

The Good Shepherd: Robert De Niro's portrait of the CIA

By Patrick Martin
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The Good Shepherd, directed by Robert De Niro, written by Eric Roth

Is it possible to make a truthful film about the history of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), one of the main foreign policy instruments of American imperialism, without addressing a single political issue, directly or indirectly? Robert De Niro has tried, and his effort, while serious, absorbing and certainly meticulous from the standpoint of craftsmanship, ultimately falls victim to this central contradiction.

The Good Shepherd has many things going for it: a topnotch and attractive cast (Matt Damon, Angelina Jolie, William Hurt, Alec Baldwin, John Turturro, Tammy Blanchard, Michael Gambon, Oleg Stefan, John Sessions, Billy Crudup, De Niro himself), great technical skill behind the scenes, a complex and literate script, and a director who demands something of the audience.

De Niro requires his audience to think, follow seemingly small details and stay with the story as it cuts back and forth between the film's "present"—1961, in the aftermath of the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba—and a series of flashbacks into the career of Edward Wilson (Damon), head of CIA counterintelligence, a fictional amalgam of James Angleton, Richard Bissell and other longtime CIA operatives.

The acting is memorable, particularly Damon, who is in nearly every scene of the film. His Wilson interacts with the world largely by looks, not words. In one critical scene, his pause and non-response amount to a death sentence for a woman he has never met. The pros and cons are spelled out and weighed, the decision made and communicated, in a way that demonstrates the awfulness of the event as effectively as a set speech.

The film traces the origins of the CIA in the World War II Office of Special Services, first established to coordinate espionage and counterintelligence against Nazi Germany. It examines the social background from which the initial cadres of the agency were drawn, upper-class graduates of Ivy League colleges, including Yale, where Wilson makes his intelligence debut, as a student supplying information on a pro-Nazi professor.

The film's plot revolves around one of the great Cold War debacles, the abortive US-backed invasion of Cuba in 1961 by right-wing exiles armed and trained by the CIA. The anti-Castro coup failed because the overwhelming majority of the Cuban people supported the new revolutionary regime and were willing to fight for it. But as portrayed in *The Good Shepherd*, the Bay of Pigs invasion was a fiasco only because Soviet intelligence succeeded in learning the location of the landing and tipped off the Cuban government in advance.

Flashbacks on Wilson's personal history and early career with the CIA are intertwined with his ongoing investigation into how the KGB learned that the invasion of Cuba would take place at the Bay of Pigs. This probe into a suspected leak becomes more intriguing when Wilson receives, from an unknown source, a photograph, evidently of a man and a woman, and an audiotape of their conversation, which appears to relate to the Cuban events.

The Good Shepherd is suffused with a dark and somber mood about the

functioning and even the very existence of the CIA. There is no triumphalism, no patriotic glorification—something which reflects, at least in part, a rejection of the "war on terror" hysterics of the Bush administration. Certainly, the most chilling sequence, in which Wilson/Damon directs the torture of a KGB defector, using the technique that today would be called waterboarding, is a deliberate effort to provoke revulsion.

These and numerous other scenes convey the gruesome and morally dubious methods intrinsic to the intelligence underworld. De Niro's spies are real people, and a far cry from the world of James Bond or Jason Bourne (the title character in Damon's commercially successful series of action films).

But overall, there is very little *political* understanding in evidence. The downside of the CIA is presented, first and foremost, as its effect on the functioning of the personnel of the agency, who live, as personified by Damon, emotionally stunted lives, largely cut off from normal human interaction even with their own families.

A distant second is the impact of the CIA and its conspiratorial methods on the functioning of American democracy at home, a problem raised only in the form of scattered hints, like a throwaway line from De Niro as General William Donovan, the legendary founder of the World War II OSS, the CIA's forerunner, or the cynical remark by another official about the supposed civilian oversight of the agency, "as if we would let them."

It is, of course, perfectly legitimate and reasonable for an artist to seek to illustrate the universal and political through the personal. Perhaps that was De Niro's intention here. But to focus on the personal to the exclusion of any consideration of broader issues can become stultifying. And in the case of the Central Intelligence Agency, one of the longest-running and most infamous criminal enterprises of modern history, this too-narrow focus amounts to closing one's eyes to the agency's victims.

One could not make a serious dramatic portrayal of the Holocaust by focusing solely on an examination of its impact on the emotional life of concentration camp guards. Their crimes no doubt had an effect on the perpetrators, but that doesn't take us very far. There are some crimes where "sympathy for the devil" is impossible. Such considerations would seem to apply to *The Good Shepherd*.

Nowhere in the film does De Niro touch on the principal impact of the CIA internationally: the destruction of hundreds of thousands of lives and the trampling on the democratic rights of (literally) hundreds of millions of people in Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America. His Guatemala is a country where the CIA organizes the overthrow of the government without a visible bloodbath. His Congo is an exotic locale for romance and spycraft, not a place of civil war and ruthless struggle for control of vital natural resources.

The only time the camera lingers over the bodies of victims of violence, it is the slain Cuban right-wingers shot down at the abortive Bay of Pigs

landing. There are no scenes of mass murder directed and supervised by The Agency, although many such episodes took place during the film's timeframe—Iran in 1953, Laos, Vietnam, the Philippines—as well as political subversion in Greece, Lebanon, Italy, France, Indonesia, Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic.

De Niro devoted enormous time to getting every period detail right, so that the film feels and looks like 1939, 1945, 1954 or 1961. He used the old Brooklyn Armory, built in 1901, for his interior shots of CIA offices in Washington (before the construction of the huge complex in Langley, Virginia, named after the first president Bush). His CIA operatives burn their paper using the same technique as the real CIA operatives of that time, thanks to the supervision of his technical consultant, former CIA Eastern European chief Milton Bearden.

But when De Niro, on rare occasions, shifts focus from the specific methods and techniques of the CIA to its larger purposes, the result is to whitewash the agency. Two cases in point: an early scene shows Wilson, in occupied Germany in 1945, interrogating a Nazi officer who wants a US passport to join relatives in Chicago, in return for providing information about the location of rocket scientists the US government wants to recruit. Wilson agrees to the deal, then tells an aide that once the Gestapo official supplies the information he should be “turned over to the Nazi hunters.”

In reality, the Cold War conflict with the Soviet Union quickly superseded the token Allied efforts at de-Nazification of Germany. Thousands of ex-Nazis, both scientists and spies, were recruited by the US government for work against the Soviet bloc. The chief of German military intelligence on the eastern front, Reinhard Gehlen, a mass murderer and war criminal, became an American asset and was ultimately installed as head of counterintelligence for the new West German government formed under US auspices.

There is similar distortion when the film turns to the best-known CIA intervention of the 1950s, the 1954 coup in Guatemala, when the left-nationalist elected government of Jacobo Arbenz Guzman came into conflict with US business interests. Arbenz was overthrown by a Guatemalan colonel, Carlos Castillo Armas, with an armed force of some 450 soldiers recruited and paid for by the CIA, and flown into the country under the auspices of the United States. The military regimes that ruled Guatemala after the coup carried out a bloody reign of terror that lasted more than 40 years, at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives.

In De Niro's portrayal, the alignment between the CIA coup and US business interests is the result of the personal corruption of the head of the agency (Hurt), whose secret bank account, courtesy of “Mayan Coffee” (standing in for United Fruit), is uncovered by Wilson. The counterintelligence chief goes to the FBI and ultimately forces his boss to resign.

The whole episode sounds a false note. What De Niro portrays as an aberration—defending the interests of American big business—is the central mission of the CIA. There is not a trace of such an understanding in *The Good Shepherd*. Instead, De Niro presents the agency's operatives as well-meaning individuals, the “guys on our side,” who are undone because of the morally compromised methods of the intelligence trade.

De Niro steeped himself in the details of spycraft, enlisted Bearden as a consultant, and won admiring applause from the OSS Society, an organization of veterans of the WWII-era intelligence service, at a special advance showing of the film in Washington, D.C. One review cited the gushing praise of the film by Richard Holbrooke, former US Ambassador to the United Nations in the Clinton administration, a veteran of US military/intelligence operations going back to Vietnam, who praised the film as accurate in “almost every incident.”

The *Washington Post's* Stephen Hunter, a self-proclaimed fan of US covert actions, wrote of the film, “It's not a tub-thumping, anti-CIA screed, I'm happy to report, but at the same time it's not a gung-ho

patriotic extravaganza about the moral certainty of our side.” Hunter suggests that De Niro is treating his audience with respect by allowing it to draw its own conclusions. Another interpretation seems more plausible: by depriving the audience of the information required to truly grasp the nature of the CIA's activities, De Niro, wittingly or not, has created a sophisticated cover-up.

Screenwriter Eric Roth began working on the script to *The Good Shepherd* as an attempt to adapt Norman Mailer's 1,300-page novel *Harlot's Ghost*. The script has been shopped around Hollywood for nearly a decade, a time during which Roth has been involved in a wide range of other films, from *The Postman* and *Forrest Gump* (for which he won an Oscar) to more critical and serious efforts like *The Insider* and *Munich*.

Roth originally hoped to have the late John Frankenheimer direct the film, and after his death agreed to adapt the script to De Niro's specifications, which unfortunately seem to have included narrowing the focus. De Niro told the Associated Press, referring to the issues facing the central character, Wilson/Damon, “I like it when you get the personal side. The personal toll I thought was, to me, interesting, and what I liked about the script when I first read it.”

Many critics have noted the parallels in structure between *The Good Shepherd* and *Godfather II*, the film by Francis Ford Coppola in which De Niro portrayed the young Vito Corleone. Coppola has an executive producer credit for *The Good Shepherd*, and De Niro has clearly emulated his directorial style in the film's pacing. Damon's character stands in for Al Pacino's Michael Corleone in *Godfather II*. In addition, the layer-by-layer unraveling of the Bay of Pigs audiotape pays homage to the plotline of Coppola's 1974 film *The Conversation*.

This last strand leads to the film's conclusion, which this reviewer found to be melodramatic and even ludicrous. After two hours of sparing no expense at verisimilitude, De Niro suddenly picks up his CIA counterintelligence chief, the man who knows the deepest, darkest secrets of the US government, and plunks him down in the middle of Leopoldville, wandering the streets of an African capital that was then (1961) the focus of Cold War intrigue, without so much as a bodyguard.

The film takes on an especially forced character in its last 15 minutes because De Niro is seeking to impose his vision of the material—“The personal toll I thought was, to me, interesting”—with unfortunate consequences for the credibility and intrinsic logic of the story. Wilson must be presented with a “Sophie's choice” between his family and his agency, and he chooses the agency, with calamitous consequences. But these are consequences, however tragic, only for a few individuals; the greater calamity, the worldwide oppression by American imperialism, for which the CIA serves as a murderous instrument to this day, is entirely outside the scope of *The Good Shepherd*.

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