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Vietnam's latter-day heroes.

A certain legend named John Rambo (minus the "John" — legends need only one name) tops 'em all in the myth department, however. His premiere in *First Blood* (1982) made him a victim of police brutality — a cute twist on anti-war protesters. As a result, he turns into the same unstoppable force he was in Vietnam turned against an America where he has no place.

He retreats into the woods, uses his green beret training to take on and outsmart hundreds of cops and national guard, and eventually returns to the small town for revenge upon the sheriff. The outsider wronged by society is a fairly sturdy character in legend, especially when he returns for revenge. But *First Blood* looks mild compared to its offspring.

In *Rambo*, which Sylvester Stallone co-wrote with James G. Cameron (of *The Terminator*), all the cards are on the table. Early on, the film states that Rambo's of "Indian-German descent — a helluva combination." Especially if you're trying to brew up a mythic warrior — part survivalist, part Beowulf. His ex-commanding officer Trautman calls him a "pure fighting machine with only a desire to win a war somebody else lost." When he takes on the MIA mission with orders not to "engage the enemy," it's a hearty joke for the audience. It's impossible to imagine him NOT in a war — working at a factory or a restaurant aren't for this demi-god. His philosophy for his kind of work — "you gotta become war."

Stallone and Cameron even pile on layers of bombastic malarkey over the framework of their barebones plot. When going "home" to Vietnam via parachute, he gets hung up by a cord outside the helicopter, which he cuts through with his huge, gleaming knife — chopping his own unwanted umbilical cord to be born again. He's even more otherworldly because Vietnam, which equals the world's worst

place in this film, is where this "fighting machine" was truly "born". "What you choose to call hell," says Trautman, "he calls home."

The American killing machine in the form of Rambo even transcends his own form. When going through his paces, he actually becomes the elements. He leaps out of pools and rivers. He becomes part of a bank of clay, he drops silently from trees, and is propelled from fireballs when attacked. What the plot doesn't do, the camera does — it worships his knife, crossbow, and machine guns with fetish-like close-ups while saving room for loving shots of his most spectacular weapon of all — the reknowned hyperbolic he-man body. That just about covers all the necessary requirements for legend.



**I**n these films, the only special effect to rival the stunts and explosions is the magic they play with reality. They turn the mess into an American victory. They claim to be "anti-establishment" as far as politicians are concerned but their scripts read like a Ronald Reagan wet dream. They make the Vietnamese helpless in their own country and the Americans into the great guerilla fighters. And that's just the beginning of the reality disappearing act.

The MIA films handily erase the presence of blacks among the American troops. In combat flashbacks and prison camp scenes *maybe* one in ten American soldiers is black. None of the MIA's they rescue are black. But over 60 per cent of the American combat troops which got shot at were made up of black men and boys — mostly boys. These aren't the first films to play down the sacrifice and slaughter of those men in order to pander to the juicy demographics of the white film goer, but it doesn't do much for reality or history, either.

These hawkishly pro-American intervention films are also being made by a lot of people whose necks weren't on the line during the war. For all the USA-boosting going on here, you wouldn't know that Ted Kotcheff, the director of both *First Blood* and *Uncommon Valor*, is a Canadian, as is David Morrell, the man who created the character Rambo. *Rambo's* director is also a Canuck hawk. And Sylvester Stallone, the actor and writer who climaxes Rambo with the tear-choked lines — "Hate my country? I'd die for it! I want what every guy who came over here and spilled his guts wants. . . for our country to love us as much as we love it!" — *that* Sylvester Stallone expressed his gung-ho love by avoiding the draft during the real war by working as a girls' athletic coach at a Swiss private school. He also put in time as an acting student and a sometime porn movie actor.

To some American Vietnam veterans, Stallone's newfound patriotism is too much to take. "He apparently feels that he can represent all vets but we don't like that," says Eduardo Cohen, a spokesperson for the Veteran's Speakers Alliance, which has organized pickets of California theatres showing the film. "He doesn't know what we went through."

"We, too, were brainwashed with similiar propaganda before the Vietnam war," says Cohen. "When we got to Vietnam we found that it wasn't like a John Wayne movie."

So did the people already living there. But they may as well have been Indians in a John Wayne cowboy movie for all the care these movies exhibit for the Vietnamese people. Once again, the country becomes the backdrop for American suffering, American triumph, and American stories. In each film there are two types of Vietnamese: noble assistants (one reason the U.S. was over there in the first place) and yellow horde (the other reason). Both types are amply killed in battle.

*Rambo* takes this good-race/bad-race split to an almost pornographic pitch. The only "good" Vietnamese Rambo sees on his mission is a woman guerilla fighter who gets blasted in the back not a half-minute after she and Rambo soul kiss. The only reason she's good, I suppose, is her use of the English language. The Yellow Horde aren't as culturally privileged, so the rest of the Vietnamese portrayed in the film are barely above the creepy-crawly insect as far as humanity is concerned.

We are shown scenes of young girls "willingly" used for sex to demonstrate the perversity of the bad race. The soldiers exist as just so much target practice for Rambo. Because the troops frantically, nervously screech at each other in a caricature of Vietnamese speech, they're easier to keep depersonalized, easier to laugh at, and more fun for Rambo to kill. The only Vietnamese man given any kind of personality is their shifty leader who shoots the "good" woman in the back, and Rambo blows him up with an explosive-tipped arrow to the gut.

The (large number of!) Russian troops are treated similarly, but their white skin makes it harder to develop the same pitch of racism.

Something else these films resurrect fits in just fine with the world of Ronald Rambo; The Domino Theory. The ideology of battling communism at any cost has full expression in these films without really bothering to touch on the issue; these men are just out to

rescue their buddies, and along the way happen to show what weak-kneed liberals wrought by not letting them "win" the war.

It's up to *Red Dawn* to put the real cap on what this Domino revivalism means. In that film, communism is the insidious cancer it was in the early '60's, spreading from country to country like The Great Flood, having no relation to social causes such as a desire to dump oppressive regimes. The Nicaraguan revolution jumps its banks and engulfs Mexico in a few short years; the Green Party in West Germany causes the annexation of Europe. It's not clear whether or not the NDP causes Canada's compartmentalization into 12 Soviet states, or whether the commie liberals or PC's take care of that with their "Socialized" medicine and crown corporations. Director-writer John Milius (Executive producer of *Uncommon Valor*) leaves such Canadian scenarios up to the viewer's imagination, but in his mind-think, shared by the new gung-ho Vietnam War films, only a complete roll-back of the red tide will make the world safe for survivalists. It isn't too difficult to see what that means if you're living in Managua or the mountains of El Salvador.

The final equation goes something like this: take a newfound belief that America never really "lost" the Vietnam war, add faith in these mythic military warriors, an America-first attitude, and a willingness to separate a people into pure good and evil, and the sum equals a perfect climate for Central American invasion. If anything, the analogy works too well. With the help of films like *Rambo* and *Red Dawn*, the first battles in the perception war are being fought right now, even here in Canada. Reagan's men may be out to rewrite history, but there's one recent slogan of the left I think they'd be content to leave as is: "El Salvador is Spanish for Vietnam." To which Rambo would just as eagerly rejoin, "Do we get to win this time?" □

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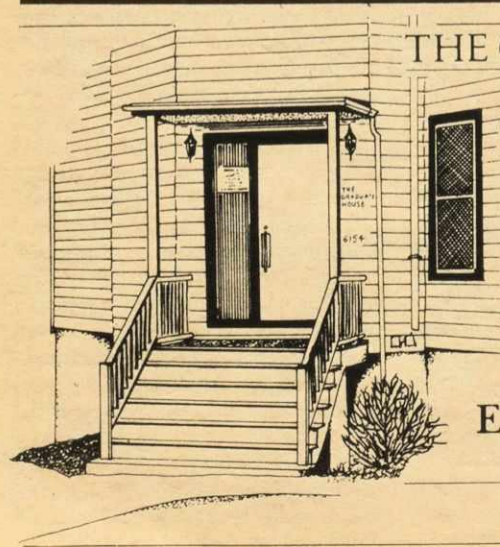
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