

RAMBOMANIA

So who won the Vietnam war anyway? / By Ken Burke

"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 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 a lot 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* where 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 80's, 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 simply to milk America's Reaganite mood for all the silver they can or to make a genuine political statement makes no difference as far as the finished product is concerned; they all ably serve the same master. They manipulate the political instability in America, focusing and whipping the audiences' insecurity into a frenzy of right-wing violent Commie-bashing before turning them loose onto the streets. 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* (plots should be singular; each film could be a re-make of the other). The story is simple: either one man or a small group of men attempts to rescue American soldiers officially "Missing in Action" during the Vietnam war but actually held captive in prison camps. They do this despite the active interference of status quo politicians in the States 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 gibbering enemy soldiers, the "MIA's" are rescued and flown back to a heroes' welcome. Roll credits.

Aside from the obscenity of making piles of money feeding the hopes of American "MIA" families, there are many other reasons these films are worth taking a second look at. One is their style, an old-fashioned patriotic appeal dressed up in slick new effects



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and rock video editing. The flash is from the '80's, but their minds are back in WWII.

As in all old-school war films, the supposed object of the fighting (rescuing the MIA's, holding the fort, blowing 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 race. Up to now, filmmakers seeking to make traditional war films about Vietnam were stymied. 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 America's "dirty little" war, but the politics of war itself. The complicated social issues surrounding the players found their way regularly onto

the big screen. Not much patriotism in there, but there wasn't an awful lot the U.S. won there, either. By shifting their emphasis from the Vietnam war as it was to a fantasy Vietnam war where SuperAmerica WINS, the filmmakers of the 80's 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 helped the country focus its energy on hating the captors, not questioning why these people loathed America for installing the Shah's bloody regime. By rescuing MIA's from Commie torture camps, these films do double duty. They get rid of that run-down, "powerless" feeling AND avoid the tricky little ques-

tion 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 U.S. of A. is easy enough to chalk 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 worldwide. *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. But each and every one shoots so far past mere militarism in its content that it lapses into a delirium where mythology is the only available comparison that works. That's Myth with a capital M, as in Hercules, Beowulf, King Arthur and all those guys of yore. Hey! — these films say — these are no ordinary dudes running through the jungle, they're a new breed of legendary warrior. They're the ultimate product of all that's good in American society placed against all that's bad. They are, to put it bluntly, a master race.

The roots of what makes an American master race are laid bare in the growing trend towards the celebration of survivalism in the American Media. Survivalism takes such attributes glorified by the American Right as self-reliance, strength, and willingness to "defend" territory against enemies, and turns them loose in extreme degrees. Survivalists are the ones building fallout shelters in Colorado to live through a nuclear war, and the people stockpiling assault rifles and grenades for the "race war" they feel is coming. The ultimate goal for a survivalist is survival at all costs; killing as many of the enemy as possible, and keeping the "American Way" intact.

Survivalism has everything to do with the new breed of Vietnam War film. These films focus on lone individuals using the ways of the jungle to kill vast numbers of "the enemy". 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. It doesn't take special training to be an effective survivalist, either. It's written right into the genes of all red-blooded American boys, or so *Red Dawn* would have you think. In that film, high-school kids escape the Communist onslaught, live on their wits in the hills, and eventually become a freedom-fighting strike force, wiping out entire Soviet convoys with football-game enthusiasm. Couldn't find these kids just anywhere.

With boys like that in every American town today, the fighting life 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 Col. Rhodes is the progeny of hundreds of years of American soldiers. "We almost lost the whole family at Gettysburg," he tells his men.

Compared to these recent heroics, John Wayne seemed almost restrained in his co-direction of "the fighting men of the Green Berets". One G.B. does take four of "them" with him in hand-to-hand combat during Wayne's opus, but that's peanuts compared to the slaughter of

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