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Unit Pride: Ethnic Platoons and the Myths of American Nationality

Richard Slotkin

We are watching a movie about American soldiers at war. A small unit is about to engage the enemy. They form ranks and the sergeant calls the roll, reeling off a list of names (the camera shows their faces one by one) that is obviously intended to represent the mixture of ethnic, regional, and (usually) racial groups that compose our heterogeneous population. The movie might be *Bataan* (1943), *A Walk in the Sun* (1946), *Fixed Bayonets* (1951), *All the Young Men* (1960), *The Dirty Dozen* (1965), *Platoon* (1986), or *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). The “melting pot” roll call has become a basic trope of the war movie, a cinematic cliché. But it also expresses a myth of American nationality that remains vital in our political and cultural life: the idealized self-image of a multiethnic, multiracial democracy, hospitable to difference but united by a common sense of national belonging. Here, for example, is the response of a reporter to the explosion of the *Challenger* space shuttle in 1985: “The shuttle crew, spectacularly democratic (male, female, black, white, Japanese-American, Catholic, Jewish, Protestant), was the best of us, Americans thought, doing the best of things Americans do. The mission seemed symbolically immaculate, the farthest reach of a perfectly American ambition to cross frontiers. And it simply vanished in the air” (Morrow 23).¹ Virtually all of the ethnic and racial types in the *Challenger* roll call appear in the roll call of *Bataan*, the prototype of the combat-film genre. To its roster *gender* has been added, a reflection of the new status of women as a group seeking admission to first-class citizenship, and an anticipation of the gender integration of the army that would fight in the Persian Gulf War of 1991.

Like all myths, this vision of America as “many in one” appears always to have been with us. But it is in fact a relatively recent innovation in American mythology. *Bataan* was the first

fully articulated statement of what was, in 1943, a new fable of American nationality, as well as a new genre of American movies. However clichéd it may now seem, the emergence of the World War II combat film as a genre marks the shift from the myth of America as essentially a white man's country, to that of a multiethnic, multiracial democracy. In this essay, I would like to look at the origins of this myth and analyze its internal dynamics, using the movie *Bataan* as a case in point. I'll conclude by looking at the way that this myth has evolved from *Bataan* to the post-Vietnam period and consider the ways in which the myth works and fails to work as a device for resolving the problematic relation of race and ethnicity to American nationality.

1

The relationship between ethnicity and nationality has been the subject of searching theoretical discussion in recent years. Anthony D. Smith, Benedict Anderson, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Etienne Balibar (among others) have proposed that the nation-state is a type of community and culture distinct from earlier forms of social organization like the clan, the tribe, or the pre-modern commune. Where earlier forms of community are based on long-standing kinship, customary, and face-to-face relations (which might be characterized as "organic") a nation is (in Anderson's words) an "imagined community" or in Balibar's formulation a "fictive ethnicity" (Balibar and Wallerstein 49).²

No modern state has been constituted by a single, coherent cultural group; all have incorporated disparate and even hostile ethnicities, each with its special history, some with their own language. According to Wallerstein, "A systematic look at the history of the modern world will show . . . that in almost every case statehood preceded nationhood, and not the other way around, despite a widespread myth to the contrary" (Balibar and Wallerstein 81). States become nations when (as Balibar says) groups of diverse origin and culture "are brought mutually to recognize one another within a historical frontier which contain[s] them all." The People, the putative "folk" of the nation, is then "constituted out of various populations subject to a common law" (96).³

The nation is not a home or community, not the singular place in which one might be born and reared, but a generalized or abstract place, which we inhabit through acts of patriotic imagination. Because, as Balibar says, "[n]o nation[-state] possesses an ethnic base naturally," the health of the state requires a myth of national identity, to sustain its solidarity against external

enemies (rival nation-states) and to overcome the disintegrative potential of internal divisions (intercommunal hostility, religious disagreement, class struggle). Hence, "as social formations are nationalized, the populations included within them . . . are ethnicized that is, represent[ed] . . . *as if* they formed a natural community, possessing of itself an identity of origins, culture and interests which transcends individuals and social conditions" (96). In the modern nation-state, this fictive ethnicity is usually named "the People," and it is deemed to have all of the qualities of a person and a community: a will, the power to make social agreements, and an identity expressed through the forms of a distinctive culture. From this "People," the abstract "folk" of the nation-state, and not from any of the singular peoples of the nation's constituent ethnic groups, the authority of the democratic state is said to be derived.

As the state becomes a nation, its proponents use all the instrumentalities of law and culture to substitute identification with the nation's *fictive* ethnicity for the particularities of real ethnicities, the preexisting cultures of province, tribe, sect, class, community, or clan. The primary cultural instruments of nationalization are the educational system and the development of popular or mass media: these provide the citizens with a language of nationality, a common form of speech and reading, a common ideology or moral vocabulary, a common set of historical fables, a pantheon of culture heroes: Charlemagne and Napoleon, Abe Lincoln and Elvis Presley. A common lore: "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." "God helps those who help themselves." "A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do."

Mythology is therefore one of the primary constituents of nationality.⁴ The mythology of the nation-state is a body of stories which vests this abstraction in the figurative flesh of representative heroes, embodying and exalting the character of "the People." Its function is not only to sanctify and glorify the state, but to promote imaginative resolutions of the conflicts that inevitably arise between the constituent ethnicities (or class ideologies) of a culturally diverse folk and the "fictive ethnicity" of the unified nation-state. Because this mythology takes its themes from the character and concerns of the state, and from the system of states in which each nation participates, its fables tend to be preoccupied with boundaries, both territorial and cultural.⁵ The national myth legitimates the state's control of its territory by identifying "the land" as the proper and natural patrimony of its "People" against the claims of a competing nation and its "People." Military narratives are crucial to national myth because they represent individuals directly engaged in the primary

work of the state: establishing or defending its territorial and cultural boundaries against the claims of others.⁶

Here the concept of *race* may be brought into play. By emphasizing the organic or genetic identity of the nation's people, and identifying "otherness" with organic enmity, the race concept "naturalizes" the ideology of the nation and puts the distinction between "our nation" and "the others" beyond the reach of criticism or challenge. But to the extent that the nation-state is divided along lines of culture or class, the metaphor of *race* may also be used internally, to abolish dissidence by equating ideological or cultural difference with a likeness to the racial enemy.⁷

The attempt to racialize a nationality creates a contradiction in the process of nationalization. Racial identification locates the basis of social solidarity in blood-kinship or "nature," a biological essence that cannot be altered by the merely linguistic processes of acculturation. One might learn to speak German, acquire a German culture in German schools, and still fail to qualify for German nationality for lack of a Teutonic ancestry. But the "People" of any modern nation are, almost by definition, *never* of one blood or ancestry. Hence the resort to racialism may intensify the sense of nationality *against* an external "Other"; but it does so at the price of dividing the people internally, as one class of citizens is identified with the blood or culture of the alien "Other."

The theory of nationality as fictive ethnicity is particularly appropriate to the case of the US. Most of the colonies of British North America were chartered as governments before they acquired their constituent (and ethnically varied) peoples.⁸ Likewise, formation of an independent American republic and the development of its federal apparatus preceded the definition and popular acceptance of a distinctly "American" nationality. It was only after the Civil War and Reconstruction that the unitary American nation became a primary focus of ideology and power, superseding loyalties to and personal identification with particular provinces of the federal republic.

The oldest and most basic of American national myths is the "Myth of the Frontier," which sees the discovery, conquest, and settlement of the West as the dominant theme of American history. The historical basis of the myth is the 300-year history of westward expansion, from the founding of Jamestown in 1607 to the conquest of the Philippines in 1902. According to this myth, the history of the frontier—the story of pioneers settling a natural wilderness and fighting wars against a racial and cultural enemy—explains the emergence of the US as a powerful, prosperous, and democratic nation. Most of the values we

think of as distinctively American—rugged individualism, pragmatism, egalitarianism, a sense of “Manifest Destiny,” the idea of America as “the last best hope of earth”—have at one time or another been explained as the consequence of our frontier history. The persistent power of the myth is attested by the prevalence of the Western and its several spin-offs, like the hard-boiled detective story and the final frontier of science fiction, among mass culture genres. The quotation I cited earlier on the *Challenger* disaster defines their “immaculate” mission as the “perfectly American ambition to cross frontiers.”

The Frontier Myth is a complex one, which I have dealt with at length elsewhere. But for this discussion there is one particular aspect of the myth that we need to bear in mind: in its original form, developed between 1780 and 1850, the myth depicts America as a *racial* entity: a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant nation, which defines itself by destroying or subjugating a “non-white” enemy—Native Americans and Mexicans. Although African Americans were part of American society during this period, the myth treats them as internal aliens, “others,” and potential enemies of “the white republic.” In doing so, the myth reflects the reality of an American society which had adopted a “whites only” limitation of American citizenship.⁹

In a myth, the patterns of narrative are the best guide to the cultural values the myth expresses. Political ideas, and concepts of the meaning and purpose of history, are indicated by the way in which characters in the myth treat one another and by the way in which certain kinds of action are seen to produce good results. The central characters of the Frontier Myth represent parties to a racial conflict, and the narrative action of the myth tells us that such a conflict is inevitably violent. Social relations among whites are always seen to be based on mutual consent, and therefore democratic; but whites can deal with Indians only through force, by exterminating or subjugating them—that is, ruling them by force, without their consent. I call this concept the “savage war” myth, and it is an aspect of the Frontier Myth which is also a basic component of the post-World War II myth of multiethnic “unit cohesion.”

The proper American use of force is dramatized in the myth through the character of the hero. The original heroes of the Frontier Myth were pioneer hunters and Indian fighters like Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett. But after the Mexican War of 1846–48, when expansion became more dependent on military power, military events and professional soldiers became progressively more important figures in popular mythology. Whether in buckskin or army blue, the hero was always marked as “The Man

Who Knows Indians”—he was seen as a man morally and spiritually on the border between savagery and civilization, with a “dark” understanding of the enemy, who redeems himself by putting his knowledge at the service of civilization. The typical hero-story involves the rescue of a captive white woman, symbolizing the civilization that is to be saved from savagery. But the more spectacular and historically oriented hero-tales enlarge the rescue story to battlefield scale. The most mythologized military episodes of frontier expansion—the defense of Boonesborough (1777), the Alamo (1835), Custer’s Last Stand (1876), the Charge of the Rough Riders at San Juan Hill (1898)—all have the same mythic structure: a small outnumbered group of white soldiers, led by a “Man Who Knows Indians,” defends America against a dark-skinned enemy.

But the social reality behind the myth began to change after the Civil War. The abolition of slavery and the tremendous influx of immigrants from all over Europe, and from China and Japan as well, profoundly altered the ethnic and racial composition of American society. In this same period, between 1865 and 1900, the political and economic structure of the republic was being transformed: traditional federalism gave way to the institutions and ideologies of a modern nation-state, and the economy of small farms and businesses gave way to an economy dominated by big business corporations operating on the national and international scale.

These developments produced a deep and divisive debate about the nature and extent of American nationality. One school of thought, which I’ll call the *racialist school*, held that American nationality ought to be equivalent to a racial identity. Racism is usually identified with turn-of-the-century Southern populists, segregationists, and Northern or Western nativists who opposed all immigration. But the most influential spokesmen for this view included many notable figures in the so-called Progressive movement, which was ultimately led by Theodore Roosevelt. This group included members of the intellectual and policy-making elite, like the Social Darwinist philosopher William Graham Sumner, the labor historian John R. Commons, the sociologist Henry Fairfield Osborn, and the novelist Owen Wister. They likened American nationality to the nationalities of England and Germany: the basis of the nation is an ancient ancestral tribe or, in German, a *Volk*, whose “blood” or genetic heredity has distinctive qualities or gifts. According to this view, only those who have the proper racial gifts can possibly make themselves compatible with national culture; the others will always remain alien to it. And because they are alien, they will represent a dan-

ger to the basic values and safety of the nation: hence, their political rights have to be limited, even at the cost of limiting democracy itself. For example, in 1877 the *Nation* magazine, a liberal or progressive journal by the standards of the time, responded to the Great Railroad Strike of that year by asserting that the American working classes were now *predominantly* composed of aliens, “to whom American political and social ideals appeal but faintly, if at all, and who carry in their very blood traditions which give universal suffrage an air of menace to many of the things which civilized men hold most dear” (68–69).¹⁰ That was actually before the great waves of immigration began in 1881. By 1907, when Commons published *Races and Immigrants in America*, the official report of President Roosevelt’s Commission of Immigration, these ideas had become a fully elaborated “scientific” philosophy: “These are the basic qualities which underlie democracy intelligence, manliness, cooperation. If they are lacking, democracy is futile. Here is the problem of races, the fundamental division of mankind. Race differences are established in the very blood and physical constitution. . . . Races may change their religions, their forms of government, their mode of industry, and their languages, but underneath all these changes they may continue their physical, mental, and moral capacities and incapacities . . .” (6–7).

Commons says that since African Americans and Asians, and other so-called races of immigrants—Jews, Italians, Slavs (peoples whom we would call “ethnic groups” rather than “races”)—have no *racial* aptitude for democracy, and their admission as political citizens will endanger American society. Consequently, we will have to choose between closing the immigration door and “despotizing our institutions”—that is, take away democratic rights from the racially unqualified.

The racialists defined *American nationality* as either “Anglo-Saxon” or “Teutonic” in its basis, and they developed policies aimed at excluding or minimizing the political power of nonwhites, for example, through the development of “Jim Crow” laws and of European immigrants through literacy tests for voting and severe restrictions on further immigration. This school of thought was most influential in policy-making at the state and national levels from 1890 to 1925.

The *opposition* to racialist nationalism was based on a cultural theory of nationality: the idea that national culture consists of a set of values and a language, which anyone can learn; and that those who acquire and adopt those values can become “naturalized” citizens, whose status is the same as if they had been native born. Leading spokesmen for this view include figures like

the journalist Randolph Bourne, the philosopher John Dewey, the anthropologist Franz Boas, and the historian Frederick Jackson Turner, as well as popular activists in the education and social work communities and urban political parties. Cultural nationalists were advocates of Americanization programs through expanded public schools, and they believed political participation essential to Americanization, and thus opposed both Jim Crow laws and attempts to restrict immigrants' voting rights. But most were not what we might call *multiculturalists*: they also believed in a distinctive national culture, and they expected that Americanization would obliterate ethnic differences.

2

As the concept of American nationality changed, it was reflected in the changing myths of the American military. The Civil War mass armies of North and South reflected the demographics of the nation. They were predominantly manned by American-born whites tracing ancestry to the British Isles; but they were also multiracial and multiethnic from the start, and became more so as the war progressed. The North recruited soldiers in Europe and railroad workers in Asia; Native Americans served in both armies; the North began recruiting African Americans in 1862, but blacks served as sailors, teamsters, stewards, nurses, and military laborers in both armies from the start. Companies and regiments were recruited from particular localities and neighborhoods. They reflected the homogeneity of individual communities, and individual outfits prided themselves on local characteristics—Yankee ingenuity, Texas bravado, and so on. Indians and African Americans served in racially segregated units, the latter under white officers. White ethnic groups (especially early in the war) formed their own units, which became the focus of ethnic pride, and in some cases, notably that of the Army of the Potomac's Irish Brigade, became part of national military folklore. There were numerous "German" regiments in the Northern armies, and also regiments formed by French, Hungarian, and Scottish immigrants. The 39th New York was organized by an Austro-Hungarian immigrant and nicknamed the "Garibaldi Guards" after the international brigade that had fought for Italian independence in 1848. It contained three companies of Germans, three of Hungarians, and one each of Swiss, Italians, French, and Spaniards and Portuguese: each ethnicity in its separate company. But as these regiments lost men to combat and disease they tended to lose their ethnic character. And in any

case, ethnic difference is a minor theme in Civil War literature: the *regional* differences among Anglo-Americans are what the war is about, and overcoming those differences through battle-field service is what the Civil War story is about—that, and the abolition of racial slavery.

The postwar Indian-fighting regular army was, of necessity, ethnically integrated, containing large numbers of recent immigrants, and racially segregated, although black units served alongside white. Nonetheless, the military mythology of this period generally presents the army as an Anglo-Saxon outfit, with the occasional Irish sergeant, standing off hordes of red-skinned savages. Most of the volunteer regiments which fought in the Spanish-American War and Philippine insurrection of 1898–1902 were recruited on the Civil War basis: as homogeneous, locally organized outfits. North-South and East-West regional differences mattered more than ethnicity in the military stories of this period, reflecting that the nation was still more concerned about regional differences, like those which started the Civil War. Race is not an *issue*: it is a *settled* matter. Blacks are to be kept segregated; Indians (or later, Spaniards, Cubans, and Filipinos) are simply the enemy.

But the regular army and the big-city regiments of 1898–1902 were ethnically mixed at the company level, and the vast increase in immigration had so changed the makeup of the American public, that some acknowledgment of ethnic diversity was required. The limits of that acknowledgment appear in the most celebrated book to come out of the war, Roosevelt's account of his regiment, the Rough Riders. Roosevelt recruits his cavalymen to reflect a mixture of class and regional backgrounds from cowboys to Harvard athletes. But all of them, he tells us, were of Teutonic racial background—they are an all-white, all-Teutonic melting pot. There are some Indians, but they are kept in a separate company. In his account of the regiment's fight at San Juan Hill, Roosevelt makes a point of denigrating the work of the 10th US Cavalry, an African-American regiment that, by most other accounts, was the most professional outfit on the field. The message is clear: the army is still the instrument of American patriotism and of imperial expansion, but the America it symbolizes is ethnically and racially exclusive. This vision of the American military, and this white Anglo-Saxon supremacist version of American democracy, prevailed through the mass mobilization of World War I.

In the wake of that war, changes began to appear. White supremacy was still the cultural rule and the law of the land, but white immigrants, whose parents had come between 1880 and

the cut-off of immigration in 1917, were now wholly or partially “Americanized.” They had gained a substantial share of power as voters, as consumers, and as creators of culture—as journalists, novelists, and filmmakers. The result was that in postwar films about the Great War, ethnicity and Americanization became a visible theme, albeit a subsidiary one. Films like *What Price Glory?* (1927) or *The Fighting 69th* (1940) feature military units whose personnel are supposed to represent the different elements that make up American society. Most of these represent a range of regions (a Southerner, a New Yorker, a Texan, an Ohio farm boy) and classes (a sensitive poet, a tough street kid, a rich boy, and so on). Included in the mix are an Irishman and a Jew: they provide comic relief and make the point that America nationalizes even the most distinctive ethnicities. The choice of the Irish and the Jews had more to do with comic vaudeville stereotypes than with demographics: their supposed ethnic peculiarities had been accepted as funny and nonthreatening. Moreover, the two were supposed to be perennially feuding, and the movie could show how fighting for one’s country could overcome such differences by “Americanizing” them. But this ethnic drama is a minor element in the World War I film, and racial difference is not represented at all.¹¹

But with the development of the combat film genre after *Bataan*, this version of the American microcosm was transformed. The reconciliation of ethnic and racial difference, which was minimized in *The Rough Riders* (1900) and subordinated in *What Price Glory?*, became the central concern of the story, and the integration of these differences became a primary symbol of American national identity.¹²

3

To appreciate the significance of *Bataan*’s integrated platoon, we have to bear in mind that the society it reflects was racially segregated, and that segregation affected not only the social relations of nonwhites but also their political rights. Discriminatory legislation kept most African Americans from voting in the South, and similar legislation kept many Asians and Hispanics off the voter rolls in western states. Japanese Americans were rounded up and forcibly interned in concentration camps for the duration of the war; often their property was confiscated or stolen. Hostility toward “hyphenated Americans” was a normal part of the rhetoric of respectable politicians and newspaper editors. Anti-Semitism was worse than at any previous time in

American history. The experience of basic training brought Americans of diverse backgrounds together, and if they discovered much they had in common, many who had lived in ethnic communities also experienced for the first time the prejudices against them. African Americans and Japanese Americans served in racially segregated units, for the most part under white officers. There was no racial integration below the regimental or company level, though some white regimental combat teams had African-American service companies attached. So the roll call with which *Bataan* begins represents a fictive or imaginary American community: one which includes Asians and African Americans on terms of equality. The *Bataan* platoon represents a military unit that could not have existed in the American army as it was then constituted and symbolizes an American community that did not yet exist. Clearly there is an intention here to create, not a mirror of Americans, but an ideal projection of what America ought to be like.

The war-film narrative tells us how we get to this new America. These diverse and (in some cases) mutually hostile social types learn that they have to put difference aside and work together against an enemy who is both evil and overwhelmingly powerful. The central irony of the story is this: it is the enemy who teaches us what we have in common, teaches us to set racial difference aside by being the ultimate “savage” enemy in the ultimate “savage” war—the most extreme form of racial “other.”

The opening scenes of *Bataan* establish ideological premises. The savage character of the enemy is revealed when we see Japanese planes bombing a column of Filipino refugees, who are protected by Americans. The pictures distinguish Americans from Japanese as colonial powers: the soldier who carries the Filipino baby symbolizes American relations with the Filipinos; Americans protect those whom they colonize, while the Japanese kill or abuse them. The platoon forms immediately after this attack; its mission will be to destroy a bridge and delay the enemy as long as possible.

Having established the ideological frame, the movie then creates an appropriate symbolic landscape for it to inhabit and defend. A jungle clearing/oasis becomes a surrogate for “home.” It contains a hut and a pool of water, and we see the platoon set up housekeeping there. Corporal Ramirez (Desi Arnaz) has a portable radio, and they can even hear jazz broadcasts from Hollywood. The ritual roll calls define this as an orderly place; and when Japanese snipers violate it we are being warned that this is a war in which no place, however homelike, however orderly, can be safe. As the battle proceeds, and the platoon loses man after

man, the survivors will unite in the recurrent ceremony of burial until the symbolic “home” is destroyed and the roll-call lineup has been transformed into a line of graves.

The next thing we learn is how this community is politically structured. It is a military unit, so we expect it to be governed by command, from high to low, officers to men; and we do not expect votes as to what the unit will do. But the real authority of the chain of command is offset by the principles of meritocracy: the lieutenant defers to his sergeant’s greater experience—the sergeant is the “Man Who Knows Indians,” or in this case the Japanese, and he proves capable of command when the officers are killed.

The roll call establishes the platoon as a microcosm of the American people. It includes six white Anglo-Saxon Protestants and six racial-ethnic characters: a Jew (Feingold), an Irishman (Malloy), a Pole (Matowski), a Hispanic (Ramirez), an African American (Epps), and two representatives of the American empire, the Filipinos Salazar (a Moro) and Katigbak.¹³ The group is racially integrated only because the army has been defeated, its segregated regular organizations broken up. Defeat thus becomes a means of teaching Americans an important lesson for the future. The message is underlined by such devices as having Epps and Matowski be buddies; having Todd and Epps share water and cigarettes (this at a time when drinking fountains in movie theaters were segregated!); and portraying Filipinos as loyal Americans, despite being a colonized people.

The racial and ethnic types are represented favorably; but at the same time, their difference from the WASP standard of Americanism is indicated by the use of patronizing stereotypes. The Irishman is coarse and feisty, the Jew has bad feet (a traditional anti-Semitic stereotype), the Hispanic is addicted to jazz and dance music, the Moro is distinctly more “savage” than the other Filipino. Epps is brave and dignified, but still comfortably within the range of accepted racial stereotypes: he sings blues and spirituals, is a would-be preacher, and does all the grave digging.¹⁴

The whites in the platoon are identified less by ethnicity than by rank or class. Captain Lassiter is a WASP West Pointer, as is the pilot Lieutenant Bentley. The tough top-sergeant’s name, Bill Dane, vaguely suggests Viking or Nordic derivation. Corporal Todd is a kind of gangster figure. Purckett is the small-town, Tom Sawyer-Andy Hardy kid—naive, eager, versatile. Hardy is a conscientious objector who will die fighting. Although comradeship unites these diverse types, subtle distinctions based on the old racialist categories mark the WASPs as generally supe-

rior to the others. WASPs dominate the positions of command; even the bad egg, Todd, is a corporal. Of the ethnics, only Feingold is a noncom, and he issues commands in only one brief scene. The nonofficer (i.e., the more “democratic”) WASPs, Dane, Todd, and Purckett, survive the longest, are the most effective killers of the enemy, and die with the most dignity. Ramirez dies of fever, not combat. Epps dies screaming, decapitated by a samurai sword. The two Filipinos are brutally murdered; Salazar is tortured. These images invoke two critical elements of racist ideology, which assert that white Anglo-Saxons have a racial gift for and an entitlement to the *command* of others, and that they are superior to other races as warriors, victors in the Darwinian test of racial fitness.

Unlike the Americans, the Japanese are a single race, for whom blood and culture are identical. Their war aims are therefore implicitly racist: they assert racial and cultural superiority in their propaganda broadcasts, and treat all other races (even the Asian Filipinos) as subjects fit for cruelty and domination. This singularity defines their “otherness” from the Americans, and it justifies our side in treating the Japanese as a racial or blood enemy, like the Apaches in a Western, who cannot be given (and will not give) mercy, and can be identified by dehumanizing racial epithets (“savages,” “no-tail monkeys”).

Bataan's story line provides two structuring fables which give larger meaning to the tale of the lost patrol's last stand. The first of these is the overt ideological premise: that the war is just, and the platoon's mission is both a necessary sacrifice and a real contribution to eventual victory. But the more powerful subtext is the story of the platoon's, and by analogy America's, initiation into knowledge of the “dirtiness” of this kind of war.¹⁵ Dirtiness first appears as squalor and hardship, but it is moral dirtiness that is really meant: the unfairness and cruelty, the remorselessness of war. This “dirtiness” is personified in the enemy, the “no-tail monkeys” who sneak up to kill from behind, who torture and mutilate captives. On sentry duty, Purckett fires at a shape in the mist, only to discover he has shot at the tortured corpse of Salazar. “Dirty dirty *dirty!*” he mutters, hunching intently over his machine gun. Salazar is identified as a kind of Indian-scout character: he is a Moro (Muslim, not Christian), proud that he comes from “one morderin' family,” and he strips to breechclouts and blackens his face before leaving on a mission. In the original script, this role was assigned to a Native American private named Evening Star, whose “grand-dad always claimed he was with *Sitting Bull* at *Custer's Last Stand*. I always doubted it. But he talked a swell Wild West” (Basinger 45).

But the enemy's moral dirtiness, his willingness to do anything to win, is also the sign of an incredible energy and commitment: the enemy never get tired, never stop coming at you, never ask for a respite let alone for quarter. You can't make deals with such an enemy: as in the savage war of the Frontier Myth, you can't make a deal; you can only fight till one side or the other is exterminated. Americans like Purckett not only have to learn about the dirtiness of savage war from the Japanese, they have to get dirty and savage too—they have to become “Men Who Know Indians” if they are to win.¹⁶

The last stage of our initiation into the “dirtiness” of war comes at the end of the film. Only Sergeant Dane is left. He has buried the last of his men and made his own grave into a machine-gun nest. Now the enemy appear as something which can only be called “the horror,” as they come swarming through the jungle, through a fog that is straight out of a horror movie, accompanied by horror-movie music. As the enemy creep closer, the weary and depressed Sergeant Dane rouses himself to a fury, which becomes *berserker* madness; he yells and curses at the charging Japanese while he fires his machine gun—at last firing it right into the camera's eye—as the final title declares our intention to return to Bataan. Thus the enemy's last teaching is the power of utter hatred, a willingness to kill limitlessly and in an overpowering rage. Like Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* (1902) or in Francis Ford Coppola's Vietnam movie, *Apocalypse Now* (1979), which uses the same words, Dane's knowledge of the horror that is the enemy makes him wish for the magic power to “exterminate the brutes.” But the propaganda purposes of *Bataan* require us to see Dane's *berserker* rage as a potentially successful model for fighting and winning our jungle war: rage against the “monkey” race *empowers* the doomed sergeant, for although we know he is about to die, we never see him fall.¹⁷

Although Dane is fiction, the kind of rage he visualizes was an inescapable part of both motivational propaganda and of the experience of war fighting itself. In his official history of naval operations around Guadalcanal in 1942–43, Samuel Eliot Morison offers this explanation for a sign at fleet headquarters which urged “KILL JAPS, KILL JAPS, KILL MORE JAPS!”: “This may shock you, reader: but it is exactly how we felt. We were fighting no civilized, knightly war. . . . We were back in the primitive days of fighting Indians on the American frontier; no holds barred and no quarter. The Japs wanted it that way, thought they could thus terrify an ‘effete democracy’; and that is what they

got, with the additional horrors of war that modern science can produce" (187).

The paradox of *Bataan* is that the emotion which enables the platoon to transcend racial prejudice is itself a virulent expression of *racial* hatred. Indeed, the degree of toleration with which *internal* racial and ethnic differences are treated in the platoon movie is proportional to and dependent on the extreme dehumanization of the *external* enemy. The final heat which blends the ingredients of the melting pot is rage against an enemy who is fully dehumanized as a race of "dirty monkeys." Dismissed by the front door, racism reenters by the window.

The makers of the film were aware of this problem, and they address it visually. In a key early sequence, just after Captain Lassiter's death, we see and hear the sergeant voicing his hatred of those "no-tail monkeys." Then we cut to a two-shot of the kid, Purckett, next to Salazar in a machine-gun nest. Purckett mutters that he'd really like to kill some Japs; Salazar approves the emotion, and the two share a stick of gum. "Gum I got plenty of," says the kid; Salazar answers, "Japs, we got plenty of." The message is clear: if *our* Asian, our "Indian scout," does not mind and even shares in Purckett's hate-speech as we share our gum with him, then our hatred of the Japanese cannot be construed as racism. It must be some different, morally superior, existentially and morally *legitimate* form of antipathy. Juxtapositions of this kind occur so frequently in war films (and in Westerns) that it seems fair to identify it as a genre convention—call it the *race-face* convention. But this leaves the war-film myth with a profound contradiction at the heart of its good intentions: it seeks to overthrow American racism by appealing to the most basic American racist myth, the myth of "savage war."¹⁸ That contradiction has persisted through the evolution of the combat genre (and related forms) since 1943, mirroring our persistent attempts to come to terms with the unresolved tension between racialism and civic egalitarianism in American life.

4

The *Bataan* formula proved extraordinarily successful. Within a year, so many other war films had been made, which followed essentially the same plan, that a new genre or form of moviemaking had been established. The form proved extremely flexible, allowing filmmakers to address a wide range of wartime issues and concerns by simply altering the mix of characters or

slightly modifying the politics of command or the combat mission. In *Sahara* (1943), for example, the platoon has an “internationalist” character: it combines representatives of all the Allied armies, plus a black Sudanese fighting with the British and an Italian who turns against fascism; they fight a delaying action against Nazi troops in the North African desert. *Gung Ho!* (1944) gives the story a politically radical twist. The movie’s Colonel Thorwald (based on the real-life Evans Carlson) had been a US military observer with Mao’s 8th Route Army in China, and his Marine Raider unit’s motto, “Gung Ho,” and its military methods are (the film tells us) modeled on those of the Communist forces. The *Gung Ho!* platoon contains the usual ethnics, but their backgrounds and attitudes reflect the radical social consciousness of New Deal liberalism and the Popular Front.¹⁹

Most of the combat films made during the war were set in the Pacific theater, so the use of *racial* imagery to define the enemy became part of the genre at an early point. Applying such imagery to the European theater, where the enemy was “white,” presented some complexities; and one reason for the prevalence of Pacific-theater settings may have been that racial opposition allowed a simpler, more dramatic, and more hate-provoking portrayal of the opposition. Racial imagery could be used in representing German Nazis, as, for example, in *Sahara*, where an Aryan-stereotype Nazi pilot mouths his racist contempt for the racially mixed platoon (which includes the black Sudanese soldier). But in the European theater, unlike the Pacific, American ethnic whites were likely to be fighting against their nation of origin. The problematics of this relationship are raised and dealt with rather subtly, for the most part. There is a sequence in *A Walk in the Sun* in which the Italian-American Tranella is called to interpret for two deserters from the Italian army. His mood shifts between emotional expressions of kinship to these nominal enemies (marked by his speaking Italian and forgetting to translate) and annoyance with them—and with an assignment that treats him somehow as much like an enemy as like an American. The camera mirrors these shifts, sometimes grouping him with the Italians, sometimes with the Americans, and sometimes isolating him between the two groups—but in the end he dismisses the Italians and marches off in the American ranks.

Later filmmakers drew on the imagery, story-form, and characterizations of *Bataan* in dealing with other phases of the war. The result was to develop a set of conventional tropes, which came to serve as hallmarks of the combat-film genre. Not all of these devices appear in all films, and there are significant variations in the way filmmakers handled particular conventions.

Nonetheless, some general tendencies in the form give it coherence as a genre. The most fundamental of these is the “savage war” structure, which conceives the war as one waged for ultimate stakes, against an enemy who is utterly opposite to truly human values, by means that must necessarily involve “getting dirty.” The character of the enemy will be visually revealed by an *atrocious* scene in which he kills wounded or helpless soldiers, civilians, or women and children (which our side tries to protect). There will be some form of *roll call* to make explicit the mixed character of “our boys,” as against the racially monolithic enemy. There will usually be a scene in which some race-identified member of the unit gives approval to the race-based demonization of the enemy (the *race-face* convention). The *mission* of the platoon is one that will require total sacrifice for the cause, the fighting of a *last stand* to hold a vital outpost, or the destruction of an enemy *nerve center*. Meritocratic democratic values will be expressed by the loss (through death or incompetence) of the platoon’s highest officer and the emergence of the *tough veteran sergeant* as leader. The *heroic deaths* of individual soldiers will suggest an implicit hierarchy of heroic qualities, with those who seem racially or culturally akin to the enemy dying less heroically. (Call this last the “Epps Convention.”) The most heroic of the soldiers will perform some spectacular act of destruction, usually constructed as an act of vengeance or suicidal martyrdom, driven by a *berserker* battle rage.²⁰

To appreciate the significance of this new mythology, we need to take both parts of the contradiction seriously: that the makers of this mythology *want* to create a nonracial, multiethnic American nationality, but that their means of doing so preserves racialism as a primary value.

The good intentions of films like *Bataan* made a great deal of difference in the way Americans think about themselves. In 1941, when *Life* magazine was covering the actual battle of Bataan, it described the struggle as a race war, using terms that are no different from those used to describe Custer’s Last Stand or San Juan Hill: “[MacArthur] stopped the Japs. ‘By God, it was destiny that brought me here,’ he had said. . . . It was more than destiny that in the whole sad panorama of white men’s bitter failure in the Far East, the only men who did not fail were Americans. . . . In holding Bataan . . . MacArthur wrote as clearly as if he had dictated it, the history of America’s future relations with Asia. War is the pay-off, and MacArthur, of all the white men in the Far East, paid off” (“Philippine” 25–26, 36).

Henry Luce’s *Life* editorialists claimed the battle of Bataan as a moral victory for the “white race”: the movie *Bataan* claimed

it for a melting-pot America. And it is the movie version that has become the basis for our historical memory of what some now call “The Good War.” Here, for example, is the concluding paragraph of Charles MacDonald’s *A Time for Trumpets* (1988), a military history of the Battle of the Bulge by a veteran of the battle: “Hitler saw the American soldier as the weak component . . . of the Western alliance, the product of a society too heterogeneous to field a capable fighting force. [MacDonald then names soldiers whose achievements his book has chronicled.] Bouck, Crawford, Tsakanikas, Umanoff, Moore, Reid, Descheneaux, O’Brien, Jones, Erlenbusch, Goldstein, McKinley, Mandichak, Spigelman, Garcia, Russamano, Wieszyk, Nawrocki, Campbell, Bercellona, Leinbaugh. Black men too, although their color was hardly to be reflected in their names. Their heterogeneity was there, but at many a place—at the Losheim Gap, St. Vith, Bastogne—the American soldier put the lie to Hitler’s theory” (619).

The war movie is of course only the cultural tip of the social iceberg. *Bataan*’s liberal values reflect the deep changes in American life and values brought about by the war. The war brought into sharp focus the fundamental contradiction between the values of democracy and racialism. The traditional values of democracy and equality had been reenergized in the 1930s by the New Dealers, the labor movement, and the Left; but in the context of the war, they constituted the ideological rationale for our armed opposition to the totalitarian and racist systems of Nazi Germany and imperial Japan. The perception of the likeness between Hitler’s racial laws and the segregation codes, which sustained Jim Crow in the South, began the process of breaking down the consensus that had sustained segregation. And the real-world mixing of races and ethnicities, in the army and in war plants, allowed people to see the positive value in a more open society.

The great achievement of the Hollywood war film was its successful integration of these new ideas, experiences, and perceptions in a new kind of myth: a simple but powerful story, which had become closely associated in people’s minds with the historical experience of wartime struggle and victory. It profoundly altered the content of national ideology, by substituting the multiethnic platoon for the representatives of white supremacy in the classic “last stand” myth-scenario. Moreover, the Hollywood platoon was more than a representation of an idealized America; it was a utopian projection of the kind of nation that Hollywood, acting as custodian of public myth, thought we should and could become through the testing and transformation of the war. This myth had a significant impact on the na-

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tional culture that emerged from the war: it made the realization of “melting pot” values *at home* the symbolic equivalent of a war aim—a domestic analogue of FDR’s “Four Freedoms.”

So the war and its filmic mythology made a cultural difference. From 1943 to 1965, whatever the divisions of local politics, when one looked to those media reflecting the life and ideal values of “America at war,” what one saw was no longer the racial dualisms of *Birth of a Nation* (1915) or *They Died with Their Boots On* (1941). Instead, they saw the multiethnic platoon of *Bataan, Sahara, Guadalcanal Diary* (1943), *Gung Ho!*, *Objective Burma* (1945), and *A Walk in the Sun*.

5

The combat-film formula brought within a single story-frame two issues which would dominate American politics and culture throughout the Cold War period. Its subject was war, which made it an appropriate venue for entertaining questions about the use of America’s new-won world-power status, especially in Korea (1950–53) and Vietnam (1960–75). And its theme was the reconciliation of racial and ethnic difference in a common nationality—which made the genre a potential vehicle for dramatizing the issues raised by the civil rights movement, and the transformation of race relations which would shape domestic politics for a generation. Without attempting to offer a detailed analysis, I would like to suggest the general tendencies of the genre in this period and indicate how other film genres have appropriated the structures and themes of the combat film.

As the civil rights era opened, the role of blacks in combat-film America had become problematic. The combat films of 1943, set in the period of American defeat, had featured racially integrated platoons, which could exist only because defeat had broken up segregated regular organizations. Films made late in the war, about victories won by regularly constituted units, could not credibly be integrated because the army itself was segregated. Still, some filmmakers tried to compensate for this fact, for example, by having an African American sing the theme music (as in *A Walk in the Sun*) or by showing black sailors on an invasion ship (*Guadalcanal Diary*). Such films contributed to a proto-civil rights ideology by emphasizing the theme of tolerance, and implicitly contrasting American ideals with Nazi and Japanese race-supremacy.

The beginning of the war coincided with the emergence of a new African-American political movement. Leaders like

A. Philip Randolph took a more militant stand on civil rights and (as a condition of their support for the war effort) pressed the administration for action against Jim Crow legislation, economic discrimination, and lynching. In response, Southern Democrats like John Rankin and Theodore Bilbo of Mississippi identified civil rights with Bolshevism and asserted that blacks might be as inclined to subversion against “the white man” as the Japanese Americans then segregated in internment camps.²¹ Although the demagoguery of Rankin and Bilbo was addressed to concerns that were peculiarly regional, the fear of “race mixing” which they voiced was not restricted to the South. Nor was racial violence: there were major race riots in Detroit and Harlem in 1943, followed in 1944 by the Zoot Suit Riots directed against Hispanics in Los Angeles.²²

The anomaly of American racial segregation was not explicitly addressed until after the war, in the film *Home of the Brave*—which centers on an imaginary experiment in integration at the squad level.²³ After the army was integrated by Harry Truman’s order in 1949, a new wave of war films depicted black soldiers in World War II combat and, incidentally, Japanese American and Puerto Rican soldiers as well (*Home of the Brave* [1949]; *Go for Broke* [1951]; *Red-Ball Express* [1952]).

But for most of the period 1946–60 the status of African Americans remained the great exception to the platoon-myth of American nationality. Even though the army that fought in Korea became racially integrated, films about the war made between 1950 and 1960 made little or no attempt to represent black soldiers. The theme of racial tolerance was carried by the presence of Asian Americans in the platoons—even Japanese Americans appear occasionally, as an indication that the old racial enemy has been accepted as naturalized American. Not until 1959 did Hollywood make major motion pictures featuring black soldiers fighting in Korea and begin the process of normalizing the black presence in the American roll call. *All the Young Men* begins with a silent roll call that places Sidney Poitier in the marching ranks of a Marine platoon, along with other instantly recognizable ethnic types (i.e., Mort Sahl as the Jewish soldier, Ingemar Johansson as the Swede). Poitier had already established his star persona as a figure symbolizing racial tolerance in films like *Edge of the City* (1957) and *The Defiant Ones* (1958). However, Poitier’s status is not taken for granted: this is a “problem” film which shows the black soldier winning the confidence of his men, and his place in the mythic American platoon, by taking over for his dying officer and becoming the platoon’s “Sergeant Dane” in a “last stand” defense of a vital pass.

A more complex and interesting take on integration is Lewis Milestone's *Pork Chop Hill* (1959). Here the platoon of ethnic types (commanded by a WASP captain, with a Japanese American lieutenant to provide a *race face*) has to fight not only Chinese soldiers, but also the insidious "Asian" propaganda of the Communists. The only member of the unit who seems susceptible to that propaganda is a black private, who needs both stern discipline and some compassion before he will stand up and fight with his white comrades—a choice which, as the captain says, makes him a member of "the most exclusive club in the world." As in *Bataan*, the nonwhite soldier is seen as more susceptible to the power of the racial enemy (an Epps convention).

At the start of the 1960s and the inception of John F. Kennedy's new frontier, the ethnic platoon story had become one of the primary structures of American mythology. Its currency is attested in part by the emergence of a new variant of the form: the blockbuster historical reconstruction of great World War II battles, such as *The Longest Day* (1962), *Battle of the Bulge* (1965), and *Anzio* (1968). But the cultural power of the myth is better attested by the way in which its structures were appropriated for other genres. The late 1950s and early 1960s saw the development of a new subgenre of Westerns that featured " platoons" of gunfighters (ethnically and racially mixed) engaged in military-style missions (rescuing Mexican villagers from warlords) that mirrored American approaches to Vietnam.²⁴ But perhaps the most significant use of the platoon structure was its use in a series of blockbuster historical epics, produced between 1959 and 1965. These were set in various periods and places, from medieval Spain to the Boxer Rebellion. Exemplary titles include *The Alamo* (1960), *El Cid* (1961), *55 Days at Peking* (1962), *Khartoum* (1964), and *Zulu* (1965). In each film civilization is seen to hinge on the last-ditch defense of a city or outpost, which is attacked by hordes of nonwhite savages and/or fanatics. "Our" side is led by a hero who "knows Indians," and the communities the heroes defend are usually marked as multiracial and multiethnic—although they are almost always outposts of European or American empire. Victory (or successful military sacrifice) is usually achieved by the hero's display of *berserker* rage, or some analogous form of emotional excess.²⁵

After 1965, both the platoon myth and the genres that carried it were subjected to extreme ideological stress and underwent radical revision. The cultural power of the combat-film genre (and cognate forms) derives from its systematic linkage of two persistent issues in national culture: the condition of race

relations and the exercise of our world-power role. During the 1960s both of these aspects of national ideology reached a state of crisis. The legislative victories of the civil rights movement disrupted official forms of white supremacy, but produced a “white backlash.” The Lyndon Johnson administration’s Great Society programs raised expectations for achieving social justice, but ended in disappointment and civil violence. And the war in Vietnam, which was to have validated an American approach to resisting Third World communism, degenerated into a bloody mess that divided the nation and discredited the military as an embodiment of American values.

The movies reflected the public’s ambivalence toward the war in Vietnam. Hollywood made almost no combat films about Vietnam while the war was in progress—an extraordinary act of avoidance. Issues raised by the war were treated indirectly, in Westerns like *The Professionals* (1966) and *The Wild Bunch* (1969). The “Good War” of 1941–45 was subjected to revisionist treatment, which looked through the idealism of nominal war aims to show the dark side of combat and of the American soldier (for example, *Hell Is for Heroes* [1962], *The War Lover* [1962], and *The Victors* [1963]). Robert Aldrich’s *Dirty Dozen* brings together both the growing disillusionment with Vietnam and the concurrent controversy over civil rights. Aldrich gives us a classic roll-call scene, in which (as in *Bataan*) a black soldier is included. The excuse for his presence is that this is a special unit, recruited from condemned prisoners for a suicide mission. Our standard melting-pot types are first presented to us as a set of criminals and psychopaths (although we will learn that the homicides committed by the black soldier and the Polish American were morally justified). Moreover, the mission they are assigned is regarded by nearly everyone at every command level as “insane” and morally suspect. It is important to note that in *Dirty Dozen*, as in other military films and Westerns of this period, it is not only the national policy and government that are subjected to a demystifying critique, it is “the People” itself whose character and motives are debunked by the transformation of its heroic embodiment (the platoon or group of gunfighters) into amoral killers.

When Vietnam infantry combat became a subject for moviemaking again, after 1978, some attempt was made to interpret it through the formulas of the classic platoon movie (*Boys in Company C* [1978]; *Full Metal Jacket* [1987]; *Platoon* [1986]; *Apocalypse Now*; *Hamburger Hill* [1987], the TV series *Tour of Duty* [1988–90]). But where the traditional combat film cele-

brated the solidarity and identity of “the People” and the democratic state, these films are built around the idea of a fundamental breach of faith between government and people, and between the constituents of the platoon microcosm. The political leaders, the high command, and the people at home are typically seen as uncomprehending of the realities of war, and as culpably responsible for sending their soldiers on an insane or meaningless mission, as well as denying them proper support.

Most of these films use the standard tropes of the genre, but with significant variations. There is a narrower range of white ethnicities represented in the roll call and a much greater emphasis on racial difference. There is also a greater emphasis on class differences, such as those between “college boys” and “redneck” or “blue-collar” whites, and between “street” blacks and Hispanics and those from rural or middle-class backgrounds. *Officers are killed* (or reveal their incompetence) and responsibility devolves on the *tough veteran sergeant* who is also a “Man Who Knows Indians.” Black soldiers seem to have a more problematic attitude than whites about war aims (the *Pork Chop Hill* variation on Epps), and a black soldier dies a particularly horrible death (Epps convention—see *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*).

A new element in many films about Vietnam is the reversal of the standard treatment of *atrocities*. The My Lai massacre has become so widely accepted as a symbol of “what we did wrong in Vietnam” that nearly every film that treats the war shows its platoon confronting a situation resembling My Lai. The irony of Vietnam was that what Americans had accepted as a “search and rescue” mission was transformed into a “search and destroy” operation. Trained by the combat genre to see ourselves as liberators, American soldiers and civilians were appalled by evidence that we were acting like ravagers and oppressors. (Oliver Stone’s *Platoon* offers an especially complex and credible version of this scene, which effectively dramatizes the contradictions of motives, ideals, fears, and angers that are at play in such a moment.) However, most films also show the enemy as a committer of atrocities: the murder of civilians, the torture and mutilation of captured Americans, the sneaky suicidal attack. The lesson which most movies have drawn from Vietnam, and purveyed as our myth of the war, is that Americans have a truly dark, cruel, and violent side, which makes us all too like the enemy, the “other” against whom we fight.

This reevaluation of the difference between “the Americans” and “those Others” requires some revision of our model of heroism. If the “lesson” of the war is that we are too much like the

“dirty” enemy to be true liberators, then the “Man Who Knows Indians”—our most effective warrior—is also an emblem of what is wrong with us. But to utterly reject the heroism of that figure is to renounce the model of historical agency that has always been at the center of our national mythology. Stone resolves the problem in *Platoon* by splitting the “tough sergeant” figure into two, both of whom “Know Indians” and are effective warriors. But the “good” sergeant has a sympathetic understanding of the Vietnamese and of his mission, while the “bad” sergeant knows only the “dirty” side of the enemy and seeks to out-do him in mercilessness. The bad sergeant’s horribly scarred face also marks him: a marker of physical difference analogous to a racial marking. Thus Stone’s symbolism preserves the racially demonic qualities of the “enemy” traditional since *Bataan*, and uses race-like imagery to link some members of the platoon to that enemy. As in *Bataan*, the racialized terms of struggle evoke a berserker rage in the hero. In *Platoon* the bad sergeant’s berserker rage is directed against the “Kid,” who is our point-of-view character; but the Kid himself (like Purckett in *Bataan*) has also gone berserk—which makes him the most effective fighter in repelling the enemy’s final attack and sets up his final confrontation with the bad sergeant.

The berserker mode of heroism operates in most combat films about Vietnam, even those like *Boys in Company C*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Platoon*, *The Deer Hunter* (1978), and *Apocalypse Now*, which are critical of American involvement in the war. It continues to work as a trope in the combat film because it links traditional versions of the race-war hero to the idea that Vietnam was an insane and maddening conflict that drove Americans to do crazy things. However, the war spawned another genre in which the berserker convention finds a more traditional expression. In this genre a team of American commandos returns to Vietnam to rescue POW/MIAs from their continued imprisonment by the Vietnamese. The premise of these films is that the enemy is truly evil, almost incomprehensibly cruel and demonic: there is no rational purpose for holding on to the POWs beyond their pleasure in atrocious cruelty, and the enemy are usually shown committing atrocities against their own civilians. The *race face* whose presence excuses the demonization of the enemy is usually a native Vietnamese or Montagnard who (like Salazar in *Bataan*) has remained loyal to his former American rulers. The rescuers in these films have to contend with the treachery of their own government as well as the horror that is the enemy. To defeat

this combination they must draw on deep wells of rage and thus find superhuman strength. This pattern is most literally embodied in the hero of *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), but it also figures in the more naturalistic *Uncommon Valor* (1983), in which the squad of rescuers contains one suicidal *berserker*.²⁶

One other type of platoon fiction has acquired new cultural authority in the wake of Vietnam: the projection of warfare in the genres of science fiction. It was *Star Trek* that reminded us that space is “the final frontier” and rocket ships merely “wagon trains to the stars.” But if the larger mission of science-fiction heroes derives from the Western, the wars of the *Star Trek* series (on television 1966–present, in movies 1979–present) come from the combat film and are fought by multiethnic, multiracial, and multigendered military units. Sometimes, as in *Star Trek*, human racial and ethnic varieties are augmented (or metaphorically represented) by beings nominally of nonhuman species. Sometimes, as in the science fiction film *Aliens* (1986) or *Starship Troopers* (1997), a standard Vietnam-era platoon of space marines is ordered out on a “bug hunt” to kill some monstrous aliens.

In the science-fiction frame, the structure of the military myth is abstracted from its historical referents and played out as pure projective fiction. But the national origin and reference of these stories is usually pretty clear. The interplanetary Federation in *Star Trek* is a thinly disguised idealization of a postimperialist US: federalist, law-governed, tender of interference in developing nations/planets, and with a civic model of citizenship that emphasizes tolerance and inclusion. The crews of the space ships in *Alien* (1979) and *Aliens* are clearly and exclusively American, as is the malign corporation, which sends them out. Most recent science fiction is based on an assumption that America is the future. In *Independence Day* (1996) it is America that saves the world, and the Fourth of July becomes the universal holiday of liberation.

These stories generally strive to represent the broadest possible dreams of inclusiveness: the *Star Trek* crews have been continually updated over a 30-year period to reflect changing racial and ethnic sensitivities. Nonetheless, these fantasies still represent multicultural solidarity as dependent on the threat of a still more alien other. Over the years, *Star Trek*'s creators have registered their understanding of the problem involved by periodically domesticating last year's enemy. Thus the dark-skinned savage Klingons of the original series join the Federation for “Next Generation”: but we still have to fight the pesky Romulans, the

Borg, and so on. There is no better illustration of the contradiction at the heart of the original myth: the precondition for multiracial solidarity is the presence of an enemy defined by race. We cannot reconcile one form of racial “otherness” without reconstituting racial otherness in some still more threatening form. We make peace with particular foes, but the structures of racial enmity still govern our worldview. History is just one “bug hunt” after another.²⁷

Aliens uses (and updates) all of the conventions of the classic combat film, but varies the heroic model by making a woman the “Man Who Knows Indians.” There is a roll call (as the troops come out of their life-support “cocoons”); a display of atrocity (the “bugs” have raped, impregnated, and devoured the helpless colonists); and a *lost lieutenant* (the shavetail in charge is not very good). At first glance, the cigar-chomping black Marine noncom seems to be our *tough sergeant*, but he doesn’t know “bugs” the way Ripley does. So the sergeant becomes just another *lost lieutenant*, and Ripley steps into the role. In the climactic scene she avenges the colonists and her comrades by descending to the *nerve center* of the “bugs” colony and exterminating them, egg and womb, in a *berserker* rage. Unlike the earth-bound combat film, the science-fiction version makes the race-war theme literally a war to preserve the purity of “our” wombs and destroy the enemy’s power of reproduction.

Thus the platoon myth persists as a significant strain in American national mythology. Its internal contradictions remain unresolved. It was developed and propagated as an antidote to our internal ethnic and racial divisions and to provide a heroic myth for a democratic, multiracial, and multiethnic America. It has had a positive effect on American culture, both reflecting and reinforcing the broad social, cultural, and political movements that have pushed us in the direction of greater equality and diminished discrimination. There is no mistaking the drift of imagery in the combat-film genre, and its science-fiction descendants, toward imagining a broader reach of social inclusion and a more restricted concept of what makes other nations our enemy. But with all that said, it is also true that this particular strain of myth still necessarily preserves the idea that war fighting is a necessary and morally positive attribute of national existence; that we need the supreme difference of an enemy to allow us to see our likeness as Americans; and that the stigmata by which enemies reveal themselves are still recognizably *racial*—a difference not merely of interest or belief but of “nature.” So long as that remains true, we will also continue to see some of “us” as more closely akin to “them,” and therefore as racially “suspect.”

Notes

1. See also Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America* (1998), esp. 100.
2. See chs. 1–3, 8–9 in Anderson. See also Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (1987).
3. See also Balibar and Wallerstein 49, 81, 83, and 94.
4. See Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (1999), chs. 2, 4, 5, and 10; *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* 177–80, 183–86, and, for his typology of myths, 192–98. See also Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890* (1985), esp. ch. 2; *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America* (1992), esp. the introduction; and Geoffrey Hosking and George Schopflin's edited collection, *Myths and Nationhood* (1997), esp. chs. 1 and 6.
5. Balibar and Wallerstein note “the ‘external frontiers’ of the state have to become ‘internal frontiers’ or—which amounts to the same thing—external frontiers have to be imagined constantly as a projection and protection of an internal collective personality, which each of us carries within ourselves and enables us to inhabit the space of the state as a place where we have always been—and always will be—‘at home.’ . . . For it to be tied down to the frontiers of a particular people, it therefore needs an extra degree of particularity, a principle of closure, or exclusion” (95, 99).
6. See Balibar and Wallerstein 94. See also Wilbur Zelinsky, *The Cultural Geography of the United States* (1973), esp. parts 1, 2, and 6.
7. See Balibar and Wallerstein, esp. ch. 4.
8. Even the predominant “British” component was divided into four distinct cultural communities, and these intermixed with each other, with Native Americans, Dutch, Africans, and others in forming functional colonies. See David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (1989).
9. See Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (1990), esp. 1–22.
10. See Charles F. Adams, Jr., “The Protection of the Ballot in National Elections” (1869). See also “The Late Riots” (1877) and “Our Indian Wards” (1876). For a fuller discussion, see Slotkin, *Fatal Environment*, esp. ch. 19.
11. In *The Fighting 69th* Irish ethnicity actually becomes a synecdoche of American nationality. A Jewish soldier passes himself off as Irish in order to fulfill his desire for patriotic service and acceptance as an American.
12. For an overview, see Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits, and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* (1987), esp. chs. 2, 9, and 10.
13. Cf. Roland Barthes's “Mythology Today” (1972) 109–59 and esp. 116.

14. Combat films were exceptional among Hollywood productions in representing blacks as competent, dignified, and heroic. The industry resisted attempts by the NAACP and other organizations to modify demeaning stereotypes in other genres. See Koppes and Black, "Blacks, Loyalty, and Motion-Picture Propaganda in World War II" (1986) 400–01 and 405.
15. See "Recreation Officers at Fort Meade Learn 'Dirty Fighting'" (1942).
16. See John Morton Blum, *V Was for Victory: Politics and American Culture during World War II* (1976), esp. 59.
17. See Samuel Eliot Morison et al., *The Struggle for Guadalcanal, August 1942–February 1943: History of United States Naval Operations in World War II* (1949) 5: 187. See also the 8 Dec. 1941 issue of *Life*, esp. 75–78 and 122–39. On the importance of this kind of fantasy for troops in combat, see J. Glenn Gray, *The Warriors* (1973), esp. 125–26.
18. See John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (1986), chs. 4, 6, and esp. 181–90; David E. Scherman, ed., *Life Goes to War: A Picture History of World War II* (1977) 125–27.
19. One of the recruits has fought for the Loyalists in Spain, and others are types drawn from Depression-era social dramas—the dead-end kid, the steel-worker, etc.
20. On the formula, see Basinger, ch. 1.
21. See Dower, ch. 7; Rankin, "Speech of Honorable John A. Rankin" (1942); and Herbert Shapiro, *White Violence and Black Response from Reconstruction to Montgomery* (1989), esp. ch. 12.
22. See Blum, ch. 5.
23. The film was based on a play in which the tolerance theme was not racism but anti-Semitism. Changing the Jewish protagonist to a black man was a significant recognition of the new primacy of race as the unsolved problem of American democracy. See the critique of the film by Michael P. Rogin in his *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (1996), ch. 7.
24. See Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, chs. 13–14 and 16–17.
25. For a more extended discussion, see Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* 503–12.
26. See H. Bruce Franklin, *M.I.A., or Mythmaking in America* (1992) 127–66; Katherine Kinney, *Friendly Fire: American Images of the Vietnam War* (2000).
27. I'm indebted to the work of my former student, Richard D. Hong, in his undergraduate honors thesis, "A Cultural Enterprise: Reconfigurations of Race and Ideology in Thirty Years of *Star Trek*" (1996). See Mark A. Altman and Edward Gross, *Trek Navigator: The Ultimate Guide to the Entire Trek Saga*

(1998); Stephen E. Whitfield and Gene Roddenberry, *The Making of Star Trek* (1968) 22–30; Daniel Leonard Bernardi, *Star Trek and History: Race-ing Toward the Future* (1998), esp. ch. 3; and Vivian Sobchack, *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film* (1987) 292–99.

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