

# Entertainment

## The Vietnam War is dead...

by Ken Burke  
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"It was a lie, wasn't it — just like the war."  
— Col. Trautman in *Rambo*

The Vietnam War is dead, long live the Vietnam War. Ten years after the fall of Saigon, the American Right is still fighting to win the war — the war of history over how the American involvement in Vietnam is perceived. They know what actually happened often matters less than what people think really happened. If history is rewritten to their satisfaction, the new, ideologically improved version of the "good war" in Indochina will make similar military excursions in Nicaragua, El Salvador and elsewhere much easier to justify.

Leading the way in this battle for Yankee hearts and minds are blockbuster films like *Rambo*, *Uncommon Valor*, and *Missing in Action*, in which the USA kicks ass in a rematch with the "Vee-Cees". In terms of their impact, they may yet be among the most important films of the decade, or a curious cultural footnote to a frightening time gone by. It all depends on who wins the war.

Together with predecessors like *First Blood* and fanatical fellow-travellers like *Red Dawn* (where the Russians, Cubans and Sandinistas invade the U.S.), these movies are so similar in content and huge in popularity that they belong together in one group. Whether their aim is to turn a profit or to make a genuine political statement is unimportant; by manipulating the current political insecurity in the States, they focus on and whip up an audience's fears into a frenzy. They're agitprop filmmaking — propaganda that works through agitating its audience — at its most effective. And ugly.

Consider the plots of *Uncommon Valor* (1983), *Missing in Action* (1984), and this year's *Rambo*. The story in each is simple:

either one man or a small group of men attempts to rescue American soldiers officially listed as "Missing in Action" during the Vietnam war but actually held captive in prison camps. Our heroes do this despite the active interference of status quo American politicians, who seem to be more on the side of the Vietnamese government. Finally, after the personal loss of a friend/friends and the killing of scores of enemy soldiers the MIA's are rescued and flown back to heroes' welcome. Roll credits.

Aside from the obscenity of feeding the

hopes of American MIA families, there are other reasons why these films are worth taking another look at. One is their style — an old-fashioned patriotic appeal dressed up in slick new effects and rock-video editing. While the flash is from the 80's, their minds are still back in WWII.

As in all old-school war films, the supposed object of the fighting (rescuing the MIA's, holding the fort, blowing up the dam, etc.) isn't really the point at all. The real purpose is to WIN; to BEAT the ENEMY and thus prove the SUPERIORITY of your side and your race. Up to now, traditional war filmmakers were stymied about Vietnam; with the exception of John Wayne's gung-ho *The Green Berets* (1968), Vietnam's saga was translated onto film in more questioning terms. Riding the peace/love movement of the era, filmmakers not only questioned American's "dirty little" war, but the politics of war itself — complicated social issues surrounding the players became the subject, not just the context. But by shifting the emphasis from the Vietnam war where America lost, the filmmakers of the 80s finally get their war movie. And the truth gets shafted.

Besides using the convention of old war movies, these souped-up models also play off one pretty obvious model — the American hostage crisis in Iran. Just as that nasty episode made America collectively feel "powerless" (so we're told), it also focused the country's hatred on the captors without questioning why the Iranians loathed American involvement in their country's affairs. By rescuing MIA's from Vietnamese torture camps, these films do double duty; they eradicate that run-down, "powerless" feeling AND avoid that tricky little question of what America was doing there in the first place. As Gene Hackman's character in *Uncommon Valor* said during his big pep talk, "This time, nobody can dispute the rightness of what you're doing." No-fault Vietnam. Except their fault of course.

The tremendous public appeal of these films in the States can be chalked up to an urge to purge bad times from the country's collective memory. But their smash business elsewhere in the world shows they touch some universal chords, at least among violence hungry men. *Rambo's* huge popularity among Shiite militiamen in Beirut proves at least that. The reason: these films create ready-made myths for our time.

It's superfluous to bring up the obvious glorification of war and violence in these films, yet the content of each shoots so far past mere militarism that it lapses into a delirium where mythology is the only available comparison that works. These modern-day heroes are the ultimate product of all that's good in America, placed against the bad.

They are, to put it bluntly, a master race.

The roots of what makes an American master races are laid bare in the growing trend towards the celebration of survivalism in media. Survivalism takes such attributes glorified by the American Right as self-reliance, strength, and the willingness to "defend" territory against enemies, and then places them in extreme circumstances.

The ultimate goal for a survivalist is survival at all costs; killing the enemy when ever possible, and keeping the "American Way" intact. The Green Berets of Viet Nam are presented as a pure breed of survivalist, possessed with a simple, admirable rule — "When in doubt, kill," according to *Rambo* mentor Col. Trautman. The qualities of an effective survivalist are not limited to the highly trained machines in the Vietnam war films. In *Red Dawn*, ordinary high school kids find it in their genes to fight back a Communist onslaught, wiping out entire Soviet convoys with football-game enthusiasm.

With boys like that in every American town today, the fighting forces in the Vietnam films have a lot to live up to — and they do. Former kung-fu star Chuck Norris is adept at taking out entire platoons with no survivors in *Missing in Action*. The army buddies of *Uncommon Valor* may not do it single-handedly, but they have great credentials, too — heredity. Gene Hackman's Colonel Rhodes is the progeny of hundreds of years of American soldiers. "We almost lost the whole family at Gettysburg," he tells his men.

A certain legend named John Rambo (minus the "John" — legends need only one name) tops all others like him. His debut 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 Viet Nam, turned against an America where he has no place.

After retreating to the woods and subsequently outsmarting hundreds of police and national guard, he returns to seek revenge upon the sheriff that did him wrong.

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 is 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. Its impossible to imagine him in a combat situation — working in a factory or a restaurant aren't suitable occupations for a demi-god. In fact, his philosophy is: "you gotta become war."

Stallone and Cameron even cover 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 other-worldly 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 weapon of all — the reknowned hyperbolic he-man body. That just about covers all necessary requirements for legend.

In these films, the only special effect to

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