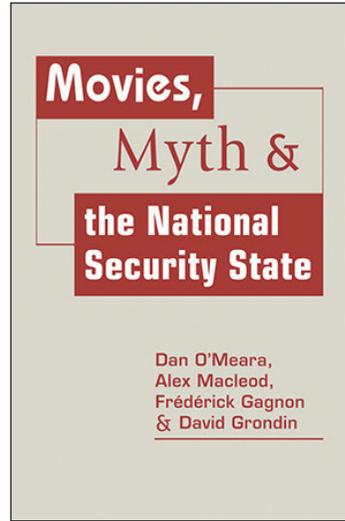


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Movies, Myth, and the National Security State

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ISBN: 978-1-62637-459-1 hc



LYNNE RIENNER PUBLISHERS

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Boulder, CO 80301 USA
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fax 303.444.0824

This excerpt was downloaded from the
Lynne Rienner Publishers website
www.rienner.com

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Introduction

*Thinking about September 11 [2001] is almost impossible
without thinking about film.¹*

As the planes struck the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on that bright, awful Tuesday morning in September, the ensuing globally televised carnage and chaos underscored a sobering new reality confronting Americans. For the first time since the war of 1812–1815, a devastating foreign attack had successfully targeted key symbols in the continental United States of the country’s military and financial power, and the lives and property of its citizens.

Throughout the preceding half-century, the United States had consistently spent more on its armed forces and intelligence services than most of the rest of the world combined. Its military was by far the most capable and technologically advanced in human history. The claims of national security had so overwhelmed America from 1947 onward that historians, political scientists, and journalists alike began to characterize the country as a “national security state.” While we present an extensive definition of the US *national security state* in the following chapter, it can here be characterized as a mode of government in which all aspects of public life are dominated by an official doctrine of imminent and urgent threat to fundamental national values and interests, and by the primacy accorded to institutions, policies, and practices said to be essential to preserve national security.

Despite this fifty-year-plus obsession with national security and despite the overweening power and reach of the vast national security state, on September 11, 2001, the United States was powerless to detect, let alone prevent, a few fanatics from launching their murderous assault. In the confused days that followed, it became clear that much US strategic planning was

obsolete. Politicians, military strategists, analysts, commentators, and ordinary citizens alike all seemed to repeat the same mantra: the shocking events of 9/11 were a turning point and “nothing would ever be the same again.”

And yet . . .

There had been something eerily familiar about the chilling live-time images of 9/11. The following day, *People Magazine* commented that the “life and death drama” of the attacks on the Twin Towers “resembled nothing so much as a big-budget Hollywood movie,” a sentiment echoed by the writer of the 1998 terrorism disaster film *The Siege*—“this looks like a movie . . . my movie”—and by some involved in other blockbusters.²

In effect, Hollywood had been preparing Americans for catastrophe for decades. Apocalyptic scenes of burning and collapsing skyscrapers; of terrorized citizens fleeing billowing chaos, imminent death, tragedy, and mass destruction; of acts of individual heroism and sacrifice had all been imprinted onto the collective unconscious by close to 200 disaster movies, many featuring New York City.³ And just weeks after 9/11, Pentagon officials spent three days with some two dozen Hollywood directors, screenwriters, and producers trying to brainstorm what al-Qaeda might do next: “If Hollywood had seen the future coming once, maybe it could do so again.”⁴ The White House painted its subsequent “global war” against “evil doers” as a white hats/black hats conflict in which the US strove to defend civilization on its global frontier with barbarism. John Wayne did not live to see the events of September 2001, but he surely would have known what to think about them, and how to react.

Hollywood movies have always both mirrored and helped to shape the tenor of their times. No one who watched the American cinema of World War II, or lived through (or read about) the Hollywood blacklists of the 1940s and 1950s, or who saw even a few of the literally thousands of Cold War movies of the 1950s and 1960s, or who observed Ronald Reagan’s presidency could doubt that Hollywood films played a significant role in instilling a climate of fear across the United States, in fostering the favorable reception of state security policies and practices, and in marginalizing alternative perspectives. The events and aftermath of 9/11 simply underscored the power of “the movies” over the American imagination.

In this book, we grapple with one vital dimension of that power. Our primary objective is to explore the ways in which Hollywood movies variously functioned to propagate, reproduce, or debate and occasionally contest, the evolving US national security state following World War II. As is explained in detail in Chapter 1, we do this by analyzing the depiction in Hollywood films of core institutions and the operational modalities of the national security state, and more particularly through an investigation of how these movies variously dealt with what we contend are the three vital elements of the mindset on which the national security state has been con-

structed since World War II. We label these elements, respectively, the *Cold War consensus* (see p. 21), the *American security imaginary* (see p. 19), and the *ideology and mythology of Americanism* (see p. 26).

In doing so, we advance three principal arguments. The first insists that a “permanent national security state”⁵ emerged out of complex sets of domestic struggles over how the United States should respond to the radical transformation of its global role during and after World War II. The core issues of these ideological, cultural, social, political, and bureaucratic struggles turned around what it meant “to be a good American”; what the United States of America was said to stand for—or should stand for—in changing post–World War II global power politics; how vital national interests were said to be threatened, and by whom; and whether the federal government was appropriately organized and adequately equipped to enable it to defend “genuine” Americanism at home and abroad.

This leads us to argue, secondly, that as an entirely new cult of national security gripped most of the United States by the end of the 1940s, the emergence, consolidation, and evolution of the national security state did much more than lead to a profound reorganization of the federal government. Perhaps even more importantly, it equally produced significant and ongoing transformations in national identity, in the prevailing view of the American community, and in foreign policy and national defense traditions dating back to the Revolution. In other words, the national security state emerged on the basis of, and then further consolidated, far-reaching changes in the dominant narrative of who “we Americans” were said to be and “what we stand for (and against *whom*)” in the very different international context following World War II.⁶

The central element of this post–World War II ideology of American identity hinged on the official insistence that the United States (we Americans) confronted an urgent, pervasive, permanent, and potentially fatal threat to its (our) vital interests, to its (our) fundamental values, and indeed to its (our) very existence. This proclaimed threat was invoked to legitimize a series of measures, institutions, and practices said to be necessary to ensure “national security”—in short, the national security state. Yet this narrative and these security practices have always been contested and the struggles over national security, national identity, and the nature of the American community and its place and role in global politics have gone through several distinct phases.

For over a century, Hollywood movies have been “the most popular and influential medium of culture in the United States.”⁷ The third central argument that we advance in this book holds that, as such, these movies played a vital role in imagining the universe and in shaping the vocabulary; defining the images, metaphors, and tropes; and establishing the mental maps, archetypes, mindsets, and emotional framework through which most

Americans came to think about themselves, their country, and national security following World War II. These too evolved over time, and we examine this evolution in largely chronological fashion from the beginning of the Cold War to the second decade of the twenty-first century.

Which Movies?

The US cinema industry produced an estimated 51,311 feature films between 1894 and 2014.⁸ Clearly no study can begin to survey anything like all of these. Our filmography, at the end of this volume, includes only those films that we directly reference—some 500 movies. However, in preparing this book, we drew on a substantially greater number of films. These include 846 of the 2,141 top-grossing movies by decade since 1900,⁹ together with all but 13 of the 200 all-time top domestic box office earners adjusted for inflation¹⁰ and 245 of the 284 films nominated for a Best Picture Academy Award between 1946 and 2010 (and all of the winners). We also watched hundreds of other films not on any of these lists, including B-movies, commercial flops, and outright disasters.

Choosing which movies to highlight in this study was no easy task. We easily could have focused on the contribution of this or that genre or sets of genres to the national security state (the war movie, science fiction, the romantic comedy, etc.), or that of leading filmmakers, or of box office successes, or Oscar-nominated films. However, we deliberately chose a more eclectic approach. This focuses variously on genre, on film directors, on categories of films from this or that decade, on films about two US wars, on blockbusters, and even on commercial failures. We chose this route since it well illustrates our method of analysis which, we are firmly convinced, allows anyone to grasp the explicit and implicit political meaning and ideological content of virtually any film (see pp. 26–34).

Our analysis of the evolving US cinema industry and its relationship to the national security state focuses in detail on forty-eight films released between 1948 and 2014, though we mention many more. Some of these forty-eight films deal explicitly with the national security state, others do so only obliquely or indirectly, still others apparently not at all. All were chosen because they seem to us to be especially emblematic both of a particular moment in US public life and of a way of posing vital issues around US security. However, it bears repeating that our choice of films is in some sense arbitrary. In almost every case, other films (or films by other directors—e.g., Elia Kazan or Howard Hawks instead of John Ford) could have been chosen, and genres not examined here (e.g., the musical) could equally have been analyzed to trace the link between movies and the national security state. We purposely chose not to focus on some obvious

national security films (e.g., Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*, Sidney Lumet's *Fail Safe*), mainly because a large literature on them already exists. Nonetheless, several other widely discussed films are included here since we believe that either these have not been mined for their national security content (e.g., *The Graduate*, *Rocky*) or they have been insufficiently located in a broader cultural context (e.g., *M*A*S*H*, *The Deer Hunter*, the *Rambo* series).

This being said, all of these forty-eight movies do address—directly or obliquely—various key issues, dilemmas, situations, and problems confronting the United States and its sense of self and role in the world since 1945. All pose, explicitly or implicitly, questions about this or that aspect of the frame of reference through which we analyze the national security state (see pp. 33–34). The American Film Institute rates several of these films as among the 100 greatest movies;¹¹ others are, to put it politely, cruder products. But they all resonate with something vital in the culture and debates of their time.

Most films that we discuss here enjoyed strong commercial success. Widely seen, they have had an impact on public debate, or reinforced one or another partisan viewpoint. In some cases, their characters' very names, or worldviews, or take on a particular situation, or elements of the movie's dialogue, have entered into everyday speech. Conversely, the striking box office failure of all but one of the films about the Iraq War analyzed in Chapter 9 says a great deal about the contemporary United States and how Hollywood consolidates the national security state.

Structure of the Book

We present a definition of the national security state and a sketch of its components, practices, and operational modalities in Chapter 1. That chapter equally spells out our understanding of the link between Hollywood movies and the national security state as well as our method of exploring how this link operates and has evolved. Those wishing to skip this more academic discussion can proceed directly to the analysis of the movies starting in Chapter 2, secure in the knowledge that each time we first deploy an analytical concept initially outlined in Chapter 1, readers are referred to the page on which this concept is discussed.

In Chapter 2, we focus on the debate over the establishment of the national security state between 1947 and 1950 through an examination of how its ideological underpinnings are refracted and legitimized through director John Ford's celebrated cavalry trilogy. In Chapter 3, we grapple with the McCarthyite period of the first half of the 1950s and the ways in which film noir came to present a coded challenge to the premises underly-

ing the national security state. Chapter 4 covers the period 1954 to 1969, and we explore director Alfred Hitchcock's ambiguous take on various facets and practices of the national security state. Chapters 5 and 6 look at the tumultuous period from the mid-1960s to the end of the 1970s. Our focus in Chapter 5 is on how key films of the "Hollywood revolution" directly challenged the assumptions on which the national security state rested, while in Chapter 6 we explore the ways in which Hollywood channeled a growing conservative backlash that relegitimized the national security state and prepared the ground for the "Reagan revolution." In Chapter 7, we assess the contribution of revisionist films about the Vietnam War to recasting America's narrative of this national trauma and so grafting Reagan's geopolitical vision onto a renewed cult of national security and a strengthened national security state. We analyze Hollywood's attempts to grapple with the post-Cold War global order and their significance for the national security state in Chapter 8. In Chapter 9, we take up the cinematic representation of the post-9/11 period and, particularly, of the Iraq War. The various threads of our argument are drawn together in the concluding chapter.

Notes

1. Weber, *Imagining America at War*, p. 3.
2. "United in Courage," *People Magazine*, 12 September 2001, <http://whatreallyhappened.com/WRHARTICLES/people.html> (accessed 15 January 2011). Lawrence Wright, quoted in "September 11: A Warning from Hollywood," Panorama, *BBC News*, 24 March 2002, http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/static/audio_video/programmes/panorama/transcripts/transcript_24_03_02.txt (accessed 5 January, 2010). See also comments by the screenwriter of *Die Hard* and *Die Hard 2*, quoted in "September 11: A Warning from Hollywood," and those of the explosives expert who blew up the White House in *Independence Day*, in Shone, *Blockbuster*, p. 294. See also screenwriter Michael Tolkin, "The Movie I Didn't Know How to Write," *New York Times*, 23 September 2001, www.nytimes.com/2001/09/23/magazine/23TOLKIN.html (accessed 5 January 2010).
3. A classic 1965 article argues that the disaster movie fad allowed viewers "to participate in the fantasy of living through one's own death and more, the death of cities, the destruction of humanity itself" (Sontag, "The Imagination of Disaster," p. 212). For more recent evaluations and lists of disaster movies, see Broderick, "Surviving Armageddon"; Hoberman, "*Nashville* Contra *Jaws*, or 'The Imagination of Disaster' Revisited"; Levine and Taylor, "The Upside of Down"; Dirks, "Disaster Films." On New York City as the principal site of disaster movies, see Shone, *Blockbuster*, pp. 293–294.
4. "September 11: A Warning from Hollywood," Panorama, *BBC News*, 24 March 2002, http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/static/audio_video/programmes/panorama/transcripts/transcript_24_03_02.txt (accessed 27 January 2011).
5. Zelizer, *Arsenal of Democracy*, p. 3.
6. On the ways in which Hollywood's post-9/11 narratives projected competing subjectivities, or what was meant by the expression "we Americans" and how "we"

(the United States) should act in global politics, see Weber, *Imagining America at War*, pp. 2–9, *passim*.

7. Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, p. 3.

8. This includes the American movies listed on the International Movie Database (IMDb), but excludes those marked as Adult, Documentary, News, Game, and TV. For the 44,704 films released between 1894 and 2012, see “Where Are Movies Made,” *A Niche in the Library of Babel*, 29 June 2013, <https://babelniche.wordpress.com/2013/06/29/where-are-movies-made/> (accessed 13 December 2014). For the additional 6,607 American films released in 2013 and 2014, see “Most Popular Feature Films Released in 2013 with Country of Origin United States,” IMDb, www.imdb.com/search/title?at=0&countries=us&sort=moviemeter,asc&title_type=feature&year=2013,2013, and “Most Popular Feature Films Released in 2013 with Country of Origin United States,” IMDb, www.imdb.com/search/title?at=0&countries=us&sort=movie_meter,asc&title_type=feature&year=2014,2014 (both accessed 21 October 2015).

9. See “Top Grossing Films of . . . [specific decade],” Stats-a-Mania, www.teako170.com/ (accessed 21 October 2011).

10. See “All Time Box Office: Domestic Grosses. Adjusted for Ticket Price Inflation,” Box Office Mojo, www.boxofficemojo.com/alltime/adjusted.htm (accessed 21 October 2011).

11. American Film Institute, “AFI’s 100 Greatest Movies of All Time,” www.afi.com/100years/movies.aspx (accessed 14 June 2012).

