

# Hollywood's Good War:

## Second World War Film at the Turn of the Century

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For the past century American foreign policy has been a pendulum swinging between extremes of isolation and intervention. The terrorist attacks on New York and Washington of 11 September 2001 precipitated just such a swing in US foreign policy. The isolationist country of the Clinton era, which left United Nations dues unpaid and avoided military commitment, became the interventionist nation of George W Bush, ready to fight the War on Terrorism in Afghanistan and beyond. Yet one corner of America had been 'at war' for a little longer. In the preceding three years Hollywood had rediscovered the war film genre, and delivered the most successful cycle of war movies since the surge of Vietnam War films of the late 1970s and 1980s.

World War Two inspired Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (1998), Jonathan Mostow's *U-571* (2000), Jean-Jaques Annaud's *Enemy at the Gates* (2001), Michael Bay's *Pearl Harbor* (2001) and Gregory Hoblit's *Hart's War* (2002). On television Spielberg and HBO joined forces to create the massive *Band of Brothers* (2001); forthcoming films include John Woo's *Windtalkers*, to be released in the summer of 2002.

Films addressed the Gulf War in David O Russell's *Three Kings* (1999), Vietnam in Joel Schumacher's *Tigerland* (2000), Bosnia in John Moore's *Behind Enemy Lines* (2001), Somalia in Ridley Scott's *Black Hawk Down* (2002), and Vietnam again in Randall Wallace's *We Were Soldiers* (2002).

Where did this cycle of films come from? How do they relate to the past experience of Second World War and the present War of Terrorism? Following a trail through the four main World War Two films: *Saving Private Ryan*, *U-571*, *Pearl Harbor* and *The Thin Red Line* we find more interest in film than politics, but that is not to say that the films are without political implications.

### How it all began: the 'Greatest Generation' meets CGI

It is impossible to imagine the resurgence of the war film without *Saving Private Ryan*. The spectacular success of Spielberg's epic proved that war movies could make money, but it was not the only influence at work. *The Thin Red Line* had developed entirely independently of Spielberg's project, being part of a long-standing project of the enigmatic maverick director Terrence Malick, brought to fruition with the intervention of the American Film Institute. Taken together these films can be seen as part of a process of a general reconsidering the Second World War, made possible by the final exorcism of Vietnam in the Gulf Conflict of 1991.

The same forces turned a number of otherwise unremarkable

books into best sellers, the most famous being *The Greatest Generation* by the NBC news anchor Tom Brokaw. *The Greatest Generation* is a tapestry of biographical portraits of Americans who were young in the war, both well known and obscure: 'men and women whose everyday lives of duty, honor, achievement and courage gave us the world we have today'.<sup>1</sup> Published at Christmas 1998 the book caught the wind stirred by *Saving Private Ryan*, but it had been a long-standing project, inspired by Brokaw's contact with veterans during the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of D-day in 1984.

Brokaw, born in 1940, offered his intensely sentimental book as a recognition of the contribution of his father's generation. In America the book became a channel for a collective reconciliation of the generations as the Baby Boomers of the 1960s honoured (or was it patronized) the achievement of their parents. Companion volumes followed and similarly themed works such as James Bradley's account of war in the Pacific, *Flags of our Fathers* also sold well.<sup>2</sup> The mood of generational peace making was evident in Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*, and explicit in the final scene in which, while the flag waves overhead the old Ryan stands by the grave of his rescuer asks his family to assure him that he lived a good life.

These emotional currents alone cannot account for the second wave of Second World War films: *U-571*, *Pearl Harbor* *Enemy at the Gates* in Europe. These films are also closely related to developments in film technology. They are – like *Saving Private Ryan* – a meeting of the astonishing technical capabilities of Computer Generated Imaging (CGI), digital sound, and familiar genre material. Every technical development in Hollywood history has provided an excuse to remake market tested, material with the added attraction of the new process. Studio logic that once produced *Beau Geste* with sound, *Robin Hood* in Technicolor and *Ben-Hur* in widescreen, now suggested a new generation of old generic wine in spectacular new digital skins.

Films like *Gladiator* (2000), *Titanic* (1997) and the 1990s disaster movies had familiar scripts but emerged fresh because of their effects. *U-571* and *Pearl Harbor* were both, in some respects, made because they could be. This appeal to cinematic culture and genre is paramount. It is possible to question the extent to which the new wave of Second World War films engaged the actual experience of the war at all. As will be seen, there is much more evidence of engagement with the war film genre. Moreover, unlike the historians who find ever more ambiguity and disturbing gray areas in the actual war, the film

makers have made the war reassuringly clear-cut.

Of course there was a time when film-makers explored the gray areas of World War Two, but there is nothing here as quite as disturbing or psychologically true as the David Lean's *Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957). In keeping with the quest for moral certainty the chief reference point is war propaganda films. As a literary adaptation, Malick's *The Thin Red Line* stands apart from this, but the 1940s studio war film is never far from *U-571*, *Pearl Harbor* or *Saving Private Ryan*. The problem in the case of *Saving Private Ryan* is claim to implicit in the style of the film that what is on the screen is not a rehash of studio formula but an authentic slice of life.

### *Saving Private Ryan*

*Saving Private Ryan* stormed ashore in 1998 following a barrage of publicity about its realism. The opening recreation of D-Day broke new ground in the representation of war. More than this the film purported (off screen) to be based on a real incident. The incident turned out to be the quest of a single army chaplain (not a promising focus for a film) to locate a lost Private (inconveniently a German-American). The arithmetic at the heart of the film, risking the lives of many to save the life of one was pure invention. The film's publicity stressed that Spielberg had insisted on subjecting his stars to 'boot camp' basic training at the hands of a retired drill instructor named Dale Dye.

The script uses soldiers slang and, in keeping with the best social histories of the war (such as Studs Terkel's *The Good War*) established the American GI not as an ideologically driven crusader but rather as a working man, with a job to do before he takes the longed for 'boat ride home.'<sup>3</sup> The problem with 'realism' as an approach is that by its nature it seeks to conceal its own artifice. Realism is as artificial a cinematic style as 'the musical' and as bound by convention. Realism is not always 'realistic'.

For example Spielberg's reconstruction of Omaha beach had all the grain, haze and blurred motion of the best known visual representation of the event, the photographs taken on the spot by Robert Capa. Yet Capa's pictures looked grainy and blurred not because of conditions on the beach per se but as a result of a dark room accident in London.<sup>4</sup> Conversely realism can obscure artifice and elements in a film that tie it to its own time, which is to say: its ideology. In the case of *Saving Private Ryan* the film arrives like a mighty express train: realism served as the locomotive but the freight was ideologically charged sentiment.

At one level *Saving Private Ryan* retells the familiar story of the platoon at war. We meet the same mix of ethnic/regional types – in this case: Southern, Hungarian, Jewish, Italian and WASP (White Anglo Saxon Protestant) – and personality traits – in this case: braggart, coward, enigmatic leader (Tom Hanks). Such characters have been a staple of war drama since Shakespeare's *Henry V*. In wartime they served as an allegory of the American people pulling together. Indeed in places *Saving Private Ryan* seems like a remake of Lewis Milestone's *A Walk in the Sun* (1946). As soon as the pyrotechnics of the D-day

opening are over we are on very familiar territory. Of course there are differences with previous versions of the story. *Saving Private Ryan* does not need the heavy anti-totalitarian speeches that marked the wartime and early Cold War combat films. It is not overshadowed by the issue of Vietnam like the films of late 1960s and 1970s when director's chose between outright cynicism and the heavy handed historicism, or to create a film that can be read both ways like Franklin Schaffner's *Patton* (1970).

The ideological freight in *Saving Private Ryan* surfaces most plainly in the framing scenes of Ryan's return to Normandy as an old man (played by Harrison Young). These scenes are as specific to the 1990s as any Cold War speech-to-camera is specific to the 1950s. Ryan has carried the responsibility of living up to the sacrifice of his saviors, and from the perspective of the 1990s he asks whether he has lived a 'good life'. The question is swiftly answered by Spielberg's staging of the final scene: the supportive, prosperous all-American family and flag in the background are as affirming as the embrace of Ryan's wife.

This and the 'save-a-son' scenario is the reassuring environment in which it is possible for *Saving Private Ryan* to open the Pandora's box of a realistic depiction of the lives and deaths of GIs in the European theatre in World War Two. Even so there are moments that reflect authentic dilemmas of wartime. The platoon have to decide how to respond to a French child and whether to shoot a German prisoner (Joerg Stadler) of war, who in one of the most curiously moving moments of the film pleads for his life by reciting a litany of references to American popular culture.

In the last analysis *Saving Private Ryan* turned away from complexity. As if in acknowledgment of this Spielberg and Hanks produced a much more sophisticated portrait of the war in their HBO mini series *Band of Brothers* (2001). The luxury of ten hours and the discipline of a historical source, Stephen Ambrose's book of the same name, produced a far more authentic record of the experience of the combat soldier in World War Two.<sup>5</sup> Each episode began with the memories of the actual members of Easy Company, implicitly validating the authenticity of what was to follow: the series included the sort of incidents that were not part of the old school of war movies: summary executions, accidental shooting of fellow Americans, drunkenness, boredom and mismanagement. Such commitment to uncomfortable truth was not on the agenda elsewhere, least of all for Jonathan Mostow, writer and director of *U-571*.

### *U-571*

Like *Saving Private Ryan*, Jonathan Mostow's *U-571* proved a runaway success. His emphasis was squarely on adventure rather than history, and the role of film as an inspiration was explicit. Mostow wrote, produced and directed *U-571*, as he explains in the DVD commentary track, as a tribute to the great submarine movies that played on television in of his childhood: *The Enemy Below* (1957) and *Destination Tokyo* (1943). The debt to Wolfgang Petersen's *Das Boot* (1981) is

also evident; the plot of *U-571* seems contrived to allow an American crew (with whom the audience can identify) into forbidden but fascinating territory of a German submarine. All the necessary submarine moments are included like elements on a well loved cake recipe: the depth charging, the race to launch a torpedo, the leak, the crash dive beyond the technical specifications of the vessel. He added a new twist of authenticity: when the depth charges explode the submarine is seen to ripple in the pressure wave. Mostow avoided overuse of CGI, preferring to do much of the sea scenes in a vast sea tank in Malta, rather the technological breakthroughs are in the field of sound – rivets pop and bulkheads buckle with wrenching crystal clarity.

The poster for the film played into the rhetoric of the *Greatest Generation*: ‘Heroes are ordinary men who do extraordinary things in extraordinary times’, but there was little attempt to ground the film in fact. Mostow’s principal historical reference point was the capture of a German Enigma coding device. He invented an American submarine mission to accomplish this. The feat had actually been accomplished by Britain’s Royal Navy and, despite a closing dedication acknowledging the fact, the British press complained bitterly about Hollywood cultural imperialism.

There were more interesting political implications elsewhere. Mostow’s narrative centered on the career of a young naval officer, Lieutenant Tyler (Matthew McConaughey) who has been rejected for promotion because he is indecisive and too anxious to be popular with the men. Wittingly or not Mostow had created a character sharing the flaws of many turn-of-the-century politicians, ever eager to please and unwilling to take the difficult decisions. In the course of the film Tyler is forced to take command. Thanks to the advice of a gruff old sea-dog (Harvey Keitel), he learns to make hard choices and when necessary to sacrifice life for the greater good. The underlying message is uncomplicated: war can be an adventure, which necessitates loss but brings the brave man comradeship and respect.

### *Pearl Harbor*

Despite its subject matter, *Pearl Harbor* sprang not so much from *Saving Private Ryan* as the runaway success of 1997: *Titanic*. Like *Titanic* *Pearl Harbor* attempted a bold double alchemy: to turn a famous disaster into an up-beat film and a traditionally ‘male’ subject into a film with appeal to the female audience, tapped so successfully by *Titanic* in 1997. The producer of *Pearl Harbor*, Jerry Bruckheimer, (known for staging all his films like commercials, with slowmotion sequences, sweeping music and wisecracking but cartoon-like characters) seemed bent on blending a sixty-years-on tribute to *The Greatest Generation* with his usual profitability. The film realized nearly half of its \$153 million budget on the first weekend of American distribution but the paid the price in artistic terms. Like a stricken battleship the film buckled under the burden of both presenting the events of Pearl Harbor and contriving a happy ending.

Unlike the spurious missions in *Saving Private Ryan* and *U-*

*571* the core heroics in *Pearl Harbor* were based on a genuine event. The writer Randall Wallace – author of *Braveheart* (1995) – drew on one of the few ‘positive’ American stories to have emerged from the attack on Pearl Harbor: the defensive feats performed by the fighter pilots, Lts. Taylor and Welch, who together shot down seven enemy planes. He promoted and fictionalized them into Capt. Rafe McCawley (Ben Affleck) and Capt. Danny Walker (Josh Harnett), now childhood friends who join the pre-war US army air force and became unwittingly caught in a love triangle with a nurse named Evelyn (Kate Beckinsale). The two reunite to defend Pearl Harbor (while Evelyn tends the wounded) and then take part in the US carrier-borne ‘Doolittle’ air raid on Tokyo. This raid ‘settles the score’ for Pearl Harbor and, with grinding predictability, also resolves their personal lives.

Like both *Saving Private Ryan* and *U-571*, *Pearl Harbor* was rooted in movie tradition. Although the action sequences recalled the large-scale spectacles of the seventies, most obviously Richard Fleischer *et al.* *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (1970), the storyline leant heavily on the films of the war. The plot lurches from that of a Tyrone Power anti-neutrality picture like Henry King’s *Yank in the RAF* (1941) to one of the more somber melodramas from 1942 designed to teach ‘American womanhood’ the necessity of sacrifice.

It even delivers much the same twist as William Wyler’s *Mrs Miniver* (1942), by killing, against our expectation, a supporting character, Betty (James King) and allowing her pilot finance to survive. In the war years such plots had a national imperative to remind women of their war role and prepare them for sacrifice. At best it is like opening a letter sixty years after it was written at worst it is a mawkish devices for wringing an emotional response from the audience.

*Pearl Harbor* makes the same claims to realism as *Saving Private Ryan*, with relentless and spectacularly staged violence. When the bombs start to fall the director also throws in shockwave ripple effect from *U-571* for good measure. But like the script the action sequences are no crafted to fulfill expectations derived from film rather than life. Aircraft swoop and turn in wing-wrenching maneuvers not like planes of the 1940s for which such acrobatics would have been impossible, but like the fighters in *Star Wars* (1977). Just as George Lucas used World War Two combat footage as an inspiration now World War Two is reconstructed in the image of *Star Wars*, using Lucas’s own Industrial Light and Magic effects.

But if the action sequences dwelt on twenty-first century expectations, the ‘look’ of *Pearl Harbor* was punctiliously 1940s. The costumes, framing and color scheme, and the faces of the actors cast reflected the wartime paintings of Norman Rockwell. The only thing missing is smoking; so ubiquitous at the time, so taboo in films today. The film’s most effective moments combine these down-home images with the savagery of the attack: boy scouts watch the first wave of planes swoop down; blood donations lap into Coke bottles; Evelyn uses her lipstick to label the foreheads of the wounded, marking them for life or death.

Every now and again *Pearl Harbor* remembers its historical

pretences and hence makes a token attempt to deal with issues like the breakdown of US-negotiations with Japan and the missed chances of American Naval Intelligence to predict the raid by breaking Japanese codes. President Franklin Roosevelt (Jon Voight) appears quite absurdly against character, making rhetorical points based on the disability he tried all his life to conceal. We meet Dorie Miller (Cuba Gooding Jr.), the Black mess steward who manned a gun on the *USS West Virginia* during the attack, but are not told that despite his courage and ability the US Navy's segregation policy ensured that he was still in the kitchen when he died in action in 1943.

The most overt historical distortion is the depiction of the Doolittle raid. In reality the raid damaged little but Japanese pride, but here vast factories erupt in flames. The aftermath, as Doolittle's planes ditch in China, degenerates into an absurd shoot-'em-up, a sort of Gunfight in the OK rice paddy. Plenty of films need a third hour for complete character development or to allow a conclusion of the action on the screen. Here the extra time is used merely to drag the film to a point where America had extracted revenge and the audience can go home happy. Even with this elongation the filmmakers still need to resort to a closing narration, to explain the 'meaning' of events.

### *The Thin Red Line*

Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* stands apart from three other films discussed here. It cost a mere \$50 million (compared to \$60 million for *U-571*, \$70 million for *Saving Private Ryan* and aforementioned \$153 million for *Pearl Harbor*). It was the only one of the three that cannot be considered a box office success. It is the only one of the three to be an adaptation of a novel. Yet it alone breaks new ground. By seeking a literary rather than a filmic source *The Thin Red Line* emphatically challenged the entrenched Hollywood war film genre, and offered a radically different view of World War Two. The 1964 version of the same novel was irrelevant. The film related the war to universal themes of landscape and nature rather than the historically specific, and in fact the action could as easily have been Vietnam 1968 or the Philippines of 1902. The result is an overwhelming and stimulating piece of cinema for the mind and eyes, like a combat film rewritten by James Joyce with art direction by Paul Gauguin.

*The Thin Red Line* follows on the fortunes of C for Charlie Company, a rifle platoon of US army regulars during the battle for Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands in 1942. The 1963 novel's title was a double allusion to exploited British soldiers of Rudyard Kipling's poem 'Tommy' ('Then it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' 'Tommy 'ow's yer soul?' But it's 'Thin Red Line of 'eroes' when the drums begin to roll--') and an old American Midwestern saying that: 'There's only a thin red line between the sane and the mad'. Malick adds a third, unstated visual meaning: this film presents a thin, futile, trail of human blood through the all-pervading jungle green of the South Pacific of 1942.

Whereas in James Jones's novel the unseen unthinking bureaucratic force of the army is the dominant character, here

it is the island. The dominant images of the film, underlined in voice-over soliloquies, stress the enduring power of nature beside which a world war is but a passing quirk of one of the planet's nastier creatures, like the glint in the eye of the crocodile that surfaces in the film's opening shot. Individual stories emerge as the film cuts between the experiences of selected members of the platoon: Private Witt (James Caviezel) longs for the idyll he found among Melanesian villagers while absent without leave; Private Bell (Ben Chaplin) yearns for his wife; Sergeant Welsh (Sean Penn) maintains cynical detachment. The war, he says, is 'all for property'. The bookish Greek-American, Captain Staros (Elias Koteas) challenges an aging Colonel Tall (Nick Nolte), who squanders the lives of his men in the hope of professional advancement.

These fragments of story defy any attempt to read a single (let alone a reassuring) meaning into the battle for the island of Guadalcanal or the Second World War as a whole. By remaining fragments they defy the usual trajectory of a war film towards a grand fusion of men and purpose: the trap of becoming propaganda for the next war. Here, individuals are as alienated from each other as from the enemy. Death and life, honour and ignominy are apportioned at random, with no regard to a character's moral worth or military prowess. It is a realism more profound than the crowd-pleasing pyrotechnics of Spielberg, Mostow or Bay.

The screenplay is generally faithful to its source novel, although the emphasis on the collision of the natural and man-made worlds is Malick's. Jones's novel took pains to show the brutalizing effects of war on men and accordingly Malick presents scenes in which American soldiers slaughter the wounded Japanese as they surrender, and pry the gold teeth from Japanese corpses. This said, Malick also chooses to sidestep some issues raised by Jones. In the original novel the Captain of C. Company is Jewish rather than Greek, raising the issue of anti-Semitism in the wartime US army. Similarly some of Jones' soldiers find solace through sex with each other while maintaining a rigidly homophobic rhetoric. Malick presumably felt that the issues of masculinity and the nature of sexual identity raised by such scenes lay beyond the scope of this work.

The basic task of an artist in representing a social ill such as war must surely be to ensure that that representation does not perpetuate that ill. The problem with all war film lies in the complex interconnection of film with war in the twentieth century. The two are not distinct, but rather have shaped each other. In the case of World War Two, studios shaped their films to help win the war. By revisiting the genre filmmakers run the risk of perpetuating messages that are long out of date. The most pressing of these is 'representation of the enemy.' Here the turn-of-the-century war films are perversely closer to the propaganda films of the war than the films of the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1950s and 1960s film makers needed to pay attention to Cold War politics that required alliance with the Japanese and the Germans. 'Good' Germans – especially – abounded in these films. Today's filmmakers need not be so constrained. *Saving Private Ryan*, *U-571* and *Pearl Harbor*

include scenes that could have been lifted directly from war-time propaganda. In *Saving Private Ryan* the sympathetic German prisoner reappears as just another Nazi automaton, and a cipher for the ultimate evil, slaughtering well loved characters; in *U-571* Mostow depicts the U-boat crew machine gunning a lifeboat;<sup>6</sup> and although *Pearl Harbor* depicts the Japanese as a dignified enemy in the body of the film (presumably to permit East Asian sales), in the finale they revert to the crudest stereotype of war propaganda.

In contrast the most haunting images in *The Thin Red Line* are those depicting the defeated Japanese enemy. The emaciated, disease ridden figures discovered as Charlie company overrun a Japanese fortification are a world away from the usual Hollywood Japanese fanatic. Malick's compassionate eye reveals the longevity of propaganda stereotypes in the work of others. The same compassionate sensibility is at the heart of another literary adaptation of a war novel, Scott Hicks's *Snow Falling on Cedars* (1999), which addresses the uncomfortable subject of the mistreatment of Japanese Americans during the Second World War. It remains all too rare.

#### The Real War

On 11 September 2001 a real war intruded into the world of the screen fictions. It was not the first time that a surge of war films had preceded a real war: the years before American entry into both World War Two and Vietnam had seen similar bulges in war film making. Yet in the case of Vietnam the films and the foreign policy were routed in the same culture of militarism; and in 1940 and 1941 Hollywood began to make war films again because producers wished to be part of a national policy of preparedness and, in some cases to precipitate intervention.

The War on Terrorism was not chosen in the same way as Vietnam or even the Second World War, and the films of 1998-2001 appeared without reference to the tensions that preceded the attacks. Unlike the pre-World War Two and pre-Vietnam films, the latest cycle of Hollywood war films was not engaged with the present but sought instead to celebrate the past, to honor the parents generation, to apply the technology of the present to a well-loved genre. If anything they sprang were products of an era of non-intervention, celebrating decisive military action in an age in inactivity and remembered the victory of 1945 in an age that had only just learned to forget about loss of 1975. This changed on 11 September.

Irrespective of the currents that built the cycle, on 11 September the new war films became part of a resurgent American militarism. At their most basic level they gave President Bush the invaluable windfall of a shared vocabulary of military images and values. The rhetoric of the War of Terrorism emerged as a strange hybrid. American propaganda in the new war recycled images from films, which were themselves recycling American propaganda from the old war.

The labored conclusion of *Pearl Harbor* in which a voice over explains that the meaning of Pearl Harbor was that once roused Americans will fight and win, suddenly seemed like a model for American reaction to 11 September. When news

commentators responded to that event by citing Franklin Roosevelt's words 'a date that will live in infamy' one wondered whether the allusion was to the historical president or his screen incarnation. President Bush has made regular use of World War Two images and vocabulary. His state of the Union address pointedly dubbed Iran, Iraq and North Korea – the next states on his target list – 'the Axis of evil'.

Bush also sought to play into the success of *Band of Brothers* by paying a visit to the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Regiment's headquarters at Fort Bragg, Georgia and alluding to the series in his remarks. President even spoke of his Secretary of Homeland Defense as a man with whom he'd be glad to 'share a fox hole', as though he were a seasoned veteran. Again one must wonder whether the point of reference is the real Second World War or its on-screen image.

Considering the turn-of-the-century Second World War films as a cycle one is left with the realization that spectacle is placed ahead of ethical or historical questions. *The Thin Red Line* pursues universal truths about men in combat, while HBO's *Band of Brothers* pays admirable attention to questions of balance and historical authenticity, but for the most part the films play fast and loose with historical fact. The Second World War is convenient morality play in which the Americans are perpetually in the white and the Germans in black, which eases generation guilt and delivers the warm glow of nostalgia for the politics and film of a 'simpler era'. The war film revival is part of a general revival of interest in many spectacular genres, but not all genres are the same.

By depicting a social ill – war – that rests on the willingness of populations to participate, the war filmmaker has specific social responsibilities which do not fall in quite the same way on other genres. James Cameron does not need to worry that *Titanic* will make his audience more susceptible to sinking ships; Ridley Scott need not be concerned that fans of *Gladiator* will begin dueling to the death or feed their enemies to lions, but the representations of the Second World War have real political consequences.

By portraying the war in an idealized way; by emphasizing the United States as a wholly moral power and ignoring such gray areas as an alliance with Stalin, the dropping of an atomic bomb, and both mismanagement of and misconduct by American troops, Hollywood has given the US government a new vocabulary of propaganda. The return to 'guts n' glory' on the screen, now reinforced by spectacular realism is film by film eroding the hard learned lessons of the Vietnam conflict, restoring warrior virtue and selling the notion that a man can prove himself in war.

So far, despite his evocation of the Good War and its films, President Bush has remained strictly within the limits learned in Vietnam, using airpower and avoiding the loss of American life. Whether the extension of the war can be accomplished so economically, and to what extent the American people will permit a more active participation remains to be seen. The World War Two films of recent years may yet be seen as the unknowing propaganda that made the escalation of a war, unimagined in 1998, easy.

## Notes

1 Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation*. New York: Random House, 1998 (quote on back cover).

2 James Bradley, *Flags of our Fathers*. New York: Bantam, 2000; Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation Speaks: Letters and Reflections*. New York: Random House, 1999; Tom Brokaw, *An Album of Memories: Personal Histories from the Greatest Generation*. New York: Random House, 2001.

3 Studs Terkel's *The Good War*, New York: Pantheon, 1984

4 Richard Whelan, *Robert Capa*. New York: Knopf, 1985.

5 Stephen Ambrose, *Band of Brothers: E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler's Eagle's nest*. New York: Touchstone, 1992

6 In the DVD commentary Mostow defends this scene by arguing that contrary to the implicit message of *Das Boot* German submariners in World War Two were typically committed Nazis. He included the scene at the opening of the movie of establish them clearly as villains.