

Imprimis

May 2005 • Volume 34, Number 5

OVER 1,200,000 READERS MONTHLY



War Films, Hollywood and Popular Culture

Michael Medved

Radio Host and Author, *Right Turns: Unconventional Lessons from a Controversial Life*



MICHAEL MEDVED is a nationally syndicated radio talk show host, best-selling author and film critic. He graduated with honors from Yale and attended Yale Law School. After working as a screenwriter in Hollywood, he reviewed films for CNN and later worked as chief film critic for the *New York Post*. He also served for twelve years as co-host of *Sneak Previews* on PBS. His daily three-hour radio program is heard in over 170 markets and his columns on media and society appear regularly in *USA Today*, where he serves as a member of the Board of Contributors. Mr. Medved is the author of ten books, including *Hollywood vs. America*, *Saving Childhood: Protecting Our Children from the National Assault on Innocence* (with Diane Medved) and, most recently, *Right Turns: Unconventional Lessons from a Controversial Life*.

The following is adapted from a lecture delivered on March 9, 2005, on the Hillsdale College campus, during a five-day seminar on the topic "War on Film," sponsored by the Center for Constructive Alternatives.

On my radio show today, I addressed the topic of military "counter-recruiters." You know what military recruiters are—the people who go to high schools and colleges and tell young people about their opportunities to serve their country in the military. Well, now there are also "counter-recruiters" who go to these schools and tell young people why they *shouldn't* serve their country in the military. I had one of them on my show today and put one of your Hillsdale freshmen on with him, and she asked him the crucial question he couldn't answer intelligently: "What would the world be like without the American military?" He said that the world would be a "beautiful place." But of course this would only be true if a world enslaved under Nazism or communism or Islamo-fascism could be called beautiful. Without the U.S. military in the last century, it would be one of these.

These "counter-recruiters," by the way, have received such strong support from teachers unions in the Los Angeles Unified School District that it has been *mandated* that they be given equal access with military recruiters in Los Angeles high schools. How have we come to such a pass? One of the important underlying factors, it seems to me, is that the popular culture has changed fundamentally in the way that it portrays the military and its mission.

Consider two movies that were released last Friday. One is called *The Jacket* and stars Adrien Brody, Keira Knightly, Jennifer Jason Leigh and Kris Kristofferson. It begins by



showing American troops committing atrocities during the first Persian Gulf War and goes from there. But what's fascinating is that it's one of the very few films that have referred to that war at all. And remember: When we fought the first Persian Gulf War, it was not controversial like the recent war in Iraq. There was a huge worldwide coalition and the American public supported it more than any conflict since World War II, according to pollsters. Nevertheless, I can count on the fingers of one hand the movies that have made any reference to it at all. Besides *The Jacket*, there was last summer's *The Manchurian Candidate*, in which there's an evil conspiracy involving brainwashing and torturing on the part of American businessmen; before that there was *Courage Under Fire* with Meg Ryan and Denzel Washington, which was about a friendly-fire incident, military cover-ups and the mistreatment of a brave young female officer; and then there was *Three Kings*, starring George Clooney, which is also about the corruption of the U.S. military and our betrayal of our allies. So here's an incredibly popular war and Hollywood hardly touches it. And it *never* treats it in any sort of favorable light. Why not?

The other relevant film released last Friday is called *The Pacifier*, and stars Vin Diesel. The plot of this one revolves around a Navy SEAL who is assigned to rescue a top-secret government scientist from terrorists. It is pretty silly. But here's the interesting thing about it: At the conclusion of the opening sequence, which is quite thrilling, it turns out that the terrorists who have kidnapped this government scientist are...*Serbian!!* How many Americans do you know who go to sleep at night worried about an attack on our homeland from Serbian terrorists?

Here we are with our country engaged in what Norman Podhoretz has rightly called World War IV (World War III being the Cold War), with Americans serving not just in Iraq and Afghanistan, but all over the world, trying to keep us safe here in the U.S. And our enemies do, after all, have a name and address: They are Islamic and fascist and they aim at our annihilation. Yet Hollywood, if it notices the war on terrorism at all, gives us Serbian terrorists. This bizarre behavior, by the way, extends back before September 11. Do you remember *Sum of All Fears*, a film based on a Tom Clancy novel? In the novel, there are Islamic terrorists and it's largely realistic. In the

movie version, the Islamic terrorists have been transformed into German neo-Nazis and it's completely *unrealistic*.

What is going on here? Wouldn't you think, given the universal American concern about the monstrous and evil people who attacked this country on September 11, that this is an issue with which Hollywood would grapple? During WWII, there were tons of movies dealing with that war—and no, the German Nazis were not portrayed as Uruguayans or Fiji Islanders. The truth of the matter is that war movies have changed in a fundamental way, and, I would submit to you, a dangerous way for the health of our culture and for the strength of our republic.

Subversion of the Classic War Film

Three elements were always present in classic war movies—films like the John Wayne version of *The Alamo*, or *The Longest Day*, or *A Bridge Too Far* or *Sergeant York*. First, there was great affection for, and indeed glorification of, the American fighting man, who was portrayed as one of us—as representative of the best of what this country is. Second, there was obvious sympathy for the American cause. And third, the wars being dramatized were portrayed as meaning something.

Every once in a while we'll still get a war film of this kind. *Saving Private Ryan* is an example, I think—even though there is a line in it where the Tom Hanks character says, "If we can bring Private Ryan back to his mother, then this whole god-awful war will have meant something." Needless to say, WWII would have meant something even if Private Ryan had been lost. Another example is *Glory*, a great Civil War movie about a famous African-American regiment, made up partly of former slaves, and its doomed but gallant assault on Fort Wagner in South Carolina. And there was Mel Gibson's *We Were Soldiers*, the single finest film ever made about Vietnam. But such traditional war movies are now the rare exception.

It is far more common in war films today, regardless of the war being depicted, for the three elements of the classic war film to be turned on their heads. American troops are more likely than not to be portrayed as sick, warped and demented—in any case, very different from normal Americans. Very often the

Barcelona • Málaga • Cádiz • Casablanca • Canary Islands • Madeira • Portimão • Lisbon

InterShow Presents

Hillsdale

COLLEGE
CRUISE



THE FIGHT FOR FREEDOM

Barcelona to Lisbon • October 25 - November 6, 2005
Aboard the Six-Star Crystal Serenity



Confirmed Speakers Include:



Victor Davis Hanson
Author, Military Historian,
and Hillsdale College
Distinguished Fellow



Larry P. Arn
President,
Hillsdale College



David Pryce-Jones
Senior Editor,
National Review
Author, *The Closed Circle: An
Interpretation of the Arabs*



Robert Conquest
Senior Research Fellow,
Hoover Institution
Author, *The Dragons
of Expectation*

Other Speakers To Be Announced!

Cabin Rates (per couple)

Category	Reg. Rate	Hillsdale Rate
PS	\$37,290	\$27,390
PH	\$29,550	\$20,590
AA	\$21,700	\$11,890
A	\$20,320	\$10,890
B	\$19,480	\$10,590
C	\$17,310	\$ 7,090
Promenade	\$16,310	\$ 6,090

For more information or to reserve your cabin call (800) 797-9519.

audience is manipulated to root for the other side, whatever the other side happens to be. And whatever the war, we are left with the idea that it is meaningless.

Think of *Platoon*, which won the Oscar for best picture in 1986. *Platoon* gives you an absolutely nightmarish vision of Vietnam. Most of the characters close to the main character, played by Charlie Sheen—including a demonic sergeant played by Tom Berringer—are dangerous, dysfunctional and horrible. The American military is depicted as being in Vietnam primarily to kill and torture people and to burn villages. And, of course, the message is that the war was totally meaningless. Or consider *Dances with Wolves*, another Oscar winner, in which Kevin Costner stars as a U.S. Army officer who is a traitor to his country. He abandons the army and goes to fight with

the Sioux. The American military, of course, is portrayed as sadistic and disgusting and inferior in every way to the peaceful, refined and altogether enlightened Sioux warriors. *Cold Mountain* is a Civil War film in which every aspect of *that* war is seen as nightmarish and pointless. And then there was *Revolution*, a perfectly dreadful movie in which Al Pacino, his Bronx accent fully intact, plays a veteran of the American War for Independence. It depicts George Washington and company kidnapping people and forcing them to fight against their will, whereas the British are decent and the entire war is shown to be hypocritical at best. The list could go on and on: In *A Few Good Men*, Tom Cruise exposes the military monster played by Jack Nicholson. *The General's Daughter*, starring John Travolta, oozes with military corruption. But you get the point.

AN EXCITING NEW RETIREMENT OPTION

Independence Grove

AT HILLSDALE COLLEGE

A Retirement Community that Values Intelligence, Integrity and Independence



From the vantagepoint of its rolling hills, Independence Grove will provide a spectacular view of the Central Hall clock tower, a symbol of the College's fierce independence. The property, which fully covers 180 acres, is conveniently located adjacent to our campus.

Hillsdale College is proud to announce that it is now accepting \$1,000 priority reservations for its affiliated retirement community, Independence Grove at Hillsdale College. By making a fully refundable deposit, you will receive a priority number that will give you your first choice of cottage or apartment at this unique community once the floor plans and building locations are finalized. As a priority depositor, you will also be able to lock in the lowest prices!



When completed, this continuing care community will offer 165 independent spacious cottages and apartments, 50 assisted living suites with 25 dedicated to the care of those with Alzheimer's disease and related dementias – a full continuum of care.

Not only will residents of Independence Grove at Hillsdale College enjoy country club-style services and amenities, they also will have the opportunity to retire with like-minded people who share the same ideas and a desire to be socially active and intellectually stimulated.

THE CLUBHOUSE WILL INCLUDE:

- Gourmet restaurants
- Fitness center & day spa
- Indoor pool
- Walking paths & putting greens
- Performance center & theater
- Library & reading area
- Business center & computer lab
- Creative art center

THE MONTHLY SERVICE FEE INCLUDES:

- Flexible meal plan
- Indoor & outdoor maintenance
- 24-hour security & response system
- Weekly housekeeping & linen service
- Concierge, travel & valet services
- Scheduled transportation
- Courses specific to resident interests
- Cultural, spiritual & social programs

ACCESS TO ADDITIONAL COLLEGE AMENITIES WILL INCLUDE:

- College music & theater productions
- College libraries, archives & computer network
- College pool, fitness center, tennis courts & indoor track
- Slayton Arboretum & Children's Garden
- Sage Center for the Arts
- NCAA Division II Sporting Events

AND SO MUCH MORE!

The response has been overwhelming. Find out why so many friends and alumni of Hillsdale College are making Independence Grove at Hillsdale College their retirement home.

For more information, call **1-800-398-8193** or independencegrove@hillsdale.edu



So why the change in approach? Why has Hollywood decided, seemingly illogically, to make movies in the United States that depict the American military as unrepresentative and twisted, America as a malignant force in the world, and all wars as pointless? Apologists for these depictions will say that in Vietnam we discovered a different face—the true face—of the American military. We saw the hideous face of Lieutenant Calley, who massacred several hundred villagers at My Lai. We heard stories such as those told memorably by John Kerry before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1971, about how U.S. atrocities in Vietnam were not the exception, but the rule. Furthermore, these Hollywood apologists will say, the Vietnam War revealed American idealism to be a sham and demonstrated that America was not a beacon of freedom but an imperialist threat. Thus Susan Sarandon, one of the “intellectual leaders” of the Hollywood community, said in 1991 that the U.S. “is a land that has raped every area of the world.” As for the idea that war is meaningless, this is presented as a natural (and beneficial) realization arising from Vietnam as well: Because 58,000 brave young Americans died for no reason in Vietnam, they will say, it is inevitable and good that people have become deeply and permanently disillusioned about war in general.

The problem with all of these Vietnam-based justifications for the modern war film is that they are built on falsehoods. For example, those who have thoroughly investigated the Vietnam War—including Guenter Lewy, who wrote a magisterial history of it—have concluded that Vietnam, far from having the highest incidence of war atrocities in American history, had some of the lowest. I would cite also the despicable, unforgivable treatment by Hollywood of the Vietnam veteran. There have been countless “compassionate” films about the effects of Vietnam on those who fought there. Movies like *Rolling Thunder* with John Lithgow, *In Country* with Bruce Willis, *Cease Fire* with Don Johnson and *Jackknife* with Ed Harris depict veterans as psychiatric cases who came home from the war broken. This is not even to mention the absurd *Rambo* series about a long-suffering vet twisted into a psychotic killer. But in truth, the typical Vietnam veteran is not homeless or disillusioned or suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. The statistics are readily available from the Department of

Veterans Affairs, and this is what they reveal: Vietnam vets—people who actually served in combat in Vietnam—are *less* likely to have psychiatric problems, *less* likely to have drug problems, *less* likely to have committed suicide, and have a *higher* median income than people of comparable socio-economic backgrounds who did not serve in Vietnam.

The Transformation of Hollywood

I would submit to you that what has changed is neither the American military nor the ordinary American’s perception of the military. What has changed is Hollywood itself. During WWII, there was a spectacular war effort in Hollywood and a great enthusiasm among the Hollywood elite—even the biggest stars—for serving their country. Jimmy Stewart, the number-two rated male movie star at the time, enlisted in 1942, flew 51 bombing missions with the Army Air Corps and ended up a brigadier general. Henry Fonda rejected the proposal that he simply promote and sell war bonds, insisted on serving in combat and was wounded in the Pacific. And such behavior was considered normal. This was America, after all, and Hollywood was *part of America*. Bringing this forward into the late 1950s, one of the great events of my childhood—and you have no idea what a sensation it created—was when the number one pop star in America, a kid named Elvis Presley, cheerfully interrupted his multi-million dollar career to be drafted into the Army.

It is hard even to imagine all this today. Hollywood is a different world. For one thing, it is a much less populist institution. Clark Gable, before he became a movie star, was a truck driver. So was Elvis. Movie people tended to come from humble backgrounds. By and large, Hollywood was not a place of upper class pretensions. It was a place that made movies for the entertainment of ordinary Americans. This is far from the case now.

Part of what changed—and it was a change that was already under way before Vietnam—was Hollywood’s transformation from a mass appeal industry to an elite institution. Many of the major stars today have an Ivy League background. And a large number of them are second or third generation stars—people who have been born into the movie business and have lived in it their whole lives. So the indus-

try is no longer connected with the public in the way that it used to be. Certainly very few of Tinseltown's luminaries have had any experience in, or contact with, the military. All of this is reflected in the new mission that Hollywood has adopted: not to entertain, but to challenge and discomfort the public.

And of course it is not simply antipathy to the military that permeates Hollywood today. There is a broader anti-Americanism—an alienation from everything American—that runs very, very deep there. Listen to Sean Penn, speaking to a press conference at the Cannes Film Festival in 1991, when asked a question about his film *Indian Runner*:

I don't think it scratches the surface of the rage that is felt, if not acted upon, by most of the people in the country where I live. I was brought up in a country that relished fear-based religion, corrupt government, and an entire white population living on stolen property that they murdered for and that is passed on from generation to generation.

And here is Oliver Stone in 1987, upon receiving the Torch of Liberty Award from the American Civil Liberties Union:

Our own country has become a military industrial monolith, dedicated to the Cold War—in many ways, as rigid and corrupt at the top as our rivals, the Soviets. We have become the enemy with a security state now second to none. Today we have come to live in total hatred, fear, and the desire to destroy. Bravo. Fear and conformity have triumphed. This Darth-Vadian Empire of the United States must pay for its many sins in the future. I think America has to bleed. I think the corpses have to pile up. I think American boys have to die again. Let the mothers weep and mourn.

Is it any wonder that people who deliver statements like that also feel the need to trash the U.S. in film after film after film?

I'll make one last point—this one about the economics of the movie business today—which is also critical in understanding what has changed in the relationship between Hollywood and America. In 1970, more than 70 percent of all revenues for the major studios in Hollywood came from the U.S. Today this

number is less than 30 percent. Hollywood has conquered the world. It sells tons of movies and DVDs in France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and increasingly in China and India. And while it has been doing that, the audience has collapsed here in the U.S. As recently as 1965, 45 million Americans attended the movies every week. Our population has nearly doubled since then, and yet today the number of moviegoers per week is barely 20 million. In other words, the American film industry has become conspicuously less American. So is it any wonder that when war movies are produced at all, there is much less reflexive sympathy and support for the American point of view?

* * *

A book published in 1999, *The Black Book of Communism*, computed the number of corpses that communism had accumulated since the Russian Revolution in 1917. The total adds up, in the 20th century alone, to more than 100 million. The U.S. fought a life-and-death struggle against world communism between the end of WWII and the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. We won that war, thank God. And Hollywood's continuing insistence on portraying the Vietnam War—which, along with the Korean War, was an integral part of that life-and-death struggle—as having taught us that all war is pointless is a way of ignoring the fact, not only that Hollywood did not engage in that struggle against world communism, but that most people in the entertainment elite were on the wrong side of it. I say this with respect and with caution. I am not suggesting that most people in Hollywood were active communists. But I *am* suggesting that the anti-anti-communism that became so typical of Hollywood during the Cold War has led to its ongoing denial that the Cold War meant anything.

Can anyone think of a movie that has celebrated America's victory in the Cold War? Probably most of us will think of *Miracle*. Apparently Hollywood can face the fact that we beat the Soviet Union in a hockey game, but not the fact that we overcame the Soviet Union politically—through attention to moral principles and through the maintenance of military superiority—because the entertainment elite is terribly invested in the idea that no war ever meant anything.

continued on next page (detach envelope)



Imprimis ORDER FORM



Name Dr. Mr.
 Mrs. Ms. Miss

Address _____

City _____ State _____ ZIP _____

Email _____ Telephone (____) _____
 Home Office

1-10 copies 50¢ each • 25-\$10 • 50-\$15 • 100-\$25

FREE SHIPPING!

Qty.	Author/Title	Price
Subtotal		
Michigan residents, add 6% sales tax		
TOTAL		

Enclosed is my tax-deductible contribution to Hillsdale College for \$_____

My check made payable to **Hillsdale College** is enclosed.

Please charge my: VISA MC Discover

Exp. Date _____

Card No. _____

Signature _____

For more information, check areas that interest you:

- Center for Constructive Alternatives on-campus seminars
 National Leadership Off-Campus Seminars Center for Teacher Excellence
 Hillsdale Academy Reference Guide Hillsdale Hostel
 Hillsdale College Admissions Gift and Estate Planning
 Hillsdale College Athletics *Freedom Library Catalog* (books and tapes)



continued from page 6

Some of you are going to leave this fine college and go out and make tremendous contributions, I hope, serving in our military, which is the most honorable thing that any American can do. But some of you also, I hope, will go out and engage in a different kind of combat, a battle to redeem the popular culture—which, in terms of its false treatment of the military and of America itself, and its denial of the awful occasional necessity of war, is a popular culture in deep need of redemption.

People like the gentleman I had on my radio show today love to say that “Violence never solved anything.” But what solved Hitler? Was it a team of social workers? Was it putting daisies into the gun barrels of Nazi Panzer divisions? Was it a commission that tried to

understand what made Hitler so angry? No. What solved Hitler was violence. And what will solve the problem of Islamo-fascist terrorism, I’m sorry to say, is not understanding, negotiation, conferences, social workers, daisies, or anything other than the heroic violence of brave men and women with guns, fighting selflessly for their country—this greatest nation on God’s green earth.



Editor, Douglas A. Jeffrey; Deputy Editor, Timothy W. Caspar; Assistant to the Editor, Patricia A. DuBois. The opinions expressed in **Imprimis** are not necessarily the views of Hillsdale College. Copyright © 2005. Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided the following credit line is used: “Reprinted by permission from **Imprimis**, the national speech digest of Hillsdale College, www.hillsdale.edu.” **SUBSCRIPTION FREE UPON REQUEST.** ISSN 0277-8432. **Imprimis** trademark registered in U.S. Patent and Trade Office #1563325.