To End All Culture Wars? A Study of World War II Film and American Culture Since 1945

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No other period of history has had more influence on contemporary American than the events that transpired during World War II. The experiences of the men fighting in Pacific jungles, French fields, and the people who worked the assembly lines back home reveal the moxie of the so-called “Greatest Generation.”¹ It also follows that the collective experience during World War II is a microcosm of the American story. Ever since the conclusion of the war over sixty years ago, Americans have tried to recapture the essence of this story. In undertaking such an endeavor, the most important objective in recapturing the story of World War II goes to the narration of the story. As with any story, the narrative used determines the perspective, or point of view from which the audience interacts with the world of the story. This is the case with the narrative of World War II. While there are many different perspectives that storytellers can use regarding the war, such as the soldiers, the nurses, the generals, or others, there exists in each story a uniqueness that functions as a piece that of the larger puzzle that is the story of World War II.

However, another key aspect of narrating the story of World War II revolves around the medium used by the storyteller to depict the story. Differing types of media, such as biographies or autobiographies, songs, or even television documentaries, provide differing methods of exploring the story of the war. Yet, none of these have had as far an impact on as many people as the motion picture has had in the narration of World War II. Motion pictures allow audiences to interact with the story in a way that cannot occur with any other media. Moviegoers can not only see the events unfold, they can relate to the story on

a deeper, more emotional level because they *experience* the same things the characters on the screen experience. Without this perception of experience, the audience loses this key connection with the characters, and the story loses its power. Ever since the war ended until now, Hollywood has tried to depict World War II and the many stories of the war in movies.

In order to research the impact of Hollywood on the narrative of World War II, the primary focus of such research is the change in narrative since the end of the war. More than just nostalgia, the changes in the narrative of World War II provide glimpses into the cultural mindset from which the movies came from. External events, such as the Cold War, Vietnam, the fiftieth anniversary of D-Day, and the War on Terror provide context for the changes in narrative. The following study examined films from the end of the war through 2009, such as: *The Bridge on the River Kwai, The Longest Day, Patton, Tora! Tora! Tora!, A Bridge Too Far, Saving Private Ryan, To End All Wars, and Inglourious Basterds*. These World War II films provide a social commentary on subsequent U.S. wars, such as the Cold War, Vietnam, and the current War on Terror as a result of the portrayal of certain characters and storylines in these films.

However, to better grasp the nature of the shift in the narratives of World War II films, it is vital to understand the basic formula that the films in this genre use. The most influential scholarship in this area derives from Jeanine Basinger’s work *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre*. This work defines the basic formula that World War II combat films use, but she also shows how each film fits into that formula. In the introduction, she concludes that World War II gave birth to the combat film genre because
before the war, this genre did not exist. From this initial statement, she then proceeds to define what constitute a World War II combat film, and what does not. Eventually, she creates a general outline of the films in this genre, and this basic outline serves as a de facto definition of this genre. For this paper, this outline merely provides a backdrop of the genre as a whole; the films used in this study will not be matched to the outline to verify Basinger’s conclusions. With a complete understanding of the definition and outline of the World War II combat film, one can dissect the shift in the narrative of World War II films over the span of roughly fifty years can then occur.

While many films about World War II came out of Hollywood during the war and in the first few years afterwards, the first film to leave a major impact is The Bridge on the River Kwai. A winner of seven Academy Awards in 1957, including Best Picture, this film provides the best example of the narrative of World War II films in the 1950s in the way that the characters act as a de facto commentary on 1950s culture. Set in Siam during 1943, the movie centers around British prisoners who constructed a bridge over the Kwai River on the infamous “Railway of Death.” Lt. Col. Nicholson, played by Alec Guinness, is the commanding officer of the British troops, who guides all of his actions by military protocol. This mindset almost results in his death, as well as the deaths of the other officers, when Col. Saito, the commandant of the prison camp, orders him and the other officers to work along side their troops, which was a violation of the Geneva Convention. Eventually he learns to deal with Col. Saito, but he still remains fervent in his command and control of the troops with respect to building the bridge. He even goes so far to consult

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3 For the purposes of my research, these differences between what is and what is not a World War II combat film do not matter.
with the Japanese engineers in charge of the project to change the bridge plans in order to build a bridge that would stand as a testament to his troops. This mindset is completely different than Commander Shears, the only American in the camp, who is very individualistic. At the beginning of the film, the audience meets Shears while digging a grave for a fellow prisoner, lamenting that the dead prisoner died for nothing. Later, after the British troops arrive, when one of the British officers poses the question of escape to him, he notes the futility of escape into miles of impassable jungle. However, he does escape after growing weary of the camp. His individualism is further revealed when the audience learns that he impersonated a dead officer in order to receive better treatment in the prison camp. On the way back to the river with the commando team, Shears lashes out at the leader of the team, Major Warden for the British type of leadership, saying

... You’d leave your own mother here if rules called for it ... You make me sick with your heroics; there is a stench of death about you. You carry it in your pack like the plague. Explosives and L-Pills [suicide pills], they go well together don’t they? And with you it’s just one thing or another, destroy a bridge or destroy yourself. This is just a game, this war. You and that Col. Nicholson, you’re two of a kind. Crazy with courage. For what? How to die like a gentleman; how to die by the rules? When the only important thing is to live like a human being ... I’m not going to leave you here to die Warden. Because I don’t care about your bridge and I don’t care about your rules....

This contrast in character personalities between Col. Nicholson and Commander Shears is a microcosm of the era of consensus that the 1950s was. While the predominant cultural trend in the United States in the 1950s leaned towards the idea that personal identity derived itself from conformity with other people, Commander Shears’ character challenges this trend with his individuality. Shears’ dramatic monologue captures his individualistic mindset in that his situation in the prison camp changed the ballgame,

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forcing him to abandon the military rulebook and adopt a Darwinian\(^5\) rulebook in order to survive. Col. Nicholson’s blind obedience to the rule book acts as an agent of the era of consensus in the way that authority cannot be challenged because it would cause anarchy to prevail among his men in the prison camp. While the film presents the case for both consensus and individuality, the film forces the audience to choose a side, thus revealing the cultural context of the 1950s.

While the main issue of 1950s American culture focused on consensus, the Cold War, started in the late 1940s, flared up dramatically throughout the 1950s and 1960s, culminating in the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1963. During this time, the Cold War became a dominating factor in virtually all aspects of American life. The “us versus them” mentality became even more prevalent after the Cuban Missile Crisis, and this mentality worked its way onto the silver screen with *The Longest Day* and *Tora! Tora! Tora!* Released in 1962, the main message of *The Longest Day*, according to Robert Brent Toplin, is, “Zanuck’s movie carries a symbolic message about the Cold War: it shows that American, British, and French troops could cooperate to defeat a common enemy.”\(^6\) The *Longest Day* depicts the D-Day invasion with the fabled Hollywood “cast of thousands,” with the action viewed from both the side of the Allies and the side of the Germans. When writing about the plot of this film, Stephen E. Ambrose writes, “The film’s theme is a patriotic one: the triumph of democracy over dictatorship. The Allied soldiers in [this movie] are bold, confident in their leaders and their cause, and eager to seize the initiative, while the

\(^{5}\) What this means is basically a rulebook where the only rules are that you look out only for your own interests in order to survive; a survival of the fittest type rulebook.

German soldiers are confused, fearful of opportunity, and deeply suspicious of the principles they serve.”7 However, the presentation of *The Longest Day* plays out differently than most other World War II films. The film acts more like a “storytelling newsreel, clearly set[ting] out to present its story as a document. Each character is introduced with the image of the actor playing the part [, and] [u]nderneath is printed information that explains who and what the person is.”8 This type of narration makes it difficult for the audience to really follow one specific character very closely. Unlike some World War II films, the combat sequences do not play as big a role with respect to the plot. Some of the criticism that this film attracted came about because of these sequences. Critics argued that these sequences were not realistic enough, that the deaths were too painless, without suffering.9 However, one of the more puzzling things about this film revolves around the portrayal of the Germans. The Germans depicted in this film are quite sanitized, more like the Keystone Kops than anything. Ambrose attributes this to the duration of time that had passed after the war, making any negative characterizations of the Germans as a bad political move.10 Ergo, “the political purpose of the film, with its forty-two international stars, was to show that Germans, British, French, and Americans could now ‘act’ together against the Communist threat from the East.”11

Likewise, *Tora! Tora! Tora!* exudes a similar goal: while the enemy did horrible things, the Americans defeated them, and now they are needed to help defeat the Russians. *Tora! Tora! Tora!* re-enacts the events surrounding the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The only

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8 Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film*, 189.
11 Ibid., 241.
other similarity that this picture has with *The Longest Day* is the way the characters are introduced. *Tora! Tora! Tora!* shows both the American and Japanese sides of the conflict. The film makes overtures throughout that appear to say that Pearl Harbor was an inevitability, not caused by Admiral Yamamoto, but caused by the forceful members of the Japanese Army, such as General Hideki Tojo. The first scene, where the outgoing Admiral, Zengo Yoshida, swears in Admiral Yamamoto shows the film’s deference towards him. Regarding the impending signing of the Tri-Partite Agreement, Yamamoto says, “You are our last hope, Yoshida. The Navy must stand firm against the alliance.” However, immediately in the next sequence, set at the residence of the Foreign Minister, Tojo says, “Now is the time to strike. . . Yes, and that fleet [the U.S. Pacific Fleet that had been recently moved from San Diego to Pearl Harbor] is a knife leveled at our [Japan’s] throat!” This contrasts the depiction of Yamamoto’s peaceful nature compared to the hawkish nature of the Army leaders, like Hideki Tojo. As the film progresses, Yamamoto and the Foreign Minister have another meeting, where Yamamoto tries to emphasize the importance of continuing negotiations with the Americans. During this meeting, however, the Foreign Minister asks about the chances of the Navy against the Americans, again showing the differences between Yamamoto and the government with respect to peace. At the conclusion of this meeting he states, “Please remember there is no last word in diplomacy.”

As the attack becomes more and more imminent, Yamamoto shifts his tone from arguing against the attack to warning about the threat the Americans would pose if

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13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
attacked. This continues throughout the film, even through attack itself, and leads to his ultimate conclusion that, “All I fear that we have done is to awaken a sleeping giant and fill him with a terrible resolve.” This perspective on the Japanese appears to paint Yamamoto as a more of a hero than anything by fighting against the bombing, which also appears to absolve him of masterminding the plan. This creates the inference that the only truly bad Asians were those in charge of the military who pushed for war; those who did not push for were received absolution in this film. However, this film flopped at the box office not because it failed at accurately re-creating the events relating to Pearl Harbor, but because it did not really entertain. As Lawrence H. Suid puts it, “No single person emerges as the American scapegoat, and no heroes appear.” In the end, Tora! Tora! Tora!, like The Longest Day, does not demonize the enemy, on the basis that, at the time of its release “American scholars and the public were eager to solidify the Pacific alliance through a better understanding of the causes of the war.” With respect to the Pacific alliance, this film makes no references towards China whatsoever, or the fact that Americans had given aid to the Chinese in order to fight the Japanese occupation there. Despite its release in 1970, this film also gives no commentary on the Vietnam War, just a commentary on diplomatic relations between Japan and the United States as they stood in 1970.

As the 1960s progressed, and as the United States became more and more involved in the Vietnam quagmire, even World War II films started to reflect some of the negativity towards the military leadership, despite their glowing successes during the war. No film

15 Ibid.
better characterizes this concept than *Patton*. Released in 1970, the same year as *Tora! Tora!*, also at the height of anti-Vietnam sentiment, *Patton* both glorifies and demonizes General George S. Patton at the same time, leaving the decision up to the audiences as to which side of the general they would see leaving the theater.

The film starts with one of the most memorable scenes in the history of cinema. Standing in front of a very large American flag, Patton delivers a resounding oratory to a crowded audience about his expectations for them.\(^{18}\) He proclaims,

> I want you to remember that no bastard ever won a war by dying for his country. He won it by making the other poor, dumb bastard die for his country. Men, all this stuff you’ve heard about America not wanting fight, wanting to stay out of the war, is a lot of horse dung. Americans traditionally love to fight. All real Americans love the sting of battle . . . Americans love a winner, and will not tolerate a loser. Americans play to win all the time, and they don’t give a hoot in hell for a man who lost, and laugh. That’s why Americans have never lost, and will never lose a war because the very thought of losing is hateful to Americans.\(^ {19}\)

This brash attitude appears in virtually all of the other scenes in the movies. But this attitude also magnifies his personal faults. The best example of this happens with the infamous slapping incidents in August 1943, towards the end of the Sicily campaign.\(^ {20}\)

During this exchange, Patton acrimoniously yells at a stammering, sobbing private, saying,

> Why hell, you’re just a god-damned coward. Shut up! I won’t have a yellow bastard sitting here crying in front of these brave men who have been wounded in battle. Shut up! Don’t admit this yellow bastard. There’s nothing wrong with him. I won’t have sonsabitches who are afraid to fight stinking up this place of honor. You’re going back to the front my friend. You may get shot, and you may get killed. But you’re going up to the fighting. Either that or I’m going to stand you up in front of a firing squad. I oughta shoot you myself . . . Send him up to the front, you hear me, you goddamned coward! I won’t have cowards in my army.\(^ {21}\)

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\(^{18}\) This speech was cut and pasted from a real speech that Patton delivered on June 4, 1944 to troops stationed in England.


\(^{20}\) In reality, Patton slapped two different men on two different occasions, but the film only shows one of the slappings.

\(^{21}\) *Patton*. 
As a result of this, Patton spends the better part of the film trying to regain his good name. Once back in the fighting after D-Day, Patton’s drive across France and his rescue of the 101st Airborne in the first pivotal days of the Battle of the Bulge help restore his image to audiences. But as quickly he restores his image, another tirade regarding the Russians destroys it, and this results in his dismissal from Third Army.

The true legacy of this film is the success that it achieved during the maelstrom of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The directors of the film had to walk the razor’s edge of accurately portraying the flamboyant bull-headedness of Patton, while playing to the audience’s disdain for the military. To do this, the directors, “. . . placed numerous references in the movie to Patton’s chivalrous mentality and suggested that he was, in many ways, a sixteenth-century man trying to live in the twentieth century.”22 Several scenes in the film reference Patton as the Quixotic hero; this is seen in the dialogue by several Germans referring to the story of Don Quixote and Patton’s wishing that he could joust Field Marshal Erwin Rommel in North Africa.23 These inferences lead to a logical conclusion that film had to show Patton as some grand anachronism, which nullified his successes as a general. These ambiguities in the portrayal of Patton led Pauline Kael, a movie reviewer for The New Yorker, to say that this film acted more like a Rorschach test.24 If a war supporter saw this film, they would see and remember Patton’s military success, but if an anti-war supporter saw this film, they would remember Patton’s faults, such as the slapping incident. In sum, “it [Patton] allowed people with diverse points of view to read

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23 Ibid, 194.
24 Suid, Guts & Glory, 275.
their own messages into the multidimensional story about a complex figure from history. [It] helped Americans to articulate their heightened feelings with respect to the struggle in Vietnam and war in general.”

From 1970 until 1998, Hollywood produced few World War II films, except for a few films such as *Midway, MacArthur, A Bridge Too Far, Force 10 From Navarone,* and *The Big Red One.* All of these films were made between 1976 and 1980. After this, no World War II film of note was made until *Saving Private Ryan,* almost two decades later. Little, if any, scholarship explains this large gap. Whatever the motives, whether it be the public knee-jerk reaction against war films after the fall of Saigon, or a shift in the kinds of the movies made, there is a symbolic importance in this twenty-eight year gap. Another possible explanation could simply be that after almost three decades of virtual non-stop warfare, Americans had grown tired of seeing war and needed a break. In the 1980s, the majority of combat films made focused on the horrors of Vietnam, such as *Platoon* and *Full Metal Jacket.* These films became big hits at the box office; so in keeping with supply and demand, Hollywood supplied what the audiences wanted, instead of World War II combat films.

In the case of *A Bridge Too Far,* released in 1977, this story by Cornelius Ryan about the star-crossed Market Garden campaign represents the pessimistic narrative directed towards military success and leadership espoused in the years immediately after Vietnam. To begin, few World War II films, if any, made prior to *A Bridge Too Far* focused on an Allied failure, such as Operation Market Garden. Secondly, this pessimism derives from Richard Attenborough, the director, who tried to make this an anti-war film by using the

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traditional “war is hell” narrative, but in the end, he fails to do this because “... it often seems too pretty, too much like a typical Hollywood combat epic and not enough like a portrayal of a tragic debate.”

Another fundamental problem with the film goes directly to its coverage of the events. The film attempts to re-create the events in the style of The Longest Day, with over twenty major stars carrying the action ten or so minutes at a time. Yet, confusion reigns in the audience because the events unfold too quickly and without notification for the audience to stay on top of the changes. The limited narrative in the film resembles that of a Western, best described when one of the British generals says,

I like to think of this as one of those American western films. The paratroopers, lacking substantial equipment [and] always short of food, these are the besieged homesteaders. The Germans, well naturally, they are the bad guys. And XXX Corps, we my friends are the cavalry, on the way to the rescue!

But, by the end of the film, this bravado has been lost, and the survivors of the fighting appear to be lucky to be alive. In a way, this symbolizes the American experience in Vietnam: the U.S. as the cavalry going in to save the oppressed from the bad guys, but in the end, chaos reigns and the survivors are lucky to be alive. This symbiotic nature of Vietnam and A Bridge Too Far reveals the cultural impact of Vietnam, even after the fighting had finished years earlier.

Eventually, the cultural wounds of Vietnam healed, and as the fiftieth anniversaries of individual World War II events approached, Americans began to introspectively look at the war again in order to remember the actions of the veterans who had sacrificed for their country. For World War II movies, the narrative needed changing. Robin Andersen calls

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26 Suid, Guts & Glory, 311.
27 Ibid.
this shift “back to the Grand Narrative.”29 This shift entailed “… the recast[ing] [of the war movie] in a mold where military authority was legitimate and commanding officers were once again noble.”30 From 1998 through 2001, Hollywood produced more World War II movies than had been made between 1971 and 1998. Among these films rises *Saving Private Ryan*, arguably the best World War II film ever made, and possibly one of the best overall films ever made.

The narrative of *Saving Private Ryan* reflects the re-emergence of the Grand Narrative in World War II films in the way the American military leadership is glorified through their noble actions and the Germans truly viewed as the bad guys. The idea for the story of *Saving Private Ryan* comes from the story of Fritz Niland, who lost three brothers before the D-Day invasion.31 However, the overall storyline tried to uphold the ideals of the traditional storyline of films of the 1940s, with

the common American solider [being] a good man who loved his country and his family. He went to war out of a sense of duty to both, and he wanted to get it over with as quickly as possible. Rather than being a natural-born killer, he was a loving family man who abhorred the use of extreme force but could inflict it when necessary.32

In continuing this dialogue, John Bodnar criticizes Spielberg for cross-wiring the cultural motives for fighting in the 1940s and the 1990s. He says, “Calls to patriotic sacrifice were contingent on assurances of a more democratic society and world… The democracy for which ‘the people’ fought, in fact, was a cultural blend of several key ideas: tolerance,
individualism, anti-totalitarianism, and economic justice.” But, for the 1990s, “narratives and images about the destiny of individuals command more cultural space than those about the fortunes of nations. As a result, . . . commemoration [has] more to say about victims or people who have met tragic fates.” This difference in cultural motivations betrays the fact when Spielberg made *Saving Private Ryan*; the storyline should ultimately reflect the values of the 1940s, according to Bodnar, if the film is about the 1940s, but in this case, the film does not.

The plot of the movie is that Captain Miller, played by Tom Hanks, leads a squad of men to find Private James Francis Ryan, played by Matt Damon, whose three other brothers died in combat. In the end, Miller locates Ryan, who is guarding a bridgehead at Remelle. The final scenes of the film re-enact the Battle of Remelle, where a majority of Miller’s squad, and eventually Miller himself, gets killed, leaving Private Ryan as one of a handful of survivors. On the surface, this basic plot reveals the shift in the narrative compared to the plots of World War II films from the Vietnam era on the basis that in the end, the mission is ultimately successful. Yet, on a deeper level, more elements of this picture further delineate the return of the Grand Narrative than that of Vietnam era World War II films. For example, the gun becomes once again a sacred object. Robert Burgoyne further discusses this point by saying, “After a decade of Vietnam films in which combat and killing were largely associated with atrocity, with dehumanizing and vicious acts, the gun in *Saving Private Ryan* is rehabilitated as a symbolic object through Jackson.” This comes as part of his discussion of “double voicing,” or rehabilitating an older genre to fit a newer

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33 Ibid., 436.
34 Ibid.
35 Robert Burgoyne, *The Hollywood Historical Film*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 57-58. Jackson is the sniper for the squad, who hails from the South. He is a very deeply religious man, who
context.\textsuperscript{36} For \textit{Saving Private Ryan}, the double voicing used allows for some of the time-honored aspects of war movies, such as the romanticizing of combat and the overflowing patriotism, once abandoned in the years during and after Vietnam, to be reintroduced and repackaged so audiences find them more palatable once again.\textsuperscript{37}

The dialogue of \textit{Saving Private Ryan} best reflects the 1990s emphasis on the return to the Grand Narrative in the way that the dialogue presents the characters as deeply moral individuals. One of the best examples comes with Jackson, the sharp shooter. Every time before he fires at the enemy, he recites Scripture as his prayer. One such notable scene occurs during the Battle of Remelle, where Jackson is in the steeple of a church, sniping the oncoming German assault. Every time before he shoots at the enemy, he whispers lines such as, “Be not Thou far from me, O God; Blessed be the Lord my strength, which teaches my hands to war, and my fingers to fight.”\textsuperscript{38} One example of the noble character of the officers, other than Captain Miller, comes from Sergeant Horvath during the scene immediately after their squad finds Private Ryan, who refuses to leave his post. In this conversation with Captain Miller he says,

I don’t know. Some part of me thinks the kid’s right. He asks what’s he done to deserve this. He wants to stay here, fine. Let’s leave him and go home. But then another part of me thinks, what if, by some miracle we stay, then actually make it out of here. Someday we might look back on this and decide that Saving Private Ryan was the one decent thing we were able to pull out of this whole god-awful, shitty mess. Like you said, Captain, maybe we do that, we all earn the right to go home.\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 58.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
This speech points to the dutiful nature that Horvath feels, that despite his better inclination to leave Private Ryan to fend for himself, his duty compels him to stay and hope for the best. Along those same lines of noble character, Captain Miller’s character throughout the film also reflects this. No scene better reflects this nature than when the squad stays for a few hours in a church after a skirmish earlier that day cost them a member of the squad. These lines spoken by both the officers and enlisted men of the squad magnify their true character as noble warriors, and carry the emphasis on the Grand Narrative that *Saving Private Ryan* promulgates.

This notion of the Grand Narrative appears again in the form of a morality play in *To End All Wars*, released in 2001. To the casual observer, *To End All Wars* almost directly copies the plot from *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. In *To End All Wars*, British prisoners are captured and taken to a Japanese prisoner of war camp in Siam, with the purpose of finishing construction on the infamous “Railway of Death.” Many of the scenes in the camp, such as the introduction of the commandant of the camp for instance, are virtually identical to each other. Even the characters provide a striking resemblance, with some differences. The commanding officer for the British in *To End All Wars* reacts the same way that Col. Nicholson does towards Saito. The lone American in the camp, nicknamed “Yanker” exudes the same attitude throughout the film as Shears did. The only notable difference between these two films is the way the Japanese are depicted. In *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, the audience sees the Japanese in a bad light, but they do not commit the expected atrocities. But, in *To End All Wars*, the audience sees the Japanese as an evil people, due to the number of atrocities that they commit. For example, the British commander gets killed after a
dispute with the commandant of the camp, after he gets water boarded; various prisoners are beaten mercilessly, and one prisoner even gets crucified.

Despite the brutal violence in To End All Wars, the film acts as a morality play on how to act nobly in the face of adversity in a prison camp. The morality play begins when Ernest Gordon, the main character and narrator of the story, wakes up after days of being unconscious from a disease. A soldier walks up to him and asks, “What’s the purpose we’ve been in what we been suffering? Where’s the justice in Nips bashing us and working us to death?”

Gordon responding to this by saying, “Would you like me to take a lecture on the meaning of life?” This prompts him to start a “jungle university” in the camp, where the soldiers learn much more than just about the meaning of life, but they also learn about Plato’s Republic, Shakespeare, art, and other subjects as well. As soon as the lectures start, the men start to hope once again, and morale dramatically improves. The soldiers also begin to work faster, which pleases the Japanese. Even when the Japanese discover the university and their materials, they eventually relent and allow Gordon to continue teaching because of the improved morale. However, the most powerful imagery comes with the crucifixion. During the graduation ceremony for the university, a small group of prisoners try to escape, but they fail, and are sent outside of the camp to be executed. However, Dusty, one of the officers, takes the place of the leader of the escape plot as a condemned man. The Japanese then take him outside of the camp and crucify him, symbolic of the crucifixion of Jesus. This act of self-sacrifice represents the highest level of nobility achievable, and thereby glorifies Dusty’s actions. This episode, along with the morality play

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40 Robert Carlyle, Kiefer Sutherland, et al., To End All Wars, DVD, (Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2004).
41 Ibid.
in *To End All Wars* reflects the aspects of the Grand Narrative that praise the noble actions of officers in the face of extreme brutality.\(^4^2\)

In 2001, it appeared that the Grand Narrative would further entrench itself into American culture, but that all changed with the September 11\(^{th}\), 2001 terrorist attacks. In the first several days, months, and even years afterwards, the Grand Narrative became more engrained into American culture, with holidays such as the 4\(^{th}\) of July and Memorial Day becoming more powerful and symbolic. Patriotism came back with a revenge in those days, on a level not seen since the end of World War II when the U.S. invaded Iraq in 2003. Yet, by 2005, public support for this so-called “War on Terror” had waned substantially as operations dragged on with no end in sight because the U.S. had failed to capture the so-called “Ace of Spades,” Osama bin Laden.\(^4^3\) By 2008, popular sentiment in the United States had turned from winning the war to just ending the mission and getting out of Iraq and Afghanistan.

This collective cultural frustration of not being able to capture Osama bin Laden is best found in Quentin Tarantino’s blockbuster hit *Inglourious Basterds*, released in 2009. The whole plot of the movie covers the exploits of an eight-man squad of Jewish-American soldiers called the Basterds. The leader of this squad is Lt. Aldo Raine, played by Brad Pitt. From the very first sequence that he appears in, their purpose is crystal clear. Directly taken from the idea of the Grand Narrative, the Nazis are clearly defined as the enemy. Or, as Lt. Raine puts it,

\(^{4^2}\) With respect to the War on Terror, this film precedes the events at Abu Ghraib, and makes no overt political statements about U.S. policy regarding torture other than torture is torture, and is really bad.

\(^{4^3}\) This moniker comes from President George W. Bush’s deck of cards with faces of terrorists on the playing cards; the higher the value the card, the more important the focus was on capturing that terrorist. As the Ace of Spades, Osama is the most valuable terrorist, with a $25 million reward out for his capture. He is so valuable because he is the head of al-Qaeda, the preeminent worldwide terrorist organization. To this date, Osama has eluded capture.
... And once we’re in enemy territory, as a bushwhackin’ guerilla army, we’re gonna be doin’ one thing and one thing only... killin’ Nazis. Now, I don’t know about y’all, but I sure didn’t come down from the goddamn Smokey Mountains, cross five thousand miles of water, fight my way through half of Sicily and jump out of a fuckin’ air-o-plane to teach the Nazis lessons in humanity. Nazi ain’t got no humanity. They’re the foot soldiers of a Jew-hatin’, mass murderin’ maniac and they need to be dee-stroyed. That’s why any and every son of a bitch we find wearin’ a Nazi uniform, they’re gonna die.44

This excerpt from Lt. Raine’s beginning monologue clearly delineates the purpose of the Basterds, who wreak havoc on German morale throughout the film.45 They do this through various means, but the two biggest ways comes through the scalping of the German dead and the swastikas that Lt. Raine carves into the foreheads of the Germans that he lets live. In his monologue, Lt. Raine says that he plans to run the squad in the fashion of an Apache resistance, meaning that they will be frightfully cruel to the Germans in order to spread fear throughout the German ranks. Before he finishes his monologue, Lt. Raine says,

... [b]ut I got a word of warning for all you would-be-warriors. When you join my command, you take on a debit. A debit you owe me personally. Each and every man under my command owes me one hundred Nazi scalps. And I want my scalps. And all y’all will git me one hundred Nazi scalps, taken from the heads of one hundred dead Nazis. Or you will die tryin’.46

The next scene of the film brutally shows what happens to the Nazis when the Basterds catch them. In this scene, members of a Nazi squad are scalped, shot, and beaten to death with a baseball bat by a man known as “The Bear Jew.” For the last German left alive of the squad, the Basterds let him go, but not before Lt. Raine carves a Nazi swastika in the middle of his forehead with a machete. After this point, the story then focuses on the main objective of the film, the blowing up of a Parisian theater where Dr. Josepgh Goebbels and

44 Brad Pitt, et al., Inglourious Basterds, DVD, directed by Quentin Tarantino. (Universal City, CA: Universal Home Entertainment, 2009). The spelling looks weird on purpose, yet Tarantino gives no reason on why it is spelled this way. This film’s title comes from a film called The Inglorious Bastards, made in 1978, but there is no other relationship between that film and Inglourious Basterds.

45 In typical Tarantino fashion, Inglourious Basterds is quite gory with respect to violence and blood.

46 Inglourious Basterds.
other members of the Nazi High Command will watch a film premiere. As the plot thickens, the audience learns through a spy that Hitler himself will attend the premiere. After a series of misfortunes that makes it seem like the mission will fail, the Basterds end up infiltrating the premiere. The film concludes with a bang, literally, as the Basterds fight their way into Hitler’s opera box, and expend three entire magazines of ammunition into Hitler’s and Goebbels’ mutilated corpses. In the end, the dynamite strapped to the legs of the members of the Basterds explodes, thereby blowing up the theater and killing everybody left inside.

While *Inglorious Basterds* is a by-product of historical revisionism, contemporary audiences can see overt references to the War on Terror in the context of this World War II film in two distinct ways. First, the vast majority of scenes are spoken in either French or German, and even a few lines of Italian. English is the primary language only in the sequence where the audience meets the Basterds. According to Tarantino, this reflects the world of today with characters speaking their native languages, not just English. In the other films for this study, no film mastered the use of multiple languages quite like this film, showing the true international nature of World War II, rather than just the version written by the English-speaking victors. Secondly, and most importantly, the historical revisionism of *Inglorious Basterds* reflects the current inability of the United States and its allies to capture Osama bin Laden. While Tarantino does not say this in any of his commentaries on the film, the climax of the film is steeped in this imagery. For many Americans, the popular opinion of the War on Terror could easily swing in its favor once the military captures Osama bin Laden, but he has still eluded capture, which has dragged down popular opinion.

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47 Ibid.
for the war. Historical revisionism in this case allows contemporary audiences the ability to vent their frustration with this situation by cheering on the Basterds as they fire round after round of bullets into Hitler’s mutilated body. These two features of *Inglorious Basterds* reflect the influence of contemporary American culture on a World War II film that takes place during World War II, but really is not about World War II.

The narrative of World War II films has changed dramatically over the past sixty-four years since the end of the war. In the 1950s, the individualism of Commander Shears came to the forefront against the cultural backdrop of the era of consensus in *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. In the 1960s and 1970s, the sterilized view of the Nazis and Japanese show the strides Hollywood took to remind Americans that what happened during the war was done, and the enemies of yesterday were needed to counter the Soviet threat to the world. At the same time, Vietnam played a heavy role in these films by stripping the military leadership of nobility and replacing it with a sense of vulnerability, something never before seen. But, by the late 1990s and early 2000s, the idea of the Grand Narrative had taken hold, and Hollywood returned the nobility of the officers to the military leadership, as well as clearly delineating why the Nazis and Japanese are the enemy. In today’s society, Hollywood has been influenced by the cultural frustrations associated with the failure to capture Osama bin Laden in the War on Terror by resorting to using revisionist history in order to fabricate a just ending. Despite the changes in the narrative of World War II combat films over the past sixty-four years, the only thing that has not changed is the interrelationship between culture and how Hollywood portrays World War II combat.

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48 In fact, so many bullets are shot into Hitler’s face that his flesh flies off his face in large chunks. Also, this scene received the most applause during the film when I went and saw this film at the theater.

49 *Inglorious Basterds*. 
Bibliography


