CHAPTER 1

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

This chapter presents an overview of the genre's development in relevant social, historical, and cultural contexts. Without pretending to offer a comprehensive history of the genre, I focus on films about those wars that have prompted significant creative activity and critical interest. Rather than simply offering a list of films, I hope to suggest a framework that will give direction and organization to understanding the persistence of the genre over time.

Major War Films, Trends, and Cycles: The American Civil War

Although the Spanish-American War remained a subject for the burgeoning film industry in the early twentieth century, the American Civil War eventually supplanted it, specifically in Thomas Ince's *Drummer of the Eighth* and *Grand-dad* (1913), and most notably in the first American film epic, D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915). The importance of *Birth of a Nation* for the war film genre and American culture is immense.[1] It follows the interactions before, during, and after the war of two families, the Stonemans from the North and the Camerons from the South. Friends before the war, they find themselves on opposite

sides during the conflict, a situation highlighted when former pals Tod Stoneman and Duke Cameron end up fighting opposite one another and dying in each other's arms. Love develops between the younger members of both families but is thwarted by the military and political effects of the war, especially by Reconstruction.

Some of the generic conventions identified in the Introduction appear in the film: youthful, immature soldiers; emphasis on the love of soldiers for the women back home; the effects of war on the home front; and displays of courage and heroism in battle. One of the most memorable battles in any war film climaxes when Ben Stoneman stuffs the Confederate flag into the barrel of a Union cannon. The conclusion of this battle is followed by a famous shot in which Griffith shows scores of dead soldiers from both sides, and provides an ironic comment in the intertitle: "War's Peace." But many of the conventions identified earlier are not present here. Actually, a great deal of the film does not occur in connection with fighting on the battlefield but on the home front, since Griffith's most important focus is on the effects of the war and Reconstruction on the South.

PLATE 2 *Birth of a Nation* (D. W. Griffith, 1915). "War's Peace" (David W. Griffith Corp./Courtesy Photofest).

Besides its technical achievements, which include stunning shots of warfare and well-edited cross-cutting to build suspense at the film's climax, its greatest importance has to do with the notoriety created by the film's depiction of African Americans and race relations. The film quite unambiguously supports the Confederacy's position in the Civil War. Led by the rhetorical power of W. E. B. DuBois, who edited *The Crisis*, the primary publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), thousands protested the racism of the work, probably the most censored in American film history. African Americans, played by whites in blackface, appeared either as passive, faithful servants or as oversexed and threatening villains. The worst of these are Gus, whose overtures to Flora Cameron (Mae Marsh) result in her death as she jumps off a mountain trying to escape from him; and Silas Lynch, a mulatto given ruling power over the southern community during Reconstruction as a result of the misguided efforts of Elsie's father. Emboldened by his rise in white society, he seeks to marry Elsie, who is in love with Ben, and overpowers her and her father. To counter the acts and rising power of the blacks, Ben Cameron founds the Ku Klux Klan, which murders Gus and stops Lynch's "marriage" to Elsie.

The film's opening coincided with a resurgenge of Klan activity in the country. Its depiction of racial tensions after the Civil War clearly affected contemporary audiences throughout the nation. According to historian Leon Litwack, the film "appeared during the most repressive and violent period in the history of race relations in the South."[2] Contributing to the controversy was the infamous approving comment on the film by President Woodrow W. Wilson, a classmate of Thomas W. Dixon who wrote *The Clansman* on which the film is based: "it is like writing history with lightning."[3] In contrast to the favorable response of the American public to films about the Spanish-American War, which was widely supported, the divided reaction along racial and political lines to *Birth of a Nation* illustrates the phenomenon discussed throughout this book: the way films based on a past historical moment can speak to the times in which they are produced. In this case, the tensions attending the growth of African Americans' status in American society figured in the negative contemporary response. Evidently sobered by the hostile reaction to the film and accusations of racism, Griffith, who was a southerner, next made *Intolerance: Love's Struggle Throughout the Ages* (1916). Its thematic emphasis on advocating acceptance of others can be seen as a redemptive corrective to the earlier film.

The best-known silent film about the Civil War made after *Birth of a Nation* is *The General* (1927), Buster Keaton's hilarious comedy about a southern railroad engineer who, although not a soldier in the Confederacy, manages to foil the Union forces and win the woman he loves by rescuing her from the enemy. It certainly can be said to fit the definition of a war film mentioned in the Introduction since it focuses directly on elements of war itself. As noted there, humorous subject matter, such as the blanket tossing, was among the activities and elements shown in l898–l899 films about the Spanish-American War. Just as the total range of films included everything from battles to horseplay, so too here, Keaton's film shows soldiers being shot and dying during battle and also classic comic scenes, including one in which Keaton's character manages to avoid detection while hiding under the dining room table of his enemies, and another in which he discovers he's forgotten to attach cars to his stolen engine.

The most famous film ever made about the Civil War after *Birth of a Nation*, *Gone with the Wind* (1939), was based on the best-selling novel of 1936 by Margaret Mitchell. It remains the highest grossing film domestically in American history: $1,450,680,400 (gross adjusted for inflation, per Box Office Mojo.com). Even though it had no combat scenes, it presented a telling depiction of the destruction of an apparently stable and secure world, especially in the indelible images of the burning of Atlanta and the depiction of the Confederate wounded and dead lying in the sun. The enormous popularity of the film was overwhelmingly driven by the success of the novel; the national interest in the competition among actresses over who would play Scarlett O'Hara; the masterful technical achievements, especially with color; and the question of censorship. A controversy ensued whether Rhett Butler's famous last line to Scarlett, "Frankly my dear I don't give a damn," could be used, given the restrictions of the Production Code Administration at that time.

Another reason for the popularity of the film on its first release in December 1939 may have to do with World War II, which had begun on September 1. One element operating in viewer response could have been the way the film spoke indirectly to a country aware of the conflagration that was now beginning to engulf Europe. Even though the United States had started to emerge from the effects of the Depression, the world itself had again become unstable, and a massive epic was opening that provided a chronicle of how vulnerable an apparently stable society is to dissolution.

World War I

Early films about World War I, or the Great War as it was called then, present complex responses to a conflict whose immensity had never before been experienced. The first ones appeared during or soon after the war itself and thus have a historical immediacy unlike that of the Civil War films, which are in a retrospective position in relation to the war depicted. *Civilization* (1916), although not specifically about the war occurring in 1916, is clearly anti-war. It concerns a submarine captain whose remorse over the destruction and death his ship inflicts on innocent passengers on another ship is followed by a kind of religious and physical rebirth, as well as recognition by the chief combatant in the story that war is wrong. In contrast, D. W. Griffith's *Hearts of the World* (1918) is completely supportive of the war. He made it at the behest of the British government, which hoped the film would encourage the United States' entrance. Set in France, the film follows the fortunes of two families torn apart by the war, the hero's battle experiences, and the threats faced by the heroine and the hero's mother and brothers. By the time of the film's release, the US had already joined Great Britain and France against Germany. Griffith deploys various strategies to demonize the German enemy, including emphasizing the pathos of young children whose mother dies as a result of the war, and presenting a vicious Hun intent on raping Marie Stephenson (Lillian Gish). The film was popular with audiences.[4]

In *Shoulder Arms* (1918), another comedy, Charlie Chaplin plays a private in the army who falls asleep and dreams he single-handedly overcomes a number of German soldiers, who are portrayed simultaneously as both threatening and oafish. The moral question of accepting or rejecting war as such never becomes an issue. In contrast, Abel Gance's *J'Accuse* (1919) clearly attacks war, using various characters and images to underscore its evil. The heroine is raped by a German soldier (an act seen twice in silhouette); one of the two principal heroes is killed in battle; the other goes mad and dies. A recurring surreal visual motif has skeletons dancing in a circle. The last fifteen minutes of the film present a remarkable surrealistic sequence in which the deranged soldier envisions the dead rising from their graves and coming back to haunt those at home who have survived.

Anti-war sentiments pervade some major silent war films of the 1920s: *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921), *The Big Parade* (1925), and *What Price Glory?* (1926). With the coming of sound, other anti-war films appear. While none of the famous aviation films of this period celebrate war, they nonetheless offer often breathtaking sequences of

aerial combat. William Wellman's *Wings* (1927) won the first Academy Award for Best Picture. Howard Hughes' *Hell's Angels* (1930) began as a silent film and then was turned into a sound film. Although in black and white, it has a well-known explosion of a zeppelin presented in a two-color process. Howard Hawks' *The Dawn Patrol* (1930) focuses on the problems facing aerial commanders and the psychologically damaging effects on them of sending men off to certain death. These strongly anti-war films reflect the disillusionment of the 1920s and 1930s about the Great War, its terrible destruction, and its failure to resolve the conflicts that caused it.

Other nations also produced anti-war films. From Germany, which was obliterated by its defeat and economic suffering throughout the 1920s, came G. W. Pabst's *Westfront 1918* (1930). This powerful film with impressive combat scenes introduces us to the lives and loves of four young men who all die as a result of the war. French filmmaker Jean Renoir's classic *La Grande Illusion* (1937) focuses on the French prisoners of war in a German camp. The commander, Captain von Ruffenstein (Erich von Stroheim), an aristocrat, gives special attention to one the prisoners, Captain de Boeldieu (Pierre Fresnay), who is also an aristocrat. Nonetheless he shoots the Frenchman when he realizes that the latter has helped prisoners to escape. The depth of his grief at his action points to the disillusion of the prewar social structure, as Roger Ebert notes: "it's a meditation on the collapse of the old order of European civilization."[5]

As the decade ended, clearly responding to the threats posed by the onset of World War II, Hollywood began to make films supportive of the United States' role in World War I. Warner Bros., having already produced *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (1939), a cautionary warning about the current dangers posed by Hitler and the rise of Germany in the 1930s, made two pro-war films based on historical figures drawn from World War I: William Keighley's *The Fighting 69th* (1940) and Howard Hawks' *Sergeant York* (1941). The first concerns a famous all-Irish regiment from New York City, which included the poet Joyce Kilmer. The second depicts the life of Alvin York, who began life as a pacifist but gradually came to accept the need for killing in war. He single-handedly knocked out a German machine-gun nest, killing many and capturing over 100 men. Interestingly, as one measure of how films may be usable as an index of sentiment about war in general, the anti-war *All Quiet on the Western Front* won the Oscar for best picture in 1930. Eleven years later, with America recently engaged in war, Gary Cooper won the Best Actor Oscar for playing the heroic soldier Sergeant York in a pro-war film.

Practically no films about World War I were made during World War II, and only a small number after 1945. With a few exceptions, their ideological positions reflect a return to the anti-war sentiments of the 1920s, whether displaying the disillusionment of Stanley Kubrick's *Paths of Glory* (1957), made a few years after the Korean War, or serving as a vehicle to criticize the war in Vietnam, as happens in *Johnny Got His Gun* (1971) and the Australian film *Gallipoli* (1981). While William Wellman's *Lafayette Escadrille* (1958) and Tony Bill's *Flyboys* (2006) return to the focus on aviation and the famous division that fought in France, the films are not political. In contrast, the love story in French filmmaker Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *A Very Long Engagement* (2004), which concerns a woman's search for her soldier lover who is presumed to have died in No Man's Land during the war, is part of a larger study of war. Cynthia Fuchs suggests the film speaks to contemporary concerns since it "arrives in theaters at the same time that real life war images appear nightly on television . . . the thematic and political connections are impossible to resist."[6]

World War II

Films about World War II began appearing in 1942 and had an immediate relationship to the ongoing conflict and to audiences akin to that seen earlier in films about the Spanish-American War. This period saw the greatest attendance figures in the history of film, with some 80 million Americans per week attending the movies. Several exemplary combat films to be discussed in Chapter 4 were about the war in the Pacific: *Wake Island* (1942), *Air Force*, *Bataan*, *So Proudly We Hail!*, and *Destination Tokyo* (all 1943). All belong to what I call a retaliation subgenre, in which films focus on how the United States is affected by and responds to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. John Ford's *The Battle of Midway* (September 1942), an Oscar-winning documentary, chronicles the first decisive victory of America in the Pacific, a major turning point in the war. Ford, a member of the Naval Reserve since 1934, was now an officer and filmed some of the action himself, during which he was wounded. In terms of the three kinds of war film to come out of the Spanish-American War, Ford's film bears noting. It is simultaneously an actuality, since the battle sequences are in fact real, but also a semi-fictionalized film in that a quasi-narrative element is provided by the voiceovers of Jane Darwell and Henry Fonda who comment on the soldier as if they knew them. As such, the film offers

an interesting example of the kind of genre hybridization mentioned earlier in the Introduction.

Europe, the other major theater of war, was represented by a number of films, such as *Desperate Journey* (1942), about the successful escape efforts of a multinational group of fliers shot down and imprisoned after a bombing raid in Germany; *Action in the North Atlantic* (1943), about a Merchant Marine ship evading German submarines as it brings supplies to Russia; *Passage to Marseille* (1944), an extremely complicated narrative (containing a flashback within a flashback) about French resistance to the Nazis before and during the war; and *The Story of G. I. Joe* (1945), about an Army company's progress from Africa to Italy as witnessed and chronicled by war correspondent Ernie Pyle. Africa was the setting of combat films such as *Immortal Sergeant* (1943) and *Sahara* (1943), and the classic Oscar-winning love story about those caught up in the Nazi occupation, *Casablanca* (1942).

Joining these films made during the war are home front films such as *Tender Comrade* (1943), *The Human Comedy* (1943), *The Sullivans* (1944), and *Since You Went Away* (1944), which all focus on the trials faced by the women and families of servicemen. In the first, working wives pool their money and resources to share a house. At the end of the film, the heroine, who has recently had a baby, receives a telegram announcing the death of her husband. The second concerns a widow and her children. One son, a high school boy, delivers telegrams in order to help support the family since his brother is at war. In one of the film's many heartbreaking moments, he discovers the dreaded telegram announcing his brother's death. The convention of breaking the bad news to family members is a staple of these films, and figures most agonizingly in *The Sullivans*, in which a Naval officer has to tell the Sullivan family that all five of their sons have been killed at sea. Everyone watching the film in 1944 knew that this true story had effectively prompted a change in policy about family members serving together. The circumstances served as one of the inspirations for *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). In *Since You Went Away*, a mother works to provide for her family while her husband is at war. One of her daughters falls in love with a soldier who is killed. Also popular during the war were service-comedies such as *See Here, Private Hargrove* (1944) and entertainment-musicals centered on the war such as *This Is the Army* (1943). The range of narrative interests represented in the films from 1942 to 1945 takes us back to the variety of viewing experiences available to audiences watching films about the Spanish-American War. These also provided audiences with different perspectives on the conflict, ranging from the comic to the serious.

Some films released in the 5–6 year period after the end of the war focus on problems of adjustment faced by returning veterans, such as William Wyler's *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), which won seven Oscars, including Best Picture and Director, and was the highest grossing film of the entire decade. Its financial success indicates how much its themes and concerns hit a collective nerve in the American public. Three veterans—Al (Fredric March), an upper-middle-class banker from the infantry, Fred (Dana Andrews), a former soda-jerk who was a bombardier, and Homer (Harold Russell), a sailor who lost both his hands—meet by chance on their way home. They and their loved ones interact in ways that underscore the emotional toll of the war and the economic problems faced by all as the nation tries to return to normal. Al, uneasy in his new civilian role, drinks too much. Fred falls in love with Al's daughter Peggy (Teresa Wright) after his marriage dissolves; she offers support for the veteran who is still troubled by his experiences at war. Homer has to overcome his initial reluctance to marry his high school sweetheart because of his condition.

PLATE 3 *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946). Peggy (Teresa Wright) tries to comfort Fred (Dana Andrews) (Samuel Goldwyn Company/Courtesy Jerry Ohlinger's).

Two other films explored the difficulties faced by wounded and disabled soldiers. Fred Zinnemann's *The Men* (1950) features Marlon Brando in his first film role as Bud, a paraplegic who has to accept the fact he will never walk again. Teresa Wright plays his wife Elly, who helps him adjust. *Bright Victory* (1951) shows the rehabilitation of blinded veterans and introduces the theme of racial bigotry to the complex problems of adjustment. A blind white southern soldier who befriends an African American at a rehabilitation hospital crudely uses a racist epithet, not realizing he is black. Eventually, their friendship is renewed. The emphasis on individual physical and emotional problems of veterans during this period may well have been a way of commenting on the national postwar malaise in general.

Several films provided a retrospective return to the war itself in *Fighter Squadron* (1948), *Command Decision* (1949), and *Battleground* (1949). Although certainly not parallel to what happens in the 1920s, when most films are strongly anti-war, these films display a marked change of tone, compared to those produced during the war. Some, like the three mentioned here, involve complicated examinations of leadership and authority, issues that were not raised in combat films made during the war. Others, like the western *Fort Apache* (1948) and gangster film *White Heat* (1949), display a greater interest in the psychology of the hero, as occurs in *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949) and *Twelve O'Clock High* (1949). Heroic leaders in those films, played by John Wayne and Gregory Peck, are shown to be psychologically troubled men in a manner that was not typical of films made during the war, with the exceptions of *I'll be Seeing You* (1944) and *A Walk in the Sun* (1945).

This shift in tone can also be linked to films appearing in another genre of this period, film noir. The dark, brooding worldview in works such as *Detour* (1945) and *Out of the Past* (1947) makes explicit what is implicit in post-1945 films about the war, a sense of unease, hopelessness, and disillusionment now that the great battle that had united everyone in a common purpose was over. Even more telling in this regard are two films noir about veterans involved in complex narratives about crime: *Crossfire* (1947), which explores the investigation of a Jewish soldier's murder by an anti-Semitic sergeant; and Zinnemann's *Act of Violence* (1949), which concerns a wounded veteran's revenge on his officer who betrayed him and others in a Nazi prison camp.[7]

One topic introduced at this time becomes increasingly more dominant in films: the Holocaust and survivors of prison camps. The few films about escapes from concentration camps that appeared before the end of World War II, such as *The Mortal Storm* (1940) and *The Seventh*

Cross (1944), were made before people had knowledge of the evil genocide that had occurred in them. Orson Welles' *The Stranger* (1946), the first narrative film to show concentration camps, concerns a German director of a camp who has escaped to the United States where he has been living undetected. Zinnemann's *The Search* (1948) shows the ultimately successful efforts of an American serviceman played by Montgomery Clift to reunite a little boy separated from his mother during their time in camps.

The first commercially released film to expose the utter horror of concentration camps was French director's Alain Resnais' *Night and Fog* (1955). In this short documentary he alternates between scenes in Technicolor showing the empty camps as they appear in the present with unbearably graphic shots of the evil and inhuman atrocities that occurred during their operation. Sam Fuller's *Verboten!* (1959) was the first American film to show actual footage of the atrocities that occurred in concentration camps. Other films that address the topic include *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1959), based on the true account of how she and her family hid in Amsterdam during the Nazi occupation; *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1962), about the trials of Nazi war criminals; *Sophie's Choice* (1982), for which Meryl Streep won an Oscar playing a mother who has to choose which one of her children will be sent to a camp to die; *Europa, Europa* (1990), the true story of Simon Perel, who escaped detection by posing as an Aryan; and Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993), which shows how a businessman saved 1,200 lives (seven Oscars, including Best Picture and Director). Most recently the Holocaust has been the subject of Roberto Begnini's *Life is Beautiful* (1997), for which he won an Oscar as Best Actor, depicting a father trying to protect his son; Roman Polanski's *The Pianist* (2005) (Best Director Oscar), about someone who hides from the Nazis for several years; *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2008), about the son of a German commandant who befriends a boy in a concentration camp; *Adam Resurrected* (2008), about the psychologically damaging long-range effects of incarceration in a camp; and *The Reader* (2008), which examines the effects of a love relationship between a woman, formerly a guard at a camp, and the young boy whom she seduces after the war.

The Korean War and the Cold War

Over 30,000 Americans were killed in the Korean War, which began in June 1950 when North Korea crossed the 49th Parallel to invade

the South, and lasted until July 1953. The Korean War was the first military manifestation of the Cold War that began at the conclusion of World War II, when the Soviet Union and countries dominated by it squared off against the United States and other countries that would become part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949. The conflict generated war films that were different in several ways from earlier films about World War II.

Sam Fuller wrote, produced, and directed *The Steel Helmet* (1951), the first combat movie made about the Korean War. It makes important contributions to the genre on a number of levels. First, the main platoon consists of a historically accurate amalgam of race and ethnicities. Fuller specifically excluded the typical New Yorker/Brooklynite, having earlier inveighed against the stereotypical inclusion, asking: "Why is it that every movie has to have a rifleman talk about Brooklyn or Coney Island?"[8] Instead of the typical American melting pot, it includes an African American, who since President Harry S. Truman's 1948 order, really could be integrated into the armed services rather than placed in a combat role inaccurately, as had occurred in *Bataan*. It also has a Japanese

PLATE 4 *The Steel Helmet* (Sam Fuller, 1951). Short Round (William Chun) and Sergeant Zack (Gene Evans) (Deputy Corporation/Courtesy Photofest).

American, who had earlier fought in World War II for the United States. Moreover, Fuller foregrounds these issues when a North Korean prisoner of war verbally attacks both the African American and the Japanese American for their stupidity in serving in their oppressor's army.

Second, it introduces the character of an innocent child as a more active participant in the war. While children had appeared in American war films as early as D. W. Griffith's *Hearts of the World*, and in Italian neorealist war films such as *Rome, Open City* (1945) and *Paisan* (1946), this is the first American film in which a little child who plays a significant role is killed by enemy gunfire. Short Round (William Chun), the South Korean child who saves the life of the hero Sgt. Zack (Gene Evans) and tags long with the platoon, is shot by North Koreans attacking the temple where the platoon is housed.

Third, Fuller consistently employs a bitter, hard-edged tone. Sgt. Zack quotes approvingly his commander from World War II: "There are two kinds of men on this beach, those that are dead and those that are going to die." A soldier ordered by Zack's current officer to check a dead body for dog tags (against the latter's advice) is blown to bits, prompting Zack to observe realistically on the nature of death in war: "A dead man's nothing but a corpse." When their North Korean prisoner makes a disparaging comment about the recently killed Short Round, Zack shoots the wounded man in cold blood, then threatens him (in the film's most famous line): "If you die, I'll kill you."

Of interest in terms of the genre is the number of prisoner of war films that appear in the postwar period. While there had been films about this subject during World War II, for example *The Purple Heart* (1944) and at least one about rescuing POWs, *Back to Bataan* (1945), such works stressed the heroism and invincibility of prisoners. But in *Act of Violence*, the postwar film mentioned above, and those that come out of the Korean War, the issue is much more complicated. In varying degrees *Prisoner of War* (1954) and *The Rack* (1956) foreground the men's vulnerability and the terrible pressures on them to survive the torturous behavior of their North Korean-Soviet captors. Sometimes soldiers who break down are perceived as traitorous, even when they are working undercover for the United States, as occurs in *Prisoner of War* in which Webb Sloane (Ronald Reagan) is vilified for appearing to conspire with the enemy.

The issue of brainwashing occurs in its most chilling form in John Frankenheimer's *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962). While the Korean War was long over by the time of this film, it appeared in the midst of the now prolonged and increasingly tense Cold War. Although the United

State entered the war as part of a United Nations force to defend South Korea, the North was receiving support from both Russia and China, the ultimate antagonists in the conflict. In the film, Chinese communists, acting on orders from an evil married communist couple in America, who appear to be super patriots, brainwash a troop of POWs. The wife, Mrs. Iselin (Angela Lansbury), has her son Raymond (Laurence Harvey) programmed by the Chinese to follow commands she gives him to assassinate various people, most importantly the winner of their party's convention nomination for president. Her husband will then be able to snag the nomination and, presumably, win the election, thus allowing communist domination of the country. Ben Marco (Frank Sinatra), a fellow prisoner, discovers the plot and is able to thwart the plan, which comes unraveled as Raymond kills his mother and her husband before committing suicide. Ironically, the film's October 24 release date put it in the midst of the Cuban Missile Crisis, which occurred between October 12 and 28. For several days, the entire world wondered if there would be nuclear war because of the United States' demand that Russia eliminate its missiles in Cuba.

The lingering bitterness about a war that stopped rather than ended, coupled with increasing international tensions between western and communist countries, created a climate in which films about World War II can be seen to reflect the tenor of the times. For example, two famous POW retrospective World War II films of the 1950s are Billy Wilder's *Stalag 17* (1953) and David Lean's *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957). The first follows the story of Sefton (William Holden, Best Actor Oscar), a cynical operator within the camp suspected of being a collaborator with the German captors, partly because he makes such advantageous deals for presumably unavailable contraband and comforts. He is vindicated when the actual agent is discovered, but not before Sefton is beaten. One contribution of this film to the genre is the introduction of the savvy operator like Sefton who manages to acquire stuff. George Segal plays a similar type of character in another retrospective World War II POW film, *King Rat* (1965).

Although set in World War II, in a Japanese prison camp, Lean's Oscar-winning masterpiece *The Bridge on the River Kwai* very much speaks to the mood of the country caught up in the Cold War. The film shows how the Japanese force British prisoners led by their commander Colonel Nicholson (Alec Guinness, Best Actor Oscar) to build a bridge. William Holden plays an American commander who works with British soldiers to sabotage the bridge. The film's conclusion in which most of the principal characters are killed, including the Japanese

leader of the camp, prompts one survivor to utter the famous last words: "Madness, madness." It is interesting in this regard to think about possibly the most famous prisoner of war film after *Kwai*, John Sturges' *The Great Escape* (1963). Even though celebrating the heroism of a unified group of soldiers in a German POW camp, it ends with the deaths of most of those trying to escape, a melancholy defeat, another symptom of the ongoing and dispiriting Cold War.

Although they are not about POWs, some other films about World War II display a similar dark mood. In *Attack!* (1956), an inept commander, having lost the confidence of his men because of repeated blunders, some leading to American deaths, is murdered by his second in command, who then confesses his crime to his superiors. Also of interest is the first film version of *The Thin Red Line* (1964). This retrospective film about World War II that appears at the height of the Cold War is a profoundly unsettling work that destabilizes many of the values associated with the World War II combat film: the unity of the group, the common shared goals, and the ability of American soldiers to survive the onslaughts.

Several notable foreign films made during the Cold War should be acknowledged since they also provide equally troubled retrospective views of World War II. Réne Clément's *Forbidden Games* (1952), which won the Oscar for Best Foreign Film in 1953, shows how two little French children adjusting to the bleak world of war and death by making a cemetery for animals. The hero of Andrzej Wajda's *Ashes and Diamonds* (1958) is a Polish resistance fighter who dies in the process of trying to eliminate a communist leader, whose ominous presence signals the post-war domination of the country. Bernhard Wicki's *The Bridge* (1959) exposes the misery and horror faced by a group of young German boys who are responsible for holding a bridge at the end of the war. Its searing depiction of their hopeless situation invites comparison with *All Quiet on the Western Front*, discussed in Chapter 3.

An important Civil War film also appeared during the Korean War. Just as World War II films made during the height of the Korean conflict show a different tone, so too does John Huston's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1951), which concerns a young soldier who runs away from battle but eventually rejoins his troop. A member of the Signal Corp., Huston had made important documentaries during World War II. According to Guerric DeBona, his film version of *The Red Badge of Courage* was cut mercilessly by MGM not because it was really "about" the Korean War, but because Huston had questioned the power of the hero's masculinity, emphasizing his cowardice too much at a time when the United

States was at war in Korea.[9] Interestingly, the next film Huston made was about World War I, this time outside the studio system, *The African Queen* (1951). Humphrey Bogart won an Oscar playing Charlie Allnut, a rugged skipper of a boat who, with Rose (Katharine Hepburn), succeeds in destroying a German war ship. This film focuses on heroic behavior in a much earlier war and shows both the principal actors winning decisively over the enemy, perhaps a gesture of turning away from the frustrating lack of closure then current with the Korean War. In its way, the film's emphasis on individuals outside any organized military force triumphing over evil may be saying something about the national sense of malaise with the lack of progress of the war that involved multinational forces.

A number of films made during the Cold War that continue to reassert the values of World War II do so in a context that very much privileges historical truth, an issue to be explored in more detail in Chapter 2: *Three Came Home* (1950), *Battle Cry* (1955), *To Hell and Back* (1955), and *Strategic Air Command* (1955). The first draws on the factual account published in 1947 by Agnes Newton Keith (Claudette Colbert) of her imprisonment by the Japanese from 1941 to 1945 in a camp on Borneo. The film presents her harrowing experiences: separated from her husband, a prisoner in another part of the camp, she and her little boy withstand horrible deprivations.[10] The second, based on the immensely popular bestselling novel (1953) by Leon Uris, foregrounds the toughness and stamina of Marines, interlaced with various romantic subplots. Uris had fought with Marines in World War II, and adapted his own novel for the screen. The authenticity associated with his creation and its celebration of the Marines certainly factored into the appeal of the film. The third unqualifiedly celebrates the heroism of its star and subject, Audie Murphy, on whose autobiography the film was based. Murphy was the most highly decorated soldier in all of World War II. Perhaps these films, which did very well at the box office, indicate that spectators, weary from the Korean War's casualties and inconclusiveness, were anxious to welcome back films that showed the country successfully waging war. Murphy's film in particular is important in that the iconic star was "really" the subject; that is, the film performs an interesting act that takes us back to the three kinds of films about the Spanish-American War. It has elements of the actuality (Murphy himself, the real hero), the reenactments of the battles some eleven years after he fought, and narrative.

While not a war film that depicts combat, the last, *Strategic Air Command*, certainly connects to *To Hell and Back*. This very successful

film concerns a former Air Force pilot, now a baseball player with the St. Louis Cardinals, who is brought back into the Air Force to fly the newest bombers. According to the American Film Institute notes, "Modern sources state that James Stewart, who, like his character 'Dutch,' was a World War II bomber pilot and was still active in the Air Force Reserve in the 1950s, achieving the rank of brigadier general in 1959, persuaded Paramount to make a picture about the SAC, arguing that it would be patriotic and financially sound."[11] That is, another "real" serviceman, James Stewart, who flew during World War II and who was the narrator of *Winning Your Wings*, a recruiting film directed by John Huston for Warner Bros. and the First Motion Picture Unit of the Air Force, plays a flier of the newest aviation weapon, the B-36 bomber, which is a key part of SAC that will be defending America in the *next* war.

Probably the most extreme example of authenticity as a factor in generating a positive retroactive World War II film occurs with Darryl F. Zanuck's *The Longest Day* (1962). While Zanuck was responsible for producing the film and directing some sequences, the principals in this regard were Andrew Marton, Ken Annikin, and Bernhard Wicki, who directed the American, English, and German sections of the film, respectively; all were from the countries represented in their responsibilities. A three-hour chronicle of the D-Day landing, the black and white film strives for an authenticity rooted in honoring the actual historical records, even when the facts are horrible in regard to deaths, as occurred with the fate of paratroopers who were killed when they landed in St. Eglise d'Mer by mistake. The film is one of the first epics to use dozens of name actors, familiar to audiences from many other war films, like Henry Fonda, Robert Ryan, Robert Mitchum, and John Wayne. This retrospective film about the greatest allied invasion in history thus benefited from its own honoring of generic history since so many of the actors were familiar as war heroes in earlier films. Wayne in particular, although he never was in the armed services, had by this time achieved iconic status as an actor in war films, particularly in *Flying Tigers* (1942), *The Fighting Seabees* (1944), *Flying Leathernecks* (1951), and above all, *The Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949), for which he was nominated for an Oscar. Use of the immense list of previous stars of World War II films has the curious effect of reviving their roles as heroes of the genre and bringing with them the values associated with the earlier films.

The impact of the Cold War on other genres appears in science fiction and horror films. As Susan Sontag has demonstrated in her famous essay "The Imagination of Disaster," the prevalence of movies about invasion

from outer space speaks to the nation's anxieties about the Cold War. In the bonding together of warring nations to fight a common external enemy, she sees a longing for unity with one's enemy. Correspondingly, the rash of monster movies that begins around the time of the Korean War and continues to flourish reveals anxieties about the fear of nuclear warfare, particularly after both Russia and China acquire nuclear weapons.[12]

One retrospective movie about the Korean War speaks to the time of its production. Although set during the Korean War, Robert Altman's *M*A*S*H* (1970) was perceived as a stinging condemnation of the Vietnam War, which by 1970 had escalated into an increasingly hopeless conflict. This unsettling mixture of hilarious comedy (some of it highly sexist) and gruesome images (in the operations), focuses on Hawkeye (Donald Sutherland), who runs the mobile army surgical hospital that gives the film its title.[13]

Vietnam

The war in Vietnam, which the United States lost in 1974 after over 58,000 Americans were killed, extended the Cold War into a different realm in Asia. The civil war between North and South Vietnam, eerily replicating the enmity between North and South Korea, played out as a conflict between Chinese and Russian communism and American democracy. Unlike any of the wars discussed in this overview, practically no films were made about it while it was occurring. The primary exception was *The Green Berets* (1968), directed by and starring John Wayne. Possibly the most reviled war film in American history, it was made in support of the US policy of sending "military advisers" to defend South Vietnam against the Viet Cong and communism. Although much less known, *The Losers* (1970, known as *Nam's Angels*), an exploitation film about American bikers in Cambodia, also supports the war.

Only after the war ended did Vietnam become a major subject of films, starting with Peter Davis' Academy Award winning documentary *Hearts and Minds* (1974), a searing attack on US policy. It presents agonizing film records of atrocities, including the famous shots of the little girl who has been burned by napalm and the shooting of the Viet Cong soldier in the head. Davis combines these with painful monologues by veterans and interviews with governmental figures, including a horrifying commentary from General William Westmoreland defending US policy.

Beginning in 1978, a number of narrative works about American involvement appeared, many of them characterized by a complex mix of sadness and devastating depictions of the horrors of war. *Go Tell the Spartans* (1978) examines the futility of the war by concentrating on the bitter disillusionment of its main star, Burt Lancaster. *The Boys in Company C* (1978) shows the absurdity of the war by castigating most of the military officers. Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978) achieved fame because of its extreme violence, particularly in a lethal game of Russian roulette that American POWs are forced to play by their Viet Cong captors, a form of torture that was not in fact documented. As if to confirm the continuing tensions and resentment in the United States about involvement with the war, the film's controversial ending produced sharply divided interpretations. Some saw its conclusion, in which a group of mourners for a suicidal veteran sing "God Bless America," as supportive of United States policy. Others, in contrast, interpreted the scene as a poignant reflection on the sadness of war and its effects.[14] The film won five Oscars, including Best Picture and Director, and set a new standard for "realism," discussed in Chapter 2.

Although the issue of whether *The Deer Hunter* is ultimately pro or anti-war remains unresolved in the criticism, no such debate exists about Hal Ashby's *Coming Home* (1978), a powerful anti-war film that combined two narrative situations familiar from World War II films: the home front and problems faced by returning, wounded veterans. In depicting the affair that develops between a housewife (Jane Fonda) and a paraplegic vet (Jon Voight), the film went far beyond anything ever seen in World War II films, not just in the explicitness of the sexual relationship but in its condemnation of the war. It won three Oscars, for its two stars and for the writing. Thus, two of the four major war films of 1978 accounted for eight Oscars, six in major categories. This suggests something about the anguished mood of the country in regard to the Vietnam War close to the time of US defeat. These films do not bear the same retrospective relationship to the war as those made shortly after World War II. They are, in effect, the repressed of the Vietnam War, the films that didn't get made during the conflict.

Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) epitomizes the various complex impulses detectable in the first wave of Vietnam films. Winner of two Oscars and many other awards, it adapts Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*, which follows its narrator's discovery of the extent of human evil, in order to condemn US involvement and military policy. Marlon Brando plays Colonel Kurtz, a totally insane embodiment and extension of US military policy. A line from Conrad's novel used

PLATE 5 *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979). Part of the helicopter fleet (Zoetrope Studios/Courtesy Photofest).

in the film, spoken by Kurtz, "the horror, the horror," epitomizes US folly in the war. Matching it in intensity is the sentiment expressed by Lt. Col. Kilgore (Robert Duvall), who states: "I love the smell of napalm in the morning." Some of the film's famous sequences underscore the madness of Kurtz and the war. In one, Coppola shows a large contingent of helicopters about to drop Agent Orange and accompanies their flight with "The Ride of the Valkyrie" from Richard Wagner's opera *Die Valküre*. Because of Hitler's fondness for Wagner operas, this music has a particularly ironic function. An evening's entertainment for soldiers consists of a show put on by Playboy bunnies flown in for their amusement, but the show is cut short when the men become unruly and swarm around the bunnies.

Films in the 1980s about Vietnam display quite contradictory trends. On the one hand, some combat films such as *Hamburger Hill* (1987) and *84C Mopic* (1989) do not specifically condemn its politics. The first offers an agonizing account based on an actual event of an attempt to take a hill during 1969. In a manner that recalls Albert Camus' use of the myth of Sisyphus as an exemplum of the absurdity of human life, the soldiers try to capture the hill, are beaten back with losses, try again, with more losses, and do so for ten days, until they succeed. The second provides an interesting experiment in which the "narrator" is a camera man with the Army's motion picture unit making first-hand accounts of life with his platoon, including battles. His death at the end of the film is signaled by the obvious loss of control over his camera. While obviously not sympathetic to the war, Barry Levinson's *Good*

Morning, Vietnam (1987) offers a different kind of perspective on it in this film based on Adrian Cronauer's experiences as a disk jockey in Saigon. The film mixes comedy, Robin Williams' typical non-stop verbal barrages, with a moving story of his attempts to befriend what he believes to be friendly Vietnamese citizens. He learns, though, that he has been involved with a Viet Cong operative, whom he thought was his friend. The film had the fourth highest domestic gross in 1987: $123,922,370.

A second kind of film revisits the war, literally from a later time period. Characterized by Thomas Doherty as "extraction films," they depict attempts to rescue prisoners of war long after the ending of the conflict, as in *Missing in Action* (1984) and *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985).[15] In the first, Chuck Norris plays a Vietnam veteran, himself a former POW, who returns to Cambodia to rescue prisoners still held by the North Vietnamese, even though they deny having them. The second, the most famous of such films, features Sylvester Stallone as John Rambo, reprising his role from *First Blood* (1982) in which he played a returning veteran assaulted by hostile Americans who scorn his service to the country during the war. In the sequel, he is released from prison, where he was sent because of his actions in the earlier film, and sent to Vietnam, presumably to take photographs that will prove no prisoners are being held. But he discovers the opposite and rescues them. The violence in the film is striking, most of it directed against the seemingly invincible hard body of Stallone, whose masculinity is the subject of a study by Susan Jeffords. She links him persuasively to President Ronald Reagan. Rambo's line to his superior upon being released from prison—"Do we get to win this time?"—is very much in line with the militarism of President Reagan, who, after watching *Rambo: First Blood* at a time when the US had suffered an embarrassing defeat by Libyan terrorists, said: "Boy, I saw *Rambo* last night. Now I know what to do the next time this happens."[16] Rambo's characters and the film itself can be seen as ideological instruments that use his body, and by extension that of President Reagan who survived an assassination attempt, to reassert America's power in the world. The film was successful, earning $150 million domestically, second only to Robert Zemeckis' *Back to the Future* ($210 million). In both of the extraction films the war gets fought again with a different resolution. In terms of our interest in contextualization, it's worth noting that *Rambo* and *Back to the Future* deal with somehow rewriting the past: in one case by sort of winning at least part of the Vietnam War, in the other by guaranteeing that errors in the past can be negated.

Yet another category of Vietnam films from the 1980s offers probing analyses of the impact of war on men, complete with harrowing

violence and disturbing depictions of evil. The two most searing examinations occur in Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986) and Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), discussed in Chapter 5. One of the most disturbing is Brian DePalma's *Casualties of War* (1989). Based on a report by Daniel Lang of an actual incident in 1968, it shows how a small platoon led by Sean Penn kidnaps, rapes, and kills a young woman, and the efforts of one member of the group who does not participate (Michael J. Fox) to bring the others to justice.

As was the case with the Korean War, retrospective films about World War II appear during the Vietnam War. Again, as we saw earlier, the current conflict provides a context for considering them. Three key films in 1970 appeared at the height of the war and violent protests against it, most horribly at Kent State University, where the National Guard killed four students during a rally against President Richard Nixon's escalation of the war by bombing Cambodia: *Catch-22* (June), *Patton* (September), and *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (September).

Catch-22, set in the Pacific, attacks the insanity of war by focusing on the attempts of Yossarian (Alan Arkin) to be relieved from his bombing duties in order to escape the mental stress they create. But the "catch" in the title refers to the fact that only a sane person would wish to be relieved; hence, he can't claim mental pressure. He would have to be insane to want to continue. The film's bitter treatment of various conventions of the World War II film such as heroism and the value of war undercuts all their positive aspects. Its tone of despair speaks much more of Vietnam than of World War II. For example, the unconscionable Lt. Milo Minderbinder (Jon Voight) controls a prostitution and blackmarket operation. By mistake, an American soldier standing on a raft is literally (and bloodily) cut in half by a plane that passes too low over him.

Patton won seven Oscars, including Best Picture, Best Director (Franklin J. Schaffner), Best Writing (Francis Ford Coppola), and Best Actor (the latter refused by George C. Scott). While not an anti-war film in any traditional sense, it offers a remarkable examination of a military mind and the way that personal ambitions can affect or subvert military responsibilities. Beginning with a stunning monologue in praise of war delivered by Patton in front of an enormous flag, the film follows his ambitious and contentious relations with his cohorts, especially the personal contest with Viscount Montgomery, who leads the British forces in Europe, as to who will get more credit quickly for achieving certain strategic goals. For an audience enduring an unpopular war in the present, this picture of a powerful and deeply flawed military

commander fighting for a noble cause certainly captures the complexity of the period. Interestingly, the film was a favorite of Richard Nixon's. According to Robert C. Toplin, Nixon made his decision to invade Cambodia after watching the film twice.[17]

Like *The Longest Day*, *Tora! Tora! Tora!* was also produced by Darryl F. Zanuck, who repeated his practice of using directors from the different countries depicted in the conflict, in this case from America (Richard Fleisher) and Japan (Kinji Fukasaku). Like its predecessor, it aims for minute accuracy in its detailed examination of the events preceding the attack on Pearl Harbor. In sharp contrast to films about the attack and its aftermath made during World War II, the film doesn't demonize the Japanese enemy, but, rather, offers a reasonably balanced depiction of both sides and the way the attack unfolds. The film failed at the box office, earning only $14.5 million, against a production budget of $25 million. Part of the problem was its perceived dullness. Vincent Canby of the *New York Times* compared it to the Spanish-American War actualities discussed earlier: "The cinema of actual event is a very old film genre that has its roots in ancient newsreels that, in 1898, passed off re-creations of the Battle of San Juan Hill as recordings of the real thing. As it has become more respectable over the years, it has also become more pious and dull."[18] Another problem may have been the absence of major stars from earlier war films. Even more, its failure to win audiences probably had to do with its actual evenhandedness. In its attempt to offer a reasonably objective depiction of how World War II begins, the film's explanation of both sides' experiences might seem to suggest the possibility of a rational reading of the conflict. But such a project actually runs counter to the mood of a country torn apart by those who disagreed totally on the value and reason for the Vietnam War: some justifying it in terms of the domino theory, which held that defending Vietnam would prevent the spread of communism even more, as opposed to those who saw the war as a hopeless, unwinnable conflict achieving nothing but destruction. Even more, a spectator in 1970 might be struck by the powerful ironies in the film, which demonstrates again and again how human blunders, frailty, and incompetence make catastrophic conflicts inevitable. In short, a movie offering a balanced perspective on a major conflict had little or no appeal.

Another retrospective film about World War II released before the wave of anti-Vietnam War films in 1978 spoke very much to the post-Vietnam anger and disillusionment. Richard Attenborough's *A Bridge Too Far* (1977) was a decided success, the third-highest grossing film of the year, earning $50 million. It concerns a disastrous failure by the

Allies to capture and secure three bridges in Holland in Operation Market Garden. In contrast to *Tora*, this film had a huge cast of internationally famous actors, including Dirk Bogarde, James Caan, Michael Caine, Sean Connery, Gene Hackman, Laurence Olivier, Ryan O'Neal, Robert Redford, and Maximilian Schell. By no means is its treatment of the failure even handed, for it pointedly exposes the way sheer ego and arrogance in the coordinator Lt. Browning (Bogarde) doom the endeavor. Very much in keeping with the post-Vietnam malaise, it examines a major loss from the later stages of a war we ultimately won.

While the next major retrospective World War II film, which celebrates the United States' role, did only modest box office business, Sam Fuller's *The Big Red One* (1980; restored by Richard Schickle, 1994) represents a decided turning away from post-Vietnam disillusionment in war films and a return to the heroic values of films made during the conflict. This highly autobiographical film follows an unnamed sergeant (Lee Marvin) and four men in his unit from Africa in 1942, Sicily, and Omaha Beach on D-Day, through France, Belgium, and ultimately to Czechoslovakia where they discover a concentration camp. Many of the familiar conventions of the war film appear (gruff, loving sergeant; untried soldiers) along with one that Fuller had introduced in *The Steel Helmet*, the way war grinds down innocent children, in this case a little boy discovered in the camp. Although he cannot speak when liberated by the heroes, prompted by the sergeant, he does take some food, and, for a moment, enjoys the companionship of his rescuer. But in one of the most heartbreaking scenes in all war films, having bonded with the sergeant at a kind of picnic, he dies as he's being carried on the sergeant's back, another child who dies as a result of war in Fuller's films.[19]

It's fascinating to view this film that turns aside entirely from Vietnam when one knows that Fuller died before being able to fulfill his desire to make a film about that war. The very first filmmaker to treat the subject of the hostilities in that area in *China Gate* (1957), he would certainly have offered a significant variation to the war film genre's conventions:

> I'd finished my own Vietnam protest, a terrific yarn called *The Rifle*. . . . The story was centered on an old M1 rifle, a World War II relic, which passed through the lives of my main characters, a legendary colonel with a death wish, a 14-year-old Viet Cong murderer, an insane French nun, and a crazed soldier who steals blood from the wounded. The movie would show the war from the perspective of the "little people" who are most affected by violence. My dream was to shoot the picture from the viewpoint of the rifle, in continuous ten-minute takes.

He described John Wayne's *Green Berets* (1968) as a "blundering movie. . . . Americans lost the real-life war because we couldn't comprehend Vietnam, its people, or its goals. We pursued our own aims, regardless of realities. So did John Wayne."[20]

Operation Desert Storm, Iraq, and the War on Terror

Conflict with Iraq began formally in 1990 as President George H. W. Bush initiated the Gulf War with Operation Desert Shield and Operation Desert Storm, an attack motivated by Saddam Hussein's incursion into Kuwait. The multinational assault resulted in Iraq's defeat and a cessation of hostilities early in 1991. Since the Gulf War ended so quickly, there was hardly time for a corpus of films to be greenlighted. Some television documentaries came out quickly after the invasion, but the first major films about the Gulf War appeared later: *Courage Under Fire* (1996), *Three Kings* (1999), and *Jarhead* (2005), discussed in Chapter 7. A period of political tensions ensued, unsettled most violently by Al-Qaeda's 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center, leading to the US invasion of Afghanistan and then Iraq in March 2003, justified by the never-substantiated claim that Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. It was followed swiftly by Hussein's fall from power in April and execution in December 2006.

The post-9/11 war in Iraq and Afghanistan has resulted in documentaries such as Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), which exposes the Bush administration's complex connection to Saudi Arabia and the Bin Laden family, and Charles Ferguson's *No End in Sight* (2007), another probing examination of the causes of the war; films about combat such as *American Soldiers* (2005), returning veterans, *Home of the Brave* (2006) and *Stop-Loss* (Kimberly Peirce, 2008); those from 2007 mentioned in the Introduction: *In the Valley of Elah*, *Grace is Gone*, and *Redacted*; and three films about 9/11, *The Guys* (2003), *United 93* (2006), and *World Trade Center* (2006). More will be said about films dealing with the Iraq War in Chapter 7. As will be seen, the changed nature of warfare in the Gulf and Iraq Wars and the War on Terror has affected the way some of the common conventions of the genre are used, specifically an increased emphasis on battles within civilian space, and the nature of combat, which so often now involves defending against suicide bombers and small groups of militants in cars and trucks.

A new kind of war film cycle appears in the remake of *The Manchurian Candidate* (2004), *Syriana* (2005), and *The Kingdom* (2007). We need

to see films in this group in relation to the concept introduced by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1961 when he warned of "the military-industrial complex":

> In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist. We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted. Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together.[21]

The films I put in a cycle of the military-industrial-complex conflict provide frightening demonstrations of how the huge corporations tied into or heavily dependent on the oil industry, which benefits from the United States' spending on war, are succeeding in a "disastrous rise" connected with their acquisition of international power.

The remake of *The Manchurian Candidate* keeps the basic plot device of the earlier film, programming someone to be an assassin, but updates it by making Raymond Shaw (Liev Schreiber) a veteran of the Gulf War. He becomes the nominee for vice-president, given the machinations of his mother Eleanor (Meryl Streep), who has arranged for scientists to implant a chip in him so that he becomes a conscienceless assassin who follows directions to kill unquestioningly. Ben Marco (Denzel Washington) also has a chip implanted in him to make him an assassin. Instead of being a communist, Eleanor is a United States senator working in conjunction with the Manchurian Corporation in order to take over the country. In fact, she is the ultimate force behind the Manchurian Corporation, which deals in oil and power. One scene at the Shaw home underscores the linkages as it shows a reception populated by corporate leaders, some of whom seem to be in on the ultimate plot. Much darker than the 1962 version, the remake indicates that Ben has probably killed people in the past. Unlike the original in which the assassin kills his mother and stepfather and then commits suicide, Ben kills both Raymond and Eleanor but is never charged because the Secret Service protects him.[22]

The extremely complicated plot of *Syriana* focuses on a CIA operative past his prime (George Clooney) being used by the government to aid it in killing a progressive Arab prince. The latter is undesirable to the government because he represents a change from the status quo

that supports the link of government and industry. At the end of the film both he and the operative die in a car bombing set up by the US government. *The Kingdom* begins with a suicide bombing killing a number of families all connected with a US corporate installation in Arabia. The particular significance of the link between the government and the corporation is never raised as an issue. Rather, the focus is on the successful efforts of Jamie Foxx and his team of investigators to root out the terrorists who killed the Americans.

While these war films display somewhat different kinds of conventions than those outlined thus far, each demonstrates what Eisenhower warned about in his speech. Still, the destruction in *Syriana* and *The Kingdom* shows the kinds of terrorist attacks and car bombings seen in actual war films about Iraq like *Home of the Brave*. All have done reasonably well at the box office domestically: *Candidate*, $65 million; *Syriana*, for which Clooney won the Oscar for Best Supporting Actor, $50.8 million; and *Kingdom*, $47 million. In contrast, actual combat films about the Iraq War have done poorly. *American Soldiers* had no release. Several had dismal grosses below $100,000: *Home of the Brave*, $51,708; *Grace is Gone*, $45,213; and *Redacted*, $65,388. Although the domestic gross of *In the Valley of Elah* was better, its mixture of combat and domestic crime investigation yielded only $6.7 million. In contrast, two of the three films about 9/11 have done quite well domestically: *United 93*, $41.383 million and *World Trade Center*, $70.278 million.

The fact-based comedy *Charlie Wilson's War* (Mike Nichols, 2007) has been the most successful film thus far to deal with United States foreign policy, making over $66 million domestically and over $31 million internationally. But unlike the other films, it takes place in the 1980s *before* the Gulf War begins. It focuses on the actions of Charlie Wilson, a Texas congressman, who is instrumental in supplying Afghanistan with weapons that will allow it to defeat the Russians whom they are fighting. Their success led to the expulsion of the Russians and a softening and change in that country's foreign policy and status, signaled most dramatically by the tearing down of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Wilson is played by Tom Hanks. Even though a hard-drinking womanizer, he is, nonetheless, once again the hero who helps the United States fight its enemies. In one sense, the film is a curious analog to *Saving Private Ryan* in that it looks back to a period when the United States was in a position to make positive changes in the world.[23]

During the period of the wars beginning in 1990, there have been many films that revisit a number of earlier wars retrospectively, many of them positively. These include the French and Indian Wars, *The Last*

of the Mohicans (1992); the American Revolution, *The Patriot* (2000); World War I, *Flyboys*; Vietnam, *We Were Soldiers* (2002), *Rescue Dawn* (2007); and Somalia, *Black Hawk Down* (2001). But by far the most significant revisiting of an earlier conflict has occurred with films about World War II: *Memphis Belle* (1990), *A Midnight Clear* (1992), *Saving Private Ryan*, *The Thin Red Line* (1998), *Pearl Harbor* (2001), *Hart's War* (2001), *Band of Brothers* (2001, the major HBO series co-produced by Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks), *To End All Wars*, and *The Great Raid* (2005). I will discuss *Flags of our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006) in Chapter 8. As I suggest in the next chapter, the reasons for the most recent return to World War II as a subject in the late 1990s in particular are complex, ranging from disillusionment with recent foreign policy debacles to, most profoundly, a desire to memorialize what Tom Brokaw calls "the Greatest Generation," those soldiers who fought in World War II, which is for many the last "good war" in which the United States engaged.

But even a cursory look at this list suggests that those retrospective war films dealing with the United States' earliest history and achieving independence, and those about US involvement in foreign wars that it wins, deserve consideration along the lines I've suggested throughout this chapter. They are made and released during a period when the wars in which the US is engaged have nothing like the support that existed for the wars depicted on screen. Significantly, even two of the films that deal with Vietnam have positive elements in them. *We Were Soldiers*, which focuses on the very first battle of the Vietnam War, emphasizes the nobility of both sides in the conflict and suggests that all the combatants are caught up in ways beyond their control in historical carnage played out on a battlefield that is indeed a level playing field. *Rescue Dawn* presents the true story of the escape of Dieter Dengler, a German-born US pilot, from a prison camp in Laos. The focus is not on the war itself but on individual heroism.