

A comment on Rules of Engagement

By Joseph Tanniru
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I went to see *Rules of Engagement* with a certain degree of trepidation. The film, directed by William Friedkin (*The French Connection*, *The Exorcist*, *To Live and Die in L.A.*), has been denounced by, among others, the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) for overt racism. Knowing the type of films Hollywood is capable of creating these days, I thought the charge quite plausible. The level to which this film plunges is, however, far below such chauvinist productions as *True Lies* or *Rising Sun*.

Artistically speaking, the film is worthless. (Its original story was dreamed up by James Webb, Secretary of the Navy under Reagan!) The plot is shallow and superficial, the characters without substance. Samuel Jackson plays Colonel Childers, a highly decorated Vietnam veteran who has just received command of a Marine division. He and "his men" are ordered to handle a protest at the American Embassy in Yemen, a Middle Eastern country bordering Saudi Arabia. After Childers arrives, the situation turns violent, and ends after Childers issues the command to fire on the Yemeni outside the embassy, including women and children.

The bulk of the film is occupied by Childers' court-martial, where he is defended by Hays Hodges, his fellow officer from Vietnam, played by Tommy Lee Jones. Hodges attempts to show that Childers was just a man doing his duty, and that his command was justified because the angry protestors were armed and were firing on Childers' troops. The US government attempts to place all blame on Childers, claiming that the only people firing were snipers. In the end, Childers is found innocent of all serious charges, and is revealed to be a "good guy" after all.

In the meantime, we are presented with a combination of American nationalism and Anti-Arab chauvinism. All the Yemeni are evil, it seems. During the development (if one can call it that) of the plot, it

becomes clear that Childers was completely justified in his actions. The protestors were really a frenzied and violent mob. A security tape of the incident (which is later burned by the National Security Advisor to bolster the government case) shows clearly that every demonstrator outside the embassy was armed, including children. They were all firing out of some irrational hatred of Americans. Whence this hatred comes we have no idea, but since even the children are consumed by it, we suspect that it is somehow engrained in the psyche of the Arab.

As the ADC points out, the portrayal of the Arab is dominated by stereotypes. They are the incomprehensible "Other," shouting untranslated slogans (presumably something on the order of "Death to all Americans") and employing automatic weapons. We briefly sympathize with the wounded and killed children, especially with a girl (10 years old?) who lost her leg during the incident. Later, however, this sympathy is "corrected." As Hodges, on his visit to Yemen, approaches her to ask her name, she shouts back with venomous spite, "Killer!" The last time we see her face is in a flashback to the shooting incident, where she is shown firing a handgun at the embassy with a mixture of hatred and bestiality.

It would be hard to list every way in which the Arab community of Yemen is vilified. Suffice it to point out the film corresponds perfectly (and in a pure form) to the stereotype dominant within the popular media: The Arab as Terrorist. In response, the ADC, a non-sectarian Arab-American organization, has organized numerous protests denouncing the film. "Rules of Engagement," they write, "can only be considered in the same light as other films whose *raison d'être* is to deliberately and systematically vilify an entire people, such as 'Birth of a Nation' and 'the Eternal Jew.'"

No chauvinism would be complete with merely the

denigration of another race. The "They" is always counterpoised to the "Us," which in this case is that ever present figment of the imagination—the American. Within a country so ethnically mixed as the United States, one would like to think that such exclusive national categories as American and non-American would lose their meaning. Yet, these divisions that place nation against nation in irreconcilable antinomy are necessary in modern society, as is amply demonstrated in *Rules of Engagement*.

The movie is filled with national symbolism. After rescuing the American ambassador from the raging Arab mob, and before ordering the ensuing massacre, Childers returns to rescue the American flag, that eternal symbol, the film would like us to believe, of freedom and justice. It is significant that the demonstrators, unable to contain their virulent anti-Americanism, fire at the flag as it is lowered. Indeed, as the film develops, we realize that it is not the violence of the crowd that is so terrible, but their *Anti-American sentiment*, which is, in the eyes of the ruling circles in the United State at least, the deadliest of deadly sins.

Of course, there is no attempt to analyze why the causes of these emotions, for there is no conceivable explanation for why such a benevolent and just institution as the United States government could be hated. (To be completely accurate, the US government actually plays something of a villain in the film, but only because it attacks Childers, who, as a member of the military, represents this same government in his own way. The critique of the government, insofar as it exists, is from the right.)

The nationalism expressed is much more subtle than mere flag idolatry, however, and is bound up with an ugly glorification of the lives and deeds of military officers. Little attention is given to the military rank and file, for they are merely "the men" of the officers. The latter, including Childers in the end, are valiant and courageous "warriors," bringing honor to the American nation. In the scenes depicting military action, the US troops are always attacked; they are never the aggressors. This includes the opening scene depicting Childers and Hodges fighting in the Vietnam War, one of the most clear-cut examples of US aggression in the twentieth century.

The film is wretched, but in its wretchedness says

something about the outlook and ambitions of the US ruling elite. The connection between storywriter Webb, a marine commander in Vietnam who spent six years in the 1970s defending a marine accused of war crimes, and Hollywood is particularly sinister. Friedkin has done nothing but hack-work for decades. Samuel L. Jackson and Tommy Lee Jones should simply be ashamed of themselves.

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