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 demonstator 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'etre 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.