some big vehicle with its lights backlighting them, and it’s a very dramatic shot. I thought, ‘Oh my god, this looks exactly like the shot of our killers standing in front of the truck in the movie.’”

What can be said for the film is that it has an instinctive, if not particularly well thought-out, antipathy toward the military-intelligence apparatus and its criminal-fascist leadership. None of the operatives working under Cyrus and Frau Kammler’s command so much as bat an eye at the notion of civilians being used as target practice for “research.” The lives of the trailer park residents—workers and disabled veterans, generally poor and struggling—are treated with the same contempt and “disposability” as those of US imperialism’s victims in the Middle East, North Africa, South and Central America, etc. etc.

Criminal brutality is treated as official policy. When a character asks for Cyrus’s identity, he responds simply, “[I’m] your government.”

There are important historical issues bound up with initiatives like Operation Paperclip and the alliance between the “democratic” US government and Nazi elements. Wingard’s inspiration for the Kammler character was an infamous Nazi SS officer of the same name who oversaw Germany’s V-2 rocket development and the construction of Auschwitz and other concentration camps. The real Kammler was “officially” said to have died in 1945, but there is evidence to suggest he was captured and transferred to the United States, where he aided in the development of the US’s own rocketry program.

Wingard’s film touches on these issues, but can’t make much out of them. The connection between the growth of fascist militarism and the broader crisis of capitalism—the breakdown of the postwar order, the explosion of social inequality, the lurch to the right by the entire political establishment—lies outside the filmmakers’ grasp. Absent this, Wingard turns to action and horror clichés, with vague references to “the Illuminati” and other disoriented conspiracy theories.

The notion that fascism is something “foreign,” injected into the US’s political bloodstream from without, is entirely misguided. It finds expression in the somewhat absurd depiction of the Kammlers, with their heavy German accents and sexual eccentricities. In reality, the “democratic” Truman administration (guilty of one of the greatest war crimes in history, the atomic bombing of Japan) could integrate Nazi elements precisely because the US and German ruling classes shared a common objective: the subjugation of the international working class and the defeat of the Soviet Union.

Indeed, the fascist Trump administration proves that US capitalism is perfectly capable of producing its own version of Nazi leadership, every bit as criminal as the Third Reich’s. One would imagine that idiot-warmonger Pete Hegseth would be highly enthusiastic about a “super soldier” mass killing program like the one depicted in the film, with perhaps the one stipulation that test subjects’ testosterone levels be carefully monitored.

Wingard, like any artist with a degree of sensitivity, has a feeling that there is something deeply rotten in the upper echelons of society. When asked at a public event who the most dangerous “super-villain” is, he responded, “The president of the United States.” But more thought, more clarity on the real sources of militarism and oppression, is necessary for artistic success, even (or especially) for popular filmmaking.



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