

# What Should a War Movie Do?

Since Vietnam, many war films have lost their critical edge, preferring to engage with the experience of war rather than its politics.

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1 In the year I was born, 1967, the most respected newsman in America was Walter  
2 Cronkite, the most recognizable soldier was General William Westmoreland, and the  
3 media was staffed with journalists like David Halberstam, Neil Sheehan, and Michael  
4 Herr, who'd reported extensively on the ground in Vietnam and contested  
5 Westmoreland's rosy assessments about the "success" of the war effort—a judgment  
6 that Cronkite would ratify by pronouncing the war a "**stalemate**" in 1968. These  
7 reporters had a hard won sense that war was not to be celebrated, that Vietnam wasn't a  
8 character-building experience, designed to turn the soft, post-war generation into the  
9 soldiers their fathers had been. Rather, war was something the government tended to lie  
10 about with **impunity**. The adults in my life all seemed to know what the Vietnam War  
11 was about, but none of them wanted to tell me. The movies of that era were the adult  
12 voices that helped me understand the paralyzing silence when my older cousin dropped  
13 the phrase "My Lai" into a conversation, and they gave me some idea as to why even my  
14 father, a veteran who was the son of a decorated WWI hero, thought Vietnam was  
15 unnecessary.

16  
17 "I'm anti-war, but I'm pro-the people forced to engage with it," director Kathryn  
18 Bigelow told *Time* magazine in 2013 about *The Hurt Locker* and its follow-up, *Zero Dark*  
19 *Thirty*, a dramatic recreation of the hunt for Osama Bin Laden. This formulation—paired  
20 with the cliché "there's no politics in the trenches," which Bigelow cites in other  
21 interviews—would prove to be the rule, not the exception, for war films of the early  
22 twenty-first century. Hate the sin but not the sinner; support the troops, on screen and  
23 off.

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25 The war films of the 1970s and 1980s—headlined by classics like *Apocalypse*  
26 *Now* and *Full Metal Jacket*—were critical riffs on the arrogance and madness of the  
27 solitary American hero. They were themselves reactions against the type of violent,  
28 solitary, self-assured gunslingers who'd ruled the range in Hollywood Westerns for  
29 decades. In Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*, the character Joker reverts to an  
30 impression of John Wayne when he wishes to mock the **jingoism** and **futility** of the  
31 American war effort. Wayne was a well-known supporter of the war in Vietnam, and his  
32 1968 film *The Green Berets* was widely panned for what the critic Roger Ebert called its  
33 clichéd attempt to depict Vietnam "in terms of cowboys and Indians"—proof to Kubrick  
34 and many others of just how out of touch the men of Wayne's generation and mindset  
35 were with the realities of Vietnam  
36 Meanwhile, *M\*A\*S\*H* (1970)—a Vietnam-era film that took place during the Korean  
37 War—featured comic anti-heroes like Hawkeye and Trapper John, iconoclastic surgeons  
38 who were engaged with the price of violence, rather than its benefits. In the film's  
39 closing frames, their friend Duke imagines returning home to civilian life and nearly  
40 bolts from the operating theater. These heroes would rather hang out with their pals  
41 than fight. The same could be said for the small town, blue-collar protagonists in *The*  
42 *Deer Hunter* who deploy to Vietnam. The brotherhood of soldiers had also been a  
43 powerful trope in earlier WWII war films like *The Great Escape* (1963). But in Vietnam-  
44 era films, the protagonists in *The Deer Hunter* are friends *before* they ever go to war; in

Deadlocked,  
no progress  
can be made

Without  
punishment

Loud  
patriotism

ineffective

45 Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986), a group of soldiers is riven by personal and political  
46 conflicts. Brotherhood isn't forged by combat; instead, it's destroyed by war.

47  
48 By the 1990s, the cultural consensus represented by the Vietnam-era movies began to  
49 shift. For those who'd never liked these films' skeptical critique of military power, the  
50 1991 Persian Gulf War offered a chance to revise the story. .. Robert Zemeckis's  
51 blockbuster *Forrest Gump* became one of the first successful movies since *The Green*  
52 *Berets* to view the Vietnam War through a positive, aspirational lens. The character of  
53 Forrest is the **apothecosis** of traditional, martial values—values which remain  
54 unquestioned, even as the world begins to shatter around him. "Don't ever let anybody  
55 tell you they're better than you, Forrest," his mother instructs him not long after he  
56 learns he was named after his ancestor, a Confederate general and member of the Ku  
57 Klux Klan. "Did you hear what I said, Forrest? You're the same as everybody else." It's  
58 an odd thing to say to a young, well-off Southern white boy in the 1950s, but that's the  
59 point: Forrest is the same as everybody else, so long as he doesn't ask the questions  
60 asked by previous Vietnam-era movies, where characters argue over the causes and  
61 purpose of the war. Toward the end of *Full Metal Jacket*, for instance, one soldier asserts  
62 that a comrade has died for the cause of freedom."... During the Vietnam sequences at  
63 the heart of *Forrest Gump*, Forrest quietly does his duty, fighting the enemy, writing  
64 letters home to his unfaithful, war-protesting girlfriend, and he is rewarded, in the end,  
65 with the Medal of Honor. It's an **apolitical**, sanitized version of war, a version of the  
66 earnest, idealized GIs who appeared in bestsellers from the same era like *Band of*  
67 *Brothers* (1992) and *Flags of Our Fathers* (2000).

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70 The veterans I know don't think of war like this. In 2006, I embedded with a company  
71 of combat engineers in Iraq; for them, blowing up bombs was serious business, not an  
72 opportunity for self-expression. When *The Hurt Locker* came out a few years later, the  
73 movie's John Wayne-style hero, a reckless, blowhard bomb defuser named Sergeant  
74 James, amused the soldiers. "You don't have to be a hero to get rid of an IED," one of them  
75 told me back in 2006, "All you do is put a charge on top, back off, and blow it up."

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77 But this kind of hero persisted into the next decade: It was good for the box office and  
78 good, it seemed, for America's morale. Clint Eastwood's 2014 film *American Sniper*,  
79 based on the life of Chris Kyle, a decorated Navy SEAL who served four tours in the Iraq  
80 War, took the single-man theory of war established by *The Hurt Locker* to a bombastic  
81 level. The casts of Peter Berg's *The Lone Survivor* (2013) and Michael Bay's recent *13*  
82 *Hours: The Secret Soldiers of Benghazi*—both directors have made a career out of these  
83 kinds of tough-guy "true story" films—are composed of nearly interchangeable great  
84 men of war: bearded, gruff, devoted husbands who call their wives with an impressive  
85 regularity. Chris Kyle's death at the hands of another veteran makes his personal life a  
86 touchy subject, but in private, you'll find very few veterans, at least among the ones I  
87 have talked to, who express much fondness for the self-serving way *American*  
88 *Sniper* emphasizes Kyle's personal awesomeness. "Doesn't anybody know how arrogant  
89 that guy was?" one asked me recently, after a few beers.

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91 Narratives are always more powerful when they have the courage of their convictions,  
92 even if those convictions elide facts that might unsettle or disturb its audience. Even if  
93 they remind me of the same convictions that make it so easy for civilians like us to start  
94 wars in the first place: Don't ever let anybody tell you they're better than you, America.  
95 Did you hear what I said, America? You're the same as everybody else.

Ideal  
example

Not political