Gunfighters and Green Berets: The Magnificent Seven and the Myth of Counter-Insurgency

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Richard Slotkin

The task of the cultural historian is to construct a historical account of the activities and processes through which human societies produce the systems of value and meaning by which they live. The narrative of cultural history centers on the continuous dialectic between the activities of myth- and symbol-making, interpretation and imaginative projection with the political and material processes of social existence.¹

In modern society, the mass media provide the broadest-based and most pervasive means for canvassing the world of events and the spectrum of public concerns, for recalling historical precedents, and translating these into the various story-genres that constitute a public mythology.² Since the concern of commercial media is to exploit as wide an audience as possible, the lexicon of genres in any period tends to be broad and various, covering a wide (though not all-inclusive) range of themes, subjects and public concerns. Within this structured marketplace of myths, the development of new genres or the substantial modification of existing ones can be read as a signal of active ideological concern, in which both the producers and consumers of mass media participate—the producers as exploitative promulgators and proprietors of their mythic formulations, the consumers as respondents capable of either dismissing a given mythic formulation, or affiliating with it.³

The continuity and persistence of particular genres identifies a culture's deepest and most persistent concerns, because it reflects repeated and continuing attempts, over several years or generations, to formulate a mythic response to political and social crises. Likewise, major breaks in the development of important genres may signal the presence of a significant crisis of cultural values and organization.
One of the signals of ideological crisis that attended the escalation of the Vietnam War was the disruption and radical revision of two of Hollywood's most important post-war film genres, the "combat film" and the Western. In every military conflict since 1917, American movie producers had capitalized on public interest by making films about Americans in combat. During the Second World War, with the studio system at its peak of productive efficiency and power, the film industry was mobilized to support the war effort; and in both serving and exploiting the public interest, the industry developed the important and distinctive genre of the "combat film"—in which the now-familiar platoon of various class and ethnic types submerges its differences to fight against the Enemy. The popularity of the genre persisted after demobilization; and its terms were thus ready at hand when the attack on Korea in 1950 inaugurated the military struggle against Communism in the post-colonial Third World. Despite the unpopularity of the Korean War, and the controversies surrounding Truman's decisions to intervene in and then to limit the war, Hollywood was able to use the formulas of the World War II combat film to absorb the new conflicts into the terms of the older consensus.

But the industry's response to Vietnam was different. With the exception of John Wayne's tendentious, overblown, and bogus *The Green Berets* (1967), no combat films were made about Vietnam while the war was in progress. Hollywood's avoidance of the subject reflected, to some degree, a fear about dealing with an issue on which its public was so intensely divided. It is a measure of the depth and intensity of that fear—and perhaps of the depth of public division—that Hollywood chose to avoid the subject, rather than to co-opt it, as they had done with the Korean War in 1950-51. The longest American war in this century was thus the only war since the invention of movies which was not the subject of fictional movie-making while it was in progress. Hollywood did address indirectly the crisis of values raised by the war, however, by projecting the matter of Vietnam into the mythic space of the Western movie. The Green Beret entered the imaginative world of his home-front fellow citizens wearing the clothes of the gunfighter.

Among the most important new types of movie that developed during this period was "The Mexico Western." It tells the story of a group of American gunfighters who cross the border into Mexico during a time of social disruption or revolutionary crisis to help the peasants defeat an oppressive ruler or warlord, or a vicious bandit.
The subject of American involvement with the Mexican Revolution was not completely new. It had been the subject of silent Westerns while it was still in progress, and during the 1930s it was the subject of two notable feature films (*Viva Villa!* [1935] and *Juarez* [1939]) as well as a number of B Westerns. The theme was rediscovered following the success of the Twentieth Century Fox production of *Viva Zapata!* (1952), and developed in the largest terms by Hecht-Lancaster in their production of *Vera Cruz* (1954). The invention of this subgenre proceeded in step with the developing American engagement in the struggle for hearts and minds in the Third World, and reached its height during the Vietnam War.\(^7\)

I first realized that these movies had special and significant elements of kinship in 1969, when I saw Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*, a quintessential Western which was also recognizably a commentary on the Vietnam War—particularly the comprehensive mayhem of the Tet Offensive of 1968, and the recently revealed details of the My Lai massacre. In this project of indirect representation, *Wild Bunch* was not alone; there were a number of Westerns made between 1965 and 1971 that referred more or less directly to the war, including *The Professionals* (1966), *Little Big Man* and *Soldier Blue* (1970), and *Ulzana's Raid* (1971).

Western movies borrowed images, issues and iconography from the televised war; the language of the Western movie (with rock and roll and mock-bureaucratic jargon) became one of the major symbol-systems through which the soldiers interpreted their war. Soldiers and medical officers agreed in identifying one of their major mental problems as something called "John Wayne Syndrome," and the "traditions" of Indian warfare were often cited as models or rationales for atrocities by soldiers whose only knowledge of those wars derived from movies like *The Searchers*. Michael Herr, in *Dispatches*, cites an instance in which an infantry captain invited him to join a search and destroy mission with the words, "Come on. . .we'll take you out to play Cowboys and Indians." Nor was this language restricted to the young, half-educated soldiers in the field. The high command also referred to Vietcong controlled areas as "Indian country," and Ambassador Maxwell Taylor, testifying on the pacification program before the Senate, compared it to "plant[ing] corn outside the stockade when the Indians are still around." Clearly, the tropes and symbols derived from Westerns were one of the more important interpretive grids through which Americans tried to understand and control our unprecedented and dismaying experiences in Vietnam.\(^8\)
In this study, I want to account for the Western's special role in the culture of the American 1950s and '60s, and to interpret the genre's effect on ideological discourse, by looking closely at a single film, John Sturges' *The Magnificent Seven* (1960). The film was an epic rendition of the traditional "gunfighter" Western, but it was also a seminal film of the new subgenre of "Mexico Westerns"—and although it predates our military intervention, it was also in many respects the first "Vietnam Western." Before we can interpret the special uses to which Sturges put the language of the genre, however, we need to review the genre's history and its relation to the development of American myth and ideology.

Myths are stories drawn from a society's history, which have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society's ideology and dramatizing its moral consciousness, with all of the complexities and contradictions that consciousness may contain. Mythic versions of history transform accepted "facts" into ideological imperatives for belief and action. The myths of Custer's Last Stand, the Alamo, and Pearl Harbor are all based on historical events, but we use them as symbols and metaphors, interpreting crises different in character and time according to these mythic models, and deriving from the models sanctioned scenarios of political response.

The Myth of the Frontier is one of our oldest myths, expressed in a body of literature, folklore, ritual, historiography and polemics produced over a period of three centuries. Its symbols and concerns shaped the most prevalent genres of both nineteenth-century literary fiction and twentieth-century movies. The myth celebrates the conquest and subjugation of a natural wilderness by entrepreneurial individualists, who took heroic risks and so achieved windfall profits and explosive growth at prodigious speeds.

Violence is central to both the historical development of the frontier and its mythic representation. The Anglo-American colonies grew by displacing Amerindian societies and enslaving Africans to advance the fortunes of white colonists. As a result, the Indian war became a characteristic episode of each phase of westward expansion; the conflict of cultural and racial antagonists became the central dramatic structure of the Frontier Myth, providing the symbolic reference points for describing and evaluating other kinds of conflict, such as those between different generations.
or classes of settlers.  

In the myth, both material and moral progress depend on success in violent enterprises. Conquest of the natural wilderness makes Americans "better off," but the struggle against the Indians—and over the analogous classes of "savages" within civil society—makes the American a "better man." The moral problem, and its triumphant solution, is embodied in the Frontier's mythic heroes: the scouts and Indian fighters of popular history and literature, "living legends" like Daniel Boone and literary myths like James Fenimore Cooper's Hawkeye. Their fables teach the necessity of racial solidarity against a common enemy, which cements a social compact that is otherwise imperiled by the ideology of self-interest. These figures stand on the border between savagery and civilization; they are "the men who know Indians," and in many ways their values and habits of thought mirror those of the savage enemy. Because of this mirroring effect, the moral warfare of savagery and civilization is, for the heroes, a spiritual or psychological struggle, which they win by learning to discipline or suppress the savage or "dark" side of their own human nature. Thus they are mediators of a double kind, who can teach civilized men how to defeat savagery on its native grounds: the natural wilderness, and the wilderness of the human soul.

By the time movie-makers took up the subject, the West—as the Frontier—had already become a thoroughly mythologized space, defined by an elaborate system of cultural illusions and ideological formulae. In 1903, when Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* became the first Western and the pattern-setter for the development of narrative cinema, the Myth of the Frontier had become the dominant formula of American historiography and geopolitics. Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Hypothesis" explained all of American history as the consequence of frontier experiences; Theodore Roosevelt, the philosopher John Fiske, and the Social Darwinist spokesmen for Manifest Destiny extended the metaphor into a model of world race history and used it to justify America's assumption of world power.

From 1903 to 1929 the silent Western developed distinctive generic patterns in its handling of Frontier stories. This development was interrupted by the advent of sound and the Depression; beginning in 1931 the genre went into a nine-year eclipse, during which few feature-length Westerns were produced. But in 1939 the Western experienced a "renaissance," which inaugurated a 30-year period in which Westerns were the most consistently popular form
of action movie, with both audiences and producers, in the theater and in the new medium of television. These Westerns were resolutely "historical" in their references, and they succeeded in establishing a powerful association between the imagery of the West and the idea of a heroic age of American progressive enterprise. The pastoral and wilderness imagery of the Western invested these fables of power and achievement with an aura of natural innocence. The narrative structure of the Western story, however, insisted that whatever the nominal historical setting, violence was the necessary and justified determinant of the outcome. Every variety of Western has its characteristic form of violent resolution: the cavalry Western has its Indian massacre or charge into battle, the gunfighter or town-tamer movie has its climactic shoot-out in the street, the outlaw movie has its disastrous last robbery or assassination, the romantic Western has its bullet-riddled rescue scene. Moreover, because the Western has been seen as a representation of American history, the genre's insistence on the necessity of violence amounts to a statement about the nature of history and of politics.

By the Korean War, the symbolic language of the Western had been developed by its practitioners to a level of high sophistication and formal economy. Narrative formulae and characterizations were so well understood as to constitute a kind of media folklore; and in this form they invited all sorts of virtuosic and allegorical play with forbidden or difficult subjects: coexistence, civil rights, homosexuality, psychoanalysis. But because the genre's material had been so heavily encoded as referring to history and politics, this artistic play was actually quite serious as both a reflection of and an influence on the ideologies of Cold War liberalism and conservatism in the years preceding the Vietnam War.

One of the most important subgenres of the Western had been the so-called "Cult of the Outlaw," derived from Henry King's epic version of Jesse James in 1939. These films had taken a Depression-era view of the outlaw as social bandit, rooting his outlawry in an experience of social oppression at the hands of corporate tyrants (railroads) or military despots (Reconstruction officers). Outlaw Westerns embodied the most explicitly populist reading of the West, and functioned as vehicles for social and political criticism. Starting in 1950, however, with Henry King's The Gunfighter, the outlaw character was reduced to the simple elements of his screen persona: his loneliness and alienation, his living outside the law, and his skill with a gun. In place of the elaborately narrated social motives of outlawry, the gunfighter appeared as a man al-
most entirely lacking in a past, or in the social motives that drove the outlaw. This tendency reached its most extreme development in Clint Eastwood's Westerns of the early '70s, in which the hero is so abstracted from history of any kind that he is called "The Man with No Name."

The ideological significance of the shift from outlaw to gunfighter can be seen in the contrast between King's *Jesse James* and George Stevens' *Shane* (1953). King's movie spends most of its narrative describing and analyzing the outlaw's response to oppression and injustice; and relates these concerns to the life of the outlaw's community, showing how Jesse emerges from the heart of that community, serves it, then goes too far and is cast out of it. The hero of *Shane* is also a skilled fighter who assists small farmers against a tyrannical proprietor. But Shane arrives from outside, and his past is concealed. His style, manners and speech mark him as an aristocrat of some kind, and the deference with which he is treated is due to both his air of refinement and his skill with a gun. He is the only character in the movie who never acts (or hesitates to act) from self-interested motives. But because Shane's motives for helping the farmers are unique, and arise from no visible history or social background, they appear to be expressions of his nature, signs of a chivalric nobility which is independent of history, like the attributes of a "higher race." Shane is never part of the community, and his superior values are not seen as belonging to that community. He is an aristocrat of violence, an alien from a more glamorous world, who is better than those he helps and is not accountable to those for whom he sacrifices himself.

*Shane's* popularity was exploited in a wave of Westerns that developed the figure of the gunfighter as chivalric rescuer. In order to get new stories out of well-used material, these films queried the romantic idealism of Shane, played variations on the opposition of economic and chivalric motives for violence, and teased new issues out of the original problem of the hero's proper relation to the erotic life and the cash nexus. A more naturalistic version of the gunfighter appeared, in which the hero begins as a mercenary professional, and experiences a kind of "conversion" to the chivalric ideal in the course of the action. The means to this conversion is usually the love of a woman, who promises both the fulfillment of romantic desire and reconciliation with a social code that demands self-sacrifice. One of the earliest and most spectacular exercises in this vein was also the first of the "Mexico Westerns," *Vera Cruz* (1954), directed by Robert Aldrich and starring
Burt Lancaster and Gary Cooper. The film drew criticism for its lavish and humorous display of cynical and self-interested motives in both hero and heavy. But its strong association of heroic competence with mercenary pragmatism set the pattern for future "adult" Westerns.

The substitution of a glamorous professional—at once a knight-errant and a mercenary—for a populist rebel as the model of an American hero echoes the shift of New Deal liberalism from radical critique to technocratic self-satisfaction. But the fictive politics of the Western represents more than the surface features of a leadership style—it deals in the fundamentals of power and force. The irreducible core of the Western story-line is its provision of a rationalizing framework which will explain and justify a spectacular act of violence. Since violence and force are aspects of politics and social control, when the movie-maker provides a motive and scenario for Western violence some of the most basic ideological concerns of the society are engaged. The terms of this response are necessarily coded in the terms of myth, substituting heroic images and styles of behavior for elaborate rationalizations of policy. But the mythic code allowed movie-makers to address the same ideological problems that engaged the policy-makers of the 1950s and '60s as well as to produce the scenario of the Mexico Western as the mythic counterpart of the scenario of counter-insurgency warfare. Together, the projected visions of policy and movie scenarists constituted a whole system, in which myth and ideology acted reciprocally to influence and reinforce each other.13

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Between 1954 and 1960 there had been a major change in the character of the Cold War, which posed serious problems for policy, and raised significant ideological dilemmas. The successes of the Marshall Plan and NATO had effectively limited Communist expansion in Europe; and the West's refusal to intervene in the Eastern Bloc uprisings of 1953-56 made it clear that there would be no attempt to "roll back the Iron Curtain." The focus of East-West competition shifted to the so-called Third World—the developing countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America, from which the power of European colonial empires had recently been withdrawn.14

This focal shift required a change in diplomatic and military strategies, and an ideological reorientation of popular politics. The ideological premises of the war against the Nazis and the Japanese empire had been anti-colonialist, and had included (in the Good
Neighbor Policy) a rhetorical repudiation of the cruder forms of American imperialism in Latin America. There was also a powerful strain of anti-militarism, even in wartime propaganda, which echoed some of the older traditions of American isolationism. In the early years of the Cold War, American leaders felt that their most difficult political problem was to overcome the public’s isolationist tendencies and distrust of the military, in order to build the European alliance and remobilize military strength that had been so hastily and happily dismantled in 1945-46. Russia’s development of atomic weaponry, Stalin’s aggressive moves in the Czechoslovakian and Berlin crises of 1948, and Communist political successes in western Europe had created the sense of crisis necessary to gain public support of NATO, but it was by no means clear that the public would support with equal consistency and understanding a broad-ranging and expensive competition with Communism in a swarm of new nations across three continents.

This new Cold War would also be different in kind from any the public had supported in the recent past. It would be a struggle against the threat of annihilation, as the World Wars had been, yet it would not be fought in the open, against the primary enemy. Rather, it would be waged indirectly and secretively, through espionage and subversion, and through covert operations. The Doolittle Report of 1954, which drew up a new charter for the CIA, dramatized the conflict as one requiring a choice between fighting in an American way that is presumed to be fair, decent and innocent, and an enemy way that is brutal, deceitful and repugnant:

> It is now clear that we are facing an implacable enemy whose avowed objective is world domination. There are no rules in such a game. Hitherto acceptable norms of human conduct do not apply. If the United States is to survive, longstanding American concepts of fair play must be reconsidered. We must learn to subvert, sabotage, and destroy our enemies by more clever, more sophisticated, and more effective methods than those used against us. It may become necessary that the American people be made acquainted with, understand and support this fundamentally repugnant philosophy.

Although the Doolittle Report referred primarily to the need for clandestine struggle against the Soviets in Europe, its primary application would be in the more primitive settings of Asia, Africa and Latin America. There were a limited number of recent American historical experiences on which to draw for models of this
new kind of warfare. The most recent examples were those of European imperial armies in the anti-guerilla campaigns in Malaysia and Vietnam. Bureaucratic compartmentalization insulated army planners from the institutional memory of the Marine Corps, which had developed its own counterinsurgency doctrine during the "banana wars" of 1915-35. If there were American models they were much older, and were known primarily through the historical mythology of the Indian wars.18

Like the Indian, the new enemy is seen as primitive, implacable and savage. He does not fight by civilized rules; he can only be defeated by someone like Fenimore Cooper's Hawkeye, or the dime novels' Buffalo Bill—"a man who knows Indians" well enough to fight like them. The American answer to the communist wars of national liberation would be to create a mirror-image of the enemy, an American guerrilla fighter, a Green Beret.19

The triumph of counter-insurgency as a policy was signaled by John F. Kennedy's election in 1960. Kennedy's campaign had established him as the symbol of a new, youthful, innovative and activist spirit in foreign affairs—a spirit which he identified with the Myth of the Frontier through his choice of "New Frontier" as his administration's heroic epithet. Although counter-insurgency doctrine, and the Special Forces themselves, had been developed under Eisenhower, both were seen as innovations of the New Frontier. The Green Berets in particular were identified with Kennedy in the public mind, as the military expression of the President's heroic style.20

Kennedy's foreign policy projected a counter-offensive against Communism in the Third World, under liberal auspices. His inaugural address, and the policy formulations that followed it, framed the project as one of personal moral regeneration, achieved through action in a particular heroic style. The New Frontiersman borrowed the tough/tender pose of the Hemingway hero, as well as the movie versions of the type represented in the urban setting by Humphrey Bogart, and in the war and Western setting by John Wayne. The Kennedy-style hero was expected to be tough-minded in assessing human motives, but at the same time idealistic enough to "ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." Patriotic service was required, not for a single Errol Flynn-like cavalry charge, but for a "long twilight struggle" against tyranny and poverty. But that moral project was contained within a politically and economically conservative paradigm: "If we cannot help the many who are poor, we cannot save the few
who are rich." Ultimately, the policy was designed not only to maintain American power, but to justify it by linking it with the New Deal tradition of concern for social welfare. Kennedy, however, translated New Deal ideology into the terms of chivalric mythology: the vision of a world polity "in which the strong are just, and the weak are protected"—a line paraphrased from Teddy Roosevelt, but owing something to the Arthurian slogan "might in the cause of right" from Camelot.21

Americans as a people would have to give their consent to a complex project of "caring for" the poor of the Third World. With their consent given, however, the deeds of charity would be vicarious. The actual work would be entrusted to small elite cadres of volunteers, who would live among the natives and learn their ways, but who would resist the temptation to "go native," and instead begin the process of modernizing—which is to say, Americanizing—the indigenous cultures. The Peace Corps and the Green Berets were two sides of this coin, mirror-images of Kennedy-style heroism. Both would pride themselves on their volunteer spirit, and their radical pragmatism—their ability to improvise techniques on the ground, and to overcome the hidebound regimes of red tape and bureaucratic restraint. Both would begin by achieving mastery of the local rules, mirroring the wiles of the native enemy to defeat that enemy on his own ground. For the Peace Corps, this meant a style of work that required the volunteer to "get his/her hands dirty." In the case of the CIA and Green Berets, "fighting dirty," fighting "like the Indians," was part of the original charter. In Vietnam this style of warfare was expected to prove itself in the field.

The mystique of the Special Forces involved almost from the start a peculiar kind of identification with the enemy—a by-product of the "mirror-image" definition of the counter-guerilla—which affected both the Green Beret self-image and the public response. The Special Forces' success in achieving this Indian/outlaw style is measured by the hostility of regular army officers to the very idea of Special Forces, and by legends of combat savagery, ruthlessness and contempt for taboos and red tape. Rambo is a recent reflection of the phenomenon, but the roots of the mystique go back to the pseudo-historical figures of the "man who knows Indians," to the several claimants to the title "Robin Hood of the Old West," and to more modern types like the hard-boiled detective. Shelby Stanton, in his history of the Green Berets, describes them as a professional elite, "a small number of specially selected and
highly trained soldiers." Yet they are also classic "rugged individualists," cast from the same mold as John Wayne's characters in films like *Fort Apache* (1948) and *The Searchers* (1956): capable of going beyond standard operating doctrine, and staring down bureaucratic sneers at "crackpot non-Army" methods; ready for "insertion" anywhere in the world, "able to survive the most hostile environment, and to take care of themselves and others...to be independent thinkers, able to grasp opportunities and innovate with the materials at hand...." They were to operate in teams, called A-Teams, consisting of an officer and six sergeants—that is to say, seven men.22

Which brings us to *The Magnificent Seven*, which tells the story of a group of American gunfighters—professionals and technicians of violence, rugged individualists all—who go into Mexico to aid a peasant village against a predatory warlord or bandit who controls their region.23 Before Kennedy took office, before the Special Forces landed in Saigon, movie-makers had begun to imaginatively explore and test out the mythological and ideological premises that lay behind the counterinsurgency of the New Frontier. The movie is a complex reflecting mechanism, not simply a device for propagating Cold War values. By combining the political concerns of the new Cold War with the traditional terms of the Western, *Magnificent Seven* frames a vision which on the one hand rationalizes and justifies counter-insurgency, but which also exposes the contradictions and weaknesses of that ideology, and the military practices the policy begot.

John Sturges' *The Magnificent Seven* was released several months before Kennedy's inauguration, and had begun production long before the 1960 presidential campaign. Obviously, we are not dealing with a case of direct influence (unless the film influenced the President). Rather, film and President share a common set of ideological premises, a common mythology, and a common conception of heroic style.

Sturges' film was officially an American remake of Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*—a film which itself owed a great deal to American Westerns, and which had enjoyed both commercial success and critical prestige during its run in the States. *The Magnificent Seven* was successful in ways that go beyond its considerable box office: it became the basis of imitation and a rich source of popular icons. The musical score by Elmer Bernstein be-
came the Marlboro cigarette theme-song, and thus part of one of the major advertising triumphs of the era, which ended by identifying the whole West as "Marlboro country." Yul Brynner and Eli Wallach revived and redirected their flagging careers from the film’s success. Supporting player Steve McQueen emerged immediately as a major star, to be followed by others of the Seven: Horst Buchholz, James Coburn, Robert Vaughn and Charles Bronson. Several sequels and innumerable imitations of the film have been made in both Europe and the United States over the last 25 years, in the combat and science fiction genres as well as the Western, many starring one or more of the original players.24

A poor Mexican village is being raided and tyrannized by Calvera (Wallach), a brutal and complex villain who acts like a bandit, but speaks the language of paternal authority—"I am a father to these men; they depend on me"—to justify his rape of the village. Driven at last to resist, the villagers send a delegation to the United States to buy guns, but they discover that in the US, guns are expensive while "men are cheap." Apparently the end of the wild
west phase of the frontier has thrown a lot of gunfighters into un-
employment. The peasants show their amenability to modern-
ization by the speed with which they learn to think like capitalists,
and take advantage of the situation. They decide to hire an
American mercenary.

The peasants’ decision is aided by a moral drama to which they
are an audience. The town drunk has died—an Indian named ‘Old
Sam”—and the town’s bigots will not let him be buried in Boot Hill.
True to the canons of the outlaw and the Indian-centered Westerns
of the ’40s and early ’50s, the film invokes a kind of pastoral nostal-
gia as the basis for a critique of American social hypocrisy. But the
scene also invokes current history, specifically the civil rights bat-
tles of the previous five years, some of which concerned the in-
tegration of southern military graveyards.

At this point two gunfighters step forward, drive the hearse to
the cemetery, stand off the bullies, and bury the Indian. These are
Chris and Vin (Brynner and McQueen)—Chris is a solemn, black-
clad figure, Vin a laid-back, easy man with a Mark Twain style, full
of folk-sayings, irony and tall tales. It is not clear why they do it;
not a word is said about integration or racism, nor do they accept
money, though both are out of funds. It appears that the sight of
injustice, and of an important job undone, is more than they can
resist: ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can
do for your country.

Old Sam’s funeral highlights the central importance of racial
imagery in the adaptation of Kurosawa’s film to American and
Western-movie terms. Seven Samurai’s narrative counterpoints two
kinds of conflict: the tactical struggle of the samurai to save the
peasants from the bandits, and the class conflict between the values
and practices of the fading military aristocracy and the peasantry.
The ideological tradition of the Frontier Myth, even in its most
sophisticated historiographical formulations, had always insisted
on American exceptionalism and our exemptions from the class con-
flicts of the Old World. The gestures toward the mythic repre-
sentation of class conflicts made during the Depression were very
tentative; even in the "outlaw" Westerns of 1939-50, the oppressed
farmers are seen as a mistreated interest group rather than a
peasantry. Now, in 1960, the only way the American producers can
imagine American engagement with the issues of class raised by
Seven Samurai is to identify class with race, and project the conflict
beyond the borders, into the Third World.

The contrasting motives that impel gunfighters and peasants
are presented as the signs of both class and racial difference. The peasants try to persuade Chris to help them by using a naive and inconsistent mixture of crass materialism ("We can pay you well") and a sentimental appeal to his sympathies. In fact, the money they offer is inadequate by Chris' professional and American standards, and Chris has already demonstrated his contempt for mere sentiment by dismissing the effusive praise an eastern "drummer" offers for his burial of Old Sam. The American's moral choices are determined by a mix of motives more complex and "sophisticated" than the Mexican peasants can imagine. Accessibility to the appeal of human sympathy and the needs of the weak is balanced and offset by the hard-headed materialism and tactical pragmatism of the mercenary, and the pride of the professional man of arms, for whom violence is a calling, a discipline and an art. What tips Chris' balance is his discovery that the little bag of coins and the gold watch the Mexicans offer are their sole possessions. He squares his chivalric sympathies with professional hard-headedness by saying, "I have been offered a lot for my services before, but never everything."

Chris then recruits six other gunfighters, through an elaborate series of tests and rituals. The narrative thus makes clear that the force that must aid the Mexicans is an elite one, carefully chosen by means that are technically and morally sophisticated. But the group which is put together is designed to emphasize the range and variety of skills and motives that compose such a killer elite. The common denominator is tough-mindedness and professionalism; the test for this is adherence to the formulas of self-interest. The good work of saving the Third World is not to be undertaken in the sentimental or idealistic spirit of romantic missionaries; it is to be firmly based in realism and a sense of self-interest, the implication being that pure idealism is too rare and perishable a quality to sustain a long twilight struggle.

There is only one pure mercenary in the crowd, however—Chris' oldest friend, Harry, who refuses to believe that there is not some hidden treasure Chris is angling for. For the rest, professionalism (as an ideal and a social status) weighs equally with cash values: Vin joins up because he is out of money, and must choose between killing for low wages or clerking in a store—"good, steady work," one of the Mexicans tells him. But Vin despises that kind of work, and the loss of status and dignity that it suggests, and he paradoxically demonstrates his contempt for the Mexican's values by immediately enlisting in the villagers' cause. The maintenance
of professional status outweighs the "peasant" (actually, the bourgeois) considerations of cash value and security.

From the first, then, we see that the differences between Mexicans and Americans have both a racial and a class aspect: the Americans are a white aristocracy or elite, whose caste-mark is their capacity for effective violence; the Mexicans are non-white peasants, technologically and militarily incompetent. Professionalism is thus a metonymy of the class and ethnic superiority of Americans to Mexicans. As more gunfighters are recruited, this definition is developed and extended. The most professional of the crew, Reb (James Coburn), is like a Zen master gunfighter; he joins because he sees an occasion to test himself and exercise his skills, and this compensates for the low pay—professionalism here is a form of religious discipline or calling. Lee (Robert Vaughan) is the neurotic gunfighter, who joins up to get away from his past, and from the vengeful Johnson brothers—professionalism is the last virtue of a failure, the last strength of the psychically damaged. The youngest and least competent of the gunfighters, Chico or "The Kid" (Horst Buchholz), is a child of Mexican peons (who may have been killed by bandits or gringo gunfighters), who wants

Chris (Yul Brynner), Chico (Horst Buchholz) and Vin (Steve McQueen) try to help the Mexican villagers.
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desperately to be one of the elite—professionalism is the means to Americanization, higher status, self-transformation. This theme is emphasized by the role of Bernardo Riley (Bronson), the child of a Mexican mother and an Irish father, whose identity is split between pride in his status as American killer-professional, and nostalgia for the maternal and familial values represented by Mexico.

In these seven, Sturges gives us a sampling of the major types of gunfighter developed by the movies in the preceding decade: the wild kid, the crazed neurotic, the aristocratic loner, the folksy populist, the ethnic outsider seeking acceptance. By multiplying heroes in this way, Sturges enlarges a form that had canonically focused on the single gunfighter. He gives us a platoon of lonely men, whose motives map the range of heroic motives, and even take in a range of ethnic possibilities: Reb is a Southerner, Chris a Cajun, Riley is Irish and Mexican, Chico is Mexican. In effect, Sturges has merged the conventions of the Western and the combat movie—the adventure of the lonely man blends with the adventure of the representative platoon. Although these men are gunfighters, the form of their recruitment and association suggests that they are also commandos, or Green Berets.

Once in the village, the gunfighters begin to train the Mexicans in self-defense. As in the combat film, there is comic contrast between the incompetence and innocence of the peons (recruits) and the expertise and professionalism of the gunfighters (sergeants). There is also ethnic tension and mutual suspicion: the farmers hide their wives and daughters, and otherwise show their distrust, until action proves the worth of the gunfighters. Likewise, the gunfighters maintain a professional reserve; they will help only as long as the peasants keep their bargain and obey orders. They keep reminding themselves that it is a canon of their professional code not to get emotionally involved with their work. Each party modifies the other, however. Association with the tribal life of the village softens the gunfighters, specifically by evoking paternal feelings. The key figure here is Riley, who becomes a father-figure to a group of children, and who will be killed at the end because of them. For Riley, acceptance of the children means accepting the part of himself that is Mexican, but he does this in a style that affirms his own higher paternalism—the paternalism of violence—even while he denies it. When the children ask to go with him, because they despise the cowardice of their peasant fathers, Riley spanks them, and orders them to believe that their fathers are not cowards because they cannot fight, that it takes more courage to be
a good father and breadwinner than to be a gunfighter.

This nominal ideology, however, is undercut by the film's entire structure, which shows frame by frame that the gunfighter is both technically and morally superior to the farmer. This clash of nominal and actual ideology is brought to full articulation in a scene late in the film, in which the gunfighters, questioned by Chico, voice their code in a formal chorus. The gunfighters begin to get sentimental about the village and its families; lonely technocrats dreaming of a lost pastoral. But Chico breaks into the mood, reminding them that "you owe everything to the gun"—no false pastoral for Chico, he knows the dark side of peon life all too well. Chico's question provokes the gunfighters to think things over, and each answers him in turn, at first emphasizing the emptiness of their life—"Home? None. Wife? None. Kids? None." Then Chris and the others chime in, and the balance shifts towards the pride and power of their calling—"Places tied down to? None. Men you step aside for? None." Although the passage is meant to underline the ideological premise that the solid family life and working-class virtues of the Mexicans are morally superior to gunfighting, it becomes a paean to rugged individualism. The audience's emotional response is voiced by Chico, the peon who would be a gunfighter: "This is the kind of arithmetic I like!"

Thus the film's visual and stylistic apparatus valorize the gunfighter ethic of violence, mobility and individualism at the expense of the farmer-values, the peon-values. The gunfighters are "good paternalists," whose order conforms to the Camelot slogan, which described the ideal world order as one in which "the strong are just, and the weak are protected." But the movie is consciously ironic in its deployment of this chivalric/paternalistic structure, because the most eloquent spokesman in the movie for paternalistic ideology, the most eloquent sloganeer for the party of order, is none other than Calvera the bandit.

The characterization of Calvera is very different from Kurosawa's bandit chief. The latter is virtually an abstraction of evil ferocity; Calvera has complexity and irony, and sardonic humor of a kind that has great appeal on the screen. There is even a kind of perverse innocence in his belief that all men, and especially all thieves and professional mercenaries, can be trusted to act on a rational calculation of self-interest. When he first arrives to rape the village, he says he must do so because he is "a father to his men," who depend on him; and he praises the village for its old-fashioned piety and hard work. He has a mouth full of cynical proverbs: "If
God did not mean them to be sheared, he would not have made them sheep."

He is more than a simple bandit, then. The movie's imagery links him to figures like Villa and Zapata, who (in their movie biographies) are transformed from horseback bandits to social revolutionaries. If Calvera looks like Villa or Zapata, he talks like Porfirio Diaz or General Huerta, cynically mouthing paternalistic slogans and religious pieties while he "taxes" the village. Clearly he is more accurately described as a "warlord" than as a bandit, but since we cannot limit Calvera's type specifically to either the revolutionary left or the patriarchal right, he becomes an abstraction of the tyrannical potential inherent in the "extremes." This paradoxical combination makes Calvera the perfect enemy: the enemy counterinsurgency always sought and never found, the enemy who is native, but more hated by the people than the alien Americans, who represents simultaneously the principle of excessive order (tyranny) and excessive disorder (banditry, revolution), who embodies two "extremes," leaving the center to the Americans.

Calvera is a savage parody of paternalism, but as such, he also offers a critique—implied and stated—of the character and motives of the Americans. Like them, he is a professional, which is to say a man whose actions are motivated by pure pragmatism, self-interest, and an advanced understanding of weapons and tactics. This parallel is perceived by every Mexican, from Calvera to Chico to the townspeople themselves. When Calvera appeals to the understanding of self-interest and pragmatism common to all professionals, he expects the Seven to understand, and is mystified when they persist in acting "unprofessionally." "We are in the same business," Calvera says. They are thieves—why do they pretend to be policemen?

The parallel becomes sharper as the plot moves toward its crisis. After Calvera's first attack is repulsed, the villagers realize that they will have to fight to the death against the outraged bandit. A party of appeasement arises, and Chris suppresses it by demanding that the peasants choose now between fighting and surrender. He holds a kind of false plebiscite right there in Sotero's bar; and when those present (some of whom are intimidated by his glare) choose to fight, he tells them that they are now committed, and if anyone backs off or tries to get out of it, Chris will shoot him. Chris deals with Sotero and the Mexican fathers as Riley deals with the children: he "spanks" and disciplines them coercively, replacing their authority with his own in everything but name; he asserts
that this paternalistic coercion will make them free and independent adult men.

The paradox in Chris's response to Sotero mirrors the contradiction on which the Green Beret approach to counter-insurgency foundered. At the center of the counter-insurgency ideology was the assumption of American superiority, not merely at the level of technology and technique, but at the level of political culture, consciousness and commitment. According to Cable's study, between 1956 and 1962 American counter-insurgency doctrine held that "the organic and unsponsored insurgency was [not] a viable possibility." It was "the American political shibboleth that insurgency could not be organic," but must absolutely depend upon an "external sponsor," not only for the material of war, but for political will, for the motivation that initiates and sustains purposeful political action over a period of years and decades.

This belief blinded policy-makers not only to the political character of the North Vietnamese regime, but also to the existence of an indigenous political culture in the South. If the native political culture was null, it followed that the American task would be to supply something in the place of nothing: to inscribe the forms of national organization on the "blank slate" of a pre-nationalist culture. Like Fenimore Cooper's Hawkeye, the Green Beret "knows Indians" and mirrors their qualities, but his mission (after all) is not to vindicate and protect their culture, but to discredit, transform, and replace it with a "more civilized" model. Thus the various programs of "reform" and "nation-building" tended to become programs of Americanization. Since there was in fact a strong and intractable political culture in Vietnam, however, Americanization of the war served only to alienate the people it was intended to protect, and to allow the Communists to identify themselves with the defense of the indigenous culture.

At the moment when Chris asserts his dominance, the narrative of Magnificent Seven departs radically from the plot of Kurosawa's Seven Samurai. The samurai and villagers achieve a kind of comradeship, and their solidarity is never broken. But the gunfighters dictate to the villagers; and the villagers betray the Seven to Calvera. For at least some in the village, Chris and Calvera are morally equivalent, and Calvera is in some ways preferable—or at least, he seems the more powerful and inescapable of the two. This moral equivalency is voiced again by Calvera, who says that "A thief who robs from a thief is pardoned for a thousand years...I pardon you!" He allows them to live, and returns their guns to them, in return for
their promise to leave Mexico. His reasons are thoroughly professional—he recognizes that the Seven probably have friends in the States who would avenge them. Calvera doesn’t want gringo trouble; he’s won his point, proven the enterprise futile. He expects men of similar professional expertise to recognize the facts, and bow to them in a rational and disinterested spirit.

Calvera’s version of a "Geneva settlement" offers the gunfighters peace at the expense of their honor, and it is clear that they are humiliated by his terms. But Chris’ behavior, and his discussion with the most mercenary of the gunfighters (Harry), confirms Calvera’s assertion that the arrangement is rational and in perfect accord with the code of more-or-less-enlightened self-interest by which the professional, modern man determines his actions. Indeed, Calvera’s treaty is just the sort of pragmatic stick-and-carrot deal which President Johnson offered the North Vietnamese in his speech at Johns Hopkins in April 1965. The logic behind the offer derived from the deterrent aspect of counter-insurgency doctrine, which aimed at deterring future guerrilla wars by demonstrating a will to impose "excessively high" costs on the enemy.29

The Seven are "magnificent" because they follow the imperatives of pride and "honor," rather than the ethic of rational self-interest. Rational self-interest, as a principle of action, is rendered morally questionable by its association with Calvera. At work here is an ideological double-standard, which sees Americans and their (non-white) enemies as governed by fundamentally different motives and standards. What is sanity and reason for the enemy is madness and dishonor for us; what is "selfless idealism" in the Seven would appear as irrational fanaticism in an enemy. Moreover, it is clear that the American chivalric standard is the higher of the two: carrots and sticks appeal only to a lower order of moral intelligence. Americans ask not what their country can do for them (nor fear what it may do to them), but ask what they can do for their country.

The decision of the Seven to return to the village heightens the distinction between hapless Mexicans and powerful Americans. The gunfighters will go back and redeem the village in spite of the villagers’ betrayal, in the teeth of evidence that the village polity does not fully sustain them, and that its culture is alien to them. Their motives are again mixed: Chris, Vin and Riley have learned to care about the little people of the town; Chico wants to vindicate his race. The common denominator is that their reasons are personal: they will finish the fight to resolve moral dilemmas which
arise more from their character as Americans and professionals than from any real tie to the village. They return because their feelings of affection for the village and their desire for symbolic vindication now coincide precisely; there is no choice between making love and making war—pragmatically, they have become the same thing.

Again, the movie reads accurately the mix of values in the political ideology of the Green Beret moment in foreign affairs. More than this, it predicts the direction in which that ideology would move: from an assertion that Vietnam must be defended for material reasons of national interest, to the assertion that the war is necessary as a "symbol" of American determination, down to the strident and pathetic demands of Nixon and Kissinger that the war must be continued and extended—through bloody infantry assaults on symbolic targets, through signals in the form of massive bombing campaigns—to prevent our being perceived as "a pitiful helpless giant." 30

In the movie, what follows this shift is a massacre scene which, had it been filmed a few years later, would have raised echoes of

"Ask not what your village can do for you...." Led by Chris, the Seven play out a Camelot scenario, where the strong are just and the weak are protected. But ironically, Calvera is the most elegant sloganeer of this doctrine.
My Lai. The Seven stage a commando-style attack on the village, in which bandits and townsfolk are completely intermingled; yet so expert is their technique that they never kill any townspeople, they only and precisely kill bandits. The mythical "surgical strike," so central to the fantasies of military scenario-makers, and the counter-insurgency fantasy of killing the guerillas without harming any of the peasants, are visualized here. But the literal representation of the attack as an extermination of the bandits is offset by the visual impression that this is indeed an attack on the village which has betrayed them. The contrast with Kurosawa's movie throws this point into high relief: Kurosawa's samurai are never outside the village, and in the last attack samurai and peasants fight as comrades. Sturges goes out of his way to show that, in the crisis, the peasants are helpless, dependent on the violent incursion of the Americans outside—and on the chivalric caritas of men who owe them nothing, except perhaps contempt. Only when the Americans have begun their act of self-sacrifice do the peasants join them.

The surviving gunfighters do not remain in the village after their triumph, however. Only Chico stays behind, to marry a local girl—the film's only bit of sexual romance. The Americans help this world, but literally have no interest in it; they are not hewers of wood and drawers of water, but professionals. This ending also fulfills in fantasy the scenario of counter-insurgency, which envisioned the victorious Green Berets—like Washington after the Revolution—declining the mantle of imperial rule. With the old colonial power gone, and the new Communist takeover defeated, the Green Berets could safely turn power back to the natives, or rather to a new class of Americanized leaders—that elusive "Third Force" envisioned by policy makers, that would be neither communist nor reactionary, neither peasant nor landlord. The war done, the Americans leave the scene, either to go back home or, like the Lone Ranger, to ride on to similar adventures in yet another imperilled town.

Magnificent Seven is, as I've presented it, nearly an allegory of American policy in Vietnam. Like the traditional Westerns that preceded it, it appears to offer a "genetic myth" or fictive history, in which a crisis in the fictive Old West appears as a primitive anticipation of some contemporary crisis—as if gunfighters historically "grew up" to be Green Berets. It's vital to recall, however, that the film was made before the government decided to make Vietnam
a test-case of counter-insurgency. The movie actually seems to anticipate both the promulgation of that policy and the crisis that tested its assumptions and called the policy into question. There is no prophetic gift involved in the process. The movie imagines its problem in these terms because it speaks out of the same ideological concerns that gave us our counter-insurgency policy; both movie and policy-makers share and exploit the same language of myth, the same images of heroism and of enemy savagery, the same narrow and essentially racist views of non-white peoples and cultures.

Like the scenarists of strategic operations, the movie scenarist projects ideological imperatives onto a fictive model of conflict, whose elements are identified by mythic templates. Both scenarists stereotype heroes and villains, type-casting the roles to determine outcomes. Both use the fictive scenario to play out the conflict to some final resolution or end. But the mythic scenarios of movies are contained within the framework of fiction and imaginative play. Even a film as drenched in ideological symbolism and concern as Magnificent Seven is not reducible to a determined allegory of ideology, pointing in a single direction. The movie turns the ideological question this way and that, indulges in ironic asides that suggest alternative perspectives, some of which call into question the basis of the film's nominal ideology, as Calvera and Sotero, and the gunfighters in their different ways, question Chris' motives, character and tactics. The best of the "Mexico Westerns"—Peckinpah's The Wild Bunch—deployed a corrosive irony not only against the premises and results of the war, but against the mythological heritage of Peckinpah's chosen genre.

The fictions of the policy-makers—once they are manifested in the political realm—become true allegories of power. They impose their categories on experience, determining both our reading of the real world and our responses to it. They save all the good lines for our side, giving no license to the ironic view that questions the premise or suggests an alternative. They use power to create "facts" that will justify the use of power, driving events deliberately toward the conclusion which the allegory-makers have pre-determined. Above all, they misread events which suggest that the scenario has gone awry: we are in Vietnam and not in movie-Mexico—and gunfighters don't grow up to become Green Berets.
Notes

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2. On the tendency of commercial mass media to organize stories into genres or formulas, see John G. Cawelti, Adventure, Mystery and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture (Chicago, 1976), ch. 1; Michael Denning, Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America (London, 1987), esp. Part I.


4. Jeanine Basinger, The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre (New York, 1986), 178-9, 244-5, 296-304. Even such problematic aspects of the war as the necessity for shooting at civilians to get at guerrillas hiding among them were treated openly and positively. See for example One Minute to Zero (1950).

5. The problem requires more discussion than I can give it here. Although the Vietnam War became profoundly divisive after 1967, from 1961 to 1966 opinion polls reflected favorable views of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations' policies. Yet even during this period, no movies were produced on the subject of American combat in Vietnam. Obviously, a change had occurred in the industry's sense of ideological mission, and/or its relationship to public affairs. On public opinion see George McT. Kahin, Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam (Garden City, NY, 1987), 72, 286-90.

6. Basinger, World War II Combat Film, passim.

7. Representative titles include: Wings of the Hawk (1953); Border River and Vera Cruz (1954); The Naked Dawn and The Treasure of Pancho Villa (1955); Bandido! and Santiago (1956); The Last of the Fast Guns and Villal (1958); The Wonderful Country and They Came to Cordura (1959); The Magnificent Seven (1960); The Comancheros (1961); The Savage Guns (1962); Gringo (1963); A Fistful of Dollars and The Outrage (1964); Major Dundee, Murietta (1965); The Appaloosa, A Bullet for the General, Django, The Professionals and Return of the Seven (1966); Bandolero!, Blue, Guns of the Magnificent Seven, 100 Rifles and Villa Rides (1968); Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, The Undefeated, and The Wild Bunch (1969); The Bounty Hunters, Joaquin Murietta and Two Mules for Sister Sara (1970). The subject of American heroes in Mexico is also treated in cavalry Westerns (esp. John Ford's Fort Apache [1948] and Rio Grande [1950] and They Came to Cordura [1959]); and in films dealing with the battle of the Alamo (Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier and The Last Command [1955], The Alamo [1960]). Figures and images from these parallel subgenres were borrowed to enlarge "gunfighter" Mexico Westerns, particularly in post-escalation films like The Professionals, Major Dundee and The Wild Bunch. The mixture of Quixotic heroism and racism in the character played by John Wayne in John Ford's The Searchers is suggested by his having been not only a veteran of the South's Lost Cause, but of Maximilian's fight against Juarez.


11. Eric J. Hobsbawm, Bandits (New York, 1969) esp. chs. 1-2, 6, 8-9. Representative "outlaw" Westerns are The Return of Frank James, Wyoming and When the Daltons Rode (1940), Bad Men of Missouri and Belle Starr (1941), Bad Bascomb and Bad Man's Territory (1946), The Younger Brothers (1949), Kansas Raiders (1950), Best of the Badmen and The Great Missouri Raid (1951), The True Story of Jesse James (1957).

12. This was consistent with the novel on which the film was based: "He was the man who rode into our valley out of the heart of the great glowing West and when his work was done rode back whence he had come and he was Shane." Jack Schaefer, Shane: The Critical Edition, ed. by James C. Work (Lincoln, NB, 1984), 274.


18. On savage war see Weigley, American Way of War, chs. 7-8; Slotkin, Fatal Environment, 53-4, 59-61.

19. Shelby L. Stanton, Green Berets at War, 11-22; Larry E. Cable, Conflict of Myths: The Development of American Counter-insurgency Doctrine and the Vietnam War, chs. 1, 6; Richard Drinnon, Facing West: Indian-Hating and the Metaphysics of Empire, chs. 21-30.


22. Stanton, Green Berets at War, 19, 21.


24. The sequels and direct imitations are listed with the "Mexico Westerns" in fn 8. The Dirty Dozen and its several imitators owe something to both the concept and the style of Magnificent Seven; the made-for-TV Battle Beyond the Stars (1982) is a science fiction version.

25. See David W. Noble, Historians Against History: The Frontier Thesis and the National Covenant in American Historical Writing Since 1830 (Minneapolis, 1965), esp. chs. 3-5, 7-8.

26. For example, Viva Villa! (1935); Eagle and the Hawk (1950); Viva Zapata! (1952). Vera Cruz (1954) costumes its revolutionary general as a bandit; and the leading spokesman for the cause is a female pickpocket.

27. Cable, Conflict of Myths, 142-6.

