

The Imperiled 'American': Visual Culture, Nationality and U.S. Foreign Policy

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Introduction: Media and U.S. National Self-Understanding

This essay explores vital elements in the historical visual culture of the USA which I argue help to explain both American cultural identity and, consequently, how the U.S. public's mobilization for war seems to be an ongoing success story despite its partly countervailing tendency to insularity. The scare quotes I have put around the word 'American' in the title are designed to open up the question of what the sense of being American, of having American nationality is, and what its sources are, especially in visual media.¹ They are also in response to many Latin Americans' ongoing irritation with the U.S. arrogation of "America" as a synecdoche to denote just one out of some 40 nations in the Americas, and thus as a constant reassertion of the Monroe Doctrine, affirming an expansive nationalism.

The title also echoes the title of a book published 50 years ago, *The Frightened Giant*. Written by Cedric Belfrage (1956), a British political activist who had lived some 30 years in the USA and was deported during the McCarthy period, it addressed a paradox. The paradox was that U.S. citizens at that time were heirs to the radical political tradition of challenge to authority within the American revolution, but were too scared to lay claim to it in case they too would be defined as Communists and suffer the negative fallout. The USA in Belfrage's view was a giant that had tragically allowed itself to become scared of its own shadow.

Other writers have addressed issues of public fear in modern American life. David Cauter wrote *The Great Fear*, his detailed account of the McCarthy era's traumas (Cauter 1979), though the most famous is still Richard Hofstadter's *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (Hofstadter 1965). There have been other expeditions into this terrain since: sociologist Barry Glassner's *The Culture of Fear: why Americans are afraid of the wrong things* (Glassner 1999), sociologist David Altheide's *Creating Fear: news and the construction of crisis* (Altheide 2002), political philosopher Corey Robin's *Fear: the history of a political idea* (Robin 2004), John Mueller's *Overblown* (Mueller 2006), and David Campbell's *Writing Security* (Campbell 1992).

Glassner details a series of issues about which the U.S. public is routinely but mistakenly fearful and agitated concerning their actual prevalence, for example road rage, political correctness on campuses,

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¹ In part, I respond here differently – but again critically - to Rod Hart's argument that prime evidence for a sense of nationhood within the U.S. public is to be found in the rapid and effective national mobilization for the 1990-91 Gulf War (Hart & Downing 1992).

kiddie porn, specifically *gay* pedophilia, monster moms, abuse of listed substances, breast implant disorders, air travel dangers. Glassner focuses principally on the contrast between evidence and reality, and critiques specific mainstream news media failures as a key element in constructing a general climate of misplaced fear. Altheide also focuses on news media, but argues that their standard reportorial routines, rather than just intermittent lapses, have helped to generate a climate of perpetual crisis in the USA. He terms this the "fear machine" in U.S. entertainment and news media (*op. cit.*, p. 41). He insists that "fear is more expansive and pervasive than crime ... or even violence" (*op. cit.*, p. 98). Altheide focuses attention, in particular, on the roles of criminal justice agencies and the military as sources of fear news for news media (ch. 7). He concludes by proposing that there is a sharp contrast between the practical awareness of dangers, which are specific, and generalized fear as a lens for interpreting life.

Robin's argument is considerably less media-focused than these two. He centers his argument on what he identifies as one of the paradoxes of American life, namely "how a country with so many freedoms can generate such widespread political inhibitions" (*op. cit.*, p.164). His basic analysis is that while - with the exceptions of westward expansion and the centuries of slavery and post-slavery - what he ironically terms "operatic violence" has not characterized American life, the "coercions of *everyday* life" and "fear's repressive consequences ... make it a toxic fact of life" for Americans (*ibid.*, my emphasis). In other words, what he terms as "Fear, American Style" is entirely real, but is not to be equated with the "culture of fear" identified by Latin American anthropologists and scholars (Corradi et al., 1992) issuing out of the fascistic Southern Cone dictatorships of the 1970s.

His empirical illustrations are mostly drawn from two sources. One is the widespread everyday labor legislation and work-disciplines in the USA, which are much more sweepingly pro-employer than in comparably democratic societies. The other, his most refreshing insight in my view, is actually the downside of fragmented government power and opportunity for civic initiatives that are the very hallmarks of the USA. It is the fact that divided governmental instances may *not* check but rather reinforce each other, and then be still *further* reinforced by independent citizen initiatives. The histories of both civil rights struggles and of the McCarthy era offer many illustrations of both. Robin insists that those were not past aberrations, but indices of the Janus-nature of our political culture and institutions.

John Mueller's *Overblown* (Mueller 2006) argues that not only is the menace of terrorism greatly exaggerated, but that its genesis lies in a well-resourced "terrorism industry," tendentially uncritical U.S. news media and, at least to date, compliant publics. His instances of the overblown are the U.S. policy responses to Pearl Harbor, the Cold War, the nuclear threat, and selected demonic figures (Qaddafi, Noriega, Kim Jong-Il). As does Glassner, Mueller largely focuses on the gap between statistical probability and perceived probability, but in specific relation to the threat of war.² Media and cultural analysis plays little part in his argument.

Lastly, David Campbell's *Writing Security* (Campbell 1992) directly engages with the central topic of my argument, the long-term origins and maintenance of U.S. foreign policy discourses and practices.

² The book is explicitly written as a polemic, and often makes crucial but neglected points, but it must also be said that sometimes Mueller's rhetoric and grasp of detail part company.

Campbell's concern is with how since the beginning of wars against Native Americans, "the practices of foreign policy have been integral to the (re)production of American identity at various junctures ... [and how] what has been affirmed is a fictional representation ..." (Campbell 1992: 143). He focuses particularly, though not entirely, on Soviet-U.S. contention from 1945 to 1991 "as another episode in the on-going production and reproduction of American identity through the practices of foreign policy" (ibid., 145). He underscores his use of the terms "representation" and "discourse" in a strong sense; in other words "hot spots" such as Korea, Vietnam, Hungary 1956, Czechoslovakia 1968, were not U.S. inventions, but "these events and not others have to be *interpreted* as threats, and the process of interpretation through which they are figured as threats employs some modes of representation and not others ... [in the process replicating] the logic and the figurations of past articulations of danger..." (ibid., 157, my emphasis). Campbell also instances the Reagan and first Bush administrations' "war on drugs" and the 1980s U.S. contention with Japan ("an economic Pearl Harbor") as examples of these articulations.

Indeed it could be argued that the "barbarism vs. civilization" construct goes back at least as far as the English attempt to settle Ireland and the discourse of life "beyond the Pale" (Campbell, op. cit., 118f., 159-187).³ The British sense of vulnerability beyond its borders, and even within them, was early ingrained by the reality of its hugely overstretched military forces and the autobiographies written by those taken captive in consequence. In her detailed analysis of over 100 widely circulating captivity narratives from the earliest days of the British empire, historian Linda Colley (2002: 10, 11) notes how "Domestic smallness and a lack of self-sufficiency made for continuous British extroversion, not to say global house-breaking, violence and theft ... the British were frequently on edge, constantly fearful themselves of being invaded, necessarily alert and ready for a fight." The so-called "King Philip's War" of 1675-76 in New England was an early battle whose later iconic representations *and repetitions* served, in historian Jill Lepore's words, to define for British settlers "what was at stake: their lives, their land, and their sense of themselves" (Lepore 1998: xiii). This sense of cultural identity was forged in opposition to their images of both Native Americans and the – supposedly more brutal – Spanish colonizers. Thus the shift from British to American politico-cultural identity on *this* front was barely a shift at all, 1776 and 1812 being mere blips, and the Bush-Blair administrations' alignment over Middle Eastern war policy in the 2000s only another chapter.

Lepore (1998: xi) emphasizes that her study is of American cultural identity and representations of war "before television, before film, before photography ... in an age and in a place where even crude wood engravings were rare and printed books an uncommon commodity." My focus engages with a specific but in my argument crucial dimension of the issues raised by all these writers' work. I will explore how far a very familiar *visual* narrative trope, first in painting, and then in cinema over the 100+ years U.S. citizens have been watching movies, may have ingrained itself to the point that they are only too willing to accept that they are under lethal attack and must respond both vigorously and violently if not to be swept away. It has, I propose, become a core element in Americans' national self-definition and – understanding.

³ I am grateful to Dr George Boulukos of Southern Illinois University's English department for underscoring this dimension to me, and pointing me to further reading on the subject.

This proposition raises conceptual questions about political culture and political memory to which I will return later, but for the moment let me cite Anthony D. Smith, a specialist in nationalism and the nation, who has written that "Few have done more to confirm, express and disseminate the ideals and problems of the nation than the artist in painted or in moving images" (Smith: 2000, 57).

The visual trope I will address is one of encirclement and vulnerability. It is one to which, to my knowledge, the writer Tom Engelhardt (1971) first drew attention at the height of the Vietnam War, in an essay "Ambush at Kamikaze Pass," namely the standard moment in so many Hollywood Westerns when the White settlers are circling the wagons and the camera looks out at the savage Indians surrounding them and outnumbering them. The camera, in other words, typically adopts the perspective of the harmless settlers under threat from barbarians.

Even when the camera takes a long shot from outside the encircled wagons, behind the Indian attackers, by that point in the narrative the film has followed the settlers as named individuals for quite a period of time. There is no risk we will be prompted to identify with nameless unknown Native Americans on the rampage. Rather, the shot is meant to accentuate how exposed and in peril are the settlers.

Engelhardt further proposed drawing a historical line from the Western to the anti-Japan war film, and then to the Vietnam war then raging. He also added in war comics to his analysis as well as movies. Historically, Engelhardt's historical perspective was very much to the point. General Douglas MacArthur Jr. – on and off part of the U.S. colonial military government of the Philippines, the commander of the Southwest Pacific Theater, the governor of postwar Japan, the commander-in-chief of the UN army in the Korean War who was recalled by President Eisenhower for urging a nuclear attack on China – was not the first of his line in the U.S. Pacific. His father, MacArthur Sr., had started his military career first for the Union in the Civil War, then pursued it for 30 years in wars against Native American nations, and then in the Philippines War of 1898 and in the savage suppression of the guerrilla struggle that followed. He was subsequently appointed military governor of the Philippines. Together they are iconic figures of the creation of the U.S. as a nation, first up to, and then all the way over, the Pacific Ocean. The U.S. 1946 retreat from direct colonial rule over the Philippines in no way signaled isolationist foreign policies.

Engelhardt's sense for the basic continuity of U.S. westward expansion and self-construction as a nation - from Thomas Jefferson's funding of the Lewis and Clark expedition from the Mississippi River to the Pacific, through the annexation of Texas and four-ninths of Mexico, to colonizing Hawai'i and the Philippines as staging points to Japan and China - is in my view correct, and underpins the continuity and centrality of the trope I am discussing (cf. Drinnon 1997). It is, however, a trope which inverts the true aggressiveness of this nation-building, led by masculinist militarists such as MacArthur father and son, and re-frames it as *vulnerability*.

As neo-conservative historian Robert Kagan repeatedly underscores in his recent book on U.S. foreign relations, *Dangerous Nation* (Kagan 2006), in White portrayals of the repetitive sequence - land-seizures, Native Americans' reprisals, savage counter-reprisals, consolidation of land-seizures and Native tribes' removal – it was Native Americans' reprisals which were highlighted as pivotal, far outstripping any other link in the chain. Nor was this simply the province of greedy land-speculators, of the flood of little

Francisco Pizarros and Cecil Rhodes pushing westward. Anthony Wallace's study of Thomas Jefferson's deeply conflicted rhetoric and policies on Native rights (Wallace 1999) is on this score a reprise of Winthrop Jordan's classic study of Jefferson's compulsive twisting and turning regarding African rights (Jordan 1968). Jefferson was not, we had better believe it, alone. His and other leaders' marked ambivalence provided the necessary space for those who, as they pushed west, intended neither to twist nor to turn.

A sense of military vulnerability has repeatedly shown itself to be fertile ground for warlike behavior all across the planet. National leaders have repeatedly been able to mobilize for battle – and beyond specific battles, for an aggressive militarism - based on appeal to imminent threat or invasion, framed within past crises and defeats. We may see this rather clearly in the militaristic expansionism historically entrenched in Russia's ruling circles, framed in response to Russian experience of foreign invaders, the Mongols, the Teutonic Knights, the Kaiser's armies, the Nazis. We see it in the militaristic expansionism of Japan's ruling circles, as the Japanese saw the rest of Asia being gobbled up by the colonial powers in the mid-19th century. We see it to some degree in Wilhelmine colonial policy in Germany, but obviously in the most extreme form in its post-Versailles National-Socialist development. We see it in Afrikanerdom in South Africa after their defeat in the second Boer War. Acknowledging this reality is not to justify Russian or Japanese militarism, Nazism or the apartheid system. It is simply to underscore how politically potent is the dynamic of historically enshrined fear.

Thus in the case of the United States, my argument is that this narrative trope of the vulnerable, encircled White defenders, *endlessly rehearsed in cinema and other media*, has had a huge part to play - though never simply on its own - in framing through endless repetition the ongoing plausibility of the proposition that 'we Americans' – U.S. citizens - are imperiled. Yet the paradox of this sense of vulnerability in the USA is remarkably acute. After all, unlike Russia or the other peoples cited, the USA has only been attacked three times on its own soil, once in 1812 by the British, once in Hawai'i in 1941 – 3700 kilometres from the mainland – by the Japanese, and once by the 9/11 terrorists. The nearest to military occupation Americans have experienced was in the rather brief post-Civil War occupation of the Confederacy states, and the nearest to ongoing terrorism the experience of African Americans. The paradox of this level of fear demands explanation then, and in a moment I attempt to offer at least a partial one.

To illustrate the depth of the paradox, after 9/11, in Austin, Texas, some 3000 kilometres from New York City, where the author was then living, many cafés, restaurants and bars in the months that followed either went out of business or nearly did, because so many people suddenly started staying home, seemingly convinced Austin's little concentration of bars and live music places might easily be the next terrorist target! Cinemas were often nearly empty. Nor was Austin in any way isolated in this regard. In the press there were reports that inhabitants of the most insignificant and remote towns were seriously of the opinion that the terrorists would strike "anywhere," as though their town had the same symbolic significance, and thus vulnerability, as the World Trade Center buildings. Admittedly, they had been very recently encouraged in that fear by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security which listed more than 80,000 potential terrorist targets. They had watched, over and over and over again, the airplane massacres in New York. But I still propose that this government and television deluge fit only too easily

within and *powerfully reinvigorated* a major cultural frame, a narrative trope that had been visually sedimented in cinema, painting, fiction and other media for well over one hundred years before 9/11.

The Álamo and Custer's Last Stand

There are indeed two emblematic historical occasions, pre-dating cinema, which have fed this frame more than any other except perhaps King Philip's War, namely the Álamo defeat of 1836, and the so-called Last Stand of General Custer in Montana some 40 years later, in 1876.

While I shall address both of them, I will pay more attention to the Custer mythology. The Álamo is a popular site for tourists, but in the end it is principally, for most Americans, a Texas story first and a US story second (Flores 2002). The Custer story is more universal, despite the best efforts of John Wayne. Let us see how and why. It is true that four films were made about the Álamo just between 1911 and 1915 (one by Méliès), a further five between 1920 and 1955, the John Wayne version in 1960, and a new version just two years ago in 2004. Slightly more than one every ten years since 1915 on average. But compared to the intensity of the Custer story's reproduction, even the Álamo shrinks.



Cultural historian Brian Dippie (1976) traced exhaustively the continual reinvigoration of the Custer myth for a whole century following the Little Big Horn battle. Drawings, lithographs, paintings and chromos of the embattled Custer and his troops were extremely widespread already even by the end of 1876.⁴ Dippie argues (op. cit., 36) that there were three versions of pictorial representation, one focused

⁴ Conn (2004: 35-78) provides a more general survey of Native American representations in 19th century U.S. painting and photography. He finds that for the most part, these representations implied or stated the trope of the "vanishing Indian," in tandem with concurrent developments in linguistics, archaeology and anthropology. If his survey is representative, then the tragic victim Custer motif would have been a major contrast case, with its roots in much earlier iconography but noisily echoed in many Hollywood westerns.

on Custer himself standing as he dispatches a Native attacker, one with Custer in an "island of troopers with a sea of Indians swirling around them," and one focusing on Indians as they "dash around a distant knot of troopers." (Dippie suggests that this paved the way for a more pro-Indian reading of the scene, but I think this is too speculative.) The picture to end all pictures was Cassily Adams' 1886 painting measuring 5 x 3 metres, which was turned into advertising copy by Anheuser-Busch brewing company and was also reproduced, it is estimated, at least 200,000 times in smaller reproductions for people's homes.

As well as pictorial representation, there were many popular poems composed and performed, or read in people's homes. Dippie is able to cite more than 130. There have been at least 20 book-length biographies. There have been numerous popular novels written, too: Dippie managed to collect around 40 dime novels, a similar number of novels written for younger readers, and well over 70 adult novels and short stories. Dramatic re-enactments were widely appreciated, year after year. As for films, the first was made in 1909, another in 1912, a third related to the battle but not showing it by D.W. Griffith in 1914, and others followed in 1921, 1925, 1926 (two), 1936, 1937, 1940 (two, one with Ronald Reagan as Custer), 1941 *They Died With Their Boots On* (starring Errol Flynn), 1948, 1951, 1952, 1954, 1958, 1965 and 1970. Dippie also cites some television versions. He shows how the film treatment of Custer's character shifted to become less and less heroic from the 1950s onwards, and in some cases portrayed him as idiotic or even psychopathic. Nonetheless, rather as Richard Flores (2002: 114-129) argues in relation to John Wayne's *The Alamo*, even if the Indians, or Mexicans,⁵ are not depicted in conventionally racist ways, the fundamental narrative structure of defeat and tragedy for the White defenders at the hands of the Indian and Mexican enemy remains intact; and for the most part the films take us into the White characters, not the Others.

The Custer and "Injun Country" themes have continued to resonate. Let us take some scattered examples. Dippie (1976: 140) cites graffiti written up by U.S. soldiers on walls in Vietnamese streets, announcing "We'll bring peace to this land if we have to kill them all. CUSTER." In the early 1980s, a film set in a South Bronx police precinct station and starring Paul Newman, was entitled *Fort Apache The Bronx* (the project generated vigorous local protests in the mostly Black and Latino neighborhood). After the 2003 war on Iraq, one of CNN's "embed" journalists, Walt Rodgers (2005), wrote a memoir of his experiences entitled *Sleeping with Custer and the 7th Cavalry: an embedded reporter in Iraq*. The Custer theme turns up yet again in the 2002 film *We Were Soldiers*. And Robert D. Kaplan (2005: 3-15), in a book reviewing his experiences interviewing US troops in bases in Afghanistan, Colombia, Djibouti, Iraq, Mongolia, the Philippines and Yemen, notes how again and again he was greeted upon arrival with the phrase "Welcome to Injun country!"⁶

⁵ Differences between Native Americans and Mexicans have far more to do with the 1848 border established by war between the U.S. and Mexico than any 'primary' ethnic category division between "Indigenous Americans" and "Latinos."

⁶ Kaplan insists that no disrespect was intended to Native Americans, as the troops frequently used Native American verbal symbols to denote their own operations – but since Kaplan never met a U.S. soldier he did not like, we may suspend judgment on his claim.

In other words, the evidence for the continuity of this frame of the embattled White Americans in a sea of "Injuns" is very considerable.⁷ As Edward Countryman writes:

"White Americans ever since [Appomattox] have liked to dwell upon the image of a fort, a cavalry regiment, a wagon train, or a cabin surrounded by savage hordes bent on destroying all that was holy and civilized. But it takes no imagination at all to realize that the western Indians – the Sioux, Cheyennes, Arapahos, Comanches, Apache, Navajos, Zuñis, Nez Percé, and the rest – were utterly and finally surrounded..." (Countryman 1996: 235)

This frame is far more extensive than my research has been able to establish, since I have not even tried to check how often many of the older as well as newer films I am providing excerpts from, are screened on U.S. cable and satellite television channels. And no analysis here is offered of films such as *Pork Chop Hill* (1959), *The Green Berets* (1968), or *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985). Nor have I analyzed the ways in which the rather popular notion of a space missile defense shield generated by President Reagan and continued by his successors perfectly fit with the assumption of American peacefulness and decency, concerned only to defend against the encircling enemies, not to attack (Fitzgerald 2000).⁸

The Varying Politics of 'Race' and Citizenship

Having said this, there are some more considerations – complications - we need to take into account. One is the inclusive nature of racism in the USA, which has effortlessly overflowed over time from Native Americans on to Black Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, Jewish Americans and Arab Americans. Thus in some film sequences to be discussed, there are scenes involving what the U.S. European-descended population has quite often defined as *internal* threats within the Euro-Americans' own *rightful* territory, threats from people they deemed as not rightfully belonging in that space as equal fellow-nationals, even if ostensibly fellow-citizens. Examples include newly freed Black Americans threatening White people in *Birth of a Nation* - especially White women, reliable symbols of vulnerability - or Mexicans attacking the defenders of Anglo-occupied Texas in films of the Álamo battle.⁹ (Campbell

⁷ See Welch (1995) and the Emmy-winning documentary *Last Stand at Little Big Horn* (dir. Paul Stekler, 1992), for perceptive accounts of the true dimensions of this confrontation. Buscombe (2006: 101-150) carefully evaluates a number of Westerns made after World War II which sought to step away from conventionally biased Native American portrayals.

⁸ The distinction is meaningless in reality: if "Star Wars" made the USA safe from attack, then the U.S. military would be all the freer to act as it wished; furthermore, lasers can be used offensively as well as defensively.

⁹ For Native Americans and Mexicans, on the contrary, the European settlers were on land that did not belong to them and thus were the *external* threat. For African Americans, the Europeans were the major permanent threat to their lives and well-being, who had uprooted their ancestors from Africa and enslaved them. They only felt "internal" to European settlerdom via coercion.

(1992: 175-187) also discusses this external/internal dynamic in the context of U.S. "containment" policies, labor struggles, tussles over sexual morality, and leftist political unrest in the 20th century.)

Nonetheless, these varying peoples of color – Native, Black, Mexican - were physically part and parcel of the USA's emergent self-definition as a nation, albeit a nation the White majority often thought dangerously compromised and gravely weakened by not being 100% European-descended and White. (Similar perspectives were common among White elites concerning their own countries throughout the Americas¹⁰). This mindset is far from dead, to say the least, as shown by Otto Santa Ana's recent book *Brown Tide Rising* (2002), which surveys and analyzes the contemporary US media definitions of Latinos as a tide of invaders, outsiders, burdens, parasites, diseases, animals and weeds. Gilens' (2000) study of White Americans' hostile attitudes to Black Americans in relation to welfare confirms this strong ongoing tide of White feeling against people thought racially unworthy to be fellow-citizens. The film *The Siege* (1998) also engages, in contradictory ways, with the "right to belong" on U.S. soil of American citizens of Arab descent (Wilkins & Downing 2002).

The nationality picture has not been uniformly White, however. In some circumstances, past as well as present, illustrated by *Bataan*, *Platoon*, *The Siege*, and *Black Hawk Down*, citizenship largely triumphs over ethnicity and 'race', so that the defenders against the foreign enemy's attacks are multi-ethnic or multi-'racial'. Or different European nationalities get combined against Chinese attackers, as in the scene to be analyzed from *55 Days at Peking*. This is why too a scene is included here from a British film, *Zulu*, which was quite widely screened in the USA at the time of its release, and is still available there in video/DVD rental stores. Despite a certain current of anti-British irritation in White U.S. culture, the more predominant feeling is one of basic kinship and solidarity. The English menaced by Zulu warriors in *Zulu* are not really different from the White Americans menaced by Black Americans in *Birth of a Nation*. Similarly, *We Were Soldiers* begins with a scene of a French army detachment under siege in Vietnam, before proceeding to tell the U.S. dénouement.

Before proceeding to analyze these films, two further points need noting. One is with a hopefully obvious caution, that media do not exist in a vacuum, and must be related to factors such as the political economy of the USA, its degree of insularity, its frequent ignorance of the rest of the world as a result of failures in its educational provision for its young citizens, and still other vectors.

The other is the important insight of film scholar Charles Ramirez-Berg (2002: 153-182), who has proposed that a number of U.S. science fiction films of recent decades produce cinematic dreamwork which renders Latino immigrants as space aliens of one kind or another, such as a terminating cyborg (*Terminator*), or an alien mother (*Aliens*). Insofar as this is correct, it means the representation of immigrants as a new kind of hostile threat to the embattled locals, but this time seemingly with extra-terrestrial powers. It is an intriguing perspective closely related to the argument here, but one focused more on narrative genre than the visual narrative trope explored here.

¹⁰ Compare for example the infamous *cuento El Matadero* by Argentina's Esteban Echevarría, or Argentinean publications concerning "The War of the Desert." Analogous texts can certainly be found for Cuba, Venezuela, Colombia, Perú and Brazil.

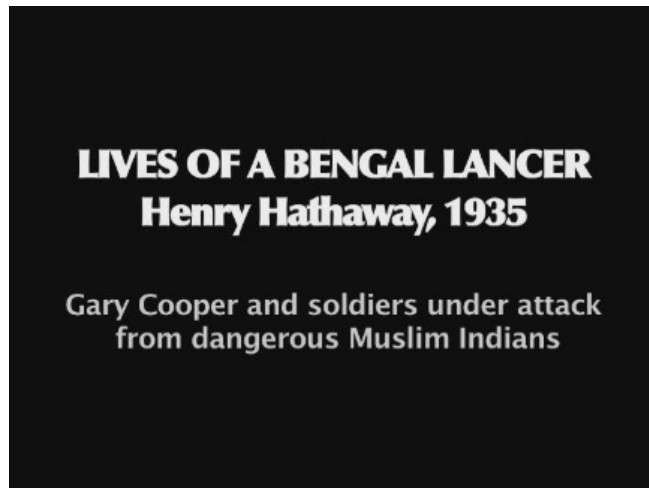
Thirteen Films

I will analyze films by date of release, rather than by their historical reference or by their 'racial' focus, in order to try to underscore the strong continuity and commonality of this trope. The selection is, of course, illustrative, not comprehensive (the *Rambo* films are not included).

The imperiled-encircled-'American' trope is found in *Birth of a Nation* (1915, dir. D.W. Griffith) in at least two sequences above and beyond the notorious attempted rape scene, in which plucky White heroine Lillian Gish jumps to her doom from atop a cliff rather than face a fate worse than death itself - a tragedy that in the film's narrative directly inspires and justifies the violent "self-defense" of the Ku Klux Klan. Before these scenes, the ground for the Klan has already been prepared by a scene in the South Carolina legislature in which lascivious newly freed Blacks stare shamelessly and obsessively at young White women in the Visitors' Gallery. This is followed not long afterwards by an extended street scene in which two or three Whites in a sea of rowdy and insolent Blacks are mocked, jostled, shoved, and eventually tossed up in the air by the crowd. Meanwhile, helplessly observing the scene from an upstairs window is a White family with one adult sick in bed and unable to intervene. This version of the encirclement trope easily positions the Klan's anti-Black terrorism as emergency White *self-defense*.



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Lives of a Bengal Lancer (1935, dir. Henry Hathaway), starring a young Gary Cooper as an American joining the British colonial army in suppressing revolts in northwest India, won seven Oscars and is rumored to have been Hitler's favorite film. Whether or not that was the case,¹¹ it was clearly no headache for U.S. producers to assume that White U.S. audiences would be happy to identify with the British rather than their colonized Indian subjects (confirming the role of *Zulu* in the list of films analyzed here). Early on in the film, the British are in a ravine and find themselves being sniped at by rebellious Indians surrounding them from the crags overlooking the ravine. The visual parallel is exact with Native American canyon ambushes of settlers on horseback.¹² One officer announces, with authentic British *sang-froid*, that there is nothing to be worried about, just before being shot to his death, a moment mirrored in the opening scene of *We Were Soldiers* (below). The Cooper character and his colleagues promptly unleash their heavy machine-guns, and the attack is splendidly and roundly defeated. Lots of bodies, justly massacred.

The encircling hordes in *Bataan* (1943, dir. Tay Garnett) are not Indian, but Japanese in the Philippines jungle. The latter part of the film dwells on a multi-ethnic squad of U.S. soldiers, marooned without any prospect of outside help, being picked off one by one by Japanese snipers. Here all ethnicities are submerged into American citizens in the face of the Yellow Peril. The Japanese themselves are basically unseen - as stealthy, invisible and one with Nature as are Native American enemies in many Hollywood films - until toward the very end, when from within rolls of jungle mist from the studio machines, mostly indeterminate shapes emerge, more and more looking like a horde of rats.¹³ Despite

¹¹ Oddly, the stereotypic Nazi "Ve haff vays uff *making* you talk!" line was actually first uttered by the Muslim prince villain of the film, Mohammed Khan, to the Cooper character and his captured colleagues.

¹² The Indian extras were played by a combination of Paiute nation members and immigrant Punjabi field-hands, all in and from Southern California.

¹³ Dower (1986: 82-93, 181-89) has analyzed the importance of this image of vermin, insects and monkeys during the Pacific War in order to dehumanize the Japanese.

being overwhelmed by vastly superior numbers, the film's lead, played by Robert Taylor in Custer mode, grimly fights on, bringing down as many Japanese soldiers surrounding him as he can with his sub-machine-gun. He screams at them "We're here, we'll always be here!" in the closing moment of the film, a claim that implicitly fuses Americans' survival, and wartime sacrifice, with the persistence of the U.S. presence in East Asia.





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In *Red River* (1947, dir. Howard Hawks and Arthur Rosson), we see one of the probably thousands of images of peaceful White settlers being surrounded by savage, bloodthirsty and whooping Native Americans. Thousands, because 7,000 Westerns were made, and from the mid-1920s through the mid-1960s approximately one-quarter of all Hollywood films were Westerns (Buscombe 1988: 13, 426-27). The camera is inside the encircled wagons for close-ups, outside for long shots of the beleaguered settlers, or for some close-ups of John Wayne and his partners galloping to help the settlers survive the attack. *Red River* had two Oscar nominations and two Hollywood Guild nominations, but particularly served to build the career of its lead actor Marion M. Morrison (AKA John Wayne), who took the role after Gary Cooper refused it. It has been listed among the ten leading Westerns made. In *Winchester '73* (1950, dir. Anthony Mann), starring James Stewart, we see exactly the same visual trope of encirclement by fierce Native Americans and White settler peril, and the same trope exactly again in *Stagecoach* (1939, dir. John Ford). The latter film has a famous sequence in which a disparate group in a stagecoach, representing White settlerdom in its limited degree of diversity, races to escape, with Native Americans galloping alongside them and shooting arrows into the coach.

Both these films are among the most-viewed of all Westerns, and will therefore serve with *Red River* to summarize this huge body of cinematic work. Even though depictions of Native Americans became more complex and less unequivocally racist toward the end of the Hollywood Western film era, the plot stories remained overwhelmingly similar.

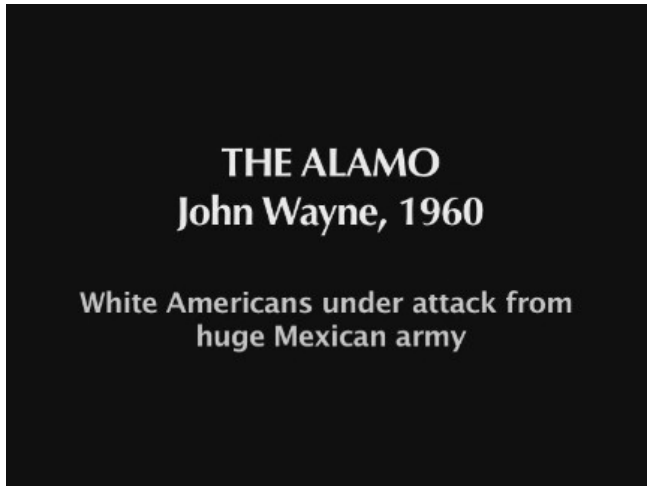


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In John Wayne's 1960 directorial version of the Álamo story (*The Alamo*), the attackers are now the uniformed, disciplined phalanxes of the Mexican army (though basically nameless and virtually faceless, with the exception of General Santa Ana). Nonetheless, the heroic and embattled defenders, despite their fort, are clearly vastly outnumbered and surrounded, and even were we not to know the original story, it is clear that their days are numbered. What stand out are their determined bravery against impossible odds, just like the Robert Taylor character's in the Philippines jungle, and especially the implication that the defenders died for American freedom, a theme that nuzzled up to Wayne's intended use of the film as an allegory for the USA in its struggle with the Soviet superpower. (He was convinced the film's failure to win an Oscar was due to the "Commies" still working in Hollywood even after the McCarthy purges.)



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In *55 Days At Peking* (1963, dir. Nicholas Ray), the so-called Boxer Rebellion of 1899-1901 is the theme, with Charlton Heston in the starring role. This time in the climactic scenes in the latter part of the movie it is masses of crazed and fanatical Chinese who are surrounding and menacing the Whites. (There is, admittedly, a handful of Chinese in the film who appear humbly grateful to the various European colonialisms that have carved out concessions along their coastline, and which are subduing the Chinese insurgents.) Just as the insurgents are reported to be at the doors, an American sergeant wakes up a representative English, German, French and Italian soldier, each in his mother-tongue: *Guten Tag! Bonjour! Buon Giorno!* The scene succinctly cements the fundamental unity of the European or European-descended competitor-colonialists as *civilized*, on the most basic level of the humble fighting soldier.¹⁴ This is in marked distinction to the Chinese hordes massing at the gates and pouring into the fort's compounds. During the final scene of the film, an early teenage Chinese girl looks pleadingly at the Heston character, hoping to be rescued from the chaos. The American looks down from his horse, generously picks up the young nation and rides off with her, safely and happily under his protection. Such is the U.S. nation, bellicose but benign.

¹⁴ In one moment of mild relief, the last soldier in line to be woken up is Chinese. The sergeant is nonplussed, not knowing how to address him, but the soldier smiles at him and says in perfect English "Good morning!" Some Chinese have the sense to be civilized, clearly... The sergeant, however, later on explodes with anger and demands of the Charlton Heston character - in line with so many soldiers' question when fighting their superiors' wars for them - what the possible point is of being in China and both risking and losing their lives. Heston hears him out, the sergeant stomps off, and Heston observes with weary superiority how hard it is for people like the sergeant to see how important the colonial mission is in China. Echoes of the war against Iraq, 2003 - .



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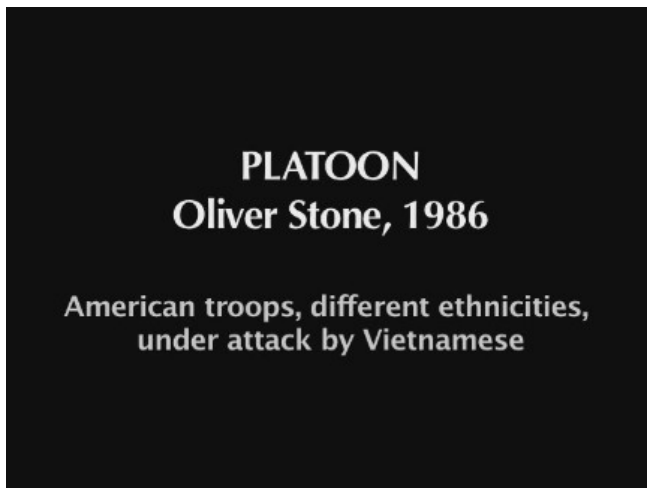
In *Zulu* (1964, dir. Cy Endfield), the encircled and embattled are White British troops in the 1879 Battle of Rorke's Drift in South Africa. Waves of Zulu fighters pour down upon them from all sides, seemingly oblivious to being mown down by the defenders. In this case, most of the defenders survived when the Zulu army retreated. For not many miles away, however, the British were suffering their worst defeat ever in South Africa at Isandlwana, where 1350 White troops and Black auxiliaries were killed. The Zulus probably saw no point in pursuing the minor skirmish at Rorke's Drift further, whereas the British government strenuously pumped up the Rorke's Drift battle for the British public, handing out multiple Victoria Crosses, as a way of deflecting attention from its deadly defeat at Isandlwana.



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It is disturbing to realize that when the film *Zulu* was being prepared for production, focusing on Rorke's Drift rather than Isandlwana, it was in the years immediately following the 1960 Sharpeville massacre. This was when South Africa's apartheid state police opened fire without warning on unarmed demonstrators running away (nearly all gunshot wounds were in the demonstrators' backs), killing 69 and injuring more than 300. On-the-spot medical attention was refused the wounded. In this choice of topic, Britain's profound economic bonds to South Africa were never more evident in cinema, though never alluded to anywhere in or indeed near the film. The Sharpeville massacre itself, or the Isandlwana battle, would have been fine subjects for a feature film ... but did not fit the trope.

Platoon (1986, dir. Oliver Stone) is reminiscent in some ways of *Bataan*, though the desperate heroism is definitely absent. The squad is multi-ethnic, but with Black soldiers more prominent, and it is, too, fighting an East Asian enemy in jungle conditions deeply unfamiliar to the Americans. At one key moment, one of the U.S. soldiers (played by Charlie Sheen) is on night guard alert. He is instantaneously paralyzed with terror, as suddenly, what had appeared in the mist and darkness to be a leafy branch a mere ten metres away, moves and begins walking silently in his direction. And then the Vietnamese soldier silently beckons comrades behind him to follow. The Sheen character initially can neither speak to warn his comrades nor dare to reach for his weapon. But as usual in this trope, we see the Vietnamese through the Americans' eyes, and none of the Vietnamese have names or even faces. They are simply the Anonymous Threat. Thus even a film such as this, highly critical of war in general and the U.S. war against Vietnam in particular, produces the same fundamental structure of visual and character identification that can be seen repeatedly elsewhere in Hollywood cinema, including the "critical" Westerns.



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Arab Muslim enemies are the focus in *The Siege* (1998, dir. Edward Zwick), but this time as terrorists creating a series of horrific bombings right in the midst of New York City: as in *Birth of a Nation* or the *Álamo*, this is the war at home. In this instance, the encirclement motif, with the Few against the Many, has to be in a sense reversed: the immediate "many" is Us, millions of New Yorkers, while the Few are creeping around and setting bombs to maim and kill the innocent, nonetheless supposedly acting in

their own minds as they do so on behalf of a larger constituency overseas (as per the famous September 2001 *Newsweek* magazine cover, "Why They Hate Us"). In a way like the Japanese and the Vietnamese in the jungle, the enemy merges into and is only intermittently visible within the metropolis's multi-ethnic crowds. The film is considerably concerned with the civil rights aspect of anti-terrorist programs, and with the potential for Arabs and Muslims to be targeted en masse for the outrages committed by a few, and one of its key scriptwriters regularly writes insightful essays on Arab affairs for *The New Yorker*. But as with *Platoon* and "critical" Westerns, the larger cinematic and cultural apparatus, historical, visual and industrial, has its own weight and momentum.

This film also has a multi-ethnic citizen component in the shape of the FBI counter-terrorism squad, which includes one Arab American as well as a Chinese American, and is headed by an African American. This squad is yet another version of the Few, but even more plainly than in the Westerns, is struggling to defend the safety of all Americans, not only of peaceful pioneer settlers. A 1986 film, *The Delta Force* (dir. Menahem Golan), similarly portrayed American Christians and Jews – and one blond German flight attendant – as victims of a terrorist plane hijack, but bonding deeply across religious lines and post-Nazi memories in opposition to their brutal Muslim victimizers.



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The next film I will cite to support this thesis concerning American national self-consciousness and the role of cinema in creating and sustaining it, is *Black Hawk Down* (2001, dir. Ridley Scott). The film is based fairly closely upon the downing of a helicopter in the U.S. military's 1993 foray into the Somali civil war, an episode which was presented at the time solely as a necessary humanitarian intervention (thus nothing to do with Middle Eastern geo-politics). A stereotypical portrait of "African chaos" surrounds the troops as they find themselves in the midst of an urban war zone. Their innocence and inexperience are depicted in a number of ways. For example, shots are being exchanged all around them, but not directly at them, so one soldier explains why he is not firing yet, since he's been told not to fire unless fired on. At his words, a fusillade commences, underscoring both his total naiveté and the crushing burden of humanitarian intervention regulations. Furthermore, he and his comrades place themselves on open

ground, rather than behind any shelter, visually a sitting target. Once again, the good and the peaceful U.S. citizens are at risk from the crazed, heavily armed savages, who are so bereft of anything morally recognizable that they do not even acknowledge 'racial' kinship with Black American troops, or indeed, their own fellow-Somalis.

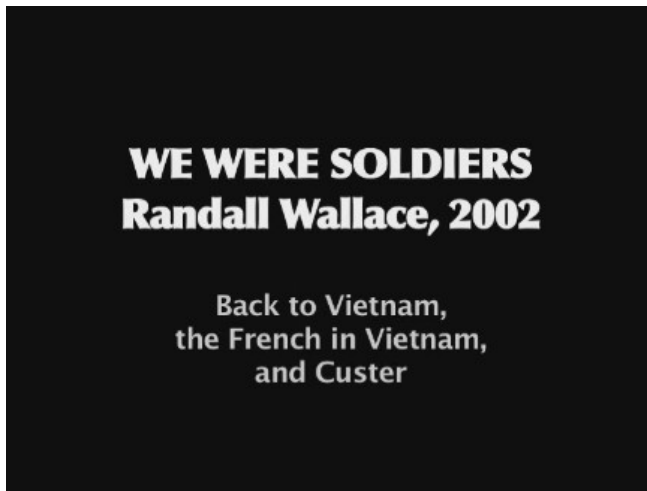




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The final film to be reviewed in presenting this argument is *We Were Soldiers* (dir. Randall Wallace, 2002). The film is based on a notoriously bloody battle in Ia Drang valley in Vietnam's Central Highlands in 1965, in which 450 U.S. Marines were encircled by some 2000 Vietnamese soldiers. The embattled encirclement trope takes up most of the movie. The initial sequence, depicting French troops in 1954 encircled by Vietnamese guerrillas, was already mentioned and has a direct inter-textual resonance with the scene earlier from *Bengal Lancers*. Later in the film however, the Custer motif is yet again thrust before us. Battalion leader Colonel Moore, played by Mel Gibson, is told by his commanding officer that the battalion's name has just been bureaucratically re-titled as the 7th Cavalry. The continuity with Custer is made immediately explicit in the conversation that follows, and is rammed home very shortly afterwards by a scene in which Moore, on the eve of deployment to Vietnam, is shown looking pensively at old color prints of the Little Big Horn battle in a book on his desk.¹⁵

¹⁵ It is only fair, however, to acknowledge that this film engages with the Custer precedent in order to suggest that the Ia Trang battle, while heroically fought and in this case won by the U.S. forces, represented nonetheless a pointless slaughter of the Marines. The hard-bitten and monosyllabic sergeant major says to Moore after the battle is over: "Custer was a pussy. You ain't." Yet the last word, almost, is with the retreating Vietnamese commander. He is deeply depressed that the U.S. victory in this battle will send a false signal to Washington, namely that where historically Chinese, French, Japanese and British had all lost, the Americans could win, and that this would certainly entail pointless further slaughter on both sides.



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Conclusions

Self-evidently, these films and the 19th century images of Custer did not invent the specific historical experience of encirclement and peril, or at least its feeling. Nor are Hollywood films the only ones to deploy this trope. French cinema portraying the Maghreb, British cinema portraying its colonized territories, Italian cinema in the 1930s, the Soviet World War II film genre, can all lay claim to it. But by contrast, whereas Soviet war films ended up in the 1980s with the younger generation ridiculing them, Hollywood's endless repetitions and re-workings of this trope seem to have fixed themselves in the national public imaginary with much greater tenacity. The popularity of the Fox TV drama series "*24*", in its sixth season at the time of writing, is a powerful index of this tenacity (Downing, forthcoming). Campbell (1992: 251) argues that "America ... is the imagined community *par excellence*. Confronted with this *aporia* of identity, the articulation of danger, the specification of difference, and the figuration of otherness, has been especially acute ..."

Here I have focused exclusively on the encirclement/vulnerability trope. We could and should go further and relate it to others, as in Robert Jewett's study *Captain America*, where, writing as an American theologian and historian critical of imperial forays, he rehearses an unnervingly repetitive list of bloodthirsty biblical citations by American political leaders over more than two centuries (Jewett 1984). Conspiracy theories of evil drawn from the books of *Daniel* and *Revelation*, proclamations of righteous crusade, the redemptive power of violence: all this and more has been part of the warp and weft of U.S. political culture. It clearly fits all too well with the trope of encirclement.

One could point by way of explanation to the frequency of U.S. military engagements beyond its borders throughout its history, and not least since World War II. If the collective political memory characteristic of U.S. national culture is to be fully understood, the relationship between the trope identified here and pre-cinematic historical representations of Custer and the *Álamo* also bears further

consideration.¹⁶ Obviously, this analysis implies the necessity for a theory of how politico-cultural memory may work, both overall, and in a given nation. Media Studies as a discipline tends obsessively to focus on the contemporary, a failing which I hope the argument here about memory will go a little way toward remedying. It is currently unusual for studies of media users to even try to engage with long-term impact, of the flow from great-great-grandparents' media uses through the generations. Maybe some oral historians and ethnographers may yet do so, because repetitive media tropes and genres do arguably serve to sustain and refresh certain defining frameworks for understanding ourselves, our nation and our world.

It may be useful in this exercise to think, socio-historically, in terms of *mnemonic nodal points*. This is my preferred translation - if a little free - of Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* (Nora 1989), which is usually translated rather literally and unevocatively as "memory sites." Mnemonic nodal points encompass monuments, buildings with particular associations, popular meeting places, but also specific generations, particular communities, and not least textbooks, films and other media. 'American' national consciousness - intuitive, emotive, inherited, hegemonic in the Gramscian sense, like national consciousnesses and identities elsewhere - is arguably constructed and refreshed through these mnemonic nodal points in very significant measure.

This is where my argument diverges from the focus of cultural historian Michael Kammen's *Mystic Chords of Memory* (Kammen 1991), even though he too dwells on U.S. traditions, collective memory and patriotism. Kammen's focus is on how particular forms of attention to specifics of the U.S. past have developed and changed, all the way through to the post-World War II celebration of "the American heritage," such as Colonial Williamsburg. My focus is on how a particular trope, iconized by the death of Custer but in no way restricted to him, has been consistently rehearsed and refreshed *visually*, with the result that it has formed an enduring definitional framework within which to interpret the present.

Moreover, Kammen's reading of the roles of media in the process of framing the past and thus the present is far more intentionalist than mine:

"...a series of technological innovations during the same period brought a profuse number of illustrations to the popular press, including weeklies, monthlies and books. That visual potential carried quite a potential for myth-making ... New technologies *could* serve as *aides-mémoire*; but they had an equal capacity to sensationalize, sentimentalize, or distort ...when influential images are used selectively by editors, publishers, and authors, then a new element of *deliberate caprice* is added to public memory. That happened in the United States during the later nineteenth and early years of the twentieth century."
(Kammen, *op. cit.*, 32, 2nd emphasis mine)

¹⁶ The relation between this trope and the ever-popular film and TV trope of the innocent citizen(s) kidnapped by a sadist and threatened with torture and death, only to be rescued at the last minute, might also be worth exploring, though for some reason that trope is almost always White-on-White.

While Kammen is perfectly right to note the role played by intentional elite action, by contrast my argument here is much more gramscian, focusing upon emergent and constantly evolving ideological frameworks which accumulate over decades and even centuries, and are not the finished purposive product of central regime ideologues, or even of irresponsible media professionals as Kammen proposes. People using Gramsci's notion of hegemony all too often telescope it in time, rendering it not much different from political public relations rather than a *historico-cultural* concept. The deep genesis, sedimentation, and ongoing vigor of the encirclement/vulnerability trope to which I have drawn attention in this analysis is a much better illustration of the gramscian concept in its fullness than any notion of spin or propaganda.

Ultimately the purpose of analyzing this visual trope lies in understanding the reasons for the repeated capacity of the U.S. elite to mobilize its population for war which, given the technological military force at that elite's disposal, necessarily prompts considerable anxiety across the planet at this juncture in the twenty-first century. My project in this analysis is to urge the need to understand very carefully the sources of our capacity and tendency as a nation to use that force.

A comparison with the alligator may be an appropriate point at which to end. Extant for 200 million years already; with a mass of surveillance sensors so extraordinarily fine-tuned in its scaly hide that they can be alerted by a drop of water falling from a leaf; with a bite of around 2000 pounds and a ferocious tail swing: the alligator is a model of sophisticated and enduring force, able through its sensors to register and act against the most minute danger to itself. Yet its brain is the size of a lima bean. As of the beginning of this 21st century, many across the planet see Americans as apparently convinced that using crushing killer force is their manifest destiny. As citizens, we need, I am urging, to peer into our cultural history to ask ourselves whether that is true; if so, why; and in the end, whether we wish or need to operate on that basis. Fortunately, on this project we Americans have much more than a lima bean to work with.

NB: Earlier versions of this article were presented to the Conference on Cinema and Nation, University of Paris IV, March 2006; at the University of Melbourne in Spring 2007; and as the Spring 2007 Tenney Lecture at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.

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