

National Security Cinema: The Shocking New Evidence of Government Control in Hollywood —How the US military and CIA go about their propaganda operations

By Charles Bogle
27 February 2020

In *National Security Cinema: The Shocking New Evidence of Government Control in Hollywood* (2017), Dr. Matthew Alford and Tom Secker offer convincing proof that the US Department of Defense, CIA and FBI have for decades used various means to manipulate content and even deny production of certain Hollywood projects, often using “national security” as a pretext to censor film and television. The real aim of these operations, according to the authors, is to advance “violent, American-centric solutions to international problems based on twisted readings of history.”

Alford is a Teaching Fellow at the University of Bath in England. He is also the author of *Reel Power: Hollywood Cinema and American Supremacy* (2010). Secker is a private researcher who runs spyculture.com—an online archive about government involvement in the entertainment industry.

Their book argues that the US military has had an influential relationship with Hollywood products since its earliest days. Alford and Secker point out that the Home Guard (reserve forces outside the National Guard) provided tanks for “the infamous feature film [D.W. Griffith’s] *Birth of a Nation* (1915), in which black slaves revolt against their masters, before the Ku Klux Klan ride in on horseback to save the day.”

Using the Freedom of Information Act, the authors gained access to files that exposed the extent of government censorship in films between 1911 and 2017. The DOD (Department of Defense, or Pentagon) provided military equipment and “advice,” and even allowed members of the military to make appearances, in exchange for some degree of control over the content of 814 films.

The authors continue, “If we include the 1,133 TV titles in our count, the number of screen entertainment products supported by the DOD leaps to 1,947. If we are to include the individual episodes for each title on long-running shows like *24*, *Homeland*, and *NCIS*, as well as the influence of other major organisations like the FBI, CIA and White House then it becomes clear that the national security state has supported thousands of products.”

Alford and Secker offer the *Transformer* movie franchise (2007-2018 so far, most of it directed by Michael Bay) as an example of how the DOD reinforces its “national security” interests by using different “under the table” methods of influencing the making of what was (and still is) considered to be pure entertainment.

Normally, filmmakers have to send drafts of the script to the DOD along with their request for material support. Not so with the makers of *Transformers*. The DOD paid the filmmakers to gain “very early influence over the scripts” by giving them the most military assistance in

filmmaking history, e.g., “twelve types of Air Force aircraft and troops from four different bases.” The second *Transformers* film was provided with \$150m F-22 fighters.

The authors rightly conclude that the *Transformers* franchise is anything but “apolitical,” and is, in fact, an example of what’s come to be known as “war pornography.” The unstated but intentional message to the audience is to “trust in officialdom” to “bring ‘em home” from foreign wars and invasions, no matter the number of human beings, American or otherwise, soldier or civilian, who are killed in the process.

When the authors turn to investigating the CIA’s influences on movies, they work from available facts and information in regard to three different eras: 1943-1965, 1966-1986 and 1986 to the present. While the CIA has censored or interfered with far fewer movies, its repressive methods and means, fittingly, are even more insidious.

During the immediate postwar period, officials of the newly formed CIA worked, according to Alford and Secker, “to ensure that Hollywood films did not depict them in any form.” Meanwhile, the agency, from its establishment, was busy “recruiting assets within the highest levels of the film industry and using them to spy on Hollywood and to add and remove material from movie scripts.”

The film versions of George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1954, John Halas and Joy Batchelor) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1956, Michael Anderson) exemplify the kind of movies that the CIA would be expected to censor. Indeed, film scholars, our authors point out, have long been aware that both adaptations “were directly affected by the CIA.” In the case of *Animal Farm*, the changes to the film’s ending were designed to encourage revolts against “communist dictatorships,” i.e., the various Stalinist regimes in the USSR and Eastern Europe, “ironically just as, in the real world,” Alford and Secker point out, “the CIA was overthrowing the democratically elected governments in Iran and Guatemala and launching operations against Sukarno’s independence government in Indonesia.”

The CIA discovered the effectiveness of working through agents—or Hollywood figures who would act as agents—during the Cold War period. As an example, the authors reveal that Luigi Luraschi, the head of censorship at Paramount Studios, regularly contacted “an anonymous individual” at the CIA to inform him of Paramount’s ability and willingness to alter films to conform to US government interests.

Among the many Paramount movies from which scenes were added or deleted—intended to improve the image of American society—include the apparently innocuous *Sangaree* (Edward Ludwig), *The Caddy* (Norman Taurog) and *Houdini* (George Marshall), all released in 1953, and

Strategic Air Command (Anthony Mann), from 1955. The latter of a number of Hollywood performers who have, in one way or another, changed to ensure that America did not appear as “a lot of trigger-happy warmongering people.”

In 1961 the CIA suffered its “first high profile failure” during the attempted invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs, an operation aimed at overthrowing the Castro government. One of the CIA’s responses to the debacle was to turn to movies to improve its image. Nowhere was this more apparent than in *Thunderball* (Terence Young, 1965), the James Bond film based on the novel by Ian Fleming (a friend of CIA director Allen Dulles), featuring a number of positive references to the agency, and the first movie with a likable CIA character, Felix Leiter (Rik Van Nutter).

1966-1986: Richard Helms, who began working in intelligence in 1943 and who served as CIA director from 1966-1973, presided over what appeared to be a less intrusive relationship with Hollywood. Alford and Secker ask, “But was all as it seemed?”

Two films from this period—*Topaz* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1969) and *Three Days of the Condor* (Sydney Pollack, 1975)—portrayed the CIA as a ruthless intelligence agency that sent “murderous villains,” i.e., CIA agents, out into the public. The authors hypothesize that the agency may have welcomed the “more menacing” image that these and other films presented. They write that if there really was “tacit CIA approval for the *Condor* script, it would suggest that the CIA was actually at ease with being represented in such threatening terms. The final scene of the film rationalises the CIA’s criminal activity, as ultimately it is only the Agency that appears able to protect the flow of oil that is vital to the nation’s survival.”

Alford and Secker point out that Helms, who was dismissed as CIA chief by President Richard Nixon in early 1973 (due in part to Helms’s refusal to help cover up the developing Watergate scandal), spoke with star Robert Redford “for hours” on the set of *Condor* in 1975.

The authors’ notion that the CIA was deliberately cultivating a “tough-guy” image is probably correct, but providing at least a brief history of Nixon’s firing of Helms and the surrounding developments, including the state of “the flow of oil,” would have strengthened their arguments and enlightened the reader.

1986-present: *Top Gun* (Tony Scott, 1986) proved to be a successful promotional film for the US Navy—in the year following the movie’s release, “Navy recruitment figures saw a spike of 16,000, and enlistment for naval aviators jumped 500 percent.” This success, according to Alford and Secker, caused the CIA to change its means of manipulating Hollywood. In fact, the CIA was taking advantage of a reactionary political and cultural atmosphere, one of whose central events was the collapse of the Eastern European Stalinist regimes and the dissolution of the Soviet Union between 1989 and 1991.

After building a relationship with author espionage-thriller writer Tom Clancy, the CIA allowed adaptations of two Clancy products, *Patriot Games* (1992) and *Mission Impossible* (1996), to be the first movies filmed at the CIA’s Langley headquarters in two decades.

Other celebrity links quickly followed, giving the CIA control over the development of a number of films. In his capacity as CIA’s Entertainment Liaison Officer (ELO), Chase Brandon, a 25-year veteran of CIA operations and cousin of Hollywood star Tommy Lee Jones, helped give the spy agency influence over the production of a number of films, such as *The Bourne Identity* (Doug Liman, 2002), *The Sum of All Fears* (Phil Alden Robinson, 2002—also based on a Clancy Cold War potboiler) and *The Recruit* (Roger Donaldson, 2003). Brandon’s role as ghostwriter of the last film has been verified. *The Recruit*, as the authors note, is intended to counter political concerns, such as the CIA’s apparent failure to predict the 9/11 attacks, and to promote the Agency’s “number one priority, terrorism.”

Perhaps the most surprising and disgraceful of the authors’ findings is

the latter of a number of Hollywood performers who have, in one way or another, shilled for the CIA and the US military. Robert De Niro (who had left-wing parents and should know better), Tom Cruise, Dan Aykroyd, Dean Cain, Will Smith, Claire Danes, Kevin Bacon, Patrick Stewart and Mike Myers are among those who have publicly visited Langley headquarters. “George Clooney and Angelina Jolie have worked on films with the CIA.” Ben Affleck, a friend of Rwandan dictator Paul Kagame, and star in the aforementioned CIA and DOD-assisted *The Sum of All Fears*, told an interviewer that “Hollywood is probably full of CIA agents.”

A “Case Studies” section allows the authors to scrutinize more closely the influence of the military-intelligence apparatus on 14 contemporary films in different genres, including James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009); Mike Nichols’s *Charlie Wilson’s War* (2007); Robert Zemeckis’s *Contact* (1997); Terry George’s *Hotel Rwanda* (2004); Seth Rogen-Evan Goldberg’s *The Interview* (2014); *The Kingdom* (2007) and *Lone Survivor* (2013), both directed by Peter Berg; William Friedkin’s *Rules of Engagement* (2000); and Paul Greengrass’s *United 93* (2006).

(The WWSWS, without of course knowing the specific role of the military and CIA in every case, sharply criticized each of the films on this list that we reviewed.)

A detailed examination of these films brings to light the fact that most of them promote a common underlying ideology, that “American military supremacy is fundamentally benevolent.”

In the case of *Charlie Wilson’s War*, the CIA advanced this ideology by deleting scenes from the script that portrayed Soviet goodwill during their occupation of Afghanistan, e.g., in one of several scenes removed from the script, a “maverick CIA operative” described Russian soldiers gathering Afghan refugees together in a semi-circle and teaching them how to read and write. *Iron Man* (2008) follows a familiar Hollywood plot line to prove the benevolence of American domination. Initially, Tony Stark (Robert Downey Jr.) is a stereotypically rich playboy, but his capture and imprisonment change him almost instantaneously into a heroic figure who, as Iron Man, uses sophisticated equipment to kill “generic Muslim terrorists,” just as the Pentagon was doing. The US Air Force rewarded the filmmakers by providing aircraft and airmen as extras, along with script and technical advice. Alford and Secker observe that “Air Force Captain Christian Hodge, the Defense Department’s project officer for the production, commented that the ‘Air Force is going to come off looking like rock stars.’” The Case Studies section concludes with a consideration of the relationship between various government departments and agencies, especially the CIA, and the work of Clancy and directors Oliver Stone and Paul Verhoeven.

While the authors note that Clancy is hardly a “laudable figure politically,” the Hollywood versions of his novels removed whatever anti-establishment elements they contained, and shifted them in the direction of misleading “people about real events and political dynamics while portraying the security state as the only answer to a dangerous and hostile world.”

Alford and Secker rather generously refer to Verhoeven’s “politically subversive trio of movies”—the sci-fi trilogy of *Robocop*, *Total Recall*, and *Starship Troopers*. The latter film, according to Verhoeven, got past the censors “because nobody [at Sony Pictures] ever saw it,” due to the fact that Sony was turning over management “every three or four months.”

Veteran filmmaker Oliver Stone had no such luck. After the release of *Snowden*, about whistleblower Edward Snowden, Stone spoke of his inability to find American financing for the movie, according to the authors, his “first major political movie in 21 years.” Stone commented, “It’s a very strange thing to do [a story about] an American man, and not be able to finance this movie in America.”

Stone faced censorship from multiple US government departments and

agencies as well as a dry well when looking for American financing of any movie that was not sympathetic to US imperialist policies.

At times, the authors fail to bring enough historical background to their statements and assertions, although a valuable Endnotes concludes the book. The critical subject matter, about which the American public knows next to nothing, deserves an even larger study.

Overall, *National Security Cinema: The Shocking New Evidence of Government Control in Hollywood* offers a clearly written presentation of a Hollywood industry and government departments and agencies that are, indeed, intent on delivering more and more “war propaganda.” Until they are stopped, “we will,” to quote the authors, “continue to live and die in a military-industrial nightmare.”

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