INTRODUCTION

Camouflaging Empire

IMPERIAL BENEVOLENCE IN AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE

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WHEN GREGOR JORDAN'S *BUFFALO SOLDIERS* (2001) premiered at the 2001 Toronto International Film Festival, audiences could not get enough.[1] The story of a corrupt U.S. Army clerk stationed in West Germany at the time of the Berlin Wall's collapse, the film offered a biting critique of the American armed forces and the troops serving on the frontlines of the European Cold War. Its protagonist, Specialist Ray Elwood (Joaquin Phoenix), is what the film's pressbook called "the ultimate risk-taker: a high-stakes arms dealer, a bureaucratic con artist, and a shrewd collector of other people's secrets," all of which he uses to "forge a lucrative career on the black market."[2] A devious but lovable grunt, Elwood's mischievous independence echoed that of other military figures who have graced the big screen in recent decades, from Hawkeye Pierce and Captain Yossarian to Joker Davis and Archie Gates.[3]

A bidding war began—the Hollywood trade paper *Variety* named *Buffalo Soldiers* the Toronto festival's "most-sought after" picture—and Miramax, the Disney subsidiary run by the power brokers Harvey and Bob Weinstein, ultimately scooped it up.[4] They agreed to open the British-German production in the United States within a year. That was on September 10. The following day, in a sequence of events seared into American memory, four hijacked planes flew into the World Trade Center towers in New York City, the Pentagon building outside Washington, DC, and a tree-lined field in rural Pennsylvania. The American mood changed overnight, and *Buffalo Soldiers* suddenly looked less like a potential source of profit than a political hot potato.

Acknowledging that the United States had any faults—or even wondering whether this might be possible—proved perilous in the attacks' aftermath. George W. Bush, who at the time had been in office less than a year, echoed much of the nation's mood in his assertion of a startlingly simple

moral universe. "This will be a monumental struggle of good versus evil," he announced as the dust was still settling at the World Trade Center. "But," he assured the nation, "good will prevail."[5] The United States, in the president's uncomplicated formulation, was a positive force for humanity and a champion of all that was right and decent. The leadership of both major parties agreed. This was, after all, what they and millions of other Americans had been told by countless films and programs over the years, with good, in these narratives, almost invariably overcoming evil.

If Hollywood had been harboring any thoughts of challenging the conventional wisdom, the industry made it quite clear that it had received the president's message. "You needed to have your head examined if you thought this was a time for questioning America," the not-yet-disgraced Harvey Weinstein asserted.[6] Miramax, which had acquired not just *Buffalo Soldiers* but *The Quiet American* (2002), the second filmic iteration of Graham Greene's 1955 novel about the United States in Vietnam, quietly shelved both projects.[7] Uncomfortably for Miramax, *The Quiet American* showed not only the origins of America's bitter war in Vietnam; it also presented the United States as a sponsor of terrorism, with an undercover U.S. intelligence operative (Brendan Fraser) responsible for the detonation of two car bombs in Saigon that kill and maim numerous innocent civilians. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, such a notion was simply verboten. Americans were terrorism's victims; they could not be its perpetrators. The film thus had to be buried. And so it was—at least for a while.

Had it not been for the persistence of the filmmakers and its leading man, Michael Caine, *The Quiet American* may never have seen the light of day. But slowly, nervously, and tepidly, Miramax did allow it to be resurrected—though only after first testing the political waters in Canada, where it was rapturously received.[8] Yet even with the positive attention the film garnered, Miramax remained nervous. When the movie did finally open, its release was initially limited to two American markets (New York and Los Angeles) and the United Kingdom. *Variety* summed up its marketing campaign this way: "Michael Caine is great in a movie that's about, well, don't ask what it's about. He's just great in it."[9] Indeed, the film garnered Caine an Oscar nomination (he lost to *The Pianist*'s [2002] Adrien Brody), and *The Quiet American* earned rave reviews.

Buffalo Soldiers, meanwhile, enjoyed considerably less success. Miramax promised to eventually release Jordan's romp about the U.S. military in Cold War Germany, but it delayed the release a remarkable five times.[10] When a

FIGURE 1.1. Alden Pyle (Brendan Fraser) dresses down a Vietnamese police officer after a U.S.-sponsored terror attack. The implication that the United States was a perpetrator of terrorism, not just a victim of it, nearly killed *The Quiet American*. © Intermedia Films, IMF—Internationale Medien und Film GmbH & Co. 2 Produktions KG, and Miramax Films.

test screening was held in New York in January 2002, the reaction was decidedly cool. "I think this is a time when we need to be patriotic and I don't think the American people should see it," one audience member was said to have counseled.[11] Miramax and its parent corporation, Disney, meanwhile, fielded complaints from what *Variety* identified as "military representatives and right-wing consumers."[12] When *Buffalo Soldiers* was invited to the Sundance Film Festival in January 2003, a woman in the audience hurled a water bottle at Jordan—it missed him and, according to at least one account, hit actress Anna Paquin—reportedly screamed "bastard!" and accused the film of being anti-American and antiarmy "propaganda." She was escorted into the lobby but escaped before the police could be summoned.[13]

It would not be until July 2003, nearly two years after its original showing, that Miramax opened *Buffalo Soldiers* in American theaters. But by then, with major wars ongoing in Afghanistan and Iraq, its story of corrupt American soldiers "with nothing to kill except time," according to Elwood, seemed positively dated. "War is hell," Phoenix's character says at one point, "but peace? Peace is fucking boring." It's undoubtedly a catchy line. But in the context of thousands of Americans suffering death and injury in the Middle East and Central Asia, not to mention the far greater number of casualties suffered by Iraqis and Afghans, it must have seemed jarring. The film was a box-office disaster, grossing a measly $354,421 during its ten-week American run.[14]

That *Buffalo Soldiers* proved so controversial says more about the limits of the American political imagination than it does about serious political

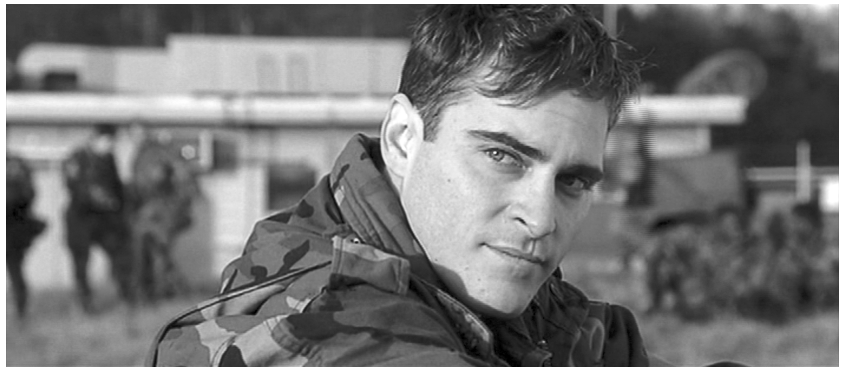

FIGURE 1.2. With its suggestion of military incompetence and criminality, *Buffalo Soldiers,* which starred Joaquin Phoenix, *shown,* proved controversial in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. © Film Four Limited, Grosvenor Park Productions UK, and Miramax Films.

dissent in American popular culture. To be sure, the film presented a scathing portrait of ignorance, corruption, and criminality within the ranks of the armed forces. But it did not really challenge the basic foundations of U.S. foreign policy. It may have mocked the cluelessness of Americans abroad, but it did not question the propriety—let alone even acknowledge the existence—of an American empire. Dennis Lim in the *Village Voice* called the picture "merely a softer-than-Wilder satire of bored peacetime mischief."[15] A. O. Scott, reviewing it for the *New York Times,* found *Buffalo Soldiers* to be "ultimately unsure of what it is mocking and in what spirit."[16] The closest the film came to challenging American global power was Elwood's pronouncement that "Vietnam was the thorn in everybody's side." But this was not because that war demonstrated American aggression. It was because the United States lost. "They stopped the draft and asked for volunteers," Elwood says, "except nobody volunteered. I mean, who wants to play for a losing team?"

So, according to *Buffalo Soldiers,* the Vietnam War was not wrong or immoral, as most Americans believed; it was simply a failure.[17] This is what passed for controversial in the wake of 9/11. In fairness, it should be noted that *Buffalo Soldiers* did not claim to challenge American power—or at least not *only* American power. "The film says that the American Army and armies around the world are full of psychopaths whose aim is to go out and kill people," director and coscreenwriter Jordan told the *New York Times.* "It's not antipatriotic. It asks the question, Why do people want to keep killing each other?"[18] Viewers might wonder just how *Buffalo Soldiers* represented the

antiwar screed that Jordan suggested; like Sam Fuller and his anti-Communist, pro-French Vietnam War film *China Gate* (1957), which Fuller later remarkably claimed "didn't make any judgment about who was right or wrong in the Indochina conflict," Jordan apparently thought his film posed more of a political challenge than it did.[19] In fact, one of his cowriters, Eric Weiss, was adamant that precisely the opposite was true. *Buffalo Soldiers* was not, Weiss insisted, "unpatriotic. It doesn't really comment on what we are doing now [in Iraq]."[20] And Weiss was certainly correct. *Buffalo Soldiers* offered a narrowly focused critique of the bad behavior of some American troops in Germany in the closing moments of the Cold War. But even that proved too much.

The essays in this volume argue that, at a moment when much of the world has probably been more openly critical of U.S. foreign policy than at any time since the Vietnam War, American popular culture since September 11, 2001, has broadly presented the United States as a global force for good, a reluctant hegemon working to defend human rights and protect or expand democracy from the barbarians determined to destroy it. Even as senior officials in Washington boasted that the United States was an imperial power—"We're an empire now," one told journalist Ron Suskind—most cultural producers still could not come to terms with this reality.[21] It is undoubtedly true that some policy makers, such as the eminently quotable Donald Rumsfeld, did continue to disavow the imperial possibility. "We don't seek empires. We're not imperialistic. We never have been. I can't imagine why you'd even ask the question," the secretary of defense snapped at an Al Jazeera reporter who asked about "empire building" just weeks after the Bush administration commenced its 2003 invasion of Iraq.[22] But Rumsfeld was speaking defensively as a political bureaucrat charged with realizing an imperial vision; his stated view, it is safe to say, resides well outside the scholarly consensus.

Imperialism is, of course, a bad word in the American political lexicon—it's something they do, not us. Millions of Americans prefer to see their government's actions abroad as selfless, benevolent, even divinely inspired. This belief in American beneficence has deep roots, from the humanitarian objectives ascribed to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century continental expansion to the more recent characterizations of the United States as a global policeman tasked with upholding international norms and laws.[23] When cultural producers have attempted to challenge this sacred axiom, as did the acclaimed filmmaker Paul Greengrass in his Iraq War picture *Green Zone*

(2010), they have often faced attack. "I am getting sick of Hollywood leftists changing stories to make America look bad," complained film critic Tony Medley, speaking, perhaps, for what Richard Nixon called America's "silent majority," in the small but influential *Tolucan Times*.[24]

However much we may agree or disagree with Medley's views of Hollywood or *Green Zone,* he was undoubtedly correct in recognizing the power of popular culture in what Amy Kaplan, writing in her now classic essay supporting American Studies' transnational turn, called the "dominant imperial culture" of the United States. Imperialism, Kaplan noted, is "not only about foreign diplomacy or international relations"; it is "also about consolidating domestic cultures and negotiating intranational relations," the last of which are capable of either "abet[ting] the subjugation of others" or "foster[ing] . . . resistance."[25] Melani McAlister, writing later about U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, pointed to the ways that popular culture, together with political discourse, the corporate media, and a number of social and religious movements, has "worked to construct a self-image for Americans of themselves as citizens of a benevolent world power" in defining and giving meaning to American interests in that region.[26]

Yet it is not just the Middle East—as McAlister would be the first to recognize. Popular culture's influence is global, persistent, and, at a time when relatively few Americans stay abreast of the news, perhaps more powerful than ever. Eric Johnston recognized as much more than half a century ago. As head of the Motion Picture Association of America from 1946 to 1963, Johnston occupied probably the most commanding perch in Hollywood during the crucial two decades following the Second World War. "There is not one of us who isn't aware that the motion picture industry is the most powerful medium for the influencing of people that man has ever built," he conceded.[27] Given that the Cold War, like the war on terror, was fundamentally an ideological conflict, his was an awesome responsibility.

Yet he and his colleagues, then and later, proved up to the task. John Wayne, for example, took it upon himself to battle the creeping belief by the mid- to late 1960s that Washington might be an imperial actor. He would have none of it. Writing to the White House in 1965, Wayne proposed to make a film—the box-office hit *The Green Berets* (1968)—that would convey to "not only the people of the United States but those all over the world" that "it is necessary for us to be in [Vietnam]." The "most effective way to accomplish this," he told President Lyndon Johnson, "is through the motion picture medium."[28] Unbeknownst to Wayne at the time, *The Green Berets* would be

the only major American fictional film about the Indochina wars to appear between the insertion of official U.S. combat troops in 1965 and the reunification of Vietnam in 1976. In the decade that followed, Hollywood released a flurry of movies, most of which sought to recast U.S. intervention as either the "noble cause" posited by Ronald Reagan (think *Rambo: First Blood Part II* [1985]) or, like the Academy Award winners *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and *Platoon* (1986), an overwhelmingly American—as opposed to Vietnamese—tragedy.[29]

At the center of American imperial culture, during the Cold War and now, is the popular view of the United States as a uniquely endowed nation lacking the selfish global ambitions that have characterized other great powers. With roots in its eighteenth-century founding, this belief is at the core of the American political system, with one of the nation's two major parties exploiting every possible opportunity to attack the other for allegedly failing to recognize "American exceptionalism." Yet imperial fantasies are a bipartisan matter, with the leadership of the Democratic Party just as wont to assert the nation's special endowment as its Republican counterpart. "The United States of America is and will remain the greatest force for freedom the world has ever known," President Barack Obama characteristically pronounced in 2014.[30] Channeling former secretary of state Madeleine Albright, Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton said two years later that the United States was not just "an exceptional nation" but "the indispensable nation." In fact, the country was "the"—not just *a*—"global force for freedom, justice, and human dignity," she insisted.[31]

Much like expressions of national sovereignty in the 1940s and 1950s reflected, as Mark Bradley put it, "persisting fears of sovereignty's precariousness rather than its hegemonic power and legitimacy," performative assertions of American exceptionalism took on an almost reflexive quality in the face of what seemed to many like twenty-first-century U.S. decline.[32] Did such declarations represent genuinely held beliefs? Or were they evidence of imperial anxiety? Regardless of their impetus, when political leaders have occasionally shown a willingness to stray from this seeming consensus on the righteousness of American power, as did President Donald Trump in February 2017 by questioning whether "our country" is "so innocent," their colleagues have immediately attempted to rein them in.[33] "I do think America is exceptional. America is different," Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said in response to the president's sacrilege. The United States is "the greatest freedom-loving nation in the history of the world," Senator Ben Sasse likewise

retorted.[34] The *New York Times,* representing the liberal wing of the establishment, lashed out at Trump's heterodoxy. While the paper allowed that the United States had "made terrible mistakes, like invading Iraq in 2003 and torturing terrorism suspects after Sept. 11," it was adamant that, "at least in recent decades, American presidents who took military action have been driven by the desire to promote freedom and democracy."[35]

Fifteen years after the 9/11 attacks, the future of U.S. foreign policy seemed uncertain, with President Trump unselfconsciously demonstrating his widespread ignorance, employing unprecedented levels of mendacity, and, even more than his fellow Republicans, generally opting for the comfort of a world unencumbered by empirical realities.[36] Concerns over what the president's inexperience, distaste for tradition, diplomatic boorishness, and "America first" rhetoric might mean for American global power grew during the first months of his administration. The neoconservatives, liberal internationalists, and others who populated the nation's foreign-policy establishment worried about the "ethnonationalist" tendencies suggested by "alt-right" spokesperson Stephen Bannon's appointment as a top White House advisor and about Trump's seeming rejection of long-standing imperial assumptions. From his criticism of "nation-building" and his openness to a recently assertive Russia—a country whose relationship with the Trump campaign became the subject of an FBI investigation—to his questioning of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the value of the Korean and Japanese alliances, a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine, and the "one China" policy for the People's Republic of China and Taiwan, this was not how American presidents were expected to behave. Beltway officials wondered whether Trump, like his predecessors, would continue to employ force as the most visible instrument of U.S. foreign policy or whether, worrisomely, he might reject the bipartisan consensus on American militarism in favor of a twenty-first-century neoisolationism.

The president appeared to offer an answer in April 2017, launching fifty-nine tomahawk missiles without United Nations sanction at a Syrian government airbase in response to an alleged chemical weapon attack. Not only had Trump employed unilateral military force but he had done so against a close ally of the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, who was seen by much of the establishment, but apparently not by the White House, as a figure of some concern. Washington and the corporate media—which, apart from Fox News and elements of the right-wing press, had on many issues been atypically adversarial in their coverage of the new administration—were

FIGURE 1.3. The media responded enthusiastically to Donald Trump's order to launch fifty-nine cruise missiles at Syria on April 6, 2017. Brian Williams of MSNBC gushed about the "beauty of our weapons," for example, while Fareed Zakaria of CNN, *shown,* said Trump "became president of the United States" that night. © CNN.

ecstatic. The top congressional Republicans, Senator McConnell and Speaker of the House Paul Ryan, both gave the attack their "enthusiastic support," reported the *New York Times*. The ranking Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Ben Cardin, praised Trump for his "clear signal that the United States will stand up for internationally accepted norms and rules against the use of chemical weapons."[37] The media were even more adulatory, equating the unilateral employment of state violence with exemplary leadership. "I think Donald Trump became president of the United States" that night, CNN host (and former *Foreign Affairs* editor) Fareed Zakaria gushed.[38] The missile strike was "very presidential" and "sets a moral compass for the United States," agreed Marty Schenker of Bloomberg News.[39] Like others, the *Washington Post* insisted that the attack was "right as a matter of morality" and yielded "a host of practical benefits." The paper's only concern was whether the strike represented merely "a one-off response" or whether it signaled a welcome change in Trump's "conception of U.S. foreign interests."[40]

For months afterward the answer remained unclear, with the administration continuing its antipathy to what it called "globalism" in favor of an increasingly global ethnonationalism marked by racism and Islamophobia, support for Brexit, opposition to immigrants and refugees, and a reactionary

backlash to "free trade" and neoliberalism. Trump did occasionally employ hypermilitarist rhetoric, such as his widely derided threat to rain "fire and fury" on North Korea or to pursue a "military option" in Venezuela, but his statements were generally treated as impetuous and irresponsible excesses rather than the sober vows to employ military force that one had come to expect as the hallmark of American empire building.[41] Trying to make sense of Trumpian foreign policy proved a challenge, and how popular culture might treat it remained a mystery.

There can be little doubt, however, that the decade and a half following the 9/11 attacks witnessed the same sorts of discourses that marked the previous fifty years: exceptionalist narratives of American virtue, only this time with an Islamist, not Communist, enemy in the crosshairs. But it was not just Islamists. As working-class everyman Hank Deerfield (Tommy Lee Jones) says of the Iraq War in *In the Valley of Elah* (2007), "My son has spent the last eighteen months bringing democracy to a shithole." Deerfield's rather unrefined statement on the U.S. overthrow of the secular Iraqi regime echoed explanations found elsewhere. "Every American president since at least the 1970s has used his office to champion human rights and democratic values around the world," claimed the *Washington Post*'s White House bureau chief in 2017.[42] The United States apparently cannot help itself; it suffers from a "humanitarian impulse," Emile Simpson wrote in *Foreign Policy*.[43]

While there have been notable exceptions, most popular culture since 9/11 has assumed American benevolence.[44] At the same time, most popular culture dealing with the war on terror, as Andrew McKevitt has observed, "did not confront the GWOT [global war on terrorism] directly. Instead, it interpreted the military and political response to 9/11 through allegory and metaphor," with fantastical tales that presented U.S. foreign policy "not unlike how George W. Bush articulated it": as an "apocalyptic, universal struggle between good and evil."[45] In this struggle, whether portrayed metaphorically or not, the United States may appear ruthless, it may occasionally be a bungler, and there can be rogue elements that attempt to undermine the government's official policies, but the basic goodness that drives American foreign relations—its diplomacy, its military interventions, its people-to-people encounters—has rarely been challenged. This is not necessarily a matter of conscious intentionality. It is simply a reflection of the extent to which imperial ideology has been naturalized in American life.

For scholars, this should come as no surprise. One has only to remember the century that just passed. The ideological conflict that marked most of its second half ended triumphantly for the United States, with the culture industries, which consistently parroted the conventional wisdom about the Communist threat and American leadership of the "free world," providing essential service to the nation's foreign-policy objectives.[46] As one of the contributors to this volume noted elsewhere, the Cold War was marked by a collaboration of state and private actors that "sometimes openly, sometimes discreetly" sought to mobilize American and foreign opinion "in the pursuit and projection of 'freedom' and 'independence.'"[47] There were exceptions, of course, just as there have been more recently. But in looking at the post-9/11 era, for every *Buffalo Soldiers*—as tepid of a political statement as it was—there have been a dozen films like *Tears of the Sun* (2003), the Defense Department–endorsed picture starring Bruce Willis about steely but benevolent American troops attempting to save a group of Nigerians fleeing murderous rebels.[48] For every critical documentary that might make its way to public television, there has been a *24* or a *Homeland,* the far more popular fictional series about U.S. intelligence agents attempting to make the world right. And for every critical utterance by the Dixie Chicks, whose Natalie Maines told a London audience in March 2003 that "we're ashamed" that President Bush was from their home state of Texas, there have been enraptured, screaming crowds for Toby Keith belting out "Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American)."[49]

The authors in this volume approach empire and popular culture from different disciplinary backgrounds and with different questions. What draws them together is a conviction that popular culture matters. Movies, television, video games—these are not just objects of mindless consumption.[50] On the contrary, people are heavily influenced by the cultural products with which they engage every day. Sometimes they educate, other times they challenge, and quite often they reinforce their audience's beliefs. At times popular culture can tell us something about how countless Americans view their nation's role in the world, and it can drive how countless people come to understand it. Of course, popular culture is complicated. It can be interpreted differently by different individuals. And much of popular culture does not engage issues of empire at all—an elision that is in fact critical to imperial preservation. But in those cases in which U.S. foreign policy is explicitly

addressed, its politics, the contributors to *Imperial Benevolence* argue, are overwhelmingly apologetic.

Rebecca Adelman takes up the emotional elements of this apologia—including its gendered construction—in her chapter on women's lamentations over the lethal affective work they must perform in serving the imperial mission. Empire is a complex undertaking, and the humans charged with its preservation at times find themselves having to do emotionally difficult things. Take drone operators, who must make life-and-death decisions thousands of miles from the field of battle; with the press of a button in the Nevada desert, an entirely family can be obliterated in the Yemeni outback. Adelman, in exploring the intersections of gender, sadness, and imperial violence in several films and television shows, focuses on the crying female protagonists, including drone operators, who populate the media landscape of the war on terror. Whether it is Maya (Jessica Chastain) in the critical darling *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) or Carrie Mathison (Claire Danes) in the popular Showtime series *Homeland,* the tears they shed, she writes, help "to lubricate the machinery of empire."

Yet not all popular-culture protagonists feel emotionally conflicted about their service. Edwin Martini, in chapter 2, addresses the case of *American Sniper,* the best-selling 2012 memoir by U.S. Navy SEAL Chris Kyle that was turned into a 2014 film by Clint Eastwood. *American Sniper* was a major cultural force. The book remained on the *New York Times* best-seller list for months, with the film proving even more popular; it earned more than $100 million in its opening weekend, received an Academy Award nomination for Best Picture, became the highest-grossing picture of 2014 at the American box office, and overtook *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) as the top domestic-grossing war movie of all time.[51] But, Martini shows us, Kyle was not one to shed tears. On the contrary, he stoically accepted his assignment as a "sheepdog" protecting the American people—the "sheep"—from the "wolves" out to get them. While this framework ascribed positive, self-defensive objectives to the American campaign in Iraq, the reception to the book and the film was divided. As Martini notes, it mirrored the larger political debates—though often within the same simplistic frames of reference—about race, religion, and foreign policy that have so riven the nation since 2001.

The fact that Kyle met his fate not in Iraq or Afghanistan but at the hands of a fellow veteran in Texas in 2013 suggests the psychological damage that the post-9/11 wars have inflicted upon thousands of men and women in the U.S. armed forces. These are men and women that most people will never

meet. With the end of conscription in 1973, only a tiny minority of Americans—many of them with few promising choices in life—now join the military.[52] The emotional distance from U.S. foreign policy that this affords most of the public is only heightened by the fact that, as David Kieran argues, veterans of the nation's recent conflicts have not been encountered in popular culture anywhere near as often as their World War II and Vietnam War counterparts. When they have, moreover, it has often been as supporting characters. There has not been a *Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) to address the readjustment to civilian life, there has been no *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) to reflect the military antiwar movement, and even the films that have addressed psychologically damaged veterans, such as the Hollywood drama *Brothers* (2009), have had a far more marginal influence on American society than earlier motion pictures, such as *Taxi Driver* (1976) or *The Deer Hunter* (1978). But where the most popular of popular culture has fallen short, documentary films have stepped in, offering stories of veterans' psychological rehabilitation through an immersion in outdoor pursuits. Such stories—which, Kieran notes, frame American veterans' injuries as largely inconsequential and their recovery as private—have obscured the costs of empire for those tasked with maintaining it, contributing to U.S. imperialism's discursive normalization.

What about those fighting men and women who are not actually members of the U.S. armed forces? This may have seemed an odd question in past decades. Mercenaries have always existed, but their numbers have typically been quite low. That changed in the post-9/11 era, however, with battlefield responsibilities increasingly farmed out to well-paid private contractors subject to only minimal levels of public accountability. Sometimes this has presented considerable problems. In 2007, for example, a group of Blackwater security contractors opened fire on dozens of Iraqi civilians in Baghdad's Nisour Square. Seventeen people were killed and another twenty injured. It was only after widespread Iraqi outrage that charges were brought against the Blackwater personnel, with four men ultimately convicted of murder or manslaughter. Yet despite their centrality to the American war effort, military contractors have been largely absent in the nation's news media. They have proved a helpful foil in American popular culture, however. As Stacy Takacs demonstrates, television programs since 9/11, in a departure from earlier series such as *Soldiers of Fortune* (syndication, 1955–1957) and *The A-Team* (NBC, 1983–1987), have presented these contractors as scapegoats for the negative outcomes generated by U.S. interventionism. The problems

experienced by the United States have not been the fault of its official operatives (that is, its uniformed personnel), the more recent programs suggest, but rather of irresponsible mercenaries driven by a quest for profits. Such depictions, Takacs argues, have allowed the American public to retain its faith in the United States as a global force for good, innocently pursuing its noble cause abroad.

At the heart of the noble cause in the Barack Obama era was a belief that only "just war" is pursued by Washington. As Min Kyung (Mia) Yoo suggests, this belief was embodied in three of the more popular television series during the eight years following the change of presidential administrations in 2009. While the shows are not in fact about U.S. foreign policy—or at least not explicitly so—the three protagonists of *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010–), *Gotham* (Fox, 2014–), and *Fargo* (FX, 2014–) are all well-meaning, innocent men who only reluctantly resort to violence when confronted with a threat to the larger population for which they have assumed responsibility. In this they resemble former president Obama—or at least the conventional portrait of President Obama popular with American liberals. "We did not choose this war," he told American forces stationed in Afghanistan in 2012. "This war came to us on 9/11. . . . We don't go looking for a fight. But when we see our homeland violated, when we see our fellow citizens killed, then we understand what we have to do."[53] Like the United States, the protagonists discussed by Yoo are morally imperfect and flawed, but their use of force is understood by audiences as an essential response to the evil they face. They are not aggressors. They kill only because the protection of decency demands it. They are, in other words, driven by the purest of intentions.

In reality, of course, American forces have not been so reluctantly dispatched nor have their missions gone especially well. Given the chaos unleashed by the nation's post-9/11 wars, what Washington may ultimately need to win its self-described "war on terror" is a handful of superheroes. At least, this is what is suggested by the recent outpouring of them on the big screen, where they have repeatedly taken on and defeated the dark forces besieging the United States. These superheroes not only win, but they do so as moral guardians of all that is right and just. Superheroes have long populated the comic-book industry and have even occasionally appeared in film, with *Superman* (1978) and *Batman* (1989) probably the best, and certainly among the most lucrative, historical examples. But nothing prepared us for the wave of superhero films that flooded the United States after 9/11. Having been turned into what essentially amounts to one big self-referential fran-

chise, such pictures now regularly cost in the hundreds of millions of dollars. There is no doubt that this has proved a good investment, however, with several having earned more than $1 billion each. The content of these films, Tim Gruenewald maintains, has been overwhelmingly supportive of U.S. military power. The superheroes—and this is especially true of Captain America, who, as his name suggests, serves as the symbolic embodiment of the United States—demonstrate a strong concern for the fate of civilians. Their protection drives the superheroes' actions, and the superheroes do everything possible to ensure that, in violently confronting the forces of evil, no harm befalls the world's legions of noncombatants.

Given just how violent these stories can be, that is a considerable challenge. But like the United States—or at least like how millions of Americans envision the United States—the superheroes see their raison d'être as the protection of the innocent. No effort is thus too great. This is abundantly clear in what, by the end of 2016, remained the most commercially successful superhero film in history: *The Avengers* (2012), whose worldwide gross topped $1.5 billion.[54] Yet it would be a mistake to think of *The Avengers* in strictly commercial terms. As Ross Griffin argues, it is freighted with cultural symbolism about the role of the United States in maintaining world order. The Avengers—from Iron Man to Captain America—must overcome myriad challenges, including a 9/11-mimicking attack on New York City, before collectively defeating the threat of evil attempting global domination. The film, Griffin suggests, offers a powerful legitimization of violence, though only when used—as it is with the superheroes and, by implication, Washington—as a reluctant response to an existential menace.

All the chapters up to this point have dealt largely with representations of U.S. foreign policy, whether directly or indirectly, since 9/11. But the post-9/11 era has also witnessed cultural products that have creatively revisited the American past. Among the most influential of these has been the Steven Spielberg picture *Bridge of Spies* (2015), perhaps, according to Tony Shaw, Hollywood's most important Cold War film since the fall of the Berlin Wall. The story of a fabled 1962 exchange of prisoners by the United States and the Soviet Union, *Bridge of Spies* is only one of several motion pictures Spielberg has made since 2001 that address either the Cold War, the threat of aggression, or the so-called war on terror. His *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008) had an aging Harrison Ford battling Soviet agents, for example, while *War of the Worlds* (2005) featured Tom Cruise fighting alongside U.S. troops in defending against an alien invasion. Drawing a