

A talk given in San Diego, Berkeley, and Ann Arbor

Art, war and social revolution

By David Walsh
31 May 2016

Below is an edited version of a presentation given at San Diego State University, the University of California, Berkeley and the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor in April and May 2016.

A generation that has only known war

I would imagine that most of you here were born between 1990 and 2000, or perhaps 1985 and 2000. If you turn 20 in 2016, you would have been two at the time of the effort to impeach Bill Clinton through a manufactured sex scandal, four at the time of the hijacking of a national election by the Bush-Cheney forces, five by the time of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the invasion of Afghanistan, and seven or so at the time of the invasion of Iraq.

If you are 20, or even 25, the United States has been at war your entire conscious life. (I am somewhat arbitrarily taking 13 or 14 to be the age at which one becomes aware of the wider world, of political events.) For anyone born in 1988 or later, the US military has been embroiled in killing people *on a daily basis* his or her entire politically conscious life, with no end in sight. Quite the contrary.

In the category I just referred to, those born in the US from 1988 through 2003—i.e., those presently conscious of events, a total that obviously excludes the very young—there are some 65 million people.

Of course, one could take the first Gulf War in 1990-1991, the US assault on Iraq, as the event that truly opened the epoch of renewed imperialist militarism and neo-colonialism in which we still live. Some 104 million people were born from 1977 through 2003. Their, or your, conscious experience encompasses a quarter-century of war or near-war, covert operations, murderous sanctions, “black sites,” torture and apologies for torture, drone strikes—and threats of new and wider wars.

The Clinton administration intervened in dozens of countries during the 1990s, often in the guise of “humanitarian interventions.”

A partial list of those countries:

- * Iraq—both military intervention to “assist” the Kurds in northern Iraq, no-fly zones, bombing campaigns and devastating economic sanctions, which led to large-scale death and destruction;

- * Operations in many portions of the former Yugoslavia, including Operation Deliberate Force in 1995, the three-week bombing of the Bosnian Serb positions, and culminating in the devastating bombing of Serbia and Serb positions in Kosovo in 1999;

- * Somalia (Operation Restore Hope, 1992-1995)—an intervention that began under the first Bush administration; and

- * Haiti (Operation Uphold Democracy, 1994-1995)—20,000 US troops eventually deployed to restore Jean-Bertrand Aristide as president.

Then there are those operations launched by the Bush administration and continued by Obama:

- * October 2001 to the present: War in Afghanistan (Operation Enduring Freedom, etc.)

- * March 2003 to the present: War in Iraq (Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation New Dawn)

- Also under Bush: Yemen (2002), Philippines (2002); Côte d’Ivoire (2002); Liberia (2003); Georgia and Djibouti (2003); Haiti (2004); Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya (2004); Lebanon (2006); Somalia (2007); South Ossetia, Georgia (2008); Somalia (2011); Uganda (2011); Jordan (2012); Turkey (2012); Chad (2012); Mali (2013); South Korean Crisis (2013); and Cameroon (2015)

- * 2004 to the present: US drone strikes to aid the War in North-West Pakistan (thousands of deaths)

- * 2010 to the present: US drone strikes in Yemen (thousands of deaths)

- * 2011: Libya (Operation Odyssey Dawn)

- * 2011: Assassination of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan (Operation Neptune Spear)

- * 2014 to the present: American-led intervention in Syria

- * 2014 to the present: Intervention against ISIS

In 2004, Richard Grimmett, a specialist in international security with the foreign affairs, defense and trade division of the Congressional Research Service, wrote a document, “Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad, 1798–2004,” detailing each episode. Literary qualities aside, it is an impressive work. It takes Grimmett 7,816 words to describe US military operations abroad from 1798 through 1991. It takes him 7,476 words—nearly as many—to describe US military operations abroad *from 1992 through 2004* ! An orgy of US imperialist violence.

War as an explosive factor in American society

War, in fact, is an explosive factor in American society. Twenty-five years of unending war, militarist violence, aggression and verbal threats. That violence is communicated through the media, the entertainment business, in fact, through every pore of official society.

The Costs of War Project at Brown University has made certain estimates on the death and destruction in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan *only* since the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. (The US sanctions in the 1990s *alone* cost hundreds of thousands of Iraqi lives.)

The authors estimate that 370,000 people have died in direct war violence. Of those, approximately 210,000 are civilians.

A leading body that studies such things, the secretariat of the Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development, estimates *conservatively* that in contemporary conflicts there are four indirect deaths to every direct death (due to malnutrition, disease, neglect, stress, etc.). That would *conservatively* put the death toll from the wars since 2001 at between 1.5 and 2 million human beings.

Some 6,900 US soldiers have died in the wars. “New disability claims continue to pour into the Department of Veterans Affairs, with 970,000 disability claims registered as of 31 March 2014. Many deaths and injuries among US contractors have not been reported as required by law, but it is likely that at least 6,900 have been killed.” (The Costs of War Project)

As of 2014, 2.8 million veterans had served in only the first Gulf War and another 2.6 million in only the second Gulf War, but there are another

1.6 million veterans who have served in one of those conflicts as well as another. That adds up to 7 million veterans of “the Gulf Wars era,” 1990 to 2014. How many other human beings has that total affected? Spouses, children, parents, siblings. Twenty, thirty million or more.

There are the physically mutilated and the psychologically mutilated. Hundreds of thousands of veterans are affected with traumatic brain injury (TBI), and hundreds of thousands suffer from war-related post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

These have been wars fought overwhelmingly by the working class, by the impoverished, by young people from small towns, the inner cities, rural areas, often the most depressed and culturally backward regions. These are essentially “economic conscripts.” Recruitment rates in rural and exurban counties across the United States are well above the national average. In rural counties in Southern states, recruitment rates were more than 44 percent above the national average during the early 2000s.

The towns and cities with the highest death rates—ranked in a 2007 report—are:

- Valdosta, Georgia (126,305 Metropolitan area population in 2007)
- Kokomo, Indiana (100,877)
- Bismarck, North Dakota (101,138)
- Casper, Wyoming (70,401)
- Altoona, Pennsylvania (126,494)
- Mansfield, Ohio (127,010)
- Corvallis, Oregon (79,061)
- Cheyenne, Wyoming (85,384)
- Elizabethtown, Kentucky (110,878)
- Salisbury, Maryland (117,761)

Altoona was once a rail center; Kokomo is identified with the auto industry; Mansfield was home to Westinghouse and GM.

This is from a 2003 article in the *Austin [Texas] American-Statesman* (“Iraq war dead: a sacrifice of small towns”):

Karen Henry has two boys in Iraq. She spread photos on the Formica table of the Coahoma [a town of 900 in western Texas] Dairy Queen. ...

Karen graduated from Coahoma High School nearly 30 years ago. She works at an oil-field service company.

“There wasn’t anything here.” She was explaining why two of her three boys enlisted. (The third, Murphy, had asthma; otherwise he might be in Iraq, too.) Her kids would hang out in front of the Town and Country convenience store until they “got run off.”

They were “bored, and they knew there was no place to get a job and that college was too expensive.”

And then, she said, “90 percent of them start drinking and partying.”

The local police came to a party Steven was attending. He raced out a back door. “He was walking back to his cousin’s house, and he stayed up all night,” Karen Henry recalled. “And that was it. He wanted more out of life.”

Steven went down I-20 to the recruiting station in Midland and enlisted.

This is the stuff of terrible human tragedy.

The impact of 25 years of war and social decline on everyday life in America is staggering. As a recent WSWS perspective noted: “This society has become so brutalized that, according to one report published last week, 200,000 Americans have been murdered in the last 15 years alone. The United States is a country at war, not just with the Middle East, but with itself.”

From the *Wall Street Journal*: “The US represents less than 5 percent of

the 7.3 billion global population but accounted for 31 percent of global mass shooters during the period from 1966 to 2012, more than any other country, [one expert said], adding that he defines a mass shooter as one who killed at least four victims. The 90 killers who carried out mass shootings in the U.S. amounted to five times as many as the next highest country, the Philippines, according to his research.” There was an average of one shooting per week, on a school or college campus, in 2015, according to ABC News.

Even though the wars are not spoken about, by any of the leading candidates, including Bernie Sanders, that does not mean they have no impact on popular consciousness and behavior. The ruling elite and their complacent, subservient media seem to think that because an issue is not framed neatly in a 30-second item on the evening news, it does not exist. This is self-delusion. The wars are gnawing away at American society.

War is now the “normal.” It is an element of everyday life. And no one is prepared for what is to come. The drive to war against Iran, Russia and China has implications that are unimaginable.

There are no foreign bases permanently located on US soil. However, the American military *officially* acknowledges some 800 bases around the world, in some 80 countries, “including Aruba and Australia, Bahrain and Bulgaria, Colombia, Kenya, and Qatar, among many other places. Although few Americans realize it, the United States likely has more bases in foreign lands than any other people, nation, or empire in history.”

David Vine, *Base Nation*, writes, “The Pentagon’s overseas presence is actually even larger. There are US troops or other military personnel in about 160 foreign countries and territories. ... And don’t forget the Navy’s 11 aircraft carriers. Each should be considered a kind of floating base, or as the Navy tellingly refers to them, ‘four and a half acres of sovereign US territory.’ Finally, above the seas, one finds a growing military presence in space.”

Great Britain has seven bases and France five in former colonies. Russia has eight in former Soviet republics. Japan has a base in Djibouti, alongside US and French bases. South Korea, India, Chile, Turkey and Israel each reportedly have at least one foreign base. There are also reports that China may be seeking its first base overseas. “In total,” Vine writes, “these countries probably have about 30 installations abroad, meaning that the United States has approximately 95 [actually more than 96] percent of the world’s foreign bases.” To speak of Russian and Chinese imperialism under these conditions is absurd.

The consequences for American society and culture

What have been the overall consequences already for American society and culture of decades of continuous warfare? It would take far more than this one talk to adequately answer that.

I hope some of the facts and figures I’ve presented so far are suggestive. But when one is discussing the character and quality of everyday life, its profound deterioration over time, and in the context of a discussion of art, such facts and figures remain a little cold.

It is precisely at this moment, ironically, that one wishes one could point to a film or novel, a drama or series of paintings, that somehow captured this historical transformation in concrete imagery, that provided a key to understanding the essential truth about the past several decades, or at least critical aspects of it. One of our chief difficulties—and criticisms—today is that there has been no such work, or very, very little of it.

Speaking very broadly, the past quarter-century has seen the emergence of a profoundly brutalized and brutalizing culture in the US. Never in history has so much degradation (or trivia) been combined with such advanced technologies. There is hardly an anti-social or psychotic impulse that has not made its way to the public by the most up-to-date means—and hardly one that has not found academic or intellectual justification, no less! Human beings in the future will look back on all this with astonishment.

War has become perpetual. In the 20th century by contrast, wars were shorter, horrible, they were exceptions to the rule. They were considered a terrible waste of human resources, horribly destructive. My father's generation fought in World War II, my grandfather's in World War I. Men (and they were mostly men) got out of the military, and they never wanted to put on a uniform again. Often they didn't want to talk about the entire experience.

War films and novels

I'd like to speak briefly about a number of films and novels that stand out for their treatment of the wars of the 20th century. I have neither the expertise nor the time to speak about other art forms, but I believe the same general trends would show themselves.

When one thinks of World War I, certain films come to mind, especially Jean Renoir's *Grand Illusion* from 1937 (although for the most part I will be discussing American films and books), *All Quiet on the Western Front* (both Erich Maria Remarque's 1929 novel and Lewis Milestone's 1930 film version), Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929—also turned into films in 1932, directed by Frank Borzage, and 1957, directed by Charles Vidor) and, much later, Stanley Kubrick's *Paths of Glory* (1957).

In Renoir's *Grand Illusion*, a couple of French soldiers escape from a prisoner of war camp. They take refuge in a farmhouse belonging to a German woman, who has lost her husband and three brothers at battles that she describes bitterly as "our greatest victories." The French soldier and the German widow fall in love, but the situation conspires against them.

This theme of the fraternization between "enemies," of the commonality of interests among the various peoples, as opposed to those organizing and running the mass killing, is a major theme of World War I films and books in particular. It countered the ferocious nationalism and chauvinism that accompanied the outbreak of the mass slaughter of the war in 1914.

All Quiet on the Western Front tells the story of a young German soldier, who is urged on by his patriotic schoolteacher to join the army. The book is about the horrible psychological and physical suffering caused by the First World War. The soldiers die over a few hundred yards of ground. At one point, the hero stabs an enemy soldier in hand-to-hand combat, and watches him die, agonizingly, over the course of several hours.

Eventually, in Remarque's novel, the young German addresses the soldier's corpse: "But now, for the first time, I see you are a man like me. I thought of your hand-grenades, of your bayonet, of your rifle; now I see your wife and your face and our fellowship. Forgive me, comrade. We always see it too late. Why do they never tell us that you are poor devils like us, that your mothers are just as anxious as ours, and that we have the same fear of death, and the same dying and the same agony—Forgive me, comrade; how could you be my enemy? ... Take twenty years of my life, comrade, and stand up—take more, for I do not know what I can even attempt to do with it now."

The Nazis burned the book after they came to power in 1933.

This effort to "humanize" the enemy, to endow him or her with familiar features, to recognize that he or she is like "us," stands in opposition to the current trend in most Hollywood films, to turn Arabs, Russians, Chinese, Iranians, into subhumans—to inure the population to the possibility of killing massive numbers of them.

World War II, *From Here to Eternity*

World War II was ideologically sold to the population as a war against fascism, and there was a powerful democratic sentiment felt by many of those who fought, but it remained an imperialist war, a war fought between the great powers for the division and redivision of the world. The anti-fascist, anti-totalitarian theme found expression in many films, not

only made in the immediate war years, but extending into the subsequent decade and into other genres (Westerns, film noir, science fiction).

There are innumerable memorable films from this era. Some that come to mind: Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940); Alfred Hitchcock's *Foreign Correspondent* (1940) and *Saboteur* (1942); Frank Borzage's *Three Comrades* (1938) and *The Mortal Storm* (1940); Fritz Lang's *Man Hunt* (1941) and *Hangmen Also Die!* (1943); John Huston's *Across the Pacific* (1942); Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca* (1942); Raoul Walsh's *Desperate Journey* (1942); John Ford's *They Were Expendable* (1945); William Wyler's *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946); Henry King's *Twelve O'Clock High* (1949); Fred Zinnemann's *From Here to Eternity* (1953) and many others.

Even many of the propaganda films made during the war, including *Why We Fight* (a series of seven films, mostly directed by Frank Capra), were done with some artistry. The series includes one devoted to the sacrifices of the Soviet people.

Among the novels, several stand out, including Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), set in the war in the South Pacific. Mailer treats the class system in the military, the power structures that affect every aspect of military life, along with a host of other themes. He was a socialist at the time, and briefly around the edges of the Trotskyist movement.

Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* took the author from 1953 to 1961 to write. Heller coined a phrase that sums up a situation from which an individual cannot escape because of contradictory rules established by those on top.

I would like to spend a few minutes on *From Here to Eternity*, James Jones's novel, published in 1951, and Fred Zinnemann's 1953 film, with Montgomery Clift, Burt Lancaster, Deborah Kerr, Donna Reed and Frank Sinatra.

Jones's 850-page novel is uneven, overwritten in many parts, but it contains fascinating and revealing elements, which tell us a good deal about America and the American soldier.

The book centers on a US army infantry company stationed in Hawaii on the eve of the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. The principal figure is Robert E. Lee Prewitt (played by Clift in the film), the son of a Harlan County coal miner, who is incredibly stubborn in his principles and conduct. His superiors only half-jokingly refer to him time and time again as the "Bolshevik." Sgt. Milt Warden (Lancaster) is another central character. The book radiates with hatred of the officer class, almost universally treated as selfish, incompetent and lazy, or fascistic.

Extremely brutal events occur in *From Here to Eternity*, including the beating of one soldier to death by guards in the stockade.

James Jones (1921-1977) wrote *From Here to Eternity*, *Some Came Running* (1957), *The Thin Red Line* (1962)—all of which were made into interesting films—along with a number of other novels and stories.

Zinnemann's film version of *From Here to Eternity* has many remarkable features, and it captures certain of the novel's themes. The principal actors all do serious work. However, the US military and the Production Code Office censored the script and insisted on significant changes. The chief officer-bully is forced to resign in the film, as the army's Inspector General comes in and clears out all the "bad apples." Zinnemann, in his autobiography, described the scene in which Prewitt's chief tormentor is called on the carpet "the worst moment in the film, resembling a [US military] recruiting short" and added, "It makes me sick every time I see it."

In any event, I would like to cite a few passages from Jones's *From Here to Eternity* that might provide the flavor of the novel.

About a third of the way through the novel, Prewitt does some soul searching, in response to the hard time he is being given by his superiors (because he won't toe the line in various ways). He thinks to himself:

But he had always believed in fighting for the underdog, against the top dog. ... So that he had gone right on, unable to stop believing that if the Communists were the underdog in Spain then he believed in fighting for the Communists in Spain; but that if the Communists were the top dog back home in Russia and the (what would you call them in Russia? the traitors, I guess) traitors were the bottom dog, then he believed in fighting for the traitors and against the Communists. He believed in fighting for the Jews in Germany, and against the Jews in Wall Street and Hollywood. And if the Capitalists were top dog in America and the proletariat the underdog, then he believed in fighting for the proletariat against the Capitalists. This too-ingrained-to-be-forgotten philosophy of life of his had led him, a Southerner, to believe in fighting for the Negroes against the Whites everywhere, because the Negroes were nowhere the top dog, at least as yet.

Prewitt goes on:

But where, you ask, does it put you politically? What are your politics? ... [I]f we had to answer it, truthfully, under oath (let us suppose that Mr [Martin] Dies and his Un-American Activities Committee called you up...), then I would say that politically you are a sort of super arch-revolutionary, the kind that made the Revolution in Russia and that the Communists are killing now, a sort of perfect criminal type, very dangerous, a mad dog that loves underdogs.

A little later in the novel, a chilling discussion takes place among a number of officers, in which one young brigadier general, Sam Slater, essentially proclaims the need for military dictatorship in the US: "I, and men like me, are forced to assume the responsibility of governing. If organized society and civilization as we know it is to continue at all, not only must there be a consolidation of power but there must be a complete unquestioned control to head it."

Slater goes on: "But when that day comes, we must have utterly complete control, as they over there [in Germany, Japan, USSR] already have complete control. Up to now, it has been handled by the great corporations like Ford and General Motors and US Steel and Standard Oil. ... But now consolidation is the watchword, and the corporations are not powerful enough to bring it off—even if they were willing to consolidate, which they are not. Only the military can consolidate them under one central control."

In *The Thin Red Line*, set on Guadalcanal, in the Solomon Islands, during the fierce fighting between American and Japanese forces in November 1942, Jones treats the official claims about the war with considerable disdain. It is a dark novel, at times rather cynical, but often liberating in its lack of cant.

Early on, Sgt. Edward Welsh (as Jones explains, the reincarnation of the Warden character in *From Here to Eternity*) mutters to himself shortly after his unit has landed on Guadalcanal:

'Property. Property. All for property.' Because that was what it was; what it was all about. One man's property, or another man's. One nation's, or another nation's. It had all been done, and was being done, for property. One nation wanted, felt it needed, probably did need, more property; and the only way to get it was to take it away from those other nations who had already laid claim to it. There just wasn't any more unclaimed property on this planet, that was all. And that was all it was.

In all of Jones's novels about World War II, including *Whistle* (1978), left unfinished at the time of his death, the more perceptive soldiers instinctively sense something foul about the war, something horribly wrong with the official picture. They are outraged or depressed, often tormented by their experiences. Without having a worked-out alternative view, or fully grasping the realities, of course, they don't believe in any of the claims being made about the great struggle for "democracy."

In *Whistle*, for example, a central character, a wounded soldier in a hospital tells another, "For example, I can see how in ten years from now all these people who are fighting each other so desperately now will be back at peace and friendly. And then they'll be making business deals and treaties with each other. And everybody getting rich. Just like nothing had happened. But all those guys who are dead, young guys like me, guys like you, will still be dead."

I'd like to make a brief comment on *The Best Years of Our Lives*. This three-hour film about veterans returning home after World War II was very popular. Astonishingly, it sold 55 million tickets in the US, at a time when the American population numbered 141 million, and the adult population 106 million! Even today, remarkably, after all the blockbusters in recent decades, it remains the sixth-most-attended film in British history. It obviously struck a chord.

Wyler's film, perhaps above all, is a story about men reconnecting with women after war. There is the deep psychological trauma of individuals who have been deprived of love and find it hard to re-establish relationships. This was a mass phenomenon: returning home, getting out of uniform.

Fred Derry (played by Dana Andrews), just out of the army, wants nothing more than to get into and stay in civilian clothes. In one scene, his status-seeking wife (Virginia Mayo) asks him to wear his uniform when they go out in the evening. He hates the idea.

Derry leaves behind with his father, Pat Derry, a bunch of papers, which includes citations for his medals, written by high-ranking officials in the military. The Andrews character wants nothing to do with them.

This exchange occurs:

Pat Derry: You forgot these, son.

Fred Derry: Oh, I don't want 'em, Pop.

Pat Derry: What are they?

Fred Derry: Fancy words that don't mean anything. You can throw 'em away.

Pat Derry: Say, these are citations for your medals. Why, Freddy, you never showed them to us.

Fred Derry: Those things came in the packages with K rations [individual daily combat food ration introduced by the US army during World War II].

The Korean War: "I was wrong...this war is going to last a long time."

American films about the Korean War tend to be bleak, perhaps because it was the first war US imperialism lost, or at least in which it was fought to a standstill. In many of the films, US forces are taking, or have just taken a beating. There is a lot of anti-communist rubbish and patriotism, of course, but the overall mood is one of gloom and disillusionment.

One thinks of Samuel Fuller's *The Steel Helmet* (1951)—characterized by Fuller's usual dynamism and emotionalism; Joseph H. Lewis's *Retreat, Hell!* (1952)—in which a genuine US retreat is called a "tactical withdrawal" or some such phrase; Mark Robson's *The Bridges at Toko-Ri* (1954)—a somewhat turgid film, but William Holden is memorable as a lawyer forced back into service as a bomber pilot who dies an

ignominious death in a ditch; Anthony Mann's *Men in War* (1959) in which I want to spend a moment describing; *Pork Chop Hill* (1959), with Gregory Peck, Rip Torn and Martin Landau, in which a meaningless, bloody battle is fought while peace talks are going on; Denis Sanders's *War Hunt* (1961)—the US military makes use of a psychopath as a "special ops" commando; and Burt Topper's *War is Hell* (1963)—a megalomaniacal sergeant sends his men into an enemy bunker, neglecting to tell them that a ceasefire has been declared.

Toward the close of Mann's *Men in War*, Platoon commander Lieutenant Benson (Robert Ryan) muses forlornly, "I was wrong...this war is going to last a long time." When the film opens, Benson's exhausted, depleted unit has been cut off from the rest of the US forces, who have just been "clobbered" and lost 400 men in a single battle. Benson's group encounters cynical Sergeant "Montana" (Aldo Ray) and a shell-shocked colonel (Robert Keith) who is unable to speak.

For the sergeant, "the war is over." He's a brutal type, without compassion or feeling. The Robert Ryan character comments at one point, "God help us if it takes your kind to win this war." Almost everyone is killed by the end, including the colonel (who awakes from his catatonic state only to rush into the fighting and almost immediately get killed), except for the sergeant and the lieutenant. In the final scene, Ryan reads the names of the dead, while the Ray character throws their medals down the side of a hill.

There is nothing here that would encourage patriotism or national morale.

The Cold War: "You can't fight in here. This is the war room!"

The Cold War produced many works, including a great deal of reactionary rubbish. But there were certain films that stood out. Stanley Kubrick directed *Paths of Glory* (1957), as noted before, a scathing indictment of the First World War. Kirk Douglas plays a French officer whose men refuse to continue a suicidal attack. They then face a court-martial. It is a powerful and disturbing film.

Kubrick, of course, also made *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), a satire about a lunatic US Air Force general who launches a first nuclear strike against the Soviet Union. Peter Sellers memorably plays three parts, including US president Merkin Muffley and the ex-Nazi, wheelchair-bound Dr. Strangelove. The film is an absurdist reaction to the terrors of the time. Who can forget President Muffley chastising the Soviet ambassador and another US air force general for wrestling in the American military's *sanctum sanctorum*: "You can't fight in here. This is the war room!" A sort of nervous hysteria prevails.

Other films of the time included Stanley Kramer's *On the Beach* (1959), based on Nevil Shute's novel, about a group of people in Australia, in the aftermath of World War III, who are waiting for the cloud of deadly nuclear fallout to arrive and exterminate them; John Frankenheimer's *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), a delirious, bewildering film about the brainwashing of the son of a right-wing politician unwittingly enlisted in a "communist conspiracy," with Angela Lansbury as a monstrous political mother-wife; Frankenheimer's *Seven Days in May* (1964), with Burt Lancaster and Kirk Douglas, about an attempted military coup; Sidney Lumet's *Fail Safe* (1964), from a screenplay co-written by former blacklisted writer Walter Bernstein, about a Cold War nuclear crisis.

I would not go out too far on the limb artistically with any of these films. But they reflected tremendous anxiety about the global (or specifically American) state of affairs, and they tackled the questions directly, or at least as directly as the circumstances allowed.

Vietnam

With the Vietnam War, all hell broke loose, so to speak. Generally speaking, the Vietnam-era films are critical of the war, of the military, of the establishment. Of course, they also reflect the contradictions and

limitations of the radical period. Robert Altman's (1970), set during the Korean War, in fact, but obviously directed at the Vietnam War, the American military and the Nixon administration, established the tone. The film was written by Ring Lardner Jr., another former Hollywood blacklist victim.

One could point to Hal Ashby's *Coming Home* (1978), Sidney J. Furie's *The Boys in Company C* (1978), Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978), Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), Oliver Stone's *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1986), Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), Brian de Palma's *Casualties of War* (1989) and others.

Those films are overwhelmingly negative about the war, about the military. They come out of, in a number of cases, the anti-war movement. These are honest, often confused films, none of them great works of art, but with some extraordinary moments. They exude the spirit of rebellion. Those who take military rules and pronouncements seriously are deluded or mad ...

In discussing these various war films, we are not looking back nostalgically to some golden age—there never was a golden age. America is a very dark country in many ways, the major imperialist power of the past century.

How do we look at films?

How do we look at these films, how do we look at present-day films? This raises the question: What is art? What is our approach in evaluating art?

For Marxists, art is ultimately a means by which we cognize, make sense of reality, it is no less concerned with truth than the objective sciences, although in a different way obviously.

We criticize or reject didacticism, preaching in art, because in a didactic work the artist has a prosaic, cut and dried content and the artistic shape is merely an ornament, something extraneous. Such work does not make a deep or enduring impression; it lacks spontaneity, life.

Art largely shows, it doesn't explain—except in unusual cases. Filmmakers think in images, they dramatize their conceptions. The conceptions are embodied in the relationships, situations and imagery.

This doesn't mean, of course, that the artist has no opinions or ideas. He or she works through images, feelings play an important role, but feelings attached to thought. The artist doesn't assume that the audience is a quivering mass of emotionalism to be manipulated.

The best films I've mentioned tended to look at American society critically, with the military viewed as one component of the social order. There was a greater awareness of the society's faults, weaknesses. A more pronounced realism predominated.

And it isn't simply a matter of the explicitly political level of consciousness. One watches *The Best Years of Our Lives*, *From Here to Eternity*, *They Were Expendable* and others, or read the Jones and Mailer novels, and they are not necessarily works of genius, but they give a sense of the American people, or at least in certain important aspects. There is a much closer relationship in those films and novels to everyday life, especially the distrust of the military brass, of big shots in general.

In one of the opening scenes of *The Best Years of Our Lives*, one of those big shots basically elbows the Dana Andrews character out of the way at an airline counter. (Self-importantly: "I arranged to have my tickets here. My name is Gibbons. George H Gibbons.") The class issues are laid out at the very outset.

The enormous distance of filmmaking today, commercial or independent, from the people, the way it actually thinks and feels, is so striking, and I'm speaking, frankly, even of those films and television series that make a special effort to present "ordinary people."

The connection to the people was much more organic, despite the social, profit-driven character of Hollywood. It was taken for granted that

the rich were less interesting, selfish, lazy, self-involved, that the big dramas lay in the working class neighborhoods or workplaces, or in the more intriguing sections of the middle class, whether past or present—or in the drama of science, or war, or political struggles of the past.

Of course, there were the performers themselves, the human material. They didn't have to pretend so hard to be "average," they came out of the hardships of the Depression and the war, and they represented something.

The anti-communist purges, the changes in American economic life, the immense social polarization of recent decades, the decades of ideological reaction, all this has had a great impact. Revitalized filmmaking will come out of a new period of struggles, out of defeats and hard-fought lessons, out of painful and exhilarating experiences.

Where is the work that has captured the horror of the "war on terror"?

Now, we've had 25 years of war ... by now, you would think a great work would have appeared.

Where is the film or novel (or drama or poem or painting) that has captured for an entire generation the horror of the "war on terror"? This is a central issue in this talk, a central problem ...

The McCarthy period in the early 1950s was a time of intense repression, but, in many respects, better film work was being done. The problem is not just repression, or even primarily repression. American capitalism's most powerful weapon is not repression, but the threat of ostracism, the power of conformism. And this itself is largely a product of the absence of a political, social alternative, a mass-based, anti-capitalist opposition. So that all the countervailing forces act on the filmmakers. Their powers of resistance are weakened.

No one has been able to capture the past quarter-century because none of the artists understand the times through which they themselves have lived or are oriented to that sort of broad historical and social representation. It's a problem and I'll return to it.

I want to say a few words about what has been produced in recent decades.

Studies of post-September 2001 cinema, for example, are obliged to confront such tendencies as "porno-sadism" and "torture porn," in the form of films consumed by unrestrained indulgence in bloody revenge fantasies. Entire franchises have been built out of inflicting pain and terror.

Of course, all this did not begin on September 11. The decay and decline of American bourgeois society and its culture has been a protracted process. The mid- to late 1970s witnessed a proliferation of "vigilante" films (*Death Wish*, et al.), which already signified a diseased mood emerging in sections of the affluent middle class. Moreover, the "action hero" who took on an army of terrorists or criminals, who somehow single-handedly—and fantastically—overcame America's decline on the world stage was a film phenomenon that grew more and more prominent in the 1980s and 1990s.

But the terrorist attacks of September 11 gave a license, a legitimacy to the public expression of genuinely depraved sentiments that had been long accumulating.

In "A Culture at the End of its Rope," written in June 2004, in response to Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill*, Vol. 2, we made some points that I think still stand up:

This is a film whose subject matter is torturing and murdering and bloody revenge. It has the word "Kill," as an imperative [a command], in its title. Remove the pointless dialogue, the self-conscious references to countless other films, the various camera and editing gimmicks, the heaps of self-satisfaction and self-aggrandizement, and what remains? A work about a group of

psychopaths eliminating one another. The first speech of the film contains the word "sadism." ...

We will be told by some that Tarantino is merely reflecting the violence in the society around him, or even that he is holding it up to criticism. Nonsense. *Kill Bill* is not a critique of sadistic bullying, it revels in it. A calculated, manipulative (and orgasmic) heaping up of violent acts cannot possibly constitute a rejection or a critique.

It is not necessary to repeat or extend these comments in regard to every example of violence, sadism and cruelty in American popular culture over the past two decades, in film, television, music, video games and so forth.

But one more example: Fox Television's "24" which first went on the air in November 2001, created by right-wing Bush supporters, pioneered the favorable representation of torture.

Brian Finney, in *Terrorized: How the War on Terror Affected American Culture and Society*, writes "The Parents Television Council calculated that 24 showed 67 scenes of torture during its first five seasons, about one incident of torture every other episode, or 12 times a day in fictional time.

"Torture became at least an intermittent feature on such shows as *The Unit*, *Lost*, *JAG*, *Alias*, and *Battlestar Galactica*, and in numerous hit movies such as *The Passion of the Christ*, *Casino Royale*, and *The Dark Knight* ... The Parents Television Council researched the number of scenes of torture shown on prime time television. Between 1995 and 2001 there were 110 scenes, an average of 16 a year. Between 2002 and 2005 the number increased to 624, an average of 156 scenes a year, and between 2006 and 2007 there were 212 scenes, averaging 106 a year." (Brian Finney,

We have written extensively about such despicable works as *Zero Dark Thirty*, the purported story of the decade-long search for Osama bin Laden. Not only did Kathryn Bigelow and Mark Boal create a new film sub-genre, the "art torture film," they did it, as journalist Seymour Hersh has revealed, on the basis of a pack of lies.

Films and novels on the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan

Dozens of films have been made about 9/11 or have been inspired by the subsequent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, ranging from the openly reactionary and bloodthirsty to the more thoughtful and critical.

These are a few of the films treating the "war on terror," the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan:

Jarhead (2005), *Syriana* (2005), *The Situation* (2005), *Home of the Brave* (2006), *Death of a President* (2006), *United 93* (2006) *Battle for Haditha* (2007), *Grace is Gone* (2007), *Charlie Wilson's War* (2007), *In the Valley of Elah* (2007), *Lions for Lambs* (2007), *Redacted* (2007), *Rendition* (2007), *Stop-Loss* (2008), *W.* (2008), *War, Inc.* (2008), *Body of Lies* (2008), *Traitor* (2008), *The Hurt Locker* (2009), *Brothers* (2009), *Green Zone* (2010), *American Sniper* (2014). One could add numerous others that obviously reference 9/11 (*War of the Worlds*, 2005) or the invasion of Iraq, including James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009).

There are numerous pointed works here (*Syriana*, *In the Valley of Elah*, *Redacted*, *Rendition*, *The Situation*, *Death of a President* and *Battle for Haditha*), as well as some truly lamentable ones or worse (*Charlie Wilson's War*, *Lions for Lambs*, *Traitor*, *The Hurt Locker* and *American Sniper*).

In my view, British director Nick Broomfield's *Battle for Haditha*—about a massacre carried out by US marines in November 2005—is the strongest of the lot, for its treatment of both the Iraqi civilians and US troops as victims of imperialist war. The final dreamlike sequence, in which an American marine takes the hand of a small Iraqi girl who survived the attack, is deeply moving.

Redacted, directed by Brian De Palma, recounts in fictional form the rape and murders carried out by US soldiers in March 2006 in

Mahmudiyah, Iraq. One author writes, “*Redacted* concludes of real-life still photographs of dead Iraqis in a sequence called ‘Collateral Damage,’ images that were denied to the American public in the drive to mythologise the war and the reasons why it was being fought.” (Terence McSweeney, *The ‘War on Terror’ and American Film: 9/11 Frames Per Second*)

As we noted in 2010, there are numerous “pointed films ... but if one may say it, these are primarily ‘small-bore’ works, works that take up elements, specific aspects of the situation. If one compares them, as a body, with *Apocalypse Now*, or even *Platoon*, for all its histrionics—the latter were movies that attempted to make a broad statement about American involvement in Vietnam, to paint it as a crime, as an imperialist crime. This element is largely missing today.”

Dozens and dozens of novels have appeared that treat the “war on terror” or the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, some of them written by veterans of those conflicts.

Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* (2005) and John Updike’s *Terrorist* (2006), both shallow and contrived novels, essentially adopt the establishment point of view.

Lea Carpenter’s *Eleven Days* (2013) is a deplorable work. It celebrates the efforts of US Special Operations Forces, America’s death squads. Carpenter is a descendant of the original du Pont in America. Her father served in US Army Intelligence in China and Burma. She was previously the deputy publisher of the *Paris Review*, the literary magazine. She is married to the former managing director of Goldman Sachs, specializing in mergers and acquisitions.

In her novel, the hero, a member of the Special Operations Forces, thinks to himself, after an intervention against Al Qaeda: “Did these contemporary war stories lack the grandeur and arc of their predecessors? Sadr City was not the Somme. That was like comparing *Mad Max* to *Madame Bovary*. But they were alike in this simple fact: men were killing other men across a small space to save the lives of millions of others half a world away. Historians would eventually take their pick of the facts and look at the larger questions, but the first wave of understanding would come from the guys who were there.”

Saving the world for Goldman Sachs. This is what passes for the American intelligentsia.

Redeployment, a collection of stories about the Iraq war, by Phil Klay, is one of the best known books written by an Iraqi war veteran. Klay enlisted in the Marines and served as a Public Affairs Officer in the surge in Iraq in 2008.

In “After Action Report,” one of the newer members of the narrator’s unit shoots an Iraqi teenager who apparently has grabbed an AK-47. This soldier, “like the rest of us, had actually been trained to fire a rifle, and he’d been trained on man-shaped targets. Only difference between those and the kid’s silhouette would have been the kid was smaller. Instinct took over. He shot the kid three times before he hit the ground. Can’t miss at that range. The kid’s mother ran out to try to pull her son back into the house. She came just in time to see bits of him blow out of his shoulders.”

Kevin Powers, the author of *The Yellow Birds*, also served in Iraq, as a machine gunner in Mosul and Tal Afar. His novel centers on the efforts of its narrator—a US soldier in Iraq—to prevent the death of a younger, fellow private, an effort that fails. The book expresses considerable disgust and anger. At one point, the narrator is considering suicide:

Or should I have said that I wanted to die, not in the sense of wanting to throw myself off of that train bridge over there, but more like wanting to be asleep forever because there isn’t any making up for killing women or even watching women get killed, or for that matter killing men and shooting them in the back and shooting them

with more times than necessary. It actually kill them and it was like just trying to kill everything you saw sometimes because it felt like there was acid seeping down into your soul and then your soul is gone and knowing from being taught your whole life that there is no making up for what you are doing ...

Ben Fountain’s *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk*, is essentially a satirical work. The novel, a film version of which is coming out directed by Ang Lee, is not so much a novel about Iraq (Fountain is not a veteran) as it is a sharp look at phony patriotism, hypocritical religiosity and corporate greed in Bush’s Texas. The sentiments are legitimate enough, but the targets are fairly easy ones at this point in history. In the end, despite its decent intentions, the book is a little too light-hearted and “soft.”

One comes across in Fountain’s novel the only reference in *any of the novels* to a possible ulterior motive on the part of the US authorities. The central character, Billy Lynn, is home and talking to his sister. She says: “Then let me ask you this, do you guys believe in the war? Like is it good, legit, are we doing the right thing? Or is it all really just about the oil?” Billy replies, “You know I don’t know that,” and, later, “I don’t think anybody knows what we’re doing over there.” That’s it, the only discussion of what the US is doing in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Disparate as they are, these latter novels or stories share certain features. None of them discuss the history of the region or the broader motives for American military intervention. Each prides itself on immediacy and immersing the reader in that immediacy. The various writers may step back occasionally to reflect on individual moral issues, or the debilitating impact of the war on their respective central characters, but never to consider the driving forces of the war itself. Not once. No one makes a genuinely profound critique of the society that produces these horrible wars, or ties them to capitalism.

Is it possible to do artistic justice to events as complex and momentous as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan when one has little or no grasp of their broader significance? Such an approach has an influence on the way in which a given writer treats human psychology and the relationships between people.

The conceptions on the whole are limited. The language tends to be flat, “even-handed,” largely non-committal, matching the writers’ attitude to the war itself.

These novels and stories are efforts at realism, but they evade one of the greatest challenges a fiction writer faces, that of providing historical realism, a general picture of a society and its contradictory parts and an overall sense of the character of the times. In the almost complete absence of that, the movement of individuals inevitably has a flattened, reduced quality. People move about, but only for the most immediate reasons. What is driving them in a more profound sense?

No one is taking on the problems head-on, no one has artistically captured the last quarter century.

Where do some of the difficulties come from?

Where do some of the current artistic difficulties come from?

The unpreparedness of the artists is a matter of concern for our movement. The artistic representation of life is vital to the education of the working class, and this education is our central task.

The anti-communist purges, the decades of political reaction, the increasing indifference of large sections of the upper-middle class to the conditions of the mass of the population—all these have had their impact.

There are many issues, including occupational hazards, so to speak. Art lags behind events at the best of times. But there is a big problem today with the conception of art itself.

I want to refer in particular to the predominance of postmodernism in

recent decades, in various forms. A portion of my generation became cynical, complacent or pessimistic, or all three, and eventually regretted missing out on the big money on Wall Street and elsewhere. While these individuals were protesting in the 1960s and 1970s, others were already getting rich. They later turned against everything they had once believed in and adopted everything they opposed.

The postmodernists declared the end of “grand narratives” or “master narratives.” What this really meant was the end to a search for fundamental causes; instead they refer to countless factors, none of them given precedence. There is no underlying truth to be discovered, simply one’s impressions, one’s narrative. This has played a disastrous role, associated as it is with the abandonment of any sense of revolutionary alternative and with accommodation, concealed behind obscurantist language, to the status quo.

By grand or master narratives the postmodernists had in mind, above all, Marxism and its “narrative” of the class struggle. Coherent theories of historical development, which often involve social emancipation, were outlawed. These grand narratives were to be replaced, as one commentator puts it, by “mini-narratives” or “stories that explain small practices, local events, rather than large scale universal or global concepts. Mini-narratives are always situational, provisional, contingent, temporary and make no claim to universality, truth, reason or stability.”

This is one of the original statements of the postmodern case, by Jean-François Lyotard: “We no longer have recourse to the grand narratives—we can resort neither to the dialectic of Spirit nor even to the emancipation of humanity as a validation for postmodern scientific discourse. But... the little narrative [*petit récit*] remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention.” (*The Postmodern Condition*, [1984 in English, originally 1979])

The influences here are Nietzsche, Heidegger and other irrationalist thinkers. This represents not only an attack on Marxism, but on the Enlightenment and the ability to cognize the world in a rational, objective fashion. One is left with fragments and the celebration of fragments.

The art and film of the past several decades has been littered with a multiplicity of “little narratives.” In the case of the artistic treatment of the ongoing wars and the drive to war, this “littleness” jibes all too neatly with the filmmakers’ and novelists’ political and historical reticence, their essential intellectual submission to the official account of the “war on terror” and America’s “humanitarian interventions.”

More than that, the “littleness” justifies and sustains a concern with oneself. The recourse to “mini-narratives” and “small practices” is almost inevitably bound up with the adoption of identity politics, the obsession with one’s race, gender and sexual orientation. The world is incomprehensible, overwhelming, unchangeable, all I know *and can know* is my immediate, “local” piece of it, my particular narrative. In short, myself. This sort of outlook inevitably encourages selfishness and self-involvement, tedious individualism, which are other characteristics of recent art and film.

Conclusion

The great novelist Leo Tolstoy—Leon Trotsky pointed out in an obituary—had contributed to the 1905 Revolution in Russia although he was no revolutionary. “Everything that Tolstoy stated publicly” about the cruelty, irrationality and dishonesty of tsarist Russia “in thousands of ways ... seeped into the minds of the laboring masses ... And the word became deed.”

This is our conception too, that art has the ability to alter the thinking and feeling of masses of human beings. To have that sort of influence, however, the artist must know something important about the world, about society and history. To do something one must be something, as Goethe observed.

Art brings into play the subjective impressions and imagination of the

artist. But these impressions and this imagination carry weight and endure, in the end, only in so far as they correspond—in accordance with art’s distinctive mirrors—to life and reality as they are.

We are not dictating this state of affairs—but it is a fact that only the art with something to say about the decisive questions facing masses of people, however indirectly or poetically, will be of great interest in the years to come. Self-absorption and social indifference will be looked on with as much astonishment as contempt.

Clearly, we have entered a new stage of development. The economic and social crisis, along with relentless wars and militarist violence, are fueling the discontent of masses of people and blowing up—or threatening to blow up—political arrangements and set-ups around the globe, including in the US.

We know Bernie Sanders and his type. There is nothing of socialism here. He is proposing mild reforms that portions of the ruling elite itself favor. He supports the ongoing wars with certain criticisms, he approves of the drone strikes. He is an advocate of economic nationalism, lining up the working class here with the American ruling elite against China and other rivals of US imperialism. The essence of socialism is internationalism, the international unity of the working class.

But the Sanders campaign and the response it has evoked are objectively significant. It has scandalized the media and the political establishment, it has disrupted the dominant narrative. In a country supposedly dominated by anti-socialism, anti-communism, someone who advertises himself as a socialist is suddenly the most popular politician in America, and among the young, by a wide margin.

The two-party system in the US has been fatally undermined because it is no longer possible to contain the vast, unbearable social contradictions within that structure. Millions have already drawn conclusions about the present system. The task of our party is to transform an unconscious historical process into a conscious revolutionary movement. The Socialist Equality Party is running candidates, Jerry White and Niles Niemuth, for president and vice president, for that reason.

When we discuss the difficulties of the recent decades, it’s not a matter of painting a gloomy picture. To a certain extent, an inevitable clearing of the decks has taken place. Tendencies that pretended to be socialist or left-wing have been revealed for what they are. Organizations that claim to represent the working class have been exposed in the eyes of millions. The same goes for many cultural figures and trends.

These decades of cultural backwardness have also created the conditions for their opposite, for an “epidemic” within the broader population and culture of humanity, compassion and social criticism. We are witnessing an immense movement to the left. We have no illusions about the confusion that exists, but it should also be clear that the course millions have set out on leads inevitably to revolutionary struggles. The elementary needs and interests of masses of human beings will bring them into a life-and-death confrontation with the ruling class.

The social and economic crisis will not be resolved quickly or easily. There will be opportunity for art to reflect on and reveal the truth about the immensely complex, sometimes confusing and enormously intense experiences that vast numbers of people will pass through.

Our concern, again, is with the political and cultural development of the working class. We need a new art committed to telling the truth at all costs. This new art will be incompatible “with pessimism, with skepticism, and with all the other forms of spiritual collapse” (Trotsky) and will have an unlimited, creative belief in humanity and its future. That’s what we’re dedicated to in the Socialist Equality Party and on the *World Socialist Web Site*. We encourage you to join that effort.

To contact the WSW and the

Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>

