

**DECADE OF DISARRAY: HOLLYWOOD  
ALLEGORIES OF U.S. FOREIGN POLICY:  
1999-2009**

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how a series of Hollywood films allegorised the contradictions of American foreign policy between 1999 and 2009. These contradictions are underlined in pictures that use military intervention as a subtext.

My argument considers the role of allegory in an array of genres, including war pictures, Westerns, and comic book adaptations. The case studies I analyse allegorise a bipartisan consensus surrounding military intervention. I postulate that this consensus was crystallised in the Kosovo War of 1999 and later became apotheosised in the 2003 Iraq War. I contend that, in pictures as diverse as *There Will be Blood* (2007) and *The Dark Knight* (2008), political allegory critiques the bipartisan allure of both neoconservatism and liberal interventionism's promises of exporting American democracy. Moreover, these narratives examine the ideas of International Relations theorists as diverse as Walter Mead, Walter McDougall, and Joseph Nye. The theories propounded by these authors become embodied in different characterisations, leading to storylines that connote ideological friction and philosophical inconsistency. Consequently, Hollywood cinema during this period highlights a contradiction in American foreign policy, a theme that is further encoded in narrative elements that focus on the strained politics of coalition building and winning hearts and minds.

**Dedicated to Dan Hickey**

**1990-2015**

**'Get busy living'**

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis argues that a series of American films allegorised the contradictions within US foreign policy and military intervention during the decade 1999-2009. Through narratives that contained subtexts of imperial overstretch, dichotomies between the International Relations philosophies of idealism and realism and critiques of US neo-imperialism, much of mainstream Hollywood cinema evoked anxieties that troubled foreign policy theorists and policymakers in the post-Cold War era.

Central to my argument is the consideration of what the centrist International Relations theorist Walter Mead called 'the kaleidoscope of American foreign policy'<sup>1</sup> and its role in American cinema during this timeframe. Case studies from different genres are explored in this thesis, including war, Western and science fiction pictures, all of which highlight a collision of International Relations philosophies. I argue that these films use allegory to portray a state of contradiction that began with a series of humanitarian interventions pursued by the Clinton administration in the late 1990s. The bulk of the thesis focuses on American cinema from the post-9/11 period and the existence of this theme in films that allegorise the US occupation of Iraq.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and how it changed the World* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), p. 30.

Before I explicate this dynamic in detail, it is essential to recount the methodological significance of allegory and how its cinematic form has critiqued American statecraft.

I begin by explaining what I mean by ‘allegory’ and the ‘contradictions within US foreign policy’, before locating these in ‘mainstream Hollywood cinema’. I then discuss how the themes and context of ‘military intervention’ are integral to the thesis. Following that will be an explanation of the formal, thematic and narrative links that connect my five chapters and a brief study of the interdisciplinary focus of the thesis. A chapter by chapter outline delineates the structure of the main argument following this introduction.

### **The allegorisation of US foreign policy in mainstream American cinema**

Defined by Madeleine Kasten in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* as ‘the use of sustained metaphor’ and the combination ‘of a figurative surface with a deeper meaning’, allegory has long played a role as a storytelling device in American cinema.<sup>2</sup> The type of allegory perhaps most resplendent throughout Hollywood filmmaking, and the one that forms the basis of this thesis, is what Kasten calls ‘the historical or political allegory’, which revolves around ‘a self-conscious relationship with an authoritative narrative or historical event which precedes it, and which provides its interpretative frame or pretext’.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Madeleine Kasten, ‘Allegory’, in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, ed. by David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), pp. 9-12 (pp. 10-11).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

American cinema is a logical area for studying the prevalence of allegory due to its implicit universality. Within literature, Fredric Jameson's designation of a 'national allegory' for texts produced in the third world has been viewed as problematic in its adherence to a 'generality' and 'theoretical orientalism'.<sup>4</sup> Yet Hollywood filmmakers, in their adjunctive relationship with the cultural, economic and political dominance of the American superpower, have consistently produced pictures that are perceived without controversy as influenced by the grandeur of the United States' global primacy. The idea of American exceptionalism, and its stress on the unique political and economic predilections that make the United States distinct, has been a longstanding theme of the country's cultural mores, from de Tocqueville's statement that America is 'entirely exceptional and it is to be believed that no other democratic people will ever be placed in it' to Reagan's invocation of Winthrop's 'city on the hill'.<sup>5</sup>

To Film Studies theorists, American films ranging from *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) to *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) have revolved around the drama of preserving these distinctions. Ian Scott interprets American political films as foregrounding 'the values, beliefs and identity that are wrapped up in the American creed', juxtaposing ideals of 'liberalism and democracy' with 'the key ideological tensions at the heart of the republic'.<sup>6</sup> Michael Coyne, whose book *Hollywood Goes to Washington: American Politics on Screen* (2008) interrogates the iconography of the political film, sees Hollywood pictures as providing similarly dichotomous

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<sup>4</sup> Imre Szeman, 'Who's Afraid of National Allegory?: Jameson, Literary Criticism, Globalization', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol.100.3 (2001), pp. 803-827 (p. 803).

<sup>5</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville and John Winthrop, quoted in James W. Ceaser, 'The Origins and Charter of American Exceptionalism', *American Political Thought*, Vol.1.1 (2012), pp. 3-28 (p. 7).

<sup>6</sup> Ian Scott, *American Politics in Hollywood Film: Second Edition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), pp. 19-21.

reflections on the state of the nation. Conditioned by a series of ‘paradoxes’ that were listed by the historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., American political cinema assimilates conflicting dynamics that were ‘at the heart of American history, society and culture’.<sup>7</sup> Schlesinger’s list, which Coyne applies to American political film, is cited below:

1. *Experiment versus Ideology*

2. *Equality versus Tolerance of Inequality*

3. *Order versus Violence*

4. *Conformity versus Diversity*

5. *Materialism versus Idealism*

6. *America as ‘Redeemer Nation versus America as One Nation Among Many.’<sup>8</sup>*

Despite Coyne briefly mentioning the existence of these dichotomies in films ‘expressly political in content without being chiefly set in the realm of US politics’<sup>9</sup>, such as *Casablanca* (1942) and *12 Angry Men* (1957), his and Scott’s methodology is heavily diegetic in its predominant discussion of pictures containing only explicit political content and American settings. This thesis differs by analysing case studies that function as allegories for American foreign policy. Although foreign policy is never divorced from the work of Scott and Coyne, they generally focalise the *mise en*

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Coyne, *Hollywood Goes to Washington: American Politics on Screen* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), p. 12.

<sup>8</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., quoted in Coyne, p. 12.

<sup>9</sup> Coyne, p. 9.

*scène* of American domestic politics. This is evidenced by Scott's sole inclusion of pictures with 'very direct settings, characters and/or references to politicians, political institutions and political history,'<sup>10</sup> and Coyne's stipulation that films possessing 'political *subtexts*' are 'of only tangential pertinence' compared to his prioritisation of 'film narratives chiefly *about* American politics'.<sup>11</sup>

Instead, the chapters in this thesis focus on how Schlesinger's list of conflicting principles pervaded foreign policy allegory in the cinematic decade 1999-2009. Before I detail American cinema's role in allegorising these oppositional ideas and the subtext of contradiction in my case studies, it is necessary to examine how and why Schlesinger's divisions have applied to US foreign policy and American political life.

The United States, particularly in its founders proclaimed democratic exemplarism and tolerance of black servitude, has long abounded in historical irony and contradiction. The clashes of virtue and inequity were argued to be dominant by Samuel Huntingdon, who, similarly to Schlesinger, thought that American political life had long been divided by 'American ideals and American institutions'.<sup>12</sup> This was further specified by a gap between the American populace's 'liberal, democratic individualistic, and egalitarian values' and states of 'national cognitive dissonance, which they have attempted to relieve through various combinations of moralism, cynicism, complacency and hypocrisy'.<sup>13</sup> To Huntingdon, foreign policy naturally

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<sup>10</sup> Scott, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> Coyne, p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> Samuel P. Huntingdon, 'American Ideals Versus American Institutions', in *American Foreign Policy: Theoretical Essays: Seventh Edition*, ed. by G. John Ikenberry and Peter L. Trubowitz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 297-322 (p. 297).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 297.

extended these divisions. A list of conflicting International Relations precepts provided by Huntington seem analogous to the postulations of Schlesinger:

*Self-interest versus ideals*

*Power versus morality*

*Realism versus utopianism*

*Pragmatism versus principle*

*Historical realism versus rationalist idealism*

*Washington versus Wilson*<sup>14</sup>

Huntingdon's final juxtaposition mentions Presidents Washington and Wilson, two men whose dichotomisation embodies the rival traditions of realism and idealism. Whereas Washington's 1797 farewell address implored Americans to withdraw from the intrigue of Europe's revolutionary wars by admonishing the 'permanent, inveterate, antipathies against particular nations and passionate attachment for others'<sup>15</sup>, the First World War saw Woodrow Wilson promise to 'make the world safe for democracy' by joining Great Britain and France in conflict against the Central Powers.<sup>16</sup>

Their understanding of American influence was also polarised. Wilson evinced an oppositional vision to what the centrist foreign policy historian Walter McDougall notes as Washington's disdain for 'a new, moral diplomacy', that was 'downright

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 311.

<sup>15</sup> Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World since 1776* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), p. 31.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 136.

injurious' to 'American exceptionalism'.<sup>17</sup> The military historian Andrew Bacevich illustrates how this difference materialised in reaction to the horrors of the First World War, embodied in Wilson's belief that 'the Old World had deviated from God's plan' and that only 'self-determination, freedom of the seas and economic openness' could 'end the ongoing European struggle', and render war 'forever obsolete'.<sup>18</sup>

Yet despite the compelling bipolarity of these presidents' rival principles, American political life has long evidenced a co-morbidity of what Huntington summates as a 'historical realism' and 'rationalist idealism'. One can see this combination demonstrated in the manifestation of reaction and progress in several historic presidencies. Andrew Jackson, who championed a democratic egalitarianism for white men, later destroyed Native American communities in the 'trail of tears'.<sup>19</sup>

Theodore Roosevelt, who promoted reform against monopolistic gilded age industries, supported a racialised Social Darwinism in propounding that 'America, Australia, and Siberia should pass out of the hands of their red, black and yellow aboriginal owners, and become the heritage of the dominant world races'.<sup>20</sup>

The complex role of International Relations tenets such as realism and idealism in American history consistently prove these contradictions have long co-existed in the realm of foreign policy. To Deudney and Meisner, realism has long safeguarded

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans are Seduced by War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 10-11.

<sup>19</sup> The inequities of American life exposed by Andrew Jackson's presidency are outlined in Robert J. Cook, 'Fanfare for the Common Man? Political Participation in Jacksonian America', in *A Companion to the Era of Andrew Jackson*, ed. by Sean Patrick Adams (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 532-554 (pp. 533-541). Cook comments, 'As far as adult white males were concerned, Jacksonian America looked to be a haven of participatory democracy'. Undergirding this 'strident white male democracy' was Jackson's 'decision to remove "civilised" Indians to the trans-Mississippi West' and 'the nation's unconscionable refusal to rid itself of the curse of human bondage'.

<sup>20</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, quoted in Stephen Graubard, *The Presidents: The Transformation of the American Presidency from Theodore Roosevelt to George W Bush* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 90.

America's exceptionalist qualities, ironically through the recognition 'that the United States is not in any significant way fundamentally different from other states'.<sup>21</sup> An America not seeking to remake the world in its own image and focused on its own security was the best path to spreading democracy and achieving the manifest destiny idyll, a contradiction integral to the westward expansion of the 19th century:

*Continental expansion against weak adversaries, regional hegemony in the New World often exploited for economic gains, global great power balancing and alliance leadership against predatory revisionist states, and then Western and global hegemony are essentially what any state (seeking security, power and interest) would have done if it were in the thoroughly enviable position of the United States in the international system.*<sup>22</sup>

In contrast, idealism aims to, in Peter Wilson's words, 'transcend the international anarchy', in order to 'create a more cosmopolitan and harmonious world order'.<sup>23</sup>

The idealism of Woodrow Wilson nevertheless involved recognition of realist principles surrounding state sovereignty. To Peter Wilson, this was embodied in his 'campaign to put national self-determination at the heart of the 1919 peace settlement', an act 'bound by a common morality with its bedrock in basic human rights'.<sup>24</sup> This was, however, an unwieldy synthesis of nationalism and internationalism. Peter Wilson further compares President Wilson's endorsements of

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<sup>21</sup> Daniel Deudney and Jeffrey Meisner, 'American Exceptionalism', in *US Foreign Policy*, ed. by Michael Cox and Doug Stokes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 24-42 (p. 23).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>23</sup> Peter Wilson, 'Idealism in International Relations', in *Encyclopedia of Power*, ed. by Keith Dowding (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, 2011), pp. 331-332 (p. 332).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 332.

self-government with his creation of the League of Nations, a multilateralism that traduced 'the power and self-interestedness of the independent nation state, the reign of instrumental reason in international politics, and the emotional appeal of national sovereignty'.<sup>25</sup>

It is easy to view the dichotomy of idealism and realism as corresponding to a divide between a multilateral America orientated towards international co-operation and the unilateral emphasis of an unsentimental nationalism. Yet far from indicating that multilateralism and idealism were synonymous, or that unilateralism and realism were always connected, the above examples highlight the essential fluidity of International Relations principles. The dynamics of American foreign policy have frequently alternated between the realist and idealist poles, consequently generating differing interpretations of key historical figures and phenomena.

Lyndon Johnson's conduct of the Vietnam War was perhaps most emblematic of this historic ambivalence. Among those who attacked the conflict for its realism was former territorial governor of Alaska and journalist Ernest Gruening. Instead of defending freedom and democracy, the South Vietnamese junta supported militarily by the US, joined a coterie of 'corrupt and unpopular dictatorships which owe their temporary sojourn in power to our massive support'.<sup>26</sup> To Francis M. Bator, this was the inevitable price of a Cold War era realism designed to protect Johnson's

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 332.

<sup>26</sup> Ernest Gruening, quoted in Robert D. Johnson, 'The Progressive Dissent: Ernest Gruening and Vietnam', in *Vietnam and the American Political Tradition: The Politics of Dissent*, ed. by Randall B. Woods (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 58-81 (p. 58).

reformist Great Society at home; if betrayed, it would have invited 'failure in the Congress' and served to 'destroy the Great Society program with it'.<sup>27</sup>

Conversely, Johnson's escalation in Vietnam has also been seen as a product of an idealism that ignored traditional realist understandings of power and diplomacy.

Rosato and Schuessler specify Vietnam's 'limited material stakes' and its status as a conflict that was chosen in spite of there being 'no balance-of-power reason for fighting in Southeast Asia'.<sup>28</sup> This stance was typified by 'an ideological aversion to communism'.<sup>29</sup> Further, Walter McDougall's theory of Global Meliorism, which is explored in both the first and last chapters in this thesis, underlines the Vietnam conflict as a liberal effort to 'feed the hungry and promote democracy abroad'.<sup>30</sup>

McDougall quotes Johnson's ambition to leave Vietnam with 'schools and hospitals and dams', along with his platitude that 'our safest guide to what we do abroad is always what we do at home'<sup>31</sup>, painting a picture of a foreign policy underpinned by a wishful idealism rather than a sober realism.

This thesis seeks to understand how similar contradictions of US foreign policy are underlined in mainstream American cinema during the decade 1999-2009. I will now, much as I have illustrated my thesis's foundation in International Relations, explain how its focus on the importance of allegory has precedent in the history of Film Studies and American cinema. I emphasise this by looking at how examples of 'Classical Hollywood Cinema' have been read allegorically, followed by an analogous

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<sup>27</sup> Francis Bator, 'No Good Choices: LBJ and the Vietnam/Great Society Connection', *Diplomatic History*, Vol.32:3 (2008), pp. 309-340 (p. 326).

<sup>28</sup> Sebastian Rosato and John Schuessler, 'A Realist Foreign Policy for the United States', in *American Foreign Policy: Theoretical Essays: Seventh Edition*, pp. 105-136 (p. 125).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>30</sup> McDougall, p. 173.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.

approach to films released under the 'New Hollywood' revolution of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Then, I shall explore the period 1999-2009 and its difference from those earlier eras.

To the film historian David Bordwell, the period of classical Hollywood cinema lasted from 1917 until 1960. Its dominant features included 'psychologically defined individuals who struggle to solve a clear-cut problem or to attain specific goals', backed by a system in which 'film techniques are patterned to the causal structure of the classical scene'.<sup>32</sup> Through looking at several archetypes of this cinema, we can see how allegoric meaning transcended aesthetic and narrative convention.

Michael Curtiz's romantic drama *Casablanca* (1942), in its wartime setting of Vichy occupied North Africa, seems to reflect the acrimonious foreign policy debates surrounding American participation in the Second World War. The film is set in the titular Moroccan city and follows the central character of Rick Blaine. An American expatriate, Blaine's proprietorship of an upscale gambling den hides a past of gunrunning to forces opposed to the revanchist ambitions of fascist Italy and Spain in the 1930s. The drama of Blaine's chance meeting with former lover, Ilsa Lund, and the eventual protection of Elsa and Czech fugitive husband Victor Laszlo from Vichy French forces, has generated interpretations that largely view Curtiz's film as an allegory for the United States's shift from isolationism to internationalism. *Time* writer Richard Corliss postulates the idea that Blaine's journey formed a mirror for very recent events in International Relations:

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<sup>32</sup> David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin, 1985), pp. 157-163.

*President Roosevelt ('casa blanca' is Spanish for 'white house'), a man who gambles on the odds of going to war until circumstance and his own submerged nobility force him to do so (read: partisan politics) and commit himself—first by financing the Side of Right and then by fighting for it. The time of the film's actions (December 1941) adds credence to this view, as does the irrelevant fact that, two months after Casablanca opened, Roosevelt (Rick) and Prime Minister Winston Churchill (Lazlo) met for a war conference in Casablanca.*<sup>33</sup>

Richard Raskin adds to the abundance of historical understandings by arguing that *Casablanca* could be contextualised by the Realpolitik of America's early 1940s policy towards Vichy France. Responding with nuance to the set of critical views that stress *Casablanca's* allegory for the non-participation versus participation debate, Raskin's critical engagement suffuses Curtiz's picture with a moral ambiguity distinct from Corliss's reading. To Raskin, the film mirrored the Roosevelt administration's rapprochement with Vichy France because the 32<sup>nd</sup> president 'strengthened US ties to Vichy by elevating American representation to the full ambassadorial level'.<sup>34</sup> Rather than gauging a divide between isolationism and internationalism, Raskin instead connects *Casablanca* to the tensions of the realism/idealism dichotomy wrought by the Second World War. He describes 'the withholding of official recognition by the State Department and White House' of the Free French forces, along with the administration 'denying De Gaulle's organization the slightest moral prestige', factors which meant that the film's political resonance stemmed more

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<sup>33</sup> Richard Corliss, quoted in Richard Raskin, 'Casablanca and United States Foreign Policy', *Film History*, Vol.4:2 (1990), pp. 153-164 (p. 157).

<sup>34</sup> Raskin, p. 153.

from 'the central role of the Vichy/Free French polarity' than the 'isolationism/involvement interpretation'.<sup>35</sup>

The classical Hollywood Western, particularly in its *mise en scène* of a west coveted by the expansionist ideology of Manifest Destiny, has perhaps most broadly allegorised the rivalries of a historical realism and a forward-looking idealism. George Steven's *Giant* (1956) showcases this divide in its storyline of a wealthy Texan family coming to terms with the racial segregation of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century America. Monique James Baxter notes the film's potency in being the 'first major motion picture to explore the effects of Jim Crow legislation on Mexicans in Texas'<sup>36</sup>, along with its 'studies of miscegenation, paternalism and blatant racism'.<sup>37</sup> The gulf between the US's democratic ideals and its legacy of white continental imperialism is most profoundly displayed in the final scene, when Texan patriarch Jordan Benedict accosts a racist café owner for barring his Mexican daughter in-law and grandson. This resonant scene mirrors a Cold War context where the United States's democratic idealism was labelled hypocritical against its practice of a fierce racial apartheid at home.

A decade later, American cinema would take a more anarchic turn in the wake of the Vietnam War. This was engineered by a 'New Hollywood' generation of directors who refused to abide by the narrative and aesthetic norms of classical Hollywood cinema. Geoff King outlines the industrial changes that had occurred as a result of

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 156-157.

<sup>36</sup> Monique James Baxter, 'Giant Helps America Recognize the Costs of Discrimination: A Lesson of World War II', in *Hollywood's West: The American Frontier in Film, Television, and History*, ed. by Peter C. Rollins and John E. O' Connor (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005), pp. 160-172 (p. 161).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 171.

the scrapping of the socially conservative Hays Production Code of 1930 and its replacement in 1966 with a ratings system where 'the bounds of possible expression were widened', leading to films driven by 'moral ambiguity and complexity'.<sup>38</sup> Bolder portrayals of violence were complemented by the use of new techniques borrowed from the French New Wave (including jump cuts in films such as *Bonnie and Clyde*) and a Vietnam driven acknowledgment of 'America as a place where freedom and democracy were dented, if not more seriously damaged'.<sup>39</sup> Supplanting the moderate progressivism of earlier critiques, it could be argued that a caustic cycle of films encapsulated the new left's revolt against the Johnson and Nixon administrations, matching what Ninkovich described as the anti-war movement's rejection of the 'Wilsonian explanation for intervention'.<sup>40</sup>

Examples of this cycle include the phenomenon of the revisionist Western, which strayed from genre orthodoxy in depicting the frontier in a nihilistic fashion. To many critics, Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969) offered a dark allegory for the United States's foreign policy in Vietnam. Set in the chaotic spaces of the Texan-Mexican borderlands in 1913, Peckinpah's film focuses on a gang of outlaws who become involved in the Mexican Revolution. The allegorical reading of Peckinpah's picture provided by Richard Slotkin hinged on lead outlaw Pike Bishop's choice of supporting the democratic principles of the Mexican peasants or colluding for profit with a brutal military dictator known as Mapache.

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<sup>38</sup> Geoff King, *New Hollywood Cinema: an Introduction* (New York City: I.B. Tauris, 2002), p. 41.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>40</sup> Frank Ninkovich, *The Wilsonian Century: US Foreign Policy Since 1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 221.

To Slotkin, this dilemma allegorises the challenges faced by Johnson in Vietnam. He makes this comparison through drawing analogues between Pike's sympathy for the revolution and the 'massive program of economic aid' offered to North Vietnam in the early stages of the conflict.<sup>41</sup> Slotkin argues that this meaning 'makes *The Wild Bunch* exceptional as a commentary on the counterinsurgency project in Vietnam', a quality accentuated by the 'analogy between Mapache and Diem', the dictator of South Vietnam during the Kennedy years.<sup>42</sup> Tangible in Peckinpah's narrative then, is a palpable divide between a liberal idealism and the pressures of American Realpolitik in South Vietnam.

Michael Coyne's book *The Crowded Prairie: American National Identity in the Hollywood Western* (1997), which differs from *Hollywood Goes to Washington: American Politics on Screen* in its greater emphasis on allegory, specifies this failure of 1960s idealism. Looking at *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) as symbolic of a revolt against the 'increasing corporatism of American society', Coyne interprets the iconic moment of their deaths in Bolivia as a metaphor for the gaucheness of the American intervention in Southeast Asia.<sup>43</sup> This was encapsulated by their 'adventurism in an alien culture Americans were ill-equipped to comprehend'.<sup>44</sup> In a fusion of the anti-war movement and the sacrifice of American lives in Vietnam, they

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<sup>41</sup> Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), p. 602.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 610.

<sup>43</sup> Michael Coyne, *The Crowded Prairie: American National Identity in the Hollywood Western* (London and New York City: I.B. Tauris, 1997), p. 148.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

formed 'innocents abroad, non-conformists, dropouts and casualties of military violence'.<sup>45</sup>

War films during this period, in their use of previous theatres of conflict as opposed to the all too raw setting of Vietnam, posed their own vicarious analysis of the US's contradictory foreign policy. Comedic and satirical war pictures utilised the loci of earlier conflicts to sublimate the feeling of dissent surrounding the liberal frustrations of a war escalated by Johnson and prolonged by Nixon. Brian Hutton's *Kelly's Heroes* (1970) and its Second World War narrative of a gang of AWOL soldiers was infused by a 1960s pop soundtrack and countercultural elements such as drug use and promiscuity, drawing attention to the mood of disdain permeating the US occupation of South Vietnam. This is also evident in Robert Altman's *M\*A\*S\*H* (1970), which uses the Korean War as a surrogate for Vietnam's frustrations and ambiguities. Altman's picture takes place in an encampment that belongs to a Mobile Army surgery hospital unit (the *M\*A\*S\*H* of the title). It focuses on a series of shenanigans by the medics, whose hedonistic behaviour signify frustration with what Paul G. Pierpaoli Jr. called the 'limited war' framework of Vietnam.<sup>46</sup> This concept, as described by Stephen Peter Rosen, depended on not only the '*diplomatic* one of how to signal our resolve to the enemy' but 'the *military* one of how to adapt, quickly and successfully, to the peculiar and unfamiliar *battlefield* conditions in which our armed forces are fighting'.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 148.

<sup>46</sup> Paul G. Pierpaoli Jr., 'Consequences of the Cold War', in *Cold War: The Essential Reference Guide*, ed. by James R. Arnold and Roberta Weiner (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2012), pp. xxii-xxxii (p. xxvii).

<sup>47</sup> Stephen Peter Rosen, 'Vietnam and the American Theory of Limited War', *International Security*, Vol. 7:2 (1982), pp. 83-113 (p. 83).

The Johnson administration, in its contradictory calls for bombing halts and vacillating efforts towards a peace deal with Viet Cong leader Ho Chi Minh, created a commitment that alienated both the American left and right. This faulty attempt at triangulation was further commented on by Rosen, who observed Johnson's 'tendency to choose plans that were controllable over plans that would be militarily successful'.<sup>48</sup> Altman's comedy satirises this political quagmire. The insubordination and tomfoolery of camp medics Hawkeye and Duke subvert Vietnam's undercurrent of bureaucratic control, pointing to the complacency of foreign policy and military elites. Clearly the dissection of America's institutional and imperial limitations under New Hollywood pointed to a newer, more pugnacious era, where the realism/idealism dichotomy was deconstructed for a more divisive conflict.

Compared to the more partisan dynamics of the early New Hollywood and Vietnam era, the films I analyse in the time period of 1999-2009 differ in their allegorising of a bipartisan, yet even more contradictory, foundation for American foreign policy.

Phillip John Davies and Paul Wells in *American Film and Politics from Reagan to Bush Jr* (2002), examining mainstream Hollywood cinema from the early Reagan era to the millennium, argue that 'contradiction is often at the centre of both destabilised cultures and those which exhibit liberal pluralist agendas'. The ambiguity of ostensibly 'conservative texts' proved to them that it is 'contradiction which has characterised American film in the last twenty years'.<sup>49</sup> Despite focusing on the realm of US domestic politics and largely excluding foreign policy, Davies and Wells's

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>49</sup> Phillip John Davies and Paul Wells, 'Life is not a box of chocolates: Introduction', in *American Film and Politics: From Reagan to Bush Jr*, ed. by Phillip John Davies and Paul Wells (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 3-12 (p. 12).

description of American contradiction is applicable to the military interventions in Kosovo, Iraq, and Afghanistan. In their attempts to reconcile idealism with military force, these interventions expressed the contradictions of foreign policy in the post-Cold War era.

What events formed this new consensus? To some foreign policy theorists, idealism's marriage with militarism was typified towards the beginning of the Reagan era. Bacevich comments how President Jimmy Carter's reaction to the Iran Hostage crisis of the late 1970s and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan licensed a 'huge shift in military policy'.<sup>50</sup> 'Renouncing his vision of a less materialistic, more self-reliant democracy', Carter proceeded to stress a militarisation in the Persian Gulf guaranteeing 'freedom, defined as more choice, more opportunity, and above all, greater abundance'.<sup>51</sup> Lloyd E. Ambrosius saw this strain echoed in Reagan's early rhetoric against the Soviet Union and its emphasis on a 'worldwide crusade for democracy'.<sup>52</sup>

Withstanding these changes, it is arguable that this seemingly seismic time constituted a false dawn, instead consolidating a policy of realism. The early neoconservatives, in contrast to their War on Terror progeny, endorsed a policy of Realpolitik towards 'pariah' states. Before becoming Reagan's ambassador to the UN, the neoconservative Jeanne Kirkpatrick purveyed this perspective in her 1979 article, 'Dictatorships and Double standards'. She claimed that 'liberalization and democratization...actually assisted the coming to power of new regimes in which

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<sup>50</sup> Bacevich, p. 182.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 182.

<sup>52</sup> Lloyd C. Ambrosius, *Wilsonianism: Woodrow Wilson and his Legacy in American Foreign Relations* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), p. 177.

ordinary people enjoyed fewer freedoms and less personal security than under the previous autocracy'.<sup>53</sup>

This understanding was perhaps ratified during the year of Reagan's landslide re-election in 1984. A 1983 terrorist attack by Hezbollah forces on the US marine barracks in Beirut led to the formation of the 'Weinberger doctrine', a set of principles that warned against nation building exercises in strategically peripheral locations. Secretary of State Caspar Weinberger argued that the US should not embark on overseas interventions, 'unless our vital interests are at stake', and the incumbent administration has 'sufficient support to win', with 'clearly defined political and military objectives'.<sup>54</sup>

A more accurate starting epoch for the new interventionist credo would be the post-Cold War euphoria of the early 1990s, when the US's successful performance in the Gulf War had seen it seemingly freed from the 'Vietnam syndrome' that had vitiated the country's military standing and ideological will to intervene in the politics of poorer nations.<sup>55</sup> It had also provided a glimpse of a world where realist orthodoxies could be supplanted for a new kind of unilateral idealism. Beginning in the 1990s, the neoconservative movement sought to build on the 'neoliberalism' the Reagan administration had instituted in the domestic and economic sphere, internationalising the concept Stephanie Lee Mudge defines as 'an unadulterated

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<sup>53</sup> Jeanne J. Kirkpatrick, *Dictatorships and Double Standards: The Classic Essay That Shaped Reagan's Foreign Policy* (2016) <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/dictatorships-double-standards/> [accessed 6 May 2015].

<sup>54</sup> Caspar Weinberger, quoted in Samuel J. Newland and Douglas V. Johnson, II, 'The military and operational significance of the Weinberger doctrine', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol.1:2 (1990), pp. 171-190 (p. 171).

<sup>55</sup> George H.W. Bush, quoted in George C. Herring, *America and Vietnam: The Unending War* (1991/1992), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/vietnam/1991-12-01/america-and-vietnam-unending-war> [accessed 27 January 2014].

emphasis on the market as the source and arbiter of human freedoms', forming a consensus which 'was underpinned by an unquestioned "common sense."<sup>56</sup>

Yet this generation of neoconservatives differed from the hawks of the Reagan era in calling for a traditionally liberal program of spreading democracy to other nations, rather than shoring up, in Weinberger's realist fashion, pro-western dictatorships. Leading neoconservatives Robert Kagan and William Kristol had broken with the former pioneer Jeanne Kirkpatrick and her isolationist call to 'take care of pressing problems of education, family, industry and technology'.<sup>57</sup> They called for a new 'benevolent hegemony' that would entail 'resisting, and where possible undermining, rising dictators and hostile ideologies; ... supporting American interests and liberal democratic principles; and... providing assistance to those struggling against the more extreme manifestations of human evil'.<sup>58</sup>

Wedded to this idealism was a devotion to traditionally conservative concerns surrounding America's military supremacy, creating, in Jonathan D. Caverly's words, a process of 'linking democracy and American security'. Caverly argues that the neoconservative philosophy of exporting American democratic and economic mores to totalitarian states stemmed from a belief in 'the enervating effects of democracy on the creation and use of state power'. These effects would help achieve 'greater safety among other democracies because the resulting distribution of relative power is more favourable to American interests in a competitive, state-centric and anarchic

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<sup>56</sup> Stephanie Lee Mudge, "What is neo-liberalism?", *Socio-economic Review*, Vol.6:4 (2008), pp. 703-731 (pp. 704-705).

<sup>57</sup> Jason A. Edwards, *Navigating the Post-Cold War World: President Clinton's Foreign Policy Rhetoric* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2008), p. 27.

<sup>58</sup> William Kristol and Robert Kagan, quoted in Francis Fukuyama, 'A Brief History of Neoconservative Policy', in *Reason, Faith, and Politics: Essays in Honour of Werner J. Dannhauser*, ed. by Arthur M. Melzer and Robert P. Kraynak (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2008), pp. 161-188 (p. 177).

world'.<sup>59</sup> Thus, realist tenets of national security and the Wilsonian goals of spreading democracy could again be linked in a compelling synthesis.

During this era, the neoconservatives routinely castigated the Clinton administration for its primary interests in globalisation and initial disinterest in military affairs.

Ironically, Bill Clinton eventually mirrored the arguments of the new post-Cold War neoconservatism by embracing both military force and democratisation. This was manifested in a series of humanitarian interventions that went beyond the conservative realism of the Reagan and George H.W. Bush administrations, and belied the label of pusillanimity that had enervated the Democratic Party since Vietnam. Douglas Brinkley's article, 'Democratic Enlargement: The Clinton Doctrine', conveyed this transformation. He specified four key points made in a 1993 speech by National Security Advisor Anthony Lake that were important to the direction of the Clinton years. Lake encompassed the need to 'consolidate the democratic base, help to encourage democracy where possible, contain reactionary regimes that oppose democracy, and pursue select humanitarian goals', ideals which championed the United States as 'the world's preeminent military power and its chief advocate for liberalising the global economy'.<sup>60</sup>

The muted reaction by the American left to a series of bombing campaigns against the irredentist Serbian government's annexation of Kosovo in 1999 proved the stability of this new consensus. This acceptance is noted by Bacevich, who perceives how 'the reflexive anti-militarism of the 1960s has given way to a more nuanced

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<sup>59</sup> Jonathan D. Caverly, 'Power and Democratic Weakness: Neoconservatism and Neo-Classical Realism', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol.38:3 (2010), pp. 593-614 (p. 594).

<sup>60</sup> Douglas Brinkley, 'Democratic Enlargement: The Clinton Doctrine', *Foreign Policy*, Vol.106 (1997), pp. 110-127 (p. 115).

view...progressives have come to appreciate the potential for using the armed services to advance their own agenda'.<sup>61</sup> Further, the fact that the Kosovo intervention was accomplished through NATO rather than the UN portended a drift away from what Kupchan and Trubowitz define as a 'liberal internationalism', a doctrine of 'leadership through multilateral partnership rather than unilateral initiative'.<sup>62</sup> The liberal abandonment of multilateralism was perhaps best delineated in Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke's *America Alone: The Neo-Conservatives and the Global Order* (2004). These authors comment on how Clinton, in respect to employment of military force, had performed a 'migration from idealism to Realpolitik'.<sup>63</sup>

This affinity between idealism and unilateralism became centralised in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, when both centre-left Democrats and neoconservatives inside the second Bush administration supported an overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime. In the National Security Strategy of 2002, a neoconservative foreign policy was promoted that would go beyond the efforts of the 1990s, symbolised in synthetic aims to 'champion aspirations for human dignity' and 'prevent our enemies from threatening us, our allies, and our friends, with weapons of mass destruction'.<sup>64</sup>

A plethora of liberal internationalists committed themselves to the Bush administration's latter pursuit of pre-emptive war in order to achieve their Wilsonian

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<sup>61</sup> Bacevich, p. 25.

<sup>62</sup> Charles A. Kupchan and Peter L. Trubowitz, 'Dead Center: The Demise of Liberal Internationalism in the United States', *International Security*, Vol.32:2 (2007), pp. 7-44 (p. 8).

<sup>63</sup> Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke, *America Alone: The Neo-Conservatives and the Global Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 97.

<sup>64</sup> US Department of State, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America: September 2002* (2002), <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/63562.pdf> [accessed 10 January 2017] (p. 1).

ideals of exporting democracy. The Canadian author and liberal academic Michael Ignatieff, who posited that ‘multilateral solutions to the world’s problems are all very well, but they have no teeth unless America bares its fangs’, signified the new mood of liberal imperialism.<sup>65</sup> Historians of empire such as Niall Ferguson called for ‘a period of American rule’<sup>66</sup> in pariah states while the military historian Max Boot exhorted that an unashamed ‘American imperialism...means imposing the rule of law, property rights, free speech and other guarantees, at gunpoint if needs be’.<sup>67</sup>

This thesis argues that, beginning in 1999 with David O’Russell’s *Three Kings*, and continuing in a series of case studies during the Bush years, American film can be seen to allegorise this bipartisan emphasis on the transformative power of military intervention. Common in these pictures is the presence of figures aligned with what Richard Van Alstyne called the ‘imperium’ of American culture, connoting ‘a dominion, state or sovereignty that would expand in population and territory, and increase in strength and power’.<sup>68</sup>

In the outrageous comedy of *Team America: World Police* (2004), liberal, left-leaning actor Gary Johnston is recruited into the titular organization that mirrors the new imperialism of the United States’s post-Cold War hegemony. Paul Thomas

Anderson’s loose adaptation of Upton Sinclair’s *Oil!* (1927), *There Will be Blood*

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<sup>65</sup> Michael Ignatieff, quoted in Tony Smith, ‘Wilsonianism after Iraq: The End of Liberal Internationalism?’, in *The Crisis of American Policy: Wilsonianism in the Twenty-first Century*, ed. by G. John Ikenberry, Thomas J. Knock, Anne-Marie Slaughter, and Tony Smith (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 53-88 (p. 76).

<sup>66</sup> Niall Ferguson, quoted in David Holloway, *9/11 and the War on Terror* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), p. 13.

<sup>67</sup> Max Boot, *American imperialism? No need to run away from the label* (2003), [http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/opinion/editorials/2003-05-05-boot\\_x.htm](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/opinion/editorials/2003-05-05-boot_x.htm) [accessed 11 January 2017].

<sup>68</sup> Richard Van Alstyne, *The Rising American Empire* (New York City: W.W. Norton and Company, 1974), p. 1.

(2007), hinges on the collaboration between oilman Daniel Plainview and moralistic preacher Eli Sunday, a business association that allegorises the Bush administration's reliance on evangelical support for its foreign policy. In the superhero blockbuster *The Dark Knight* (2008), the crossover between the interests of liberal Wilsonians and neoconservatives is symbolised in an early partnership between idealistic District Attorney Harvey Dent and vigilante Batman, a relationship that alludes to the contradictory foreign policy coalitions of the post-9/11 era.

The prevalence of foreign policy allegories in modern American cinema was heralded by the work of International Relations scholar Cynthia Weber, who views realist and idealist philosophies as encoded in 1990s Hollywood film. Her analysis generally perceives this symbolism to be subordinate to the propagandistic creation of 'IR myths' and 'the building blocks of International Relations theory'.<sup>69</sup> This is embodied in her analysis of popular alien invasion film *Independence Day* (1996) as a 'neo-idealist tale of international cooperation in a post-Cold War era'.<sup>70</sup>

Although my argument for this thesis differs from Weber's in my view that allegorical film can provide critique of prevalent American foreign policy traditions as well as mythos, it shares Weber's application of IR theories. To clarify how I shall be assessing the allegorical impact of these diplomatic philosophies, I underline what methodological definition of allegory I use. I begin this by examining how the nature of allegorical film has been contested in the years since the attacks that occurred on 11<sup>th</sup> September, 2001. For many Film Studies scholars, the phantasmagorical nature

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<sup>69</sup> Cynthia Weber's *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction* (Hove: Psychology Press, 2010), p. 2.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

of the Twin Towers' felling incentivised the employment of allegory as a response to the onset of the War on Terror era. These interpretations often drew on a multitude of pre-9/11 Hollywood blockbuster pictures, which, in the decade prior to the attacks, had exploited the spectre of Al Qaeda style terrorism for exhilarating action set pieces (in James Cameron's *True Lies*, 1994), explicitly featured the threat of weapons of mass destruction (*The Rock*, 1996), or bombastically depicted the destruction of contemporaneous New York (*Mars Attacks*, 1996).

To Frances Pheasant-Kelly, the haunting, seemingly ahistorical memory of these pre-9/11 pictures encourages alternatively 'oblique meditations of 9/11', with allusions to 'environmental catastrophe, and economic recession becoming discernible across a range of genres'.<sup>71</sup> Fantasy and comic book franchises such as *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001-2003) and Christopher Nolan's cycle of Batman 'reboots' could be 'dark and nihilistic and invariably espouse a subtext of death'.<sup>72</sup> In a similar fashion to how the 'noir films of the 1940s and 1950s emerged from the political instabilities of the Second World War and the Cold War', 'the darkness of post-9/11 fantasy...encapsulates the contemporary zeitgeist'.<sup>73</sup>

Terence McSweeney exemplifies this expansive reading of post-9/11 allegory's potential. Listing films which range from horror in *Hostel* (2005) to historical drama in Ridley Scott's *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005), he cites allegory's ability to 'function as a site of sustained and interrogative discourse on the era' and present 'vivid

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<sup>71</sup> Frances Pheasant Kelly, *Fantasy Film Post 9/11* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), pp. 2-3.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

encapsulations of the prevailing ideological debates of the decade'.<sup>74</sup> These achievements surpassed reverential dramatisations of recent history such as Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center* (2006) and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2011). Such films, contrastingly to Sweeney, served to 'reify 9/11 as an almost ahistorical moment', providing 'an elaborate erasure of political and historical context'.<sup>75</sup>

In contrast, Douglas Kellner's *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era* (2009) interprets a 'transcoding' of 'the political discourses of the era' across a range of genres. Political meaning was tangible in conservative films that echoed 'Bush and Cheney discourses on foreign policy and militarism', liberal productions (such as Robert Redford's 2007 political drama *Lions for Lambs*) that 'were critical of Bush-Cheney foreign policy', and pictures that were noticeably unpartisan. Kellner views the third type as typified by films such as the revisionist Western and literary adaptation *No Country for Old Men* (2007), which formed an example of a picture 'multilayered, and open to multiple readings'.<sup>76</sup>

Despite the novel ambiguity of this classification, the postulations here largely update Kellner and Michael Ryan's *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (1988). In that collaboration, they argued that films of the Reagan era as different as *E.T.* (1982) and *Salvador* (1986) posed as 'cultural forces at work in contradiction to the hegemonic conservative bloc'.<sup>77</sup> Likewise, the broader picture painted by Kellner in *Cinema Wars* is one of a Hollywood cinema

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<sup>74</sup> Terence McSweeney, *The 'War on Terror' And American Film: 9/11 Frames Per Second* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014) pp. 20-21.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>76</sup> Douglas Kellner, *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 2.

<sup>77</sup> Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Bloomington, Indiana: University of Indiana Press, 1988), p. 12.

consisting of a positive hyper-partisanship. He describes 'a contested terrain that reproduces existing social struggles'.<sup>78</sup> He also praises 2000s Hollywood cinema as 'comparable to the so-called Hollywood Renaissance of the late 1960s and 1970s' (the New Hollywood period), due to the 'surprisingly many critical films that engage with the issues of the day'.<sup>79</sup>

In opposition to these largely positive judgments of post-9/11 allegory are Film Studies academics who view the allegorical tradition as unconstructive, or worse, symptomatic of a political evasiveness over the destructive nature of American power. Stephen Prince, whose book *Firestorm: American Film in the Age of Terrorism* (2009) explores cinematic, documentary, and televisual responses to the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent Iraq War, adheres to this sensibility. He thought the 'films range from those that seek simply to exploit 9/11 for entertainment purposes to those that seek to understand, explain, and interpret this recent history'.<sup>80</sup>

Yet in contrast to Pheasant-Kelly and McSweeney, Prince dismisses Hollywood's mainstream blockbusters and their engagement with the War on Terror. He views the themes of 'vengeance' and 'payback' to be both located in the allegoric *The Dark Knight* and the terrorism-themed action film *Collateral Damage* (2001).<sup>81</sup> Thus, rather than incentivising allegory, the War on Terror gave Hollywood 'a new means for inflecting the conventional elements of existing genres', which are wedded to a 'vengeance narrative'.<sup>82</sup> Wheeler Winston Dixon echoes this theme by looking at 'a

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<sup>78</sup> Kellner, *Cinema Wars*, p. 2.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239.

<sup>80</sup> Stephen Prince, *Firestorm: American Film in the Age of Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 4.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 286.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 286.

renewed audience appetite for narratives of conflict' in the wake of 9/11, embodied in war films that included *Black Hawk Down* (2001), *Collateral Damage* and *We Were Soldiers* (2002).<sup>83</sup> To Dixon, though 'Hollywood momentarily abandoned the hyperviolent spectacles that dominated mainstream late 1990s cinema' in the months following the attacks, the status quo ante was resumed in this series of 'crash and burn movies'.<sup>84</sup>

These critiques by Prince and Dixon tend to view post-9/11 Hollywood cinema and mainstream allegory as catering to Mead's idea of a 'Jacksonian' instinct in American political life. This animus, derived from the bellicosity of Andrew Jackson's political persona, is orientated towards principles of 'self-reliance' in International Relations.<sup>85</sup> Mead discusses how traditional American attitudes that included 'defense of the home and person against robbers, defense against usurpations of the federal government, and defense of United States against its enemies' were flaunted in a diplomatic philosophy treasured for its 'realism' and 'honor, concern for reputation, and faith in military institutions'.<sup>86</sup>

Other critiques argue that post-9/11 allegory, and the broader picture of Hollywood cinema, attests to a liberal collusion with this disposition. Matthew Alford outlines a meeting between Bush's chief political advisor, Karl Rove, and several Hollywood executives in November 2001, as key to an effort that generated liberal varieties of propaganda in response to the attacks. This policy shift was indicated by head of the

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<sup>83</sup> Wheeler Winston Dixon, 'Introduction: Something Lost – Film after 9/11', in *Film and Television After 9/11*, ed. by Wheeler Winston Dixon (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), pp. 1-28 (p. 1).

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>85</sup> Mead, p. 238.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 244-245.

MPPAA (Motion Picture Association of America) and former special assistant to Lyndon Johnson, Jack Valenti, who exhorted filmmakers to convey that 'America has clothed and fed and sheltered millions and millions around the world without asking for anything in return'.<sup>87</sup>

At the same time, however, this liberal idealism was fused with a Jacksonian realism, as Valenti subsequently spoke of the need to 'avenge the 9/11 attacks' and reinforce that 'benevolence is a word that must be struck from our vocabulary'.<sup>88</sup> To Alford, despite the occasional presence of 'more critical' films, this, amidst numerous other examples, proved Hollywood pictures automatically operated on 'fundamental assumptions of American benevolence on the world stage', at the same time as catering to 'national security services' and 'a rigid corporate system'.<sup>89</sup>

To scholars that stress the failings of allegory, such combinations manifest in a dissonance between spectacle and politics. David Holloway accuses Hollywood of a shallow partisanship that upholds the principles of American intervention and the War on Terror. Studying pictures as diverse as the remakes of *The Manchurian Candidate* (2004) and *War of the Worlds* (2005), he evokes the impact of an 'allegory lite', where 'controversial issues can be safely addressed because they can be "read off" other stories by the viewer...the other attractions on offer are sufficiently compelling or diverse, that the viewer can enjoy the film without needing to engage

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<sup>87</sup> Jack Valenti, quoted in Matthew Alford, *Reel Power: Hollywood Cinema and American Supremacy* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), p. 25.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>89</sup> Alford, p. 169.

at all'.<sup>90</sup> To Holloway then, the allegorical quality could be nullified by the spectacle Hollywood cinema provides.

Guy Westwell perceives a different failure. He interprets mainstream Hollywood cinema's treatment of the War on Terror, whether allegorical and literal, as seeking 'hegemonic reconciliation between politically irreconcilable positions'.<sup>91</sup> A picture such as *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, where the traumatised state of post-9/11 New York is juxtaposed with a grandfather's painful memories of bombing Dresden, builds on 'folklore that allows 9/11 to be phrased in a redemptive way', showing how 'the allegorical dimension may license an aggressive and expansive foreign policy'.<sup>92</sup>

This thesis differs from these contributions by emphasising how a series of American films underlined a cognitive dissonance in US foreign policy. By 'cognitive dissonance', I mean the definition in psychology of holding two contradictory ideas at once. Such a focus distinguishes my thesis from the celebratory partisanship of Kellner, who sees post-9/11 Hollywood cinema as animated by liberal and conservative divides. It of course harks back to the dichotomies outlined by Schlesinger and Huntingdon; the latter mentioned a cognitive dissonance in relation to American foreign policy and political life. But it also draws on the precedents of Slotkin, who characterised a 'cognitive dissonance that afflicted contemporary ideology' in the Westerns of the late 1960s.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Holloway, p. 83.

<sup>91</sup> Guy Westwell, *Parallel Lines: Post 9/11 American Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. 94.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>93</sup> Slotkin, p. 591.

The framed nature of cinematic analysis in the 2000s, which largely traces the political resonance of Hollywood films to either the predilections of the soft Democratic left or the hard Republican right, contrasts with a series of pictures that in some way seek to critique a bipartisan consensus surrounding American foreign policy. The deconstruction of military intervention plays a key role in David O’Russell’s Gulf War set *Three Kings*, but also in the febrile westerns of *No Country for Old Men* and *There Will be Blood*, two pictures which probe the neoconservatism that infiltrated the Bush administration. Moreover, by beginning with a case study before 9/11 in 1999’s *Three Kings*, I hope to show the existence of this phenomenon before the onset of the War on Terror.

An analysis of production context can further underline the fact that Hollywood production companies have not been completely cornered into the formulaic narratives mentioned by Holloway. The industrial practice that Geoff King categorised as ‘Indiewood’<sup>94</sup>, a system where subsidiaries of major production companies have been created to target niche audiences, has, for all its mainstreaming of alternative cinema and directors, created a system where allegory is more likely to ferment. Indeed, three directors of the case studies in this thesis, David O’Russell, Paul Thomas Anderson and Christopher Nolan, achieved early prominence through this production context. Though this thesis begins with *Three Kings*, a film that blends mainstream and independent sensibilities, the final two chapters of the thesis, which focus on *The Dark Knight* (2008) and *Avatar* (2009), illuminate the entry of subversive allegory into the mainstream. The thesis then,

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<sup>94</sup> Geoff King, *Indiewood, USA: Where Hollywood Meets Independent Cinema* (New York City: I.B. Tauris, 2009), p. 1.

besides exploring the subtexts of a contradictory foreign policy in film, delineates the assimilation of allegory into blockbuster Hollywood productions.

Now that I have underlined how my approach to the cinematic decade of 1999-2009 relates to other contextual and thematic readings, what of the minutiae of allegory?

The presence of allegoric content in Hollywood film is contested by different methodologies. Following, I specify these methodologies before explaining my own understanding of what constitutes political allegory. I start with the work of Peter J. Haas and Terry Christensen, who use a matrix to assess variations of political content and political intent (table 1)<sup>95</sup>:

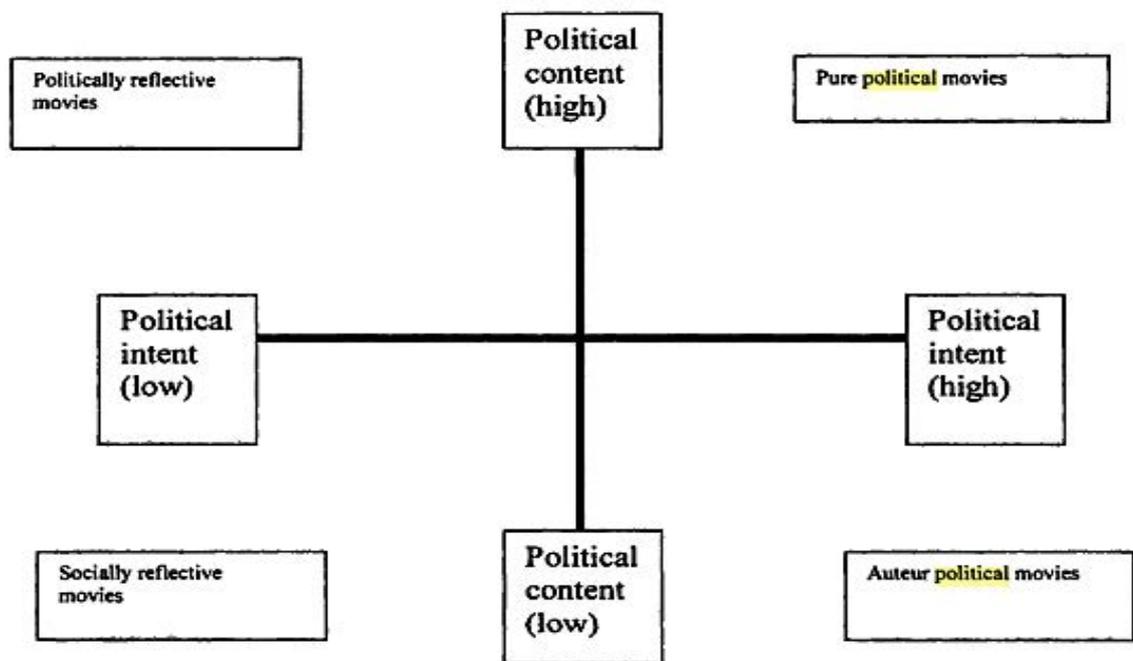


Table 1: Haas and Christensen's (2005) matrix

<sup>95</sup> Matrix located in Haas and Christensen, *Projecting Politics: Political Messages in American Films* (Armonk, North Castle, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2005), p. 8.

Haas and Christensen also explain the kinds of films that fit into this matrix through a subsequent table (table 2)<sup>96</sup>:

<b>Examples of Film Types</b>	
<b>Politically reflective films</b>	<b>Pure (overt) political films</b>
<i>Independence Day</i>	<i>Mr. Smith Goes to Washington</i>
<i>Invasion of the Body Snatchers</i>	<i>The Candidate</i>
Many legal, western, and gangster films	Most social problem and documentary films
	Propaganda films
<b>Socially reflective films</b>	<b>Auteur political films</b>
<i>Pretty Woman</i>	<i>The Godfather</i>
<i>Gone With the Wind</i>	<i>Natural Born Killers</i>
Many other genre films	

Table 2: Haas and Christensen's (2005) examples of films

Haas and Christensen rationalise the measured nature of these classifications.

'Politically reflective movies' such as Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), a science fiction film famous for its allegory of the red scare of the 1950s, are placed in a bracket that features high political content but low political intent due to their representation of 'popular ideas about political phenomena'.<sup>97</sup> In contrast, 'Auteur political films', where renowned directors such as Francis Ford Coppola and Oliver Stone provide an imprimatur of style and theme on their productions, are classified as high in political intent but low in political content. Haas and Christensen argue that this is because 'political meaning is imparted...without overt reference to obvious political imagery'.<sup>98</sup> Allegorical meaning is therefore disseminated through

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>98</sup> A definition of the auteur political film is provided in Ibid., p. 9.

more sophisticated aesthetic and thematic traits rather than a direct mirroring of contemporaneous political culture.

Haas and Christensen's system distinguishes itself from the stratified emphasis on political diegesis foregrounded by Coyne and Scott.<sup>99</sup> Nevertheless, concepts such as the auteur political film and politically reflective film premise politicisation on the basis of inevitably flawed categories. The auteur political film, for example, is constrained by a nebulosity that straddles artistic veneer with political allusion, whilst the politically reflective film conveys a crass popularisation that vitiates any reading of allegory. 'Socially reflective films' are seemingly the most frivolous phenomena specified by Haas and Christensen, due to their precept that films of this type 'have as their core a political message that any viewer can perceive'.<sup>100</sup>

Moreover, their diametrical opposition to 'pure political films', the weightiest category in terms of content and intent, clearly still places explicit diegesis as driver of political meaning.

A different reading of political symbolism in film is provided by Ernest Giglio, who questions the methodology of Haas and Christensen. He wonders how 'audiences would be able to sort out the more significant messages from the less important ones' and queries the 'significance of the political message among other material in the film'.<sup>101</sup> Giglio even contemplates whether Haas and Christensen had considered

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<sup>99</sup> As mentioned towards the beginning of this introduction, Coyne and Scott's writing on American politics in Hollywood film stresses the necessity of explicit *mise en scène* and political content when gauging political meaning.

<sup>100</sup> Haas and Christensen's explanation of the 'socially reflective category' is located in Haas and Christensen, p. 9.

<sup>101</sup> Ernest D. Giglio, 'Searching for the Political Film', in *Hollywood Raises Political Consciousness*, ed. by Michael Haas (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2014), pp. 47-66 (pp. 53-54).

if there is 'a quantity standard for the political material' within a film.<sup>102</sup> To avoid these pitfalls, he proposes measuring a film's politics according to 'intent' and 'effect'.<sup>103</sup> This methodology attempts to respond to the problems of assessing political allegory postulated by Phillip John Davies and Paul Wells, such as whether 'messages and meanings are authorially intended, commercially created, academically invented or genuinely embraced by real people in actual audiences'.<sup>104</sup>

By ignoring the quality of content, Giglio seems to imply that true political allegory is discernible without the presence of political references and explicit narrative elements. Whereas Giglio sees the category of 'intent' as dominated by documentaries such as Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) and Dinesh D'Souza's *2016: Obama's America* (2012), his category of 'effect' features a far broader series of films, divided effectively into what could be called transparent and contested political messages. Transparent films include *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), *Milk* (2005) and *The Kids Are Alright* (2010), pictures where American audiences could 'hardly mis-interpret the social and political messages expressed in these films'.<sup>105</sup> Giglio gives equal salience to more complex pictures such as *Casablanca*, the comedy drama *Forrest Gump* (1994), and Charlie Chaplin's *A King in New York* (1957), pictures that differed in giving viewers 'ambiguous interpretations'.<sup>106</sup>

Both transparent and contested messages however, were included in Giglio's effect category not for their content or explicitness, but for their fostering of debate. To identify the irrelevance of content for the political film, thus illuminating allegory's

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., pp. 55-57.

<sup>104</sup> Davies and Wells, p. 5.

<sup>105</sup> Giglio, p. 58.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

key role, Giglio explores two films, *Hyde Park on Hudson* (2012) and *J Edgar* (2011). These films focus on the respective 'mundane' and 'personal' aspects of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and J. Edgar Hoover's lives rather than on a more overt political theme.<sup>107</sup> Giglio's theory, and its stressing of a film's resonance over its surface *mise en scène*, is closer to the framework of my thesis than Haas and Christensen's more hierarchical definition of political animus. Yet Giglio concludes by noting that the political 'rests in the eye of the beholder rather than any textbook definition'.<sup>108</sup> Although this might seem a rational categorisation, such relativism can lead to the ignoring of a film's more coded imagery or narrative elements. Giglio's category of 'effect' then, because of its reliance on an openness and prompting of discussion, somewhat contravenes my definition of what constitutes the animus of the allegoric political film.

James Combs's deeply ideological writing on American cinema is closer to my political reading of mainstream Hollywood pictures. Combs cites the importance of analysing films whether for 'overt or covert political meaning', and argues that the viewing experience entails 'the unobservable process of political learning, the acquisition of ideas and images which in diffuse, long-term, and often unconscious ways affect people's attitude towards politics'.<sup>109</sup> Though my thesis lacks the Marxist antecedents of Combs's analysis, his emphasis on allegory's assimilable nature very much resembles my methodological approach.

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>109</sup> James Combs, *Movies and Politics: The Dynamic Relationship* (New York City and London: Garland Publishing, 1993), p. 7.

Allegory, in its subtlety, can assimilate political and social currents with only a muted level of disruption of the viewing experience. For all the modern analyses of *Casablanca*, *Giant* and *The Wild Bunch* that exist, their cinematic releases were far from marked by the political dialectics that might characterise their viewing today. The aim of this thesis is to dispel a similar state of casualised assimilation through highlighting the allegoric qualities in case studies from the decade 1999-2009. How do I assess what is tangible political allegory? My answer to this is somewhat paradoxical - the tangibility of political allegory is mostly conveyed through a picture's more inexplicit moments. Moving away from looking at a film's politics as connected to literal elements, such as whether it references particular events or includes direct historical footage, allows a greater focus on plot dynamics that might convey a hidden meaning. Neither does allegory require films to signal open messages about politics or offer obvious talking points that reflect 'hot button' issues such as abortion, gay marriage, and indeed, US foreign policy.

My first chapter for example, explores *Three Kings*, a picture set, and initially wholly concerned with, the ending of the First Gulf War. This is because, on the surface, its premise of four rebellious US soldiers who try to steal Kuwaiti gold from Saddam's troops in post-ceasefire Iraq seems solely concerned with a hypocrisy surrounding the ending of that intervention. Yet I argue that its deeper implications extend beyond its 1991 setting. The second act of O'Russell's picture sees the roguish Major Archie Gates attempt to save the lives of Iraqi dissidents after 'retrieving' the stolen gold from an Iraqi village. This plot development showcases a remarkable synergy with the war in Kosovo that closely preceded the film's 1999 release. Its

juxtaposition with the robbery of 'Kuwaiti bullion' also dichotomises the Clintonian agenda of economic renewal and humanitarian intervention that dominated the late 1990s. To summarise, meaning can extend beyond a film's immediate narrative elements.

To return to Giglio's category of 'intent', what are the motives of the directors who make these productions? In *Team America: World Police* and *Avatar*, political intention is, as discussed in chapters 2 and 5, expressed by the directors. In other case studies, such as *No Country for Old Men*, there are no political aims foregrounded by the directors such as in interviews. In spite of this, the Coen Brothers's film possesses an affinity with the political mood of its release year, 2007. Released when the Bush administration was suffering record low approval ratings, but set in the year of Reagan's first election victory in 1980, a compelling interrogation of neoconservative ideology emerges through antagonist Anton Chigurh's strange melding of rugged individualist and nihilistic killer.

A companion piece to *No Country for Old Men*, *There Will be Blood*, demonstrates that a film can be an allegory without requiring 'effect' as well as 'intent'. Despite director Paul Thomas Anderson mentioning *There Will be Blood's* allegoric qualities in a January 2008 interview with the Guardian, his film attracted only a tentative amount of politicised critical responses.<sup>110</sup> This lack of detailed political critique makes the probability of allegory all the more intriguing. Through an examination of

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<sup>110</sup> The few 'politicised critical responses' towards *There Will be Blood* are specified in chapter 3. Paul Thomas Anderson admits the allegorical nature of his film in a January 2008 interview with the Guardian's Ed Pilkington. He concedes to Pilkington's point that *There Will be Blood* is 'more overtly engaged with politics than his previous films', but also stresses the subtlety of this message, emphasising the need for a 'good show' as well as a 'movie about oil and religion'. Ed Pilkington, 'Tell the story! Tell the Story' (2008), <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2008/jan/04/awardsandprizes> [accessed 12 July 2015].

the film's setting in the industrialising west of early 20<sup>th</sup> century California, I postulate that it allegorises the neoconservative agenda of regime change and economic liberalisation applied to post-Saddam Iraq. By focusing on the malevolence of misanthropic oilman Daniel Plainview, and his equally salient partnership with preacher Eli Sunday, I illustrate the significance of these allusions and the film's apposite themes of greed, individualism, and hubris. This picture highlights how the ideal model for political allegory is one innately subtle and unconscious, an almost synesthetic interaction with the contemporaneous 'zeitgeist' of the viewing experience.

Perhaps the most pertinent methodological template for this thesis would therefore be Adam Lowenstein's concept of 'allegorical moments', which entails a 'shocking collision of film, spectator and history where registers of bodily space and historical time are disrupted, confronted and intertwined'.<sup>111</sup> This is the definition of allegory that underpins my analysis. It corresponds with my own interpretations of the thesis case studies and is undergirded with lengthy textual analysis, engaging with dynamics that I believe allegorise those of US foreign policy.

The most ardent retort to Lowenstein's approach is located in Martin Barker's 2011 book *A Toxic Genre: The Iraq War Films*. This text explores the financial failure of literal representations of the Iraq conflict. Barker briefly comments on the inherent intuitivism of the allegorical reading. He cites Kellner's view of the political drama *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005) as reflective of the 'Bush-Cheney rightwing extremist regime', and his hypothesis that the villain in the 'torture porn' franchise

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<sup>111</sup> Lowenstein, quoted in McSweeney, p. 21.

*Saw* (2004-09) formed 'a metaphor for Dick Cheney and his subordinates'.<sup>112</sup> To Barker, these observations showcased a frustrating arbitrariness. The fact that *Good Night, and Good Luck* 'is set in the 1950s' and 'constitutes a quiet, measured evocation of one man's courage', while the *Saw* instalments 'are set contemporaneously in various Eastern Europe countries and operate at the fringes of the horror genre', proved to him allegory's 'tendency to lose specificities and squash differences', forming 'parallel accounts'.<sup>113</sup>

This dismissal neglects allegory's amorphous, provocative potential, instead stigmatising it with a crass populism that deems it unworthy of serious consideration. Rather, Lowenstein's understanding of a convergence between audience consciousness and narrative meaning conveys the most perceptive definition of how a film can resonate with viewers politically.

It should be noted that this thesis focuses on film narratives that examine the ideological makeup of US foreign policy. This contrasts with studies orientated around the relationship between representations of war and audience spectatorship. Such focus is a key tenet of J. David Slocum's edited volume *Terrorism, Media, Liberation* (2005), which emphasises 'the consistent positioning of viewers as political subjects and consumers', a bias that, in the context of mainstream films concerning war and terrorism, 'privileges a certain vision of cultural or geopolitical insecurity'.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Kellner, quoted in Martin Barker, *'A Toxic Genre': The Iraq War Films* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), pp. 12-13.

<sup>113</sup> Barker, pp. 12-13.

<sup>114</sup> J. David Slocum, 'Introduction: The Recurrent Return to Algiers', in *Terrorism, Media, Liberation*, ed. by J. David Slocum (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005), pp. 1-36 (p. 28).

Cynthia Weber (whose contributions to analysing foreign policy outlooks in American film were mentioned earlier) further applies this radical subjectivity to a succession of films spanning from the 1990s to the 2000s. She explores pictures that revolved around military action in *Behind Enemy Lines* (2001) and *Black Hawk Down* (2001), but also surveillance culture in the gritty science fiction thriller *Minority Report* (2002), and argues that these provided both 'episodes of humanitarian intervention' and 'justified vengeance', informing how a 'moral America casts its character and constructs its interpretative codes for understanding itself'.<sup>115</sup>

Weber's argument for a disingenuous self-perception of a 'moral America'<sup>116</sup> is counterbalanced in this thesis by narratives that interrogate this blend of Wilsonianism and militarism. The case studies presented observe the relationship between a contradictory foreign policy and its destabilising effect upon traditional formulations of American identity. Such incongruity is key to *There Will be Blood* and its complex allegory for the Bush administration's intention of reconciling its evangelical base to neoconservative foreign policies. It is similarly prominent in *The Dark Knight's* portrayal of a failed attempt to prosecute Wilsonian intervention, singularly embodied in the dramatic rise and fall of idealistic lawyer Harvey Dent.

My readings of the case studies, above all, focalise a *dysphoria* in US foreign policy. This is primarily accomplished through my explicit emphasis on cinema as a site of allegorical reflection, capable of deconstructing the orthodoxies of the neoconservative and liberal interventionist ideologies so integral to the 1999-2009 decade. Far from fostering a hawkish neoliberal solipsism in the manner outlined by

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<sup>115</sup> Cynthia Weber, *Imagining America at War* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), pp. 6-8.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Slocum, allegory can offer critical engagement with the vulnerabilities created by the United States's own interventionist foreign policies.

Further, exploring how films delve into the specific ideological underpinnings behind intervention, as opposed to a study focused on the cinematic diegesis of war and its effect on the spectator, makes this sentence more palpable. This is an understanding applied from the first chapter's analysis of the war satire *Three Kings*, a picture suffused by the late 1990s subtext of liberal intervention. Though I consider the tropes and aesthetic elements that Hollywood cinema uses to represent warfare, it is this particular salience which forms the overarching focus of the thesis.

Due to the American origins of the films explored, it might be considered an irony that the case studies chosen allegorise neo-imperial failure at the same time as being a product of Hollywood's neo-imperial dominance. I acknowledge this central contradiction as an inherent part of analysing mainstream allegory. To political critics of Hollywood's output, blockbuster critiques of American intervention such as *Avatar* might validate perception of the United States as a 'free' and 'democratic' country, ironically comporting the allegorical film within the very American exceptionalism it is attempting to deconstruct. This compulsion fits in with Gramsci's concept of a 'hegemony,' that, in the words of Zahran and Ramos, 'should be exerted in the sphere of ideas and culture, manifesting a capacity to obtain consensus and gain social basis for it'.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Geraldo Zahran and Leonardo Ramos, 'From hegemony to soft power: implications of a conceptual change', in *Soft Power and US Foreign Policy: Theoretical, Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. by Inderjeet Parmar and Michael Cox (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), pp. 12-31 (p. 21).

Zahran and Ramos's reading is further affirmed by Joseph Nye's theory of 'soft power', (a theory that is reflected in American foreign policy allegory throughout the thesis), an approach to world affairs he views as embodied in the history of American cinema. Nye recounts the effect the American film industry had on a former viceroy of India in 1931, who feared that the eclectic, multi-racial America depicted by Hollywood would shatter the 'white man's privilege in the East'.<sup>118</sup> At the same time as projecting an attractive image of American global power, Nye acknowledges how the market-based liberalism of American culture has incurred reactions that have ranged from the devotion of Czech dissidents to the anger of Islamic communities, creating a combustible mixture of 'admiration, envy, and resentment'.<sup>119</sup>

To Kapur and Wagner, Hollywood since the 1970s had updated soft power for the neoliberal era, forming a 'veritable citadel of cultural policy concealed behind an illuminated sign of private enterprise', thus becoming a 'model for the propagandistic simulation of U.S. culture and nationalism, as well as the bearer of market freedoms'.<sup>120</sup> Michael Parenti also opines on the fig leaf of cultural freedom that had disguised the neoliberal heritage of American filmmaking, citing an ambit where 'ideological control is carried out implicitly', within a 'narrow and superficial sphere,' preventing 'a truly radical critique'.<sup>121</sup> Michelle Langford further thought this was evident in the aesthetic stratification of mainstream Hollywood cinema, which

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<sup>118</sup> Former viceroy of India (unnamed by author), quoted in Joseph Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), p. 38.

<sup>119</sup> Nye Jr., p. 38.

<sup>120</sup> Jyostna Kapur and Keith B. Wagner, *Neoliberalism and Global Cinema: Capital, Culture, and Marxist Critique* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), pp. 22-23.

<sup>121</sup> Michael Parenti, Foreword to *Reel Power: Hollywood Cinema and American Supremacy*, in Alford, p. xii.

prevented allegorical meaning 'due to the necessity of rendering cinematic techniques such as editing invisible'.<sup>122</sup>

Guy Westwell provides a post-9/11 variant of this argument. He proposes that mainstream Hollywood cinema could offer only a bland centrism of 'political positions' and an acknowledgment of 'historical complexity'.<sup>123</sup> This was buttressed by a 'nationalist sentiment', which served to 'maintain the status quo'.<sup>124</sup> This thesis contends that mainstream allegory is equally valid to what Westwell praised as a higher echelon of independent films, which contain 'political engagement' and 'aesthetic and generic variety'.<sup>125</sup> The films discussed in this thesis are automatic products of American soft power, but they also possess storylines that confute perceptions of hegemonic conformity. This contradiction is tangible in the barbed depiction of the First Gulf War media coverage in *Three Kings*; the satire of *Team America: World Police*, which in fact illustrates Hollywood's role in a neo-imperial soft power; the dysphoric allegory for a War on Terror resigned America in *The Dark Knight*. The next section will continue foregrounding these qualities by explaining how the post-1989 ideal of military intervention has lent itself to the expansive and critical potential of mainstream Hollywood allegory.

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<sup>122</sup> Michelle Langford, *Allegorical Images: Tableau, Time and Gesture in the Cinema of Werner Schroeter* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), pp. 66-67.

<sup>123</sup> Westwell's differing views on mainstream Hollywood and independent productions are located in Westwell, p. 16.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

## **‘Consensual hard power’: the changing nature of American military intervention and its allegorisation in Hollywood cinema**

In order to match its hallowed origin as a constitutional republic differentiated from the autocratic monarchies of Europe, the United States has frequently stressed the ‘consensual’ nature of its foreign policy. This has been understood by International Relations scholars of both the left and right. According to the neoconservative Robert Kagan, America’s continental and subsequent global influence has been commonly postulated as an ‘accident or odd twist of fate’ because Americans ‘still believe their nation’s natural tendencies are often toward passivity, indifference and insularity’.<sup>126</sup> Yet, after underlining the unconscious nature of American expansion, Kagan argues that the predominant theme of American foreign policy has instead been a ‘universalistic nationalism’ that dated from the continental rebellion against the British, where citizens were ‘tied together not by common ancestry, common history and common land but by common allegiance to the liberal republican ideology’.<sup>127</sup> The centrist Walter McDougall shares this view by arguing that America’s modern reputation as world hegemon relied on its democratic exceptionalism. He describes a litany of actions that have cemented this image:

*From Washington’s Farewell Address and the Monroe Doctrine to the Open Door policy and Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points, from Franklin Roosevelt’s Atlantic Charter to the United Nations, Marshall Plan, and*

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<sup>126</sup> Robert Kagan, *Dangerous Nation: America’s Foreign Policy from its Earliest Days to the Dawn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), p. 5.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

*ultimate collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States weighed in on the side of human dignity, progress, and liberty.*<sup>128</sup>

Walter Mead too promulgates the belief that American foreign policy drew on its philosophical origins, but he also sees it comprised of other facets derived from American history and society. He cites four schools of foreign policy: the 'Jeffersonian' (principled isolationism and disinterest in global affairs); the earlier mentioned 'Jacksonian' (a tough-minded and self-interested realism that catered to the interests of blue-collar Americans); the already specified 'Wilsonian' (an idealism of spreading international law and democracy); finally, the 'Hamiltonian' (a school orientated principally around economics and the interests of the business class). Successful foreign policies matched 'the representative nature of American society', making an equivalence 'between the political strength of the given schools and their weight in the nation - and the invisible hand takes care of the rest'.<sup>129</sup>

Mead's 'invisible hand' reference to Adam Smith shows that American foreign policy has been celebrated for its extension of liberal capitalistic mores. This has been underlined by Jeff Friedan. He argued that the experiences of the Great Depression and the Second World War culminated in an 'internationalist victory' that 'allowed for the construction of the American-led post-World War II international political economy'.<sup>130</sup> Similarly, Fred Block considers the seminal National Security Council Report of the early Cold War, NSC-68, which urged the 'creation of an international

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<sup>128</sup> McDougall, pp. 2-3.

<sup>129</sup> Mead, p. 95.

<sup>130</sup> Jeff Friedan, 'Sectional Conflict and U.S. Foreign Economic Policy, 1914-1940', in *American Foreign Policy: Theoretical Essays: Seventh Edition*, pp. 171-194 (p. 171).

order that was consistent with US economic strength'.<sup>131</sup> This message stemmed from its call to 'look to other markets' and 'foster a world environment in which the American system can survive and flourish'.<sup>132</sup>

Of course, these congratulatory interpretations have been counterbalanced by more polemical understandings of the economic motivations of US foreign policy. The left wing historian William Appleman Williams's *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (1972) examines this subtext through his 'open door' theory. To Williams, the American demand for manifest destiny in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was driven by 'the acquisition of more land as a primary way of solving their problems', a desire that transmogrified into a 'foreign policy of overseas economic expansion' in the Spanish American War of the late 1890s.<sup>133</sup> Indeed, one can see this rationale in far later military deployments, such as Reagan's 1983 intervention in Grenada and its dispelling of a late 1970s malaise. It is a dynamic foregrounded in my first case study, *Three Kings*, which features four soldiers attempting to 'retrieve' stolen Kuwaiti gold against the recessionary context of the early 1990s.

Analysts of International Relations have updated William's polemic for the post-9/11 era of US foreign policy, with anthropologist David Harvey critiquing the 'new imperialism' praised by liberal imperialist advocates like Ferguson and Ignatieff. Harvey argues that the free market imperialism explored by William Appleman Williams had, since the end of the Vietnam War, become central to a new edict of 'accumulation through dispossession'. This state of affairs had been helped by an

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<sup>131</sup> Fred Block, 'Economic Instability and Military Strength: The Paradoxes of the 1950 Rearmament Decision', in *American Foreign Policy: Theoretical Essays: Seventh Edition*, pp. 139-153 (p. 141).

<sup>132</sup> The Foreign Relations of the United States Documents, quoted in Block, p. 140.

<sup>133</sup> William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1972), pp. 23-27.

‘internal class structure that blocked any large-scale application of surplus capitals towards social reform and infrastructure investments at home’ and had been exacerbated since the beginning of the Iranian revolution in 1979, which had incentivised ‘military means to ensure the uninterrupted flow of Middle Eastern oil into the global economy’.<sup>134</sup>

In short, the neoliberal economic doctrines about to become implemented by the Reagan administration had incentivised the premise of championing military supremacy and control of resources abroad rather than investing, Keynesian style, in Americans at home. Like the consensus surrounding Reaganomics at home, foreign policy would have to ‘maintain labour discipline and foster a good business climate’.<sup>135</sup> This stance would be apotheosised in Harvey’s study of the neoconservative overview of the Second Gulf War, where Iraq was hoped to ‘be liberalized for open capitalistic development with the aim of creating a wealthy consumerist society along Western lines’.<sup>136</sup> Marc Mulholland further notes the interventionists’ hopes of reforming the state sector in Iraq based on America’s neoliberal model, citing the Bush administration’s belief that ‘the advance of markets and free markets helped to create a middle class that was confident enough to demand their own rights’, a philosophy that possessed utter dissonance with Iraq’s ‘five hundred or so state-owned enterprises’.<sup>137</sup>

Military intervention then has often been an expression of domestic consensus and seemingly commonsensical understandings of economic and social dynamics. This

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<sup>134</sup> David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 180.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

<sup>137</sup> Marc Mulholland, *Bourgeois Liberty and the Politics of Fear* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 286-289.

has been illustrated throughout America's diplomatic history - one can think of: Franklin Roosevelt's 'four freedoms', a compendium of rights that sought to extend the social and economic security guaranteed by the New Deal into a world enervated by the terror of WW2; Eisenhower's sending of marines in response to the Lebanon crisis of 1958 as expressive of his broadly centrist emphasis on consensus and stability; Nixon's use of a 'madman theory' to rationalise mass carpet bombing of North Vietnamese targets as associable with the frayed domestic atmosphere of the United States in the early 1970s and his 1968 campaign's 'silent majority' animus against anti-war and black agitators.<sup>138</sup> Besides evincing the contradictions of US foreign policy in the 1999-2009 decade, the case studies in this thesis engender reflection on how American intervention has been both domestically and internationally orientated.

The first part of the third chapter, which focuses on the allegorical dimensions of *No Country for Old Men*, underscores this interplay. *No Country for Old Men's* setting at the Texas-Mexico border of 1980, and the decision of central character Llewellyn Moss to rob drug money from the site of a botched drug deal, encapsulates the domestic dimensions of Reagan's election victory that year. This is because Moss's theft reflects a miasma of neoliberal greed and self-interest apposite to its early 1980s setting. Yet the anarchic violence imparted by the antagonist who pursues him, Anton Chigurh, makes this dynamic additionally complex, as if Moss's decision is being evaluated from the perspective of a figure symbolic of the post-9/11 era. The

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<sup>138</sup> Oddly enough, perhaps the best definition of Nixon's madman theory is proffered by the psychiatrist Jim Birch. To Birch, the madman theory attempted to counteract 'the problem of symmetry in warfare' by subjecting the enemy to 'apparently random behaviour'. This is because 'in the face of apparently random behaviour an adversary encounters a system whose rules can no longer be defined'. Jim Birch, 'The madman theory of war: a possible application in therapy', *Journal of Family Therapy* Vol.7:2 (1985), pp. 147-159 (pp. 147-148.)

result, I argue, is a film that connects the economic shibboleths of the Reagan era with the insurgency that resulted from the Bush administration's attempt to install neoliberalism in Iraq. This subtext, in its allegorising of both the domestic and international sphere, directly resonates with the film's release year of 2007, a time when a context of failed privatisation in Iraq and an amassing subprime mortgage crisis in the American economy portended a collapse of these neoconservative and neoliberal principles. Fittingly, a reflective disillusionment hinders the efforts of ailing town Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, whose failure to stop Chigurh conveys the consequences of a New Right philosophy that resulted in foreign policy quagmire.

The case studies across this thesis broadly show this connection between military intervention and American domestic policy. My first chapter's study of *Three Kings* views protagonist Archie Gates, and his embrace of both materialism and sexual disinhibition, as implying a complex relationship between contemporaneous American intervention and the themes of globalisation and sexual transgression that had emblematised the Clinton presidency. Conversely, my final chapter's study of James Cameron's science fiction film *Avatar* understands its 'Pocahontas' style storyline as representative of a late 2000s backlash against the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan and their attempt to export American economic and social modernity. The thesis therefore delineates a decade long journey that saw the rise and fall of unilateral military intervention as a guiding principle for American hegemony. The chapter by chapter outline below explains the structure of this argument and how International Relations theories are applied to the case studies.

## Chapter by chapter outline

The case studies that form the five chapters of this thesis are structured in chronological order of release and are each explored for their deconstruction of a key foreign policy ideology. Two films are used in the case of Chapter 3's study of the revisionist Western and neoconservative foreign policy.

Chapter One, 'From realism to Global Meliorism: *Three Kings* and the contradictions of 1990s foreign policy', revolves around the place of Walter McDougall's theory of Global Meliorism in *Three Kings*, a philosophy that argued for the United States to democratically and economically reform the third world. I postulate that Major Archie Gates and his men's unilateral support for Shia rebels in Iraq alludes to how the Clinton administration updated this theory for America's post-Cold War unipolar hegemony. These themes are foregrounded in the film's presentation of both Gates's men and the Iraqi dissidents as cosmopolitan materialists, satirising a model of intervention based on the Clinton administration's promulgation of neoliberal globalisation.

A comparable subtext is contained in Chapter Two, '*Team America: World Police* and the militarisation of Soft Power', which analyses how Matt Stone and Trey Parker's film scrutinises Nye's theory of a 'soft power' alternative to American military intervention. This scrutiny is evident in *Team America's* allegorisation of the events of George W. Bush's first term. The film follows effete Broadway actor Gary Johnston, whose recruitment into the international anti-terrorist organization Team America leads him to appreciate the potential of military power, symbolising the rapprochement between secular Democratic liberals and neoconservative

Republicans that was formed in the build-up to the Iraq War. I further argue that the outrageous comedy of *Team America: World Police* symbolises the infiltration of militarist values into American political life, a phenomenon that was emblematised in John Kerry's presidential campaign and its reverential odes to American troops and Kerry's own participation in the Vietnam conflict.

The third chapter, 'Neoconservatism and Nihilism: the deconstruction of neoliberal occupation in *No Country for Old Men* and *There Will be Blood*', focuses on how two revisionist Westerns released in Bush's second term use their period settings to scrutinise the foundations of neoconservative philosophy. The employment of Sunbelt settings in West Texas and Southern California, themes of material avarice, together with imagery that connotes both terrorism and occupation, interrogates the ideological background of neoconservatism and its affinity with the neoliberalism installed by the Reagan administration in the early 1980s. The often pathetic characterisations of Sheriff Ed Tom Bell and preacher Eli Sunday illustrate how this ideological nexus alienated traditional Republican constituencies.

This theme of a schism continues in chapter four, 'Endless War in *The Dark Knight* - Eulogy to Wilsonian failure', which examines how the superhero blockbuster *The Dark Knight* allegorises the profanations of Wilsonianism that took place under Bush. By looking at Batman as allegoric for the national security imperatives of the post-9/11 era, and idealistic District Attorney Harvey Dent as symbolic of Wilsonian principles, this chapter argues that the partnership between the two is allusive to neo-conservatism's alliance with multilateralist Democrats. The role of villain The Joker, and a series of dramatic twists in the film's second act, conveys the instability

of this coalition and how pre-emptive war left Wilsonianism a damaged and compromised doctrine.

The final chapter, '*Avatar* and the rejection of Global Meliorism - leading from behind over democratising from above' brings the themes explored in the earlier chapters together. I accomplish this through examining *Avatar's* rejection of the foreign policy philosophy that began the thesis in Global Meliorism. By exploring how *Avatar's* scenes of collaboration between Wilsonian scientists and military grunts symbolise the strains of the bipartisan consensus incepted in *Three Kings*, this final chapter argues that *Avatar* forms the most polemical deconstruction of intervention in the thesis. It also underlines the historical invocations of US foreign policy in Cameron's film. This is displayed in the alien planet Pandora's Vietnam style jungles, and its references to the economic motivations that have driven intervention throughout American history. Finally, I consider the meaning of *Avatar's* politics for the Obama era and the 'leading from behind' strategy that sought to replace the interventionism of the Clinton and Bush years.

## CHAPTER 1:

### FROM REALISM TO GLOBAL MELIORISM: *THREE KINGS* AND THE CONTRADICTIONS OF 1990s FOREIGN POLICY

In 1997, the International Relations theorist and historian Walter McDougall argued that a philosophy called Global Meliorism had returned to American political life.

This doctrine, which saw opposition to the United States as ‘in great parts the products of oppression and poverty’, rationalised a foreign policy based on ‘promoting democracy, defending human rights, and fostering economic growth’.<sup>1</sup>

Having emerged out of the liberal internationalism of the Roosevelt and Truman administrations, Global Meliorism became a central part of the United States’s postwar occupations in Japan and Germany. It formed a ‘New Deal idealism’, that proved an ‘example of what humane American activism could achieve overseas’.<sup>2</sup>

However, for McDougall, later conflicts such as the Vietnam War conspired against the consistency of this theory. Lyndon Johnson’s attempt to disseminate ‘the international version of our domestic Great Society programs’ was attenuated by the exigencies of military occupation, a dissonance amplified by the brutal emphasis on ‘pacified villages and body counts’.<sup>3</sup> To McDougall, the foreign policy of the 1990s had sought to redeem these past errors by attempting ‘the purest Global Meliorist

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<sup>1</sup> McDougall, p. 208.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.

agenda to date'.<sup>4</sup> This had ironically been embodied in the presidency of Bill Clinton, a former draft dodger who had pursued the 'quixotic goal of state-building in marginal, chaotic countries like Somalia, Haiti, and Bosnia'.<sup>5</sup>

Contrary to McDougall's view, David O'Russell's satirical war picture *Three Kings* (1999) shows the Global Meliorism of the 1990s to be mired in complexity. This is emblematised by its narrative, which focuses on four American soldiers who join an insurgency against Saddam Hussein's regime in the aftermath of the First Gulf War. Released in the seventh year of Bill Clinton's presidency, *Three Kings* conveys how Global Meliorism became rehabilitated for the era of American unipolarity. Major Archie Gates's roguish decision to defy the realism and mere symbolism of the ceasefire that ended the First Gulf War encapsulates the militarised idealism that culminated in 1999's Kosovo intervention. The focus of this chapter is on how *Three Kings* highlights the discrepancies between the human costs of American military power and the post-Cold War ideals of globalisation and democratisation. This theme of foreign policy contradiction recurs in my post-9/11 case studies, which evaluate the neoconservative use of idealism to justify America's military presence in Iraq during the Second Gulf War.

This chapter comprises three sections. Section 1.1, '*Three Kings* and the search for a new Global Meliorism', discusses how the film represents the fallout of the First Gulf War and the confusion of the early Clinton years. I postulate that the hedonism and anarchy of these early scenes suggest the search for an alternative approach to both George H.W. Bush's realism and a domestically focused, progressive isolationism.

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

Section 1.2, '*Three Kings*: intervention as Clintonian psychodrama', explores how Gates's intervention in Iraq delineates the 1990s journey towards Global Meliorism and the Clinton administration's attempt to escape the legacy of Vietnam. By 'Clintonian psychodrama', I mean the complex interplay between the countercultural baggage of Clinton's presidency and the pursuit of liberal intervention that occurred during the late 1990s. Section 1.3, '*Three Kings* and the Clintonian ideal of centrist liberation' analyses *Three Kings*'s second half and its representation of Iraq's dissidents as purveyors of American hegemony. It also focuses on how Gates reconciles their humanitarian suffering with the conservative military brass and his own self-interest. This reconciliation, I argue, offers a defining allegory for the remade Global Meliorism of the 1990s.

### **1.1: *Three Kings* and the search for a new Global Meliorism**

*Three Kings*'s offbeat opening underlines the anxiety that stemmed from the failure to apply Global Meliorism in the First Gulf War. It begins with a subtitle displayed across a black screen, stipulating, 'March 1991. The war just ended'. This subtitle is of course profoundly ironic given the retention of power by Saddam Hussein at the war's end. The epochal connotations of the statement are counterbalanced by the film's opening tracking shot, an uneasy journey through a Kuwaiti desert inflected by tones of ennui and bathos. O'Russell's use of Ektachrome stock further accentuates this uneasiness. The style of cinematography was chosen for its reflection of a 'digital look' that drew from the First Gulf War being 'the first war to really have colour

pictures in newspapers'.<sup>6</sup> O'Russell elaborated on 'the colour xerox quality to them...kinda blown out...where the colours really pop'.<sup>7</sup> This depersonalised and derealised quality led the DVD version of the film to include a warning preface that explained the desaturated, hyper-stylised look.<sup>8</sup>

The psychological states of depersonalisation and derealisation, respectively defined as 'the alteration in the perception or the experience of the self' and 'the alteration in perception of the world so that it seems unreal',<sup>9</sup> have often been used in war films to underscore the dehumanising aspects of military intervention. Film Studies academic David La Rocca invokes the philosopher Richard Wollheim to make clear the centrality of depersonalisation in Francis Ford Coppola's Vietnam War picture *Apocalypse Now* (1979). He argues that depersonalisation's 'denial of part of ourselves' is fundamental to the film's representation of 'madness'.<sup>10</sup> The visualisation of American hegemony as depersonalising, derealising force is not one solely confined to the war film in this thesis and recurs in the later case studies, especially the desert set allegories of *No Country for Old Men* and *There Will Be Blood* but also in the comic book adaptation of *The Dark Knight*.

When viewed within *Three Kings*, the depersonalised and derealised style illustrates the gulf between the grandiosity of American exceptionalism and the morbid consequences of the US's military power. This deconstruction continues when the

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<sup>6</sup> This information was found in an interview with O'Russell at Jeffrey M. Anderson, *Interview with David O'Russell: The Fourth King* (1999), <http://www.combustiblecelluloid.com/intrussell.shtml> [accessed 25 January 2014].

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> This warning features as a preface to the film on the 2000 DVD edition of *Three Kings*.

<sup>9</sup> The American Psychiatric Association, quoted in Dawn Baker, Elaine Hunter, Emma Lawrence, Nicholas Medford, Maxine Patel, Carl Senior, Mauricio Sierra, Michelle V. Lambert, Mary L. Phillips and Anthony S. David, 'Depersonalisation Disorder: clinical features of 204 cases', *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol.182:5 (2003), pp. 428-433 (p. 428).

<sup>10</sup> David La Rocca, *The Philosophy of War Films* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), p. 234.

tracking shot shows Sergeant First Class Troy Barlow running at the bottom right corner of the screen. After Barlow stops and spies a lone Iraqi soldier in the distance, he glances off-screen and asks a fellow officer casually, 'Are we shooting people?' The desultory delivery of this line makes it seem as if actor Mark Wahlberg is talking to the film's production team. In having Barlow break the fourth wall, O'Russell sets up an atmosphere of collusion that undermines the successful image of the First Gulf War. This bathetic sensibility continues when the camera pans left to highlight the confusion and frivolity of Barlow's comrades. One soldier asks for gum while Barlow's best friend, Private First Class Conrad Vig, searches for a grain of sand in a fellow troop's mouth. Barlow however, returns to action when he sees that the Iraqi soldier has a weapon, revealed in a POV shot from his rifle scope. After shooting the soldier in the neck, Barlow and Vig head to gauge the impact of the shot. The state of the man, who lies on the floor gargling blood, prompts Vig to exclaim, 'Congratulations my man, you shot yourself a raghead!'

The harsh, abrasive look of the Ektachrome stock, combined with the dying soldier who stares towards the camera, lends the scene a feeling of unreality. Its nihilistic tone feels analogous to Bacevich's description of the George H.W. Bush era of intervention. Bacevich implies how this era failed to deliver the radical change of a 'New World Order'<sup>11</sup> and instead alienated those desiring a liberal projection of US power:

*The Post-Cold War military encounters that have sent Americans soldiers hurrying from Panama to the Persian Gulf and points in between have*

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<sup>11</sup> Discussion of this is evident in Herring, *America and Vietnam: The Unending War*.

*produced not only changes in tactics, organization, and hardware. They have also produced a new mindset...an imperial America will have need for military officers with just the right touch when it comes to meting out fear, violence and money to pacify those classified in former days as wogs.*<sup>12</sup>

This form of militarised mercantilism emerges in a montage that encapsulates the circumscribed, self-interested nature of the First Gulf War. The montage begins with a series of medium shots depicting American soldiers weightlifting and celebrating, images connotative of an almost quotidian economic and military virility. The coarse quality of these sights jars with George H.W. Bush's emotive castigation of Saddam Hussein as 'Hitler revisited, a totalitarianism and brutality that is naked and unprecedented in modern times'.<sup>13</sup>

Liberal reporter Adriana Cruz ignores this cognitive dissonance by attempting to square the raucous scenes with the high-minded rhetoric that rationalised the war. A dizzying pan around her reporting makes clear the verve of the victory, a mood catered to by her exclamation that 'music is high and spirits are soaring'.

Nevertheless, the funk rock song that plays over this scene, 'I just wanna celebrate' by Rare Earth, conveys the essential superficiality of the mood. Read solely on the basis of its title and the montage's hedonistic backdrop, the musical choice expresses the euphoria of the Gulf War victory. Yet the song's other, more subtle elements, such as a lyric that laments 'I put my faith in the people but the people let me down',

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<sup>12</sup> Bacevich, p. 218.

<sup>13</sup> George H.W. Bush, quoted in Meenekshi Bose and Rosanna Perotti, *From Cold War to New World Order: The Foreign Policy of George H.W. Bush* (Westport, Connecticut: Praegar Publishers, 2002), p. 146.

can be read as symbolic of the anti-climax of the war's finish and the intervention's failure to deliver genuine reform to the Middle East.

Adriana's experience at the camp soon implies disingenuousness as well as disillusionment. When it is established that the footage of her is from the perspective of a TV camera, she asks embarrassedly to her television crew, 'did I just say that?' Her uncertainty adds to the scene's tonal incongruity and reflects a broader subtext of collusion. The practice of 'pooling' and 'embedding' reporters akin to Adriana with soldiers benefited the Bush administration's reputation for handling the war. In a reverse of the investigatory reporting of Vietnam, government and media formed a reciprocal relationship; reporters like Ted Koppel thought of pooling as a 'dream'<sup>14</sup> while George H.W. Bush expressed his admiration for the news reportage when he claimed that 'I learn more from CNN than I do the CIA'.<sup>15</sup> To Kellner, the obsequiousness of this journalism indicates a 'militarization of consciousness'.<sup>16</sup>

Besides these collaborations between military and media, O'Russell alludes to the First Gulf War's consolidation of America's economic hegemony. The supplanting of Adriana's reporting with shots of soldiers perfecting their physiques signifies this, manifesting images of capitalistic self-improvement relatable to David Harvey's label of a 'New Imperialism' that 'typically sought to enclose the commons, privatize, and

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<sup>14</sup> Karen Zeinert and Mary Miller, *Brave Women of the Gulf Wars* (Minneapolis: Twenty First Century Books, 2005), p. 85.

<sup>15</sup> Helena Vanhala, *The Depiction of Terrorists in Hollywood Blockbuster Films: 1980-2001* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2011), p. 48.

<sup>16</sup> Douglas Kellner, quoted in Stephen D. Reese, 'Militarized Journalism: Framing dissent in the Persian Gulf Wars', in *Reporting War: Journalism in Wartime*, ed. by Stuart Allan and Barbie Zelizer (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), pp. 247-265 (p. 251).

build a framework of open commodity and capital markets'.<sup>17</sup> Yet the First Gulf War context presented in this first act is crucially distinct from Harvey's focus on the 2003 occupation of Iraq.

Bush's Churchillian rhetoric masked his refusal to pursue the regime change later championed in the Second Gulf War by neoconservatives and liberal interventionists. Head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell attested to this position, aiming to have 'a limited war under a limited mandate for a limited purpose'.<sup>18</sup> Further, Bush's claim that the war 'had kicked the Vietnam syndrome'<sup>19</sup> elided the fact that the short, 100 hour duration of conflict had avoided Vietnam's nation building and Global Meliorist dimension. Bush conveyed this aversion when he privately refused to send 'one single dime of the United States taxpayers' money' to Iraq.<sup>20</sup> Wyn Q. Bowen and David H. Dunn note the mere symbolism of this foreign policy. They describe how Saddam Hussein's retention of power had turned 'what at first had seemed like victory for a new just and stable order' into 'no more than the reestablishment of the status quo ante'.<sup>21</sup>

In *Three Kings*, the hypocrisy of the war's rhetoric and its inconclusive end undercut Bush's realist worldview. The tension between realism and idealism surfaces during Adriana's third take. She quizzes a group of soldiers on the Bush administration's rhetoric by stating, 'They say you exorcised the ghost of Vietnam with a clear moral

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<sup>17</sup> Harvey, p. 184.

<sup>18</sup> Colin Powell, quoted in James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans, the History of Bush's War Cabinet* (London: The Penguin Press, 2004), pp. 191-192.

<sup>19</sup> George H.W. Bush, quoted in Herring.

<sup>20</sup> George H.W. Bush, quoted in Sarah Graham-Brown, *Sanctioning Saddam: The Politics of Intervention in Iraq* (New York City: I.B. Tauris, 1999), p. 18.

<sup>21</sup> Wyn Q. Bowen and David H. Dunn, *American Security Policy in the 1990s: Beyond Containment (Issues In International Security)* (Aldershot: Dartmouth Publishing, 1996), pp. 12-13.

imperative'. The lofty, grandiose rhetoric fails to resonate with the American troops who face Cruz and her television crew. In a medium shot, a soldier grins at the camera and boasts to Cruz 'we liberated Kuwait' before his comrades descend into cheers and crass gesticulations.

This dichotomy between the US's self-image as benevolent hegemon and the baser manifestations of its military culture returns in subsequent case studies. It reaches its apex in saturnalian images that suggest not only the Bush administration's cognitive dissonance, but also signify the search for a new outlook on world affairs.

After Adriana watches the soldiers with tacit uncertainty, O'Russell moves to a series of POV shots from the reporter's TV camera. These shots show the troops erupting into a communal revelry of Lee Greenwood's country song, 'God Bless the USA'. Popular in Reagan's re-election year of 1984, Greenwood's song was revived for the feeling of national renewal suffusing the First Gulf War. The move away from the freewheeling tones of *Rare Earth* underscores the jingoism engulfing the base camp. The next shot, a vertiginous close-up of a pilot flying a combat helicopter and singing stridently, signals this fervour. As he commandeers the vehicle, inebriated and filmed at a canted angle with the barracks visible directly below, it is as if America's Vietnam neurosis ironically allays itself. This is due to the pilot resembling a triumphalist, post-Gulf War version of Colonel Kilgore in *Apocalypse Now*.

The patriotic celebration reaches its highest pitch when O'Russell cuts to the inside of an army tent filled with drunken, elated troops continuing the sing-along.

Bombastically leading the chorus is Barlow, who appropriates a Keffiyeh for headwear. He surrounds himself with soldiers who wave torches as if they are in a

rock concert, further adding to the exuberant emphasis on America's military 'hard power'.

The remainder of the montage soon breaks with this tone by hinting at a desire for an alternative attitude to American predominance. The nationalism of 'God Save the USA' is brought to an abrupt halt when Barlow is freeze-framed at the song's end. As the frame dwells on Barlow, the music switches to Public Enemy's 'I can't do nuttin for you man'. A return of the subtitles that contextualised the film's Gulf War setting adds to the changing mood by wryly reintroducing Barlow as 'Troy Barlow, new father'. Jaap Koojiman spoke of Public Enemy's track as 'a rap song that induces its listeners to 'fight the power' of American authority and its white patriotism as embodied by its pop-cultural heroes Elvis Presley and John Wayne'.<sup>22</sup> Further, the anti-establishment animus of the song, in its departing from the nationalistic revelry of 'God Save the USA', can be seen to form an implicit rebuke to the conservative Republicanism of the Bush administration, its disruption of the scene and emphasis on racial difference showing the domestic discord that lies underneath the earlier celebrations of a new imperialism.

A stylised visual technique conveys this rebellion - O'Russell's camera pans across a group of African American and white soldiers who dance and scream to the song with deranged energy, scenes of disorder and superficial racial unity that feel imitative of the 1990s acid house subculture. Tony Gradeja argues that the musical shift culminated a montage that displayed apostasy from the moral ambiguity of the

First Gulf War:

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<sup>22</sup> Jaap Koojiman, *Fabricating the Absolute Fake: America in Contemporary Pop Culture* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008), p. 87.

*As a counterargument to the war as a clear-cut battle of good versus evil, where we are indivisible, Three Kings stitches divisiveness within the ranks, implying as much from the outset through its soundtrack. Shots of US soldiers celebrating the announced ceasefire (and the official end of the war) are accompanied by a diegetic montage of three pop songs: Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the USA.," the 1984 country hit that became the unofficial anthem of the Gulf War; Public Enemy's "I can't do Do Nuttin for you Man," a track from significantly, 1990's Fear of a Broken Planet; and Rare Earth's "(I Just Want to) Celebrate," that crestfallen farewell to the counterculture with its memorable line, "Put my faith in the people, but the people let me down." The incongruous mix here, in which the songs overlap but remain distinct, signifies through sound a sense less of unity than of unease, not harmony but dissension - the audible dimensions of the ambiguity of this war.<sup>23</sup>*

Gradeja's final mention of 'dissension' underlines the quiet disdain for the realism of the George H.W. Bush administration. A transition from the self-interestedness of the George H.W. Bush years to a new, garrulous, Clinton era becomes evident in the concerted shift from the vaunting of self-improvement and patriotism towards more overtly hedonistic moments of disinhibition. Rare Earth's 'crestfallen line', far from a farewell, foreshadows a new political formation against the frustrations of a cynical conflict.

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<sup>23</sup> Tony Gradeja, 'Picturing Torture: Gulf Wars Past and Present', in *Rethinking Global Security: Media, Popular Culture, and the 'War on Terror'*, ed. by Andrew Martin and Patrice Petro (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2006), pp. 206-235 (pp. 211-212).

The introduction of Major Archie Gates allegorises this formation. A character who dissents from the exorbitant claims of military victory, his first scene takes place in a private bunker, where he has sex with a youthful reporter. He is introduced in offbeat fashion - after Gates and the reporter climax, a freeze-frame recurs with subtitles that laconically note, 'Archie Gates, retires in two weeks'. The rebellious tone continues when Gates's superior, Colonel Ron Horn, and reporter Adriana Cruz (who is in fact meant to be pooled with Gates) exasperatedly enter the bunker. The situation creates a culture war between the military brass and Gates's libertarian hedonism, pervading a kind of center-left populism redolent of the backlash against Clinton's impeachment. Indeed, the conflict between a 1960s countercultural milieu and a staid form of conservative deference, prevalent in the psychodramas of the Clinton presidency, is integral to the subsequent altercations. After the encounter, Gates and the young reporter receive admonishments for their breaching of protocol. Especially pertinent is the dual embarrassment of both Cruz and the young reporter, whose very different forms of exploitation seem redolent of the humiliations enacted on army head nurse Margaret 'Hot Lips' O' Houlihan in Robert Altman's *M\*A\*S\*H* (1970).

To Tim John Semmerling, the treatment of *Three Kings's* female journalists creates a 'remasculinization' that serves to 'analogize journalism with feminine'.<sup>24</sup> This mirrors the memories of a Vietnam War context 'when journalists were blamed for sowing the seeds of indecision and dissent on the homefront'.<sup>25</sup> Yet whilst Semmerling shows great historical fidelity to the First Gulf War context, he negates Gates's own

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<sup>24</sup> Tim John Semmerling, *Evil Arabs in American Popular Film: Orientalist Fear* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2006), pp. 128-29.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

allegoric qualities. His argument derives from an animus of updated political correctness that occludes the explicitly 1960s based libertarian hedonism contemporised in these scenes. Gates's treatment of the female reporters can be seen to symbolise these latter mores, forming a sublimated revolt against the First Gulf War's hypocritical conclusion. *M\*A\*S\*H's* Korean War setting (intended however, to parallel the experience of the Vietnam War for its 1970 release) and scenes of male driven debauchery offered an analogous frustration with limited war. Leo Cawley's analysis of Altman's film can equally be applied to *Three Kings*:

*The resentment of military bureaucracy in the main characters is a trivialising surrogate for the rebellion and antiwar feeling of the Vietnam years. But antibureaucratic struggle keeps cropping up in M\*A\*S\*H and elsewhere as little folks discover they don't like the system. Their struggles with superiors serve as a surrogate for more principled conflict. Among other things, this acts as a surrogate for conflict over principle.<sup>26</sup>*

The scene that follows Gates's imbroglio shows how this rebellious sensibility possesses affinity with the 1990s drift towards Global Meliorism. The following morning, Gates is told by Horn that 'this is a media war...you better get with the program'. Gates, breaking with the loucheness of his introduction, responds morosely by stating 'I still don't know what we did here, Ron'. After Horn asks if he

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<sup>26</sup> Leo Cawley, 'The War about the War: Vietnam Films and the American Myth', in *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*, ed. by Lina Dittmar and Gene Michaud (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1990), pp. 69-80 (p. 72).

wants to 'go in and do Vietnam all over again', the scene concludes on a note of dysphoria. Gates stands dejectedly, bemused by the repressive, bureaucratic control exerted over his idealism. A long shot of Horn leaving in a military helicopter amplifies this malaise. It takes off in intentionally blurred slow motion while Gates wanders uneasily, a symbol of unresolved *fin de siècle* angst. This alienation has parallels with the Clinton presidency's early years, tangibly recalled by the roguish Gates's sexual libertinism, political impotence, and idealistic anger. Indeed, Horn's invocation of Vietnam was echoed almost exactly by Clinton in regard to criticism for his vacillating response to the Serb and Croatian attacks in Bosnia, attributing a fear to his opponents of 'a Vietnam all over again'.<sup>27</sup>

During Clinton's first two years in office, a gaucheness and similar uncertainty towards foreign affairs gave political ammunition to his conservative opponents. These vulnerabilities were of course compounded by the countercultural milieu of the president's background. The first disaster stemmed from Clinton's inheritance of a commitment in Somalia initiated by the UN and supported by George H.W. Bush. By extending the mission's goals to capturing warlord Mohammed Aided and rebuilding the war-torn nation, the UN mandate culminated in an October 1993 downing of a Black Hawk helicopter and the killing of 18 American soldiers. Charles Krauthammer opined on the open-endedness of the intervention and the repudiation of US hegemony by anti-American insurgents, stating that 'famine relief is one thing, nation building is another'.<sup>28</sup> Six months later, in April 1994, an error of

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<sup>27</sup> Bernard von Bothmer, *Framing the Sixties: The Use and Abuse of a Decade from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush* (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), p. 161.

<sup>28</sup> Charles Krauthammer, quoted in William G. Hyland, *Clinton's World: Remaking American Foreign Policy* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1999), p. 57.

omission followed when Clinton declined to intervene against the Rwandan genocide, where 800,000 ethnic Tutsis perished out of a national population of 8 million.<sup>29</sup>

An intervention in Haiti further cemented the dilettante image of Clinton's foreign policy. Trying to reemphasise the US's Global Meliorist potential after the abandonment of Rwanda and the over-extension of Somalia, Clinton sought to reinstate the democratically elected John Bertrand Astride, who had been overthrown in a military coup in 1991. However, the operation attracted consternation from realists of the ousted Bush administration such as former Secretary of State James Baker, who warned of another 'open-ended operation'.<sup>30</sup> Clinton's defence of the military action fused the realism of the Monroe Doctrine with the language of humanitarian intervention.<sup>31</sup> He implored Americans to realise 'when brutality occurs close to our shore, it affects our national interests and we have a responsibility to act'.<sup>32</sup> Yet the farcical scenes of the intervention, which saw US troops assaulted by rock throwing mobs, failed to deliver this combination of realism and idealism.<sup>33</sup> To William G. Hyland, Haiti formed 'part of an anti-Clinton

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<sup>29</sup> Information found in Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History: 1974-2008* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), p. 338.

<sup>30</sup> James Baker, quoted in Hyland, p. 65.

<sup>31</sup> The Monroe Doctrine, which was thought by many historians to be authored by President James Monroe's Secretary of State and presidential successor John Quincy Adams in 1823, is principally remembered for its opposition to European colonisation of the Western hemisphere. To the American legal scholar John Bassett Moore, the doctrine was notable for engendering the 'growth of an American system' and encouraging 'reciprocal non-interference'. Although there are scholars who detect impulses of idealism in the Monroe doctrine, it is chiefly regarded as realist in its nationalism and interest in an American sphere of influence.

John Bassett Moore, 'The Place of the United States in a World Organization for the Maintenance of Peace', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol.26 (1921), pp. 31-33.

<sup>32</sup> Bill Clinton, quoted in Hyland, p. 65.

<sup>33</sup> This information is located in Michael E. Brown, *America's Strategic Choices* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2000), p. 318.

litany, along with Bosnia and Somalia, a three part indictment of his management of foreign affairs'.<sup>34</sup>

*Three Kings's* early scenes convey this early 1990s myopia, a reflection of Michael E. Brown's description of an era where commentators 'searched in vain for a pattern to U.S. interventionist policy since the end of the Cold War'.<sup>35</sup> The crucial moments that build up to and introduce the prospect of Kuwaiti gold highlight this ideological uncertainty. Shortly before this discovery occurs, a series of close-up shots show Barlow and Vig interrogating Iraqi POWs. Barlow feigns a kind of benevolent paternalism towards the prisoners, who he coaxes with promises of food and shelter. In contrast, Vig threatens them with racial epithets - he asks a soldier to 'take his fucking rag off' before Barlow implores him to take a lighter touch.

Although Barlow eventually tells a silent POW, 'Sir, we're going to need you to disrobe like all the other towelheads', the initial differences in attitude between his easygoing, mid-western persona and the bigoted, parochial disposition of the Southern Vig can be seen as allusive to the distinctly regional preoccupations that divide US foreign policy. The centre-right political theorist Walter Mead spoke of 'the idealistic and/or populist voices in its foreign policy', the fact that 'the thickly populated, overwhelmingly industrial states of the Northeast and the Middle Atlantic regions and the isolated, lightly populated states of the Rocky Mountains and the southwestern deserts have different foreign policy interests'.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Hyland, p. 65.

<sup>35</sup> Brown, p. 318.

<sup>36</sup> Mead, p. 42.

These political divides become more palpable when Vig and Barlow move to a private tent and examine a map retrieved from an Iraqi prisoner's buttocks. Soon joining them is the African American Sergeant Elgin (introduced previously as 'Sergeant Elgin, on a four month paid vacation from Detroit'). Uncomfortable around Vig and his racial slurs, Elgin warns him not to use the terms 'dune coon' or 'sand nigger' and instead approves of the replacement insult 'camel jockey'. The caustic agreement here vaunts a domestically empowered, American black identity but views Arab dignity as far more elusive. Vig's admission that he doesn't know 'why we use this pro-Saudi, anti-Iraqi type language' can be seen to emphasise how the Bush administration's realism prompted these ethnic and geopolitical divisions.

Director O'Russell had depicted those abandoned by American Realpolitik earlier in his life, having begun his career by filming Nicaraguan refugees in his early twenties. During the production of *Three Kings*, he was galvanised by the complex morality of the First Gulf War, and found himself 'exploring every human and political dimension'.<sup>37</sup> These dimensions are highlighted through an exploration of the men's private ambitions and disparate social backgrounds. Their home lives reflect on the divide and rule nature of the Bush administration's foreign policy and its concomitance with a similar agenda at home.

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<sup>37</sup> David O'Russell, quoted in Sharon Waxman, *Rebels on the Backlot: Six Maverick Directors and How they Conquered the Hollywood Studio System* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2005), pp. 216-217.



Image 1: *Three Kings* and the treasure map<sup>38</sup>

The African American Elgin encapsulates this when he defines Kuwait as ‘the Arab Beverly Hills’. He continues to use ghettoised rhetoric to evoke Saddam Hussein’s theft of Kuwaiti gold, blustering that ‘Saddam jacked them for it’ as the group gather around a table to study a map that has become shaded in portentous lighting.

Adding a messianic emphasis to the map, and its implications of hidden treasure, is Elgin’s spirituality. He states that he has ‘a ring of Jesus fire to guide his decisions’, before discussing with Barlow the potential cars he could purchase after becoming rich.

These conversations of social mobility offer an escape from the recessionary, polarised context of the early 1990s. Elgin’s dissension from the Bush administration’s conservative realism led Khatib to cite Sobchack’s reading of a ‘Democratic microcosm of the United States’, legitimised through the film’s ‘multi-

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<sup>38</sup> Image found at HPPopcorns.com, *Three Kings 1999 720p* (n.d.), <http://hdpopcorns.com/three-kings-1999-720p/> [accessed 21 December 2017].

ethnic army unit'.<sup>39</sup> Borrowing from Willis, Khatib further noted how the 'black body' was 'used as a sign for American democracy'.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, Elgin can be seen as allusive to American imperialism's long history of propounding its ability to alleviate domestic, racial, and economic discontent in an avowedly progressive manner. This ideal is explored by William Appleman Williams. His 1972 work *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* focuses on the widespread belief in 1897 that the coming liberation of Cuba in the Spanish-American War could create a relationship 'linking prosperity, social peace, and foreign policy'.<sup>41</sup> The politically antithetical Robert Kagan, a neoconservative, praised this as a model for American neo-imperialism during the George W. Bush years. Analysing populist and working class support for the invasion of Cuba in the years preceding the Spanish-American War of 1898, he invoked the 'people rebelling', who 'saw echoes of their struggle in Cuba, where workers, farmers, the poverty-stricken, and the common man were also pitted against heartless plutocrats and the forces of conservatism'.<sup>42</sup>

Although a similar cross-cultural intervention does not occur until the film's second act, the men's rebellion against both the Bush administration's realist foreign policy and the coalition of Arab oligarchies that fought in the first Gulf War recalls the quotidian populism evinced by Kagan's study. This sensibility becomes palpable when Gates arrives to join the adventure. He expresses the opinion that 'Saddam stole it from the sheiks, I have no problem stealing it from Saddam' and argues that

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<sup>39</sup> Lina Khatib, *Filming the Modern Middle East: Politics in the Cinemas of Hollywood and the Arab World* (New York City: I.B. Tauris, 2006), pp. 69-71.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>41</sup> Williams, p. 43.

<sup>42</sup> Kagan, pp. 383-384.

stealing Kuwaiti gold would prevent the men from having to return to their 'day jobs'.

A montage composed of flashbacks illustrates the banality of the men's civilian lives. Barlow, who works incongruously in a clerical office job, embarrasses himself by spilling black ink all over his white shirt in front of his colleagues. Elgin's work as a baggage handler at Detroit airport is too bathetic, juxtaposing the character's alienation from Bush's New World Order with the numbing routine of his daily work. The small humiliations of these scenes recall George Lipsitz's description of American life since 1973. He outlines how 'the US defeat in the Vietnam War, deindustrialization, changes in gender roles and the rising emphasis on acquisition, consumption and display' had 'characterized the increasingly inegalitarian economy of the postindustrial era'.<sup>43</sup> The internationalisation of this process is described by Ruth Blakely, who interprets America's post-1989 foreign policy as consisting of 'an emphasis on legitimization, by promoting democracy and securing popular support for neoliberalism'.<sup>44</sup>

*Three Kings* displays a discord between this outlook and the comparatively small material gains of America's imperial foot soldiers.<sup>45</sup> Jill Nelmes notes how the recession of the early 1990s saw an end to 'the boom periods of the yuppie Reagan years...a developing awareness that capitalism was not infallible', with films such as

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<sup>43</sup> George Lipsitz, 'Whiteness and War', in *Race, Identity, and Representation in Education: second edition*, ed. by Cameron McCarthy, Warren Crichlow, Greg Dimitriadis, and Nadine Dolby (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 95-116 (p. 98).

<sup>44</sup> Ruth Blakely, *State Terrorism and Neoliberalism: The North in the South* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), p. 109.

<sup>45</sup> This tension further becomes integral to Chapter 3's analysis of the revisionist Western and neoconservatism, especially in looking at neoliberalism's destruction of blue collar America and its ruination of the Vietnam War veteran Llewellyn Moss in *No Country for Old Men*.

*Falling Down* and *Groundhog Day* (both 1993) reflecting 'a white masculinity in crisis'.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, the soldiers' insecure existences become most salient in the final flashback, which shows Vig in his home region, firing a shotgun at an abandoned car. The setting is filtered in grey, dour cinematography, creating tonal association with the post-industrial decline that enervated the United States in the early 1990s. It is an experience of economic dislocation corroborated by Vig, who admits to Gates after the flashback, 'I don't have a day job, sir'.

The recessionary anxieties of the early 1990s were seized as an issue by Bill Clinton at the Democratic National Convention in 1992. He warned that 'just as we have won the Cold War abroad, we are losing the battles for economic opportunity and social justice here at home'.<sup>47</sup> The Karbala adventure in *Three Kings's* second act sees Gates and his men reject this centre-left populism for both the liberal interventionism and neoliberal globalisation championed by the Clinton administration in its second term. The next section will discuss this shift and its evocation of the militarised Global Meliorism that became dominant in the late 1990s.

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<sup>46</sup> Jill Neldes, 'Gender and Film', in *An Introduction to Film Studies*, ed. by Jill Neldes (London and New York: Taylor and Francis, 2003), pp. 239-278 (p. 269).

<sup>47</sup> Hillary Clinton, *In Their Own Words; Transcript of Speech by Clinton Accepting Democratic Nomination* (1992), <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/07/17/news/their-own-words-transcript-speech-clinton-accepting-democratic-nomination.html?pagewanted=all> [accessed 14 March 2014].

## 1.2: *Three Kings*: intervention as Clintonian psychodrama

The original draft for *Three Kings*'s screenplay, written by John Ridley, was titled 'Spoils of War' and resembled more of a pure action picture. O'Russell, who subsequently took on the project, altered this vision after researching the immediate aftermath of the First Gulf War. He evinced, in often hyperbolic rhetoric, the eclecticism of the post-ceasefire rituals in a 1999 interview with *Combustible Celluloid Magazine*:

*I was researching this turn-of-the-century mystery for myself at the time. But I couldn't stop thinking about this one thing. I got this L.A. Times book that was day-by-day of the war and I saw Bart Simpson, and I saw hundreds of soldiers being stripped in the desert -- this bizarre ritual -- taking prisoners. I thought it was so funny and odd. I saw green Cadillacs -- things that were taken from Kuwait. And I thought, I could go nuts in this environment.<sup>48</sup>*

This anarchic sensibility is brought to the next section of the film, which is set beyond the confines of the army camp. Again echoing *Apocalypse Now*, but also the delirious search for stolen cash in Stanley Kramer's *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1963), a wide angle shot of three individuals running against a febrile Middle Eastern dawn lends a grandiosity to the shift in setting. However, it is soon revealed that this is not Gates and his men. It is instead Cruz, her camera assistant, and a soldier called Bolo, hired by Gates to distract Cruz from his search for gold. The operatic music amplifies

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<sup>48</sup> O'Russell, quoted in Anderson, *Interview with David O'Russell*.

the ludicrousness of the situation as it plays over the group entering a dune buggy, a vehicle that sits incongruously with Cruz's intended professionalism.

The next scene sees this whimsical tone alternate with the more serious subject of America's hard power. Whilst Gates drives his men in a jeep towards Karbala, Elgin throws soccer balls from the jeep to be fired on by Vig in a perverse game of shooting practice. When a ball strapped with C4 explodes and impels Gates to stop the vehicle, a shock discovery implies the contradictions of military intervention. Gates introduces the men to a series of charred, long deceased Iraqi soldiers destroyed by American bombs, reinforcing the sense of ambivalence surrounding America's post-Gulf War foreign policy.

The sight of the dead officers recalls the work of John Mueller, who underlined the annihilation inflicted on Iraqi troops fleeing Kuwait. He invoked the journalists who 'said the most bodies at one place was 40 and estimated that a total of 200 to 300 had died'.<sup>49</sup> The appearance of this context in *Three Kings* carries a contemporaneous relevance. The scorched earth imagery, placed against the hedonism, social liberalism and multi-racialism of Gates's men, becomes a topical juxtaposition when one considers the intervention in Kosovo that occurred in the same year as *Three Kings's* release. Adam Roberts delineated how the Global Meliorist desire to protect Serbia's Albanian minority was attenuated by mass bombing. He quoted the journalism of Steven Lee Myers, who observed how Serbia 'clearly suffered enormous damage, particularly to its roads, bridges and industry

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<sup>49</sup> John Mueller, 'The Perfect Enemy: Assessing the Gulf War', *Security Studies*, Vol.5.1 (1995), pp. 77-117 (p. 92).

after 11 weeks of increasingly intense bombing'.<sup>50</sup> Roberts deduces morose conclusions from this, commenting that 'the disturbing lesson of the air campaign may be that its most effective aspect involved hurting Serbia proper'.<sup>51</sup>

The vexed Gates mirrors this cognitive dissonance. The fact that he is middle aged (the rest of the rebellious unit are all noticeably younger) and redolent of the 1960s counterculture makes him relatable to the baby boomer leaders who pursued unilateral intervention in the late 1990s. This pursuit was foregrounded by Clinton's second inaugural address in 1997, which warned that 'the enemy of our time is inaction'<sup>52</sup>. It was further crystallised by British Labour Prime Minister and fellow baby boomer Tony Blair, whose 1999 Chicago speech in support of the Kosovo war promised 'a millennium where dictators know that they cannot get away with ethnic cleansing or repress their people with impunity...a new internationalism'.<sup>53</sup>

The visual pyrotechnics in O'Russell's film display the tension between these ideals and the unforgiving nature of military violence. In a subsequent conversation, Gates asks Barlow about the shooting that took place in *Three Kings's* nihilistic opening scene. A dreamlike flashback subsequently restages the killing from the desensitised mind of Vig, who reimagines the death of the soldier. He visualises the soldier's head flying off after Barlow's shot, ascending 'three feet in the air'. Vig's bombast has an affinity with the 'Jacksonian', the foreign policy animus that, according to Mead, emblematised 'a love affair with weapons', and a 'code of honour' based particularly

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<sup>50</sup> Steven Lee Myers, quoted in Adam Roberts, 'NATO's humanitarian war over Kosovo', in *Survival*, vol.41.3 (Autumn 1999), pp. 102-123 (p. 117).

<sup>51</sup> Roberts, p. 117.

<sup>52</sup> Bill Clinton, quoted in Hyland, p. 152.

<sup>53</sup> Tony Blair, quoted in Stanley Henig, 'To War For a Just Cause', in *The Kosovo Crisis: The Last American War in Europe?*, ed. by Tony Weymouth (London: Pearson Education, 2001), pp. 39-58 (p. 55.)

on the Southern and Western frontier cultures of the United States. Jacksonian attitudes championed the fact that, 'Attacks on civilian targets and the infliction of heavy casualties on enemy civilians have consistently played a vital part in American war strategies'.<sup>54</sup>

Carter and Dodd describe these predilections in military-orientated action films of the post-9/11 era, such as Peter Berg's *The Kingdom* (2007). They believe this cinematic milieu tended to 'produce movies that closely adhered to the Jacksonian perspective on international affairs'.<sup>55</sup> This position somewhat echoes that of Gearóid Ó Tuathail, who considers how the film *Behind Enemy Lines* (2001) evidenced the 'liberation of war-fighting masculinity from the constraints of multilateralism and diplomacy to get the job done'.<sup>56</sup> Ó Tuathail uses the central character, Lieutenant Chris Burnett, as an example of this. After having his jet downed during the late stages of the Bosnian War in 1995, Burnett is trapped in a state that clashes with the interests of American diplomats and his more war-weary European counterparts. To Ó Tuathail, these narrative developments mean John Moore's film disdained 'restrictive rules of engagement' and 'diplomatic considerations...that emanate, it is implied, from America's European alliance partners'.<sup>57</sup>

Comparable fissures are present in *Three Kings*, but there are also more nuanced and evenhanded representations of a cognitive dissonance in international relations. This

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<sup>54</sup> Mead, p. 221.

<sup>55</sup> Sean Carter and Klaus Dodd, 'Hollywood and the War on Terror: genre-geopolitics and Jacksonianism in *The Kingdom*', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, Vol.29:1 (2011), pp. 98-113 (p. 110).

<sup>56</sup> Gearóid Ó Tuathail, 'The Frustrations of Geopolitics and the Pleasures of War: *Behind Enemy Lines* and American Geopolitical Culture', *Geopolitics*, Vol.10:2 (2005), pp. 356-377 (p. 361).

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 362.

is because O’Russell presents a collision between the Jacksonian’s unilateral, blue-collar populist conception of American power and the idealism of humanitarian intervention. Indeed, throughout *Three Kings*, O’Russell places the Jacksonian uncomfortably alongside Mead’s notion of the ‘Wilsonian’, a preface to Global Meliorism in its liberal internationalist view that ‘order must also be based on principles of democratic government and the protection of human rights’.<sup>58</sup>

This theme of incongruity recurs in later chapters. It is central to *Three Kings’s* aversion to political conformity, typified in a refusal to fulfil the easy championing of either a militaristic conservatism or what David Holloway would call a soft left ‘allegory lite’.<sup>59</sup> The lengthy Karbala sequence, with its uncomfortable blend of Wilsonian concerns and Jacksonian unilateralism, purveys this disharmonious perception.

The sequence begins with the group clambering inside their jeep to the exuberant tones of the Beach Boys’ ‘I get Around’, a choice of song that becomes uncomfortable as they approach the impoverished town of Karbala. Gates boasts that his men should ‘hit them with the blinding power of American sunshine’, yet the lurid, somewhat jaundiced cinematography lends a sense of dysphoria to the group’s encounters with the town’s inhabitants. In haunting slow motion, a medium shot from the jeep shows raggedly dressed Iraqi boys running elatedly at the sight of the American troops. The juxtaposition of this with a shot of an American flag located on the back of the men’s jeep further connotes the false promises of liberation. Reinforcing the men’s hypocrisy is the continued refrain of ‘I get around’. The song

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<sup>58</sup> Mead, p. 139.

<sup>59</sup> Holloway, p. 85.

choice increasingly symbolises a freedom of action available to the American hegemon that is conspicuously lacking in the Iraqis oppressed by Saddam's troops.

Gates, who yells that they have 'orders from President Bush', soon attempts to defuse the excitement of those individuals betrayed by the caprice of the Bush administration's foreign policy. The welcoming appearance of Saddam's opposition makes the shamefulness of this defusing acute; a number of Shia rebels are dressed in western clothing, conveying amenability to the possibility of regime change. A low angle shot of an insurgent proclaiming an American-led liberation from a rooftop further amplifies this cacophony of pro-American attitudes. Vig, who stands guard while his men search for the gold, can only watch as the Iraqi civilians anticipate their emancipation.

Eberwein calls *Three Kings* a 'transgressive work' that reveals 'no myth can be sustained by ordinary genre conventions,' which reflects "O'Russell's desire to ground events in history and expose the actual truths about our involvement in the war'.<sup>60</sup> To Eberwein, *Three Kings's* verisimilitude is heightened by its stylistic variation. It is worth testing his view by briefly comparing *Three Kings* with a plethora of other war films released in the late 1990s.

The only Gulf War set picture before *Three Kings's* release, David Zwick's *Courage Under Fire* (1996), was thought by Tom Pollard to form a companion piece to O'Russell's work. He proposed that both films refused to fulfil the 'good war formula', making the viewer 'distanced from the official moral and political rationale

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<sup>60</sup> Robert Eberwein, *The Hollywood War Film* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 130-31.

for US military intervention'.<sup>61</sup> This is perhaps most indicated by *Courage Under Fire's* morose plotline, which focuses on the mysterious death of a female soldier, alluding to the internecine battles within the Gulf War and its murky conclusion. Such moral ambiguity is visible in the portentous opening, which features a radio excerpt of Bush's call to liberate Kuwait play before an incident of friendly fire. Yet *Courage Under Fire*, possibly because of its tonal sobriety, lacked the more anarchic political impact of *Three Kings*.

One other non-allegorical war picture offers a starker antithesis. The Second World War drama *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) had its sombre tones appropriated as part of the Clinton impeachment drive. Krin Gabbard notes Republican senators Henry Hyde and Lindsay Graham's invocation of the 'men who fought for America—especially the men who landed at Normandy on June 6<sup>th</sup>—as they argued for the removal of that best-known of all Baby Boomer draft dodgers'.<sup>62</sup> The representation of war in *Saving Private Ryan*, despite avoiding jingoism through its sanguinary rendition of the Second World War, perhaps lent itself to these politicised readings in its objective, reverential tone, and genre homogeneity. Its purist conformity to the war genre, filming style, and aesthetic emphasis on 'realism' (embodied most in its opening D-day landing sequence) likely increased this conservative affinity. *Saving Private Ryan's* political potency was understood by Phillip John Davies and Paul Wells, who saw in its narrative the humbling proposition 'that the contemporary era

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<sup>61</sup> Tom Pollard, 'The Hollywood War Machine', in *Masters of War: Militarism and Blowback in the History of American Empire*, ed. by Carl Boggs (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), pp. 311-341 (p. 335).

<sup>62</sup> Krin Gabbard, 'Saving Private Ryan Too Late', in *The End of Cinema as we know it: American Film in the Nineties*, ed. by Jon Lewis (London: Pluto Press, 2002), pp. 131-140 (p. 137).

should be proud and grateful for the preservation of the principle of democracy in itself, rather than evaluate or criticise its systematic abuse in the postwar era'.<sup>63</sup>

Of course, *Three Kings's* mercurial qualities contrasts with this referential deference towards 'necessary war'. Therefore, Eberwein's viewpoint is accurate to the extent that genre subversion serves *Three Kings's* polemic. Yet his notion of a straightforward grounding of 'events in history' lacks application in that the allegorical meaning of O'Russell's picture extends beyond the confines of its early 1990s diegesis. This is above all evident in the surreal content of the Karbala sequence and its often lurid moments of cathartic violence.

Jean Baudrillard, in his 1991 essay, 'The Gulf War did not take place', speaks of a conflict where 'what is it at stake...is war itself', a state where 'it is not beholden to have an objective but to prove its very existence'.<sup>64</sup> The distraught conditions of the Iraqi rebels, and their reaction to an especially vivid truck accident, reflect the bathetic and merely symbolic function of the Gulf War intervention. The long shot that films the truck's entry into Karbala emphasises its distance from the poverty of the town, a mirage-like emblem of modernity elevated above the destitution of ordinary Iraqis. *Three Kings* was filmed largely in Arizona<sup>65</sup> and the particularly southwestern veneer of the gas guzzling truck, embodied in its isolation, individualism, and ostentation, adds to Gates and his men's deracination. After the truck is fired on by the Iraqi soldiers, the vehicle crashes in a manner that would perhaps be more

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<sup>63</sup> Davies and Wells, pp. 8-9.

<sup>64</sup> Jean Baudrillard, quoted in Steve Redhead, 'The Gulf War: Is It Really Taking Place?', in *The Jean Baudrillard Reader*, ed. by Steve Redhead (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 99-121 (p. 102).

<sup>65</sup> IMDb, *Three Kings (1999): Filming Locations* (n.d.), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0120188/locations> [accessed 14 March 2016].

congruent in an outrageous buddy comedy along the lines of Michael Bay's *Bad Boys* franchise. This is due to its seemingly crazed, hyper-stylised nature. The truck and attached tanker topple over, unleashing a torrent of milk that floods the town square.

This sight would not be amiss in the set piece of a generic action picture. However, the desperate Iraqi civilians who try to drink the liquid dispel any notion that the after effects of this accident are going to continue the first act's knockabout comedy. Several aerial shots show the degradation of starving women who stain their garments to drink the milk. The images here invoke the memory of sanctions employed against Saddam Hussein's regime in the 1990s. Whilst interventions against Milosevic wooed internationalist opinion, the decline of health, water purification, and sanitation for the rural and urban poor in Iraq proved the limits of the United States's altruism, a state exacerbated by Saddam Hussein's Baath party's simultaneous attainment of higher salaries and non-rationed goods.<sup>66</sup> Most dramatically, in 1996, ambassador to the United Nations and later Secretary of State Madeleine Albright rationalised the sanctions as 'worth it'<sup>67</sup>, a stance that enervated the altruistic image of Clinton's foreign policy.

To David O'Russell, the key to conveying these horrors was tonal alternation. The recreated horrors of an autarkic Iraq would work alongside a more lighthearted, disinhibited, countercultural tone:

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<sup>66</sup> The explicit inequality of these economic and political dynamics was detailed in Graham-Brown, pp. 180-185.

<sup>67</sup> This 1996 Interview with Albright is located at Madeleine Albright, *End War: Madeleine Albright Says Deaths of 500,000 Iraqi Children Is Worth It; UN Sanction Genocide* (2011), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ROWDCYcUJ4o> [4<sup>th</sup> February 2014].

*The war to me itself wasn't very interesting. What was interesting was the moment everybody stopped paying attention. And that was very fertile for making a movie. They broke out the yellow ribbons. Meanwhile, these guys are partying -- drinking liquor out of mouthwash bottles, because no liquor was allowed in Saudi Arabia -- and 60 miles away there's a democratic uprising. Which to me, was a mind-blowing opportunity for a movie that felt like M\*A\*S\*H (1970) in some parts, and really powerful drama in other parts. Because you start out with the M\*A\*S\*H partying, they go for a joyride, and now they're in the middle of something more serious. It has to become a very human fable for me, at the end. There's a face. It's not a computer grid of a bomber. It's some guys who hate Saddam as much as we do.<sup>68</sup>*

In this provocative description, O’Russell hints at the fusion of *M\*A\*S\*H*’s anarchic politics with more sobering discussions surrounding American military intervention. This ideological blend is further visible in O’Russell’s debt to Brian Hutton’s *Kelly’s Heroes* (1970), a picture which displays comparable collisions between a 1960s spirit of countercultural rebellion and a Jacksonian war culture. Hutton’s film follows a group of roguish American soldiers undergoing their own private mission in Nazi occupied France to find 14,000 gold bars stored in a French bank behind enemy lines. Led by Private Kelly, a former lieutenant wrongfully blamed for a botched infantry assault, Hutton alludes to the hedonism of the Vietnam anti-war movement through several knockabout scenes of promiscuity (the group enjoy the company of

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<sup>68</sup> O’Russell, quoted in Anderson, *Interview with David O’Russell*.

French prostitutes) and subversive characterisations (Oddball, a stupefied platoon commander, mirrors the drop-out hippie culture.) In a way not dissimilar to O’Russell’s use of the Beach Boys, Hutton employs Lalo Schifirin’s soulful theme song ‘Burning Bridges’ against scenes of mass bombing that show the violent destruction of German positions.

The ideological confusion reaches its highest pitch in the climax to *Kelly’s Heroes*, which revolves around a deal between Kelly’s men and the German troops to split the gold. Shortly after this occurs, Kelly and his men join the surreal celebrations of a French village liberated by American troops - a series of shots show French civilians waving French and American flags, but also a shot of a child waving a Nazi flag, a political schizophrenia that carries association with the contradictions of the Vietnam conflict.<sup>69</sup>

O’Russell’s picture borrows the treasure hunt premise of Hutton’s film, becoming, in James Chapman’s words, ‘a reversioning of *Kelly’s Heroes*, in which a motley crew embark on a private mission to “liberate” Kuwaiti gold from the Iraqis’.<sup>70</sup> Added to this updated storyline, and an analogous war commentary, is the subtext of a 1990s era globalisation that influences both the American soldiers and their Iraqi counterparts. After Gates realises the gold is located in an underground bunker, he and his men find a group of soldiers enjoying a variety of American commodities. The first shot inside the bunker depicts a soldier exercising on an aerobics bike, with a mural of Saddam Hussein benevolently kissing the cheek of an Iraqi child lying

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<sup>69</sup> From playing the DVD of *Kellys Heroes*, this specific shot appears two hours, thirteen minutes, and thirty-six seconds in.

<sup>70</sup> James Chapman, *War and Film* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), p. 238.

surreally in the background. This surreal image highlights the national guards as imbibers of America's capitalistic hegemony, a quality corroborated by the scene's broader *mise en scène* - as the camera pans around the room, the guards are shown to be surrounded by computers, other gym equipment, and TVs. The diegetic sound of Eddie Murphy's 'Party all the Time' plays on a cassette player over these scenes, adding to the hedonistic atmosphere. These displays of globalisation cater to Gates and his men's material desires. They also serve as palliatives for a domestic malaise at home. In one shot, a TV broadcasts the savage beating of Rodney King that took place in March 1991, an incident that plays uncomfortably against the seizure of gold. Nevertheless, the footage merely becomes drowned out and assimilated into the hyper-capitalist mania of the bunker. Chris Holmlund comments on this erasure of political incongruity:

*Three Kings's second act ferociously indicts late-nineties consumerism: in Russell's view, love of expensive "stuff" transcends national boundaries. In a hidden Iraqi bunker, Gates and Co. stumble on pillaged exercise equipment, Rolex watches, brand-name blue jeans, Cuisinarts, mini-stereos, televisions, jewelry as well as the gold. U.S culture is pervasive: Saddam's soldiers watch an Eddie Murphy movie and Rodney King on TV.<sup>71</sup>*

However, other aspects of this scene indicate the divisive impact of this cultural ubiquity. The robbery of the guards, who appear humiliated by Gates and his men,

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<sup>71</sup> Chris Holmlund, '1999: Movies and Millennial Masculinity', in *American Cinema of the 1990s: Themes and Variations*, ed. by Chris Holmlund (New Brunswick and New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2008), pp. 225-248 (p. 242).

mirrors Jeremy Brecher's argument against the creation of a 'global village' during the Clinton presidency. He instead contemplates the prospect of a 'global pillage', where 'uncontrolled economic forces and powerful economic factors are able to devastate the people of the world and their local and global environments'.<sup>72</sup> The global village becomes, in the context of the bunker, a symbol of discontent. In one moment, Gates chastens the troops for their love of American ostentation by turning the music off, labelling it as 'bad' for them. His belittling leaves the soldiers petty recipients of the morsels of American-led globalisation, revealing the truly hierarchical nature of America's cultural and economic power.

This abrasiveness captures the dark underbelly of what Dumbrell called the Clinton administration's 'philosophy of democratic optimism', which was purportedly, 'strong enough to contain contradictions'.<sup>73</sup> The contradictions that have so far manifested in *Three Kings*, between realism and idealism, as well as between a domestically focused self-interest and an altruistic liberal internationalism, are tested in the men's attempt to steal the gold without becoming involved in Karbala's politics. While they pack the gold, O'Russell cuts to a family of hostages who are flanked by Iraqi soldiers. The use of this crosscutting contrasts the men's materialism with the brutality of Saddam Hussein's rule. The lurid golden cinematography that suffuses the hostages embellishes this uneasiness, evoking the unwieldy divide that separates the self-interest of the robbery and the humanitarian nightmare of the Iraqi family's suffering. The men's extraction of the gold extends this juxtaposition.

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<sup>72</sup> Jeremy Brecher, 'Introductory Outline: 'Global Village or Global Pillage?': A New Architecture and New Architects', in *Which 'Global Village'? Societies, Cultures, and Political-economic Systems in a Euro-Atlantic Perspective*, ed. by Valeria Gennaro Lerda (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2002), pp. 3-8 (p. 3).

<sup>73</sup> John Dumbrell, *Clinton's: Foreign Policy: Between the Bushes, 1992-2000* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), p. 61.

Viewers are compelled to watch a systematic exercise in collaboration with the Saddam Hussein regime, illustrated in shots of Iraqi troops who stand in long, antlike lines to deliver the gold to a blue Humvee. The genre hybridity of *Three Kings* adds to the power of these visual techniques. When the men return to Karbala's square and view the hostages made to kneel by Saddam's troops, the atmosphere is akin to that of a Western, seemingly building towards a Mexican standoff.

The specific tone of the revisionist Western of the counterculture era, to which *Kelly's Heroes* also bore an affinity, is noticeable in elements of *Three Kings's* narrative. It is worth considering how this debt informs the political psychodrama of these scenes. Michael Coyne notes how the Western in the late 1960s became 'increasingly focused on frontier parallels of the war in Vietnam', with films such as Sam Peckinpah's *Major Dundee* (1965), Richard Brooks's *The Professionals* (1966) and George Roy Hill's *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) offering a critique of both 'individual and imperial hubris'.<sup>74</sup> *Major Dundee's* Civil War set plotline of an interracial private army of Union soldiers working with Confederates and Indians to find an Apache war chief bears particular comparison with the multi-racial, anarchic imperialism of *Three Kings*. Peckinpah's 1969 film *The Wild Bunch* (mentioned as an example of Vietnam War allegory in the introduction to this thesis) offers a comparable political subtext. This is visible in its portrayal of an America attempting to reconcile the humanitarian uplift of Global Meliorism with the darker aspects of military power. It is worth briefly outlining the politics of Peckinpah's film before discussing how *Three Kings* presents a similar allegory.

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<sup>74</sup> Coyne, *The Crowded Prairie*, pp. 126-127.

*The Wild Bunch's* 1913 set plotline focuses on a gang of aging outlaws fleeing to Mexico only to become entangled in the Mexican revolution, allegorising, like *Three Kings*, the contradictions of American intervention. It moves from scenes of Pike Bishop's outlaws enjoying debauchery in war-plagued Mexico to set pieces that focus on their employment of frontier violence, conflicting ideals that reflect the 1960s culture wars over the sins of commission in Vietnam. Peckinpah's picture also analogises the specific structural failings of the Vietnam War. Mexican General Mapache makes a convincing double for the South Vietnamese junta whilst the Mexican revolutionary rebels make obvious comparison with the Viet Cong. The failure of 1960s Vietnam policy manifests itself in a scene where Bishop contemplates buying off the revolutionary villagers at war with the Mexican government, the policy being, in Richard Slotkin's words, 'a classically liberal solution, akin to the peace process offered by Lyndon Johnson in his Johns Hopkins address of April 1965, in which the North Vietnamese and VC were to give over their revolution in exchange for a massive program of American economic aid'.<sup>75</sup>

The failed idealism of this approach, and the fact that Bishop tries erroneously to play off the right wing Mexican junta and the left wing rebels against each other, lends an inevitability to the film's final scene. *The Wild Bunch's* conclusion forms a vicious, fatalistic metaphor for the US's sponsorship of the South Vietnamese regime, embodied in a lethal gunfight launched by Bishop after Mexican gang member Angel is murdered by Mapache. Slotkin reads the deaths of Bishop and his men metaphorically. Their sudden demises underlined the United States's refusal to understand 'the power and complexity of the extant political culture in Vietnam in

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<sup>75</sup> Slotkin, p. 602.

the South no less than the North' and its failure to appreciate the 'civil character of the conflict'.<sup>76</sup>

This dynamic of cognitive dissonance surrounding American foreign policy is one that recurs in my third chapter's exploration of post-9/11 revisionist Westerns. Yet it is also located in how O'Russell presents the brutal murder of an Iraqi mother by a soldier. The moment is comparable to the *cassus belli* of Angel's death in *The Wild Bunch*, only with the nihilism of Saddam's Iraq taking the place of Mapache's junta. Much as Bishop was forced to witness the throat cutting of Angel after a weapons deal with Mapache's private army, Gates and his men have their greed tested by a callous act of barbarity performed by Saddam's regime. Before the murder, O'Russell conveys the suffering of the westernised father watching his wife's torment. This discomfort is mirrored by a medium shot of Barlow, also a father, who watches from the truck with visible discomfort. The Iraqi father, Amir Abdullah, is dressed in a bourgeois business outfit, rather than traditional religious garments and it is this superficial affinity with the Americans that adds to the kaleidoscopic quality of the scene. O'Russell amplifies the *bricolage* by, in true Western style, crosscutting in a build-up to the shootout, moving between the human suffering of the rebels, the tyrannical evil of Saddam's national army, and the collective guilt of Gates's men. The shots are a dizzying encapsulation of the dilemmas of 1990s foreign policy in their mixture of westernisation, moral imperative and unvarnished nihilism. The Global Meliorist assumption that the United States should 'deploy its assets to lift up the poor and oppressed'<sup>77</sup> becomes crystallised in her death, which is rendered in

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 610.

<sup>77</sup> McDougall, p. 208.

stark slow motion. Her demise, which signals the end to collusion with Saddam's rule, offers the same *fin de regime* connotations as Angel's death; yet the aftermath is somewhat different.

In their initiation of a Western style shootout, Gates and his men embark on a humanitarian intervention that illustrates the febrile consequences of modern warfare. Their abandonment of realism begins when Gates wrestles an AK-47 off a soldier only for it to shoot the officer in the foot. The fatalistic, withdrawn tone that accompanies this move has affinity with Baudrillard's notion of a pre-9/11 'universal attraction' to violent spectacle in American cinema, an 'acting out' that 'is never very far away, the impulse to reject any system growing all the stronger as it approaches perfection or omnipotence'.<sup>78</sup> Whilst Gates's action is denuded of the nihilistic politics Baudrillard is emphasising, his attempt to save the insurgents is similarly destructive. The frightening implications of this vision are conveyed by images of Iraqi soldiers being rapidly executed in slow motion. Their deaths have a traumatic effect and, in spite of Gates's and his men's survival (Barlow is shot but protected wholly by Kevlar), underscore the pyrrhic nature of the American response.

To Elizabeth E. Martinez, the men's journey towards intervention illustrates disconnect 'between theories of just war and the actual conduct of war'. Echoing the methodologies of Just War theorists such as Michael Walzer, she argued that *Three Kings* revolved around whether 'war is a game of action or of justice'. The former is personified in the 'occupational and professional imperative' of the soldiers while

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<sup>78</sup> Baudrillard, quoted in Dixon, p. 4.

the latter manifested in their decision to 'make a difference in the outcome of the war' by intervening in Karbala.<sup>79</sup>

This dichotomy, which mirrors the Jacksonian and Wilsonian divide, is tangible in *Three Kings's* coded references to the key foreign policy debates of the 1990s. The men's escape from Karbala typifies O'Russell's use of provocative imagery to provide political resonance. Invoking a scene in *Kelly's Heroes*, where Kelly's men crossed a minefield in order to escape encroaching Nazi troops, circumstances force Barlow to drive through a desert of landmines whilst being attacked by mortars containing tear gas. When Barlow's driving topples the getaway vehicle and forces the Iraqi rebels to exit, the men's altruism and the reality of modern war become more discordant from one another. *Sight and Sound* writer John Wrathall considers how the landmines implied 'the sickening nature of modern warfare'.<sup>80</sup> This starkness intersects with O'Russell's presentation of humanitarian intervention, a synthesis encapsulated by the tracking shots that follow Barlow chasing two Iraqi children attempting to flee the effects of the tear gas. Subsequent close-up shots show the children's feet narrowly missing the strategically placed landmines, creating an additional disjointedness between Barlow's rescue and the stark brutality of the *mise en scène*.

These collisions of idealism and realism recall various compromises in Clinton's second term, most notably his refusal to sign a landmine treaty in 1997. The decision

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<sup>79</sup> Elizabeth E. Martinez, 'The 1991 Iraq Invasion in Cinematic Perspective: *Jarhead* and *Three Kings*', in *Cinematic Sociology: social life in film*, ed. by Jean-Anne Sutherland and Kathryn Feltey (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, 2013), pp. 347-361 (p. 350).

<sup>80</sup> John Wrathall, *Three Kings, USA/Australia 1999: Reviewed by John Wrathall* (2012), <http://old.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/review/556> [accessed 21 January 2014].

was rationalised as ‘a line I simply cannot cross’ by the president.<sup>81</sup> This was due to opposition from a recalcitrant Republican Congress and the administration’s reliance on landmines placed in the Korean Peninsula against Kim Jong-il’s dictatorship. When Clinton was castigated by Nobel Prize winner Jody Williams as ‘neither a leader or a statesman’<sup>82</sup>, the crisis conveyed the difficulty of synthesising Global Meliorist ideals with the demands of American militarism. Appropriately, Barlow’s rescue attempt ends with his humanitarianism nullified - after he grabs hold of the fleeing children, a group of Iraqi soldiers knock him to the ground and take him into custody.

The next section assesses how the discrepancies surrounding liberal intervention are resolved in *Three Kings*’s second half, beginning with an analysis of the collaboration between Gates and a group of liberal, pro-capitalist Shia rebels.

### **1.3: *Three Kings* and the Clinton era ideal of centrist liberation**

*Three Kings* differs from *The Wild Bunch* and *Kelly’s Heroes* in its moving beyond the *fin de regime* conclusions of both those pictures. Whereas Peckinpah’s film climaxes with Bishop’s last stand against Mapache and *Kelly’s Heroes* ends with lurid scenes of American-led liberation, in *Three Kings*, the scenes that succeed the shootout and Karbala raid see Gates and his men grow to embrace an ever contradictory concept of intervention. These structural and tonal differences can be seen to anchor *Three Kings*’s distinct allegorical focus. If the nihilistic endings of *The Wild Bunch* and *Kelly’s*

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<sup>81</sup> CNN, *Worldwide ban on Landmines approved, without U.S.* (1997) <http://edition.cnn.com/WORLD/9709/17/land.mines/> [accessed 16 March 2014].

<sup>82</sup> Anita Price Davis and Marla J. Selvidge, *Women Nobel Prize Winners: 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2015), p. 176.

*Heroes* allegorised the miasma of Vietnam, then it is arguable that the mercurial nature of *Three Kings's* later scenes offers a valuable mirror to the political rivalries of the 1990s. The neoconservative Charles Krauthammer, who excoriated the president's conduct of the Kosovar war for 'recapitulating the disastrous gradualism of Vietnam', illustrated the hyperpartisanship that surrounded the Global Meliorist doctrine.<sup>83</sup> In *Three Kings's* second half, Gates attempts to achieve a form of Global Meliorism contrary to the realism of his vituperative superiors. In the process, he synthesises, in Clintonian, third way, fashion, the 1990s orthodoxies of neoliberal globalisation and liberal intervention.

This fusion first becomes visible when Gates and the remaining refugees (separated from Barlow after his capture) are rescued by an organised faction of Iraqi rebels. The rebels emerge from a cave and arrive in the haze of nerve gas, donning brown cloaks and gas masks. This otherworldly entrance oddly conjures memories of the desert-dwelling Jawas or Tusken Raiders in George Lucas's original *Star Wars* (1977). Their garb and arrival could therefore be viewed as cheapening or commodifying, yet their masked appearance also captures the sentiments of Global Meliorism, generating the image of marginalised liberals fighting the authoritarian repression of Saddam Hussein's regime. The seemingly desultory portrayal of them as *Star Wars* style characters fits a broader pattern of westernisation, foreshadowed by the bourgeois imagery of the Iraqi dissidents in Karbala.

Nolwen Mingant notes these 'silent and ghostly figures, hidden by their long robes and gas masks, appearing and disappearing in a fog of tear gas,' as proof of their

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<sup>83</sup> Charles Krauthammer, quoted in George Rising, *Stuck in the Sixties: Conservatives and the Legacies of the 1960s* (Bloomington, Indiana: Xlibris, 2003), p. 218.

'silenced' position.<sup>84</sup> Mingant's notion of 'silenced' here references their oppression by the Saddam Hussein regime. I would add that the Shias silenced nature, as well as their phantasmagorical aesthetic, reflects the desire for a pro-western, anti-clerical Iraqi opposition.

This portrayal continues when Gates and his men arrive at their underground shelter, an ambit that presents a Democrat-leaning, liberal idyll. The interior of the cave shelter resembles a religious hall, an atmosphere amplified by a Shia shrine that occupies the centre of the room. Its *mise en scène* is bathed in an ethereal blue that, in its serenity, denudes the iconography of its religious conservatism. The growing affinity between Gates's men and the rebels additionally averts any implications of sectarian tribalism. Elgin kneels and prays with a group of Shia Muslims despite being a Christian, while Vig learns, nascently, of the importance of dedicated shrines for the dead in Shia culture.

It is not the egalitarianism of religion that is central in this scene, however, but the liberal commonalities between Gates and the grieving father Amir. Amir relates that he himself studied at an American university and returned to become a successful hotelier before the war when 'you guys all bombed our cafes'. Bemoaning the abandonment by the Americans after the ceasefire and questioning the men's rationale for being in Iraq, his anger illustrates Iraq's abandonment during a period of global democratisation. The westernisation of his insurgent comrades encapsulates what Marc Mullholland describes as the 'bourgeois liberty' of the post-

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<sup>84</sup> Nolwenn Mingant, 'Beyond Muezzins and Mujahideen: Middle-Eastern Voices in Post-9/11 Hollywood Movies', in *Muslims and American Popular Culture*, ed. by Anne R. Richards and Iraj Omidvar (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2014), pp. 167-193 (p. 175).

1989 era, signalling ‘the revolutionary impetus’ of a ‘clear commitment to spreading free-market democracy’.<sup>85</sup> Such a thrust would be central to the Global Meliorism of the 1990s and its postulations that ‘revolution, terrorism, and other ethnic, racial and religious hatred...are in great part the products of poverty’, requiring American ‘power, prestige, technology, wealth and altruism’.<sup>86</sup>

The university educated Amir mirrors these positive effects. This is particularly evident in his ‘new man’ persona, embracing what Penny Griffin sees as ‘the particular coding of masculinity’, that ‘drew men into consumer culture’, and the realm of ‘emotional availability and domestic capacity’.<sup>87</sup> Amir also embodies Joseph Nye’s notion of ‘soft power’, the liberal ideal of American hegemony as the promotion of ‘universal values’.<sup>88</sup> Nye considers how soft power disseminates ‘values and interests that others share’, creating ‘relationships of attraction and duty’.<sup>89</sup> John Carlos Rowe perceives these qualities of soft power in Gates and his men and notes their ‘respective sympathy with the Iraqi dissidents’, which serves to ‘perform a narrative of cultural hybridity that unmistakably argues for greater understanding of other peoples as an alternative to unilateral globalization and US militarism’.<sup>90</sup> Yet this view, which interprets the hard and soft power facets of American hegemony as inherently separate, ignores how Gates and Amir’s cultural affinities form a basis for military collaboration. The motif of soft power returns as a core theme in the next

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<sup>85</sup> Mulholland, pp. 282-285.

<sup>86</sup> McDougall, p. 208.

<sup>87</sup> Penny Griffin, *Popular Culture, Political Economy and the Death of Feminism: Why Women are in refrigerators and other stories* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), pp. 152-153.

<sup>88</sup> Nye, p. 11

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>90</sup> John Carlos Rowe, ‘Culture, US Imperialism and Globalization’, in *Exceptional State: Contemporary U.S. Culture and the New Imperialism*, ed. by Ashley Dawson and Malini Johar Schueller (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2007, pp. 37-59 (p. 51).

chapter's analysis of *Team America: World Police*, its role as a fig leaf for military power recurring throughout the thesis.

After deciding that his men will help the Iraqis cross the Iranian border in exchange for support in finding Barlow, Gates forms a coalition with Amir which blends a representation of hard and soft power. Their partnership moves Gates's unit away from their blue-collar backgrounds and reorients them towards an image of white-collar progressivism. A brief montage indicates this rapprochement. In a rapid series of shots, the Americans get to grips with AK-47s found by Amir and his cosmopolitan Shia, bonding over their shared understanding of the weaponry.

The combination of militarism with business, hard with soft power, and western liberalism with conservative religion signals a centrist imperialism that befits the post-ideological 1990s. This centrism, moreover, avoids Rebecca Bell-Metereau's description of an American war film 'divided into binary oppositions' of 'patriotic versus unpatriotic, hawk versus dove, masculine versus feminine, hard versus soft, action versus indecision'.<sup>91</sup> This non-binary emphasis on American foreign policy returns in the latter case studies of *Team America: World Police* and *The Dark Knight*, which portray liberal characterisations wedded to militaristic foreign policies.

In contrast to the ideological comity of the Shia hideout scene, the subsequent torture sequence rebukes both the realism of the First Gulf War and the militarised Global Meliorism of the late 1990s. This rebuking is delivered by the anguished Iraqi officer Said, who uses a mixture of pantomime and personal tragedy to chastise the imperial foot soldier Barlow. Said's first rhetorical question to Barlow scrutinises the

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<sup>91</sup> Rebecca Bell-Metereau, 'The How-to Manual, the Prequel and the Sequel in Post-9/11 Cinema', in *Film and Television After 9/11*, pp. 142-162 (p. 161).

cultural dimension of neo-imperialism. He asks, 'What is the problem with Michael Jackson?' before imitating the musician's iconic tropes with outrageous laughs and glove gestures. He then segues from this to an outright polemic, lambasting Barlow for the culture that made Michael Jackson 'cut off his fucking face,' making him 'the pop king of sick fucking country'. When Barlow responds that 'he did it to himself', Said slaps his face with a paper clipboard, castigating his 'main man' for defending the nation that 'make the black man hate himself just like you hate the Arab and the children you bomb over here'.

The ghettoised language of Said and his accusations of a racial hierarchy ironically return to the dissension of *Three Kings's* early scenes. His interrogation therefore denudes the Karbala intervention of its rebellious and countercultural dimension, realigning Barlow with a white supremacist, WASP controlled caricature of George H.W. Bush's New World Order. To Kitaeff, these appropriations are ideologically dubious. This was because Said 'rejects dominant U.S. social values' whilst simultaneously being 'assigned a role that ultimately recuperates Western culture and, more specifically, hegemonic US ideology'.<sup>92</sup>

Yet this quality of perverse emulation, seen later within the thesis in antagonists such as *No Country for Old Men's* Anton Chigurh and *The Dark Knight's* The Joker, provides a critique of contemporaneous American foreign policy. When Said asks if the US army is coming back to help Iraq's children, the character becomes a rigid interrogation of the men's drift into Global Meliorist predilections, questioning and

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<sup>92</sup> Lila Kitaeff, 'Three Kings: Neocolonial Arab Representation', *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, No.46 (2003) <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc46.2003/kitaeff.threeKings/text.html> [accessed 14 April 2014].

admonishing Barlow for his hypocrisy in only helping a rebellion after entering Iraq for ill-gotten wealth. Possessing a less authoritarian demeanour than the troops he works with, Said's volatile playfulness both affirms and scrutinises the power of American hegemony. He succeeds his lecture to Barlow with violence, as, in several close-up shots, he electrocutes the American and watches his suffering in a staid, lugubrious manner. The alternating dynamics of Said's behaviour, to Ira Jaffe, undercut a wisdom that 'the soldier thrives on incongruity'.<sup>93</sup> The Michael Jackson anecdote, and 'its specter of self-erasure', added to a 'hybrid cinema' concerned with 'hybrid identity'.<sup>94</sup> This dysphoric feeling of fragmentation manifests in the scene's foreign policy allegory.

An incongruity becomes explicit when Said tells of the American firepower that killed his wife and one year old son. A brief flashback shows a cot crushed by falling debris caused by US bombing. The moment connotes a discordance between rhetoric and reality that was also evident in 1999's Kosovo intervention. Mary Robinson, the UN's High Commissioner for human rights, established how incidents of collateral damage from NATO-led bombings in villages such as Korisa, where 80 civilians died, compounded the devastation to the country's civil society, evidenced in the destruction of schools, hospitals and places of worship.<sup>95</sup>

This acknowledgement of Global Meliorism's attenuated state is lent additional unease by the way O'Russell abruptly cuts to a flashback showing Barlow's home life.

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<sup>93</sup> Ira Jaffe, *Hollywood Hybrids: Mixing Genres in Contemporary Films* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowan & Littlefield, 2008), p. 79.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>95</sup> Mary Robinson, 'Report on the Human Rights Situation Involving Kosovo, HC/K304, Geneva, 30 April 1999', in *The Kosovo Conflict and International Law: An Analytical Documentation, 1974-1999*, ed. by Heike Krieger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 48-54 (p. 51).

A brief tracking shot of Barlow's wife walking outside with his daughter in prosperous 1990s suburbia signals a harmonious world, wholly removed from the brutality of Said's existence. This is next counteracted by a nightmarish, though still hypothetical, image. The image is of Barlow's family home and shows his wife and daughter killed by an explosion akin to what killed Said's son. Barlow's contemplation of this tragedy underlines a more subversive side to Said's interrogation methods than Kitaeff's view of them as a recuperation of American cultural hegemony. Like Amir, Barlow's 'new man' embrace of suburban modernity and capitalistic sophistication is placed against the horror of personal loss. He cannot reconcile this persona with Said's trauma, crying as the soldier describes how American warfare destroyed his family. In arriving at this position, Barlow realises the cultural and political schizophrenia epitomised by the Michael Jackson anecdote. His anguished state reflects a cognitively dissonant hegemon that cannot decide whether its power is for altruism or economic self-interest.

The inability to reconcile these dispositions is scrutinised by Said in another talking point, which questions the first Gulf War's rationalisations of stability. This critique begins while a visual flashback to Barlow cavorting with his wife plays onscreen. Said speaks over the flashback, telling the American of how the Reagan administration taught the Iraqi army English and how to use weaponry. Superficially, Said's rant rebukes the Reagan-Bush administration's collusion with the Saddam Hussein regime during the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s. This attitude was embodied in ambassador to Iraq April Glaspie's refusal to condemn Saddam Hussein's expansionist ambitions.

She told the dictator, 'We have no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflicts, like your border disputes with Kuwait'.<sup>96</sup>

Barlow replies to Said's revelations by rationalising the war's realism from a Global Meliorist perspective. He notes that 'too much bombing' could not negate the seriousness of 'saving Kuwait' and that protecting the Arab nation would 'keep the world stable'. Said retorts by questioning the US commitment to ending pariah regimes around the world. The dark, muted browns of the torture cell's *mise en scène* signify his anhedonia. Said concludes his torture by shoving a CD into Barlow's mouth and pouring oil into his throat, an act of violence prompted by the American's platitudes of 'stability'. The nature of this scene, which features critiques of both realism and idealism, is grounded in the heady, uncertain unipolarity of the late 1990s.

For some academic scholars, however, Barlow and Said's dialogue had more fervid associations with the Second Gulf War. To Pat Brereton, this sequence forms an 'excessive image', which served as an 'objective correlative to dramatize a secret history that is not played out until much later'.<sup>97</sup> The impact of the later Iraq War inevitably consumes much debate over the political orientation of O'Russell's film. One can argue that *Three Kings* becomes such an overture by dint of its release in 1999, a year when the influence of the 2003 invasion's architects had already become prominent.

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<sup>96</sup> April Glaspie, quoted in Kevin Phillips, *American Dynasty: Aristocracy, Fortune, and the Politics of Deceit in the Bush White House* (New York: Penguin Group, 2004), pp. 306-307.

<sup>97</sup> Pat Brereton, *Smart Cinema, DVD Add-ons and New Audience Pleasures* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 193.

The neoconservatives, while sharing Clinton's vaunting of neoliberal globalisation, thought his administration lacked commitment to military force and the wave of post-Cold War democratisation. The inception of the think tank 'Project for a New American Century', which included future Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld amongst its members, allowed greater neoconservative influence on the complexion of foreign policy in Clinton's second term. The Kosovo intervention was preceded by Clinton's signing of the PNAC sponsored Iraq Liberation Act, a bill that called for a long term policy of removing Saddam Hussein from power and for more material support to the Iraqi opposition.<sup>98</sup> It could be posited, therefore, that *Three Kings's* pro-American rendition of the Shia rebels hews closer to this neoconservative agenda than the revived Global Meliorism of the 1990s.

Any discernible affinity with neoconservatism certainly didn't affect the critical acclaim that surrounded O'Russell's film. Despite faring poorly at the box office by only grossing \$108 million worldwide of its \$48 million budget<sup>99</sup>, *Three Kings* looked set to achieve a popular following when reviewers such as *Empire's* Ian Nathan complimented its 'violent, blackly comic, ultra-cool, anti-war satire'.<sup>100</sup> Roger Ebert shared this interpretation of O'Russell's film as politically potent. Praising its subtext of American-led globalisation, he commented that, '*Three Kings* is startling in the way it shows how the world is shrinking and cultures are mixing and sharing

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<sup>98</sup> Explicit detail of these policies is provided at John Wooley and Gerhard Peters, *William J. Clinton: XLII President of the United States: 1993-2001: Statement on Signing the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998: October 31, 1998* (1998), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=55205> [accessed 2 February 2014].

<sup>99</sup> The Numbers website, *Three Kings (1999): Theatrical Performance* (1999), <http://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Three-Kings#tab=summary> [accessed 4 February 2014].

<sup>100</sup> Ian Nathan, *Three Kings Empire Magazine Review* (2000), <http://www.empireonline.com/movies/three-kings/review/> [accessed 17 January 2014].

values'.<sup>101</sup> *Sight and Sound's* John Wrathall admired *Three Kings's* 'serious indictment of the conduct of the war, not least the way George Bush encouraged the Iraqi population to rise up against Saddam Hussein', a boldness accentuated by the film's 'irreverence and cynicism'.<sup>102</sup>

Yet this depiction of liberal intervention became problematic when the Bush administration attempted regime change in Iraq only four years later. In a 2003 interview conducted by *The New York Times's* David Edelstein, O'Russell decried neoconservative readings of his film's moral stance by claiming its purpose was in 'pointing out the hypocrisy of our intervention'.<sup>103</sup> Matthew Alford and Ian Scott disagreed with O'Russell's analysis. Alford, who viewed modern Hollywood cinema as essentially adhering to American exceptionalist thought, lambasted *Three Kings* for suggesting that 'the problems of Iraq can be solved, and only solved, by the application of US force'.<sup>104</sup> Indeed, its 'humanitarian rhetoric' and 'assumptions of benevolence' had 'ideological consistency with the 2003 Iraq War'.<sup>105</sup> Scott, who takes a more benign perspective of Hollywood's politics, grouped *Three Kings* with Ridley Scott's *Black Hawk Down* (2001). He thought that both sought to 'contemplate political choices, diplomatic engagement and military intervention...the major global issues that immersed the US in the 1990s'.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Roger Ebert, *Three Kings review* (1999), <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/three-kings-1999> [accessed 20 January 2014].

<sup>102</sup> Wrathall.

<sup>103</sup> O'Russell, quoted in David Edelstein, *Film; One Film, Two Wars, 'Three Kings'* (2003), <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/04/06/movies/film-one-film-two-wars-three-kings.html?src=pm&pagewanted=2> [accessed 28 January 2014].

<sup>104</sup> Alford, p. 80.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>106</sup> Ian Scott, p. 192.

A view of the film as neoconservative, however, is somewhat reductionist. Although Alford is right to point out that Gates's actions bear an affinity with the rationalisations for the 2003 war, his focus on this conflict deprives *Three Kings* of its 1990s context. This prevents an understanding of the role liberal interventionism and Global Meliorism played in the formulation of American foreign policy before and after 9/11. Further, Scott's grouping of *Three Kings* with *Black Hawk Down*, whilst contextually fitting, is tonally incongruent, due to the latter's sombre and patriotic tone. *Three Kings's* dualistic depiction of intervention speaks to a bipartisan emphasis on hard power, a theme that recurs in Chapter 2's analysis of *Team America: World Police*. The satire of this bipartisanship, as well as being applicable to the post-9/11 era, is apposite for a time when the former rogues of the 1960s drifted towards a romanticisation of military deployment.

The build-up to Barlow's rescue pervades the liberal hawkishness of the late 1990s. This is evident in a scene where Gates, Vig, and Elgin walk with Amir and a large band of liberal-minded Iraqi rebels. As they walk, the Americans talk with a rebel who desires to open a hair salon. Rowe notes the cultural amorphousness of the rebel Iraqis. He observed that the profession of hairdressing, 'a traditionally respected profession among the Kurds...hints at Kurdish affiliations, displaced from the main population centers of Northern Iraq to the film's setting in Southern Iraq'. This 'deliberate confusion of different dissident groups' serves to 'achieve cinematic economy', and makes the dissidents 'more accessible to the US soldiers', due to their suffusion with 'US multiculturalism'.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Rowe, p. 51.

I would add that this stressing of ethnic, class, and racial transcendence is key to *Three Kings's* reflection of a centrist Global Meliorism. Vig's opinion that Iraqis believe 'America is the great Satan' is rebuked by Amir, who comments that 'they don't care if they cut American hair, Sunni hair, Shiite hair...they just want to get rid of Saddam'. This vision of an imported liberal capitalism is soon complemented by moments which militarise bourgeois values for Iraq's indigent rebels.

The subsequent montage, which portrays the men walking by a series of cheering Shia vagrants, delineates this sensibility. It is accompanied by a resolute cosmopolitanism, conveyed by the non-diegetic song that plays over their walk, 'Stop Ou Encore' by the Belgian musician Plastic Bertrand. The track signals a multicultural verve to the American's vision of collaboration with the rebels, but takes on an additional pugnacity when placed against the military prowess of this army of dissidents. For all the rebellious, countercultural quality of the music, Gates's mission resembles a centrism that bears comparison to the Clinton administration's attempt to rehabilitate the liberal activism of the Kennedy and Johnson years. The men's pro-business deliverance of Global Meliorism can be interpreted as emblematic of the 'tough-minded' liberal tradition of Schlesinger's 'vital centre', a belief evinced by Strom as 'the promotion at home and abroad of constitutional practices based on individualism and free enterprise'.<sup>108</sup> It also recalls Halberstam's notion of an 'aggressive, combative liberal nationalism' in the early Kennedy years.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Sharon Hartman Strom, *Political Woman: Florence Luscomb and the Legacy of Radical Reform* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 2008), p. 19

<sup>109</sup> David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1972), pp. 41-42.

In updating this centrism for the 1990s, Gates's mission acknowledges the necessity of neoliberal capitalism for America's deliverance of Global Meliorism, a quality elucidated in *Three Kings's* imagery of a pro-American and pro-market Iraqi opposition. The implications of both co-option and hegemonic dominance that surround the group's assault on the fortress foreground this relationship, evoking the desirability of an 'idealism mixed with pragmatism'<sup>110</sup> described by neoliberal Democratic National Committee chair Paul Kirk. Sanctifying this stance is a comity between the glamour of America's 'soft power' culture and its military force.

The sequence begins with Vig driving Elgin and two Iraqi rebels to the fortress, a journey made memorable by its eclectic coupling of musical choices. Vig's car radio alternates between playing Chicago's 'If You Leave Me Now' and Arabic music, before settling on a combination of sound and image that is emphatic of America's soft and hard power. A close-up shot of Vig driving is accompanied by the Chicago track playing at full blast, its sentimental tones seemingly in discordance with the violent actions that the men will embark on. Yet the significance of this track lies in its evocation of American militarism and soft power's reciprocal relationship.<sup>111</sup> The song plays over a shot that shows Iraqi political prisoners fleeing from the fortress, sanctifying Gates and the Iraqi insurgents' pro-western views of the military intervention. This combination recurs again when Vig engages in a firefight with Iraqi troops before returning to the vehicle that continues playing the track. A medium shot shows him smashing the window of the car to grab a gun as the strains of

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<sup>110</sup> Paul Kirk, quoted in Bothmer, p. 137.

<sup>111</sup> This will be the predominant theme of the next chapter's focus on *Team America: World Police*.

Chicago play in dramatic slow motion, a juxtaposition that reinforces the men's fusion of cultural attractiveness and hyper-stylised violence.

The events at the fortress add to the eclectic, radical chic quality of intervention presented throughout O'Russell's picture. Elgin's stylised, repeated use of a C4 rigged American football to blow up an underground section of the fortress and helicopter reiterates the heavily countercultural undertones tangible throughout their mission. Coupled with this humour is a moment of tragedy that conveys the internationalist vision of the new Global Meliorism. After the men rescue Barlow from Said, both Barlow and Vig are suddenly shot by a stray sniper. The sequence that follows dwells on the wounds of Barlow. A succession of close-up shots depicts the desperate attempt to decompress his lungs in order to stop the cauterisation of the wound. Most interestingly, the film focuses solely on Barlow's agony, only revealing Vig's death after the decompression process. Subsequent to this, the scene fades into a Shia funeral for Vig. A series of shots show the Shia rebels burying the erstwhile bigot, a multicultural redemption suffused with liberal internationalist sentiment.

To Semmerling, Vig's death absolved 'his prior ignorance and prejudices' and masked that 'many more Iraqis died in relation to this single American loss'.<sup>112</sup> Jude Davies offered a contrasting opinion by viewing his arc as part of a wider 'imperialistic deployment of multiculturalism'.<sup>113</sup> This was embodied in Vig's 'trajectory from white racist to would-be Muslim', a change that encompassed

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<sup>112</sup> Semmerling, p. 157.

<sup>113</sup> Jude Davies, 'Diversity. America. Leadership. Good over evil. Hollywood multiculturalism and American imperialism in Independence Day and Three Kings', *Patterns of Prejudice Journal*, Vol.39:4 (2005), pp. 397-415 (p. 411).

'multiple and sometimes contradictory poles of Americanness'.<sup>114</sup> For all the glibness of this transition, she implies that Vig's departure is cynical, making the 'troubled, blue-collar white collar guy' akin to a 'defunct national myth'.<sup>115</sup> Read in this light, the focus on Barlow in the gun wound sequence hints at Vig's ideological occlusion from the group's mission. Gates's rebellious, countercultural masculinity, Barlow's 'new man' sensitivity, and Elgin's spirituality offer more palatability to the Iraqi people. Vig's indelibly redneck identity makes his demise inevitable, an outlier to a progressive imperium.<sup>116</sup>

Indeed, the death of the authentically Jacksonian Vig portends the consolidation of Global Meliorism in *Three Kings's* final scenes. The exit of the rebels across the Iraqi-Iranian border becomes filled with notions of rapprochement between realists and liberals, as well as between soldiers and journalists. Adriana Cruz, who was disillusioned at the beginning of the film, now appears moved by the men's actions. In a series of tracking shots, she films with a sensitivity that is in direct contrast to the gaucheness of her early encounters with the celebrating troops, both reporting on the men's breaking of international law and the desperation of the refugees. The intervention supplants memories of her early sexual marginalisation, a high-mindedness heightened by an emotional score that underlines the galvanisation of those aiding the escape. Even when the scene is dramatically interrupted by Ron Horn and the US army, the narrative proceeds to arrive at an accord that conveys Global Meliorism's primacy in 1990s foreign policy.

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 412.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 415.

<sup>116</sup> The manner in which Jacksonian America is betrayed by American intervention is further examined in Chapter 3's analysis of neoconservative ideology in *No Country for Old Men* and *There Will be Blood*.

The troops that storm the scene are filmed with a handheld camera, a technique that accentuates the political tumult. The contrast between the uniform, serious Horn and the rebellious Gates and Cruz renews the film's broader allegory of the 1990s era arguments between staid, conservative realists and liberal interventionists. In a series of close-up shots, O'Russell alternates between the sober-minded, cold realism of Horn and the emotionalised idealism of Gates. Gates's imploration to Horn that he can 'return the gold, save some refugees, get that star' serves to resolve the narrative disequilibrium but also illustrates the opportunistic centrism of the updated Global Meliorism.

Perhaps Gates's triangulation seems most invocative of the philosophies of democracy promotion and free market globalisation that, especially to Walter Mead, had been central to America in the 1990s. Mead defines the latter as the Hamiltonian, a key component of US foreign policy, due to its pursuit of 'commerce...potentially as a cause of peace'.<sup>117</sup> He further noted how, during the Clinton era, it was 'Hamiltonians and Wilsonians who dominated the executive branch', a dominance counteracted by the Jacksonian domination of 'military institutions and the Congress'.<sup>118</sup>

Horn's eventual decision to accept both the repatriation of the gold to Kuwait and the refugees' escape shows the essential power of the Hamiltonian and Wilsonian schools, whilst pointing to a fundamental mollification of military power. This reconciliation emerges when the Iraqi refugees finally cross the border. In a wide angle shot of the desert landscape, emotive music plays over the refugees fleeing

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<sup>117</sup> Mead, p. 103.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., pages 305-306.

the country as the realist Horn watches in acquiescence. The scene is one of centrist compromise, unifying the militaristic, liberal interventionist and pro-business dimensions of American foreign policy for a successful deliverance of the Global Meliorist doctrine.

The 1990s updated Global Meliorism for an era of increasing unilateralism in international relations and a world dominated by American-led globalisation. *Three Kings's* final montage shows how this ideological reconfiguration became an attractively centrist position. Exuberant soft rock music plays over freeze-frames of the men, superimposed with a subtitle that tells of their 'honourable discharge...thanks to the reporting of Adriana Cruz'. The montage then reveals the men's glamorous post-discharge lives; Gates works as a stuntman on a Hollywood film set; Barlow returns home to open his own business with a loving family; finally, Elgin boards a plane to work with Gates.

The juxtaposition of this prosperity with the compassion seen previously posits a 1990s style, third way alternative to realism. The film's final subtitles note that 'the gold was returned to Kuwait' but 'some was missing'. Global Meliorism is at once a means for humanitarian alleviation but also self-glorification and economic advancement. The following chapter will explore this theme of contradiction in relation to the representation of soft power in *Team America: World Police*, renewing a focus on the combustible mixture of idealism, materialism, and military potency that drove American power in the unipolar era.

## CHAPTER 2

### **TEAM AMERICA: WORLD POLICE AND THE MILITARISATION OF SOFT POWER**

In his 1990 work *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, the International Relations theorist, Joseph Nye, postulated that the future of American power would depend on 'cultural and ideological appeal' and the maintenance of a 'healthy and open society', alongside 'military strength' and a strong economic base'.<sup>1</sup> Sustaining these hegemonic qualities would depend on the 'soft power resource', the sources of power based on 'American culture' and 'transnational production'.<sup>2</sup> This would supplement the 'traditional wisdom of realism and its concern for the military balance of power'.<sup>3</sup>

Fourteen years later in 2004, the consequences of the Iraq War had prompted Nye to update his notion of 'soft power'. Voicing the concern that the neoconservative attempt to install free market democracy in Iraq had focused 'too simply on substance and not enough on process', Nye emphasised soft power's premise of attraction.<sup>4</sup> The United States could appeal to Muslim populations through getting 'others to admire your ideals and want what you want', embodied in the promulgation of concepts such as 'democracy, human rights and individual

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), p. xvi.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 192-193.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178.

<sup>4</sup> Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, p. 15.

opportunities'.<sup>5</sup> Nye cites soft power's historic success in various examples of culture (particularly American film) that contain 'subliminal images and messages about individualism, consumer choices, and other values that have important political effects', which convey 'American values that are open, mobile, individualistic, anti-establishment, pluralistic, voluntaristic, populist, and free'.<sup>6</sup>

Similar arguments would be renewed during Bush's second term. The 'Princeton Project on National Security', a bipartisan initiative stewarded by George P. Schultz and Anthony Lake, concluded that American strategy should be directed towards 'common interests',<sup>7</sup> encompassing a range of 'formal and informal multilateral tools' based on 'private networks, rules, norms and shared expectations'.<sup>8</sup> Nye would continue to champion an International Relations approach that tempered a military based 'hard power' with soft power's championing of 'attraction', which formed an intelligent combination of 'smart power'.<sup>9</sup>

The impossibility of this synthesis is highlighted by Matt Stone and Trey Parker's 2004 comedy satire *Team America: World Police*. Its crude premise of *Thunderbirds* style marionettes fighting global terrorism places soft power against an anarchic world of regime change and pre-emptive war. The collusive role of soft power is embodied in the character of Gary Johnston, a Broadway actor and liberal who is recruited into the anti-terrorism unit of the film's title. Gary's status as an ostensible

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. x.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 46-47.

<sup>7</sup> G. John Ikenberry and Anne-Marie Slaughter, *The Princeton Project on National Security: Forging a World of Liberty Under Law: US National Security in the 21st Century: Final Report of the Princeton Project on National Security* (2006), <http://www.princeton.edu/~ppns/report/FinalReport.pdf> [accessed 16 March 2015] (p. 19).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Get Smart: Combining Hard and Soft Power* (2009), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2009-07-01/get-smart> [accessed 17 March 2015].

soft power resource is made complicated by his collaboration with Team America's militarism, illustrating the inequitable relationship between hard and soft power. His advertisement for American cultural dominance, a quality tangible in the regular references to his 'acting skills', further overlaps with the ambitions of liberal interventionists and neoconservatives who lauded democratisation of the Middle East.

Thus in *Team America*, soft power succumbs to the fervent belief that the world is divided between democracy and totalitarianism. Even when chosen as an alternative to military force, it remains an invocation of America's global preponderance. *Team America's* second half evokes this paradox. This is evident in Stone and Parker's parody of anti-war celebrities who are shown attempting to broker a peace conference with North Korean dictator Kim Jong-il. Through their naïve belief in a radical soft power that can bring world peace and global democracy, these celebrities ironically anticipate the destructive results of regime change in Iraq. This chapter explores how *Team America's* parody of the action film genre and Hollywood's popular output illuminates the failure of soft power in the War on Terror era.

The first section of this chapter, '*Team America* and the volatility of soft power', discusses how Stone and Parker portray the cultural resources that make up America's soft power, as well as the impossibility of fusing hard and soft power in an equitable fashion. Section 2.2: '*Team America* and the paradoxes of soft power' examines how *Team America* represents soft power's role in an American neocolonialism towards the Middle East. It also analyses how the climax of *Team*

*America* demonstrates that soft power, even when being proposed as a palatable alternative to military intervention, inevitably relies on the hard power facets of American hegemony.

### **2.1: *Team America* and the volatility of soft power**

Like *Three Kings*, *Team America* opens with a simulacrum that creates dissonance between the universalising rhetoric of American exceptionalism and a pugnacious culture of militarism. As the opening titles of Stone and Parker's picture appear onscreen, a militaristic drumroll parodies American ambitions towards global preponderance. *Team America's* first image, like the artifice of Barlow's breaking of the fourth wall, carries an inauthenticity that serves to paint the American hegemonic perspective as solipsistic.

A picture postcard rendition of contemporary Paris sits as a backdrop onscreen whilst the jaunty sounds of an accordion play, which lends an unsophisticated parochialism to the cosmopolitan setting. This insularity is compounded by the set of subtitles that appear onscreen, which sardonically explain for audiences, 'Paris, France...3, 635 miles east of America'. As a French puppet appears onscreen and exclaims 'sacre bleu' in front of the city, Stone and Parker draw back to reveal that this backdrop forms a puppet show within their own cinematic puppet show - a wide angle shot exposes the backdrop and puppet to be part of a piece of street theatre in a three dimensional, mockingly fantastical modern Paris. A pan around the setting

displays a sense of paradisiacal whimsy, connoted in the portrayals of effete Frenchmen puppets that alternately converse, ride bicycles, and carry baguettes to a genteel orchestral score.

The tonal and attitudinal contrast with the militarism of the opening titles, besides setting up a discrepancy between hard and soft power, mirrors Robert Kagan's dichotomous notion of 'Americans' from Mars and 'Europeans' from Venus. Writing on 30<sup>th</sup> March 2003 just after the launch of the Iraq War, Kagan's essay 'Of Paradise and Power' commented on the Manichean cultural differences that had risen between the United States and its anti-war transatlantic allies towards the launch of the invasion. He saw a multilateralist Europe embracing 'a self-contained world of laws and rules and transnational negotiation and co-operation' that championed 'a post-historical paradise of peace and relative prosperity'.<sup>10</sup> This realisation of Immanuel Kant's 'perpetual peace' contrasted with a war resigned United States.<sup>11</sup> This alternate hegemon exercised 'power in a Hobbesian world where international laws and rules are unreliable, and where true security and the defence and promotion of a liberal order still depend on the possession and use of military might'.<sup>12</sup>

This cultural gulf is tangible in *Team America's* satire of America's soft power resources, particularly the action films that destabilised the United States's appeal to the Islamic world before the 9/11 attacks. The harmonious images of daily Parisian

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power* (2003), <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/30/books/chapters/of-paradise-and-power.html> [accessed 17 January 2015].

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

life, which bear comparison to Kagan's picture of emasculated European identity, are promptly brought to an end when a tracking shot follows a French boy who bumps into an elderly man dressed in Islamic headdress. The feverishness of the encounter signals how American sources of soft power can hew closely to America's 'Mars' perspective of an anarchic world order. A low angle POV shot from the child's perspective suffuses the man in dark, febrile tones - a soundtrack of Arabic chanting parodies a history of skewed Muslim representation in American cinema, a phenomenon of pre-9/11 blockbusters such as *True Lies* (1994) and *The Siege* (1998). This satire signals the diverse, conflictive nature that forms the cultural resources of soft power. As Nye himself notes and concedes, 'American popular culture often worked at cross purposes to official government policies', a trait embodied in 'Hollywood movies that show scantily clad women with libertine attitudes or fundamentalist Christian groups that castigate Islam as an evil religion'. These results vitiated 'government efforts to improve relations with Islamic nations'.<sup>13</sup>

*Team America's* references to the more reactionary elements of Hollywood cinema show how American culture has frequently betrayed the universalism of Nye's ideal, instead subscribing to a propounding of militarism. The oppositional contrasts of this early scene indicate that the purveyance of soft power is flawed and inevitably given to collisions with other, less attractive facets of the American psyche.

Before continuing to analyse how this issue is presented in *Team America*, it is worth explaining how soft power has relied on aspects of American 'hard power' to secure hegemony. To Christopher Layne, even the understanding of a 'good' form of soft

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<sup>13</sup> Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, p. 15.

power is to ignore the co-morbidity of this theory with endorsement of military intervention. Layne notes how the liberal dimensions of soft power are 'rooted in the Wilsonian tradition' and have always relied on 'the foundation of the USA's hard power', thus making the theory 'a polite way of describing the ideological expansionism inherent in US liberal internationalism', an expansionism that 'led to disasters like Vietnam and Iraq'.<sup>14</sup>

The complexity of assessing the 'right' or 'wrong' form of soft power, and the struggle to sustain this theory as a counterbalancing force to American hard power, is typified in examples such as the film industry's complex response to the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Did the rushed release of a film like *Black Hawk Down* (2001) purvey soft power because it portrayed the Somalia intervention as benevolent in intention and outwardly humanitarian? Or did its presentation of warfare and politically timed promotion mean it had more in common with the attitude disseminated to the MPAA by Bush administration advisor Karl Rove, who advocated presenting a 'fight against evil?'<sup>15</sup> This ambiguity is compounded when considering MPAA head Valenti's wish for a cinematic culture that reflected an America that 'clothed and fed and sheltered millions and millions around the world without asking anything in return' and 'educated hundreds of thousands of people all over the world in our universities'.<sup>16</sup> Did this attitude possess affinity with Nye's praise of 'high cultural contacts' and 'academic and scientific exchanges' during the Cold

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<sup>14</sup> Christopher Layne, 'The Unbearable Lightness of Soft Power', in *Soft Power and US Foreign Policy: Theoretical, Historical, and Contemporary Perspectives*, pp. 51-82 (p. 73).

<sup>15</sup> Karl Rove, quoted in Alford, p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> Jack Valenti, quoted in Alford, p. 25.

War?<sup>17</sup> Or was this use of soft power a mere fig leaf for a hawkish advertisement for military power, a stance implied by Valenti's later comments that American film should promote the need to 'avenge the 9/11 attacks' and that 'benevolence should be struck from our vocabulary'?<sup>18</sup>

Viewed against this post-9/11 context, soft power, far from forming an attractive political culture for the purpose of winning hearts and minds, can be seen to have had concurrence with the very militarism Nye wished to avoid. The delays and re-edits of productions that explicitly portrayed terroristic violence (such as the Arnold Schwarzenegger action picture *Collateral Damage*, which was forced to replace Libyan terrorists with Columbians) further conveyed how some of the more abrasive films of Hollywood's pre-9/11 production context had become uncomfortably tarnished by the events of that day.<sup>19</sup> *Team America*, which encodes this interaction between popular cinema and terrorism, can be seen as an illustration of how the bombast of Hollywood's cultural resources became disturbingly congruent with the trauma of the 9/11 attacks and subsequent War on Terror.

Additional contradictions appear when Nye's theory is applied to the actions and rhetoric of the Bush administration. Nye concludes his 2004 book *Soft Power: A Means to Success in World Politics* by claiming that soft power should ultimately temper 'hard power', the militaristic dimension of American statecraft, in order to achieve a 'smart power', that is, 'a better balance of hard and soft power in our foreign policy'. This tempering could be accomplished through avoiding the

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<sup>17</sup> Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, p. 45.

<sup>18</sup> Alford, p. 25. This idea of soft power as a shield for American military power will be further discussed in Chapter 3.

<sup>19</sup> This information is located at *Ibid.*, p. 97.

unilateralism that had underpinned the Iraq War, which had ‘squandered our attractiveness’, and instead by basing policy on a ‘public diplomacy’ that would rely on ‘allies and institutions’ to be implemented.<sup>20</sup>

Yet it is hard to accept Nye’s fusionist argument when the Bush administration had also employed aspects of soft power in its pursuit of unilateral intervention in Iraq. At a February 2003 speech to the conservative American Enterprise Institute, roughly a month prior to the Iraq invasion, Bush celebrated the potential of Iraq’s native population by lauding the country’s ‘proud heritage, abundant resources and skilled and educated people’.<sup>21</sup> He further hoped for ‘internal reform, greater politics participation, economic openness, and free trade’ across the wider Middle East.<sup>22</sup> These paeans recall the essential principles of soft power, what Nye cites as the intention for ‘others to want the outcomes you want’, a politics that ‘co-opts people rather than coerces them’.<sup>23</sup> Even the hawkish and unilateral National Security Strategy of September 2002, which urged ‘pre-emptive action to counter a sufficient threat to our national security’, adheres to these shibboleths.<sup>24</sup> The document’s simultaneous promotion of ‘effective public diplomacy to promote the free flow of information and ideas to kindle the hopes and aspirations of freedom’<sup>25</sup> matches the language of Nye, resembling what he refers to as ‘the universalistic culture’<sup>26</sup> of American soft power. Nye also specifies soft power’s long-termism and how ‘its

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<sup>20</sup> Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, p. 147.

<sup>21</sup> George W. Bush, *Full text: George Bush's speech to the American Enterprise Institute (2003)*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/feb/27/usa.iraq2> [accessed 14 March 2015].

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, p. 5.

<sup>24</sup> U.S. Department of State, p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>26</sup> Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, p. 11.

resources often work indirectly by shaping the environment for policy, and sometimes take years to produce the desired outcomes'.<sup>27</sup>

Various neoconservatives, inside and outside the Bush administration, had used similar techniques to make the case for a post-Saddam government in Iraq. Before he became a Middle East advisor to Dick Cheney, the foreign policy specialist David Wurmser urged understanding of Shia opposition groups in Iraq, who he thought could become a 'foundation of liberalism and civil society', and embodied Western ideals of 'financial independence and relative autonomy'.<sup>28</sup>

Private contact with the main Iraqi opposition in exile, the INC, was integral to this public relations effort. The spirit of co-option Nye foregrounds as necessary for soft power was therefore carried over into the Bush administration's planning of the Iraq War. The role of Middle East specialists Harold Rhode and Michael Rubin in the Pentagon's Office of Special Plans allowed contacts to be made between neoconservatives and members of the INC, who both fraternised over the prospects of a Shia led democracy in Iraq. The journalist George Packer noted the surreal nature of this collaboration by referring to 'the convergence of ideas, interests and affections between American Jews and Iraqi Shia as 'one of the more curious subplots of the Iraq War'.<sup>29</sup>

The liberal interventionists who supported both wars in Iraq and Afghanistan also embraced a synthesis of hard and soft power. Bacevich notes the role of left wing,

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>28</sup> David Wurmser, *Tyranny's Ally* (Washington D.C.: The AEI Press: Publisher for the American Enterprise Institute, 1999), p. 78.

<sup>29</sup> George Packer, *The Assassins Gate: America In Iraq* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2005), p. 109. This background story recurs in my next chapter's analysis of *There Will be Blood's* Iraq occupation allegory.

non-governmental human rights groups who had been attracted to the military interventions of Iraq and Afghanistan because they mirrored their own 'calls for US intervention abroad to relieve the plight of the abused and persecuted'.<sup>30</sup>

This tradition was as well evident in academia and journalism. In late 2002, Packer explained the role of 'liberal hawks' in promoting the upcoming war with Iraq, a category that included writer Christopher Hitchens and liberal interventionist proponent Paul Berman. Their culture embodied 'a vision of postwar Iraq as a secular democracy with equal rights for all its citizens' and drew on a 'liberal descent' that 'connected the fall of the Berlin Wall, Bosnia, Kosovo, Sept 11 and Iraq'.<sup>31</sup> The Canadian human rights advocate and academic Michael Ignatieff further evinced this cosmopolitan Wilsonianism by calling for an intervention that involved 'European participation in peacekeeping, nation-building and humanitarian reconstruction', but also ideals of 'human rights', which 'sustains the principles of self-determination, the right of each people to rule themselves free of outside interference'.<sup>32</sup> Somewhat paradoxically, only a 'new imperialism' that was coupled with soft power's adherence to 'influence, example, and persuasion' could achieve these goals.<sup>33</sup>

*Team America: World Police's* satire evinces these ambiguities surrounding soft power as well as the bipartisan support for the War on Terror. After it is revealed that the elderly Muslim is carrying WMD and meeting other insurgents, *Team*

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<sup>30</sup> Bacevich, p. 25.

<sup>31</sup> George Packer, *The Liberal Quandary Over Iraq* (2002), <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/12/08/magazine/the-liberal-quandary-over-iraq.html> [accessed 14 March 2015].

<sup>32</sup> Michael Ignatieff, *The American Empire; The Burden* (2003), <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/01/05/magazine/the-american-empire-the-burden.html> [accessed 17 June 2015].

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

*America* continues to connote the more destructive implications of American cultural influence. Echoing Baudrillard's view that the 9/11 attacks had been portended because 'countless movies bear witness to this fantasy'<sup>34</sup>, a cinematic firefight ensues when Team America arrive via jet plane and helicopter to terminate the group. A Kung Fu duel between team member Chris and one insurgent satirises this proximity between cinematic violence and the phantasmagorical nature of modern terrorism. The two engage in a stylised fight reminiscent of the martial arts sequences from the 1999 science fiction blockbuster *The Matrix*. This parody is rendered more comical by the intentional ludicrousness of the fight - akin to the marionettes seen in *Thunderbirds*, the puppet strings of these figures are transparently visible, thus robbing their battle of narrative credence. It appears as a bathetic dance of death because their strings only allow them to wave and gesticulate at one another in close proximity. A frenetic musical score highlights the fight's lunacy as the two scrap in circles, never to exchange fists.

In spite of this intentional bathos, their battle encapsulates the incendiary nature of much of American soft power's cultural resources. The fight scenes in *Team America* were choreographed by cinematographer Bill Pope, who worked on comparable (though tonally oppositional) scenes in *The Matrix* and the 2002 superhero blockbuster *Spiderman*.<sup>35</sup> Zizek attributed the title of a post-9/11 themed 2002 essay collection, 'Welcome to the Desert of the Real', to *The Matrix*, which in turn

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<sup>34</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism* (2001), trans. by Chris Turner, [http://insomnia.ac/essays/the\\_spirit\\_of\\_terrorism/](http://insomnia.ac/essays/the_spirit_of_terrorism/) [accessed 15 May 2015].

<sup>35</sup> IMDb, *Bill Pope* (n.d.), <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0691084/> [accessed 17 March 2015].

borrowed that phrase from Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981).<sup>36</sup> It could be argued that the blockbuster *Spiderman* was also involved in the post-9/11 consciousness - an already released trailer of Spiderman spinning webs between the twin towers was promptly removed from circulation after the events on September 11<sup>th</sup>.<sup>37</sup> The stark words of Robert Altman, who opined that 'the movies set the pattern', aptly summarised these unwelcome intersections of popular culture and mass trauma.<sup>38</sup>

The inclusion of similar fight choreography to *The Matrix* in *Team America's War on Terror* satire reminds of this inadvertent collision with the post-9/11 zeitgeist and encapsulates a hyperreality that had been encountered by Americans on the day of the terrorist attacks. This state, and its founding idea of being unable to distinguish between the real and unreal, was embodied in Baudrillard's description of 9/11 as a cinematic 'event'.<sup>39</sup> This event status was further conveyed by the attack's 'murderous phantasmagoria', which legitimated 'fascination', and a Manichean state in which 'the moral condemnation and holy alliance against terrorism are on the same scale as the prodigious jubilation at seeing this global superpower destroyed'.<sup>40</sup>

A visual corroboration of this theory would be a set piece from *The Matrix* which featured a helicopter crashing into a corporate building, a moment that, in retrospect, seems strangely anticipatory of the events of 9/11. Baudrillard's belief in American cinema's provocation of phantasmagoric violence was noticeable in the

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<sup>36</sup> Slavoj Zizek, quoted in Phillip Hammond, *Media, War and Postmodernity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), p. 3.

<sup>37</sup> This is detailed in Pat Stephen Keane, *Disaster Movies: The Cinema of Catastrophe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 92.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Altman, quoted in Marcus O'Donnell, *remediating the apocalypse: Hollywood Responds to 9/11*. <http://www.apocalypticmediations.com/hypertext/hollywoo.html> [accessed 16 May 2015].

<sup>39</sup> Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

writings of Umberto Eco, who criticised an 'Ur-Fascism' in American cinema.<sup>41</sup>

Rebecca Bell-Metereau expanded upon Eco's theory by citing a culture that 'values sacrifice, obedience, the cult of the hero, and the doctrine of constant warfare'.<sup>42</sup>

This was embodied in male-orientated films before and after 9/11 that embraced the 'Ur-Fascist drama', such as the alien invasion blockbuster *Independence Day* (1996), the war picture *Pearl Harbor* (2001), and the thriller *Panic Room* (2002).<sup>43</sup> These storylines, to Dixon, helped 'create a siege mentality' and 'justified revenge, both in the public and private spheres of film narratives'.<sup>44</sup> To Bell-Metereau, the destructive nature of the War on Terror seems to have its antecedent in these 'militaristic movies', which resulted in 'deja-vu' on the day of the 9/11 attacks for cinema-going Americans.<sup>45</sup>

It would be easy to interpret the coarse tone of *Team America's* opening as reflective of this uncomfortable association between the reactionary elements of America's soft power and Islamist insurgency. Yet *Team America* also allegorises the bipartisan endorsement of intervention that occurred in the early stages of the War on Terror. Indeed, the atavistic quality of these cinematic references comes suffused with the cosmopolitan Wilsonianism that had rationalised the Bush administration's goal of bringing liberal democracy to the Middle East. Team America is egalitarian in its composition of militarised men and women from different regions and backgrounds - there is: Joe, a starry eyed quarterback from the University of Nebraska; the aforementioned Chris, a tough-minded soldier from Detroit; Lisa, a psychology

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<sup>41</sup> Eco defines in his own theory in Umberto Eco, 'Ur-Fascism' (1995), <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1995/06/22/ur-fascism/> [accessed 22 July 2015].

<sup>42</sup> Bell-Metereau, p. 147.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>44</sup> Dixon, p. 20.

<sup>45</sup> Bell-Metereau, p. 147.

expert with insight into the mental neuroses of Islamic terrorists; Sarah, a clairvoyant from California who claims to be able to gauge emotional anguish with astonishing precision; Carson, Lisa's sensitive fiancé.

Though largely coming across as gauche, unsophisticated embodiments of militarism, certain members of Team America therefore fit the liberal dimensions of the coalition that supported the Bush administration's post-9/11 foreign policy. Moreover, the way in which characters such as Lisa and Carson combine a cosmopolitan attractiveness with militarised violence illustrates the role of smart power within this bipartisan alliance. As a group made up of individuals from both red states and blue states, what unites Team America is their embrace of what Ryan Bishop called the 'US geopolitical strategy that had been justified by 'freedom', showing how clearly the two compliment and reflect one another'.<sup>46</sup>

The Pyrrhic victory which climaxes Stone and Parker's opening scene combines this latter freedom agenda with the hubristic consequences of American military power. Spotting a terrorist fleeing towards the Louvre, Joe fires a rocket launcher and misses, promptly hitting the Eiffel tower. The high angle shot of the iconic building toppling is a bizarre, comical inversion of the sight of the Twin Towers falling on 9/11, again connecting the imagery of the American action movie with nihilistic destruction.<sup>47</sup> This traumatic accident is phlegmatically cast aside by the team, who proceed to locate the terrorist in the Louvre - team member Sarah, who is flying a *Top Gun* style jet plane, fires and proceeds to destroy the tourist site, causing mass

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<sup>46</sup> Ryan Bishop, *Comedy and Cultural Critique in American Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 113.

<sup>47</sup> Similar ideological inversions of the felled towers are featured in subsequent case studies, particularly the revisionist Western *There Will be Blood* and the science fiction blockbuster *Avatar*.

devastation. As medium shots show Parisians looking on in horror at the wanton carnage, the remaining members of Team America jump up and down in celebration. Especially naïve is Joe, who reassures the civilians that ‘everything is bon’ and that ‘we stopped the terrorists’. Like the early scenes of *Three Kings*, the American exceptionalism evinced by Team America and their distinct emphasis on an inclusive ‘Americanness’ jibe with the harsh realities of military force. The introduction of Broadway actor Gary Johnston provides a figure who offers a lynchpin for these disparities of soft and hard power.

After Lisa’s boyfriend Carson is murdered by a stray terrorist, the action heads to New York, where a Broadway play showcases the talents of Gary, Carson’s potential replacement. The play is titled ‘Lease: the Musical’ (a parody of the drama *Rent*, a play based on the lives of AIDS sufferers) and is a bizarre exercise in liberal identity politics.<sup>48</sup> Gary, who leads a musical number entitled ‘Everyone has AIDS’, sings of the ravages of the disease upon his community, speaking of everyone from his ‘grandma’ to his ‘dog ‘ol blue’ possessing the disease. For all the differences with the more militarised notions of heroism pervaded by Team America in the previous scene, Gary’s acting is earnestly reverential in tone, almost as if it is an embodiment of patriotic duty.

This quality is affirmed in Gary’s subsequent encounter with Team America head Spottswode (possibly a crude play on the surname of Roger Moore era Bond director Roger Spottiswoode), who, in an effort to recruit him, praises his reputation as an ‘all-American actor who graduated Iowa University *summa cum laude* with a

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<sup>48</sup> Jonathan Larson, *Rent* (New York City: Harper Collins, 1997).

double major in theatre and world languages'. The effete, liberal arts background of Gary continues to be treated with a complete lack of irony when Spottswode invites him to take a limousine to Team America's base in Mount Rushmore. Gaudy, neon lighting suffuses the interior of the limousine, as if to reflect the continuing feting of Gary's garish acting skills. A diatribe by Spottswode affirms this reverence by telling the actor, 'that some people out there want you dead' and 'it's not who you are Gary, it's what you stand for'. Spottswode's view of Gary's cosmopolitan liberal identity as concomitant with a hard power orientated American nationalism can be juxtaposed with much of the Bush administration's bipartisan rhetoric. A speech by Bush a year after the launch of Operation Iraqi Freedom co-opted the language of secular humanism and liberalism to advocate continuation of the American occupation:

*We who stand on the other side of the line must be equally clear and certain in our convictions. We do love life, the life given to us and to all. We believe in the values that uphold the dignity of life, tolerance, freedom, and the right of conscience. And we know that this way of life is worth defending. There is no*

*neutral ground – no neutral ground – in the fight between civilization and terror, because there is no neutral ground between good and evil, freedom and slavery, life and death.*<sup>49</sup>

Davidson notes the essentially 'liberal mission' delineated in this language, which disguises the Manichean nature of a philosophy that demonises ' swathes of the population' and denounces them as 'the antithesis of life'.<sup>50</sup> David Simpson additionally describes this phenomenon as the 'attribution of nihilism or nothingness' to Islamist terrorism, which could be reduced to 'the result of jealousy, of them wanting what we have and destroying it because they cannot have it...an intransigent fundamentalism wholly foreign to our professed ethic of tolerance'.<sup>51</sup>

Spottswode's approval of Gary's actor identity matches this liberal solipsism in its self-gratifying praise of American democracy and cultural freedom. It achieves further ratification once Gary arrives at Team America's headquarters inside Mount Rushmore (a hideout specifically located in George Washington's mouth). Gary is escorted by Spottswode and introduced to every member of Team America, from the standoffish Chris to the whimsical Sarah. His meeting with the bereft psychology expert Lisa, however, offers the clearest indication of this liberal rationalisation of a terroristic nihilism, shown in her summary explanation of a jihadist psyche that derives from a 'malignant narcissism, usually brought on during childhood'.

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<sup>49</sup> George W. Bush, quoted in Joanna Davidson, 'Humanitarian Intervention as Liberal Imperialism: A Force for Good', *POLIS Journal*, Vol.7 (2012), pp. 127-164 (pp. 146-147).

<sup>50</sup> Davidson, p. 147. Similar co-options of secular humanist and liberal ideals become evident in *There Will be Blood* and *The Dark Knight*.

<sup>51</sup> David Simpson, *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 7.

Because its production context overlapped with the launch of the Iraq War, it is easy to interpret *Team America* as a satire of a post-9/11 hysteria that had infiltrated American cultural life. Its makers affirmed this quality, purveying the distinctly unpartisan satire that was contained in Stone and Parker's work on the *South Park* series. The directors voiced their belief in the futility of making a partisan anti-Bush picture, commenting wryly that Bush was not a 'target', as 'in America, you only have to walk 10 feet to find it'.<sup>52</sup>

Yet for all this contrarianism, *Team America's* political commentary is more nuanced and insightful than the insouciance that these statements suggest. Gary's complex encapsulation of liberal soft power resources highlights this quality. The idea that soft power only ratifies the Wilsonian dimension of the Bush administration's neoconservative foreign policy is further conveyed in a series of musical montages. The first such number, a country song entitled 'Freedom Isn't Free', plays over shots of Gary pacing around Washington DC while he contemplates whether to join Team America's upcoming mission to fight Islamic terrorists in Egypt. The imagery of the sequence forms a paean to the democratic and civic virtues of American life. Whilst Gary visits the historic Abraham Lincoln statue and Washington monument, the jangling tones of 'Freedom Isn't Free' add a distinctly modern nationalism to the sites. The chorus lyrics provide this tone: 'Freedom isn't free, it costs folk like you and me, and if we don't all chip in, we'll never pay that bill'.

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<sup>52</sup> Anwar Brett, *Matt Stone, Team America World Police: Interviewed by Anwar Brett* (2005), [http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2005/01/13/matt\\_stone\\_team\\_america\\_interview.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2005/01/13/matt_stone_team_america_interview.shtml) [accessed 18 November 2014]

Gary's reverence towards the historical sites of virtue and heroism can be seen as a reflection of H.W. Brands's premise of an exemplarist tradition in foreign policy, the idea that the United States, by virtue of its example, provides a role model of a 'humane, democratic and prosperous society', that views 'perfecting American institutions and practices at home' as 'a full-time job'.<sup>53</sup> This idea of course has an affinity with Nye's soft power in its stress on an attractiveness and cultural appeal integral to American hegemony. The opposite to exemplarism postulated by Brands is the 'vindictionalist' perspective, an outlook that emphasises 'active measures' and a 'military might', that rejects the 'utopian' thinking that America could lead purely on its democratic example.<sup>54</sup>

Despite this similarity, however, Brands's dichotomy between intervention and an America leading based on democratic exemplarism contrasts with Nye's own belief in a synthetic 'smart power' that can combine these two philosophies. The exemplarist imagery of America's democratic founders and their juxtaposition with the more militaristic lyrics of 'Freedom Isn't Free' indicates the potentially collusive nature of soft power in the War on Terror era. As the montage progresses, Gary moves from the deified icons of American history towards the Vietnam War memorial. While this transition occurs, the lyrics pugnaciously reference 'all those war vets' and ask rhetorically, 'if someone asked you to fight for freedom, would you answer the call'. The bombast here recalls Ian Scott's notion of a political culture in Hollywood films wedded to 'crudely patriotic visions of institutional rhetoric and

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<sup>53</sup> H.W. Brands, *What America Owes the World: The Struggle for the Soul of Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. vii-viii.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. vii-viii.

behaviour as part of the norms in political life', a purveyance of democratic exemplarism that here is lent an overt tone of militarisation.<sup>55</sup>

This first section has explored how *Team America* signals the unwieldiness of combining soft and hard power. The next section continues this theme by analysing the role of the Hollywood anti-war movement in *Team America* and their illustration of soft power's futility, even in its purest form.

## **2.2: *Team America* and the paradoxes of soft power**

The diverse representations of soft power in *Team America* display its expansiveness but also its limitations. At its best, as embodied in the 'Freedom Isn't Free' montage, soft power successfully rationalises American hard power through the refrains of American democratic and cultural exceptionalism. At its worst, as seen in the opening sequence, it results in alienation, amplification of cultural difference and resentment of American influence, an unwanted effect that can be seen to result from sources that explicitly indicate collusion between soft and hard power. The struggle for equilibrium between hard and soft power becomes integral to the remainder of *Team America's* narrative and indicates the latter's fundamental unreliability. Its capricious nature is first implied when Gary returns to Team America only to find that the soft power of his acting skills are going to be given a warped, racialised twist. Team America's first mission requires Gary to use his acting skills in order to infiltrate an Islamist cell in Cairo, but first he is required to undergo facial 'valmorification' surgery so he can resemble an insurgent of Arab descent.

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<sup>55</sup> Scott, p. 252.

The valmorification sequence indicates a dynamic similar to Kitaeff's description of a neo-imperialism that combined 'racism with neocolonialism'.<sup>56</sup> In an operating theatre, Lisa and Sarah perform an operation reminiscent of John Woo's *Face/Off* (1997). The operation changes everything from Gary's eye colour to the size of his nose, Arabising him for the purpose of Team America's mission - like Said's polemical appropriation of American rap music and Michael Jackson in *Three Kings*, Gary's state as soft power resource is placed as subordinate to a hegemonic whiteness that mirrors the overwhelmingly militarist prerogatives of the American superpower. This racialism is emphasised in close-ups that show a medical computer screen relaying the various phases of the operation, such as 'mandible modification' and 'iris pigmentation'. The essential ridiculousness of the valmorification becomes explicit when Gary examines the final results in a mirror; the operation has given him a scruffy makeshift beard and artificially tanned skin that appears, for all the professionalism of the operation, comically inauthentic.

The cosmetic changes wrought to Gary pervert the transference of 'values and culture' that Nye found so essential in soft power resources, undercutting his theory as a sensitive alternative to more abrasive kinds of American influence. They also connote soft power's inherent lack of agency next to the greater impact of contemporaneous America's national security and foreign policies. Central to Nye's defence of soft power is that it offers an 'attraction' and 'agenda setting' that differed from the 'inducements' and 'coercion' involved in 'economic power', as well as the 'threats' and 'force' integral in 'military power'.<sup>57</sup> Nye qualifies what makes

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<sup>56</sup> Kitaeff, 'Three Kings: Neocolonial Arab Representation'.

<sup>57</sup> Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, p. 31.

soft power by arguing that it is not 'cultural resources' in themselves, but the qualities that created 'soft power behaviour', or the 'behaviour of attraction', and the specific 'context' that dictates the 'effectiveness of any power resource'.<sup>58</sup>

Leaving aside the nebulosity of defining what constitutes attractive behaviour and when or where soft power resources should be employed, the practicality of states applying soft power in a palatable manner is vitiated by its location in inherently private sources. Zahran and Ramos note how the state 'cannot fully control its soft power resources', which stemmed from popular phenomena such as 'large corporations, sports stars, pop cultural symbols, and a number of civil society groups'.<sup>59</sup> The only answer was in attempting to 'adopt behaviours which exploit and reinforce the soft power resources' a state 'already has', and 'make sure its actions do not end up undermining them'.<sup>60</sup> The 'America, Fuck Yeah' song number in *Team America* displays this essential incongruity between state power and the non-state sources of American culture. It also unveils how this contradiction is disguised by soft power's role in a hegemony premised on the universal appeal of American cultural and political life.

The song first features in a montage that depicts Team America's airborne journey to Cairo. The chorus of 'America, Fuck Yeah' caters to the neoconservative ideal that only military force can deliver the inevitable onward march of American capitalistic democracy - its lyrics boast that America is 'coming to save the motherfucking day' and 'freedom is the only way'. As if to accentuate the self-affirming and exuberant

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., pp. 11-12.

<sup>59</sup> Zahran and Ramos, p. 20.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

nature of the chorus, these lines are punctuated awkwardly by the 'yeah' of the song's title. The definition of war here is overwhelmingly pop cultural. The song's use of coarse rock and roll background music, which plays against the *Top Gun* style imagery of Team America flying, makes the montage fundamentally Jacksonian in its infusion of unabashed blue-collar populism. Not only do the rock and roll stylings of 'America, Fuck Yeah' highlight the difficulty of harnessing appropriate soft power sources, it again proves that in many cases, the sources of Nye's theory merely sanctify the more nationalistic aspects of American identity.

Although the entire song isn't played until *Team America's* end credits, this complete version signals the pervasive theme of a contrived reconciliation between American hard and soft power. It highlights how soft power, even at its best, is secondary to the more tangible resources of military and economic power. Stone and Parker's lines provide a litany of alternately attractive and repellent soft power sources, which are rapidly listed in lyrics that often only amount to single word nouns. The aggressive, patriotic delivery of the song nevertheless militarises and implies control over the otherwise anarchic character of these producers of soft power; given special recognition are 'books', 'the internet', and 'liberty', but also arguably less admirable slices of American life such as 'McDonalds', 'Wal-Mart', and 'porno'. The incongruity of these references, which is particularly compounded by the aggressive rock and roll soundtrack, creates a celebration of American hegemony bipartisan in character. Indeed, despite the disparate cultural resources mentioned, the song is a 'warts and all' celebration of America's virtue and sin, embodied in its simultaneous acknowledgement of historical crimes such as 'slavery' and praise towards the

contributions of 'immigrants', 'Democrats', and 'Republicans'. In this comprehensive paean to American hegemony, soft power is inextricably wedded to the imperium of American military and economic dominance, whitewashing a political history built on cognitive dissonance and moral hypocrisy.

Walter McDougall comments on these difficulties in regard to the United States's dissemination of Global Meliorism - he notes the danger of 'sermons about human rights, fair trade, the environment, and sexual and family issues' that 'only invite foreigners to remark on the poverty, crime, drugs, pornography, collapse of the family, inequality, and travesties of justice that characterise American society'.<sup>61</sup> In its celebration of American democracy imperialised, 'America, Fuck Yeah' possesses affinity with the hubristic nature of this vision, thus drawing soft power resources close to the militarised Global Meliorism portrayed in *Three Kings*. It also offers a wry reflection of McDougall's fear that America's hegemonic influence pervades the more sordid sides of its cultural life. The song personifies a national insouciance that has let both the liberal hedonism of cultural resources and hard power's militarism alienate the receivers of soft power.

Gary's infiltration of an Islamist cell in Egypt signals how his use of soft power is filtered through an unashamed perspective of American neocolonialism. This sequence begins with a tracking shot of Gary walking through an ascetic Middle Eastern market, a rendition of contemporaneous Cairo that is distinctly retrograde. Unlike in *Three Kings*, where the Arab subjects appeared as explicit emblems of Westernisation, the Egyptians don burqas and Islamic headdresses in a

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<sup>61</sup> McDougall, p. 209.

representation that is more redolent of Afghanistan than Egypt. Despite this difference, however, Gary displays the westernising perspective of *Three Kings's* central protagonists. A feverish Spaghetti Western soundtrack imperialises Gary's march towards the entrance of the Islamist cell's meeting. His attempt to gain entry is similarly infused by the ubiquity of American cultural resources - quizzed by a group of insurgents brandishing AK-47s, he uses his acting 'skills' to convince the men, which amount to little more than a successful repetition of faux Arabic words such as 'durka, durka, Muhammed, Jihad'.



Image 2: *Team America World Police's* Cairo set piece<sup>62</sup>

The zany juxtaposition of American popular culture with neo-imperialism that takes place here was portended by a *South Park* episode released by Parker and Stone in November 2001, entitled 'Osama bin Laden Has Farty Pants'. In the episode, the four *South Park* boys Cartman, Kyle, Stan and Kenny head to Afghanistan and find Osama

<sup>62</sup> Image can be found in Terri Schwartz, "TEAM AMERICA: WORLD POLICE" CAST AND PUPPETEERS REUNITE FOR LOS ANGELES ANIMATION FESTIVAL (n.d.), <http://www.ifc.com/2017/12/holiday-gift-guide-80s-movies>, [accessed 22 December 2017].

Bin Laden to be a slapstick figure only capable of repeating words such as ‘Durka’, ‘Burqa’, ‘Jihad’. The most notable part of the episode is a comical set piece in which Bin Laden is manipulated by Cartman into blowing himself up with dynamite, a cartoonish event that imitates the humour of Loony Tunes cartoons. Gary’s arrival inside the insurgents’ den offers a comparable projection of crude westernisation. The interior resembles the Mos Eisley cantina bar scene in the original *Star Wars* film (1977) and replicates the exact same jazz music used in that sequence (though the sole lyric of ‘jihad’ is this time added by an insurgent to punctuate the music). Although Iraq’s insurgents in *Three Kings* were viewed by Gates and his men as mystical arbiters of Western values, the perception here is far more decadent, as if the jihadists betray the same hedonistic foibles evinced in the ‘America, Fuck Yeah’ song. Members of the cell are shown drinking and enjoying the company of a belly dancer in clear displays of hypocrisy and cognitive dissonance. For all their anti-Americanism, it is as if they are inevitable imbibers of America’s hegemonic dominance, illustrating what Lloyd C. Gardner describes as an imperium where ‘no one lives outside of the empire’s power’, safeguarded by ‘a new military, one able to strike quickly with shock and awe any place in the world’.<sup>63</sup>

It is important to remember that *Team America* was released in 2004, a year when both presidential candidates George W Bush and John Kerry accepted the rationales for military intervention that had been established since the 9/11 attacks. A series of accusations made it necessary for Kerry to adhere to this consensus; attack advertisements from a veteran group named ‘Swift Boat Veterans for Truth’ publicly

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<sup>63</sup> Lloyd C. Gardner, ‘Present at the Culmination: An Empire of Righteousness?’, in *The New American Empire: A 21st Century Teach in on US Foreign Policy*, ed. by Lloyd C. Gardner and Marilyn B. Young (New York: W.W. Norton and Company Inc, 2005), pp. 1-31 (p. 27).

questioned Kerry's service in the Vietnam War, which he of course had attempted to harness for his presidential campaign.<sup>64</sup> Kerry accepted wholly the premises of the Iraq War. He bemoaned only that it was 'extraordinarily mismanaged and ineptly prosecuted' and that soldiers needed more 'preparation and hardware'.<sup>65</sup> This proved to Bacevich that 'mainstream politicians today take it as a given that American military supremacy is an unqualified good, evidence of a larger American superiority'.<sup>66</sup> For all Gary's employment of soft power, the *mise en scène* of the bar and his work for Team America illustrates his collusion with this bipartisan militarism.

The purest form of soft power in *Team America* is left to be incorporated by the Film Actors Guild (who, accentuating the film's uninhibited satire, call themselves by the acronym F.A.G.), a group of left wing Hollywood celebrities who seek to build a multilateral world free from American intervention. Their background mirrors what Ben Dickenson describes as a 'liberal crisis'<sup>67</sup> in Hollywood celebrity culture. This tension had begun with the neoliberal and unilateralist direction of the Clinton administration in the 1990s, yet had become apotheosised during the early stages of the War on Terror and the celebrity protests that followed in its wake. Reacting vociferously against the Bush administration's neoconservative agenda, an October 2002 speech by Tim Robbins castigated 'our fundamentalism', which was 'cloaked

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<sup>64</sup> Information on these ads is located at Nicholas D. Kristof, *A War Hero or a Phony?* (2004), <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/18/opinion/a-war-hero-or-a-phony.html> [accessed 13 March 2015].

<sup>65</sup> John Kerry, quoted in Bacevich, p. 15.

<sup>66</sup> Bacevich, p. 15.

<sup>67</sup> Ben Dickenson, *Hollywood's New Radicalism: War, Globalisation and the Movies from Reagan to George W. Bush* (New York City: I.B. Tauris, 2006), p. 75.

with patriotism and the claim to spread democracy around the world...the business of diverting attention from Enron and Halliburton'.<sup>68</sup>

In *Team America*, this animus against American intervention is first present in a news montage that introduces some of F.A.G.'s leading celebrity members. There is F.A.G. head Alec Baldwin, who speaks of presenting a world 'with compassion not violence'; the aforementioned Tim Robbins, who blames 'the corporations who financed Team America'; and most comically of all, Sean Penn, who provides an anecdote about a trip to pre-invasion Iraq. Echoing the controversial representation of pre-2003 Iraq in Michael Moore's documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Penn tells of 'flowery meadows, rainbow smiles and rivers made of chocolate where the children laughed and danced and played with gumdrop smiles'.

These Hollywood celebrities embrace what can only be defined as the constructivist dimensions of soft power. The nature of the constructivist approach was specified by Ted Hopf, who summarised a theoretical understanding of foreign policy that 'assumes selves, or identities, of states are a variable' and 'likely depend on historical, cultural, political, and social context'.<sup>69</sup> Constructivism seeks to transcend these factors by promulgating, in Kubalkova's words, 'a universal human experience' that 'leads to a very different understanding of states and states' relations'.<sup>70</sup> This makes foreign policy a product of 'individuals whose acts materially affect the world'

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<sup>68</sup> Tim Robbins, quoted in World Socialist Web Site, *New York to California: Tens of thousands in US rally against war in Iraq* (2002), <http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2002/10/demo-o07.html> [accessed 7 November 2014].

<sup>69</sup> Ted Hopf, 'The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory', *International Security*, Vol.23:1 (1998), pp. 171-200 (p. 176).

<sup>70</sup> Vendulka Kubalkova, 'Reconstructing the Discipline: Scholars as Agents', in *International Relations in a Constructed World*, ed. by Vendulka Kubalkova, Nicholas Onuf and Paul Kowert (Abingdon: Routledge, 1998), pp. 193-201 (p. 193).

rather than a government's self-interest or predilection for a particular political ideology.<sup>71</sup>

In divorcing soft power from other forms of state power and instead making themselves agents of the political process, F.A.G. offer a constructivist definition of Nye's theory that is averse to smart power's pragmatism. This is encapsulated in their plan to form an international advisory committee that can bring an end to the need for US intervention. In the grandiose Californian headquarters of the Film Actors Guild, Baldwin reveals his plan for the Film Actors Guild to be keynote speakers at an international peace conference headed by North Korean dictator Kim Jong-il, a decision that is greeted by members with collective applause. For all the uncompromising embrace of soft power's emphasis on 'institutions, values and culture'<sup>72</sup> here, the goals ironically resemble, in terms of grand ambition, the neoconservative agenda for democratising the Middle East. There is also, despite F.A.G.'s pacifist credentials, the compulsion to use violence. This contradiction is signalled in a puppet George Clooney's boast that 'we've all done action films...if anyone tries to get in our way, we'll show just how tough us actors really are'.

The climax of *Team America*, which takes place at the international peace conference in Kim Jong-il's palace, signals not just how F.A.G.'s monolithic form of soft power is a failure, but also how much of its purveyance of American liberal values can be seen to give inadvertent legitimacy to neoconservatism's democratising vision. After battling his way through a series of fanatical Hollywood celebrities, Gary arrives on a stage in front of the world's leaders. He interrupts Alec

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 194.

<sup>72</sup> Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, p. 8.

Baldwin to warn that the conference is a front for Kim Jong-il's grand plan to cause nuclear war, only for Baldwin to prompt boos and cries of anti-imperialist derision from the audience. What the centrist Walter Mead describes as the 'kaleidoscope of American foreign policy' is reflected in a speech delivered by Gary in response to Baldwin<sup>73</sup>:

*We're dicks! We're reckless, arrogant, stupid dicks. And the Film Actors Guild are pussies. And Kim Jong-il is an asshole. Pussies don't like dicks, because pussies get fucked by dicks. But dicks also fuck assholes - assholes who just want to shit on everything. Pussies may think they can deal with assholes their way, but the only thing that can fuck an asshole is a dick, with some balls. The problem with dicks is that sometimes they fuck too much, or fuck when it isn't appropriate - and it takes a pussy to show 'em that. But sometimes pussies get so full of shit that they become assholes themselves, because pussies are only an inch-and-a-half away from assholes. I don't know much in this crazy, crazy world, but I do know that if you don't let us fuck this asshole, we are going to have our dicks and our pussies all covered in shit.*

The scatological references here allegorise the various ideological differences that percolated International Relations debate in the post-9/11 era - there are the dicks, the neoconservative hawks willing to intervene pre-emptively at any cost; the pussies, purist soft power constructivists who favour multilateral institutions and wish to avoid war, instead preferring the pacific stances of America's Western

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<sup>73</sup> Mead, p. 30.

European allies; and the assholes, those pariah states who routinely flout international law. For all their differences, the dicks and pussies can collaborate over their shared preservation of America's partisan rivalries and democratic norms. The world leaders who applaud Gary's speech understand this dynamic, as do the rest of Team America, who are stunned by his oration.

The speech was lifted from a drunk met by Gary earlier in the picture and the crude, populist wisdom spouted here conveys a rambunctious celebration of American foreign policy's often sectional nature; Mead notes the 'influence of local and parochial perspectives in the foreign policy process'<sup>74</sup> and the 'dicks, pussies and assholes' speech is almost folksy in its ode to the US's political pluralism. In my view, Gary is making a hegemonic argument for American democracy as the best form of government, and a sensitive smart power as the best possible equilibrium for sustaining American influence and internal cohesion.

To James Gow, this speech reflects a 'Constructivist-Realist interpretation of International Relations, where security issues are defined by the intersubjective interaction of interests, ideas and values, gauged against necessity'.<sup>75</sup> Summarising Gow's opinion, Gary's speech reflects that 'interests and values need to be protected with force', a consensus ironically echoed by the Film Actors Guild, 'who begin as adherents of a liberal world order', but 'resort to violence in an attempt to block Team America's trying to stop Kim and his plot'.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>75</sup> James Gow, 'Team America World Police: Down-Home Theories of Power and Peace', *Millennium-Journal of International Studies*, Vol.34:2 (2006), pp. 563-568 (p. 567).

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 568.

In this sense, F.A.G.'s degeneration into violence is a warped, metropolitan mirror of the neoconservative aim to defend a liberal world order with unilateral military power. Both Gary's liberal background and his embrace of Team America reflect soft power's fundamentally adjunctive relationship with the hard power dimension of American hegemony. The final moments of *Team America*, which also see the group prevent nuclear war and Kim Jong-il impaled by a Pickelhaube, acknowledge the equilibrium that must take the place of F.A.G.'s fanatical form of soft power; Lisa admits her love for Gary by noting he had her 'at dicks, pussies and assholes' before the bombastic strains of 'America, Fuck Yeah' begin to play over the end credits, affirming that American military force and soft power resources will work in unison.

*Team America's* aversion to direct critiques of the War on Terror attracted disappointment from various critics. Roger Ebert opines that *Team America's* refusal to take an explicit political stance against the War on Terror pervaded 'nihilism'.<sup>77</sup> Picking up on comments from Stone and Parker that urged voters to 'stay home'<sup>78</sup> before the 2004 election, Ebert anthropomorphises *Team America* as a 'cocky teenager, who's had a couple of drinks before the party...they don't have a plan for who they want to offend, they just want to be as offensive as possible'.<sup>79</sup> This epitomised a cynical opportunity to 'sneer at both sides'.<sup>80</sup> Phillip French of *The Guardian* offers a less vituperative variation on this theme. He concedes the film was

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<sup>77</sup> Roger Ebert, *Team America: World Police* review (2004), <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/team-america-world-police-2004> [accessed 15 November 2004]

<sup>78</sup> Matt Stone and Trey Parker, quoted in Heather Havrilesky, *Puppet Masters* (2004), <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2004/oct/12/1> [accessed 19 November 2014].

<sup>79</sup> Ebert, *Team America: World Police* review.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

'hilarious', but wryly comments that 'the makers appear to let Bush pass 'go' and pick up two million votes'.<sup>81</sup>

Yet these reviews missed the crucial observations of *Team America's* narrative, namely its allegorisation of the bipartisan consensus surrounding intervention that had been reinforced in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, as well as the difficulty of employing soft power in the War on Terror era.<sup>82</sup>

These first two chapters have focused on the militarisation of American foreign policy that occurred in the late 1990s and early 2000s. They have detected these influences in two case studies that satirise a model of intervention based on a political centrism and an idealised synthesis of conflicting philosophies. The next series of chapters will be markedly different, examining the theme of contradiction in films released during George W Bush's second term, and identifying them with the backlash against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that occurred during this time. This will begin by exploring the deconstruction of neoconservative ideology in the Westerns *No Country for Old Men* and *There Will be Blood*.

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<sup>81</sup> Phillip French, *Team America: World Police* (2005), [https://www.theguardian.com/film/News/Story/Critic\\_Review/Observer\\_review/0,4267,1391354,00.html](https://www.theguardian.com/film/News/Story/Critic_Review/Observer_review/0,4267,1391354,00.html) [accessed 15 November 2014].

<sup>82</sup> A similar fatalism and failure on the part of the left to achieve a liberal alternative to intervention manifests itself in Chapter 4's analysis of *The Dark Knight*.

## CHAPTER 3:

### NEOCONSERVATISM AND NIHILISM: THE DECONSTRUCTION OF NEOLIBERAL OCCUPATION IN *NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN* AND *THERE WILL BE BLOOD*

In February 2006, famed pronouncer of the 'end of history'<sup>1</sup> and former neoconservative Francis Fukuyama lambasted the manner in which the Bush administration had departed from traditional conservative understandings of foreign policy. He described how an 'ambitious social engineering - which in earlier years had been applied mainly to domestic policies like affirmative action, busing and welfare', had become central to an 'American activism', where 'transformational uses of power had prevailed over the doubts about social engineering'.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter analyses two revisionist Westerns, directed by the Coen Brothers and Paul Thomas Anderson, which deconstruct the origins and contradictions of the neoconservatism that had grown antithetical to Fukuyama. Though Fukuyama implied that modern neoconservatism's failure derived from its propounding of a liberal Global Meliorism, these two films highlight this ideology's failure to have emerged from its export of neoliberal economics. *No Country for Old Men*, a sanguinary adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's 2005 novel, and *There Will be Blood*, a

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *After Neoconservatism* (2006), <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/19/magazine/after-neoconservatism.html> [accessed 5 May 2015]

febrile rendition of Upton Sinclair's 1927 work *Oil!*, provide narratives that scrutinise neoconservatism's ideological discrepancies. They delineate how its co-option of a liberal idealism sat incongruously with its simultaneous endorsement of the undiluted, raw competition of neoliberal ideology.

Both these pictures, released in 2007, coincided with an antipathy towards an ideological movement that had its ascent in the Reagan revolution of the early 1980s. Though much of its original adherents consisted of Democratic intellectuals previously wedded to the New Deal and liberal internationalism of Roosevelt and Truman, neoconservatism's power emerged in tandem with neoliberalism and its rejection of a liberal consensus that had governed the United States since the post-war era. Whilst neoliberalism prescribed what Marc Mulholland called a 'classically bourgeois vision of an unfettered commercial civil society', championed by 'Margaret Thatcher's Conservatives in 1979' and 'Ronald Reagan's Republicans in 1980'<sup>3</sup>, contemporaneous neoconservatives such as Jeanne Kirkpatrick applied these mores to foreign policy by urging the United States to maintain favourable relationships with authoritarian capitalist regimes. Arguing that 'traditional autocrats leave in place existing allocations of wealth, power, status and other resources,' Kirkpatrick propounded that Communist regimes could not be reformed because they 'claim jurisdiction over the whole life of the society and make demands for change that so violate internationalized values and habits that inhabitants flee by the tens of thousands'.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Mulholland, p. 254.

<sup>4</sup> Kirkpatrick, *Of Dictatorships and Double Standards*.

Neoconservatives continued to venerate the Reagan era long after the Cold War. Yet the 1990s saw a shift from defending pro-capitalist dictatorships to urging reform of what Mulholland called 'holdouts against free market democracy'.<sup>5</sup> The War on Terror, besides vaunting a doctrine based on pre-emptive war and democratisation of the Middle East, continued the imposition of neoliberal economics on pariah states. Toby Dodge notes this inculcation of neoliberalism during the Iraq War. He observes how 'neoliberalism shaped the reform agenda applied in the aftermath of regime change', a phenomenon attested to by the actions of Coalition Provisional Authority head Paul Bremer.<sup>6</sup> Bremer's privatisations of state owned enterprises and disbanding of Iraq's national army encapsulated the neoliberal disdain for 'an overbearing state using coercion to oppress its society'.<sup>7</sup>

Both *No Country for Old Men* and *There Will be Blood* allegorise this destructive attempt to create a market economy in Iraq. Moreover, both pictures respond to the conservative disillusionment with the Bush administration by presenting both neoliberalism and neoconservatism as indifferent to the Republican Party's blue-collar and evangelical constituencies.

The first section of this chapter explores the neoliberalism depicted in *No Country for Old Men*. I argue that the plot's focus on a search for drug money in West Texas, as well as its setting at the beginning of the Reagan era in 1980, convey the origins of a neoliberalism that would have nihilistic consequences when applied to the Middle East.

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<sup>5</sup> Mulholland, p. 277.

<sup>6</sup> Toby Dodge, 'The ideological roots of failure: the application of kinetic neoliberalism to Iraq', *International Affairs*, Vol.86:6 (2010), pp. 1269-1286 (p. 1276).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1281.

This is followed by the second section's focus on *There Will be Blood*, a film which provides an expansive allegory for neoconservative contradiction. I postulate that this Western critiques neoconservatism through its representation of central character Daniel Plainview and his attempt to transform a small town religious community, a narrative that resonates with the neo-imperialism of Paul Bremer's CPA. In both pictures, characters such as Sheriff Ed Tom Bell and preacher Eli Sunday fail to domesticate amoral market forces with the traditional institutions of the law and religion. These dichotomies show a discord between the export of a neoliberalism and the instincts of the Republican Party's traditional base. This further rejects Fukuyama's argument that neoconservatism's failure stemmed from its Wilsonian promotion of democratisation, instead implying overreach in its promotion of neoliberal economics.

### **3.1: *No Country for Old Men* and the anarchy of exporting neoliberalism**

The Coen Brothers open their screen adaptation of *No Country for Old Men* with a montage of wide-angle shots that depict the languid beauty of a West Texas dawn in 1980. Despite the possible affinity of the Sunbelt setting and year with the conservative realignment of Reagan's first election victory, a melancholic voiceover dispels any idea that a 'morning in America' is arriving for the denizens of this region.<sup>8</sup> Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, a man bemused by his own failure as a law enforcement officer, delivers a monologue that mourns the decline of small-town values in the

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<sup>8</sup> 'Morning in America' was a sentiment that summed up themes of economic and national renewal in a TV spot for Reagan's 1984 presidential campaign. This can be found in Ronald Reagan, *Ronald Reagan TV Ad: "It's morning in America again"* (2006), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EU-IBF8nwsY> [accessed 4<sup>th</sup> March 2016].

face of rising crime and delinquency. Whilst the camera remains focused on pastoral sites that include desert landscapes and sedate farms, Bell proceeds to delineate the changing conventions of his hometown. He begins by telling how he has held the job of sheriff since the age of twenty-five, after inheriting the role from a long line of fathers and grandfathers. The West Texas of 1980 however, contrasts with the earlier periods where 'some of the old time sheriffs never even wore a gun'. The crimes too, have escalated; after contemplating his length of time on the job, Bell morosely recounts the story of 'a boy he sent to the electric chair' for murdering a 14 year old girl. Though Bell mentions that the crime was categorised as 'a crime of passion', he pithily comments that, 'There was no passion to it'. He quotes the perpetrator, who perfunctorily stated that he had 'been planning to kill somebody for as long as he could remember' and 'was going to hell'.

Bell concludes this anecdote while the arrest of hitman Anton Chigurh occurs onscreen. Even though the antagonist's face is barely visible, the final lines of Bell's voiceover signal Chigurh's dangerous character - he confides to the viewer that the hired killer will commit violence, acknowledging, 'That the crime you see now, it's hard to even take its measure'.

At the same time as corroborating Bell's anxieties, Chigurh's presence is visually subversive, offering a dark alternative to Bell's reticent, 'small-c' conservatism. This is overt in Chigurh's appearance, which combines the rugged individualism of the traditional Western protagonist with the animus of foreign threat. Although McCarthy's novel rarely describes his physique or dress sense, the Coen Brothers use

the character's visual appearance to embody his layers of ideological contradictions.<sup>9</sup>

Chigurh's fashion sense, an odd combination of jean jacket with a mop top haircut, makes him appear preternaturally alien. This alien quality also stems from his unknown background and identity. A performance by Spanish actor Javier Bardem blurs the line between foreigner and American, contrasting the Vietnam veteran depicted in McCarthy's novel.<sup>10</sup>

To Ben Walters and J.M. Tyree in *Sight and Sound*, Chigurh's incongruous aesthetic posed as 'an interrogation of American manhood' and served to 'lampoon the frontier ethos of the Reaganite cowboy man'.<sup>11</sup> By combining Reaganite imagery with moments of disinhibited violence, Chigurh offers a perverse mirror to the foreign policy context of the late 2000s. A series of mercurial murders underlines this allegorical meaning.

The first execution by Chigurh occurs in a Texan police station. Before the killing, a medium shot foregrounds the young officer who arrested Chigurh. The officer, who talks on the phone with his superior officer, is unaware of Chigurh approaching from behind. Interrupting the conversation, Chigurh places his handcuffs around the police officer's neck and drags him to the floor. His facial expression becomes maniacal as he strangles and cuts the officer's neck with the jagged chain that

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<sup>9</sup> Visual details regarding Chigurh (and other characters) only occur when directly relevant to the narrative in the novel. When it is established Chigurh is in police custody, McCarthy mentions his 'manacled hands behind him', but specifies no other visual characteristics. Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men* (London: Picador, 2005), p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> In the novel, Chigurh's experience of Vietnam is implied by the veteran and hitman Carson Wells in *ibid.*, p. 153. He relates his Vietnam experience to major character Llewellyn Moss (also a Vietnam vet) and summarises Chigurh as someone with 'principles that transcend money or drugs or anything like that'. Although Wells could be talking about collaborating with Chigurh in the contract killing business, the conversation is suffused with the traumatic memory of Vietnam. Chigurh's Vietnam background is less implicit in the film, where Bardem's performance overshadows these allusions.

<sup>11</sup> Ben Walters and J.M. Tyree, *Cash and Carion: Film of the Month: No Country for Old Men* (2011), <http://old.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/review/4192> [accessed 7 May 2015].

connects the handcuffs, causing a pool of blood to soak the floor beneath them. The murder's fanatical nature associates the character with the sectarian violence occurring in civil war plagued, post-occupation Iraq. Yet Chigurh's killing also appears invocative of his rugged individualist identity, embodying a survivalist capitalism that distrusts traditional authority and state regulation.

This ideological ambiguity continues in Chigurh's second murder. After exiting the police station, Chigurh finds a vehicle to escape the crime scene and comes across a lone driver. Treating the local man as if he were part of a herd of cattle due for meat processing, Chigurh produces a cattle gun and uses it to murder the individual with a clinical shot to the head, moving from fanatical violence to a display of raw, brute capitalist efficiency. The fact that air and thus the very same oxygen that gave the man life powers the cattle gun makes Chigurh commodify mere existence, giving this murder a strange undertone of privatisation. His threat is existential and places the landscape of West Texas under a lethal form of market logic.

Several academic critics of both the novel and film adaptation of *No Country for Old Men* have viewed Chigurh as a kind of harbinger for the neoliberalism soon to be institutionalised by the Reagan administration. These specific readings have been prominent in interpretations of the novel. To Dierdra Reber, Chigurh's cattle gun functions as 'a metaphor for capitalist culture', that represented its 'central and reigning logic'.<sup>12</sup> Raymond Malewitz speaks of Chigurh's use of both the handcuffs and cattle gun as a model of capitalist ingenuity, interpreting a metaphor for 'an individual strategy for working class survival in an era of disappearing social safety

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<sup>12</sup> Dierdra Reber, *Coming to Our Senses: Affect an Order of Things for Global Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), pp. 157-158.

nets'.<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Elmore and Rich Elmore draw parallels between Chigurh's murderous treatment of the Texan locals and Foucault's understanding of a neoliberalism that framed 'human interactions as economic choices, choices about how to use one's limited resources to achieve one's desired ends'.<sup>14</sup>

Despite absencing neoliberalism from his discussion of Chigurh's identity, Enda McCaffrey's philosophical analysis resonates with the character's moving between fervent criminal and solipsistic individualist. To McCaffrey, Chigurh juxtaposes 'crimes of passion with gratuitous murder', 'making his gratuitous actions appear paradoxically to involve some form of underlying passion'.<sup>15</sup> Bell's story of the wilful young man sent to the electric chair seems to portend this fusion. Akin to the man's murder of the fourteen-year-old girl, Chigurh's improvised killing and escape from the police station gives the impression of lurid mania. Yet this initial image disguises the reality that he is, like the young man, ultimately passionless, a soullessness purveyed in the gratuitous cattle gun killing and its subjection of the lone Texan driver to a raw cost benefit analysis.

The amorphous, seemingly ubiquitous threat that Chigurh makes neoliberalism is evident in sections of McCarthy's novel occluded from the screen adaptation.

Though in the novel, Bell chastises abortion and the derision of 'rednecks' by Texan

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<sup>13</sup> Raymond Malewitz, *The Practice of Misuse: Rugged Consumerism in Contemporary American Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), p. 164.

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Elmore and Rich Elmore, 'Human Become Coin: Neoliberalism, Anthropology, and Human Possibilities in *No Country for Old Men*', *Cormac McCarthy Journal*, Vol.14:2 (2016), pp. 168-185 (p. 169).

<sup>15</sup> Enda McCaffrey, 'Crimes of Passion, Freedom and a Clash of Sartrean Moralities in the Coen Brothers', in *Existentialism and Contemporary Cinema: A Sartrean Perspective*, ed. by Jean-Pierre Boule and Enda McCaffrey (New York City: Berghahn Books, 2011), pp. 125-143 (p. 128).

liberals<sup>16</sup> (a socially conservative dimension of his character interestingly absent in the film adaptation), he conveys disdain for the rapid pace of technological and economic change engulfing 1980 America. Bell admits to fearing the impact of a trans-border gun trade that allows Mexican gangs to copy the police's 'new technology', which 'comes into our hands, comes into theirs too'.<sup>17</sup> He later briefly recounts his experience of attending college under the GI bill of the mid 1940s, a time that contrasts favourably with 'the hell in a handbasket' world of 1980, embodied in the litany of 'rape, arson, murder' and 'drugs'<sup>18</sup> that corrode the Texan landscape.

The cinematic adaptation of McCarthy's novel encodes neoliberalism's damage through the aesthetic and thematic properties of the revisionist Western. According to Michael Coyne, this kind of Western undercut the conventional mores of genre archetypes that 'sanctified territorial expansion, justified dispossession of the Indians, fuelled nostalgia for a largely mythical past, exalted self-reliance and posited violence as the main solution to personal and societal problems'.<sup>19</sup> This revisionism is prevalent in Bell, a man fearful of a new capitalist culture that vitiates the more old-fashioned frontier codes of honour and community. Although the Coen Brothers did not specify an explicit political subtext to *No Country for Old Men*, its revisionist Western elements make it rich in symbolism. It shares this characteristic with a plethora of other revisionist Westerns released in 2007. Though not all of them deal

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<sup>16</sup> McCarthy, pp. 195-196.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>19</sup> Coyne, *The Crowded Prairie*, p. 3.

with the theme of neoliberalism, they share *No Country for Old Men's* deconstruction of the Western's traditional American exceptionalist mythos.

Andrew Dominik's *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* lampooned the democratic populism of the American West by representing famed outlaw Jesse James as a withdrawn depressive whose exploits proved to be largely fraudulent or nefarious. James Mangold's remake of the 1957 Western *3:10 to Yuma* focused on a captured outlaw and the Stockholm syndrome he displayed for his rancher captor, a state of trauma that undermined the liberating promise of the frontier. As will be underlined in the next section, Paul Thomas Anderson's *There Will be Blood* portrays an avaricious brand of manifest destiny that allegorised the neoliberal motivations for the Iraq occupation. A number of academics connect the cynical nature of these pictures to a litany of failures associated with the Bush administration in its second term. In these readings, the associations primarily focus on the tumultuous reconstructions of Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet they also invoke the neoliberal economic policies that the Bush administration sought to export in these interventions and that domestically, led to the economic collapse of 2008.

Dina Smith describes this series of Westerns as having 'moved beyond simple revision.... Suffering from an Oedipal crisis that gets narrativised in stories about impotence, failure and dying fathers', a thematic focus that results in 'displaced allegories for a failed war and administration'.<sup>20</sup> To Douglas Kellner, *No Country for Old Men* and *There Will be Blood* preoccupy themselves with 'the destructive effects

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<sup>20</sup> Dina Smith, '2007: Movies and the Art of Living Dangerously', in *American Cinema of the 2000s: Themes and Variations*, ed. by Timothy Corrigan (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2012), pp. 172-193 (p. 173).

of greed and predatory capitalism', compounded by an evil grounded 'in a remorseless nature and fallen human beings'.<sup>21</sup> Stacey Takacs sees evidence of foreign policy allegory in American TV during the 2000s through examining feminist journalist and author Susan Faludi's notion of a paternalistic 'terror dream' in post-9/11 American life.<sup>22</sup> Takacs argues that this patriarchal state of mind, which 'gripped the United States in the wake of 9/11' and 'took the peculiar form of a Wild West fantasy of frontier violence, captivity, and rescue', became central to television Westerns *Saving Jessica Lynch* (2003) and *Deadwood* (2004-2006).<sup>23</sup>

Whilst having different political orientations, both these productions captured the anxieties regnant in the terror dream. *Saving Jessica Lynch* 'used Western imagery to frame the invasion of Iraq as a defensive struggle to rescue civilization from savagery'.<sup>24</sup> *Deadwood*, contrastingly, 'used Western conventions to interrogate the logics of Manichean morality and militarised heroism underwriting the Bush administration's turn to war' and present an 'anti-heroic depiction of life on the frontier'.<sup>25</sup>

These seemingly disparate themes of a hubristic American capitalism, fallen patriarchy, and radical visions of post-9/11 intervention can be contextualised by delineating a foreign policy culture that had attempted to harness and export neoliberalism. The 1990s decade, besides showing evidence of a liberal

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<sup>21</sup> Kellner, *Cinema Wars*, p. 15.

<sup>22</sup> Susan Faludi, quoted in Stacy Takacs, 'The Contemporary Politics of the Western Form: Bush, *Saving Jessica Lynch*, and *Deadwood*', in *Reframing 9/11: Film, Popular Culture and the "War on Terror"*, ed. by Jeff Birkenstein, Anna Froula, and Karen Randell (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), pp. 153-166 (p. 153).

<sup>23</sup> Takacs, p. 153.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

interventionist and neoconservative drift towards unilateralism, saw the neoliberalism implemented in domestic policy by the Reagan administration become central to America's outlook in world affairs. The Defence Planning Guidance of 1992, authored by then Undersecretary of Defence Paul Wolfowitz and deputy Scooter Libby, stipulated the primacy of America's economic hegemony in foreign policy. This document stressed the need to 'prevent the re-emergence of a new rival', through stopping 'any hostile power from dominating a region whose resources would, under consolidated control, be sufficient to generate global power'.<sup>26</sup> In an overt championing of both political and economic unipolarity, the document further sought to mollify 'the interests of the advanced industrialized nations', so the United States could 'discourage them from challenging our leadership or seeking to overturn the established political and economic order'.<sup>27</sup>

A foreign policy geared towards neoliberal economic orthodoxy would prevent rival power centres to American hegemony. These ideas could be disseminated through the championing of regime change against illiberal pariah states. The neoconservative think-tank Project for a New American Century co-opted the Wilsonian idealism that had been integral to the liberal internationalism of FDR and Truman by calling for 'a foreign policy that boldly and purposefully promotes

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<sup>26</sup> *The New York Times*, *Excerpts from Pentagon's Plan: 'Prevent the Reemergence of a New Rival'* (n.d.), <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/03/08/world/excerpts-from-pentagon-s-plan-prevent-the-re-emergence-of-a-new-rival.html?pagewanted=all> [accessed 15 May 2015].

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

American policies abroad' and 'national leadership that accepts the United States's global responsibilities'.<sup>28</sup>

The employment of these combinations was integral to the military interventions pursued by the Clinton administration in the 1990s. To Tony Smith, the post-1989 windfall gave birth to a neoliberalism applied to international relations. He refers to the 'fresh conviction' caused by the 'apparent success of economic globalization, bringing with it the rise of an international middle class, growing prosperity, the increased independence of peoples, and the spread of agreements that required a rules-based order domestically as well as internationally'.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the United States departed from a mere 'liberal internationalist hegemonism' and 'entered a new phase of thinking best labeled *progressive imperialism*'.<sup>30</sup> Thomas McCormick further elucidates a connection between 'the economic defence of American hegemony' (embodied in the ratification of NAFTA and a primary focus on economic matters) in Clinton's first term and 'the beginnings of militarization' that took place in his second, secured in the 'expansion of NATO' and 'war with Yugoslavia (Serbia) over Kosovo'.<sup>31</sup>

These actions were tentative, however, compared to the more ideologically aggressive policies attempted by the Bush administration in the aftermath of 9/11, which were less focused on spreading the bromides of globalisation than auguring a

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<sup>28</sup> RRojas databank, *PNAC - Statement of Principles* (1997), <http://www.rrojasdatabank.info/pfpc/PNAC---statement%20of%20principles.pdf> [accessed: 17 May 2015].

<sup>29</sup> Smith, 'Wilsonianism after Iraq: The End of Liberal Internationalism?', p. 71.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas McCormick, 'American Hegemony and European Autonomy, 1989-2003: One Framework for Understanding the War in Iraq', in *The New American Empire: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Teach in On US Foreign Policy*, pp. 75-112 (pp. 87-91).

dramatic change in economic, cultural, and political mores within the Middle East. This effort, emblematised in the Bush administration's occupation of Iraq, came to represent both the apex and defeat of neoliberalism as an underlying rubric for an interventionist foreign policy. The governance of CPA head Paul Bremer, who imposed a series of privatisations of Iraq's formerly state owned industries, led to an economic climate where unemployment rose to over 50% and Iraqi civil servants and soldiers were left penurious. George Packer describes the deleterious effect of this situation, where 'thirty-five thousand mostly Sunni employees of the bureaucracy, including thousands of schoolteachers and midlevel functionaries, lost their jobs overnight', damaging the efforts of 'American officials who had begun establishing relations with Iraqis in the ministries and other offices'.<sup>32</sup> Patrick Cockburn further notes how 'the US administrative apparatus was more incompetent, bureaucratic, corrupt and divided than most Iraqis imagined...Ignorant of the growing hatred of the occupation and the beginning of armed resistance they did not see that they had no time to waste'.<sup>33</sup>

By the time of Bush's second term in 2005, plunging approval ratings signalled the administration's negligence at home and abroad. Perceptions of inertia stemmed from its inability to solve the civil war between Sunni and Shia in Iraq, an embarrassing mishandling of social security reform, and the belated response to the Hurricane Katrina disaster in New Orleans.<sup>34</sup> In a sign that the administration was questioning its own neoconservative foreign policies, Bush decided to form the Iraq

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<sup>32</sup> This information is located in Packer, *The Assassins Gate: America in Iraq*, p. 191.

<sup>33</sup> Patrick Cockburn, *The Occupation: War and Resistance in Iraq* (London: Verso, 2006), pp. 85-86.

<sup>34</sup> This information is located in Dan Balz, 'Bush's Ambitious Second-Term Agenda Hits Reality', in *Second-Term Blues: How George W. Bush has Governed*, ed. by John C. Fortier and Norman J. Ornstein (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2007), pp. 17-38 (p. 35).

Study Group in June 2006, a bipartisan commission that included realist members from father George H.W. Bush's administration. The commission, which included former Secretary of State James Baker and Reagan era Attorney General Edwin Meese, produced a report that rejected the neoconservative pursuit of reconstruction and occupation, instead arguing, 'All combat brigades necessary for force protection should be out of Iraq'.<sup>35</sup>

Peggy Noonan, a reporter for the Wall Street Journal, thought that the Iraq Study Group's influence was pervasive during the farewell address of the younger Bush family scion and outgoing governor of Florida Jeb Bush in December 2006. She speculated that the sight of a crying George H.W. Bush at the ceremony had roots in the failures of his older son, whose decision to invade Iraq made him wrong 'in the great decision of his presidency' and 'was now suffering a defeat made clear by the report'.<sup>36</sup>

Clearly, this political disarray inspired a high degree of dramatic conjecture.

Analysing *No Country for Old Men* against this context makes it easier to see why Film Studies academics such as Kellner, Smith, and Takacs draw thematic associations between the new plethora of revisionist Westerns and the policy failures thought to be enveloping the Bush administration in the late 2000s.

Malewitz comments on this quality concerning McCarthy's novel, noting how the 1980 setting served to explain 'the more exaggerated conditions of post 9/11

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<sup>35</sup> Bob Woodward, *The War Within: A Secret White House History: 2006-2008* (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2009), p. 251.

<sup>36</sup> Peggy Noonan, *A Father's Tears* (2006), <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB116560985458844878> [accessed 11 May 2015].

neoliberalism by returning to its primal scene'.<sup>37</sup> In translating this setting into visual images of despair and nihilism, the film adaptation of *No Country for Old Men* creates contradiction between modern neoconservatism's idealistic propounding of democratisation and a Social Darwinism incarnate at the beginning of the Reagan era. Indeed, Bell's misery towards the greed he sees dissents from the modern neoconservative belief in the potential of American democracy and economics to rehabilitate damaged societies. His reticence offers what John Cant interpreted as 'a mythoclastic assault on America's exceptionalist vision of itself', a view heightened in resonance because 'his vision of humanity as irredeemably "fallen" is, of course, conservative in the older sense of that much contested word'.<sup>38</sup>

To relate back to Fukuyama's anger towards what he considers to be an idealised, capitalistic social engineering, the despondency of Bell seems to be fundamentally realist in character. Although Robert Jarrett posits that the sheriff's wistfulness is symptomatic of a 'democratic idealism', I believe Bell's melancholy embodies the understanding of a society grounded in ruthless self-interest.<sup>39</sup> This self-interest is of course pervasive to Chigurh's character, whose solipsism contravenes the activist tone Fukuyama so excoriated in his 2006 article. In his blend of deracinated entrepreneur with foreign mercenary, Chigurh connects the early Reagan era's culture of capitalistic individualism with America's War on Terror malaise.

Conversely, Chigurh's incongruity within this Western setting also makes it plausible to view his role as that of a Frankenstein's monster of neoliberalism, whose ghostly

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<sup>37</sup> Malewitz, p. 163.

<sup>38</sup> John Cant, *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), p. 239.

<sup>39</sup> Robert Jarrett, 'Genre, Voice, and Ethos: McCarthy's Perverse Thriller', in *From Novel to Film: No Country for Old Men*, ed. by Lynnea Chapman King, Rick Wallach, and Jim Welsh (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2009), pp. 60-72 (p. 69.)

associations with the failed regime changes of the 2000s haunts and renders ironic the right wing *annus mirabilis* of Reagan's election victory.

The causal links between the 'realigning' election year of 1980 and the military interventions of the Bush years are evoked by Bacevich's work in *The New American Militarism: How Americans are Seduced by War* (2005). He describes 1980 as a year of 'neoconservative lore', 'when the nation decisively turned things around', embodied in how 'Americans elevated to the presidency a man who gave every sign of sharing the neocon sense of deepening peril requiring drastic remedial action...a leader able to lift the United States out of its slough of post-Vietnam despond'.<sup>40</sup> The neoconservative vision of the early 1980s as a time of Wilsonian renewal is disseminated by the International Relations historian Tony Smith, who posits, 'No administration since the presidency of Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921) has been so committed to the tenets of liberal democratic internationalism as that of Ronald Reagan'.<sup>41</sup> Yet such analysis ignores the fact that Reagan's generation of neoconservatives largely avoided the idealistic policies of nation building later seen in the theatres of Iraq and Afghanistan. This dissonance is specified in Halper and Clarke's book *America Alone: The Neo-Conservatives and the Global Order* (2004), which delineates the journey of neoconservative thinking into 'an unlikely mating of humanitarian liberalism and brute force'.<sup>42</sup> This shift ignored the 'pragmatist' nature of much of Reagan's foreign policy.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Bacevich, p. 78.

<sup>41</sup> Tony Smith, quoted in Ambrosius, p. 177.

<sup>42</sup> Halper and Clarke, p. 181.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

Akin to Halper and Clarke's argument, *No Country for Old Men* refutes modern neoconservatism's ahistorical view of 1980 as a right wing reconfiguration of Wilsonian idealism. The cynical tone of the revisionist Western signals this rejection. In my first chapter on *Three Kings*, I argued that the Karbala sequence's revisionist Western elements helped underscore the failure of George H.W. Bush's New World Order, and more central to its 1999 release, the broader array of dilemmas that confronted the Clinton administration. Similarly, in its revisionist Western style painting of the Sunbelt west at the dawn of the Reagan and neoliberal era as a time of greed, malaise, and decline, *No Country for Old Men's* debt to this sub-genre comments on the contradictory status of America's position in world affairs towards the end of the Bush years. This commentary is further visible in how Anton Chigurh signals the damaging effects of neoliberalism in both domestic and foreign policy. Comparing the character to a similarly amoral protagonist in Clint Eastwood's Vietnam era revisionist Western *High Plains Drifter* (1973) can illustrate how the revisionist Western, particularly in its Vietnam era form, provides precedent for the multi-faceted allegory presented by the Coen Brothers.

Eastwood's film revolves around an unnamed male stranger, the 'high plains drifter', and his violation of Western norms in the somnambulant mining town of Lago. Like Chigurh's encapsulation of a neoliberalism zealously applied to Iraqi institutions, the drifter possesses allegoric qualities associated with the anarchic consequences of US foreign policy in Vietnam. Akin to Chigurh's actions in the opening scenes, his first acts are violently transgressive - he kills three men from Lago who insult him and then rapes a townswoman who denies him the respect he thinks he deserves. Yet

the drifter's criminal position completely changes when he is given the task of defending Lago from bandits by the town's mayor, a responsibility he uses to create chaos. In several key scenes, the drifter gives weapons to the most irresponsible members of the town and creates a campaign of subversion by ordering that every building in Lago be painted blood red, including the sacred site of Lago's church. To Stephen McVeigh, the drifter's actions were emblematic of a political allegory - McVeigh comments on how the drifter 'acts like a military advisor', in 'scenes acting as a parody of the initial American involvement in Vietnam'.<sup>44</sup> In McVeigh's reading, this allegoric connection between the stranger and Vietnam becomes clear in the film's final moments, where a climatic battle destroys the town. Quoting Major Chester L. Brown's infamous line that 'it became necessary to destroy the town in order to save it', McVeigh postulates that this aphorism 'resonates with the drifter's actions', which evoke 'the destruction of the village in Ben Tre'.<sup>45</sup>

Chigurh similarly alters Western conventions in a way that suggests American individualism operating at its most psychopathic. Besides making existence a mere commodity, much of Chigurh's actions imply connection with American transgressions abroad - the holding cell location of his first murder appears redolent of the abuse that took place in the Abu Ghraib prison site. One can relate his violent disruption of Bell's longing for a peaceful, gun free past to the perverse desires of the neoconservatives galvanised in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, who,

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<sup>44</sup> Stephen McVeigh, *American Western* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p 186.

<sup>45</sup> McVeigh's quoting of Brown and his subsequent analysis of *High Plains Drifter* is located in *ibid.*, p. 190.

according to David Hoogland Noon, saw 'an existential conflict whose stakes involved the very survival of democracy'.<sup>46</sup>

At the same time as alluding to these infractions, both the drifter and Chigurh's contradictions draw attention to the unintended consequences of US foreign policy. In *High Plains Drifter*, not only does Clint Eastwood's laconic protagonist militarise Lago, he also viciously subverts the small town's conservative social mores by sleeping with a hotel owner's wife, literally painting the town red and desecrating the town's church. Though these actions could allude to the damage wrought to Vietnamese society by the US military presence, they are ironically countercultural in their anarchy, drawing connection between the drifter's nihilism and the anti-war riots prompted by the Vietnam conflict. Similarly, the entrepreneurial avenging angel Chigurh is resonant for an America exhausted by the Iraq occupation. His contradictory persona delineates the neoliberal mores that resulted in Islamist insurgency. These strange undercurrents of ideological schizophrenia have been integral to various characterisations in this thesis, such as Said's simultaneous flaunting of American cultural globalisation and anger towards the US bombing campaign in the first Gulf War, as well as the militant pacifism of F.A.G. in *Team America: World Police*. The multifaceted nature of allegory will further be present in the next chapter's discussion of the superhero picture *The Dark Knight*, where villain The Joker reflects both the ideological changes to US foreign policy created by 9/11 and the terrorism employed by insurgent groups in Iraq.

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<sup>46</sup> David Hoogland Noon, 'Cold War Revival: Neoconservatives and Historical Memory in the War on Terror', *American Studies*, Vol.48:3 (Fall 2007), pp. 75-99 (p. 83).

Not merely character, but also setting, creates allegories that are dualistic in purpose and that provide overture to the crises of the modern *zeitgeist*. In chapter one, I related *The Wild Bunch's* allegorical dilemma of choosing between Mapache (South Vietnam's Diem) and the Mexican peasants (the North Vietnamese) to the dilemmas of *Three Kings's* Karbala set piece. In many ways, *The Wild Bunch*, though attuned to the cultural and political shocks of the 1960s, offers comparable images to *No Country for Old Men*, particularly in its evocation of nihilism in both America's domestic life and its neo-imperialism. In an early moment in *The Wild Bunch*, Bishop and his men briefly view a group of children watching two large scorpions battle with a colony of red ants, a moment that can be interpreted as microcosmic of the violence appearing on American screens during the Vietnam War of the late 1960s. What makes the allegoric imagery further expansive is the dramatic bank robbery that follows this scene, which shows Bishop and his men rob a group of progressive era evangelicals and industrialists. To Slotkin, the dynamic of this robbery functions as an allegory for both the foreign and domestic policy dilemmas faced by the United States in the late 1960s by being emblematic of the 'urban battles of Tet, and of Detroit and Newark'.<sup>47</sup> Judged in a similar light, the ant and scorpion fight is observational of a militaristic complicity in nihilistic violence, but also allegoric of the change in cultural mores that occurred during the late 1960s, a shift embodied in the children's unadulterated enjoyment of the violent, transgressive spectacle. After the carnage of the robbery, Peckinpah uses a close-up to revisit the now immolated ant nest, an image evocative of this nihilism engulfing both US domestic and foreign policy.

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<sup>47</sup> Slotkin, p. 598.

Whereas Bishop's rebellion against the morality of the Progressive era clearly functions as an overture to the cultural watersheds and catharsis of the late 1960s, the Coen Brothers's deconstruction of a 1980 conservative realignment indicates acute resonance with the imperial overstretch of 2007 America. A comparable overture to the problems confronting American foreign policy is present in the introduction of Llewellyn Moss, a welder and Vietnam veteran whose discovery of drug money properly begins the film's storyline and allegorises the bipartisan allure of neoliberalism's promise. Judged against the fatherly Bell's more staid, cautious style of conservatism, the younger Moss is the wayward son whose Reagan Democrat identity mirrors neoliberalism's domestic appeal, forming with Chigurh and Bell a triumvirate of differing political reactions to this ideology.

The first image of Moss appears directly after Chigurh's first murders, and consists of a prolonged close-up shot depicting the veteran peering through the scope of a hunting rifle. Moss, in his Vietnam veteran identity and rancher garb, resembles an emblem of a blue-collar, Jacksonian America. He embodies the theory's domestic as well as wartime traits, personifying the ethos of what Walter Mead classifies as a 'folk community', bound by 'an honor driven egalitarianism and fiery nationalism'.<sup>48</sup> It is worth contextualising the Jacksonian animus in relation to *No Country for Old Men's* 1980 set political allegory. Tough-minded and unsentimental Jacksonian ideals of patriotism and blue-collar populism enabled support for Reaganism, and the consequent vicissitudes of neoliberalism, from the traditionally Democratic working class. Joanne Moarreale notes the Jacksonian support for Reagan's domestic policies

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<sup>48</sup> Walter Russell Mead, *Andrew Jackson, Revenant* (2016), <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2016/01/17/andrew-jackson-revenant/> [accessed 20 January 2016].

that emerged from ‘the populist themes’ of Reagan’s first presidential campaign and its vision ‘of a struggle between the common man and powerful interests that threaten to encroach upon the individual’.<sup>49</sup> It also enabled support for Reagan’s foreign policy, which promised an analogous struggle against the Soviet Union and what Laurence French and Magdaleno Manzanarez calls the ‘Jacksonian-like extra-legal methods’ used to support insurgencies in El Salvador and Nicaragua.<sup>50</sup>

In the aftermath of 9/11, the Bush administration sought support from Jacksonian America for a more grandiose agenda of pre-emptive war and democracy promotion in the Middle East. Simultaneously at home, Republican proponents of neoliberalism rationalised a housing bubble that would have dark implications for blue-collar America.<sup>51</sup> The consequences of both these forces would eventually repel the Bush administration’s Jacksonian constituents. In terms of neoconservatism, Mead notes how a schism was enshrined in Jacksonian America’s rejection of the Iraq War’s status as a ‘Wilsonian nation-building project’, along with its concomitant withdrawal of support for the conflict’s ambition to ‘restore peace and security to the United States’ and end ‘serious threats to America’.<sup>52</sup> This coalition received scrutiny in Fukuyama’s 2006 book *After the Neocons: America at the Crossroads* (2006), which specifies the ‘alliance of neoconservatives and Jacksonian nationalists, who for

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<sup>49</sup> Joanne Morreale, *A New Beginning: A Textual Frame Analysis of the Political Campaign Film* (Albany, New York: The State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 41.

<sup>50</sup> Laurence French & Magdaleno Manzanarez, *NAFTA and Neocolonialism: Comparative Criminal, Human & Social Justice*, (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2004), p. 126.

<sup>51</sup> The insouciant attitudes towards the housing bubble pervaded by former Chairman of the Federal Reserve Alan Greenspan and head of President Bush’s Council of Economic Advisors Ben Bernanke are detailed in Jean Edward Smith, *Bush* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016), pp. 608-609.

<sup>52</sup> Walter Russell Mead, ‘The American Perspective on Global Order’, in *Still a Western World? Continuity and Change in Global Order*, ed. by Sergio Fabbrini and Raffaele Marchetti (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), pp. 59-70 (pp. 61-62).

different reasons accepted the logic of regime change in Baghdad'.<sup>53</sup> The disaffection of this group became clear in an overambitious occupation that alienated 'red-state Americans whose sons and daughters are the ones fighting and dying in the Middle East' through pushing them 'back toward a more isolationist foreign policy'.<sup>54</sup>

The bank bailouts of the late 2000s only compounded this dissatisfaction.<sup>55</sup> To John R. Bartle, Bush's Republican Party had drifted away from the 'limited government spending and taxation' of the Reagan era.<sup>56</sup> The formation of the populist Tea Party during the Obama years provided a platform against this apostasy, attacking what Mead calls the 'recent Republican adventurism' of the Bush years.<sup>57</sup> This Jacksonian de-coupling from both neoliberalism and neoconservatism has had its most recent apotheosis in Donald Trump's presidential campaign, which repudiated a 'globalist' agenda of free trade and intervention abroad.

Moss's Reagan Democrat and Jacksonian image creates an interrogation of the contradictory sources of support behind the modern neoconservative coalition. Indeed, his discovery of the site of a botched drug deal indicates a collision between the interests of the Jacksonian and the unintended consequences of neoconservatism's neoliberal dimension. The crime scene connotes the avarice and indiscriminate violence that has so far been thematically explicit. Yet beyond its

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<sup>53</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *After the Neocons: America at the Crossroads* (London: Profile Books, 2006), pp. 7-8.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>55</sup> This dissatisfaction was illustrated by the Wall Street Journal writer William Galston, whose article 'The Tea Party and the GOP crackup' outlined 'the wedge between corporate America and the Republican Party that emerged during the late Bush and early Obama years: William Galston, *The Tea Party and the GOP Crackup* (2013), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/galston-the-tea-party-and-the-gop-crackup-1381877495> [accessed 27 January 2016].

<sup>56</sup> John R. Bartle, 'Tea Parties, Whigs and Compromise: The Historical Roots of US Government-Business Relations', *International Journal of Organization Theory and Behaviour*, Vol.13:3 (2010), pp. 342-353 (p. 347).

<sup>57</sup> Mead, 'The American Perspective on Global Order', pp. 66-67.

indictment of an early 1980s greed, the carnage of the site functions as an overture to the dysphoria of the post-9/11 era. The internecine warfare between Sunni and Shia occurring in the mid-2000s is encapsulated in close-ups of the deceased, bloodied Mexican drug dealers that Moss towers over. To Jim Welsh, who also visualises a War on Terror subtext in the carnage of the *mise en scène*, these images ‘fit the murderous wastelands of Iraq or Afghanistan’, and more broadly indicated an ‘allegory concerning the murderous anxieties consequent upon terrorism and Neocon America’.<sup>58</sup>



Image 3: Moss discovers a botched drug deal in *No Country for Old Men*<sup>59</sup>

Moss’s theft of abandoned drug money associates the rise of this miasma with the origins of neoliberal economic practices. It captures the spirit of what David Harvey calls ‘accumulation through dispossession’, a set of actions that underline the ‘primitive’ nature of modern capitalism.<sup>60</sup> Harvey describes this as resplendent throughout eras of market liberalisation, including ‘the commodification and privatization of land and the forceful expulsion of peasant populations’ seen in

<sup>58</sup> Jim Welsh, ‘Borderline Evil: The Dark Side of Byzantium in *No Country for Old Men*, Novel and Film’, in *From Novel to Film: No Country for Old Men*, pp. 73-85 (p. 77).

<sup>59</sup> Image located in IMDCB: Internet Movie Cars Database, *1988 Dodge Ram Forum* (n.d.), [http://www.imcdb.org/vehicle\\_155000-Dodge-Ram-1988.html](http://www.imcdb.org/vehicle_155000-Dodge-Ram-1988.html) [accessed 22 December 2017].

<sup>60</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 159.

modern Mexico and China.<sup>61</sup> Moss, in abandoning a dying Mexican who tells him of the money's location, perpetuates this economy of racial hierarchy. The 1980 setting further invokes Harvey's notion of a 'New Imperialism' that had been incentivised by the 1970s decline of Keynesian economics as well as 'an internal class structure that blocked any large-scale application of surplus capitals towards social reform and infrastructure investments at home'.<sup>62</sup>

A POV shot of a satchel hidden underneath a tree, taken of course from Moss's perspective, permeates this shift with a Faustian sensibility. The febrile, Edenic quality of the sight adds a biblical nature to the unforgiving economics engulfing West Texas, but it also conveys, like Chigurh's earlier killings, a fundamental ambiguity. Jarrett sees the hubris of Moss's robbery as suffused by the philosopher Reinhold Niebuhr's theory of an 'original sin' incarnate from America's post-war position as a world hegemon. He emphasises how Niebuhr stressed the foolhardiness of those with 'boundless social optimism' and who 'underestimate the peril of anarchy in the national and international community'.<sup>63</sup> The error of Moss, according to Jarrett, is to 'believe this myth of original American innocence'.<sup>64</sup>

Niebuhr's warning against idealism would resonate with Fukuyama, who thought that an intended benevolence, and not the implementation of neoliberalism, proved so deleterious for the Iraq intervention. I propound, however, that a vicious globalisation precludes this altruism in *No Country for Old Men*. After returning to join his wife, Carla Jean, at their trailer park home, Moss descends into guilt over the

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>62</sup> Harvey, *The New Imperialism*, p. 180.

<sup>63</sup> Niebuhr, quoted in Jarrett, p. 68.

<sup>64</sup> Jarrett, p. 69.

dying man and returns to the site after dark. This decision has disastrous consequences. Moss finds that the Mexican is dead and is spotted by two cartel members, setting off the chain of events that prompts the hiring of Chigurh to kill him. It seems, on superficial glance, that Moss's compassion and inconsistency prove his undoing. This was the opinion of Jarrett, who, foregrounding the realism/idealism dichotomy as part of *No Country for Old Men's* post-9/11 salience, contends that Moss's 'naïve belief that he can take the money yet return with water to restore his innocence...encapsulates the paradoxes of the foreign policy of an American empire vacillating between the paranoid self-interest of Chigurh and Bell's democratic idealism'.<sup>65</sup>

Yet there are elements that tie Moss's doom to an America disorientated by economic change. Shortly before Moss leaves for the site, Carla Jean refers to her work at Wal-Mart, thus prefacing his action with a reminder of their place in the New Right economy. In the novel it is revealed that Moss first met Carla Jean within one of this corporation's stores, further framing his life within a neoliberal context of late capitalist consumption.<sup>66</sup> The Mexican drug cartel's pursuit of Moss highlights the sacrifice of America's blue-collar at the altar of neoliberal globalisation. In both embracing a culture of risk capitalism and attempting to rescue the benighted Mexican, Moss damns himself with an ideological inconsonance at the root of the United States's modern malaise.

This tension between the neoliberal economic order and the exercise of American power to prevent atrocity was integral to *Three Kings's* presentation of Gates's

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>66</sup> Moss and Jean's first meeting at Wal-Mart is detailed in McCarthy, pp. 131-132.

unilateral intervention. His men's reconciliation of neoliberal globalisation with humanitarian intervention, however, allegorised a centrism unavailable to the harsh politics of Moss's Texas. The fact that Moss cannot both take the money unnoticed and rescue the dying Mexican, nor escape the malaise of his Vietnam veteran status, captures the futility of neoconservatism and neoliberalism's appeal to Jacksonian America, felt towards the end of Bush's second term. Indeed, both Moss and Bell cannot reconcile their Southern hospitality with the drug cartel's steadfast, unrelenting determination - the final lines of Bell's monologue see him acknowledge: 'You had to be willing to die to do this job....But I don't want to push my chips forward and go out and meet something I don't understand'.

The uselessness of Bell starkly contrasts the risk embracing Moss and the virile new market forces entering West Texas. His failure to adapt to the new economy is foregrounded in the irony of *No Country for Old Men's* title and its allusion to W. B. Yeats's poem 'Sailing to Byzantium', a work that eulogised the unchanging moral order of the holy city.<sup>67</sup> Saxton and Cole argue that the Ed Tom Bell of Cormac McCarthy's novel realises the impossibility of attaining this moral order, shown in his relinquishing of 'masculine expectations' and understanding that his longing is for a 'mythical era when strong, white men, enforced a clear, unquestioned morality'.<sup>68</sup> Though, as mentioned earlier, the Coen Brothers deprive Bell of his literary counterpart's social conservatism and racism, the screen translation shows how his nostalgia for the more idealistic rule of his patriarchal forebears does nothing to

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<sup>67</sup> The first line of Yeats's poem states 'that is no country for old men'. W.B. Yeats, 'Sailing to Byzantium', in *Selected Poems and Four Plays of William Butler Yeats*, ed. by M. L. Rosenthal (New York: Scribner, 1996), pp. 102-03 (p. 102).

<sup>68</sup> Benjamin Saxton and Thomas R. Cole, 'No Country for Old Men: a search for masculinity in later life', *International Journal of Aging and Later Life*, Vol.7:2 (2012), pp. 97-116 (p. 101).

prevent neoliberalism's dislocating effects. Unlike the technological ingenuity of Chigurh, who utilises a tracking device hidden in the stolen satchel to decipher Moss's position in the West Texan countryside, Bell's vision of a more moral American order is outmoded against forces that transcend borders, locality, and conventional understandings of human nature.

The sheriff's laggard nature is evident in his first onscreen appearance with his wife, Loretta, who watches him prepare to head to the site of the botched drug deal. The scene, like the montage that begins the picture, takes place against the elegiac backdrop of a Texan dawn. Yet this visual introduction to Bell is forceless when compared to the more intense first appearances of Chigurh and Moss. Bell's first action is not a murder or the shooting of prey but a banal exchange with his wife at his home ranch. The narrative cliché that Bell must face one last case before retirement makes this sense of anti-climax more tangible. A moment when Loretta tenderly admonishes Bell to stay away from danger, a trope that would normally elicit a response of bravado or laconic observation from the Western protagonist, merely reconfirms Bell's agedness and homespun nature.

This sense of inertia is integral to Bell and his partner Wendell's search for Moss and is most pithily evident when the officers investigate his trailer park home. They arrive just hours after Chigurh has already visited, yet instead of finding the hitman, they discover a half-drunk bottle of milk in his place. In a close-up shot, Bell despondently drinks the remainder of the bottle of milk that was once Chigurh's - the occurrence of this shared act contrasts the two characters and their oppositional renditions of frontier conventions.

Bell's bathetic emulation and the act's strange significance anchors the powerfully hidden nature of Chigurh, who forms a kind of twisted embodiment of Adam Smith's notion of an 'invisible hand' in human affairs. A moment of repetition encapsulates the preternatural ubiquity of his screen presence - Bell stares at a silhouette of himself on the TV screen, a childlike action that Chigurh performed only hours earlier. He is doomed to be Chigurh's mere shadow, never to understand the new transnational capitalism gripping the West Texan landscape.

Besides deconstructing neoconservatism's revisionist idealism, Chigurh undercuts its realist championing of national security. Arne de Boever's 2009 article, 'The Politics of Retirement: Joel and Ethan Coen's *No Country for Old Men* after September 11' puts forward the idea that the malaise in West Texas illustrates the failure of this dimension in post-9/11 American foreign policy. To de Boever, a 'politics of retirement' thematically grounded the central characters and suggested the failures resultant from the Bush administration's interventions.<sup>69</sup> This theme is of course most explicit in Bell but is also located in Moss, 'a retired welder', and his wife, Carla Jean, who is 'declared retired by her husband after he finds a satchel full of money'.<sup>70</sup> Chigurh is the exception, but even he dallies with this subtext, due to his prime activity consisting in 'retiring or killing other living beings'.<sup>71</sup> In constructing her argument about this subject, de Boeuvre borrows from Judith Butler's

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<sup>69</sup> Arne de Boever, 'The Politics of Retirement: Joel and Ethan Coen's *No Country for Old Men* after September 11', *Image [&] Narrative*, Vol.X:2 (2009) [http://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/l\\_auteur\\_et\\_son\\_imaginaire/DeBoever.htm](http://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/l_auteur_et_son_imaginaire/DeBoever.htm) [accessed 13 July 2015].

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

refutation of a concept called 'final control'.<sup>72</sup> This concept revolves around a state of cognitive dissonance, namely the hope that the United States could defend itself in the wake of 9/11 whilst retaining its capitalistic hegemony. To Butler, the 9/11 attacks proved that 'radical forms of self-sufficiency and unbridled sovereignty, are, by definition, disrupted by the larger global processes of which they are a part....No final control can be secured, and that final control is not, and cannot be, an ultimate value'.<sup>73</sup>

De Boever echoes Butler's fatalism by citing the thematic centrality of 'the act of retirement' in the Coen Brothers' picture. She opines that the retirement Bell anticipates is 'especially necessary when faced with the inhuman terror embodied by Chigurh that escapes the limits of law and order's humanist presuppositions'.<sup>74</sup> By transferring Butler's theory to the foreign policy allegory of *No Country for Old Men*, de Boever signals that the Coen Brothers convey a United States resigned towards a position of endless war. I would argue that Chigurh's market amorality engenders this condition, providing a lineage between America's paeans to global free markets and the spectre of anti-American violence. This view is also shared by Stephen Tatum, who detects political meaning in Bell's fearful relationship with the transborder drug trade. His analysis implies that the West Texas of 1980 is vitiated by neoconservatism's blend of Jacksonian and neoliberal approaches. Tatum reflects on an incoherent policy that 'seeks to eliminate borders and barriers so as to accelerate the flows of peoples, drugs, capital, and commodities', and simultaneously establish

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<sup>72</sup> Judith Butler, quoted in de Boever, 'The Politics of Retirement: Joel and Ethan Coen's *No Country for Old Men* after September 11'.

<sup>73</sup> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (Abingdon: Routledge, (2004), p. xiii.

<sup>74</sup> Arne de Boever, 'The Politics of Retirement: Joel and Ethan Coen's *No Country for Old Men* after September 11'.

'a barricaded border or militarized regulatory framework' needed 'to discipline this space'.<sup>75</sup>

Bell and Chigurh's differences highlight this contradiction of neoconservative ideology. Whereas Bell presents a rooted America based on communal ties, the law, and national security, Chigurh personifies a globalised capitalism where free movement of goods and people are for nihilistic ends. This disconnect is further indicated in Bell's attachment to Texas's economic and state sovereignty. He resents the cross border violence brought by the transnational drug wars and remains wedded to the stakes of his retirement and pension. In contrast, Chigurh inhabits a cosmopolitan expatriate status wholly removed from the lives of the ordinary Texans he meets and frequently murders. He rarely speaks to other Americans and remains perennially emotionally detached from the Texan soil - if not for his absurd haircut and incongruous dress sense, he would convey a businesslike aloofness. Judged in this light, 'the act of retirement', especially as incarnated by Bell, takes on its own protectionist implications. Chigurh's foreignness adds to the seriousness of this subtext - like the ease with which the 9/11 hijackers entered America and Islamic movements infiltrated post invasion Iraq, his rootless, unpunished acts of violence become reminders of American vulnerability in an era of mass globalisation.

In dichotomising the tension between Bell's parochialism and Chigurh's personification of borderless globalisation, the Coen Brothers encapsulate the

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<sup>75</sup> Stephen Tatum, 'Mercantile Ethics: *No Country for Old Men* and the Narcocorrido', in *Cormac McCarthy: All the Pretty Horses, No Country for Old Men, The Road*, ed. by Sara L. Spurgeon (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), pp. 77-93 (p. 87).

exploitation of blue-collar America that had begun in the Reagan years.<sup>76</sup> Throughout *No Country for Old Men*, it becomes clearer that Chigurh's capitalistic individualism is destabilising for Bell's prioritisation of his fellow Texans' security and safety. This danger becomes most apparent when Chigurh visits a gas station store and aggressively quizzes the owner. The scene, filmed disquietingly without music, sees Chigurh bemuse the middle-aged owner by asking him questions about his personal history. It is the first time Chigurh speaks and his voice lacks pleasure and intonation, especially when compared to the storeowner's geniality. He begins by coldly mocking the storeowner's southern folksiness but later interrogates the storeowner's family history, asking if he has 'lived here his whole life'. The storeowner can only respond with a bewilderment and repetition that further compounds his helplessness. Upon learning that the storeowner inherited the business from his father-in-law, and has only migrated from Temple, Texas, Chigurh derides him by claiming he 'married into' his business.

These insults climax in a proposed coin toss where, in Chigurh's words, the storeowner stands to gain or lose 'everything'. He postulates to the storeowner that he has been 'putting it up his whole life' and thus has to choose between heads and tails. Although the storeowner calls the right side, Chigurh's interrogation shows his remorseless disregard for human life in West Texas. What is the meaning of the coin toss? Chigurh's framing of it as an exercise in choice perhaps fetes the new culture of risk capitalism. At the same time, the game's fatalism possesses a sinister otherness that is hostile to the man's small town, parochial interests. The coin toss, besides

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<sup>76</sup> This shift towards parochialism will recur in the next chapter's discussion of *The Dark Knight* and its subtext of a damaged Wilsonianism.

implying Chigurh's combination of capitalist individualist and merciless arbiter of human life, assaults the storeowner's embrace of economic and familial security over liberty, fusing the ethos of neoliberalism with the more contemporary threat of anti-American insurgency.

Throughout this section, I have argued that Chigurh's nihilistic rendition of neoliberal ideology victimises other segments of the modern Republican Party's electoral base. The next section continues this theme by focusing on *There Will be Blood's* representation of a schism between oilman Daniel Plainview's empire and the interests of Christian evangelical groups. Although in *No Country for Old Men* Chigurh primarily harms the blue-collar Jacksonian, it is arguable that he subverts this other dimension of conservatism too. Bacevich notes how the neoconservative ascendancy of 1980 had additional support from evangelicals like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, who sought 'to reverse the tide of godlessness and social decay to which the 1960s had given impetus'.<sup>77</sup> The religious right influenced what Jason Hackworth describes as the 'biblically inspired neoliberalism' co-opted by much of the Reagan administration, evident in Falwell's citing of both 'God and the patriarchs of neoliberalism to justify low taxes, the abolition of secular welfare and free trade'.<sup>78</sup> This feting of neoliberalism by the religious right has a nightmarish mutation in Chigurh's synthesis of Social Darwinist economics and deontological absolutism.

Unlike Moss and the professionals in the drug trade, Chigurh is orientated around a comprehensive set of 'rules' that lead him to refuse deals or compromise. Next to

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<sup>77</sup> Bacevich, p. 124.

<sup>78</sup> Jason Hackworth, 'Faith, Welfare and the Formation of the Modern American Right', in *Religion in the Neoliberal Age: Political Economy and Modes of Governance*, ed. by Francois Gauthier and Tuomos Martikainen (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 91-108 (p. 92).

the gauche Texans who he encounters and challenges, this uncompromising quality often means he comes across as *No Country for Old Men's* culture warrior. Those neoconservatives who joined the New Right agenda of privatisation and religious conservatism in the late 1970s shared comparable disdain for the cultural drift they perceived to have descended on American life since the end of the Vietnam War. Chigurh's snide, almost alien superiority, to the directionless Texans he encounters recalls the animus of the neoconservative Allan Bloom (a lecturer to Bush administration acolyte Paul Wolfowitz), who bemoaned the stagnation of American society that resulted from Vietnam and the countercultural movement. Bloom castigated what he called the 'flat souled' nature of American cultural life in the wake of the 1960s social revolutions, 'their world devoid of ideals', left 'unadorned by imagination'.<sup>79</sup>

The similarly elitist progenitor Leo Strauss, anticipating an allegiance with the religious right and lamenting America's spiritual and philosophical torpor, deplored the liberal secularisation of the United States. He attacked the 'movement away from the recognition of a superhuman authority – whether of revelation based on divine will or a natural order – to a recognition of the exclusively human based authority of the state'.<sup>80</sup> In 2003, the liberal interventionist Paul Berman updated these ideas to defend the War on Terror in his work *Terror and Liberalism*. Berman argues that Islamist attacks on America derived from an inflexible culture unable to understand Western freedoms. In his description of an American 'hideous schizophrenia' that sought to reconcile religion and capitalism, Berman warns it was

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<sup>79</sup> Allan Bloom, quoted in Anne Norton, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 65.

<sup>80</sup> Leo Strauss, quoted in Halper and Clarke, p. 65.

this collaboration that galvanised the founders of Islamist extremism such as Sayud Qutb and their modern descendants in Al Qaeda, who thought, 'religion together with a capitalist economy' was 'preposterous'.<sup>81</sup> Berman further notes that America's simultaneous championing of 'religious sentiment' and 'commercial materialism' had heightened this alienation.<sup>82</sup> Its ultimate consequence was, in the eyes of Islamists, a 'calamity to the world'.<sup>83</sup>

Chigurh perverts this fusion of American capitalistic mores and religious principles, contrasting the American characterisations incapable of achieving this hideous schizophrenia. Unlike Chigurh's obeisance to the coin's cutthroat logic and his game's transcendent, absolutist morality, other characters cannot square the vagaries of amoral chance with their own Christian obligations. Moss cannot steal the money *and* perform charity for the dying Mexican; neither can the storeowner both adhere to his small town American values and repudiate Chigurh's icy contempt for the fact that 'he has been putting it up his whole life'. Chigurh, in contrast to the human and secular foibles of *No Country for Old Men's* other key figures, personifies a form of capitalist risk culture that is darkly ascetic and even monastic in character. He never laughs and is instead only capable of a sinister grin. Despite the loneliness of his nomadic lifestyle, Chigurh remains in this flatlined emotional state throughout the picture and declines to spend his contract killing money on debauchery or excess. His existence is an anhedonic rendition of New Right politics. To Dierdra Reber, Chigurh's joylessness made him a kind of angel of death for neoliberal ideology, 'the perverse holy spirit of capitalist risk culture in which the foundational

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<sup>81</sup> Paul Berman, *Terror and Liberalism* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2003), p. 81.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 81-82.

practice of risk taking is distilled to its starkest terms as a wager between life and death'.<sup>84</sup>

In apotheosising a culture of religious devotion towards risk capitalism whilst terrorising ordinary Americans, Chigurh establishes connection between neoliberal America's ideological makeup and the rise of Islamic insurgency. The co-morbidity of these themes, and their dual manifestation in a War on Terror context, become most implicit in the scenes that follow a dramatic encounter between Chigurh and Moss. After tracking Moss to a border town hotel, Chigurh engages in a gunfight that spills on to the street, resulting in both characters suffering bullet wounds. Chigurh's attempt to alleviate his injury is a model of both capitalistic ingenuity and terroristic violence. Trying to create a distraction in order to steal goods from inside a pharmacy, he pours oil over a piece of cloth, places it inside a car fill cap, and ignites the material with a lighter. Chigurh's method, and the resulting explosion, recalls the IEDs (improvised explosive devices) employed against American troops in Iraq. Yet the theft it enables also connotes his aggressive self-sufficiency. Next to Moss, who nurses his own bullet wounds in a hospital, Chigurh rises above the banality of West Texas to become a model of survivalist capitalism.

In the subsequent scene, Chigurh proves his autonomy by alleviating his wounds with items stolen from the pharmacy. The contrast with the bed-ridden Moss highlights the emasculation of America's Jacksonian identity. The immobilised position of this blue-collar Vietnam veteran fits the consequences of a neoliberal,

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<sup>84</sup> Reber, p. 157.

antigovernment agenda that fuelled the rise of Islamist insurgency in Iraq, a descent luridly delineated by Chigurh's primal libertarianism.

The ill-fated narrative arc of Carson Wells, a hitman hired to broker a deal between Chigurh and Moss, illuminates the unbending nature of Chigurh's principles. Unlike Chigurh's joyless fatalism, Wells is garrulous and talkative, as well as something of a diplomat in the tumultuous field of cross border drug wars. Indeed, a scene where Wells visits Moss in hospital to strike a deal over the stolen money sees them acknowledge shared combat experience in Vietnam and exchange sardonic dialogue, leavening the tension of the film's cat and mouse chase.

Yet the character's duplicity (Wells cajoles Moss to accept protection whilst he himself attempts to obtain the satchel) offends Chigurh's singular devotion to the categorical imperative of his contract killing. Wells's death, which occurs in his own hotel room, sees his diplomatic abilities lambasted by Chigurh. Immediately before murdering Wells, Chigurh sits in a rocking chair and asks him 'if the rule you followed brought you to this, of what use was the rule?' before shooting the fellow hit-man. Chigurh's arbitrary codes ground the mythic 1980 of neoconservative ascension in a brutal, anarchic fanaticism. His associations with Islamist terrorism fit an image of neoconservative demonology; yet, judged against the 1980 context, his existential scrutiny of West Texas shares commonality with the New Right's early judgments of an America beset by economic stagnation and moral relativism.

The major characters who are murdered, or mortally wounded, in *No Country for Old Men's* final scenes convey the locust-like dissemination of the hitman's complex ideology. A sorrowful fate descends on Moss, who, to Bell's dismay, dies at the

hands of a cartel after meeting his wife and mother in law in Odessa. Later, there are direct implications that Carla Jean, but also far more ironically Chigurh, fall prey to breaking the 'rules' which govern the Texan landscape. After returning to her deceased mother's home in Odessa, Jean encounters Chigurh waiting for her. Whereas in the novel Jean succumbs to his game of coin toss and fatally loses, she refuses it wholesale in the cinematic adaptation and instead rebels against its premise.

Coupled with this change is an excision of a brief exchange surrounding religion between Chigurh and Jean - in the novel, Jean argues that Chigurh's nihilism arises from 'a loss of faith', to which he replies, 'a nonbeliever might find it useful to model himself after God'.<sup>85</sup> Yet, in occluding Chigurh's blasphemy, the Coen Brothers instead centralise the doctrine of Social Darwinist chance as West Texas's true metaphysical and moral force. It is this secular religion that Chigurh is ironically forced to profane by Jean, who repudiates his vision by refusing the coin toss. Jean's death does not manifest directly onscreen, yet Chigurh's exit contains a suggestive motif. A long shot shows Chigurh wiping his shoes on the doormat, a ritual of preservation performed after his murder of Wells (where he hoisted his feet away from Wells's body to avoid them getting bloodstained), and his earlier ambushing of a border town motel (where he removed his shoes prior to embarking on a mass killing spree). In murdering Jean before his requisite game, Chigurh breaks his own self-made rules and moral framework. Yet the imagery that succeeds this apostasy indicates that Chigurh's nihilistic brand of neoliberalism will have its dominance beyond the 1980 *mise en scène* presented.

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<sup>85</sup> McCarthy, pp. 255-256.

Chigurh's final scene conveys this epochal sensibility. After he leaves the vicinity of Jean's family home, a close-up shot shows him driving through a sanguine, sun-kissed suburbia, a locale that contrasts with the more abrasive images of deserts and ranches shown earlier in the picture. Amplifying this disconnect is the colloquial 'sucker punch' thrust on Chigurh's character. A sudden car crash punishes Chigurh for violating his rules - he forgets to look at a junction and collides with an oncoming car, a moment that perhaps occurs, because, like the viewer, he is absent-mindedly thinking about what took place in the previous scene. This shocking development culminates in a physical vulnerability hitherto unseen in the character. Chigurh wanders from the crash with a compound fracture that makes his bone protrude from his arm, a state perilously close to the fate of death long personified by his executioner image. The abrupt event looks akin to a *deus ex machina* that has come to bring karmic repudiation on Chigurh for violating his shibboleths. Yet for all the proven instability of Chigurh's contradictory philosophy, the moments that follow this accident prove his nihilism's contagiousness.

As Chigurh walks in a daze, two teenage boys run to help him, so suggesting that there are limits to his violence. Chigurh gives one of the boys money in exchange for a shirt to use as a sling and tells them 'you didn't see anything'. Unlike the opportunistic, middle-aged Moss and the storeowner conscripted into the coin toss, their innocence defies Chigurh's contempt for West Texas and the hypocrisy that governs the region's social mores. Nevertheless, this one act of mercy has only ephemeral meaning next to the significance of the scene's ending - as a wounded Chigurh flees into the homogeneity of the Texan suburbs, a long shot displays the

boys fighting aggressively over the money, a sign that this contagious form of risk capitalism will descend on future generations.

The shot's lack of non-diegetic music (the sole noise onscreen is that of the boys yelling) renders it uneasily elliptical in tone, heightening the sense that Chigurh's nihilism will have no logical conclusion. This implicit immutability, viewed from the perspective of the film's release year of 2007, resonates with the context of an amassing sub-prime mortgage crisis and the consequences of neoliberal occupation in Iraq. The sectarian image of the boys fighting over the cash, coupled with the money's connotations of Reaganite avarice, again reinforces an analogue between the fratricidal violence occurring in the Middle East and the neoliberalism incarnated at the dawn of the Reagan era. Like the burning ants nest in *The Wild Bunch*, the misanthropic image feels like an overture to America's own contemporary malaise, and in its imprimaturs of sectarianism and greed, dilemmas of American domestic and foreign policy.

In the end, the only major character we know survives both in Cormac McCarthy's novel and in the Coen Brothers's film adaptation is Bell, a man who perceives American decline and accepts that his career has been a failure. The final scene sees Bell reject the activist notion of Faludi's 'terror dream' by acknowledging that resistance to Chigurh's violence is futile. This monologue takes place soon after Bell has retired and features the character speaking at length to his wife about two dreams he had the previous night. He pontificates about the aimless first one, which saw him attempt to meet his father in town, only for this plan to fail after he loses some money. The second dream was set in 'older times' and revolved around a

horseback journey with his father in the desert. The two again enter a state of separation, this time because Bell heads to retrieve firewood for a campfire while his father proceeds ahead. Bell can only affirm, 'I knew that whenever I got there, he'd be there...and then I woke up'. A few seconds after this line, the picture fades to black.

To Dan Flory, Bell's disposition emblematised Nietzsche's concept of a 'passive nihilism'.<sup>86</sup> Reinforcing this state of resignation is the causative relationship between neoliberalism and Bell's impotence. His gauche loss of the money in the first dream implies his alienation from the culture of greed sweeping through West Texas. The circumscribed nature of the second dream shows how these forces robbed Bell of his ancestors' more confident rule. Unlike his departed father, whose disappearance offers a sublimated inversion of Bell's failure to find the prodigal son Moss, the former sheriff has proved incapable of bringing harmony to his home region. Lost in a state of lethargy, he inverts the terror dream fantasy by waking up and declaring withdrawal from the sectarian violence he sees. His anhedonia resonates with a free market culture that sabotaged American authority in Iraq.

This section has explored how *No Country for Old Men* illustrates the neoliberal origins of the Bush administration's difficulties in the Middle East. Belying modern neoconservatism's later synthesis of Jacksonian nationalism and liberal Wilsonian idealism, the Coen Brothers portray an economic context that has dark implications for America's prosecution of the War on Terror. The next section will expand on the

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<sup>86</sup> Flory's use of this idea is lifted from Nietzsche and his concept of a passive nihilism that can be counteracted by 'an active nihilism that worked to transform old, rejected values into new, meaningful ones'. Dan Flory, 'Evil, Mood, and Reflection in the Coen Brothers' *No Country for Old Men*', in *Cormac McCarthy: All the Pretty Horses, No Country for Old Men, The Road*, pp. 117-134 (p. 126).

themes introduced in this case study by revealing a more specific allegory for neoconservative contradiction in Paul Thomas Anderson's *There Will be Blood*.

### **3.2: *There Will be Blood* and the schisms of neoconservative intervention**

Beginning in 1898, a time when the United States had embarked on imperial forays into Spanish-held Cuba and the Philippines, *There Will be Blood* presents a schizophrenic form of American imperialism taking place in the domestic context of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century oil industry. This narrative, like *No Country for Old Men*, allegorises the failure to reconcile neoliberal economics with neoconservatism's promises of democratic renewal. Much as the Coen Brothers conveyed this disconnect through the juxtaposition of Chigurh's market amorality with Bell's longing for the moral authority of his father's era, the lengthy twenty minute opening sequence of *There Will be Blood* revolves around a similar dichotomy, this time between duelling notions of Social Darwinism and an expansionist idealism. The opening shot of Paul Thomas Anderson's film foregrounds this theme of contradiction in its display of a vast desert suffused simultaneously by ennui and the grandiosity of manifest destiny. This incongruity is tangible in the harsh, dysphoric violin score (performed by Radiohead's Jonny Greenwood) that plays over the image and the palpable mania of the desert landscape seen by the viewer, a juxtaposition that suffuses the site of American expansionism with connotations of instability.

Protagonist Daniel Plainview, who first appears in the interior of a mining pit, continues this sense of duality. He pervades both the failed paternal authority seen in Bell and the machine-like capitalist solipsism personified by Chigurh. In a medium shot, grey cinematography permeates his aggressive dig for oil, an action fuelled by undertones of misanthropy. Method actor Daniel Day Lewis invests Plainview with an anhedonic disposition that contravenes the stereotyped exuberance of westward expansion. His vampiric appearance, accentuated by a nefarious handlebar moustache and ascetic mining clothing, lends the entrepreneurialism of the dig a barren quality relatable to Chigurh's dark rendition of Reaganite individualism.

What becomes most apparent from his struggle to find oil is its violently Sisyphean nature. In subsequent shots, Anderson tracks the arduous process of Plainview attempting to use a rope and bucket to extract discovered oil from the mining pit. The tone is one of darkly resigned fatalism, a conception of manifest destiny denuded of Jeffersonian utopia. The bathetic moment that follows conveys this, as a vertiginous high angle shot shows Plainview pulled down by the weight of the oil bucket, directly back into the tunnels of the putrid mining pit. The subsequent close-up shot of Plainview writhing in pain signals the vagaries of fortune that stem from his nihilistic embrace of a resurgent capitalism. As in the opening of *Three Kings*, American power takes on a derealised, cognitively dissonant quality illustrative of the gulf between American exceptionalist ideals and the dark realities of imperial expansionism.

One can further elucidate this alternation between idealism and realism through examining how *There Will be Blood* invokes the late 19<sup>th</sup> century crisis of American

identity. This is underlined by Kris Woods, who views *There Will be Blood's* narrative as an especially potent rendition of Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis. He sees the 1890s beginning as concerning 'the final stage of westward expansion', 'marking the end of manifest destiny'.<sup>87</sup> The reflection of this imperial dilemma is complemented by Plainview's fierce spirit of competition. Returning to the debates of American political intellectuals in the late Nineteenth Century can help understand how the 'survival of the fittest' ethos of Social Darwinism permeated arguments for and against American imperialism.

Intellectuals such as Brooks Adams postulated that America had lost the martial discipline of the Civil War and understood that overseas expansion could serve as an alternative to an ostentatious gilded age where 'the economic supersedes the martial mind'.<sup>88</sup> Conversely, Social Darwinist diatribes against empire were contained in the work of William Graham Sumner, who claimed 'those whom humanitarians and philanthropists call the weak are the ones through whom the productive and conservative forces of society are wasted,' a paternalistic relationship that served to 'constantly neutralize and destroy the finest efforts of the wise and industrious'.<sup>89</sup> To Sumner, empire extended this welfarist dynamic, creating a 'collision of the civilized and the uncivilized' and ignoring 'the inevitable doom of those who cannot or will not come into the new world system'.<sup>90</sup> Terri Murray's analysis affirms how *There Will be Blood* mirrors Social Darwinism's ubiquity in late 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophy and political debate:

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<sup>87</sup> Kris Woods, *Mapping Contemporary Cinema: There Will be Blood, 2007* (2011), <http://www.mcc.sllf.qmul.ac.uk/?p=1> [accessed 30 June 2015].

<sup>88</sup> Brooks Adams, quoted in Brands, p. 27.

<sup>89</sup> William Graham Sumner, quoted in Brands, pp. 18-19.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

*These early scenes of injury and death set the contours of what will follow: destruction, loss and injury is seen throughout the film as an integral part of all that is exceptional, energetic, life-affirming and productive, not as antithetical to it. It is a means to greatness, progress and flourishing.*<sup>91</sup>

The Social Darwinism outlined here possessed a hegemony comparable to the neoliberalism institutionalised by successive American administrations in the late twentieth century. Just as the ideology of Social Darwinism conditioned conversation over foreign policy in the late nineteenth century, neoliberalism has dominated discussion over the direction of US statecraft since the post-1989 era. G. John Ikenberry refers to the ‘doctrines of neoliberalism and market fundamentalism’ that supplanted memories of how ‘notions of national security and economic security emerged together in the 1940s, reflecting New Deal and World War II thinking about how liberal democracies would be rendered safe and stable’.<sup>92</sup>

Charles S. Maier, in a position that cynically undercuts Nye’s argument for US soft power, writes ironically of this capitalist order. He offers a critique of a belief in an ‘investment capital, sometimes diffused consciously by cultural diplomacy and student exchanges’, or ‘sometimes just by popular taste for the intriguing products of the metropole, whether Coca-Cola or Big Mac’, which could put an ‘end to

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<sup>91</sup> *There Will be Blood* (2011), [https://philosophynow.org/issues/74/There\\_Will\\_Be\\_Blood](https://philosophynow.org/issues/74/There_Will_Be_Blood) [accessed 30 June 2015].

<sup>92</sup> G. John Ikenberry, ‘The Future of the Liberal World Order’, in *Foreign Policy: Theoretical Essays: Seventh Edition*, pp. 575-581 (p. 579).

endemic warfare and murderous ethnic or religious conflicts'.<sup>93</sup> As mentioned in Chapter 3.1, Tony Smith argues that the liberal interventionists of the 1990s shaped the agenda of neoliberalism into a Wilsonian foreign policy, undergirded by a consensus that 'international organizations not dominated by market democracies may fail to protect the peace'.<sup>94</sup>

The turn of the century opening of *There Will be Blood* is a significant change from *Oil's* backdrop of World War One and the early 1920s. Yet the end of frontier setting remains politically evocative, drawing parallels between Plainview's attempt to found an oil empire and the context of an America losing its myth of isolationist innocence overseas. In further adopting the late nineteenth century subtext of Social Darwinism, the sequence forms an overture to the neoliberalism applied in occupied Iraq. As the montage proceeds to show Plainview's business in 1902, the growing industrialisation of Southern California appears as a crucible for modern capitalism's birth, drawing parallels with the Edenic site of the botched drug deal in *No Country for Old Men*. Instead of the dark bathos that surrounded Plainview's first attempt at extracting oil, the viewer sees shots that layer his profession and business with overtones of religious ecstasy. A tracking shot rapidly speeds towards an oil derrick built by Plainview, implying that his endeavors have become manic in ambition. This quality becomes evident when the camera arrives at the interior of the mining pit. A high angle shot shows Plainview and a co-worker bathed in a pool of oil, an image that has its putridity belied by a change in Greenwood's score - previously shrill in

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<sup>93</sup> Charles S. Maier, 'Introduction: An American Empire? The Problems of Frontiers and Peace in Twenty-First Century World Politics', in *The New American Empire: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Teach-In on US Foreign Policy*, pp. xi-xix (p. xiii).

<sup>94</sup> Smith, 'Wilsonianism after Iraq: The End of Liberal Internationalism?', p. 60.

the 1898 segment, the soundtrack consists of higher notes and imparts a mystical aura, canonising the otherwise fecal appearance of Plainview's activity. Ethereal overtones are present in the subsequent medium shot of a hyperventilating, exhausted Plainview gently supported by a co-worker, an image that portrays the men's economic prowess as a state of homoerotic rapture.

The volatile aspects of these images show, like Moss's theft, the struggle to synthesise the ruthlessness of modern capitalism with the idealised frontier of the American West. A subsequent medium shot of an oil worker cradling his baby son above the pit indicates this undercurrent of profanation. The backdrop of the oil pit acts as a secular authority for the father and son. It supplants the father's paternal benevolence for its hegemony of dark, capitalistic greed. Like the trans-border capitalism beginning in Cormac McCarthy's *West Texas*, Plainview's business conveys how the worship of unrestrained free market capitalism denuded America of its moral authority. Besides the explicit images of corrupted fatherhood, the essential nihilism of Plainview's vision is viewable in the more subtle symbolism that infuses the oil derrick and the tools his men use to achieve entrepreneurial success. A later tracking shot follows the descent of an anchor used to puncture the bottom of the oil well, a sight that appears metaphoric of an umbilical cord, connecting the oilmen intimately with the lifeblood of the modern economy. The almost biological quality of the oil dig has additional emphasis in a low angle shot taken from the bottom of the pit. It shows Plainview staring directly towards the viewer, an authoritarian image that gives the impression of primal conquest and masculine domination. This atavistic sensibility permeates the wider locus of the mining area, as a series of wide-

angle shots portray oilmen pouring the black liquid on to the desert, forming pools revered with wide-eyed fascination.

What makes the dark birth of a Social Darwinist capitalism shown in these images more epochal is an unexpected cinematic reference. Anderson's use of primordial imagery has a visual and thematic affinity with the beginning of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (2001). The shifts in time and space from 1898 to 1902, along with the cosmic portrayal of the oil dig, offer a striking nineteenth century rendition of Kubrick's 'Dawn of Man' sequence, a twenty minute opening, famed for its portentous portrayal of a tribe of apes learning to employ technology for the first time. Nelson Carjavel comments on this connection by speculating, 'Anderson is channeling Kubrick's powerful visualization on the primordial nature of humanity, amidst the frail, dangerous nature of discovery'.<sup>95</sup> Indeed, the mystical black monolith that mesmerised the apes in *2001: A Space Odyssey* has its effect eerily replicated in the spellbinding power of the oil, as does the theme of Darwinian prowess. Plainview's oilmen live primitively and in a state of warlike determination, nineteenth century updates of Kubrick's tribal apes. These visual parallels add to how the sequence presents its own dawn of a capitalism shaped by Social Darwinist mores. In their asceticism and brutality, they scrutinise the foundations of a foreign policy driven by the dominance of a neoliberal doctrine that prescribed unfettered competition and privatisation.

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<sup>95</sup> Nelson Carjavel, *Video Essay: 2001/The Dawn of Blood* (2012), <http://www.indiewire.com/2012/04/video-essay-2001the-dawn-of-blood-132192/> [accessed 2 July 2015].

Like the grandiose jump cut that connected the ape's bone with the futuristic satellite in *2001*, the primordial imagery of the oil pit shows an affinity with distinctly more modern phenomena. The atmosphere around the oil derrick implies a militarisation. Plainview's men gather not just as industrial workers, but also as intrepid liberators sent to tame the Western environment. The character of Plainview foregrounds this idea most explicitly, as in one close-up shot, the viewer sees him doodling and mapping the position of an oil derrick in the serious manner of a military strategist. The dramatic death of Plainview's co-worker cements this connection between social Darwinist economics and militarism. It leads to a narrative development that firmly reinforces the theme of an idealised West sabotaged and perverted by the power of capitalistic mores. After an anchor used for oil extraction kills the unnamed co-worker, Plainview meets and seemingly co-opts the deceased man's now orphaned baby son into his baroque vision of Social Darwinist expansion. Plainview's disregard for the mores of the American family is evident in his first awkward interaction with the orphaned baby, which he alleviates through giving the infant whiskey.

Yet for all the barbed humour of this moment, the last shot of the opening sequence views this relationship with wry portent and not comedy. In this unsettling image, Plainview stares clinically out of a steam train with his newly adopted son and potential asset to the reputation of his growing empire. Plainview's cold, misanthropic demeanour, which he still maintains while sitting next to the baby, implies his deceptive, overtly utilitarian vision of American expansionism. Their

juxtaposition makes integral the cycle of paternal failure and Social Darwinist philosophy in *There Will be Blood*.

Much of the rest of this section will continue analysing this cycle in relation to the remainder of *There Will be Blood's* narrative, which offers a more complete allegorisation of the contradictions surrounding neoconservative foreign policy than *No Country for Old Men*. Before I explicate this broader political allegory, however, it is worth examining *There Will be Blood's* production context and Anderson's own emphasis on his picture's allegorical intent.

Like the production context of David O'Russell's *Three Kings*, the process of adapting *Oil!* was inherently politicised. After re-reading *The Jungle* (1906), Upton Sinclair's novel on the early 20<sup>th</sup> century meatpacking industry, *Fast Food Nation* and *Reefer Madness* author Eric Schlosser obtained the rights to *Oil!* and became interested in this later Sinclair novel's distillation of American power. In a February 2008 interview with *The New York Times*, he argued that the novel offered a perceptive take on US geopolitics, expressing, 'Southern California was the Kuwait of the Jazz Age', and enthusiastically embracing *Oil!'s* 'major themes', including the 'corrupting power of oil money'.<sup>96</sup>

The language here, particularly the reference to Kuwait, seems redolent of the anarchic tone that underlined both the screen content and production context of *Three Kings*. Indeed, Kuwait was of course memorably mentioned as 'the Arab Beverly Hills' by Elgin. Yet unlike *Three Kings's* satirical presentation of American

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<sup>96</sup> Eric Schlosser, quoted in *The New York Times*, 'Oil!' and the History of Southern California (2008), [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/22/timestopics/topics\\_upton Sinclair\\_oil.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/22/timestopics/topics_upton Sinclair_oil.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&) [accessed 23 June 2015].

neocolonialism as a glamorised Clintonian third way, translating *Oil's* politics for 2007 would make *There Will be Blood* closer in substance to the less centrist context of the neoconservative Bush years. The adaptation process highlighted this updating. The majority of Sinclair's novel focuses on Bunny, son of oil magnate James Arnold Ross (altered to the character of Plainview in Anderson's film), and his relationship with Paul Watkins, a radical socialist who wishes to overthrow the forces of capitalism taking over southern California. Yet when Anderson took over the project from Schlosser and began writing the screenplay, he supplanted this strain of labour activism in favour of another dimension in Sinclair's novel. The reciprocal relationship between religion and capitalism embodied in the partnership between Ross and Paul's preacher brother Eli would instead take centre stage.

In a January 2008 interview with media magazine *AV club*, Anderson casually admitted the blatant parallels that could stem from this juxtaposition and its obvious thematic affinity with American neo-imperialism and the religious right. He commented, 'That you know you're walking into a film about an independent oilman and a guy that runs a church', but argued that he could achieve this allegorical quality subtly, through avoiding 'big, long speeches that would help in paralleling or allegorizing, if that's a word'.<sup>97</sup>

Much as O'Russell's casual discussion of *Three Kings* promoted its eclecticism over commentary on 1990s foreign policy, Anderson and Schlosser disseminate similarly restrained visions of *There Will be Blood's* political qualities. Yet in spite of this, the narrative decisions, *mise en scène*, and cinematic homages of Anderson's film make

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<sup>97</sup> Paul Thomas Anderson, quoted in Josh Modell, *Interview: Paul Thomas Anderson* (2008), <https://film.avclub.com/paul-thomas-anderson-1798213013> [accessed 13 July 2015].

its allegory explicit. This becomes evident when Anderson revisits Plainview's empire in 1911, nine years after the ending of the twenty-minute opening sequence.

The first scene in this year begins with an address by Plainview that attempts to reconcile frontier ideals with his own ambitions of industrialisation. As the image of father and son slowly fades into a close-up shot of Plainview in 1911, the voice of the entrepreneur becomes audible for the first time. He claims he has 'travelled over half our state to be here tonight' before listing the amount of projects organised by his business. Plainview is more formally dressed than his appearance in the twenty-minute introduction - he wears a business suit and has a demeanour of salesmanship wholly absent in that sequence. After the camera eventually moves from Plainview, the aura of his talk becomes more akin to a political rally than a promotion of his business. Revealed to his left is his adopted son, now aged nine years old and given the initialled name of H.W. His presence enables his surrogate father to cast himself as a 'family man' and adds respectability to his still intimidating appearance. This morality comes juxtaposed with entrepreneurialism - Plainview presents himself as an individualist, capable of 'my own drilling,' who can offer a 'brand of family very few oilmen can understand'.

As it becomes clear that the town hall Plainview is addressing is full of socially conservative rural Californians, his language increasingly seems an attempt to pass an ideological litmus test, as well as a vainglorious effort at self-promotion. These affectations, so palpably associated with the ideological purity of the Republican right, are made more uneasy by the sheer unpleasantness of Plainview's manner and character. His vampiric appearance, and reliance on his son as a moral prop, gives a

demagogic impression to his performance. He supplements this demagoguery with imperious rhetoric. Plainview boasts that his industrial competitors 'won't be there when it comes to the showdown', militarising the petty quarrels of the oil business to impress the townspeople. David Denby discerns a discrepancy between Plainview's small town audience and the impersonal nature of his empire. He comments, somewhat acerbically, on how 'the thrown-together buildings look scraggly and unkempt, the homesteaders are modest, stubborn, and reticent, but, in their undreamed of future, Wal-Mart is on the way'.<sup>98</sup>

Plainview's desire for the townspeople to be subservient to this new economy is implicit in moments that convey his regal, rapacious nature; his flanking by senior business advisor Fletcher, who stands protectively in various medium shots, lends his speech a dimension of authoritarianism that blends uneasily with the speech's flirtations with the populism of religion and family. The scene culminates in anarchy as the townspeople aggressively question the veracity of Plainview's promises whilst the oil baron leaves haughtily, declining to drill the town on grounds of 'too much confusion'.

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<sup>98</sup> David Denby, *Do the Movies Have a Future?* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012), p. 90.



Image 4: Plainview's culture war/self promotion in *There Will be Blood*<sup>99</sup>

Although the majority of *There Will be Blood* takes place some seventy years before the *annus mirabilis* of Reaganism in *No Country for Old Men*, the nexus of ideas presented in this scene ironically offers a more modern allegory for the effects of neoconservative ideology and its different constituencies of support. This is primarily resplendent in language and imagery that create parallels between Plainview's artificial family dynasty and the ideological direction of the George W Bush administration. The name of Plainview's adopted son is H.W., a coded reference to George H.W. Bush that inverts the order of the Bush family tree. Kellner treats this explicit inversion polemically, citing its inclusion as part of 'an allegory about the Bush family and its vicious quest for money and power, culminating in George W. Bush and Dick Cheney's invasion of Iraq – in part for oil – and resulting in blood'.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Image located in Nathan Rabin, Keith Phipps, Noel Murray, Tasha Robinson, and Scott Tobias, *The best film performances of the '00s* (2009), <https://film.avclub.com/the-best-film-performances-of-the-00s-1798218709> [accessed 23 December 2017].

<sup>100</sup> Kellner, *Cinema Wars*, p. 15.

Yet it is arguable that this reference, and the sequence as a whole, is as deconstructive as it is polemical, evoking meaning from the contradictions within Plainview's ideological branding. Plainview's difficulty in reconciling his oil empire with the conservative religion of the townspeople reflects the journey of a Republican party seeking closer alliance between neoliberal economic doctrine and conservative religion. If the early scenes of *No Country for Old Men* included incidents that symbolised the problematic relationship between Jacksonian America and neoliberal economics, then the dichotomy presented in this case hinges on a similar schism within neoconservative ideology. To Kris Woods, Plainview's courting of Christianity and family values resemble the pressure of groups such as 'the moral majority, a movement dedicated to ensuring core Christian values were part of the New Right in the 1980s'.<sup>101</sup> This offers a contemporaneous reflection on the 'fundamentalist religious groups' that 'held significant sway over the presidential elections of 2000 and 2004'.<sup>102</sup> Critics frequently pontificated this element, with Dave Calhoun of *Time Out* viewing the film as reflecting 'then and now, the power of the church'.<sup>103</sup> *Empire* magazine's Helen O'Hara notes Anderson's focus on 'the wider forces of religion and capitalism and the role they've played in America's development'.<sup>104</sup>

At the time of *There will be Blood's* release, this collaboration seemed most salient in foreign policy. Bacevich argues that the Bush administration's expansionism offers a 'necessary adjunct to the accomplishment of Christ's saving mission', and cemented

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<sup>101</sup> Woods, *Mapping Contemporary Cinema: There Will be Blood, 2007*.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Dave Calhoun, *There will be Blood Time Out London Review* (2008), <https://www.timeout.com/london/film/there-will-be-blood> [accessed 2 July 2015].

<sup>104</sup> Helen O'Hara, *There Will be Blood Empire Magazine Review* (2008), <http://www.empireonline.com/movies/will-blood/review/> [accessed 3 July 2015].

the coalition for the 'new American militarism'.<sup>105</sup> Yet there was also discord within this coalition. The ambitious post-9/11 goals of transforming Islamic societies and pariah states often repelled prominent evangelicals who deemed Islam and democracy incompatible, a friction evident as early as Bush's first term. Martin Durham comments on how leading religious figure Franklin Graham was criticised by the Bush administration for denouncing 'Islam as an evil religion,' an attitude that vitiated the Bush administration's proposal of political and economic change in the Middle East.<sup>106</sup> In 2003, Ralph Reed and Moral Majority founder Jerry Falwell wrote a letter expressing concern over support for negotiations between Israel and Palestine, a cause that would, in Pat Robertson's words, expose the administration 'to the wrath of the lord'.<sup>107</sup>

*There Will be Blood*, however, is less focused on the friction stemming from neoconservatism's Wilsonian idealism than the ideology's dangerous export of market economics. Marc Mulholland comments on the primacy of this ideological tenet in the Iraq invasion, specifying the 'export of bourgeois revolution on the point of US and allied bayonets', and the tumult of an occupation that combined 'American business led avarice and neo-conservative fervour'.<sup>108</sup> Critics implied the relationship between business and religion in *There Will be Blood* to be symbolic for the Bush administration's domestic electoral coalition, but did not detect a comparable foreign policy allegory. The sole exceptions were articles in *Vanity Fair* and *The Economist*, yet these pieces concentrated more on topicality than content.

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<sup>105</sup> Bacevich, p. 146.

<sup>106</sup> Martin Durham, 'Evangelicals and the Politics of Red America', in *Right On?: Political Change and Continuity in George W. Bush's America*, ed. by Phillip Davies and Iwan Morgan (London: Institute for the study of the Americas, 2006), pp. 204-218 (p. 208).

<sup>107</sup> Pat Robertson, quoted in Durham, p. 208.

<sup>108</sup> Mulholland, p. 289.

The former acknowledged, 'With its price tickling \$100 a barrel at press time, and the U.S. allegedly not waging war for it all over the Middle East, there couldn't be a better time to make a movie out of *Oil!*'<sup>109</sup> The latter saw 'the Bush dynasty as the perfect foil' for Anderson's drama, and wryly commented that the 'lust for oil is something far more dangerous than creating the makeshift towns of Plainview's day'.<sup>110</sup>

A duality of allegory applied to *No Country for Old Men*'s 'getaway' narrative, a storyline overladen with both the domestic and international implications of the neoliberalism instituted in the early 1980s. A similarly multi-faceted meaning emerges from Plainview's partnership with town preacher Eli Sunday, Anderson's version of the Eli Watkins character in Sinclair's novel.

The fact that Eli's socialist brother Paul only has a brief cameo in Anderson's film updates Sinclair's polemic for a post-1989 context of American neoliberal hegemony. It also makes Plainview and Eli's relationship, and thus the relationship between American capitalism and religion, the film's centre of ideological conflict. The first meeting between Plainview and the Sunday family takes place in a landscape not wholly unlike the 'wastelands of Iraq and Afghanistan' described in Jim Welsh's analysis of *No Country for Old Men*.<sup>111</sup> The landscape is forbidding, as conveyed by a wide-angle shot that shows Plainview and H.W. marching towards the primitive, dilapidated site that is the Sunday ranch. A return of the ennui-ridden score that opened the picture adds to the austerity of this Western environment and denudes

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<sup>109</sup> Bruce Handy, quoted in Jason Sperb, *Blossoms and Blood: Postmodern Media Culture and the Films of Paul Thomas Anderson* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), p. 211.

<sup>110</sup> *The Economist* editorial, *Lexington: Blood and Oil* (2008), <http://www.economist.com/node/10533992> [accessed 7 July 2015].

<sup>111</sup> Welsh, p. 77.

Plainview's proposed industrialisation of any glamour or grandeur. Indeed, Plainview's first exchange with morose family patriarch Abel markedly contrasts the whimsy that suffused their first meeting in Sinclair's novel. Whereas in that text, son Bunny Sunday exudes excitement over his first sight of the ranch and Sunday family, enthusing as if 'he were approaching the birthplace of Abraham Lincoln'<sup>112</sup>, the tone of Anderson's film is deeply uneasy, a quality conveyed by how Day Lewis consistently portrays Plainview with a heavy-handed, gruff demeanor. Dressed in an oppositional fashion to the scruffy Abel Sunday, the cultural gulf between them reignites the spectre of Plainview's neocolonialism.

The tension between Plainview's Social Darwinist vision and the exacting evangelism of the Sundays becomes further tangible in a dinnertime meeting. The penurious nature of the setting, a cramped kitchen no bigger than a log cabin, is rendered more ascetic by the darkly, baroque lighting placed over the meal, as well as the ambience of mutual distrust that suffuses the dinner table. This miserabilism is palpable in the introduction of Eli Sunday. Sunday, who dominates Little Boston's civic life, is a character haughtily shrill in tone - played with a boyish entitlement by actor Paul Dano, the preacher watches Plainview with uncomfortable disdain. His quizzing of Plainview's reasons for being in Little Boston, and demands of ten thousand dollars for his ominously titled 'Church of the Third Revelation' in exchange for oil rights, give him an irascibility that is darker than the absurdist decadence of his incarnation in *Oil!* Whereas in *Oil!*, Plainview's first meeting with the Sundays sees the family descend into a religious frenzy in response to an earthquake<sup>113</sup>, the depiction here is

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<sup>112</sup> Upton Sinclair, *Oil!* [originally published 1927] (London: Penguin Classics, 2008), p. 87.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 92-95.

less comical and more saturnine, alluding to new sources of ideological friction for the United States.

The capricious imagery conjured by Eli Sunday has resonance when applied to The Bush administration's own contradictory foreign policy. Besides attempting to appease their domestic evangelical constituencies, various neoconservatives in the Bush administration had appealed to various elements of Iraq's religious population long before March 2003. David Wurmser, who served as a Middle East advisor to Vice President Dick Cheney, advocated a rapprochement with Iraq's Shia in his 1999 work *Tyranny's Ally: America's Failure to Defeat Saddam Hussein*. Attacking the realist use of 'Iraq' as a 'bulwark against Islamic fundamentalism', Wurmser argued that the alternative path to stability in the Middle East lay with the oppressed Shia majority who had no freedom under Saddam's Sunni dominated government.<sup>114</sup> He voiced the possibility of Shi'ism's 'Western affinity', a quality embodied in 'shrine cities' and 'Shi'ite institutions' that 'were powerful bases for civil society' and for a 'tradition of political decentralization in Iraq'.<sup>115</sup>

Post-9/11, similar ideals were disseminated in the Office of Special Plans, a Pentagon unit for intelligence gathering related to Iraq created by Deputy Secretary of Defence Paul Wolfowitz and Undersecretary of Defence for Policy Douglas Feith. Members recruited, including neoconservative academics Michael Rubin and Harold Rhode, were overwhelmingly sympathetic to the goal of placing secular Shia exile Ahmed Chalabi in power in Iraq. They advocated, in George Packer's words, restoring 'the Hashemite Kingdom of Iraq, with King Hussein's brother Prince Hassan on the throne

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<sup>114</sup> Wurmser, p. 70.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., pp. 76-78.

and Chalabi as prime minister...which would effectively return Iraq to its pre-1958 government'.<sup>116</sup> Rhode further described Chalabi as a prophet who 'people at first doubted, but came to realise the wisdom of his ways'.<sup>117</sup> This sectarian idealism clashed with the alternative vision of the State Department's Future of Iraq Project. Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke comment on this favoured co-operation with 'Baath party members' (former functionaries in Iraq's national ruling party, the Baath Party) who were 'a necessary part of the nation-building process', along with a plan for occupation that would win 'hearts and minds' by 'filling the security vacuum, restoring services, and making the transition to democracy'.<sup>118</sup> How the Office of Special Plans used this vision in a way that ignored the more pragmatic vision of the State Department is considered in the next chapter's analysis of Wilsonianism in *The Dark Knight*.

For now, it is worth examining how the application of neoliberalism to Iraq exacerbated the disastrous path of this decision and made uniting the country's disparate religious groups impossible. The later choice to replace the post-invasion provisional government, titled the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (referred to commonly as ORHA), with Paul Bremer's Coalition Provisional Authority (earlier referred to as the CPA) led to a changed agenda. Having a different emphasis on ORHA's overseeing of 'repairs to the war-damaged Iraq infrastructure, such as oil fields, hospitals, roads and telecommunications networks', the CPA alienated the Sunni Iraqi populace by embarking on an indiscriminate policy of 'de-Baathification', which removed all civil servants, government workers and soldiers

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<sup>116</sup> Packer, p. 108.

<sup>117</sup> Harold Rhode, quoted in Packer, *The Assassins Gate: America in Iraq*, p. 108.

<sup>118</sup> Halper and Clarke, pp. 224-225.

who had worked for the previous regime.<sup>119</sup> The policy of what Khalid Mustafa Medani refers to as a 'state building in reverse', the belief of Paul Bremer a stable Iraq would 'require the wholesale reallocation of resources and people from state control to 'private enterprise', led to 'rampant unemployment, lengthy gas lines, sporadic violence and an uncertain political future'.<sup>120</sup> The neoliberal belief that free markets 'contain the key to human wellbeing' was central to the neoconservative planned occupation, an essential part of a policy that would ensure 'a liberal democratic beacon to steer the Arab world away from Islamic fundamentalism'.<sup>121</sup>

Besides the destitution created by the CPA, this prediction of democratic harmony collided with the authoritarian nature of Bremer's governance. As noted in Dobbins, Jones, Runkle, and Mohandas's National Security report *Occupying Iraq: A History of the Coalition Provisional Authority* (2009), the CPA saw him able to exercise 'supreme executive, legislative and judicial powers', which 'created penal consequences and altered Iraqi law'.<sup>122</sup> This exercise of power, besides attenuating the hopes for a Shia led democracy, displayed evidence of an authoritarianism that sat uneasily with the early ambitions for a civil society modelled on the leadership of moral Shia.

In *No Country for Old Men*, the impossibility of fusing neoliberal economics with Christian morality suffused the early Reagan era in contradiction. The allegory in *There Will be Blood*, in spite of its more period setting, has more contemporary

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<sup>119</sup> James Dobbins, Seth G. Jones, Benjamin Runkle, Siddharth Mohandas, *Occupying Iraq: A History of the Coalition Provisional Authority* (Santa Monica, California: The RAND Corporation, 2009), p. 4.

<sup>120</sup> Khalid Mustafa Medani, *State Building in Reverse: The Neoliberal 'Reconstruction' of Iraq* (2016), <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer232/state-rebuilding-reverse> [accessed 14 June 2015].

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Dobbins, Jones, Runkle and Mohandas, pp. 14-15.

resonance. A scene inside Eli Sunday's derelict church encapsulates the nihilistic consequences of the CPA's privatisation and serves to place Berman's notion of a 'hideous schizophrenia' in a neocolonial context. The scene begins with a long shot that shows Sunday standing before a congregation in awe of his energy and theological wisdom. Plainview, who watches from the back of the church hall, can only look with smug superiority at the unthinking populism of the congregation and the visibly impoverished church setting. Other than the appearance of a feverish Texan sun that enters through the hollowed out church roof and windows, the building appears moribund and resigned, a state that is only alleviated through the deranged mania of Sunday's sermon. Sunday's attempt to 'heal' an elderly woman with arthritis is both comic and sinister yet it above all conveys the fundamentally primitive nature of his enterprise. In a medium shot, Sunday caresses the elderly woman's arm and gesticulates towards the heavens. The high-pitched voice that Dano brings to his performance makes the sermon take on a shrill and effeminated nature. It makes a marked contrast with the masculinised, and often militarised, ethos of Plainview's oil empire. Plainview's reaction signals this disconnect. He watches the spectacle with wry amusement, knowing that his more sophisticated oil business will be subsidising Sunday's performances. The tracking shot that culminates the sermon makes the unhinged nature of the church more apparent. Sunday and his congregation screech directly towards the camera, collectively howling for the devil to exit the beleaguered woman's spirit. Yet this absurd image also serves a thematic purpose, establishing the cultural gulf between the rituals of the Church of the Third Revelation and Plainview's neocolonial Social Darwinism.

This tension is tangible in the conversation that bookends the scene. A medium shot begins the exchange and shows Plainview and Sunday talking outside the chapel in a manner almost akin to a backroom deal. Yet their dialogue promptly destabilises this image of accord. Sunday notes with upset the death of a recent worker on an oil derrick and argues that had not Plainview's workers brought hedonism and alcohol into Little Boston, the man could have lived. Plainview responds caustically, propounding that the workers cannot be effective if 'they are listening to your gospel' and concludes bombastically by promising 'gold all over the place'.

The vulgarity of Plainview's empire, and the callousness that surrounds the worker's death, is an interpretable allegory for the CPA's offence to Iraqi civilians. Patrick Cockburn opines on how 'the free-market principles of the Bush administration and simple greed meant that Iraq became a hunting ground for the world's shadier characters', a coded description for private contractors who typified 'a privatization of military jobs' that 'may have been sensible in peacetime America but not in war-ravaged Iraq'.<sup>123</sup> Such jobs of course, deprived former Iraqi soldiers of work. Thomas McCormick comments on the irony that neoconservatives such as Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Perle had started out their careers as Democrats committed to 'an aggressive foreign policy, but also to traditional Democratic concerns for social welfare', a past wholly ignored by the occupation's 'absence of a social safety net for Iraqis'.<sup>124</sup> Thus, the neoconservatives had 'lost their former affection for social

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<sup>123</sup> Cockburn, pp. 174-176.

<sup>124</sup> McCormick, pp. 99-100.

reform' and 'other corporate interests had tipped the scales to effect a transformation more to their own views on nation building in Iraq'.<sup>125</sup>

To Fukuyama, the Iraq occupation's ruination was not neoliberalism, but instead the administration's 'naïve Wilsonianism' and attempt at 'trying to democratize the world'.<sup>126</sup> Fukuyama further implied that a Global Meliorist animus in contemporary neoconservatism exacerbated this through a vision of 'welfare' and 'social engineering'<sup>127</sup>, making his argument completely oppositional to Cockburn and McCormick's stress on the neoliberal character of neoconservative regime change.

The progressive nature of Plainview's promises to Little Boston in *There Will be Blood* might be seen to corroborate Fukuyama's view. A scene set at an opening for a key oil derrick differs from the emphasis of Plainview's earlier altercation with Eli and instead portrays an imperialism associated with the human rights-orientated rationales for the Bush administration's interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. After being informed by H.W. that Abel Sunday's young daughter Mary is routinely beaten, Plainview uses this as an opportunity to publicly embarrass the patriarch. Standing at the site of the derrick, a medium shot shows Plainview standing with Mary and H.W. before a crowd of Little Boston's congregation. He refers to Mary Sunday as a 'proud daughter of these hills' and even delivers paeans that are socialistic in tone, proposing to Little Boston 'we pray together, we work together, and if the Good Lord smiles kindly on our endeavor, we share the wealth together'.

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>126</sup> Fukuyama, *After Neoconservatism*.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

This reformist impulse plays a role in the celebratory dinner that follows. Whilst having dinner with Abel Sunday near the oil derrick, a chance meeting with Mary gives Plainview the chance to illustrate his creation of social change. He briefly talks to Mary about her new dress, a gift from him to celebrate the oil derrick's opening and Little Boston's escape from penury. For all of Plainview's unsavoury aspects, this moment carries no paedophilic connotations. Rather, Plainview's gift is steeped in an old-fashioned tone of *noblesse oblige* paternalism and serves to advertise the cultural as well as economic modernisation of Little Boston. Conveying his power over the town's social and religious codes, Plainview proceeds to ask Mary rhetorically, 'Your daddy doesn't hit you anymore, right?' He repetitively boasts of 'no more hitting' directly in front of Abel, who can only watch ashamedly. Plainview's repudiation of Little Boston's social conservatism is further explicit in the scene's final moments, where he taunts Abel by continually swigging from his whiskey flask. Plainview's aggressive reforms of Little Boston's culture resonate with the aims of liberals who sought a program of progressive nation building. To Michael Ignatieff, it was the ideal of 'liberal imperialism' that should have driven the Bush administration's War on Terror. This was the hope that a post-9/11 American empire could become 'the last hope for democracy and stability alike', a quality accentuated by America's role as an 'empire lite', 'a global hegemony whose grace notes are free markets, human rights, and democracy, enforced by the most awesome military power the world has ever known'.<sup>128</sup> Famed writer Christopher Hitchens endorsed an even more pugnacious perspective, praising a 'battle against the forces of nihilism and absolutism', that would enhance the 'secular and pluralist forces within Afghan

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<sup>128</sup> Michael Ignatieff, *The American Empire; The Burden*.

and Iraqi society'.<sup>129</sup> The foreign policy analyst Anne-Marie Slaughter, who opposed the Iraq War for its unilateralism but supported the Afghanistan intervention, provided similar, though more tempered, rationalisations.<sup>130</sup> She argued that it was 'permissible to free a society from the iron grip of a government bent on the destruction or virtual suffocation of a significant portion of its own population - whether an ethnic group, as in Rwanda, or all women, as with the Taliban in Afghanistan'.<sup>131</sup>

If read as an integral part of the neoconservatism pursued by the Bush administration, these liberal and secular humanist views not only fit the welfarist imperialism derided by Fukuyama. Indeed, they would also undermine the Bush administration's alliance with evangelical Christianity in the War on Terror, contravening Walter Mead's premise that Bush era neoconservatism was predisposed towards a 'revival Wilsonianism', an outlook driven by a pursuit of democratization 'more specifically Christian' rather than adhering to 'liberal secular humanist values in foreign policy'.<sup>132</sup> Plainview's undercutting of the Church of the Third Revelation's social conservatism potentially mirrors Fukuyama's belief that neoconservatism had descended into an out of touch secular liberalism. Yet it is more arguable that Plainview's reformist agenda is a mere fig leaf for the Social Darwinism of his business empire, a method of subterfuge that suspiciously

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<sup>129</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *A War to Be Proud Of* (2005), <http://www.weeklystandard.com/a-war-to-be-proud-of/article/7193> [accessed 18 June 2015].

<sup>130</sup> Anne-Marie Slaughter's views are further integral to the next chapter's analysis of Wilsonianism's relationship with neoconservatism in *The Dark Knight*.

<sup>131</sup> Anne-Marie Slaughter, 'Wilsonianism in the Twenty-first Century', in *The Crisis of American Foreign Policy: Wilsonianism in the Twenty-first Century*, pp. 89-117 (p. 105).

<sup>132</sup> Walter Russell Mead, *Power, Terror, Peace and War: America's Grand Strategy in a World at Risk* (New York: Penguin Roundhouse, 2004), pp. 90-91.

resembles the paeans to democratisation that disguised the pursuit of neoliberal economics in Iraq.

This deceit is evident in a speech Plainview delivers to Little Boston. Before the address even begins, Anderson illustrates an authoritarianism that bears comparison with the heavy-handed nature of the CPA. Meeting in a private office with business advisor Fletcher, Plainview is informed that ‘one holdout’ has refused to assemble for his address. In an indication of his misanthropic state and disdain towards these instances of political difference, Plainview hears this news shrouded in *noir* shadow, and merely muses that the individual or ‘holdout’ that refused to come, an elderly man named William Bandy, will ‘come round’. Fletcher and Plainview’s contempt for their opposition and loaded language recalls the words of Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld, who used the term ‘dead-enders’ to mock fired and disenfranchised former employees of Iraq’s national government who had resorted to insurgency.<sup>133</sup> Anne M Wittman sees Rumsfeld’s words as attempting to imply ‘these were isolated fanatics trying to fight for a regime that had already been defeated’.<sup>134</sup>

Plainview’s opponents are subject to a similarly fatalistic attitude. This sensibility is implicit in the oil baron’s subsequent speech, which takes place in a barn adjoining his private office. It begins with Plainview speaking to a crowd of bemused, raggedly dressed citizens. Repeating almost verbatim the beginning of his earlier pitch, he

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<sup>133</sup> Donald Rumsfeld, quoted in Anne M. Whitman, *Talking Conflict: The Loaded Language of Genocide, Political Violence, Terrorism, and Warfare* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2016), p. 91.

<sup>134</sup> Whitman, p. 91.

boasts that he has travelled 'halfway across the state to be here and see about this land'.

The disingenuous intent of the speech becomes increasingly clear through a series of juxtapositions. Plainview's address eventually descends into voiceover format when it plays over a tracking shot of oilmen arriving at Little Boston's train station, creating a montage that plays against his dialogue. The effect of this juxtaposition illustrates the discrepancy between the progressivism Plainview propounds and his agenda of privatisation. As Plainview attempts to 'dispel the extravagant rumours about what my plans are', the oilmen walk in a cocksure fashion towards Little Boston at nightfall, an image that befits the animus of a nighttime raid. Plainview's speech repeatedly counteracts these implications of rapacity and militarisation - he speaks of the social renewal oil can bring to Little Boston, rhapsodising about the benefits of 'education' and 'wonderful schools'. Despite the benevolence of Plainview's language, these promises again collide with the cold aggression of his empire. A series of wide-angle shots display Plainview's oilmen in a field full of tents, pondering the riches of the oil derrick they see before them. The encampment of tents, and their battlefield like appearance, undermines the soft power of Plainview's language, encoding contradiction and dissonance.

The next few lines of Plainview's address attempt to disguise his oil empire's abrasive qualities by promoting Global Meliorism. Plainview argues passionately that, 'no child in Little Boston should look on a loaf of bread as a luxury' before a pan across the Little Boston fields. As this vista appears onscreen, he continues to muse on the possibilities of 'irrigation', 'cultivation', 'roads', and the village having 'more

grain than they know what to do with'. These paradisiacal ambitions are scrutinised in the scene's final moments. Eli Sunday asks off-screen 'if the new road will lead to the church?', a concern Plainview attempts to mollify by claiming, 'That will be the first place it leads'. Greenwood's score descends into melancholy as this exchange occurs, adding a sense of dysphoria to Plainview's neocolonialism.

Because of Plainview's purveyance of a Global Meliorism for Little Boston, much of this scene's content has an affinity with Kevin Phillip's understanding of the Bush administration's neoconservatism. Kevin Phillips draws parallels between the neoconservative zeal towards Iraq and President Lyndon Johnson's Global Meliorist attempt to synthesise a 'latter-day U.S. manifest destiny and a personal compulsion to match Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal in the usual Texas style'.<sup>135</sup> Much like Plainview's proposals of civilisation, irrigation, and cultivation, Johnson promoted 'democracy in Saigon' and 'a \$1 billion program for electrification in Indochina's Mekong delta valley'.<sup>136</sup> This constituted 'an adventure in nation building', and a liberal idealism that offered a 'naïve preview of what his neoconservative heirs would promise the Tigris-Euphrates Valley nearly four decades later'.<sup>137</sup>

Yet *There Will be Blood* conveys how this idealism was obviated by the American occupation. Much as the Vietnam War betrayed a dissonance between the Great Society rhetoric that underpinned the US presence and the illiberal realities of the South Vietnamese junta, Paul Berman's Utopian ideal of a 'beachhead of Arab democracy in the Middle East'<sup>138</sup> became incongruous next to the economic shock

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<sup>135</sup> Phillips, p. 297.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., p. 297.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., p. 297.

<sup>138</sup> Packer, *The Assassin's Gate*, p. 58.

therapy of Paul Bremer's CPA. An analogous incongruity applies to the juxtaposition of Plainview's Wilsonian rhetoric with the arrival of his imperial foot soldiers. The surreptitiousness created by these images recalls the words of Walter Le Feber, who cynically called the Bush administration's Iraq intervention 'a way to disguise regime change with the rhetoric of Wilsonian democracy'.<sup>139</sup> Plainview's rule, like the CPA and its dismissal of former Iraqi state employees, is concerned with democratic reform only if it comports with his own notions of economic hegemony.

The domineering nature of this retrograde neo-imperialism is evident in Anderson's cine-literacy. *There Will be Blood* of course embodies the characteristics of the revisionist Western; yet the cinematic parallels are more perverse than that of *No Country for Old Men*. Although both pictures were filmed in nearby Texas locations, Anderson's choice of Marfa is interesting as this was also the shooting site for George Stevens's classical Hollywood Western, *Giant* (1956).<sup>140</sup> *Giant*, which focused on wealthy Texan patriarch Jordan 'Bick' Benedict and his rivalry with *nouveau riches* oil baron Jett Rink, possesses cursory similarities with *There Will be Blood's* narrative. The historical theme of manifest destiny is palpable in an early discussion between Benedict and his East Coast wife Leslie Lynton about the American acquisition of Texas. The vicious politics of the oil business is integral to Benedict's hatred of Rink; finally, the struggle to reconcile moral idealism with the exigencies of US

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<sup>139</sup> Walter LaFeber, 'The Flawed Rice Doctrine of Transformational Diplomacy and American Global Policy', *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, Vol.4:3 (2006), <http://japanfocus.org/-Walter-LaFeber/1870/article.html> [accessed 18 November 2015].

<sup>140</sup> Information on *No Country for Old Men's* shooting locations in *The Worldwide Guide to Movie Locations, No Country for Old Men film locations* (2014), <http://www.movie-locations.com/movies/n/No-Country-For-Old-Men.html#.WVrbl4jyvIV> [accessed 30 June 2015]. Detail on *There Will be Blood* is in James Ponsoldt, *Giant Ambition* (n.d.), <http://filmmakermagazine.com/archives/issues/winter2008/blood.php#.WVrd54jyvIW> [accessed 2 July 2015].

expansionism is present in Lynton's attempts to provide education for segregated Mexican-Americans. Yet whereas Plainview's business embraces malice and regression, the patriarch Benedict grows more liberal over the course of *Giant*. The third act of Stevens's film sees Benedict approve of his children marrying Mexican-Americans and, in a climatic polemic against the apartheid of the 1950s South, confront a racist café owner for denying his non-white grandchild and daughter in-law service.

Released in 1956, the beneficence of *Giant*'s white leads corroborates Richard Slotkin's understanding of a 'progressive' sensibility in various classical Hollywood Westerns.<sup>141</sup> Ashton D. Trice and Samuel A. Holland affirmed this reading, citing examples of a genre that 'sees the next generation as an improvement'.<sup>142</sup> Although *Giant* shares *The Wild Bunch* and *High Plains Drifter*'s stark allegorising of the contemporaneous zeitgeist, it is fundamentally unrevisionist in this emphasis on the frontier as a site of social renewal. Therefore, unlike *No Country for Old Men*'s similarities to the Peckinpah and Eastwood directed films, *There Will be Blood*'s invocation of *Giant* is ironic due to the 'regressive' West presented in Anderson's picture. The all-white cast of *There Will be Blood*, along with its contest between reactionary evangelism and misanthropic Social Darwinism, make its portrayal of the American West exclude any notion of progressivism or reform.

The atavistic nature of Plainview's empire becomes clear in a dramatic oil strike set piece, reminiscent of a similar scene in *Giant*, where the youthful Jett Rink discovers

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<sup>141</sup> Slotkin, p. 394.

<sup>142</sup> Ashton D. Trice and Samuel A. Holland, *Heroes, Antiheroes and Dolts: Portrayals of Masculinity in American Popular Films, 1921-1999* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 2001), pp. 118-119.

oil to the chagrin of a weary Benedict. The consequences of Plainview's oil strike, however, are far darker and serve to highlight how an avaricious culture denuded the United States of its benevolent paternalist promises to the Middle East. What literalises this meaning is the accident's first victim in Plainview's adopted son H.W., who is on Little Boston's signature oil derrick at the same time as a gas explosion. A tracking shot shows Plainview racing to the site frenetically, as the tone of Greenwood's score becomes feverish and intensifies the trauma of the accident. The desaturated, greyed out nature of cinematographer Robert Elswitt's images creates the atmosphere of a war picture, oddly not unlike the sanguinary opening scenes of *Saving Private Ryan*.

This warlike quality becomes most explicit when an oil-drenched Plainview finally finds H.W., who has become deaf from the explosion. In a medium shot of Plainview yelling at the traumatised H.W., the sound becomes mute with the dramatic exception of Greenwood's frenetic score. Although this technique primarily signals the deafness of H.W., it also appears reminiscent of the way Spielberg alternately muted sound in *Saving Private Ryan's* D-day sequence, a technique which amplified the visual horror of the battlefield. Plainview's solipsism still dominates the scene. After placing H.W. in his office, he returns to the fiery derrick. A series of wide-angle shots portray him standing in awe next to his bewildered business advisor, Fletcher, who he castigates for undue moroseness. Plainview asks him what he is 'so miserable about', when 'there's a whole ocean of oil underneath our feet and no one can get at it except for me!'

It is this characteristic selfishness and paternal abdication that is inextricably associated with his borderline fetishisation of the burning oil derrick, which eventually topples in an image redolent of the Twin Towers' collapse. The oil derrick's conflagration therefore has the appearance of a perverse and dualistic *cassus belli*, one that juxtaposes the oil motivated subtext of the US's Iraq occupation with 9/11 style imagery that connotes the United States's own domestic trauma.<sup>143</sup> To Guy Westwell, who sees the simultaneous use of both post-9/11 and Iraq War imagery in Steven Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* (2005) as producing a sense of 'victimisation', such juxtapositions in Hollywood cinema merely promotes reconciliation, aligning them with 'conservative discourse'.<sup>144</sup>

Yet the result in *There Will be Blood* is polemical. In associating the Twin Towers style destruction of the collapsed oil derrick with Plainview's neocolonialism, Anderson denotes an American hegemony based on a primal, nihilistic exhilaration. The destroyed site recalls the language of Lloyd C. Gardner, who comments on how the codenamed 'shock and awe' culture of the Iraq invasion displayed a 'theological tone not confined to the Christian Right'.<sup>145</sup> This formed a takeover 'by ideologues with an agenda that tolerates no dissent', who ignored 'any limits on the sacrifice of its own citizenry to be able to place high-tech centurions around the globe'.<sup>146</sup> Plainview's rapturous reaction to the immolated oil derrick blends this globalised 'shock and awe' militarism with that other key facet of the New Right political predilection,

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<sup>143</sup> I shall discuss how this dualistic meaning is replicated in Pandora's mother tree in *Avatar*.

<sup>144</sup> Westwell, pp. 100-104.

<sup>145</sup> Gardner, 'Present at the Culmination: An Empire of Righteousness?', p. 27.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

namely the neoliberal will to privatise and deregulate at whatever economic and environmental cost.

Bacevich noted how this combination had its crystallisation in the neoconservative *annus mirabilis* of 1980. The Carter administration's decision to endorse military action in the Persian Gulf to protect America's oil resources formed 'a militarization of US policy', that aimed to safeguard 'the ever increasing affluence that underwrites the modern American conception of liberty'.<sup>147</sup> Indeed, Bush merely used Wilsonian rhetoric as a 'smokescreen' for 'armed might to secure American pre-eminence across the region, especially in the oil-rich Persian Gulf'.<sup>148</sup>

Plainview's joy at the flaming oil derrick reflects the combination of militarism and American material avarice lying beneath the Wilsonian smokescreen. Like *No Country for Old Men*, this imagery grounds neoconservatism in its original concomitance with neoliberal ideology and exposes the hollowness of its platitudes towards democratic reform. It highlights the reactionary basis of neoconservative designs towards the Middle East, supplanting *Giant's* desert of progressive idealism for a barren marriage between militarism and Social Darwinist capitalism.

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<sup>147</sup> Bacevich, p. 183.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.



Image 5: Plainview's flaming oil derrick in *There Will be Blood*<sup>149</sup>

The spirit of a distinctly different Western amplifies this ideological toxicity. After *There Will be Blood* was released, Anderson acknowledged his debt to John Huston's *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948).<sup>150</sup> Huston's film takes place in Mexico in 1925 and focuses on the travails of Humphrey Bogart's Dobbs, an unemployed American who meets two men, Curtin and Howard, in a quest for gold in the Sierra Madre Mountains. The harsh, ascetic tone of Huston's film is perceivable in the unforgiving West of Anderson's picture. Plainview's later uncovering of a man who pretends to be his long lost half-brother, Henry Plainview, invokes the misanthropic dynamics of Huston's film, but also renews the notions of sectarian conflict that were evident in *No Country for Old Men*.

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<sup>149</sup> This image can be found in Andrew Dix, *US election 2016: Five Films Donald Trump should watch* (2016), <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/us-election-2016-five-films-that-donald-trump-should-watch-a7177391.html> [accessed 23 December 2017].

<sup>150</sup> James Ponsoldt, *Giant Ambition*.

Plainview accosts the imposter next to a forest campfire, a *mise en scène* analogous to a dramatic campfire scene in Huston's picture. That scene, which took place in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre's* third act, saw Dobbs shoot Curtin to retain his share of the gold acquired in the mountains. Anderson's scene is similarly nihilistic - after confronting and interrogating the imposter briefly, Plainview promptly murders him. The febrile campfire flames that light up the aftermath of this act add to the demonic nature of Plainview's enterprise, as, in a series of shots, Plainview buries Henry in a dark, dingy mud pit, comparable to the oil pool shown in *There Will be Blood's* opening sequence. Though this is the first murder of Anderson's film, it feels a natural, and long portended, culmination of Plainview's amorality.

In the landscape of post-occupation Iraq during 2006, fratricidal murders between communities became the norm under the Shia dominated Maliki government. Ali A. Allawi comments on how 'death squads and the infiltrated police began to match - and exceed - the insurgents in the scale and viciousness of their attacks on civilians'.<sup>151</sup> This outcome was far from the civilising hopes of what Wurmser propounded in 1999. The final scene of Anderson's film, like *No Country for Old Men*, is resigned to sectarian carnage. Yet whereas the bathos of the Coen Brothers's picture lay in the quietude of Bell's monologue, Anderson ends with a tone of sound and fury, one that allegorises both the destruction of the Bush administration's electoral coalition and the religious identity of post-invasion Iraq.

The final scenes of *There will be Blood* flash-forward to 1927 and are set in a mansion owned by a retired Plainview. Though this is the closest Anderson's film comes to

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<sup>151</sup> Ali A. Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 453.

overlapping with *Oil!*'s time period, as Sinclair's novel ends in 1924, the content of this epilogue again differs markedly from its original source material. It is worth specifying these immense differences. *Oil!*'s ending revolves around the funeral for the socialist Paul Watkins, who has been killed by a hypodermic needle after being beaten to near death by an anti-communist mob. Though Bunny desires a 'Red funeral' for his friend, he must endure Eli imposing his 'majestic authority' in a Church of the Third Revelation ceremony, a macabre occasion that occurs concurrently with conservative Republican president Calvin Coolidge's dramatic electoral landslide.<sup>152</sup> The ending inextricably connects Eli with the malevolent forces of American capitalism, as both he and Bunny's father Ross treasure the 'opportunity to enslave and exploit labour'.<sup>153</sup> However, as S. Brent Rodriguez-Plate illustrates, Anderson inverts this alliance, ending with 'a shocking, violent assertion of capitalist dominance over religion', one that departs from Sinclair's understanding of the two 'in close allegiance'.<sup>154</sup>

Plainview and Eli Sunday's last meeting takes place in an ostentatious bowling room within Plainview's mansion. Sunday, who finds a drunken Plainview on the floor, wakes him with inspiring anecdotes about Little Boston. For all its primordial beginnings, much of Little Boston has come to embrace the modernity brought by Plainview's oil industry - Sunday is a radio evangelist, who broadcasts nationally for religious American audiences; the grandson of William Bandy is embarking on a

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<sup>152</sup> Sinclair, p. 547.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., p. 548.

<sup>154</sup> S. Brent Rodriguez-Plate, 'A Nation Birthed in Blood: Violent Cosmogonies and American Film', in *From Jeremiad to Jihad: Religion, Violence, and America*, ed. by John D. Carlson and Jonathan H. Ebel (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2012), pp. 48-61 (p. 55).

career in Hollywood movies and thus has different values to the parochialism Plainview first encountered from his family.

Although Bandy and Sunday's elevation to capitalistic modernity seems to make Little Boston emblematic of the neoconservative dream, desperation underwrites Sunday's visit. Urgently needing money and seeking to rekindle his partnership with Plainview, he mentions his discovery of oil beneath the abandoned Bandy homestead. In order to finalise an agreement to drill the area, Plainview stipulates that Sunday must recant his belief in the lord, and repeatedly proclaim, 'I am a false prophet and God is a superstition!' After Sunday performs this utterance several times, Plainview admits 'those areas have already been drilled'. He proceeds to lambast Sunday with histrionics, comparing the Bandy tract to the 'blood of the lamb' that 'he drinks up'. Like the image of the fighting boys towards the end of *No Country for Old Men*, the misanthropic greed that underpins this scene resonates with the destructive trajectory of American neoliberalism in the late 2000s - Sunday descends into tears over Plainview's deceit and bemoans 'the recent panic in our economy'.

Anderson's film finishes with a cathartic divorce between religious conservatism and untrammelled capitalism. In a series of long angle shots, Plainview chases and throws bowling balls at the preacher. Plainview proclaims 'I am the third revelation' before culminating his assault with a brutal murder, achieved through repeatedly smashing Sunday's head with a skittle. Afterwards, Plainview sits while his butler enters the room to investigate the commotion. The final image of *There Will be Blood* is a long shot of Plainview next to Eli's dead body - the oil baron states 'I'm

finished' before Greenwood's score concludes on an ironical, jaunty riff, a tone wholly oppositional to the melancholia that opened the picture.

Read as an allegory for the Bush administration's fracturing electoral coalition, Plainview's jettisoning of Sunday from his empire is bizarrely insouciant in tone. Yet it suggests a schism that mirrors the disarray confronting the neoconservative movement and the Republican right in the mid-2000s. Plainview's vision is so totalising that constituents like Sunday become impervious and irrelevant to his empire, a subtext of imperial overstretch that befits the film's release towards the end of the Bush years. If interpreted as allegoric for the United States's neocolonial role in Iraq, the scene proves the unsuitability of implanting Western capitalistic mores on socially conservative populations. Sunday, who naively bought into Plainview's individualism by becoming a radio evangelist, is penurious before his untimely demise. He provides a direct inversion of the happy coalition evinced in Sinclair's novel and serves to belie the neoconservative myth that socially conservative populations would adapt easily to the forces of American privatisation.

*There Will be Blood* conveys how the neoconservative agenda prioritised economic control over democratisation. Like *No Country for Old Men*, an undercurrent of Social Darwinism pervades its narrative and contravenes Fukuyama's reading of a foreign policy undone by liberal idealism. Both films reflect on neoliberalism's incompatibility with a welfarist democracy, a meaning that resonates with America's nation building failure in Iraq. The next chapter continues examining this unwieldiness in Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* and its allegory for the Bush administration's collaboration with liberal interventionists, discussing the

contradictions of this coalition in relation to the unilateral orientation of  
neoconservative foreign policy.

## CHAPTER 4:

### ENDLESS WAR IN *THE DARK KNIGHT* – EULOGY TO WILSONIAN FAILURE

In his introduction to *The Crisis of American Foreign Policy: Wilsonianism in the Twenty First Century* (2009), G. John Ikenberry asks whether the Bush administration's foreign policy during the Iraq War formed 'an evolved Wilsonian worldview that is widely shared across the political spectrum', or resulted from, 'a group of ideological outliers who hid behind Wilsonian ideas but were ultimately wielding a very different vision of America and the world'.<sup>1</sup> This chapter discusses how Ikenberry's question is answered in *The Dark Knight*. It accomplishes this through examining how the collaboration between the idealistic District Attorney Harvey Dent and the vigilante superhero Batman represents the profanations that Wilsonian philosophy underwent during the Bush years.

Originating in President Woodrow Wilson's call for a democratic settlement in the war-torn Europe of 1917, Wilsonian belief in its original form was themed around the principles of multilateralism and liberal internationalism. Lori Damrosch saw the traditional ideals of Wilsonianism as founded on 'the advancement of democracy through US initiatives,' alongside 'the development of norms and institutions to which opposition to unilateral intervention could be mobilized'.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Walter

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<sup>1</sup> G. John Ikenberry, 'Introduction: Woodrow Wilson, the Bush Administration, and the Future of Liberal Internationalism, in *The Crisis of American Foreign Policy: Wilsonianism in the Twenty-first Century*, pp. 1-24 (p. 2).

<sup>2</sup> Lori Damrosch, 'Nationalism and Internationalism: The Wilsonian Legacy', *New York University Journal of International Law and Politics*, Vol.26:3 (1994), pp. 493-510 (pp. 493-494).

Mead defines Wilsonianism in its orthodox form as the belief that, 'the United States has a moral obligation and an important national interest in spreading American democratic and social values throughout the world, creating a peaceful international community that accepts the rule of law'.<sup>3</sup> To many liberals, this vision was undermined in the Second Gulf War. Whilst the Bush administration had employed Wilsonian rhetoric to justify the spread of 'freedom and democracy'<sup>4</sup>, the unilateral launch of the war had contravened Wilsonianism's original emphasis on international law, comity within International Relations, and arbitration of conflict through the League of Nations and its later progeny in the UN. Wilfried Gerhard sees this development as replacing Wilsonian internationalism 'with imperial attitudes', a culture where 'the United States is entitled to unfettered freedom of action, specified in the concepts of unilateralism' and 'pre-emptive action'.<sup>5</sup>

By considering Dent as representative of liberty and Batman as allegoric of the realist principle of security, this chapter argues that their relationship mirrors the changes to Wilsonianism created by neoconservatism. Through three acts, director Christopher Nolan encapsulates this shift in his portrayal of their fight against the iconic villain of The Joker. These acts are analysed with corresponding chapter sections. Section 4.1: 'Change versus continuity and *The Dark Knight's* early scenes' explores the first act and its representation of the problems confronting Wilsonianism in the post-9/11 era. A dramatic opening bank robbery by The Joker foreshadows the threats to and compromises facing Wilsonians in the early Bush

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<sup>3</sup> Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy And How it Changed the World*, p. xvii.

<sup>4</sup> Bush, *Full text: George Bush's speech to the American Enterprise Institute*.

<sup>5</sup> Wilfried Gerhard, 'American Exceptionalism and the War in Iraq', *ENDC Proceedings*, Vol.18 (2014), pp. 11-24 (p. 17).

years. Section 4.2: 'The Joker's insurrection and the degeneration of Wilsonianism' discusses Batman and Dent's fight against The Joker's insurgency during the second act, a Sisyphean struggle that allegorises the failure to implant Wilsonian democracy in Iraq. Section 4.3: 'The foreign policy we deserve, but not the foreign policy we need right now' analyses the final act and its illustration of how the Bush years damaged Wilsonianism. The climax of *The Dark Knight* depicts an America trapped in a purgatory of endless war, incapable of a return to multilateralism. This distortion of Wilsonianism is central to Nolan's picture.

#### **4.1: Change versus continuity and *The Dark Knight's* early scenes**

*The Dark Knight* opens with a set piece that implies the rejection of the liberal world order imagined in the 1990s through its portentous use of anti-capitalist and anti-globalisation imagery. This set piece revolves around a bank robbery orchestrated by The Joker. He is a villain, who, like earlier antagonists in this thesis, symbolises the changes to US foreign policy mores wrought by its post-Cold War hegemony. The opening shots show various clowns preparing to attack Gotham City's central bank from locations that include a getaway car and a nearby rooftop, images of tense preparation that carry a veneer of the pre-meditated violence applied in the 9/11 attacks.

Cinematographer Wally Pfister's use of desaturated, grey colours accentuates this quality, making the scene acquire a sobering, visceral sensibility. Pfister, who worked on every installment in Nolan's Batman trilogy, designed a look for the franchise that

was 'very natural' and 'grounded in reality'.<sup>6</sup> For *The Dark Knight*, this feat was partially accomplished by shooting in British locations such as Glasgow, Liverpool, and Battersea, London.<sup>7</sup> The juxtaposition of the maniacal clowns against the cityscape infuses the scene with a sense of hyperreality, owing to their assault on a real life location that could suffer a potential terrorist attack. Further, the derealised, aloof quality of the sequence should feel starkly familiar when recalling the openings of earlier case studies in this thesis. One can easily compare the aggressive score by Hans Zimmer and elements of hyper-capitalist mania conveyed by the clowns to the similarly nihilistic opening moments of *There Will be Blood*. This tonal affinity becomes most evident in *The Joker*, a villain who associates himself with the political ideologies that animated the post-9/11 era.

Shortly before the antagonist first appears, Nolan shows a series of betrayals orchestrated by the criminal mastermind. The robbers abruptly shoot one another because of conflicting instructions from their villainous boss, machinations that are satiric of the 'cutthroat' culture of American capitalism they are attacking. This deconstruction becomes most apparent after the shooting of a corrupt bank manager. The manager, who is also a money launderer for the mobs of Gotham City, howls 'criminals used to believe in something...honour...respect...what do you believe in?!' A close-up shot of the manager's assailant conveys an almost punk rock veneer, displaying a visage made distinctive by facial scars, clown paint, and grungy,

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<sup>6</sup> Wally Pfister, quoted in Owen Williams, *The Cinematography of The Dark Knight* (2012), <http://www.empireonline.com/movies/features/wally-pfister-dark-knight/> [accessed 17 October 2015].

<sup>7</sup> IMDb, *The Dark Knight (2008): Filming Locations* (n.d.), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0468569/locations> [accessed 5 November 2015].

unwashed hair; yet more important is his dialogue, which proclaims, 'What doesn't kill you...makes you stranger'.

The combative nature of The Joker's introduction shows an affinity with the Islamist terrorism that precluded the post-Cold War hope of the United States merely playing the role of a pacific commercialist, introverted power. To the Marxist David Harvey, the 9/11 attacks and the War on Terror exposed 'a crisis in "neoliberal" capitalism'.<sup>8</sup> Only military intervention could serve as an effective adjunct to what Kaplan and Kristol opined as the 'wishful idealism' and 'liberalizing powers of commerce' that fuelled the economic boom of the 1990s.<sup>9</sup> Further, Matteo Albanese contemplates the end of 'a largely pacified international political framework' and a return to an 'ideological vision put forward by neoconservatives, which provided for the return to closed systems, ideologically and territorially defined'.<sup>10</sup>

The Joker's behaviour signals this return of ideology. In a subsequent close-up shot, he places a smoke grenade in the corrupt bank manager's mouth, subordinating the ethos of neoliberal deregulation to a landscape of militarisation. To Dan Hassler-Forest, who writes on the political subtext of comic book adaptations, 'The Joker's actions define a future of absolute neoliberal dogma and radical deregulation' and mirror our 'ambivalence in the face of a new form of capitalism that is as monstrous, chaotic, and unpredictable as it is inseparable'.<sup>11</sup> This ideological schizophrenia was

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<sup>8</sup> Harvey, quoted in Holloway, p. 25.

<sup>9</sup> Kaplan and Kristol, quoted in Holloway, p. 26.

<sup>10</sup> Matteo Albanese, *The Concept of War in Neoconservative Thinking*, trans by Nicolas Lewkowicz (Vimodrone, Italy: IPOC di Pietro Condemi, 2012), p. 95.

<sup>11</sup> Dan Hassler-Forest, *Capitalist Superheroes: Caped Crusaders in the Neoliberal Age* (Portland, Oregon: Zero Books, 2012), p. 156.

also emblematic to Anton Chigurh in *No Country for Old Men*, a character that, like The Joker, infused the mores of neoliberal capitalism with dysphoric violence.

The scenes beyond this opening sequence continue to evoke the alterations to America's post-9/11 foreign policy. The differences between billionaire superhero Bruce Wayne and District Attorney Harvey Dent allegorise the divide between a purgatorial emphasis on unilateral war and the ideal of an America pursuing hegemony through international law and multilateralism. Wayne first appears in an underground base filled with military equipment and surveillance footage of Gotham City, directly associating the protagonist's superhero identity with the circumscriptions of civil liberties inherent in legislation such as the Patriot Act.<sup>12</sup> His weary state is connotative of an administration resigned to war - whilst Wayne sews a wound received in battle, butler Alfred warns him to 'know your limits', a line that seems suffused with implications of imperial overstretch.

The figure of Dent, who first surfaces on security footage with Wayne's ex-girlfriend Rachel Dawes, contrasts this sobering mood. For all the soap opera style dynamics of Wayne's prying, his real interest in Dent is political. A close-up shot of the footage shows Dent's square jawed, chiseled appearance, a disposition reminiscent of the tough-minded, pragmatic liberalism of the Kennedy era. Actor Aaron Eckhart thought

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<sup>12</sup> A detailed account of the Patriot Act is provided by C. William Michaels. He comments on this landmark piece of legislation, which was 'passed virtually without dissent by Congress on October 25, 2001 while the billowing smoke from the fallen World Trade Center still hung in the air' and encompassed 'a sweeping series of troubling provisions placing intelligence, surveillance, investigation, law enforcement, and terrorist attack preparedness on a new level in American social and political life'. C. William Michaels, *No Greater Threat: America After September 11 and the Rise of a National Security State* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2005), p. 43.

of Robert Kennedy<sup>13</sup> when playing Dent and his performance recalls K.A. Cuordileone's description of the Kennedy administration in the early 1960s, connoting a liberal identity 'rational, flexible and instrumental, concerned with the achievement of results through experimentation and dispassionate analysis'.<sup>14</sup> To Lloyd E. Ambrosius, Wilsonianism provided a similar rationale for 'modern liberalism as the foundation for America's foreign policy', counteracting 'radical or revolutionary changes'.<sup>15</sup>

Much of this disposition is conveyed in the scene that properly introduces Dent. This scene opens in a courtroom where Gotham City's key mobster, Sal Maroni, awaits trial. Upon arrival, Dent pervades a 'cool' representation of American power. He flips a rare 'lucky coin' (which actually has two heads) before the trial begins, associating his arrival with the triumph of America's economic and political liberty. Indeed, the swelling Zimmer score that plays over this sequence is both brooding and quietly patriotic, making his persona seem connected with the health of Gotham's body politic. This sensibility is palpable when Dent accosts a witness of the Maroni crime family, a questioning that makes his character seem figurative of a sophisticated, yet simultaneously hawkish liberalism. In a medium shot of Dent aggressively quizzing the witness, Nolan pans across the courtroom whilst the score grows increasingly serious in tone, adding to Dent's patriotic élan. The seamy nature of the mob and Dent's hawkish stance against crime is reminiscent of what Michael Coyne refers to

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<sup>13</sup> William Keck, *Aaron Eckhart puts on his best acting face* (2008), [http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/people/2008-07-28-eckhart\\_N.htm](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/people/2008-07-28-eckhart_N.htm) [accessed 4 March 2016].

<sup>14</sup> K.A. Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War: Masculinity, the Vital Center and American Political Culture in the Cold War, 1949-1963* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p. 217.

<sup>15</sup> Lloyd E. Ambrosius, 'The Others in Wilsonianism', in *U.S Foreign Policy and the Other*, ed. by Michael Patrick Cullinane and David Ryan (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014), pp. 124-141 (pp. 124-25).

as a 'Tough Liberalism' phase of American film that was embodied in courtroom dramas such as *Advice and Consent* (1962) and *The Best Man* (1964), cinematic responses to 'the glamour, liberal toughness and sex appeal' of 'the Kennedy mystique'.<sup>16</sup>

The final moments of this sequence convey such centrist qualities. In an abrupt turn of events, the witness pulls a gun on Dent. The District Attorney then knocks out the gang member before grabbing his weapon and turning around to a stunned courtroom. The moment carries a stylisation that befits Dent's Kennedyesque persona as well as *The Dark Knight's* place in the comic book adaptation sub-genre. Dent's liberal patriotism continues in his admonishment of Maroni. He uses dialogue that celebrates the supremacy of American economic and democratic conventions, stipulating, 'If you want to kill a public servant, I suggest you buy American'. For all the toughness of Dent's liberalism, his offer of a politics distinct from the unilateralism of Bruce Wayne's Batman recalls the objectivity Hillary M. Larkin sees in Wilsonianism. Larkin writes of an internationalism 'humanitarian, egalitarian or pacific in emphasis' that was 'entirely noble and disinterested'.<sup>17</sup>

Dent's appeal recalls an era long before the onset of the War on Terror. His inclusive approach to fighting crime is redolent of the early Clinton's era's 'assertive multilateralism,' promoting, in Jennifer Sterling-Folker's words, a 'pragmatic global problem solving', reliant on 'the societal tendency to assume that American interests

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<sup>16</sup> Coyne, *Hollywood Goes to Washington: American Politics on Screen*, p. 27.

<sup>17</sup> Hillary M. Larkin, 'The Victorian aetiology of Wilsonian Liberal Internationalism', *Intellectual History Review*, Vol.26:4 (2016), pp. 537-555 (pp. 548-550).

and values are universal'.<sup>18</sup> Interpreting this in cinematic terms, Dent's liberal idealism is comparable to what was presented in the Washington DC set montage in *Team America: World Police*, his pursuit of justice fitting Ian Scott's description of a Hollywood political culture that 'found ways to perceive hopeful, optimistic, if crudely patriotic visions of institutional rhetoric and behaviour as part of the norms in political life'.<sup>19</sup> Dent's portrayal then, can be seen as closely connected with the soft power often integral to Wilsonian ideals of democratisation and the spread of American liberal values. Ellen Hallams notes the comity of soft power with Wilsonianism, mentioning the influence of Nye's concept on the Clinton administration's stressing of 'globalization and interdependence...The "Wilsonian" belief that promoting democracy and liberalism would foster a more stable and peaceful international order'.<sup>20</sup>

Yet it would also be easy to interpret Dent as allegoric of Barack Obama, whose presidential campaign formed the background to the film's release in July 2008. Ry Rivard of *The Daily Athenaeum*, in his column entitled, 'Is Barack Obama our Harvey Dent', compared the then senator's campaign to the 'white knight' figure of Dent in Nolan's film.<sup>21</sup> However, it adopts a contrived reading of Obama's politics by associating his campaign with the figurative 'white knight' reformism of Dent, a title which grates with and even traduces the historic event of Obama's election as the

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<sup>18</sup> Jennifer Sterling-Folker, 'Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Assertive Multilateralism and Post-Cold War U.S. Foreign Policy Making', in *After the End: Making U.S. Foreign Policy in the Post-Cold War World*, ed. by James M. Scott (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 277-304 (p. 278).

<sup>19</sup> Scott, p. 252.

<sup>20</sup> Ellen Hallam, 'From Crusader to Exemplar: Bush, Obama and the Reinvigoration of America's Soft Power', *European Journal of American Studies*, Vol.6:1 (2011), pp. 1-25 (p. 3).

<sup>21</sup> Ry Rivard, *Column: Is Barack Obama Our Harvey Dent?* (2008), <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/column-is-barack-obama-our-harvey-dent/> [accessed 22 October 2015].

first black and bi-racial president. Rivard's argument further relies on the film's timely release in the summer of 2008, belying the fact that the film's shooting schedule took place in the first half of 2007, when Hillary Clinton was her presumptive for the Democratic nomination.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, direct comparisons between Dent and Obama ignore deeper political realities, by obfuscating the less Wilsonian elements of Obama's campaign and presidency.

Robert Singh opines on the 'unrelentingly, pragmatic, prudent and at times accommodationist approach to world affairs' signified by the Obama administration's simultaneous reliance on drone strikes and withdrawal of forces from the Middle East.<sup>23</sup> To Singh, these policies were spearheaded by 'a goal of calibrated strategic retrenchment: scaling back commitments, reducing costs, minimizing unilateralism, encouraging multilateralism, cutting defence, and espousing less rather than more US assertiveness abroad'.<sup>24</sup> Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright saw this emblematised in Obama's 2009 Cairo speech, which attempted to generate a rapprochement with the Muslim world and create a 'blend of idealism and pragmatism', seeking to 'balance our values and interests...the good name of democracy restored but in a realistic way'.<sup>25</sup> Finally, the boldest refutation of reading Obama as a purist Wilsonian comes from James Mann,

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<sup>22</sup> CNN, *Hillary Clinton Launches White House bid: 'I'm in'* (2007), <http://edition.cnn.com/2007/POLITICS/01/20/clinton.announcement/index.html?eref=yahoo> [accessed 22 October 2015].

<sup>23</sup> Robert S. Singh, *Barack Obama's Post-American Foreign Policy: The Limits of Engagement* (Bloomsbury, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>25</sup> Madeleine Albright, 'Obama's Realist Idealism', *New Perspectives Quarterly*, Vol.26:2 (2009), 12-14.

who sees the president as a contradictory synthesis of ‘the realism of Kissinger and Scowcroft and the idealism of Woodrow Wilson’.<sup>26</sup>

I shall return to the film’s specific meaning for the 2008 election cycle and America’s post-Bush era in Chapter 4.3, ‘The foreign policy we deserve, but not the foreign policy we need right now’. The focus of this analysis, for now, will rest on examining how Dent’s Wilsonian idealism becomes compromised by the alternative, unilateralist conception of US power elevated during the Bush years. Therefore, my argument here situates *The Dark Knight* as a particular delineation of US foreign policy in the 2000s, with the Dent and Batman personas effectively dichotomising philosophies of liberty orientated and national security based intervention.

A first meeting between Dent, Gordon and Batman on the rooftop of Gotham’s police headquarters shows how Dent’s Wilsonian idealism legitimatises Batman’s culture of unilateralism. The meeting begins with Dent and Gordon arguing over their failure to stop the criminal businessman, Lau, from leaving the country, with Dent accusing Gordon of failing to stop corrupt police officers leaking information. Gordon responds to Dent’s frustration by accusing Dent’s law office of attracting undue attention to the investigation. Dent replies in turn by expressing anger about an officer he had ‘cold on a racketeering beat’. The institutional rivalry in this scene seems comparable to the bureaucratic warfare between the Defence Department’s Future of Iraq Project and Colin Powell’s State Department that took place shortly before the Iraq War. Dov Zakheim describes the ‘knee-jerk venom’ between the

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<sup>26</sup> James Mann, *The Obamians: The Struggle Inside the White House to Redefine American Power* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), p. 166.

departments that was 'exacerbated during the build up to Iraq'.<sup>27</sup> This divide is further encapsulated by Anthony H. Cordesman's analysis of the political wrangling over the Defence Department's Future of Iraq project, a collaborative effort formed of Iraqi exiles and diplomats. Cordesman notes how the Bush administration's plans were undercut by the Pentagon and State Department's methodological, ideological, and attitudinal differences:

*The State Department's planning efforts for nation building were lost or made ineffective, because of the deep divisions between the State Department and Department of Defence over how to plan for peacemaking and nation building...the office of National Defence staffed its nation-building effort as a largely closed group composed of members who had strong ideological beliefs but limited practical experience and serious area expertise.*<sup>28</sup>

These fissures could be disguised by both the necessary language of pre-emptive warfare and the image of Wilsonian idealism. Batman, who watches Gordon and Dent's argument, offers an approach that contravenes the constitutional niceties required as upholders of the law. The superhero proposes a way of getting Lau to the men so they 'can get him to talk'. He further emphasises a solution that will deliver on Dent's promises to the Gotham public, but will also involve breaking the rules of due process. The dynamics of this can be compared to William Walker's analysis of how the Bush administration elided traditional models of Wilsonianism. Walker

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<sup>27</sup> Zakheim, quoted in Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 103.

<sup>28</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Iraq War: Strategy, Tactics, and Military Lessons* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2003), p. 498.

argues that the Bush administration's foreign and domestic policy 'raises questions about sovereignty, the ideal of self-determination, adherence to international law, indefinite detention, and *habeas corpus*, and the resort to torture in the name of security'.<sup>29</sup> Describing how this formed a 'mockery for many inside and outside the country of America's commitment to freedom, democracy and human rights,' Walker considers that Wilsonianism lent the unilateralism of the Bush administration a political license.<sup>30</sup> Bush's 2002 speech at West Point, which championed 'human liberty' and 'free and open societies' besides a military 'ready to strike at a moment's notice in a dark corner of the world', is a case in point for Walker.<sup>31</sup> He posits that 'the universalism that suffused Bush's address was a reminder of the pre-emptive action throughout American history'.<sup>32</sup>

The rooftop meeting between Batman, Dent and Gordon prompts a return to the question postulated by Ikenberry at the beginning of this chapter. Does the collaboration between Dent and Batman in this scene hint at an inevitable co-existence between Wilsonianism and a unilateral foreign policy or does it instead suggest that the latter is the cause of Wilsonianism's destruction? To Tony Smith, who takes a less polemical view on this subject than Walker, the liberal internationalism of the 1990s shared commonalities with the neoconservative interventions of the Bush years. Smith spoke of an 'emerging imperialist consensus on the part of American Wilsonians' that came out of the end of the Cold War,

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<sup>29</sup> William O. Walker III, *National Security and Core Values in American History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 269.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 269.

<sup>31</sup> *The New York Times*, *Text of Bush's Speech at West Point* (2002), <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/06/01/international/text-of-bushs-speech-at-west-point.html> [accessed 13th November 2017].

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 269.

leading to a 'bid for global supremacy on Washington's part for the sake of freedom and peace and American national security'.<sup>33</sup> The fact that liberal internationalists like Michael Ignatieff and Democrats in Congress 'joined the war party led by George W. Bush', proved 'progressive neoliberal members of the party supported the terms of the Bush doctrine as their own, modified only by their invocation of multilateralism'.<sup>34</sup> To Edward Lock, the Wilsonian belief that 'universal values such as those regarding democracy represent resources of the USA' evinced commonality with the beliefs of hawkish neoconservatives like Kristol and Kagan, who 'championed the promotion of the American principles of democracy, free markets and respect for liberty'.<sup>35</sup>

The consensus formed between liberal Wilsonians and neoconservatives is reflected in the triumvirate established by Batman, Gordon, and Dent. Nolan's decision to give each of these characters equal screen time accentuates this quality. By breaking with the central focus on the superhero traditional in comic book adaptations, Nolan's film encapsulates the bipartisan accords of the War on Terror's early years.

Smith's idea that idealistic Wilsonianism and unilateralism are wholly compatible is later given tangibility in a political discussion between Dent and Wayne (whose identity as Batman is unknown to Dent). This scene takes place in a high-end Gotham restaurant, where Wayne, adhering to his billionaire playboy persona, brings a Russian ballerina to meet Dent and ex-girlfriend Rachel Dawes. The surrounding *mise en scène* is filled with Gotham's wealthy elites, all drinking and socialising to the

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<sup>33</sup> Smith, 'Wilsonianism after Iraq: The End of Liberal Internationalism?', p. 67.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>35</sup> Edward Lock, 'Soft Power and Strategy: developing a strategic concept of power', in *Soft Power and US Foreign Policy: Theoretical, Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, pp. 32-50 (p. 47).

diegetic sound of genteel orchestral music. During the dinner, Dent undermines this elitism by propounding a populist defence of Batman's vigilantism. His argument expresses Batman's beneficial effect on the city and is arguably a hinge moment for The Dark Knight's political dialectic.

Dent claims that 'Gotham city is proud of an ordinary citizen standing up for what is right', a position that attracts ridicule from Natasha, who feels that 'Gotham needs heroes like you, elected officials, not men who are above the law'. The historical analogy that Dent uses as rebuttal fetes unilateralism as key to consolidating Gotham's vulnerable democracy. Dent refers to the wartime suspension of Roman democracy under Caesar, praising the role of Batman as a protector for life and contravening his own public endorsement of using the criminal justice system to fight terrorism. Although Rachel derides the fallacious parallel, a soaring musical score highlights the seriousness of Dent's analogy and the growing comity of belief between him and Wayne. The scene concludes on a poignant note for both individuals. Dent admits his belief that Batman 'wants someone to take up his mantle,' a gesture that in turn prompts Wayne to propose a fundraiser for Dent. The pursuit of unilateralism is renewed by both reactionary vigilante and orthodox liberal, creating a spirit of bipartisanship that has parallels with the events of George W Bush's first term.

The uncritical praise of militarism by Dent has parallels with the United States's post-Cold War history of intervention. In the first chapter of his seminal work *The New American Militarism: How Americans are Seduced by War*, entitled 'Wilsonians under arms', Bacevich argues that 'at the end of the Cold War, Americans said yes to

military power'.<sup>36</sup> Bacevich uses a series of examples to highlight this 'prevailing national security consensus'.<sup>37</sup> He refers to the veteran motifs of John Kerry's 2004 campaign, which guaranteed 'an appreciable boost in the status of military institutions and soldiers themselves'.<sup>38</sup> Corroborating Bacevich's observation is the liberal Professor of Humanities at Yale University, Harold Bloom, who, in an October 2003 article, celebrated the imperial potential of the American presidency. The argument Bloom makes is directly comparable to Dent's Caesar analogy, in both tone and substance:

*Lincoln, confronting the South's rebellion, first established our imperial presidency. Since then we have become increasingly a plutocracy. Like such precursors as Benjamin Harrison, William McKinley and Warren Harding, the current possessor of the White House sincerely believes in making the rich richer, while expressing the hope that somehow all of his constituents must eventually benefit from this benign process. Our nation has long invested in this hope, with our territorial expansion (mostly at the expense of Mexico, and of the Native Americans) and also overseas extensions fueling the investment. At this time, we occupy all of Iraq, and rather less of Afghanistan. These unrealistic adventures, while expensive in money and in blood, are more venturesome than most of our past incursions, but otherwise not radically new. What is different are the provocations. Fundamentalist Islam conducts a world-wide terror onslaught, much of it financed by Saudi Arabia. Israel and*

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<sup>36</sup> Bacevich, p. 14.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

*the Arabs continue to fight a Hundred Years War, going back to the earliest Zionist emigrants, and we are now well along in the first decade of a religious war that could endure for another century. All this is piously denied by nearly everyone, yet all the deniers know better. The American Empire, like the Roman before it, seeks to impose a Roman peace upon the world...we have no option except imposing a Roman peace. The question I bring forward is: what is the proper training for our imperial presidents?*<sup>39</sup>

Bloom goes on to champion former NATO commander Wesley Clark for president in the 2004 election, a man whose role in the Bosnian and Kosovo wars would make him 'an authentic unifier, wise and compassionate'.<sup>40</sup>

The liberal fetishisation of American military power has played a crucial role throughout this thesis and was especially celebrated in the narratives of *Team America: World Police* and *Three Kings*. A progressive celebration of militarism is tangible in Dent's speech to such an extent that the argument of Bloom feels eerily invoked. Are Dent and Bloom's arguments betrayals of natural Wilsonianism? To the proponents of neoconservatism, the Wilsonian ideals of interdependency and democratic proliferation could only be achieved through the preponderance of American military force and the interests of imperial power. As mentioned in Chapter 3, neoconservatism shared an ideological affinity with the neoliberal backlash against the Keynesian consensus that had orientated United States and

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<sup>39</sup> Harold Bloom, *Cometh the Hour...* (2003), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB106609527057702800> [accessed 15 March 2016].

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

British domestic policy since 1945. Its early formation by Jeanne Kirkpatrick distinguished between fighting 'traditional and revolutionary autocracies'.<sup>41</sup> The end of the Cold War largely nullified this dichotomy and replaced it with a newly modulated post-1989 ideal, described by Stephen McGlinchey as one that 'presupposes that liberal democracy will spread globally in the wake of the West emerging triumphant in the Cold War, rendering all opposing political orientations obsolete'.<sup>42</sup>

Yet despite this transmutation, adherents to neoconservatism before and after the Cold War can be said to champion an authoritarianism that traduced Wilsonianism's original democratic and multilateral vision. The philosopher Leo Strauss, whose writings influenced the Bush era disciples of neoconservatism, spoke of the necessity of the 'noble lie' in Plato's *Republic*.<sup>43</sup> He argued that society was not possible 'without a fundamental untruth' and defended the 'replacement of the earth as the common mother of all men, and therewith of the fraternity of all men, by a part of the earth, the land, the fatherland, the territory, and the fraternity of only the fellow citizens'.<sup>44</sup> The bounds and exigencies of nationalism and warfare would undergird the body politic. In his 1953 book *Natural Right and History*, Strauss produced an argument that was fundamentally Jacksonian in its stress on a wartime distinction between 'what the self-preservation of what society requires and the requirements of communicative or distributive justice...there are no limits which can be defined in

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<sup>41</sup> Kirkpatrick, *Of Dictatorships and Double Standards*.

<sup>42</sup> Stephen McGlinchey, *Neoconservatism and American Foreign Policy* (2009), <http://www.e-ir.info/2009/06/01/neo-conservatism-and-american-foreign-policy/> [accessed 4 March 2016].

<sup>43</sup> Leo Strauss, quoted in Alessandra Fussi, 'Loyalty and Love in Plato's Republic', in *Leo Strauss, Philosopher: European Vistas*, ed. by Antonio Lastra and Josep Monserrat-Molas (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2016), pp. 43-66 (p. 59).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

advance, there are no assignable limits to what become just reprisals'.<sup>45</sup> Perhaps drawing on his memories as a youth of the failed liberal democracy of Weimar Germany and its capitulation to the Nazi state, Strauss warned that the Lockean concept of 'Natural right must be mutable to be able to cope with the inventiveness of wickedness'.<sup>46</sup>

By marrying this authoritarianism to their vaunting of regime change, the neoconservatives of the Bush administration evidenced a distinctly partisan take on Wilsonianism. Abram Shulsky, director of the Office of Special Plans, viewed Strauss's work as conveying that 'deception is the norm in political life' and sought to ideologise the process of democracy promotion by using intelligence to mollify the Iraqi exiles that supported the Iraq invasion.<sup>47</sup> This in turn led to the overruling of the State Department's Future of Iraq Project and its pragmatic, inclusive, vision of reconstruction. George Packer comments on the secrecy of Shulsky's office, specifically its effort to 'circumvent the normal interagency process, in which the unconverted would have been among the participants and might have raised objections...Shulsky directed the writing of Iraq, WMD, and terrorism memos according to strictly supervised talking points'.<sup>48</sup>

This process was anathema to Anne-Marie Slaughter, who sees the disingenuous orchestration of the Iraq War as a rejection of Wilsonianism. In her view, defenders of neoconservative foreign policy used the term as a rhetorical redoubt that 'conflates the military adventurism of American conservatives with broad

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<sup>45</sup> Leo Strauss, quoted in Steven B. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss: Politics, Philosophy, Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 198.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.

<sup>47</sup> Abram Shulsky, quoted in Packer, *The Assassins Gate: America in Iraq*, p. 106.

<sup>48</sup> Packer, *The Assassins Gate: America in Iraq*, p. 108.

international efforts to build a law-based world that preserves peace, prosperity and human rights'.<sup>49</sup> The scenes which close *The Dark Knight's* first act draw attention to this conflation, underlying the betrayal of Wilsonianism that lies in Wayne and Dent's political symbiosis.

Following through on Dent's desire to rescue Lau, Nolan shows Wayne head to Hong Kong to capture the criminal businessman. The imperial emphasis of this venture contrasts with the pacific sophistication of the courtroom set scenes. Wayne's trip begins with a display of incongruity that breaks with the earlier *mise en scène* of Gotham City, showing Wayne, butler Alfred, and a plethora of sunbathing women waiting aboard a yacht on the Pacific Ocean for a smuggler's airplane that will aid the billionaire's mission. The style of this scene is redolent of a Sean Connery era James Bond picture. This is evident in the wry chauvinism of Wayne's playboy presence and the Russian women bedecked in bikinis who massage him (Wayne uses taking a Russian ballerina troupe on vacation as a front for his unlawful activity) whilst he waits for his flight. The specifically male orientated adventurism of the scene departs from the claustrophobic atmosphere of Gotham City. It also makes the unilateralism integral to Wayne's superhero identity noticeably fetishised. Nevertheless, there is a dark undercurrent to Wayne's journey. The fact that Wayne uses 'smugglers from Pyongyang' to help him on his journey extrapolates Slaughter's argument that Wilsonianism had become a cover for transgressive actions by the Bush administration. Examples of authoritarian nations colluding with American national security policy had been evidenced in countries such as Egypt, where terrorist suspects were interrogated by the CIA outside of American law, practices that to

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<sup>49</sup> Slaughter, 'Wilsonianism in the Twenty-first Century', p. 90.

David P. Forsythe, caused 'a US loss of reputation and soft power from CIA kidnapping, Black sites, extraordinary rendition, and abuse'.<sup>50</sup>

The Hong Kong set capture of Lau resembles a hyper-stylized form of extraordinary rendition. The nighttime set sequence opens with a long shot of Batman standing atop a large Hong Kong skyscraper, staring at the building where Lau is dwelling. A recurrence of the brooding Hans Zimmer score portrays him as a figure of western individualism, seemingly standing against a corrupt and syndicalist east, favouring a prioritisation of security over liberty distinct from the democratic idealism of Dent's first scene. This emphasis is further embodied in a coded reference to warrantless wiretapping. Batman uses an electromagnetic pulsing device, provided by Wayne enterprises scientist Lucius Fox, to help disorientate the corrupt launderer. The device's disabling of the lights in Lau's entire office building allows the superhero to glide into the building, leading to a set piece where Batman engages in hand to hand combat with several of Lau's bodyguards.

Transcending the spectacle of the fighting, Batman's breaking of international law and the scene's moody tone seem to signify a trend of deception in American foreign policy. Batman's use of an air recovery system/grappling hook employed by CIA agents in the Vietnam War underlines the covert nature of US power and creates a broader spirit of political transgression. As shall be indicated again in this and the subsequent chapter, references to Vietnam in mainstream Hollywood pictures usually imply the attenuation of liberal internationalist outlooks. This is conveyed in the scene's final image, a low angle shot that shows Batman use the grappling hook

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<sup>50</sup> David P. Forsythe, *The Politics of Prisoner Abuse: The United States and Enemy Prisoners after 9/11* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 160-161.

to arrive aboard an overhead smuggler plane with Lau, a moment that, for all its brio, seems ideologically opposed to the transparency promised by Dent towards the beginning of the picture.

This first section has conveyed how *The Dark Knight's* first act allegorises the stresses and compromises undergone by Wilsonianism in the Bush years owing to neoconservatism. The next sub-chapter, 'The Joker's insurrection and the degeneration of Wilsonianism', continues examining how the attenuation of Wilson's original ideals pervades *The Dark Knight*, explicating how the experiences of Dent and Batman in the second act reflect the anarchy of the Iraq occupation.

#### **4.2: The Joker's insurrection and the degeneration of Wilsonianism**

In order to continue analysing Nolan's representation of Wilsonianism and its relationship with the events of the Bush years, it is worthwhile to consider *The Dark Knight's* place within the comic book adaptation sub-genre and how its political subtext differs from other pictures under this classification. To Garyn G. Roberts, the plethora of comic book adaptations released in the 2000s, including the *Spiderman* franchise and *X-men* series, served to restore certainties damaged by the trauma of the 9/11 attacks. He evokes an America in search of 'a dark avenger hero as much as ever...in quest of a moment of well-conceived humour, and archetypal truths about

gender and lifestyle, the workplace and home life, and the innocence and bliss of children and all-too-human pets and animals'.<sup>51</sup>

This reading of comic book pictures as socially conservative adjuncts to foreign policy, however, jars with the polemical qualities of several superhero installments released in the 2000s. The blockbuster sequel *X-Men 2* (2003), which revolves around an ensemble of superhero mutants and their search for acceptance, mirrors liberal fears of Muslim and minority persecution in the wake of Bush's Patriot Act. It features several scenes in which a fictional US president calls for a lockdown on mutant superheroes living in the United States. To Terence McSweeney, these scenes observed 'the echoes of the anti-Muslim fervour that swept the United States after 9/11'.<sup>52</sup> Such scenes are nevertheless leavened by an epilogue in which the mutants address a fictionalised president in the Oval Office, a moment which calls for a tolerance and unity missing from the febrile state of post-9/11 America.

Specific allegorical qualities are located in *The Dark Knight's* predecessor, *Batman Begins* (2005), which layers the origin story of Bruce Wayne's Batman with notions of political disarray. Nolan, who also directed this earlier installment, provides allusions to the War on Terror through the cave dwelling villains of the League of Shadows, who bear curious resemblance to Al Qaeda. Through their training of Wayne in combat and martial arts during the first act of the picture, these antagonists hauntingly allegorise the errors of the previous generation of neoconservatives who supported the Afghan mujahideen against the invading Soviet Union in the 1980s, a

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<sup>51</sup> Garyn G. Robert, 'Understanding the Sequential Art of Comic Strips and Comic Books and their Descendants in the Early Years of the New Millennium', *The Journal of American Culture*, Vol.27:2 (2004), pp. 210-217 (p. 210).

<sup>52</sup> McSweeney, p. 114.

decision of Realpolitik that played a role in the blowback of 9/11.<sup>53</sup> This support, and the War on Terror that resulted twenty years later, is compellingly synthesised in a climax that sees Wayne lead the fight against the League's threat of a WMD style launch of poison gas upon Gotham City.

More moral ambiguity, but also more humour, is provided in Jon Favreau's *Iron Man* (2008), the comic book adaptation released most approximate to *The Dark Knight*. Favreau's picture concerns the transformation of billionaire protagonist and arms manufacturer Tony Stark (comparable to Wayne) into the titular, armour plated superhero and utilises explicit references to the War on Terror. The picture begins with Stark celebrating the military industrial complex by heading to Afghanistan with American troops in order to showcase his self-made 'Jericho missile'. His capture by a gang of mujahideen evocative of the Taliban and his friendship with a fellow scientist named Yinsen, however, leads him to an epiphany that seems to reject the doctrines of military hegemony proposed by neoconservatives. Upon escaping, he uses a prototype super soldier outfit to become 'Iron Man' and publicly dissociates his company from the production of weapons, echoing the arguments of liberals who thought the United States should cease to use 'boots on the ground' interventions in the wake of the second Gulf War.

Like *Team America: World Police's* emphasis on the futility of soft power, Stark's posturing offers no real escape from the War on Terror. His optimistic emphasis on a

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<sup>53</sup> The support for the Afghan mujahideen against the Soviet Union and the theory of a blowback against the United States is explained in Chalmers Johnson, 'American Militarism and Blowback: The costs of letting the Pentagon Dominate US Foreign Policy', *New Political Science*, Vol.24:1 (2002), pp. 21-38 (p. 23). Johnson comments on how the CIA 'secretly undertook to arm every *mujahideen* volunteer in sight, without ever considering what their politics might be'. He attributes the 'unintended consequences' of 9/11 to this policy.

convenient alternative to ground forces (an argument that would rationalise drone strikes during the Obama administration) recalls G. John Ikenberry's description of Nye's centrist smart power, understanding 'successful states need both hard and soft power - the ability to coerce others as well as the ability to shape their long-term attitudes and preferences'.<sup>54</sup>

These films, compared to the cynicism of *The Dark Knight*, are more cautious in their political allegories, and are noticeably lacking in the superhero sequel's political nihilism (this applies even to *Batman Begins*, which ends with Gotham saved from the League of Shadows and their mass chemical attack). Perhaps it was this marginalisation of political critique that led Christobel Giraldez Caladan to criticise *Iron Man* for presenting 'American foreign policy realised without context', resulting in 'the successful transmission of white supremacy centered on the dehumanization of Arab ethnicity'.<sup>55</sup>

It is arguable that the perception of these deficiencies emerged from its more insouciant, yet still satiric, tone. A sardonic approach had been present in *Team America*, yet, as was made clear in the previous chapter, Bush's second term had seen moodier forms of International Relations allegory. The way in which *The Dark Knight* conforms to this latter characteristic makes it aesthetically and tonally closer to the narratives of *No Country for Old Men* and *There Will be Blood*, renewing their morose themes of imperial overstretch and terroristic insurgency.

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<sup>54</sup> G. John Ikenberry, *Capsule Review: Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* by Joseph Nye Jr.: Reviewed by G. John Ikenberry (2004), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/capsule-review/2004-05-01/soft-power-means-success-world-politics> [accessed 16 March 2016].

<sup>55</sup> Christobel Giraldez Caladan, quoted in Liam Burke, *The Comic Book Film Adaptation: Exploring Modern Hollywood's Leading Genre* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2015), p. 37.

These subtexts are present in a scene where Dent and Gotham's Mayor Anthony Garcia discuss the arrests of Gotham's key mob syndicates, only to discover the murdered body of a 'copycat' vigilante pretending to be Batman. The sudden sight of a man dressed as Batman hung from the building and thudding into Garcia's office window ends the triumphalism of Lau's capture, emphasising a world plagued by anarchy. A close-up shot depicts how The Joker has mutilated the copycat's mouth and painted his face in white paint, a warped act of desecration that recalls the actions of Islamist insurgents towards US troops in Iraq. This is evident due to the manner in which this dead body is exhibited, which feels invocative of the four civilian contractors who were immolated and hung by Al Qaeda during the Fallujah uprising of March 2004. The photograph of this event, which also showed cheering crowds of Iraqi civilians, conveyed the nihilism created by the US occupation and boded ill for the US's attempt to cultivate a liberal democracy in Iraq.<sup>56</sup> Further invoking this anarchy is a close-up of the victim's dead body, which is adorned with an annotated joker card. It asks 'will the real Batman please stand up?', implying a power vacuum redolent of the occupation's early stages.

These parallels manifest explicitly in the videotaped torture and murder of the fake vigilante by The Joker. The scene is allegorically similar to Chigurh's first murder through its replication of the insurrectionist violence that destroyed the hopes of bringing Wilsonian ideals to Iraq. The tape is first shown on a TV in Wayne's luxury penthouse soon after Lau is brought into custody. Its screening within this domestic

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<sup>56</sup> Michael Meyer, *The 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of a Photo that changed the Iraq War* (2014), [http://archives.cjr.org/feature/one\\_day\\_in\\_the\\_war\\_of\\_images.php?page=all](http://archives.cjr.org/feature/one_day_in_the_war_of_images.php?page=all) [accessed 22 October 2015].

context serves to heighten the anxiety of audiences familiar with media transmissions of terrorist atrocities orchestrated by Islamist groups. The 'underground' veneer of the tape amplifies this. The Joker uses a digital camera with a distinctly grainy quality to film his victim, named Brian Douglas. As the camera is in the hands of The Joker, most of the video takes place in virtual first person, placing the viewer close to his perspective. The fact that the *mise en scène* of the torture location, a barren room which looks like the interior of the warehouse, is never revealed, additionally implies the covert nature of his terrorism, a mood compounded by The Joker's transgressive behaviour. Before he viciously executes Douglas, The Joker twirls Douglas's bat mask around and even gently strokes the imposter's face. These bizarre, lurid gestures seem ironically allusive to the sexual humiliation employed by American troops in the Abu Ghraib scandal.<sup>57</sup>

Such gestures add to The Joker's dualistic portrayal of terrorist insurgency. To Frances Pheasant-Kelly, the execution simulated the video messages of 'the Taliban and al-Qaeda', 'displayed by the media after 9/11'.<sup>58</sup> The manner in which The Joker blackmails Batman to 'take off his mask and turn himself in' also reminds viewers of comparable messages by Al Qaeda's leader in Iraq, Musab Al Zaqawi, who fought a propaganda war against US troops by posting videos where he beheaded military and civilian targets.<sup>59</sup> General Eric Shinseki accounts for the propagandistic effect of

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<sup>57</sup> The photographs of Iraqi POWs being sexually humiliated by American troops at the Abu Ghraib prison complex in Iraq damaged American soft power in April 2004. A detailed account of the prison abuses and their impact on the collective psyche can be found in Kari Andèn-Papadopoulos, 'The Abu Ghraib torture photographs: News frames, visual culture, and the power of images', *Journalism*, Vol.9.1, pp. 5-30.

<sup>58</sup> Pheasant-Kelly, p. 136.

<sup>59</sup> Mary Anne Weaver, *The Short, Violent Life of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi* (2006), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2006/07/the-short-violent-life-of-abu-musab-al-zarqawi/304983/> [accessed 23 October 2015].

Zarqawi's blackmail, which created the view that 'we were working with Zarqawi to create the maximum amount of chaos possible'.<sup>60</sup> This is a dynamic clearly allegorised in The Joker's message of escalation. The blame he seeks to engender towards Batman's authoritarianism has clear parallels with Chalmers Johnson's theory of a 'blowback', resulting from the US's long support for repressive governments in the Middle East.<sup>61</sup>

How would a Wilsonian respond to the wave of terrorism created by The Joker?

Taking the progressive era philosophy in its purest form, one could say that reforming Gotham city's corrupt politics and crony capitalism might break with the long term malaise wrought by an indifferent regime. Orthodox Wilsonians would reject using the unilateralist methods employed by Batman to further this success. Perhaps most importantly, historically sensitive Wilsonians would avoid collectively punishing the outgoing pariah state. The signature proof of this danger was in Wilson's original attempt to reform post-war Europe in 1918. His proposals to create a liberal international order under the League of Nations were attenuated by his collaboration with European leaders Lloyd George and Clemenceau over the Treaty of Versailles, which called for German demilitarization and open-ended reparations.<sup>62</sup> The historical consequences of these decisions could have served as a warning to the Bush administration officials who endorsed the firing of Iraq's state employees and former members of the national Baath party. The numerous historical interpretations that draw causation between the Treaty of Versailles and

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<sup>60</sup> General Eric Shinseki, quoted in Ricks, p. 99.

<sup>61</sup> Johnson, p. 21.

<sup>62</sup> Wilson's collaboration with European leaders and the resultant fallout of the First World War are detailed in McDougall, pp. 140-142.

Hitler's later ascension to power underline the danger of adopting punitive measures towards fallen regimes.<sup>63</sup>

The ideological impurities that threatened Wilson's original vision foreshadowed its volatile, fluid alterations throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. G. John Ikenberry notes how the Roosevelt and Truman administrations offered a more palatable version of Woodrow Wilson's original vision for a 'liberal international order', 'sobered by the failure of Wilson but convinced that a new global order committed to human rights, collective security, and economic advancement was necessary to avoid the return to war'.<sup>64</sup> In contrast, the Wilsonianism of Lyndon Johnson and his Secretary of State Dean Rusk became more militarised, championing, in Thomas W. Zeiler's words, a 'neo-Wilsonian mission, a vision hinging on a refusal to retreat in the face of aggression or a losing cause'.<sup>65</sup> After the failure of Vietnam, Wilsonianism was deprived of this hawkishness by the Carter administration. Carter instead focused on 'the global desire for greater social justice, equity, and more opportunity for individual self-fulfilment', leading to what Mary N. Hampton refers to as 'the purposeful downgrading of the bipolar competition' in American-Soviet relations.<sup>66</sup>

As was highlighted in the first chapter, Wilsonianism underwent change again in the

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<sup>63</sup> An early example of this reading is located in Thomas A. Bailey, *Woodrow Wilson and the Lost Peace* (New York City: Macmillan Company, 1944), pp. 297-303. Bailey delineates how both the vindictiveness of postwar European leaders and the antipathy of a Republican Congress vitiated Wilson's vision of a liberal international order. Above all, he describes how the 'Fourteen Points' for a post-World War One order promised to Germany by Wilson were 'violated', as the allies 'could invoke principles that operated to Germany's disadvantage, and discard those that did not'. As a consequence, 'much of Germany's bitterness against the Treaty turned against America, and particularly against Wilson'.

<sup>64</sup> G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 191.

<sup>65</sup> Thomas W. Zeiler, *Dean Rusk: Defending the American Mission Abroad* (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources Books, 2000), p. 133.

<sup>66</sup> Mary N. Hampton, *The Wilsonian Impulse: US Foreign Policy, the Alliance, and German Unification* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1996), p. 141.

1990s - its tenets of democratisation and international justice rationalised a series of unilateral military interventions that betrayed the caution of the Carter years.

Moreover, Wilsonianism has not only been applied in different ways politically - the essence of the Wilsonian ideal has been subject to clashing interpretations by academics. Whereas, to McDougall, Wilson's philosophy originally stood 'as an ideological weapon against arbitrary power everywhere'<sup>67</sup>, Frank Ninkovich's 1999 work *The Wilsonian Century* interprets a worldview born out of epochal change and emergency. He outlines a crucible for a world traumatised by the experience of World War One, driven 'on behalf of international organization...a response to the crisis of a civilization that, if left to the old methods of regulating foreign policy behavior, appeared destined for self-destruction'.<sup>68</sup> Ninkovich further argues against interpreting Wilson's philosophy as belonging to a tradition of liberal idealism and cosmopolitan globalism. He instead distinguishes Wilsonianism as a 'crisis internationalism' that contrasted with a 'normal internationalism', which was a 'natural out-growth of the commercial and cultural internationalism of the nineteenth century'.<sup>69</sup> In stark opposition to other International Relations theorists, he sees the Wilsonianism of the 1990s as belonging to a commercially orientated, normal internationalism. This contrasts with his view of the Cold War, which made Wilsonianism 'become central to US foreign policy in the postwar years'.<sup>70</sup>

This view of course has an affinity with the neoconservatives who saw the War on Terror as providing an ideological legitimation analogous to that of the Cold War.

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<sup>67</sup> McDougall, p. 146.

<sup>68</sup> Ninkovich, p. 48.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 144.

These include the neoconservative historian David M. Kennedy, who praises Wilsonianism as ‘America’s only consistent tradition in foreign policy’.<sup>71</sup> Kennedy perceives in the Bush administration a tangible promise to ‘redeem on a global scale the full revolutionary scale of 1776’, its invocation of Wilsonianism not being a legitimization for unilateralism, but rather proof of a doctrine that had ‘taken on even greater vitality’.<sup>72</sup> Like the Wilsonian rhetoric of the Cold War, this understanding takes on a hypocritical solipsism. From John F. Kennedy’s idealistic use of counterinsurgency in South Vietnam to Reagan’s praise of the Afghanistan mujahideen as ‘the moral equivalents of America’s founding fathers,’ America’s leading statesmen repeatedly used Wilsonianism to emphasise a moral impetus lacking in their Soviet opponents, even if American diplomacy failed to achieve its lofty ideals.

A brief montage in *The Dark Knight* alludes to the blowback against the hypocritical Wilsonianism applied in the War on Terror. The montage sees the mob’s grievances against Dent represented in a series of assassinations against members of Gotham’s criminal justice system. These assassinations threaten the foundations of Dent’s liberal vision of Gotham City and match the animus of Ninkovich’s term of ‘crisis internationalism’ in their fervent implications of Gotham’s wartime state. The montage begins in Bruce Wayne’s penthouse, where a luxury fundraiser is held for Harvey Dent’s political career. This fundraising party initially seems like a time of reflection and poignancy, captured in a speech by Wayne that praises Dent as the

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<sup>71</sup> David M. Kennedy, *What ‘W’ Owes to ‘WW’* (2005), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2005/03/what-w-owes-to-ww/303731/> [accessed 3 March 2016].

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

best option for Gotham's future. This mood is ruined by a spate of terrorist attacks across Gotham city - as Dent speaks to girlfriend Rachel, a medium shot shows Wayne suddenly grabbing the District Attorney from behind to escort him to safety as a frenetic score signifies the threats to their safety. The action then shifts to a car interior, where a close-up shows a pair of hands who happen to belong to Judge Sirillo, the woman in charge of the prosecution of the Maroni crime family. The interior of the car is filtered in dark blue lighting by cinematographer Wally Pfister, signalling a state of moroseness and inertia. The close-up focuses on the judge's hands, which open an envelope to reveal a blank piece of paper with only the word 'up' printed on the page. This message is followed by the sudden detonation of Sirillo's vehicle, which occurs in an exterior shot.

A medley of notable elements adds to the realism of Sirillo's death. The sleek, *neo-noir* cinematography of Pfister and Gotham's urban setting captures the impact of terrorism on western cities during the 2000s. Yet the desultory manner of the bombings and the targeted killing of the public official carry a distinct flavor of the sectarian carnage that targeted UN and CPA officials in Iraq. The shift to the police commissioner's office, where Commissioner Loeb is abruptly murdered, renews this subtext. The commissioner inadvertently drinks whisky laced with acid by a mole working for The Joker. As smoke emits from the drink glass, a medium shot shows Gordon kneeling and yelling for help while Loeb gags and sputters on the floor. The dysphoric music that plays over this scene underlines the ferocity of the rebellion facing Dent and Batman. This is accentuated by the particularly febrile connotations of the death, which appears redolent of the chemical weapons feared in the build up

to the Iraq invasion and the anthrax mailed to US political representatives in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.<sup>73</sup>

Looking beyond the catalogue of post-9/11 iconography present here, I would argue that these scenes reflect the backlash against the effort to politically reform Iraq. The Joker's rallying of Gotham's police rank and file against Dent has parallels in the fired Iraqi civil servants and soldiers who rose up against the new regime. James P. Pfiffner notes the alienation of former civil servants and army members 'who could not support themselves or their families....Creating insurgents who were angry at the US, many of whom had weapons and were trained to use them'.<sup>74</sup> When asked about the danger of the de-Baathification order that fired thousands of members of Saddam Hussein's Iraqi Baath party from political jobs, Under Secretary of Defence for Policy and neoconservative Douglas Feith replied that not doing so would 'undermine the entire moral justification for the war'.<sup>75</sup> As noted in the previous chapter, the zealotry of disbanding the Iraqi army went beyond the tempered strategy of 'winning hearts and minds of the average Iraqis' outlined in the State Department's Future of Iraq Project, causing alienation through a program of reform that could have been inclusive.<sup>76</sup>

Two later scenes in *The Dark Knight* allegorise how Wilsonianism descended into this Manichean agenda under the neoconservatives. The first scene returns to Wayne's underground base of operations and begins with a medium shot that shows Wayne

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<sup>73</sup> CNN, *FBI Concludes Investigation into 2001 anthrax mailings* (2010), <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/CRIME/02/19/fbi.anthrax.report/> [accessed 13 March 2016].

<sup>74</sup> James P. Pfiffner, 'US Blunders in Iraq: De-Baathification and Disbanding the Army', *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol.25:1 (2010), pp. 76-85 (p. 76).

<sup>75</sup> Douglas Feith, quoted in Pfiffner, p. 79.

<sup>76</sup> Halper and Clarke, pp. 224-25.

and Alfred facing a multitude of widescreen TVs, all displaying various clips from The Joker's torture video. Most of the clips exhibit The Joker laughing and gesticulating at the camera in a looped video. Their endless repetition creates a kind of Nietzschean abyss redolent of the nihilistic imagery of *No Country for Old Men* and *There Will be Blood*. This atmosphere is further evident in an anecdote by Alfred that seems analogous for the experience of fighting Islamist terrorism in Iraq. He refers to his time as an imperial policeman in British occupied Burma, where he tried to buy the loyalty of tribal leaders by bribing them with precious stones. His effort was undermined by the actions of a lone bandit who raided the coveted gems and disposed of them throughout the countryside, a repudiation of western materialism that feels allegoric of the refutations of American cultural and economic imperialism by Islamist groups.

To Christopher Layne, Wilsonian and soft power ideals were irrelevant in what he called the 'very hallmarks of international politics – anarchy, self- help, and competition'.<sup>77</sup> The nature of Alfred's story also rebukes 'hegemonic stability theory', what Kevin Narizny describes as 'a realist account of internationalism' due to its assertion 'that the most powerful state in the international system will use legal principles to try to persuade other countries to recognize the legitimacy of its dominant position'.<sup>78</sup> Narizny goes on to comment on how this synthesis was rebuked at the heights of American hegemony, citing the Harding administration's abandonment of the League of Nations in the early 1920s as an example.<sup>79</sup> The futility of co-option conveyed in Alfred's imperial anecdote should further draw

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<sup>77</sup> Layne, p. 59.

<sup>78</sup> Kevin Narizny, 'Rational Idealism', in *American Foreign Policy: Theoretical Essays*, 195-223 (p. 197).

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

attention to the naively consensual basis Narizny sees in hegemonic stability theory, the fact that American power 'has little incentive to constrain its high politics in affairs with international law unless it is exceptionally far sighted in anticipating decline'.<sup>80</sup>

Conversely, the liberal internationalist propagation of American democracy has often been confounded by the recipients of this reform and their failure to build liberal institutions. The most iconic example of this took place, like Narizny's anecdote, in the interwar years, where the collapse of the old European order portended fascism and the destruction of the Second World War. The rise of nationalism in states such as Germany and Italy was perhaps compounded by Wilson's arguments for self-determination. As exemplified by Peter Wilson in the introduction to this thesis, his export of democracy was rationalised by a realism that saw 'the emotional appeal of national sovereignty' and 'the power and self-interestedness of the independent nation state'.<sup>81</sup>

The ineluctability of anarchy, and the corresponding rejection of America as a benevolent hegemon, is connoted in the final moments of Wayne and Alfred's exchange. When Wayne asks why the bandit stole the stones in the first place, Alfred responds with a stoical realism. While the camera slowly zooms in on footage of The Joker staring and puckering his lips deliriously, Alfred opines on how 'some men aren't looking for anything logical...they can't be bought, bullied, reasoned or negotiated with...some men just want to watch the world burn'. The juxtaposition of this dialogue with a harsh, dysphoric violin score by Hans Zimmer is comparable to

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 197.

<sup>81</sup> Peter Wilson, pp. 331-332.

the associations of melancholy and foreign policy quagmire created in Anderson's *There Will be Blood*. Alfred's anecdote is further associable with David Simpson's writing on the bipartisan attributions of nihilism to terrorism (prevalent in *Team America*), which attested to the labelling of 'an intransigent fundamentalism wholly foreign to our professed ethic of tolerance'.<sup>82</sup> Is Alfred's speech a call for a bolder, more determined extension of Wilsonianism or an explicit repudiation of its call for a liberal world order? To Ninkovich, the fiercely ideological language of Alfred and the apocalyptic nature of his final line might be connectible with his premise of crisis internationalism. As mentioned earlier, Ninkovich's argument differed from interpretations that stressed the wholly pacific, humanitarian and commercialist qualities of Wilsonianism, stressing a philosophy that was 'an attempt to impose form on what was otherwise chaotic historical content', a form of 'normal internationalism mobilized'.<sup>83</sup>

It is worthwhile to consider whether Alfred's anecdote, as well as the wider narrative elements of *The Dark Knight*, reflects the definition of Wilsonianism that Ninkovich provides. Certainly, the anti-capitalist revolt of The Joker's bank robbery seems to mirror the kind of chaotic conditions required for this crisis internationalism. Moreover, Gotham City's reliance on Batman and the general irrelevance of Gotham's traditional political elites can be seen to mirror the supplanting of normal internationalism for this more fervent alternative. Yet Alfred's speech, whilst borrowing crisis internationalism's emphasis on stabilisation, deviates from Ninkovich's reading. Whereas Ninkovich views the state of war as aberrational,

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<sup>82</sup> Simpson, p. 7.

<sup>83</sup> Ninkovich, pp. 68-69.

Alfred instead offers an unadulterated vision of endless war and neocolonial conflict. This quality is differentiated from what Mead views as the original Wilsonian goal of ‘creating a peaceful international community that accepts the rule of law’.<sup>84</sup> It is also distinguished from what Walzer calls the ‘universal moral principle’ of America’s entry into World War One.<sup>85</sup> Walzer argues that Wilson’s efforts to stop the Allies enforcing harsh penalties on the Central Powers informed his goals of creating a pacific environment for trade and diplomacy, envisioning that peace would be ‘conceived as a normative condition’ and that the conflict would be a ‘limited war’.<sup>86</sup> Bacevich further acknowledges how this gravitas played a role in Wilson’s vision, which was, besides its hope for a ‘world of sovereign states committed to the principles of liberal democracy and free enterprise’, ‘possessed of a deep-seated aversion to armaments, militarism, and killing’.<sup>87</sup> The original Wilsonian view understood that ‘the resort to arms could be for the United States never more than an expedient, a temporary measure reluctantly employed, not a permanent expression of the nation’s character’.<sup>88</sup>

If Dent and Batman’s collaboration can be seen to form a new kind of Wilsonianism, then, Alfred’s allegory shows how its post-9/11 form is unmoored from the original Wilsonian goals of collective security, peace, and democratisation. Indeed, its nature can be said to adhere to realism in its dedication to America as a kind of leviathan power. It recalls Robert Kagan’s description of an America that operated within ‘an

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<sup>84</sup> Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy And How it Changed the World*, p. xvii.

<sup>85</sup> Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), p. 111.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>87</sup> Bacevich, p. 11.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

anarchic Hobbesian world where international and rules are unreliable'.<sup>89</sup> This position is philosophically opposed to Ninkovich's ultimate Wilsonian ideal of the 'Americanization of internationalism'.<sup>90</sup> Wayne's drawing on the imperial mythos of Alfred's story further seems symbolic of the neocolonialism that eventually haunted the United States's post-Second World War hegemony. Though post-9/11 'liberal imperialists' like Michael Ignatieff spoke fondly of a new era of 'empire lite' that would see the US become the guarantor of 'peace, stability, democratization and oil supplies in a combustible region of Islamic peoples stretching from Egypt to Afghanistan', the trauma of incidents such as the battle of Haditha and the chemical destruction of Fallujah only served to invoke the US's previous imperial venture in Vietnam.<sup>91</sup> Alfred's anecdote, like the Vietnam references in *Three Kings* and the manifest destiny setting of *There Will be Blood*, takes a view of America's post-Cold War imperium that is wedded to notions of an inescapable neocolonial past. The quality of this scene corroborates McSweeney's claim that cinema 'proves able to function as a site of sustained and interrogative discourse on the era', contrasting 'the hegemonic master narrative of 9/11'.<sup>92</sup>

This interrogative discourse is continued in a scene revolving around two parallel interrogations. The first interrogation sees Dent threaten a deranged employee of The Joker in a dilapidated section of Gotham City known as 'The Narrows'. Dent opens his interrogation by making the employee, a former Arkham asylum inmate called Thomas Schiff, kneel on the ground for questioning. Dent's aggressive stance

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<sup>89</sup> Kagan, p. 3.

<sup>90</sup> Ninkovich, p. 286.

<sup>91</sup> Michael Ignatieff, quoted in Holloway, p. 14.

<sup>92</sup> McSweeney, pp. 19-20.

towards Schiff and the squalid backdrop of the *mise en scène* recalls Dick Cheney's call for US intelligence agencies to 'work the dark side' in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, thematically embodied in the stark, darkly lit *neo-noir* ambience of the cinematography that envelops the scene. This disposition continues to be highlighted when Nolan crosscuts to a nearby parallel interrogation of mob boss Maroni by Batman. As Dent is threatening Schiff, a medium shot shows Batman dangle the mob boss from a building in an effort to extract information about The Joker. After dropping the mob boss to the ground, Batman descends to threaten Maroni who groans in agony, extrapolating what Dent could potentially do to Schiff. The presence of these parallel interrogations establishes the growing schizophrenia of Dent's political identity. When Nolan returns to Dent's interrogation, he has indeed descended further into unilateral violence - a medium shot shows the District Attorney pointing a gun directly at Schiff's temple. Whilst a moody score plays, the viewer sees Dent decide the man's fate in a coin toss, creating a strange association between his behaviour and Chigurh's in *No Country for Old Men*. As with Chigurh's manipulation of the storeowner, Dent attempts to reconcile arbitrary punishment with unbending principle, attesting to analogous contradictions of national identity initiated by the War on Terror. Like Chigurh, Said, and most perversely, The Joker, Dent symbolises a specific duality associated with contemporaneous US foreign policy.

Dent's degeneration into criminal vigilantism implies the effect of new foreign policy realities. To Daniel Benjamin, member of the United States National Security Council from 1994-1999, the 9/11 attacks legitimised 'covert, lethal operations' against 'a

different enemy'.<sup>93</sup> Such changes have precedents in the volatile history of Wilsonianism. The Wilsonian creed was repeatedly attenuated by the exigencies of American militarism; Stephen Graubard notes the domestic environment that vitiating Wilson's quest to 'make the world safe for democracy' in World War One, specifically the patriotic fervour and wartime curtailment of civil liberties that 'served to threaten the kind of peace policies he advocated'.<sup>94</sup> Although Ninkovich writes of Wilsonianism as a hawkish doctrine employed in times of wartime and discord, the Iran hostage crisis and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan ruined the Carter administration's pacific emphasis on human rights orientated policies, paving the way for the Reagan administration's realist support of anti-communist dictatorships. This created, in Steigerwald's words, 'the specious distinction that there was a difference between totalitarianism and authoritarianism'.<sup>95</sup>

The subsequent arrival of Batman illustrates Jacksonian realism's corrupting influence on Wilsonianism. After stopping Dent's interrogation, the superhero admonishes the District Attorney for putting his own career at risk, and reminds him of his promise to be Gotham's symbol of justice. Batman tells Dent he is 'the symbol of hope I can never be...the first legitimate ray of light in Gotham in decades'. Dent's position as a legate to Batman's hawkish worldview would perhaps provoke cynicism from Anne-Marie Slaughter. She propounds that Wilsonianism should be efficient and 'defined power in terms of getting results, which at least in the international sphere means that multilateralism has to be more than window

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<sup>93</sup> PBS Frontline, *The Dark Side* (2006), <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/darkside/themes/darkside.html> [accessed 13 March 2016].

<sup>94</sup> Graubard, p. 190.

<sup>95</sup> David Steigerwald, *Wilsonian Idealism in America* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 235.

dressing'.<sup>96</sup> Such aims were firmly demarcated from unilateralism and the 'blind for American leadership' used by the Bush administration.<sup>97</sup>

The corrosion of Wilsonian philosophy is further symbolised in the persona of Schiff, whose mental degradation recalls not just the treatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, but also the atmosphere of psychological trauma that permeated the US occupation. George Packer spoke of the looters that engulfed post invasion Baghdad and broke into the al-Rashad psychiatric hospital, an act that 'liberated about six hundred of the hospital's one thousand chronic schizophrenics and other hard-core, burnt-out cases'.<sup>98</sup>

To some academic critics of *The Dark Knight*, this abrasive symbolism proved a lack of political commitment. Although Douglas Kellner praises the film's portrayal of 'the morass and abyss of the Bush-Cheney era' and the 'dark, deep pessimism of people plagued by their own economic and political elites and deadly enemies who want to destroy them', other readings of *The Dark Knight* have interpreted the film as a reactionary extension of an amorphous post-9/11 American psyche.<sup>99</sup> Stephen Prince, who sees mainstream American cinema during the War on Terror as providing a mere sublimation of the chauvinism underscored in the action pictures of the 1990s, views *The Dark Knight's* chief attractions to be its 'generic elements of action and a vengeance narrative', its subtext of terror creating a tone of 'egregious violation' felt in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Slaughter, 'Wilsonianism in the Twenty-first Century', p. 96.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>98</sup> Packer, *The Assassins Gate: America in Iraq*, p. 149.

<sup>99</sup> Kellner, *Cinema Wars*, p. 11.

<sup>100</sup> Prince, p. 286.

Martin Fradley criticises Kellner's reading for its detachment, calling it a 'covertly progressive' interpretation that fails by 'focusing solely on the *consequences* of political violence' and ignoring the fact that *The Dark Knight* failed 'to condemn torture *per se* as a moral, ethical and political obscenity'.<sup>101</sup> Surmising the politics of *The Dark Knight* and its predecessor in *Batman Begins*, Justine Toh perceives the franchise as embodying the dominance of neoconservatism and neoliberalism, its pessimism conveying 'the ills of the system instead of offering a real alternative for all'.<sup>102</sup> A central problem with these readings is their dismissal of both the film's fatalistic tone and their implicit desire for a kind of partisan stance in its place. Instead of viewing *The Dark Knight's* exploration of a contradictory US foreign policy in the same fashion as tonally similar westerns such as *No Country for Old Men* and *There Will be Blood*, their critiques dismiss its politics purely on the basis of political nihilism. This, akin to earlier criticism of *Three Kings* and *Team America: World Police*, ignores the salience of ideological schism in Nolan's picture. Like Prince, Toh and Fradley refrain from interpreting *The Dark Knight's* dystopian imagery as allusive to the conflicting political impulses of the post-9/11 era.

The final section assesses how the film's third act illustrates the long term damage to Wilsonianism wrought by this theme of contradiction. It also examines the views of critics and International Relations theorists in order to understand what kind of future Nolan's picture portends for a post-Bush United States.

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<sup>101</sup> Martin Fradley, 'What Do You Believe In? Film Scholarship and the Cultural Politics of the Dark Knight Franchise', *Film Quarterly*, Vol.66:3 (2013), pp. 15-27 (p. 18).

<sup>102</sup> Justine Toh, 'The Tools and Toys of the War on Terror: Consumer Desire, Military Fetish, and Regime Change in *Batman Begins*', in *Reframing 9/11: Film, Popular Culture and the "War on Terror"*, ed. by Jeff Birkenstein, Anna Froula, and Karen Randell (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), pp. 127-140 (p. 138).

### 4.3: 'The foreign policy we deserve, but not the foreign policy we need right now'

In chapter 3, I discussed how the fraught relationship between neocolonialism and evangelism in *There Will be Blood* undermined Mead's notion of a neoconservative 'revival Wilsonianism'.<sup>103</sup> The collaboration between unilateralism and Wilsonianism in *The Dark Knight* becomes comparably discordant. Its vulnerability is best illustrated after a dramatic third act plot development in which the triumvirate of Batman, Dent, and Gordon successfully arrest The Joker. The brief bout of hope this creates is soon disturbed when Gordon discovers that Harvey Dent and Rachel Dawes have been kidnapped by corrupt, bribed police officers, a realisation that prompts Batman to interrogate The Joker. An interrogation between Batman and The Joker subsequently takes place in a dank holding cell, a location filtered by stark, putrid cinematography. A line spoken in jest by The Joker that Dent 'could be in one place' or 'several places at once' leads to a reenactment of the 'ticking time bomb' scenario, as Batman begins to beat The Joker violently for information surrounding the couple's location.

The stark, profoundly impersonal nature of the holding cell and the torture recalls American actions at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. Paralleling the allusions to American violence is the site of Dent's kidnapping, an indistinct warehouse filled with tubs of kerosene rigged to explode. Like the mysterious locale of Douglas's murder, its anonymity invokes the indiscriminate nature of sectarian violence performed throughout post-occupation Iraq. Immobilised and strapped to a chair,

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<sup>103</sup> Mead, *Power, Terror, Peace and War: America's Grand Strategy in a World at Risk*, pp. 90-91.

Dent's demeanour is similar to what was seen in the Schiff sequence. He appears anguished, a stark contrast with the *elan* of his political image.

His torment compounds when Dawes, who is being held in an analogous warehouse on the other side of Gotham, uses a radio device to make contact with him. The desperate conversation between them, filled with blanket reassurances that 'everything is going to be ok', feels reminiscent of the phone calls between loved ones that took place on the day of the 9/11 attacks.<sup>104</sup> Yet the fact that Dent is the liberal embodiment of change in Gotham makes his humiliation more nihilistic than tragic, stymieing the possibility of reform in the War on Terror era.

The two 'sucker punches' that follow undercut the relevance of Dent's politics for a post-9/11 America. The first 'sucker punch' sees Nolan's violate what Stephen Faller called 'the false dichotomy choice'<sup>105</sup>, the obligation in comic book movies for the hero to save two imperilled parties despite the great adversity in doing so. Though this orthodoxy is fulfilled in the lighter *Spiderman* (2002), *The Dark Knight* flaunts this cliché by killing Rachel off before the police can reach her in time. Her death is especially unsentimental - in a close-up shot, she desperately murmurs Harvey's name before a fiery explosion abruptly engulfs the screen. This aversion to genre tropes seems to reject not just the contrived equilibriums of other mainstream comic book pictures, but also the prospect of the US enjoying its unilateral power without mortal consequence. Because the 'sucker punch' comes after a narrative that has consistently focused on the blowback to US power, the terroristic imagery of the

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<sup>104</sup> Peggy Noonan, *The Sounds that Still Echo from 9/11* (2006), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB115774704992357920> [accessed 19 July 2015].

<sup>105</sup> Stephen Faller, quoted in McSweeney, p. 120.

explosion is, like the oil derrick's immolation in *There Will be Blood*, divorced from an ahistorical, isolated emphasis on 9/11's trauma.

The second 'sucker punch' occurs directly after this tragedy and places the terrorist attack within a context that suggests the human costs of American militarism, both on the foot soldiers and on the victims of the American imperium. Though Batman arrives to escort an emotional Dent away from his warehouse location, a timed explosion from the building unleashes flames on to Dent's face, mutilating him. A close-up shot displays the savage pain afflicting Dent as he rolls around screaming. To Dave Calhoun, Dent's disfiguring was associable with the bombing attacks that occurred across Iraq in the wake of the US invasion. This interpretation was provided in his *Time Out* review, which viewed Dent's immolation as evocative of the zero-sum nature of the War on Terror, recalling 'the charred bodies of Iraq'.<sup>106</sup>

A montage connotative of endless war succeeds these subversive images. In contrast to the fervour of earlier dramatic sequences, the mood is largely melancholy, symbolised in a morose violin score by Zimmer. Its first shot depicts The Joker with a stickout tongue speeding through Gotham in a stolen police car, a moment transgressive and tonally heterodox in its aversion of the sentimentalism that might normally succeed a tragic sequence in a mainstream comic book picture. The medium shot that follows shows firefighters dousing the flames of the ruined building where Rachel died while Batman stands morosely against the backdrop, a sight that invokes the iconographic photographs of Ground Zero after 9/11.

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<sup>106</sup> Dave Calhoun, *The Dark Knight Time Out London Review* (2008), <https://www.timeout.com/london/film/the-dark-knight> [accessed 2 November 2015].



Image 6: *The Dark Knight's* 'Ground Zero'<sup>107</sup>

The despondent depiction of the site, and its juxtaposition with the nihilistic demeanour of The Joker, makes absent the resilient, blue-collar populism that manifested in the journalistic and public praise of the bravery of emergency workers and firefighters on the day of the 9/11 attacks, resulting in an allegory wholly fixated with the costs and exigencies of US power.<sup>108</sup> The realism evidenced in a grief-laden discussion between Wayne and Alfred in Wayne's penthouse shows this lack of sentimentality and underlines neoconservatism's false promises of Wilsonian idealism. After finding a letter written by Rachel before her death, Alfred reads of her love for Dent and her belief that Wayne should continue on in his role as Batman. This letter, if read by Wayne, could further compound his already distraught

<sup>107</sup> Image can be found in Shortlist, *15 Things You (Probably) Didn't Know About the Dark Knight* (n.d.), <https://www.shortlist.com/entertainment/films/15-things-you-probably-didnt-know-about-the-dark-knight/90336> [accessed 23 December 2018].

<sup>108</sup> One manifestation of the praise for firefighters and emergency workers is located in R. William Franklin and Mary Sudman Donovan, *Will the Dust Praise You? Spiritual Responses to 9/11* (New York City: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2003), p. 142.

state. By hiding the letter from Wayne, Alfred hints at a policy of deception that breaks with the hopes of democratic transparency evinced in Dent's first appearance. Alfred embraces this deception in another monologue that helps Wayne realise the necessary role that Batman plays for the security of the city.

Whilst Wayne stares despondently out of his penthouse window into the Gotham dawn, Alfred describes how Wayne 'spat in the faces of Gotham's criminals', a stance which would lead to a state of affairs where 'things were only going to get worse before they got better'. However, most thematically important is Alfred's return to his Burma anecdote. After telling Wayne that Batman will now have to be Gotham's hero rather than Dent, Wayne asks how Alfred caught the bandit in Burma. Alfred's pithy retort, that, 'we burned the forest down', appears emblematic of the degenerative notions of American imperialism seen in the earlier case studies, its Ben Tre imagery resembling the encounters with modern warfare evidenced in *Three Kings's* caustic satire and *There Will be Blood's* allegory of neocolonial aggrandisement. The dark nature of the line recalls the political alternations of *Team America: World Police*; the successive relationship in the Burmese story between co-optive power (shown in the earlier tales of bribery) and violence show how American soft power segues easily into its harder form.

The primacy of security over liberty in these conflicts is signalled in a key climatic scene where Wayne, in his Batman incarnation, meets Wayne Enterprises Scientist Lucius Fox. In their meeting at Wayne's corporate headquarters, they discuss finding The Joker through a sonar device that will spy on every person in Gotham City. The *mise en scène* here, which features a row of computer screens playing security

footage of civilians engaged in everyday activities, symptomatises the authoritarian paranoia of this debate. Although the sonar device could track down The Joker before his next attack, its impact is potentially pyrrhic, damaging civil liberties and confronting Wayne with his own 'burning the forest' legacy. Fox expresses this sensibility by imploring 'this is too much power for one person', promising his resignation if the device is maintained after Batman captures The Joker. To Muller, the scene's explicit allusions to the Patriot Act and Fox's tone of indignation critiques the Bush administration's abuse of civil liberties in domestic and foreign policy. Muller argues that 'insinuations of causal connections between Gotham's populace and the city's perpetual troubles in the context of these historical associations afford viewers the opportunity to reflect on their own relationship to September 11 and its aftermath'.<sup>109</sup> Muller's reflection, however, is contradicted by the fatalistic tone of the scene. The device's epochal connotations reference a curtailment of civil liberties seemingly perennial in post-9/11 American life, suggesting what the exigencies of terrorism can provoke.

The prioritisation of security over liberty here can be connected to a shift in Iraq policy that occurred in the years leading up to *The Dark Knight's* 2008 release. The repudiation of neoconservatism in the 2006 mid-term elections, which saw the Republican Party lose both houses of Congress, halted the Wilsonian facet of the Bush administration's intervention in Iraq. Though to Jason Stahl, the Bush administration's refusal to heed the advice of the bipartisan Iraq Study Group

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<sup>109</sup> Christine Muller, 'Power, Choice, and September 11 in *The Dark Knight*', in *The 21st Century Superhero: Essays on Gender, Genre, and Globalization in Film*, ed. by Richard J. Gray II and Betty Kaklamanidou (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 2011), pp. 46-59 (p. 51).

seemed to ‘not bring respite from further neoconservative foreign policies,’<sup>110</sup> the resultant surge in troops sent to Iraq in 2007 could be interpreted as a capitulation to the greater demands of security over liberty in the country’s governance. Much of this alteration in sensibility was conveyed by the former CIA intelligence analyst and Middle East expert Kevin Pollack, who wrote on ‘the change in strategy and tactics’ that saw increased troop numbers supervise the development of the Iraqi Security Forces.<sup>111</sup> This led to the deployment ‘of reasonably competent and reliable formations that could be counted on to fight the militias and insurgents, keep the peace, and maintain law and order’.<sup>112</sup> The pragmatic brokerage of a ‘new power sharing arrangement’<sup>113</sup> between formerly warring Sunni and Shia groups further distanced the United States from the original quixotism of building a pro-American democracy in the Middle East, and acknowledged that ‘Iraq descended into a Hobbesian state of nature’ post-invasion.<sup>114</sup>

Pollack also discusses the defeat of a Tammany Hall style sectarian politics that had dominated the early years of the insurgency. The greater provision of troop security seemed to end the cruel rule of elected Shia militias, who had before ‘siphoned off Iraq’s oil wealth into their own coffers’, and ‘often purposely hindered the rebuilding of government capacity to ensure that the people remained dependent on them’.<sup>115</sup> Did these attempts to create a fairer and more transparent state still signal a role for Wilsonianism? Only in the sense that these reforms were more pragmatic than the

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<sup>110</sup> Jason Stahl, *Right Moves: The Conservative Think Tank in American Political Culture since 1945* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), p. 196.

<sup>111</sup> Kenneth M. Pollack, ‘The Fall and Rise and Fall of Iraq’, *Middle East Memo*, Vol.29 (2013), pp. 1-21 (p. 8).

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

Manichean neoconservative policies that had stigmatised state employees and Sunni groups previously. The vision of a model Shia government boasted of in the build-up to the war was long over, forsaken for the understanding that the country was too besieged to achieve this state.

Such futility becomes tangible in *The Dark Knight's* epilogue, which takes place after Batman captures The Joker and finds out that he has manipulated Dent into murdering members of Gotham's mob and corrupt police force. Batman then heads to find Dent at the site of Rachel's death, where the former District Attorney holds Gordon and his family hostage. After Batman is forced to knock Dent off the derelict site, a lengthy coda begins with Batman and Gordon reflecting on the loss of Dent's progressive politics.

Gordon notes that Dent's murders will make 'Harvey's prosecutions, everything we fought for, undone,' concluding that: 'The Joker took the best of us and tore him down.' Batman, in defiance, tells Gordon that he will take the blame for Dent's murders in order to restore faith and order to the city, making Dent a martyr instead of a murderer in the minds of the Gotham public. The backdrop of the Ground Zero style site of Rachel's death lends this proposition an intensity. The setting and Dent's position as both martyr and murderer seem implicative of the 9/11 attacks; yet, more importantly, Batman's protection of Dent's legacy testifies to a myth of progressivism that was used to cover the US's subsequent pursuit of pre-emptive war. McSweeney views the endorsement of Dent and the self-tarnishing of Batman as adhering to a 'maxim from *The Man who Shot Liberty Valence* and the

commitment to “Print the legend” rather than reveal the truth to the public’.<sup>116</sup> In a manner that epitomises its presentation of an exploited Wilsonianism, *The Dark Knight’s* final montage sees the liberal legend of Dent again used to paper over an unaccountable political agenda.

The montage displays a sequence of interconnected events that draw attention to Gordon and Batman’s cover-up. Within these events are eulogies for the political roles Batman and Dent have played. The first such example is in literal form, and begins in a ‘flash forward’ segment where Gordon delivers a eulogy for Dent at his funeral. This segment is filmed in bright white to reflect the District Attorney’s politically canonised status. The feting of Dent is encapsulated by Gordon’s dialogue, which describes ‘a hero...not the hero we deserve, but not the one we needed...a knight, shining’.

Though Gordon’s speech stands out in its deception, this moment seems to pall in significance next to the more symbolic eulogy that resolves around Batman embracing a kind of vicarious redemption for Dent’s sins. This begins in the next flash forward segment, which depicts Gordon smashing the bat signal used to form meetings between him, Batman, and Dent. Gordon’s action establishes the end of the triumvirate that was used to track down Lau and The Joker earlier in the picture. The use of inserted dialogue taken from the aftermath of Dent’s death further indicates this end to multilateralism and institutional collaboration. In dialogue directly corresponding to Gordon’s smashing of the bat signal, Batman grunts that the police will ‘hunt me, condemn me, set the dogs on me’. Despite this not being a

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<sup>116</sup> McSweeney, p. 122.

eulogy in the literal sense, Batman's stoical dialogue celebrates his endurance of the city's political turmoil. The extra-legal nature of his power, unlike the idealistic liberalism of Dent, can survive and be consolidated against the exigencies of terrorism and institutional corruption. This is symbolised by the following image, a low angle shot that displays Alfred burning the emotional letter intended for Wayne from Rachel earlier in the picture. In a juxtaposed voiceover, Batman expresses that, 'sometimes the truth isn't good enough...sometimes people deserve to have their faith rewarded'. Wayne's line, dramatically ironic when placed against the burning of a letter he would have wanted to read, emphasises the noble lie. Even a subsequent medium shot of a pensive Fox, who looks over the destruction of the sonar device that was used to track down The Joker, fails to escape this fatalism. It is merely a token gesture that sits uncomfortably with the cover up of Dent's crimes.

The hegemony of this authoritarianism is integral to the final eulogy of this sequence, which returns to the Ground Zero style site. As police arrive on the scene to arrest Batman, Gordon tells his son why Batman is being framed for the good of Gotham. Gordon speaks of Batman as 'the hero Gotham deserves, but not the one it needs right now' whilst a grandiose score by Zimmer plays over images of Batman fleeing the scene. A bombastic non-diegetic drum rhythm adds to the intensity of Gordon's lines. He utters, 'We'll hunt him because he can take it' as a series of police chase the superhero. When Batman drives away from the scene, using a slick item known as the bat-bike, Gordon concludes the peroration for his legacy. He celebrates 'a silent guardian...a watchful protector...a dark knight'.

Understandably, this final sequence lent itself to partisan readings of Nolan's picture. There are two interpretations of this concluding scene I want to discuss. The first one is by the right wing commentator Andrew Klavan, who praises *The Dark Knight* as a purveyor of neoconservative values. The second is from the liberal perspective of *The New York Times's* Jonathan Lethem, who views this sequence as indicative of an evasiveness that covers for the Bush administration's transgressions. To Andrew Klavan, *The Dark Knight* formed a 'paean of praise to the fortitude and moral courage that has been shown by George W. Bush in this time of terror and war', embodied in the concluding scene's 'moral complexity'.<sup>117</sup> He adds that this ending seems a rebuke of a liberal mentality in which 'we prosecute and execrate the violent soldier or the cruel interrogator in order to parade ourselves as paragons of the peaceful values they preserve'.<sup>118</sup>

In contrast, Lethem criticised the tone of this ending and *The Dark Knight's* broader presentation of a post-9/11 dysphoria. He thought the film 'echoes a civil discourse strained to helplessness by panic, overreaction and cultivated grievance' and failed to serve as a helpful allegory for the United States in 2008, describing a climax consisting of 'déjà vu battles', where 'the combatants forever escape one another's final judgment, whirl off into the void, leaving us awed standing in the rubble, uncertain of what we've seen, only sure we're primed for the sequel'.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Andrew Klavan, *What Bush and Batman Have in Common* (2008), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB121694247343482821> [accessed 3 November 2015].

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Jonathan Lethem, *Art of Darkness* (2008), <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/21/opinion/21lethem.html> [accessed 3 November 2015].

The partisan fashion of these reviews seems to mirror Kellner's view of Hollywood cinema as a 'contest of representations and a contested terrain that reproduces existing social struggles and transcodes the political discourses of the era'.<sup>120</sup> Yet Kellner's methodology, along with Lethem and Klavan's reviews, focuses on a dynamic of hyperpartisanship that fails to acknowledge the representation of foreign policy contradiction fundamental to *The Dark Knight's* ending and broader narrative. As with the conclusion of *No Country for Old Men*, Wilsonian idealism has been enervated, with Dent's ideology shown as less hegemonic than Batman's national security state apparatus. Though Klavan champions Nolan's conclusion for forming a pugnacious defence of the Bush administration during its final two years in office, this ending could be termed as more subversive in its allegorising. For all the spectre of Leo Strauss's noble lie in the cover up surrounding Harvey Dent's death, Dent's hallowed position as liberal figurehead implies the possibility that Bush administration shibboleths will be preserved in a future Democratic regime.

In Section 4.1, I warned against analogies of Harvey Dent with Barack Obama, owing to their colour blind indifference to Dent's early label as a 'white knight'. Yet interpreting the lies surrounding Dent's death as figurative of the continuation of Bush era policy enables some comparisons to be drawn between the Wilsonian fig leaf we see at the end of *The Dark Knight* and the various betrayals of liberal idealism in the Obama years. The cover up of Dent's death, rather than the persona of Dent himself, can be seen as portentous in regard to the future of United States policy. Although Obama's election seemed to give the imprimatur of a new

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<sup>120</sup> Kellner, *Cinema Wars*, p. 2.

Wilsonian idealism, events, and reevaluations of his foreign policy, conspired to belie this image.

Jack Goldsmith interprets the Obama administration's continuation of extra-judicial assassinations, state secret privileges and indefinite detention as proof that the administration had made no substantive change, arguing, 'the main difference between the Obama and Bush administration's concerns was not the substance of terrorism policy, but rather its packaging'.<sup>121</sup> To Robert Singh, whose views were briefly discussed in Section 4.1, Obama renewed 'a restrained pragmatic realism in place of a militarized Wilsonianism' that had begun late in the Bush administration's second term.<sup>122</sup> Although Paul Bonicelli opines that 'the tenor and work of the (Obama) administration is best described as idealist or liberal', other analysts of his presidency see it as constrained by events that tested orthodox Wilsonian presumptions of championing international law and democracy.<sup>123</sup> Adam Quinn comments on the 'obliged reconsideration' of Wilsonianism that occurred in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, where a series of 'zero sum political conflicts' led to 'tacit support for manifestly authoritarian forces that have rolled back the liberalization of politics sought by the Arab revolutions'.<sup>124</sup>

The Obama administration was forced to fear the results of demands for democratisation in Egypt, Syria, and Libya. This again repeated on a regional scale

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<sup>121</sup> Jack Goldsmith, quoted in Robert S. Singh, 'Continuity and Change in Obama's Foreign Policy', in *The Obama Presidency: Appraisals and Prospects*, ed. by Bert A. Rockman, Andrew Rudalevige, and Colin Campbell (Washington DC: CQ Press, 2011), pp. 268-294 (p. 288).

<sup>122</sup> Singh, 'Continuity and Change in Obama's Foreign Policy', p. 288.

<sup>123</sup> Paul Bonicelli, *Obama the realist?* (2012), <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/12/10/obama-the-realist-2/> [accessed 10 March 2016].

<sup>124</sup> Adam Quinn, 'Obama's National Security Strategy: Predicting US Policy in the Context of Changing Worldviews', *Chatham House: The Royal Institute of International Affairs*, US Project (2015), pp. 1-25 (pp. 20-21).

the dichotomy between liberty and security that occurred in the Iraq War. Although the Obama administration supported a British and French led humanitarian intervention in Libya and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton supported the overthrow of Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak, the brutalised status of Syria in Obama's second term and the conflict between Russia backed dictator Assad and the sectarian forces of ISIS proved that Wilsonianism, whether annexed by neoconservatives or remolded by liberals, would find no easy assimilation within the outlook of United States foreign policy.

The ending of *The Dark Knight* indicates that Wilsonianism, even in its orthodox form, is impossible to recapture. This disillusionment was renewed in the final film of Nolan's Batman trilogy, *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), which added a Great Recession subtext to its representation of terrorist villain Bane, whose revolutionary spirit of violence encapsulated the Obama administration's failure to mollify the discontents of neoliberal globalisation and bring about a New Deal style realignment in American political life. Other comic book adaptations, such as *Iron Man 3* (2013) and *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014) would comment on the lack of reform in the Obama era through narratives that featured the corruption of national security agencies, the latter film chiming in with the NSA scandal of 2013. James Mann, whose book *The Obamians: The Struggle inside the White House to Redefine American Power* (2012) underlines the struggles of Obama's first term, wrote of the consensus surrounding foreign policy during this period and the maintenance of a security orientated policy that had been consolidated in Bush's second term:

*The drones and targeted killing didn't stop. The United States continued to hold prisoners without trial. The policy of rendition remained in effect. Just as many of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal reforms didn't become permanent until the Eisenhower administration failed to do away with them, so, too, some of George W. Bush's antiterrorism policies didn't seem like permanent changes until they were perpetuated by Obama.*<sup>125</sup>

*The Dark Knight* allegorises the damage to Wilsonianism that occurred during the Bush years. Neoconservatism saw Wilsonianism unmoored from its previous emphasis on international peace and free trade. In recalibrating Wilson's vision for the post-9/11 era and a pre-emptive foreign policy, the Bush administration profaned his emphasis on democratisation and paralysed his doctrine for the Obama administration. Nolan's picture, in its final capitulation to realism in international affairs, underlines this vitiation. This theme of a disgraced liberal internationalism recurs next in the final chapter and its analysis of James Cameron's *Avatar*, a picture that returns to the Global Meliorist philosophy explored at the start of this thesis.

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<sup>125</sup> Mann, *The Obamians: The Struggle Inside the White House To Redefine American Power*, p. 334.

## CHAPTER 5:

### **AVATAR AND THE REJECTION OF GLOBAL MELIORISM - LEADING FROM BEHIND OVER DEMOCRATISING FROM ABOVE**

In 2011, Walter McDougall returned to his theory of Global Meliorism after ten years of the War on Terror. He bemoaned how the Bush administration's Iraq occupation had delivered 'Global Meliorism with guns', a combination underpinned by what he called the 'persuasive analogy between Iraq and Vietnam', which further discredited the 'shocking and arrogant novelty' of the 'Bush doctrine'.<sup>1</sup> This final chapter examines how the disdain towards this militarised form of Global Meliorism is reflected in James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009). Cameron's science fiction narrative, which focuses on disabled marine Jake Sully's journey from server of American empire to anti-imperialist, encapsulates the backlash against intervention that occurred during the late 2000s.

The first case study of this thesis presented a model of Global Meliorism that fit the politically centrist Clinton years. The analysis in this chapter focuses on how *Avatar* repudiates the bipartisan consensus surrounding military power incarnated during the late 1990s and renewed during the Iraq War. In depicting the ruination of Global Meliorism, *Avatar* conveys not just how this nation building ideal was profaned by its associations with American hard power. It signals how this proximity ended the

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<sup>1</sup> Walter A. McDougall, 'Are US Foreign Policy Traditions Relevant to the Middle East?', in *Culture and Civilisation: Volume 2: Beyond Positivism and Historicism*, ed. by Irving Louis Horowitz (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), pp. 16-32 (pp. 30-31).

culture of an America implanting 'democracy from above', and foreshadows the replacement of this outlook with an alternate 'leading from behind' strategy key to the approach of Obama's first term.

*Avatar's* science fiction narrative, which was released to mass audiences during the first year of Obama's presidency in 2009, again uses allegory to critique America's imperial overstretch. Taking place in the year 2154, the first half of Cameron's picture sees Jake Sully inducted by a group of liberal-minded scientists into the avatar program. This program enables him to control the body of an alien life form in order to co-opt a tribe of extra-terrestrial humanoids, known as the Na'vi, for the purposes of American neo-imperialism. Sully's growing ambivalence towards this device and his increasing sympathy for the Na'vi signifies the uneasiness surrounding intervention in the wake of the Bush years. The picture's second half, which sees Sully lead an anti-imperialist rebellion against his corporate and military employees, further conveys Cameron's message that the American hegemon should be sensitive to the local desires and mores of foreign populations.

*Avatar* therefore mirrors the exasperation with war abroad that led to the election of Barack Obama in 2008. Yet its place in this final chapter is for reasons beyond its contemporaneous resonance. Cameron's picture apotheosises Hollywood's use of International Relations allegory during the 1999-2009 decade and offers the most explicit interrogation of a contradictory foreign policy amongst case studies in this thesis. It also poignantly reflects the end of both neoconservatism and liberal interventionism as dominant doctrines. I argue that this loss of hegemonic power is reflected in Sully's rebellion, which conveys the search for a new outlook on world

affairs. The analysis of this final case study will therefore bring the thesis back full circle, returning to the state of ambivalence and desire for an alternative International Relations philosophy that underscored *Three Kings's* early scenes.

This chapter is divided into two sections - Section 5.1, '*Avatar* and the consummate contradiction of foreign occupation', examines how the film's early scenes allegorise the divisive nature of nation building in Iraq. I use the word 'consummate' because the arrival of Sully on the alien planet Pandora relies on dichotomies evidenced throughout the previous case studies. These include the juxtaposition of the Wilsonian and Jacksonian schools of foreign policy, as well as the International Relations elements of soft and hard power. Section 5.2, '*Avatar* and the end of Global Meliorism', delineates how the second half of Cameron's picture rejects the nation building dimensions of both liberal interventionist and neoconservative foreign policy. This is displayed in set pieces that combine the pre-emptive language of the Iraq War with the sanguinary imagers of Vietnam. With these scenes, *Avatar* reflects McDougall's view that the neoconservative co-option of Global Meliorism had replicated the problematic nature of that earlier conflict. *Avatar* illustrates the poignant end to a theory that, only a decade earlier, had been revived for the unipolar era.

### **5.1: *Avatar* and the consummate contradiction of foreign occupation**

*Avatar* opens with imagery that encodes quiet dissent against the forces of American neo-imperialism and a Global Meliorism that seeks to implant democracy from

above. This sensibility begins with a tracking shot that heads rapidly through the jungle of the alien planet Pandora, the setting where the majority of the allegorical critique is to take place. A location of portentous fog and vertiginous heights, the jungle has a derealised, dreamlike quality. Further underlining the mystical nature of Pandora is the sound of the planet's indigenous humanoids, the Na'vi. Although not seen onscreen, their music plays over the scenery in an ethereal manner, implying the sacredness of this agrarian planet.

For all the sublimity of these visual and aural elements, the voiceover of *Avatar's* central protagonist adds an ambivalent tone. The Na'vi's paeans soon jar with the soldierly bluntness of Jake Sully's first line. This refers to the impact of a war wound that left him without the use of his legs and stuck in a veterans' hospital 'with a big hole blown through the middle of my life'. His abrupt account of his quadriplegia, for all its initial incongruity, has an intimate connection with the landscape before the viewer. Sully comments on the dreams he had of 'flying' during his time convalescing in the hospital, thus revealing the tracking shot to be from the perspective of his traumatised subconscious. The causative relationship between Sully's role as a soldier and his dreaming of Pandora is soon revealed to be more than a merely ephemeral fantasy. After the dream ends, a close-up shot shows Sully in a cryogenic chamber on a spacecraft, juxtaposing the planet's beauty with the clinical reality of Sully's outer space mission. The final line of Sully's voiceover connotes this uneasiness. He notes that 'you always have to wake up', rationalising the implications of his dreaming for viewers.

This acknowledgment nevertheless fails to defuse the dream's loaded nature. In its implications of an indigenised solidarity and spiritualist fantasy, his dreaming inverts Faludi's notion of a hawkish, masculinised 'terror dream' in post-9/11 life. This theory proposes that a 'national fantasy of virtuous might and triumph' underpinned the War on Terror.<sup>2</sup> To Faludi, a benevolent paternalism was sanctioned by 'rescue language'.<sup>3</sup> This rhetoric supported the 'liberation' of the women of Iraq and Afghanistan, who formed the 'cumulative elements of a national fantasy'.<sup>4</sup> The national security dimension of this idea was rebuked in the final scene of *No Country for Old Men*, which saw Bell's aimless, bathetic dream reject the activist notions of Faludi's theory and its vaunting of a frontier culture to protect the homeland. In its subtle repudiation of American influence, Sully's dream refutes this theory's neo-imperial connotations and its co-option of a Global Meliorism used to rationalise American change of the Middle East. Like the bathetic opening moments of *Three Kings* and *There Will be Blood*, Sully's conflicted status underlines a cognitive dissonance in American foreign policy.

Although Sully's rebellion against American power is foreshadowed in these opening moments, Cameron makes clear the complex nexus of reasons behind his journey to Pandora. Sully's rationalisations for joining the Pandora mission, which are indicated explicitly in the director's cut of Cameron's picture, return to the motivations for American imperialism that were explored in the earlier case studies. As in the early scenes of *Three Kings*, a series of flashbacks make clear how these are compelled by economic discontent and decline at home. A wide angle shot foregrounds a

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<sup>2</sup> Faludi, p. 289.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

wheelchair bound Sully sitting against the backdrop of an unspecified American city, signalling the essential anonymity of his life on earth. Sully's existence in this industrialised wasteland, which is not unlike the polluted miasma of LA of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), is further delineated in imagery redolent of the baneful aftermath of the Vietnam War in the 1970s. In a moment reminiscent of the behaviour and treatment of Ron Kovic in *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), Sully is kicked out of a bar for being drunk and disorderly. He is, in spite of being a quadriplegic, left to languish in a gutter, and to contemplate his limited existence on veteran benefits.

The economic rationales for the Pandora mission also overwhelm its tragic origins. A flashback displays Sully looking over the dead body of his scientist brother, as well as former Avatar program member, Tommy. His death, the result of a violent mugging, makes a vacancy available for Sully. A group of government agents are subsequently shown offering financial inducements for him to head to Pandora, engendering the opportunity to change his material circumstances and pay towards an operation for his quadriplegia. As this occurs, Sully comments in voiceover that he is 'just some dumb grunt going someplace he is going to regret'.

The left wing International Relations theorist William Appleman Williams noted the ameliorative effects of American expansionism on a beleaguered national psyche. He wrote objectively on how the 1890s rationalisations of overseas imperialism propounded 'the firm conviction, even dogmatic belief that America's domestic wellbeing depends on ever such sustained, ever-increasing overseas economic

expansion'.<sup>5</sup> To the right of Williams on the political spectrum, the International Relations theorist Walter Mead diagnosed this impulse as associated with his foreign policy school of the 'Hamiltonian', a business orientated philosophy (reflected in presidents as diverse in temperament as Theodore Roosevelt and George H.W. Bush) that sought 'a strong alliance between the national government and big business as the key both to domestic stability and to effective action abroad'.<sup>6</sup> Bacevich sees this manifested in the neoconservative ascension of the late 1970s and the military build-up of the early Reagan years. American neo-imperialism could serve as a palliative for the sense of malaise left by Vietnam, a phenomenon most crystallised in the post-1989 era:

*The new American militarism materialized as a reaction to profound disorientation and collective distress. In the wake of a humiliating defeat and a closely related cultural upheaval, restoring the sinews of US military might, celebrating soldierly virtue, and contriving ways to restore the utility of force seemed in some quarters to offer an antidote. The ailments were real, but the remedy turned out to be toxic.<sup>7</sup>*

This toxic effect, and the ultimate failure of this medicine to stop a recurrence of the Vietnam syndrome, is very much in abundance when Sully reaches Pandora. His arrival conveys how this solipsistic belief in military expansionism was prioritised over the 'welfare and uplift'<sup>8</sup>, and the deploying 'of assets to lift up the poor and

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<sup>5</sup> Williams, p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How it Changed the World*, p. xvii.

<sup>7</sup> Bacevich, pp. 225-226.

<sup>8</sup> McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State*, p. 173.

oppressed'<sup>9</sup>, key to Global Meliorism. The first port of call for arrivals on Pandora is Hell's Gate, a grey base of operations used by the mining corporation 'RDA' and their private military contractors. The base is protected by a pentagonal fence to keep out invaders and shows signs of perennial industrialisation, a condition illustrated by the refineries and plants that comprise the structure. Less the opulence of the imperial palace that housed Paul Bremer's CPA in Iraq<sup>10</sup>, Hell's Gate is more akin to Israel's border wall in its lugubrious connotations of neocolonial oppression. These 'qualities' are signalled in the *mise en scène* of the area where Sully's spacecraft lands, which is filled with armed private contractors, bulldozer style vehicles, and human controlled robots known as AMP suits (lifted from the analogously designed 'powerloaders' in Cameron's 1986 science fiction blockbuster *Aliens*) designed expressly for removing Na'vi settlements.<sup>11</sup> The privatised nature of the military culture alienates Sully. He comments in voiceover on how his time on earth celebrated the 'brave marines fighting for freedom', a culture that has no relevance to the private contractors who are 'hired guns, taking the money...working for the money'.

The Social Darwinism of these soldiers accentuates this unease. Before Sully even exits the spacecraft in his wheelchair, he is referred to as 'special K' and told, 'Do not make me wait for you!' by a senior officer. These attitudes become more abundant when Sully manoeuvres through the runway of Hell's Gate. After one soldier sees the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 208.

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Galbraith describes the 'full scale occupation with imperial Americas cloistered in a palace of the tyrant, eating bacon and drinking beer, surrounded by Ghurkhas and blast walls': Kenneth Galbraith, quoted in Christine Cooper, 'US Imperialism in action: An audit based appraisal of the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq', *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, (2009), Vol.20:6, pp. 716-734 (p. 716).

<sup>11</sup> Comparable images recur in the second section of this chapter.

wheelchair bound Sully for the first time, he belittles him as ‘meals on wheels’ before smirking derisively. In another instance, a low angle shot shows Sully stopping before a vehicle designed for tree demolition. The vehicle towers above him, signalling the all-powerful nature of American military technology, and also his own lowly stature. To Frances Pheasant-Kelly, these early moments of emasculation relate to the ‘costs of the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan’, a pain evoked by Sully’s simultaneous use of ‘combat gear and wheelchair’, which recalled ‘recent images of amputees and injured combatants’.<sup>12</sup> At the same time as reflecting this world weariness, Pheasant-Kelly propounded the idea that Sully reflected Faludi’s notion of an ‘impotence’ felt by the United States in the aftermath of 9/11. This multifaceted quality observed the ‘congruencies with 9/11 and the War on Terror’.<sup>13</sup>

It is not the spectre of terrorist insurgency that is most disconcerting in Sully’s arrival on Pandora, however, but instead the implications of neo-imperial violence. The contemporary and historic associations of this violence establish the attenuation of Global Meliorism to be a key motif of Cameron’s picture. The former contemporary quality is evident in the private contractors, who, like Plainview’s oilmen in *There Will be Blood*, allegorise the privatised quality of the Iraq occupation. Thomas Ricks notes the indiscriminate violence of the ‘personal security details for CPA officials’, who ‘forced Iraqi cars onto sidewalks, needlessly alienating the capital’s population’, as well as the ‘worried U.S. troops or third world contractors’ who ‘shot at Iraqi civilians to make them keep their distance’.<sup>14</sup> Martin Barker views this trope as an essential aspect of war films released during the 2000s. Mirroring Bacevich’s

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<sup>12</sup> Pheasant-Kelly, p. 165.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 165.

<sup>14</sup> Ricks, p.225.

perception of a 'new American militarism', Barker puts forward the argument that films such as the 2008 *Rambo* reboot evidenced a supplanting of the conscription/draft culture in Vietnam for the new ethos of privatisation:

*After Vietnam, then, the 'Grunt' became a moveable feast within popular culture. In most versions, he is a soldier just desperate to survive. Fighting wars he (or she) does not believe in, invading space, alien worlds, even taking alien form, the 'Grunt' becomes a virtual mercenary. And this is important since, unlike Vietnam, for Iraq there has been no draft. The American army in Iraq is a volunteer army, aided by privatized military forces. It is vital to our understanding of these films to see that the image of the 'American Soldier' is in meltdown.<sup>15</sup>*

At the same time as encapsulating these changes, *Avatar* transplants them to a milieu associated with America's signature foreign policy failure. The jungle backdrop of Pandora is of course reminiscent of Vietnam. This is also true of the runway at Hell's Gate, which bears comparison with the neocolonial role of air bases at Pleiku and Da Nang. In having the privatised military culture of the Iraq War descend on this setting, *Avatar* depicts the new American militarism as atavistic. To invoke Malewitz's memorable phraseology towards the 1980 of *No Country for Old Men*, it returns to the 'primal scene'<sup>16</sup> of Global Meliorism's ruination.

It is worth contextualising again how McDougall's theory of Global Meliorism emerged (a phenomenon first discussed in Chapter One) and the permutations it experienced before it was dramatically remolded in the Clinton era. Emerging as a

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<sup>15</sup> Barker, p. 68.

<sup>16</sup> Malewitz, p. 163.

corollary to the Wilsonianism and liberal internationalism of the Roosevelt and Truman administrations in the mid-1940s, Global Meliorism sought to promote a welfarism in foreign policy that had been integral to the New and Fair deals.<sup>17</sup> To McDougall, this was first applied in the postwar reconstruction of Western Europe and Japan. Elements of the latter example, especially the attempts to reform the Zaibatsus (large business conglomerates that dominated the Japanese economy before and during the Second World War) by Commander Douglas MacArthur and his staff, extended a 'new-deal idealism' into the sphere of military occupation, a progressivism tangible in the bequeathing of 'women's rights, land reform, and renunciation of war'.<sup>18</sup> This progressive dimension of the occupation is specified by John W. Dower, who describes the 'major land reforms' and 'labour laws' that formed a 'nation building' program 'designed to crack open the old authoritarian system'.<sup>19</sup> The Global Meliorist philosophy was simultaneously prevalent in the early stages of the Cold War. McDougall notes its integral place in the Marshall Plan of 1948, which, in its \$13 billion program of economic aid, typified the belief that Global Meliorism could stem the influence of Communism. McDougall corroborates this with a quote from Sallie Pisani's 1991 work *The CIA and the Marshall Plan*, which underlined the CIA's adherence to Global Meliorism and the institution's view of it as a practical outlook on world affairs. The intelligence service supported the theory's proposals of economic modernisation on the basis that, 'developing nations

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<sup>17</sup> Both the New and Fair deals were an ambitious set of programs designed to encourage co-operation between business and labour as well as promote trade union rights and social security. The premises of the New Deal, which Truman attempted to renew in his promise of a Fair Deal in 1949, are outlined in Steve M. Gillon, 'Democratic Party, 1932-68', in *The Concise Princeton Encyclopedia of American Political History, Volume 2*, ed. by Michael Kazin, Rebecca Edwards and Adam Rothman (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010), 169-172 (p.169).

<sup>18</sup> McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State*, p. 179.

<sup>19</sup> John W. Dower, 'Occupation: A Warning From History', in *The New American Empire: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Teach-In on US Foreign Policy*, pp. 182-197 (p. 185).

receiving adequate assistance from the West in the form of planning and technology would aspire to emulate Western ideas and be less vulnerable to Communist agendas'.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the evidence of its widespread recognition as an attractive political philosophy, the original implementation of Global Meliorism was imperilled by tension and incongruity. McDougall discusses the ambivalence of Yoshida Shigeru, the Prime Minister of Japan at the time of the US occupation, who feared this idealism that 'went to extremes, in complete ignorance of the complex realities then prevailing in our country'.<sup>21</sup> McDougall cites the prime minister's disdain for purges of former militarist officials, the reforms of the Zaibatsu, and educational programs that 'sapped the moral fibre of our youth'.<sup>22</sup>

The later efforts by the CIA to use coups and other covert methods to install pro-Western regimes further attenuated Global Meliorism's promises of democratic and economic renewal. Interestingly, McDougall cites the 1953 coup against Iran's democratically elected Prime Minister Mohamed Mossadegh as an example of what he called 'proactive Meliorism', due to it installing 'the pro-Western Shah'.<sup>23</sup> Yet McDougall disregards the schisms provoked by this action. The fact that the dictatorial Shah was placed in power through undemocratic means indicated that the spread of democracy, a key tenet of Global Meliorism, was not always concurrent with American interests and hegemony. More pertinently, it illustrated that the other goals of Global Meliorism, such as its stress on economic and cultural

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<sup>20</sup> Sallie Pisani, quoted in McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State*, p. 181.

<sup>21</sup> Yoshida Shigeru, quoted in McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State*, p. 179.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

<sup>23</sup> McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State*, p. 181.

Westernisation, could potentially be spoiled by the uncertainties of democracy. This anxiety is corroborated by Roham Alvandi, who delineates the spectre of 'a communist takeover' feared by the CIA in 1953. This motivated the CIA's urging of Iranian regime officials to defect and 'join forces with a network of royalists and British agents in the army, the clergy, and the bazaar to topple the Prime Minister'.<sup>24</sup>

A decade later, the fissures within Global Meliorism became heightened in the early stages of the Vietnam conflict. These tensions are best evoked by the work of Patrick Lloyd Hatcher, who argues that the tumult of the Vietnam War emerged from the rival perceptions of administration 'Whigs' and 'Tories'.<sup>25</sup> By invoking the political divides of late eighteenth century Britain, Hatcher makes clear the internecine differences that plagued the planning of the Vietnam conflict. Whigs who opposed absolute monarchy were embodied in individuals such as the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs Roger Hilsman. He advocated supporting political reform of the corrupt Diem regime and a 'government that could really care'.<sup>26</sup> The aim of the Whig mentality was to instill democracy by 'writing constituents, organizing trade unions, establishing legal studies, and holding elections of all sorts'.<sup>27</sup> Tories, in contrast, 'prefer to support economic action'.<sup>28</sup> They expressed concern for issues

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<sup>24</sup>Roham Alvandi, *Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah: The United States and Iran in the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), <http://www.oxfordscholarship.com.ezproxyd.bham.ac.uk/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199375691.001.0001/acprof-9780199375691> [accessed 21<sup>st</sup> October 2016]

<sup>25</sup>Information surrounding Whig and Tory attitudes is located in Patrick Lloyd Hatcher, *The Suicide of an Elite: American Internationalists in Vietnam* (Palo Alto, California: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp. 19-21.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

such as 'promoting dry farming techniques, in augmenting human labour with machines' as well as 'upgrading health and sanitation practices'.<sup>29</sup>

Vietnam's Whig and Tory divides did not form splits between liberals and conservatives - they were both integral parts of an unwieldy liberal internationalism. What they shared was an inability to find a comprehensive answer to the problems confronted by US involvement. This progressive cognitive dissonance was evident in the Pentagon's command unit the Military Advisory Command Vietnam, which 'found its personnel absorbed with problems of political and economic intervention', and issues of 'civic action and pacification'.<sup>30</sup>

The exigencies of anti-communism and counterinsurgency, which became more conspicuous in Johnson's later escalation of the war, made the ideological purity of the Whig and Tory visions increasingly difficult to maintain. McDougall, who argues that Hatcher's two labels played a role in the Global Meliorism of Vietnam, indicates this incoherence when he evokes the crude efforts to move South Vietnam closer to democracy. Whig ambassador to South Vietnam Henry Cabot Lodge's endorsement of a coup against Diem's regime in the fall of November 1963, which led to a military triumvirate, proved 'even less effective at winning public support and fighting the Viet Cong'.<sup>31</sup> This discrepancy between idealism and the unsavoury nature of American neo-imperialism metastasised further in the Johnson years. McDougall describes how Johnson hated the 'military side' of the conflict, but loved the 'Tory Meliorist' dimension of America's involvement.<sup>32</sup> He cites his ambition for 'foreign

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp. 20-21.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 19-21.

<sup>31</sup> McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State*, p. 188.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 188.

policy to be an extension of our domestic policy', and Johnson's desire for a legacy of 'schools and hospitals and dams'.<sup>33</sup> Elizabeth N. Saunders underlines this cognitive dissonance by examining Johnson's 'tendency to separate the military aspects of the war from Vietnamese domestic issues'.<sup>34</sup> She notes his April 1965 speech to Johns Hopkins University, 'in which he offered to invest \$1 billion to develop the Mekong Delta region', a 'proposal that came in a separate section...not connected to the nature of the conflict or the military strategy'.<sup>35</sup>

In *Avatar*, the schism between the RDA's private army and the avatar project's designers invokes these examples of foreign policy contradiction. Firstly in outlining how the designers of the avatar project purvey this Global Meliorism, it is important to discuss the Jacksonian realism of the RDA's private army. This is embodied in the figure of Colonel Quaritch, the head of the military mission in Pandora. His introduction carries a jaundiced, febrile quality. Though it takes place in a drab clinical dining hall designed for Pandora's private security forces, his first lines are feverish - he admonishes his audience of soldiers that 'you are not in Kansas anymore', and reports an environment where: 'Every living thing that cries, crawls, squats in the mud wants to kill you.' This paranoid language is interspersed with shots of the soldiers who admiringly imbibe Quaritch's advice, an authoritarianism made more intense by the brooding score that plays over these images. Such elements make the tone and thematic content of this scene comparable to the fatalistic neocolonialism of Alfred's diatribe in *The Dark Knight*. Indeed, like the

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 190.

<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth N. Saunders, 'Transformative Choices: Leaders and the Origins of Intervention Strategy', in *American Foreign Policy: Theoretical Essays: Seventh Edition*, pp. 521-550 (p. 537).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 537.

nihilistic connotations of the burnt forest, Quaritch paints a realist portrait of an America facing conditions of international anarchy, a status quo maintained by Pandora's 'indigenous population of humanoids', who are able to survive attack through 'bones reinforced with naturally occurring carbon fibre'.



Image 7: *Avatar* - Quaritch 'rallies' the troops at Hell's Gate<sup>36</sup>

The language here again grafts the imagery of Vietnam on to a War on Terror subtext. James Chapman and Nicholas J. Cull see Quaritch as a 'generic hyper-masculine, seething marine whose idiom reflects that documented in *Full Metal Jacket* (1987)', a Vietnam War film with an equally vituperative figure in Gunnery Sergeant Hartmann.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, they view this reference as juxtaposed with

<sup>36</sup> Image found in Screenmania, *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009) (2013), <https://www.screenmania.fr/film-critique/critique-avatar-2009/> [accessed 23 December 2017].

<sup>37</sup> James Chapman and Nicholas J. Cull, *Projecting Tomorrow: Science Fiction and Popular Cinema* (New York City: I.B. Tauris, 2013), p. 208.

a subversive War on Terror allegory, created by Quaritch's argument that the troops must fight 'terror with terror'.<sup>38</sup>

Quaritch's racialised language attests to the recurrence of the Vietnam syndrome in Iraq, drawing on the memory of General William Westmoreland's chauvinistic views of the Vietnamese in Peter Davis's 1974 documentary *Hearts and Minds*. It possesses affinity with the argument that 'the Oriental does not put the same high value on human life as does the westerner...life is plentiful, life is cheap in the Orient'. The deeply technological understanding of the Na'vi's fighting skills, and 'their naturally occurring carbon fibre', further ascribes this misanthropic perspective to the IED-plagued landscape of occupied Iraq. It evokes Cockburn's understanding of a conflict that 'resembled Vietnam' in its 'guerrilla war' nature and 'abundance of lethal booby traps...placed nearby to kill unwary sappers'.<sup>39</sup>

Although it is this Iraq/Vietnam connection that predominates as an allegorical refrain, Quaritch references policies of Jacksonian realism that extend beyond those theatres. In a later scene at Hell's Gate, he champions American power as a preventive force to Third World insurrections. Whilst weightlifting in a plane hangar, Quaritch refers to his combat experience in Venezuela to Sully. He elucidates the country's tumultuous politics with the language of sexual violence, referring to it as 'some mean bush'. He follows this by promulgating a militaristic form of smart power - he exhorts Sully to ignore the effete 'limp dick science majors' responsible for the avatar program, figures that are useless next to his 'powerful combination' of 'an avatar with a marine's mind and physique'. If Sully were to apply this synthesis to

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 208.

<sup>39</sup> Cockburn, pp. 3-4.

the Na'vi, he would have the power to 'force their co-operation or hammer them hard'. The neo-imperial reference to Venezuela that begins this 'pep talk' recalls the numerous attenuations of Global Meliorism during the Cold War and the more recent War on Terror. Adam Cohen of *The New York Times* illustrated *Avatar's* critique of American neo-imperialism in the Western hemisphere, viewing the picture as a '22<sup>nd</sup> century version' of 'Latin America vs. United Fruit'.<sup>40</sup> This referred to an event in 1954 not unlike the overthrow of the Shah in Iran the previous year, where the CIA organised a pro-capitalist coup in Guatemala on behalf of the multinational United Fruit Company. Quaritch's abrasive recollection of Venezuela, especially juxtaposed with his repudiation of the soft power orientated scientists, additionally recalls the vitiating of Global Meliorism in the Western hemisphere during the Kennedy-Johnson years. Saunders notes the problems confronting Kennedy's Alliance for Progress, an aid program for Latin America designed to shift 'from military aid and toward economic development assistance'.<sup>41</sup> This set of policy goals was later altered by Johnson, who 'de-emphasized development-orientated aid and demanded support for U.S. anti-communist goals in return for aid'.<sup>42</sup>

The Venezuela anecdote also carries more recent associations. At the same time as the build-up to the Iraq invasion in 2002, the Bush administration declined to condemn a military coup against socialist leader Hugo Chavez. *The Economist* thought this decision a betrayal of the United States's support for 'new democracies'

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<sup>40</sup> Adam Cohen, *Next Generation 3-D Medium of Avatar Underscores Its Message* (2009), [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/26/opinion/26sat4.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/26/opinion/26sat4.html?_r=0) [accessed 2 December 2015].

<sup>41</sup> Saunders, p. 532.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 533.

and a blow to its 'credibility'.<sup>43</sup> Greg Grandin further explores the resumption of a Latin American Realpolitik within the Iraq occupation. He achieves this through outlining the parallels between the unilateral basis of the war and the Reagan era involvement in Nicaragua. The US employed 'tactics it perfected in South America' through 'the paramilitary force made up of Kurds, Shiites, and ex-members of Saddam Hussein's intelligence apparatus', who intended to 'hunt down and presumably execute members of the Iraqi resistance'.<sup>44</sup>

In opposition to these episodes of Jacksonian realism is the Global Meliorism of the avatar project, whose scientist progenitors embrace what Vietnam era Defence Secretary Robert McNamara declared to be 'the social scientists war'.<sup>45</sup> The introduction of Pandora's head scientist Grace Augustine emphasises this connection. She evokes the similarly tough-minded liberalism portrayed by Gates in *Three Kings* and Dent in *The Dark Knight*. Imbued with implacability by *Alien* lead Sigourney Weaver, her introduction takes place in a setting oppositional to the cold oppression of Hell's Gate's soulless canteens and hangars, a laboratory suffused by blue lighting and ethereal cinematography. She first appears exiting a cryogenic sleeping chamber, cantankerously calling for cigarettes. This anger is soon directed towards Sully, who enters the room with anthropologist and avatar programmer Dr. Norm Spellman. Sully's lack of soft power is made conspicuous when Spellman is asked to speak in the Na'vi language, a skill absent from the former marine's military training. Augustine expresses contempt for the fact that Sully has performed no

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<sup>43</sup> *The Economist* editorial, *United States: Tales from a failed coup; The United States and Venezuela* (2002), <http://www.economist.com/node/1103582> [accessed 2 December 2015].

<sup>44</sup> Greg Grandin, 'Iraq is not Arabic for Nicaragua: Central America and the Rise of the New Right', *The New American Empire: A 21st Century Teach in On US Foreign Policy*, pp. 135-152 (p. 135).

<sup>45</sup> Robert McNamara, quoted in McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State*, p. 189.

laboratory research on the avatar program, a farce that makes her believe the 'RDA is pissing on us without the courtesy of calling it rain'.

The alternation between the culturally sensitive, liberal-minded avatar programmers and the Jacksonian Quaritch recalls the bipartisan pursuit of intervention seen in both the Vietnam and post-Cold War contexts. Paul Gottfried notes the application of the 'American managerial state' to the Vietnam conflict, an attitude that defined a 'welfare-state anti-Communism' as a 'defining mark of the struggle against Soviet imperialism'.<sup>46</sup> He also discusses the updated fusion between militarism and progressivism in the centrist Clinton-Blair era, where the 'military action' of the Kosovo intervention was defined as an 'assault on bigotry'.<sup>47</sup> It is the military side of this equation that most conspicuously dominates in *Avatar* - Augustine and her scientist cohorts are marginalised, furtive figures, deracinated intellectuals in a landscape of militarisation. The aggressive vision of occupation that domineers over Augustine's liberal idealism mirrors the planning stages for the Iraq conflict, where the exacting research done under the State Department's Future of Iraq Project was supplanted by the destructive aims of the Office for Special Plans. Halper and Clarke note how this neoconservative organ opposed the inclusivity of the State Department's vision. By heeding the whims of the sectarian INC and the ideal that the Baath Party could be 'banned and party members dismissed from their jobs, this office helped to leave millions of Iraqis without electricity and fresh water'.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Paul Edward Gottfried, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Guilt: Toward a Secular Theocracy* (Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2004), p. 102.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>48</sup> Halper and Clarke, p. 225.

The tension between the Quaritch and Augustine personas returns to dichotomies integral to the earlier case studies. These include the collision between Gates's liberal internationalism and Vig's blue collar Jacksonian heritage in *Three Kings*; the rivalry between soft and hard power in *Team America: World Police*; and the discrepancy between the welfarist imperialism and the neocolonial Social Darwinism presented in *There Will be Blood*.

These tensions are further encapsulated when Augustine confronts RDA head Parker Selfridge in his corporate office. Their argument contemporises the Vietnam War's divide between Whigs and Tory Meliorists for Iraq War era audiences. Whereas Augustine favours a more concentrated emphasis on nation building and rejects the 'trigger happy marine' Sully, Selfridge frames her Whig concerns for 'building them a school' and 'teaching them English' against the neoliberalism and unilateralism that dominated the post-1989 landscape of intervention. His office is, like the canteens and hangars of Hell's Gate, soulless, but comes suffused with a neocolonial mania - this sensibility is conveyed through the RDA's use of lurid yellow and blue holograms, which display the location of the Navi's most precious resource, 'unobtainium'. This resource serves a dual allegorical purpose. 'Unobtainium' is a clear reference to the non-existent WMDs used to rationalise the Iraq War's unilateral and pre-emptive nature. It also symbolises the more covert material motivations of the intervention, encompassing what Steven Hurst calls 'the need to maintain a dominant position in the international oil system'.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Steven Hurst, *The United States and Iraq since 1979: Hegemony, Oil and War* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p 20.

Amplifying the allegory for this second, materialist rationale is Selfridge's affinity with the privatising ethos of Paul Bremer's CPA - Selfridge warns Augustine that her 'hearts and minds' strategy is subservient to the goals of retrieving unobtainium for the RDA corporation, 'which pays for the whole party' and subsidises her 'science'. At the scene's conclusion, Selfridge replaces the Tory meliorism of Vietnam for the hegemony of neoliberalism. He displays a piece of unobtainium to Augustine, instructing her to find 'a diplomatic solution' and 'get results'.

The different facets of the Pandora occupation correspond with Mead's categorisations of American foreign policy. As mentioned earlier, the corporate nature of the Pandora occupation is associable with the 'Hamiltonian', a dimension indicated by Selfridge's chairmanship of the RDA. Much as the Global Meliorist vision in *Three Kings* sat alongside the liberal internationalist credo of Wilsonianism, there is an affinity between the scientists' paternalism towards the Na'vi and what Mead calls the 'universal' nature of the Wilsonian doctrine, which propounds a 'recognition of equality both within and beyond the United States...protecting poor and weak countries as well as the rich and the strong'.<sup>50</sup> The Jacksonian nationalism of Quaritch of course personifies Mead's description of a foreign policy wedded to 'honour, concern for reputation, and faith in military institutions'.<sup>51</sup>

The competition between these schools, and the struggle to reconcile them, has been thematically integral to this thesis. In the centrist politics of *Three Kings*, the final scenes displayed the victory of Gates's cosmopolitan vision of intervention over the Jacksonian realism of the US army, an ideological vindication that fit the liberal

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<sup>50</sup> Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and how it Changed the World*, p. 169.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 244-245.

globalisation of the late 1990s. Chapter 2 explored an inversion of this in *Team America: World Police*, where the Jacksonian became dominant over both the Wilsonian aspects of Team America and the radical soft power of the Film Actors Guild. *No Country for Old Men* offered a radically different allegory for the neoconservative coalition's instability, highlighting the discrepancy between the Jacksonian constituents who supported the War on Terror and the Hamiltonian neoliberalism that destabilised the securitisation of Iraq. In *There Will be Blood*, the Wilsonian idealism of Plainview's reforms in Little Boston became vitiated by the same Hamiltonian forces of economic competition, allegorised this time by the Social Darwinist capitalism of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. *The Dark Knight* portrayed the unilateral, Jacksonian elements of the War on Terror as a dramatic end to multilateral Wilsonianism, symbolised dramatically in the downfall of Harvey Dent during the film's final scenes.

Sully's experience of the avatar technology, which allows him to control a Na'vi body, rejects the cohabitation of these schools. His debut as a Na'vi, especially compared to the soullessness of Hell's Gate, is an exercise in aesthetic and ideological purity - a POV shot from a hospital bed conveys his avatar experience as disorientating but also exhilarating, a tone amplified by a series of high angle shots that show Sully staring in awe at his towering, elongated Na'vi form. Like the dream that opened the picture, the spectacle connotes a sublimated revolt, its pleasant aura of depersonalisation rebelling against Faludi's notion of an atavistic, war obsessed terror dream. This spirit becomes noticeable in a short sequence that sees Sully escape the hospital and run through a series of training grounds designed for other

users of the avatar program. Upon reaching the outside world, Sully witnesses a paradisiacal landscape of colour and natural beauty. The tracking shot that delineates Sully's run alternates between reminders of the neo-imperial purpose of his mission (many other avatars/Na'vi duplicates are depicted playing basketball) and his own raw experience of the Na'vi body, dichotomising American neocolonialism with his own newfound sense of liberation.

For all the rejection of the Hamiltonian, Jacksonian, and Wilsonian schools, the quiet revolt against American power here touches on a hitherto absent foreign policy school created by Mead, that of the 'Jeffersonian'. Mead describes this school as antithetical to the internationalism that dictated 'endlessly involving American arms, credit, honour, and prestige in attempts to spread democracy', defined by the 'enduring sense...that the United States could better serve the cause of universal democracy by setting an example rather than imposing a model'.<sup>52</sup> Sully's integration with Pandora's natural landscape rejects neocolonialism's impositions - his encounter with the planet's luscious landscape is redolent of the agrarian fantasy in the time of Jeffersonian America, its virginal and atavistic state possessing an ideological innocence. Mead discusses this image of the Jeffersonian in contrast with the other, more expansive foreign policy philosophies:

*Liberty is indeed precious, and almost as infinitely fragile; that is the core belief of the Jeffersonian movement. In this it differs from all the other major political forces in American life. Hamiltonians believe that commercial development can secure the blessings of free government;*

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., pp. 182-184.

*Jeffersonians note that in one democracy after another, great commercial interests have subverted the process to its destruction, and that the ambitious rich man can be the greatest danger to a democratic system. Wilsonians believe that the force of progress and enlightenment is moving mankind toward a reign of peace and reason; Jeffersonians believe that history goes backward as well as forward, and that ambition and the lust for wealth are too deeply embedded in human nature to be easily harnessed by just and rational laws. Jacksonians, as we shall see, believe that the deep, good heart of the American people will instinctively repel any threat to their cherished democracy; Jeffersonians know too well the danger to which an unchecked, unbridled popular passion can endanger the very democracy that it wants to protect.<sup>53</sup>*

*Avatar* favours the Jeffersonian school's peaceful realism, yet unlike Mead's kaleidoscopic understanding of foreign policy, Cameron's picture does not suggest a healthy concomitance or rivalry between the Jeffersonian and other schools. Sully's Na'vi experience divorces itself from the unwieldy coalition of the Hamiltonian, Jacksonian, and Wilsonian. The resultant dichotomy between principled non-intervention and intervention is closer to H.W. Brands's rival models of 'exemplarism' and 'vindicationism'. Whereas the Whig Meliorism of the avatar scientists adheres to the vindicationist position that 'the imperfections of the rest of the world' should necessitate 'forcible American efforts to close the imperfection gap', Sully's identification with Pandora's sublimity recalls the humbling emphasis of

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 183.

exemplarism, which 'asserted that Americans must concentrate on improving their own society', in order to serve as a model for 'social organization'.<sup>54</sup>

Sully's experience of his Na'vi body also belies both the hard and soft power facets of the avatar program, quietly subverting its aims of spreading American hegemony. On the one hand, the vicarious nature of the avatar program appears a less sinister version of the technology that allowed the deliverance of remote controlled drone strikes in Iraq and Afghanistan. Bianca Baggiarini refers to this flexibility as a 'techno-fetishism', which formed 'co-constitutive responses to the perceived need to unman combat', leading to a world where 'state violence is privatized and increasingly disembodied'.<sup>55</sup> Yet the avatar program's true aim, which is to co-opt the indigenous Na'vi, embodies a heightened version of soft power. The fact that Sully is required to manipulate the Na'vi into relinquishing unobtainium mirrors soft power's 'contrast with the hard or command power of *ordering* others to do what it wants'.<sup>56</sup>

As with the rejection of Mead's colliding schools of foreign policy, Sully's dramatic experiences on Pandora associate both hard and soft power with a dubious missionary imperialism. This is evident in his first encounter with the Omatiyaya, a key Na'vi tribe who guard vast sources of unobtainium. At first he meets the tribe head's daughter, a warrior princess called Ney'teri. She rejects his universalising notions of neo-imperialism by ignoring a question asking if she went to one of Augustine's colonial schools. He is instead derided as an irrational 'baby', viewed as a delusional, colonised misfit in a jungle defined by indigenous identity. This rejection

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<sup>54</sup> Brands, p. viii.

<sup>55</sup> Bianca Baggiarini, 'Drone Warfare and the Limits of Sacrifice', *Journal of International Political Theory*, Vol.11, (2015), pp. 128-144 (pp. 128-129).

<sup>56</sup> Joseph S Nye Jr., 'Soft Power', in *Foreign Policy*, Vol.80, Twentieth Anniversary (1990), pp. 153-171 (p. 166).

of westernisation continues when Sully is imprisoned and taken to a mass gathering of the Omaticaya tribe. Mo'at, Ney'teri's mother and the tribe's spiritual leader, allows Sully to join purely to see if his 'insanity can be cured', humorously pathologising the neocolonial project that threatens their way of life.

To Pheasant-Kelly, the visual imagery of both the RDA's private army and of Pandora's landscape serves as a kind of palliative for the anxieties of the post-9/11 era. This is achieved through a debt to the eighteenth century political theorist Edmund Burke and his notion of the 'sublime'. Much as the power of the sublime served as a counteraction to the excesses of the French revolution of the 1790s, *Avatar* could similarly mollify the irrational fears of 2000s era viewers. Pheasant-Kelly considers how the early scenes at Hell's Gate, but also the naturalistic jungles of Pandora, draw on Burke's notions of 'associations' and 'memories', generating an ability to 'marshal contemporary anxieties in more subtle ways than realistic depictions, allowing the viewer to work through traumatic issues unconsciously in a way that a realist film could not do'.<sup>57</sup> Pheasant-Kelly applies this reading to a sequence in which Sully is forced to traverse Pandora's mountains as part of his training by the Omaticaya. She argues that this vertiginous set piece serves as a catharsis for War on Terror weary viewers. This is because 'the contemplation associated with the vastness and strangeness of the mountains' exerted a 'sublime effect', 'providing examples of arresting images in their surreal elements and, for

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<sup>57</sup> Pheasant-Kelly, p. 162.

some viewers, resurrecting memories of the falling bodies during the Twin Towers' attacks'.<sup>58</sup>

Although this interpretation is compelling, Pheasant-Kelly's therapeutic reading of the sublime here disregards its more polemical effects. It ignores how Sully's otherworldly experiences on Pandora marginalise a paternalistic Global Meliorism, and instead perceives *Avatar's* drama as a mere allaying for a post-9/11 neurosis. The sublime imagery of Pandora is most prevalent in a montage during *Avatar's* second act. Just before the montage begins, the viewer sees footage of Sully which illuminates his growing detachment from the avatar project's original neocolonial purpose. Sully makes a video using his computer's web camera while his Na'vi body sleeps, allowing him to produce a log for the scientists and the RDA. Not unlike the aesthetic of The Joker's execution videos in *The Dark Knight*, the webcam footage carries a *verite*, hyperreal quality. Sully speaks candidly to the camera and admits to how 'the days are starting to blur together', a state of delirium amplified by the dreamlike, blue lighting that suffuses the video address. Despite this ethereality, the conflicted nature of Sully's log recalls Barker's study of the 'YouTube phenomenon' of 'soldiers' videos', which 'created a recognisable look to the conflict, among whose meaning was the trustworthiness of those images'.<sup>59</sup>

Although lacking the wartime aesthetic of Barker's description, Sully's log segues to a montage that prompts a similar questioning of American hegemonic authority. This juxtaposes the independence of the Na'vi tribe with the lessening relevance of the scientists' Whig Meliorism. It begins with a medium shot of Sully being trained to use

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 170.

<sup>59</sup> Barker, p. 36.

a bow and arrow by Ney'teri and follows this with footage of the avatar programmers, who are increasingly proud of his integration (Sully comments wryly that Spellman's 'attitude has improved'). As the montage progresses, it becomes clear that the scientists' purveyance of Global Meliorism is made conditional on Sully's rapprochement with the Na'vi, rather than the protection of Quaritch's army. Cameron shows a Na'vi Augustine, who is joining Sully in using the avatar program, returning to the Na'vi children she used to teach, a moment suffused with joy. Despite the neocolonialism of this imagery, it is soon made clear that her missionary imperialism is subservient to Sully's understanding of Pandora's sublimity. Her paternalistic vision of the Na'vi is juxtaposed with Sully's attendance at a funeral procession. As Sully joins the moving ceremony for a fellow Omaticaya, he recalls the words of Ney'teri, who describes life on Pandora as a 'network of energy', 'that flows through living things'. In an admonishment that implicitly targets the oil incentivised Iraq occupation and celebrates an indigenised autonomy, he remembers her words that 'all energy is borrowed...you have to give it back'.

This first section has discussed how *Avatar* deconstructs the Global Meliorism re-established in the late 1990s and invoked during the Iraq War. The final section of this chapter examines the set pieces of the film's second half, which taint Global Meliorism with the stain of military transgression and imply the need for an alternate foreign policy strategy.

## 5.2: *Avatar* and the end of Global Meliorism

From the beginning of its production, Cameron intended *Avatar* to be an explicit polemic against American imperialism. In an interview with *SFGate*, Cameron outlined the political and thematic concerns of his picture, which ‘broadly concerned imperialism in the sense that the way human history has worked is that people with more military or technological might tend to supplant or destroy people who are weaker, usually for their resources’.<sup>60</sup> Although, like *The Dark Knight*, *Avatar* received generally positive reviews, many academic and critical readings of *Avatar* have tended to accuse its politics of glibness, covertly championing the American hegemony it portrayed as under threat. To Will Heaven of *The Telegraph*, *Avatar* was ‘nauseatingly patronising’ because the Na’vi ‘were a childish pastiche of the ethnic’, who ‘must rely on the principled white man’.<sup>61</sup> A less vituperative form of this argument was put forward by Annalee Newitz. She saw *Avatar* as another addition to Hollywood’s white guilt narratives, with the Na’vi resembling the Native Americans of paternalistic Western dramas like *Dances with Wolves* (1990). This contrasted uncomfortably with the Americans, who were ‘leaders of the natives - just in a kinder, gentler way’.<sup>62</sup>

A comparable cynicism was shared by academic critics of Cameron’s film. In a critique not unlike Holloway’s derisory labelling of Hollywood cinema in the 2000s as

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<sup>60</sup> James Cameron, quoted in Michael Ordonez, *Eye-popping ‘Avatar’ pioneers new technology* (2009), <http://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/Eye-popping-Avatar-pioneers-new-technology-3278484.php>

[accessed 17th November 2015].

<sup>61</sup> Will Heaven, quoted in *The Week Magazine*, *Avatar’s ‘ugly message* (2009), <http://theweek.com/articles/498243/avatars-ugly-message> [accessed 4 February 2016].

<sup>62</sup> Annalee Newitz, *When Will White People Stop Making Movies Like ‘Avatar’?* (2009), <http://io9.gizmodo.com/5422666/when-will-white-people-stop-making-movies-like-avatar> [accessed 4 February 2016].

an 'allegory lite', Zizek accused *Avatar* of a 'Hollywood Marxism...sympathizing with the idealized aborigines whilst rejecting their struggle'.<sup>63</sup> Reiterating his argument that Hollywood cinema implicitly sympathised with the ideology of liberal intervention, Alford compared *Avatar* to *Three Kings* (a film he also thought adhered to this disposition) because the 'key characters amongst the US invading force are leading figures...our heroes remain the humans, and US marines at that'.<sup>64</sup>

Alford considered Cameron's allegory to be ultimately less effective than another 2009 science fiction picture which concerned the abhorrence of colonial oppression. Neil Blomkamp's *District 9* revolved around the treatment of a group of extra-terrestrials in Johannesburg. This allegory inverted the dynamics of the alien invasion film and served as a commentary on the treatment of black South Africans under apartheid. To Alford, *District 9* contrasted with *Avatar's* 'simplistic and unnerving message', illustrating a critique that functioned 'in a more rigorous manner, notably by depicting the apartheid style system with cold and brutal realism'.<sup>65</sup> Thakur shared this view of *Avatar's* superficiality, believing Cameron's film 'folded into the axioms of Hollywood's endorsed forms of protest', forming 'ideology at its most pragmatic form'.<sup>66</sup>

Although these views correctly observe the derivativeness of *Avatar's* storyline, they disregard its insightful portrayal of foreign policy contradiction. Moreover, the polemical imagery of *Avatar's* more sanguinary second half is unlike the

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<sup>63</sup> Slavoj Zizek, *Avatar: Return of the natives* (2010), <http://www.newstatesman.com/film/2010/03/avatar-reality-love-couple-sex> [accessed 3 February 2016].

<sup>64</sup> Alford, p. 120.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 119-120.

<sup>66</sup> Gautum Basu Thakur, *Postcolonial Theory and Avatar* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 143.

timorousness outlined by Zizek, Alford, and Thakur. Resembling Drolet's argument that neoconservatism is 'predicated on an atavistic conservative philosophy', that is 'in fact ferociously predatory on liberal values and liberal mechanisms of governance', this section of Cameron's picture sees the Global Meliorism of the avatar scientists overwhelmed by the forces of militarism and neoliberalism.<sup>67</sup> This begins with an image of a sleeping Na'vi Sully lying next to Ney'teri (who has, in a manner not unlike the story of 'Pocahontas', long become his love interest), resting unknowingly whilst the diegetic sound of an RDA bulldozer encroaches on the scene. Ney'teri, who first sees the oncoming bulldozer, attempts to wake up Sully. Amplifying the tension is the onslaught of robots and troops who suddenly appear onscreen, a sight that matches the 'shock and awe' sensibility of Operation Enduring Freedom. The use of subversive political references makes this imagery more pernicious. When the Na'vi Sully finally wakes up, he stands alone against the bulldozer in an image that compares the American occupation in Iraq with nefarious examples of intrastate oppression. A high angle shot of Sully from the tank's perspective recalls the infamous 1989 Tank Man photograph, which showed a lone Chinese civilian challenging the path of a tank in Tiananmen Square.<sup>68</sup> The bulldozer's destruction of Na'vi land also recalls the settler culture of the Israel-Palestine conflict, a parallel that entwines the RDA with an explicitly militarised form of neocolonialism.

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<sup>67</sup> Jean Francois Drolet, 'A liberalism betrayed? American neoconservatism and the theory of International Relations', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, Vol.15:2 (2010), pp. 89-118 (p. 89).

<sup>68</sup> Valuable insight into this photograph and its resonance is available in Margaret Hillenbrand, 'Remaking Tank Man, in China', *journal of visual culture*, Vol.16.2, pp. 127-166.

The authoritarianism implied here, and its affinity with forms of oppression practised across the world, highlights the reactionary aspects of the Iraq War. Like the CPA and their private security details, the corporate RDA displays scant regard for Pandora's pre-colonised state. Most interestingly, this portrayal had an impact on audiences in China and the West Bank, who respectively recognised Cameron's portrayal of capitalist indifference and military occupation. In areas supplanted by development projects such as the Three Gorges Dam in Hubei Province, Chinese citizens identified with the Na'vi's forced eviction from native soil. The impact of this affinity was so extreme that the Chinese government banned *Avatar* from cinema screens, due to the fear of violent upheaval.<sup>69</sup> A comparable influence was tangible in the West Bank, where Palestinian protestors donned blue paint and dressed as Na'vi to create a powerful protest against the separation barrier created by Israel.<sup>70</sup>

Do these examples mean *Avatar* purveys a form of liberal internationalism at the same time as presenting ideologies such as Global Meliorism to be enervated? Nye would argue that the revolts enacted by Chinese and Palestinian communities mirror the effect of progressive, pro-democracy elements of soft power during the Cold War, which revealed 'a closed system, lack of an attractive popular culture, and heavy-handed foreign policies'.<sup>71</sup> McDougall notably saw this transnational solidarity

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<sup>69</sup> Mackie Jimbo, *Why Did China Kill 'Avatar'?* (2010), <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2010/01/why-did-china-kill-avatar/33817/> [accessed 19 December 2015].

<sup>70</sup> The Guardian, *Avatar protest at West Bank barrier* (2010), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2010/feb/14/west-bank-barrier-avatar-protest> [accessed 18 December 2015].

<sup>71</sup> Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, p. 75.

as integral to the vision of Wilsonianism and its power 'as an ideological weapon against every arbitrary power anywhere'.<sup>72</sup>

Yet *Avatar's* rejection of a top-down nation building also refutes these clarion calls for the emulation of American democracy. A set piece that revolves around the destruction of the home tree, the Omaticaya's dwelling and repository for unobtainium, uses allegoric imagery that symbolises the failure of the idealist visions explored by McDougall and propounded by Nye. Like the early scenes in *Hell's Gate*, this stance is achieved through shots and dialogue that entwine the Vietnam War and the War on Terror in a febrile synthesis. The set piece sees the Omaticaya confronted with total war. High angle shots show helicopters and spacecraft sent to terrorise the Na'vi, who flee from aerial assaults reminiscent of the 'Ride of the Valkyries' scene in Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*. These images become more provocative after Quaritch decides to destroy the Na'vi's home tree. He uses a series of measures against the indigenous people, including nerve gas and 'incendiaries'. The latter consists of an onslaught of inflammatory missiles which are powerfully invocative of the use of napalm in Vietnam. At the same time, however, there are elements associable with the War on Terror - the use of tear gas recalls the chemical devastation of battles such as Fallujah, while, inversely, the Na'vi appear redolent of the traumatised civilians who witnessed the 9/11 attacks and were forced to wander through clouds of noxious dust after the Twin Towers fell.

This strange, dualistic allegorical depiction, which alternates between the Na'vi as third world counterparts to those ordinary Americans and victims of US imperialism,

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<sup>72</sup> McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State*, p. 146.

is heightened by the multi-faceted meaning of the home tree. Much like the sites of the flaming oil derrick in *There Will be Blood* and the smouldered Ground Zero style warehouse in *The Dark Knight*, the destruction of the home tree portends the end of an idealism in foreign policy. In *There Will be Blood*, this was the reformist imperialism briefly promised by Plainview in his address to Little Boston; in *The Dark Knight*, the Wilsonianism originally envisioned by Dent became destroyed; in this case it is the Global Meliorism of the avatar scientists under threat, a quality symbolised in the home tree's nurturing, welfarist role for the Na'vi. A *bricolage* of shots and dialogue connect a disparate medley of political symbolisms. Sully, whose work for the RDA has been discovered by the Omaticaya, can only flee from the tree's collapse. In a coded reference that recalls the destruction of the Twin Towers, he warns that 'Quaritch is going to blow the columns'. The home tree's descent is delineated in a series of long shots, which lend its fall a totemic, grandiose status. Its assault is, like the 9/11 attacks, an act of terrorism, designed seemingly to repudiate an entire 'way of life'. At the same time, its immolation, and the ethno-religious identity of the Na'vi, evokes the sectarian carnage unleashed by the US's pursuit of regime change in Iraq. The destruction of the Samara mosque, a Shia shrine destroyed by Al Qaeda militants in February 2006, emblematised this chaotic nihilism.<sup>73</sup> The felling of the home tree transfers the responsibility for such crimes on to the US occupiers, depicting Quaritch's assault as both terroristic and militaristic, a seemingly schizophrenic unity of sectarian violence and neoconservative shock and awe.

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<sup>73</sup> Robert F. Worth, *Blast Destroys Shrine in Iraq, Setting off Sectarian Fury* (2006), <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/22/international/middleeast/blast-destroys-shrine-in-iraq-setting-off-sectarian.html> [accessed 16 December 2015].

The process of allegory here, for all its polemical nature, would likely provoke conflicting opinion amongst scholars of War on Terror cinema. McSweeney would likely acknowledge Cameron's avoidance of a 'culture of dismemberment and mythologisation', a phenomenon he viewed as prominent in films which dealt exclusively with recent epochal events.<sup>74</sup> He argued that *United 93* (2006) and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) refused to answer 'troubling questions of political cause and effect', generating an 'end of innocence' that 'works by disconnecting itself from the history of the twentieth century'.<sup>75</sup> Conversely, Westwell identified invocations of history and contemporaneous political context as part of a deeply hegemonic function. A film such as Steven Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* merely solipsised history because its scenes of alien invasion reference 'the experience of Iraq, the genocide in Rwanda and the bombing of Hiroshima', 'amplifying the significance of 9/11 and reducing history to a level playing field of traumatized victims'.<sup>76</sup>

Although Cameron's film is not explored in his book *Parallel Lines: Post-9/11 American Cinema*, Westwell would likely apply these accusations of moral equivalence to *Avatar*, which, just like *War of the Worlds*, juxtaposes the 'traumatic shock caused by the experience of 9/11' with 'the vicarious experience of the Iraq War as victim'.<sup>77</sup> Yet Westwell's position disregards allegory's deconstructive potential. *Avatar* contravenes Westwell's understanding of a synthetic moral equivalence in its later scenes of Na'vi rebellion, which subversively employ post-9/11 imagery to repudiate the top-down forces of American neocolonialism.

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<sup>74</sup> McSweeney, p. 27.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>76</sup> Westwell, p. 120.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

Moreover, *Avatar's* narrative focus on the victims of US power differs from the comparative parochialism of a picture like *War of the Worlds*, which, for all its topical references to the Iraq War, is situated solely from a US perspective.

The inversion of Westwell's understanding of a 'hegemonic reconciliation' within allegory, which licensed 'an aggressive and expansionist foreign policy', is evident in a later speech by Sully to the Omaticaya.<sup>78</sup> This situates the 9/11 style *cassus belli* of the fallen home tree within the subtext of a third world uprising. Sully's address takes place immediately after Augustine dies from a fatal gunshot wound, a narrative development that reinforces the vitiation of the Global Meliorist doctrine. Rather than invoking her ideology of Whig Meliorism, Sully conveys that the Ground Zero site where the home tree once stood should galvanise the Omaticaya to repel their American invaders. Refuting his marine background and work for the RDA, he lambasts the 'sky people taking whatever they want', and declares that 'this is our land'. The pugnacity of this speech is made more vivid by a bullish score and a sweeping panning shot. The use of such dialogue and techniques ironically engender association with the 'bullhorn speech' delivered by George W Bush on 13<sup>th</sup> September 2001. This speech, which was delivered at the site of Ground Zero, promised that: 'The people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon!'<sup>79</sup> Rather than disseminating its heartfelt patriotism, Sully's rally reframes this response for those made impotent by American power. In a subsequent montage, he

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., pp. 94-95.

<sup>79</sup> George W. Bush, *George W. Bush: Bullhorn Address to Ground Zero Rescue Workers* (2001), <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gwbush911groundzerobullhorn.htm> [accessed 3 January 2016].

traverses across Pandora to rally neighbouring tribes and species, transcending the divisive effects of US neo-imperialism in an expression of Panglossian unity.



Image 8: 'The inversion' - Sully addresses US imperialism in *Avatar*<sup>80</sup>

To critics of *Avatar's* politics in academia, these scenes merely sublimate the post-9/11 pursuit of pre-emptive war and regime change into a palatable narrative of moral equivalence. Professor of Philosophy Pierre Desjardins, writing in the French Newspaper *Le Monde*, criticised the metaphoric nature of the fallen home tree because it 'conceals a view that is remarkably caustic: that of justifying war for us peaceful Westerners'.<sup>81</sup> Another academic with a background in Philosophy, Nathan Eckstrand, interprets the uprising encouraged by Sully as signalling a 'passive wisdom and goodness' in the Na'vi, who are subservient to 'Jake's knowledge, ingenuity, and bravery', and his effort to 'convince them to form an effective plan of attack against

<sup>80</sup> This image can be found in Great Multiverse Wiki, *Navvi* (n.d.), <http://greatmultiverse.wikia.com/wiki/Nav%27vi> [accessed 27 December 2017].

<sup>81</sup> Pierre Desjardins, *Avatar: Nothing But a 'Stupid Justification for War!'* (2010), <http://worldmeets.us/lemonde0000223.shtml#axzz3zRj7mRVW> [accessed 14 January 2016].

the colonizing forces on Pandora'.<sup>82</sup> Thus, Sully's anti-colonial rhetoric displays signs of the very neocolonialism it rejects.

Yet these plot elements can be read in a more nuanced fashion. Sully's abandonment of the RDA's neocolonial project and Jeffersonian deference to the interests of the Na'vi recall several policy shifts during the early Obama years. Georg Lofflmann considers how Obama 're-appropriated' American exceptionalist beliefs in the 'uniqueness of the United States' and 'the belief in the superiority of American values'.<sup>83</sup> Part of this re-appropriation would be the understanding 'of a post-American world'.<sup>84</sup> In direct contrast to 'Clinton's liberal interventionism and the unilateral primacy of the Bush administration', which embraced 'the country's unparalleled military supremacy' and 'unique values', Obama disputed the 'equation of American exceptionalism and American global leadership'.<sup>85</sup> The Libya intervention, which saw the Obama administration's 'leading from behind' strategy delegate responsibility to the French and British governments for stopping a brutal crackdown by Gaddafi's regime, embodied the post-American outlook and search for a new middle way, signifying a 'contradictory fusion of realist restraint and liberal engagement'.<sup>86</sup>

Maria Helena De Castro Santos illustrates how this change seemed to offer a more pragmatic philosophy than the 'merging' of 'American security interests' and 'liberal democratic values' during the Bush years, instead promoting the idea that 'regime

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<sup>82</sup> Nathan Eckstrand, 'Avatar and Colonialism', in *Avatar and Philosophy: Learning to See*, ed. by George A. Dunn (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), pp. 190-200 (p. 199).

<sup>83</sup> Georg Lofflmann, 'Leading from Behind - American Exceptionalism and President Obama's Post-American Vision of Hegemony', *Geopolitics*, Vol.20:2 (2015), pp. 308-332 (p. 309).

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 318.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 315.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 322.

change should be a task for the nationals', de-linking 'democracy to security'.<sup>87</sup> This aversion to the Jacksonian-Wilsonian fusion is underlined by Mead, who sees the early years of the Obama presidency as instead consisting of a contradictory 'human rights agenda and Jeffersonian realism'.<sup>88</sup> Such a combination was evident in the president's wish 'for an orderly world in which burdens are shared', and where 'the military power of the United States is a less prominent feature of the international scene'.<sup>89</sup>

The attempt to achieve this new pragmatism, and the consequent disassociation from the militarised Global Meliorism of the Clinton and Bush years, is made vividly clear in *Avatar's* climatic final scenes. They again present an interplay between Vietnam and Iraq alluding imagery. Quaritch, echoing the Westmoreland style language he employed in his introduction, speaks vituperatively of 'fighting terror with terror', and 'blasting a crater in their racial memories so deep they won't come within a thousand clicks of this place ever again'. This dualism is reemphasised during the subsequent battle between Quaritch's vehicles and the Nav'i, who utilise pterodactyl-like creatures known as 'mountain banshees' against the RDA's aircraft. Quaritch maniacally boasts of 'shock and awe' while trying to counteract the Viet Cong style guerilla warfare employed by the Omaticaya, who use their knowledge of the jungle environment to sabotage his assault and hijack the marauding planes.

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<sup>87</sup> Maria Helena De Castros Santos, 'Interests and Values in Obama's Foreign Policy: Leading from Behind?', *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional*, Vol.58:2 (2015), 119-145 (pp. 119-120).

<sup>88</sup> *The Economist* editorial, *Seven Questions for Walter Russell Mead* (2010), [https://www.economist.com/blogs/democracyinamerica/2010/01/seven\\_questions\\_walter\\_russell\\_mead](https://www.economist.com/blogs/democracyinamerica/2010/01/seven_questions_walter_russell_mead)

[accessed 15 January 2016].

<sup>89</sup> Walter Russell Mead, *The Carter Syndrome* (2010), <http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/01/04/the-carter-syndrome/> [accessed 15 January 2016].

The lineage between the failings of Vietnam and Iraq is most explicit at the film's ending. After Quaritch's army is dramatically defeated, Selfridge and his corporate employees are forced to leave Hell's Gate in handcuffs. The scene, which takes place on the runway of Hell's Gate, is bathed in golden, sanguine cinematography, a tone oppositional to the portent of Sully's first arrival at Hell's Gate. Nevertheless, in spite of this optimism, the conclusion of *Avatar* pervades a serious political message against the nation building agendas of liberal interventionists and neoconservatives. Sully wryly comments that 'the aliens went back to their dying world', associating himself with the interests of the Na'vi and inverting the traditional neocolonial dynamic. The declinism in Sully's statement is heightened by the *mise en scène*; the runway setting, as well as the Na'vi who escort the RDA employees and private soldiers, presents a more benign rendition of the climatic scenes in 1975 Saigon. Those scenes, which saw the mass exit of US diplomats from a collapsing South Vietnamese regime, halted the United States's pursuit of a militarised Global Meliorism for a generation. In presenting this scene for 2009 audiences, *Avatar* implores pragmatism, foregrounding a new consensus after a decade exhausted by intervention.

*Avatar* presents the defeat of the militarised Global Meliorism that returned during the late Clinton years. Its political imagery highlights how the Iraq War returned this ideology to its Vietnam era contradictions, a fatalism further evoked by Cameron's portrayal of rival occupying forces. The schisms between the RDA and the avatar programmers portend the end of the unilateral idealism institutionalised in the late 1990s and preserved by the Bush administration. Sully's narrative arc is delineative

of this decline, unveiling, much as *Three Kings* did a decade earlier, the drive towards a new centre ground in foreign policy.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis has explored a series of motion pictures that have allegorised notions of contradiction in US foreign policy and consequently deconstructed a bipartisan consensus surrounding the employment of American military intervention. By focusing on the allegorical qualities of case studies from the 1999-2009 decade, it is clear that narrative elements and characterisations delineate collisions between International Relations principles and outlooks. The contrasting attitudes of Archie Gates and Conrad Vig in *Three Kings* demonstrate the combustible relationship of the Wilsonian and Jacksonian schools; the volatile attempt to reconcile hard and soft power is integral to Gary Johnston's narrative arc in *Team America: World Police*; the final revolt of *Avatar* befits the Obama administration's effort to meld Jeffersonian introversion with Wilsonian altruism.

The broadness of these examples, in both political meaning and genre, attests to the inherent prevalence of contradiction in American foreign policy and film's role in negotiating this theme. Memorable precedents from the New Hollywood and Classical Hollywood periods suggest that numerous American pictures of the 2000s draw on an already existing tradition of International Relations allegory, despite differing in their allegorical subject matter. The recognition of contradiction, or cognitive dissonance, became a resplendent trope of American cinema during the post-9/11 era.

Moreover, representations of contradiction are amplified by the presence of time-honored dichotomies derived from American history and culture. The conflicting

imperatives of 'self-interest versus ideals'<sup>1</sup> and 'order versus violence'<sup>2</sup>, respectively underlined by the references to Huntingdon and Schlesinger's arguments in the introduction to this thesis, anchor the foreign policy allegories of Westerns such as *No Country for Old Men* and *There Will be Blood*, as well as play a role in the comic book dystopia of *The Dark Knight*.

Specific invocations of historical contradiction supplement these illuminations of a cognitive dissonance in American life and foreign policy. Most common is the transgression of the Vietnam War, which fuels the anxieties of Colonel Ron Horn in *Three Kings* and vividly embeds itself in the minutiae of *Avatar's* Hell's Gate. Yet there are other possible interpretations; Daniel Plainview's shifts between Social Darwinism and progressivism in *There Will be Blood* recall the contradictory imperialism of the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, while the authoritarian realism in *The Dark Knight* reflects a stance enervative of the liberal internationalism vaunted by Woodrow Wilson in 1918 and Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1945.

Most salient in each picture, however, are contemporaneous issues surrounding American foreign policy relevant to their year of release. 2004's *Team America: World Police* engages with the alliance forged between neoconservatives and liberal interventionists in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks; 2007's *No Country for Old Men* presents a Texas landscape littered with tribal violence and rampant greed, conjuring memories of Iraq's post-invasion civil war and the spiraling sub-prime mortgage crisis of the mid 2000s; 2008's *The Dark Knight*, notably released in the year of Obama's

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<sup>1</sup> Huntingdon, p. 297.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., quoted in Coyne, *Hollywood Goes to Washington*, p. 12.

first election victory, predicts a world of endless war despite the aegis of political change.

Alternate allegorical and contextual focuses result in manifestly different epilogues, dealing with the lack of reconciliation within International Relations in distinctive ways. In films coinciding with the Democratic administrations of Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, such as *Three Kings* and *Avatar*, but also in the 2004 released *Team America*, resolution is achieved after lengthy periods of ideological conflict and incongruity. Gates's rapprochement with Horn, Gary's 'dicks, pussies and assholes' speech, and Sully's championing of the Pandora natives all foreground a specific centrism associated with the national zeitgeist. By 'specific centrism', I mean the pursuit of policies and ideological blends that celebrate a political moderation. These include the remolded Global Meliorism of the 1990s, the versatility of smart power, and the restrained 'leading from behind' approach pioneered by Obama. Some films concerning these approaches conclude somewhat artificially, restoring a sense of both narrative and political equilibrium to a world plagued by uncertainty.

The endings of other pictures, namely those released during the tumult of Bush's second term, propound disarray. They do so while invoking the failures of important ideological and political collaborations, suggesting that the basis of allegorical imagery can lead to different resolutions. The lost patriarchal authority of Ed Tom Bell at the end of *No Country for Old Men*, the collapsing state of Plainview's empire during the final scene of *There Will be Blood*, and the noble lies of *The Dark Knight's* climax purvey subtexts of disintegrating foreign policy coalitions and imperial overstretch. Unlike the case studies that concern centrist policy orientations, these

pictures primatise the effect of ideological extremes. The neoliberalism that dawned at the beginning of the Reagan era destabilises the semblance of law and order in West Texas, as does the Social Darwinism in *There Will be Blood*. *The Dark Knight* portrays a doctrine of pre-emptive war and curtailed civil liberties as triumphing over the attractive vision initially personified by Harvey Dent. Key in these films is the unwieldiness of intervention, and the supplanting of one facet of American foreign policy for another. Much as the Bush administration struggled to straddle Jacksonian nationalism, Hamiltonian mercantilism, and Wilsonian idealism in the Iraq War, these pictures allegorise an International Relations landscape that is mercilessly chaotic, culminating in scenes of despondency and ideological schizophrenia.

Withstanding these contrasts, the case studies share an affinity in their use of allegorical imagery, combinations of different genres, and emphasis on contradiction. The allegorical style is perhaps more effective at painting the dilemmas of intervention than pictures that attempt to attain an aesthetic realism, a point saliently conveyed by Mamoon Abassi's dual analysis of *Avatar* and of Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* (2009). Inverting the fantastical premise of *Avatar*'s Pandora setting, he sees Cameron's blockbuster as a more nuanced portrayal of the difficulties of winning hearts and minds than the gritty verisimilitude of Bigelow's war picture, set in 2004 Iraq. The cognitive dissonance and contradictions of US foreign policy, and the need for resolution, is central to *Avatar*, a film that stresses the damaging impact of American hard power:

*Ironically, and contrary to official film labeling, for many Iraqis 'Avatar' is seen as the most accurate Iraq War movie so far, while 'The Hurt*

*Locker' might appear as more alien to them. The link to Iraq in 'Avatar' is apparent to many from the outset of the film, but it is further entrenched with the use of terms like 'shock and awe' and 'fighting terror.' However, the plot thickens. The blue humanoids in 'Avatar' appear more humane than their human invaders, who came from earth to steal the resources of their planet. In 'The Hurt Locker', where we follow an adventurous US bomb squad in Iraq, the Iraqis in the movie appear to serve just as a background that shows how heroic the film's stars are. Almost faceless and voiceless, they are - as in the world of politics - robbed of their humanity.<sup>3</sup>*

The thesis's first chapter showed *Three Kings*, despite being primarily a war film, displayed similarly bold visual and thematic attempts at negotiating cultural and political contradictions. *Avatar* arguably applies this evenhanded approach to American diplomacy as well as its neo-colonial allegory, connoting a willingness to investigate conflicting International Relations philosophies, such as Global Meliorism and the Jacksonian, evidenced over the course of the 1999-2009 decade.

This defiance of partisanship, and presentation of political discord, has been perceptible in a variety of films since 2009. Richard Linklater's *Bildungsroman Boyhood* (2014), which traces the growth of a Texan boy from 2002 to 2013, provides a compelling adjunct to the psychodramas of the Bush and Obama years. The experiences of *Boyhood's* lead character Mason, who grows up amongst a series of alternately liberal and conservative father figures, creates a mosaic suffused with

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<sup>3</sup> Mamoon Abassi, quoted in Barker, p. 160.

ideological difference. Blockbuster pictures, such as comic book adaptations, continued to comment on the topical political, economic, and of course, foreign policy divides of the Obama era. As briefly mentioned in Chapter 4, 2012's *The Dark Knight Rises* contains motifs of economic populism that mirror an America riven by the cultural clashes of the Great Recession. Villain Bane's insurgency against Gotham's economic elites encapsulates the sharp polarisations of Obama's first term, reflecting the rivalries of the left-leaning Occupy Wall Street movement and the libertarian ethos of the Tea Party.

The *Captain America* franchise has perhaps most allegorised American foreign policy contradictions during Obama's second term. *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), released soon after revelations of global spying by the NSA in 2013, illuminates the gulf between the Obama administration's promulgation of reformist idealism and its retention of Bush era surveillance programs. The Wilsonian and Jacksonian schism that was so visibly underlined at the end of *The Dark Knight* is a focal subject in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016). The battles of Captain America and Iron Man, who disagree over UN arbitration of superhero activity after a tragic incident of collateral damage in Lagos, again dichotomise these philosophies of unilateralism and multilateralism.

Given the populist uprisings of 2016 in both the US and Britain, can cinema provide convincing International Relations allegory in what looks like a new era of hyperpartisanship? The release of Christopher Nolan's purist war picture *Dunkirk* (2017) suggests the need for a reassuring, tasteful patriotism in a Britain divided

between the desires of the cosmopolitan bourgeois and the so-called 'left behind' classes.

In a Hollywood appalled by the 2016 presidential election and troubled by the existential damage of the Weinstein scandal, there may well be affirmations of comparable cultural gulfs. The ascension of a populist candidate who touted a Jacksonian belief in 'America first' will perhaps produce a series of cinematic critiques that lambast a resurgent nativism in American political life. President Trump's rejection of the militarised Wilsonianism that had been shared by Republican neoconservatives and liberal interventionist Democrats will likely make producing International Relations allegory more complex, having dramatically fragmented Mead's kaleidoscope and disturbed a bipartisan consensus. Like the rapacity and vulgarity of Daniel Plainview, the anarchic, avaricious, and seemingly improbable candidate Trump has belied the benevolent America championed by neoconservative and liberal interventionist ideologies. Furthermore, his leadership will likely expose the hollowness of American idealism, consigning it, much akin to Plainview's domination of Little Boston, beneath the priorities of economic supremacy and self-aggrandisement.

Nevertheless, the cathartic nature of Trump's presidency, particularly in its illustration of a close proximity between the high-concept extrapolations of popular culture and the electoral dynamics of US politics, will no doubt yield new dramas concerning America's diplomatic contradictions. The vituperative reaction of the 'alt-right' to Trump's bombing of Syria for human rights violations in April 2017 hints that the Wilsonian/Jacksonian breakdown of the late Bush years is likely to return in a

newer, more conspiratorial form. It is too soon to comment on his promises to end the Hamiltonian trade deals signed during the Clinton years, such as NAFTA, or the likelihood of his much vaunted border wall. I predict, however, that a failure to achieve these goals, or the prospect of mercurial compromise with his erstwhile Democratic party, will engender a staunch Jacksonian backlash. As I look forward to what American filmmakers can proffer in response to this political landscape, the dramatic changes, but also recurring tensions, in Trump's presidency tell me that the theme of contradiction is here to stay.

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*No Country for Old Men*, dir. by Joel and Ethan Coen (Miramax, 2007)

*Panic Room*, dir. by David Fincher (Columbia Pictures, 2002)

*Pearl Harbor*, dir. by Michael Bay (Buena Vista Pictures, 2001)

*The Professionals*, dir. by Richard Brooks (Columbia Pictures, 1966)

*Rambo*, dir. by Sylvester Stallone (Sony Pictures Releasing, 2008)

*The Rock*, dir. by Michael Bay (Buena Vista Pictures, 1996)

*Salvador*, dir. by Oliver Stone (Hemdale Film Corporation, 1986)

*Saving Jessica Lynch*, dir. by Peter Markle (National Broadcasting Company, 2003)

*Saving Private Ryan*, dir. by Steven Spielberg (DreamWorks Pictures, 1998)

*The Siege*, dir. by Edward Zwick (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1998)

*South Park: Osama bin Laden Has Farty Pants*, dir. by Trey Parker (Comedy Central, 2001)

*Spiderman*, dir. by Sam Raimi (Columbia Pictures, 2002)

*Star Wars (1977)*, dir. by George Lucas (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1977)

*Team America: World Police*, dir. by Matt Stone and Trey Parker (Paramount Pictures, 2004)

*There Will be Blood*, dir. by Paul Thomas Anderson (Paramount Vantage, 2007)

*Three Kings*, dir. by David O’Russell (Warner Bros., 1999)

*3:10 to Yuma*, dir. by James Mangold (Lionsgate, 2007)

*Top Gun*, dir. by Tony Scott (Paramount Pictures, 1986)

*The Treasure of Sierra Madre*, dir. by John Huston (Warner Bros., 1948)

*True Lies*, dir. by James Cameron (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1994)

*2016: Obama's America*, dir. by Dinesh D'Souza (Rocky Mountain Pictures, 2012)

*2001: A Space Odyssey*, dir. by Stanley Kubrick (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1968)

*United 93*, dir. by Paul Greengrass (Universal Pictures, 2006)

*War of the Worlds*, dir. by Steven Spielberg (Paramount Pictures, 2005)

*We Were Soldiers*, dir. by Randall Wallace (Paramount Pictures, 2002)

*The Wild Bunch*, dir. by Sam Peckinpah (Warner Bros./Seven Arts, 1969)

*World Trade Center*, dir. by Oliver Stone (Paramount Pictures, 2006)

*X-Men 2*, dir. by Bryan Singer (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2003)

*Zero Dark Thirty*, dir. by Kathryn Bigelow (Columbia Pictures, 2012)

