September 11th and Film: Terrorism, the State and Ambiguity

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How have the representations of the relationship between the agencies of the United States and terrorism changed since September 11th? This question can be answered by highlighting the different ways that these two groups are criticized and given legitimacy through the medium of film. The purpose of this paper is to show how the ideas of terrorism and nationalism have evolved in film and are presented to citizens of the United States since September 11th. In order to accomplish this, a selection of films was chosen based on their chronological placement to September 11th and their historical relevance. The films’ portrayal of the dynamics between the United States and terrorists are examined in the analysis section with the purpose of analyzing ambiguity. Furthermore, contemporary social and political concepts such as symbolic power, agenda-setting theory, ontological displacement and social solidarity are discussed in depth. The use of social and political theory in examining this topic cements its relevance within the academic field of political science. The result of this research is a conclusion which supports the idea that United States and terrorist representations in film have shifted away from ambiguity and toward explicitness due to the humanization of the United States actors and the realization of terrorism as a legitimate threat.

Introduction

On the topic of art and politics, the famous American actor, director and writer Orson Welles has been quoted as saying “I don't take art as seriously as politics.” Film, serving a significant function in American society, does more than entertain. Film can be used to encourage critical thinking in its viewers, but it can also be used to elicit emotions connected to the American ethic by creating a sense morale and national identity. Film is significant as a political tool because filmmakers have the unique ability to reach wide audiences and communicate ideas through the imagined worlds that are projected onto the silver screen.

Why is the representation of the United States government and terrorist depiction in film important? According to agenda-setting theory, the media holds significant power in influencing the salience of the topics with which the public is exposed. While many would consider this power to primarily belong to mainstream news outlets, Hollywood has the power to dictate entertainment and, by extension, promote certain ideas and ethics. With this in mind, producing films that deal with topics that are political in nature, such as terrorism, can allow for a significant amount of leeway for bias, which comes in the form of legitimization as well as criticism. This dynamic between the media and the American public can allow for both explicit and implicit manipulation and socialization.

The September 11th terrorist attacks were chosen as the hinge for the comparison of state and terrorist representations due to its continuing cultural significance. September 11th has impacted many cultural mediums such as art, design, music and film. My
primary technique in evaluating these films will be the "popular culture as mirror" approach outlined in Nexon and Neumann's text *Harry Potter and International Relations*, which emphasizes popular culture such as film as a medium for understanding and exploring international relations themes and theories. The films which precede September 11th in my analysis are *Delta Force*, *Three Kings*, and *Under Siege*, while the films representing post-September 11th politics in my analysis are *Team America: World Police*, *Zero Dark Thirty*, and *Jarhead*. These films were chosen due to their topical relevance to the research question and their chronology in respect to the terrorist attacks which took place on September 11th, 2001. Each film presents a differing narrative and representation of the United States and the terrorist while still maintaining the same overarching theme of terrorism and the fight against it.

Legitimization, criticism and ambiguity are the central themes of my analysis because they illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of the United States as well as act as a mirror of many prevalent attitudes in the United States. Through studying the representation of terrorism in film, many racial and ethnic stereotypes as well as criticisms of foreign policy are highlighted. Finally, the ambiguities created between terrorists and agents of the United States often have the ability to dissolve the archetypal "good versus evil" dichotomy which has been a present theme in storytelling for centuries. With these themes and concepts in mind, I would argue that film has become less ambiguous since the September 11th terrorist attacks took place in 2001.

The review of literature for this research involves a discussion of political and social concepts, specifically the body of critical theory surrounding art and morale, with propaganda and satire being central themes. These concepts and their relation to the methodology of the research are discussed in the research design, while the central analysis of the paper focuses on the actual application of these concepts to the films in question. The historical context of these films is also discussed in order to highlight their cultural relevance and the events that they are based on.

**Literature Review**

A lot has been written about politics in film, and a survey of the existing body of literature suggests that there are several different themes present within films: political morale and film, propaganda as film, humor in film, and film as a teaching tool or a tool for socialization. Each different theme carries within it certain underlying assumptions about its audience, presents a unique agenda, and makes use of different theories. In this literature review, I will discuss these themes in greater depth, show criticism of these themes, and illustrate how my research contributes to the academic conversation surrounding politics and film.

In order for United States citizens to adopt and find value in the democratic creed, a fabric of emotion must first be weaved around the essential aspects of democracy. Citizens of the United States must find a source of inspiration and confidence in their government. Wanger's theory concerning the role of film in creating national morale draws from the idea that film has the power to dramatize and emotionalize the essential tenets of democratic life and instill a sense of patriotism within its citizens. According to Wanger, political morale must be built upon a foundation of courage, which in turn can only be created with conviction (Wanger 380). Drawing these sentiments out of American citizens by using film as a medium is the obstacle faced by the producers of propaganda (Kerr).

The use of mass media as propaganda serves two purposes: to weaken enemy morale and to strengthen national morale.
Powers, J., May 2016
www.sparksjournal.org/film-terrorism-state

(Soley). It is in this way that film can act as a social and institutional form of coercion. However, the line between "propaganda" and "self-explanation" is thin and difficult to navigate (Meyer 271). Propaganda involves aggrandizement of a particular group such as the United States government, as well as showing an enemy such as a terrorist group in an exaggerated or weakened state. Propaganda film relies heavily on the presence of in-group bias and shared symbolism. American propaganda film presents the United States as "the conscience of the world" (Kerr 46) and presents the government as a powerful, precise, and organized unit while oftentimes ignoring the issues which underlie certain events and wars.

While movies can indeed dramatize anything, it is a rare occurrence when a film greatly impacts national morale. To alter nationwide confidence in the government using film depiction as a medium, the citizens of a country such as United States must set aside differing ideologies to a certain extent and reach a degree of agreement on essential American values. The social relevance of a film, the clarity of the issues addressed in the film, and the political orientation of American citizens must fall in line with one another (Wanger 381-382). With this in mind, Wanger's theory identifies the main obstacle in using film for morale as finding concepts and values that the masses can understand and identify with, which is in agreement with Bourdieu's concept of art as a form of symbolic power and social solidarity (Bourdieu 166).

The United States government, when satirized, can become humorous through the exaggeration of certain issues and flaws (LaBoeuf 13-14). While one may view a work of comedy at face value and see humor for its own sake, satire is "an art form which has the ability to point out the deficiencies certain human behaviors and the social issues which result from them" (LeBoeuf 1). When a country enters difficult social and political periods, satire can be necessary as a form of relief and create a better understanding of world issues (LaBoeuf 13-13). Satire is a delicate form of art, which requires critique, irony, and implicitness. Satire relies heavily on the idea of ontological displacement, as "the use of popular cultural texts as mirrors can force us to reflect on our theoretical and pedagogical assumptions" (Nexon and Neumann 13).

Satire has its place in contemporary politics because works of satire often present a more cynical view of world issues that is considered "invaluable in speaking truth to power" (Higie 183). While satire can be used as a tool to criticize a government or ideology, it is often done at the cost of simplifying complicated political issues. A prime example of the simplification of political issues in satire is The Daily Show (Higie 184), which openly mocks world politics in a format which is easily understood. Furthermore, satire often focuses on the absurdities and flaws present in the political world, which can create a sense of alienation from the political process in viewers. Satire, however, can "subvert and expose" (Higie 191) world issues, giving unique power to popular culture, especially in the current postmodern climate.

Movies work as teaching tools due to their combination of visual and oral teaching, making information easier to understand (Engert and Spencer 85). When applied to issues such as terrorism, the United States government and world events, these concepts become more concrete, relevant, and understandable. More importantly, a film can lead a viewer to empathize with the political actors portrayed in the film in order to better understand the ethical implications at stake in complex political circumstances (Engert and Spencer 86). However, a drawback of using film to obtain information is that the issues portrayed are often one-sided and their underlying and complex political theories are not fully developed, which is a major
shortcoming of the medium (Engert and Spencer 87).

Research Design

The following analysis accent three major concepts which underlie the power of film: ontological displacement, social solidarity, and agenda-setting theory. The idea of ontological displacement in my analysis will follow the definition offered by Nexon and Neumann in *Harry Potter and International Relations*, while Bourdieu's definition of social solidarity from his work *On Symbolic Power* is used to identify the shared symbolism in the data and how they relate to American ideology. Finally, agenda-setting theory will be explored due to the power that mass media outlets have to affect the salience of political issues.

The concept of ontological displacement is important in the analysis because many popular cultural works, especially satire, challenge viewers to set aside vested interests in order to be exposed to differing viewpoints of important issues (Nexon and Neumann 12). Through the mirror of popular culture, aspects of the world around us can be presented in a completely different conceptual "world" that is able to be manipulated by its creators (Weber 9). It is in this way that imagined worlds can mirror the real world and open viewers to different viewpoints. "Sometimes, seeing historical events reflected in the mirror of popular culture gives plausibility to a particular interpretation of those events" (Nexon and Neumann 12). An example of this dynamic can be seen in *Team America: World Police*, a satirical film which exaggerates the absurdities of the war on terror and challenges viewers to reevaluate the concept of war and nationalism.

Film can act as a tool to create morale, but it can also be used as a way to make sense of the world around us. This application of film can extend to many aspects of the world, including hot-button issues such as terrorism, which is when popular culture as a mirror of the world is an effective approach (Nexon and Neumann 12). Popular culture does not always seek to entertain, but it can also be used to illuminate concepts and processes. It is in this way that, not only does the medium of film hold potential as a morale booster, but exposes viewers to different viewpoints, encouraging critical thought. Film can play a part in a country's ideological struggle when the lines between fact and fiction are blurred (Dearth 22). The film *Three Kings* illustrates this by showing a less flattering side of the United States military. The plot of *Three Kings* is set in motion by three soldiers illegally obtaining a map to Iraqi gold and jeopardizing national security by pursuing it.

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The political and social powers of film are limited by the concept of "social solidarity" (Bourdieu 166), which is the idea that certain symbols must be shared throughout a culture in order for large numbers of people with different intellects to reach agreement. So as to capitalize on the power of film, shared symbols must be manipulated in ways that serve a particular interest. Film, being art by definition, draws from the power of symbolism: the power of constructing reality, which serves both political and social functions (Bourdieu 166). Film serves a political function by promoting the interests of parties who hold some sort of power over ordinary citizens. In the case of propaganda films, the goal is to "establish and legitimize" (Bourdieu 167) the United States as a world power. An appeal to social solidarity can be seen in the film *Zero Dark Thirty*, which is the most recent film that is examined. *Zero Dark Thirty* avoids references to the Bush and Obama administrations in order to appeal to a larger demographic. The message of the film, though riddled with ambiguity, is that the United States is a dominant world military power and its citizens should feel pride in defeating a major branch of Al-Qaeda.
According to agenda-setting theory, agendas primarily exist on two theoretical frontiers: object and attribute. Object-level agenda setting affects media coverage of topics and attempts to establish causality, while attribute-level agenda setting occurs as a result of object-level agenda setting and affects political advertising and the behavior and opinions of individuals (McCombs 11). If agenda-setting theory is applied to film, it can potentially impact the political behavior and opinions of United States citizens by highlighting various differing political viewpoints and biases. Each film discussed in the analysis section employs agenda-setting theory by showing different interpretations of the United States and the terrorist.

Analysis

I. Legitimization of the United States Government

How do films legitimize the United States government? Portraying the United States military as a calm, collected, and highly skilled unit, The Delta Force, released in 1986, stands as an exemplar of United States military propaganda. The Delta Force, employed against a rogue group of Middle Eastern hijackers, is composed of military experts who seem unfazed by the imminent threat that they are up against. This is evidenced by Major Scott McCoy's (Chuck Norris) deadpan tone and overall lack of expression and dialogue throughout his rampage against the terrorist threat.

The soldiers that make up the Delta Force are shown making small talk and reading magazines throughout their pursuit of the hijacked plane, and furthermore, upon the successful completion of their mission, untroubled by the stress and trauma of the mission, the Delta Force and the rescued passengers are shown singing "America the Beautiful" and consuming alcohol. The Delta Force is also legitimized by their skill compared to the terrorists. Although larger in number, the terrorist group fighting against the Delta Force claims no casualties and often misses with their firearms. Major Scott McCoy also displays an almost superhuman mastery of combat, marksmanship, acrobatics and an extremely high threshold for pain. These features are evidenced by his mastery of multiple weapons, expertise in martial arts, and his ability to land on his feet after jumping out of the top of a building. In The Delta Force, Major Scott McCoy stands as the personification of the United States ethic of nationalism.

The Delta Force also serves to legitimize the United States in its use of music. The opening scene of the film shows Major Scott McCoy completing his final mission before retirement. After rescuing a fellow soldier, his carrier takes off as a triumphant theme song which will be revisited throughout the film plays. The Delta Force is given an upbeat theme song, while the scenes where the hijackers are prominent feature a slow and dramatic dirge. This reinforces the military prowess of the Delta Force in a very subtle but effective way.

Zero Dark Thirty, released in 2012, legitimates the United States government somewhat differently than its pre-9/11 counterpart. A dramatization of Operation Neptune Spear, which successfully pursued and neutralized Osama Bin Laden, Zero Dark Thirty presents the United States government, specifically the CIA, as an incredibly strategic, intelligent, and unforgiving entity. The film predominantly revolves around the torture of detained Al-Qaeda operatives with a presumed connection to Osama Bin Laden. Dan, the CIA official interrogating detainees at black sites, repeats the mantra of "you lie, I hurt you" to the detainees, asserting that all terrorists have a breaking point.
Zero Dark Thirty is also similar to Delta Force because it portrays the United States government as an efficient machine made up of skilled professionals. This can be seen throughout the film by the CIA navigating through different channels of intelligence in their fight against Al-Qaeda. The point which both films have in common, however, is the deployment of an expert tactical military squad against a terrorist threat. The raid on Osama Bin Laden's compound and the climax of Zero Dark Thirty, while a dramatization of a real world event, displays a team of focused soldiers showing mercy only to the children living in the compound. While the grandiose nature of Major Scott McCoy's raid against terrorism may distinguish it from its post-September 11th counterpart, the two scenes share the same purpose of legitimizing the United States as a military power.

Under Siege, released in 1992, legitimizes the United States in a way similar to The Delta Force: by personifying the United States ethic as a super soldier or an American archetype. Although Major Scott McCoy and Casey Ryback both belong to the United States military, they both essentially take on terrorist threats by themselves. After the hijacking of the USS Missouri, Ryback fights his way to the hijackers in the missile control room by utilizing a mastery of stealth, firearms, and hand-to-hand combat. This is evidenced by his ability to escort Jordan Tate, a guest on the ship, throughout the ship while keeping her safe and by his impressive ability to neutralize the mercenaries in his path while remaining unnoticed. The climax of the film is a hand-to-hand fight between Ryback and the film's main antagonist, Strannix. Ryback is able to defeat Strannix and reroute a tomahawk missile that he fired, earning him an honor ceremony as the USS Missouri sails into the sunset at the end of the film. The final scene of Under Siege glorifies and exalts Ryback and, by extension, American nationalism by placing Ryback onto a proverbial pedestal and treating him as an idol for his victory.

II. Criticism of the United State Government

How do films criticize the United States government? Released in 2004, Team America: World Police is a satirical action comedy focused primarily on shedding light on the more unflattering aspects of the United States government. The film stresses a critical view of the United States as a military power, as well as of the war on terror. Team America is made up of flawed individuals who strive to make the world a safer place but ultimately fall short and trigger chaos.

The main focus of the film is Team America's attempts to thwart terrorist attacks but instead usually trigger massive firefights, causing collateral damage that is equal to or outweighs the amount of damage that the terrorists could have accomplished. Examples of this are the destruction of Paris, Cairo, and the Panama Canal as the direct result of their mission to fight against terrorism. Although Team America fights in the name of security and peace, they usually leave mass destruction in their wake. Unlike The Delta Force, Team America: World Police shows the United States as a flawed group of individuals capable of losing as opposed to a group of highly trained soldiers. The cast of Team America: World Police attempts to stay a step ahead of the terrorists, but due to factors such as faulty intelligence and a lack of skill and organization, the Panama Canal is destroyed and the team faces humiliation in the eyes of the rest of the world.

Perhaps more important than the criticism of the United States as a major military power, Team America: World Police exaggerates the stereotypes that are associated with the American nationality. More fittingly, the film portrays American culture as the sum of its least appealing aspects such as racism, anti-intellectualism,
and sexism. This can be seen throughout the film, especially when Gary Johnson (the protagonist of the film) is tasked with redeeming the United States in the face of all of its destruction. The speech that he delivers to an audience made up of world leaders stresses that the United States is only violent for the sake of the freedom and security of the world and that harm as an unintended result of altruism is better than harm that is spiteful and intentional. This speech mirrors an attitude that is especially prevalent among conservative Americans who justify war and military spending. The theme of anti-intellectualism is weaved throughout the cast of Team America, as the primary members of the team are a phony clairvoyant, a former high school football star, and a prejudiced martial arts expert.

Released in 1999, Three Kings is also a satirical war comedy. Compared to Team America: World Police, which is largely focused on post-9/11 politics in America, Three Kings takes place during the Gulf War and offers a vastly different perspective of the United States government through a satirical and critical lens. The opening scene of Three Kings shows a United States soldier throwing a string of racial slurs at a surrendering Iraqi Army soldier and shooting him. This scene is followed by the announcement that the Gulf War has ended. The following scenes show United States military personnel illegally consuming alcohol and celebrating their patriotism. Three Kings portrays members of the United States military as largely unintelligent and reckless. The prime example within Three Kings is the character Conrad Vig, who is only semi-literate, acts as a decoy for the media, and uses a football rigged with C4 as a weapon.

Although shown in an unflattering light, Three Kings differs from Team America: World Police because the flaws of the three protagonists are examined as opposed to the perceived flaws of the American government at large. The plot of Three Kings revolves around three men who find a map to one of Saddam Hussein's bunkers which is presumed to contain gold. In a show of greed and insubordination, the three men choose to steal it instead of reporting it to their commanding officer. This action results in the death of several Iraqi civilians and Conrad Vig, and culminates in their arrest at the hands of their superiors, further legitimizing the United States military. This act legitimizes the United States as a military power because it shows an instance of non-discrimination with superiors holding their inferiors accountable for their insubordination. The group of protagonists finds redemption, however, in submitting the stolen gold for the safety of the Iraqi refugees who called them hypocrites.

III. Representation of Terrorism

How does film represent terrorism? The Delta Force portrays terrorists as a group of rogue, hostile Lebanese men sporting facial hair and dark skin as is stereotypical. The terrorists are also given stereotypical, familiar middle-eastern sounding names such as Abdul, Mustafa and Jamil. The group of terrorists are shown to hate the United States, and their hatred is confirmed by their torture of the three United States sailors traveling on the hijacked airplane. The Lebanese terrorists also display hostile, racist behavior by singling out and holding every passenger with a Jewish name prisoner and beating them.

The terrorists in The Delta Force are shown to be unorganized and unskilled as evidenced by their inability to land shots on members of the United States Army during the many firefights in the film. The Delta Force creates ambiguity by leading viewers to sympathize with Mustafa, a hijacker coping with the loss of his daughter who helps a young girl and a pregnant woman on the plane only to be brutalized by Major Scott McCoy. The depiction of terrorists in
The Delta Force is largely based on racial and ethnic stereotypes and feeds into the prevalent American idea that terrorists hate American freedom.

Zero Dark Thirty portrays terrorists vastly differently than The Delta Force. In Zero Dark Thirty, the United States is fighting against an identified threat: al-Qaeda. The terrorists in the film are based off of real al-Qaeda operatives that worked with Osama Bin Laden as opposed to the rogue group of Lebanese men shown in The Delta Force. Additionally, the terrorists in Zero Dark Thirty are shown to be strategic and intelligent enough to maintain a cold trail for the majority of the film, tricking the CIA with false leads until Osama Bin Laden's compound is eventually discovered.

Team America: World Police depicts terrorists as unintelligent extremists with an insatiable urge to destroy. Team America: World Police takes perhaps the most ambiguous perspective on terrorism because the middle-eastern threat is funded by an outside source with an ulterior motive (North Korea), and its agents speak to one another in gibberish without communicating any reason for their destructive tendencies. This idea is further enforced when the protagonist Gary Johnson is given reconstructive surgery in order to blend in with the terrorists. While the operation was performed in order to help him blend in, it only morphed him into a racist caricature based on stereotypes with blotchy brown skin and a patchy beard. Despite looking clearly different from their targets with his botched disguise, Gary Johnson is able to maintain cover and infiltrate the terrorists' stronghold.

Despite his poor disguise, the rest of his team is unable to distinguish him from the other terrorists during a chase scene and proceeds to open fire on him. The portrayal of terrorism in Team America: World Police suggests that the average American only understands the middle-east and Islam through a set of racial and ethnic stereotypes, which is similar to, but more extreme than, The Delta Force. This portrayal is driven even further when Team America sends Gary Johnson to infiltrate the terrorists' hideout. By simply mimicking their gibberish, he is able to gain entry, showing a clear American stereotype of middle-eastern people.

Three Kings presents terrorists differently than any film so far in that it focuses on struggling refugees rather than men who kill in cold blood. The real threat in Three Kings is the Iraqi army who served Saddam Hussein. While these men were ruthless in their pursuit of the three protagonists of the film, the majority of "terrorists" were members of the anti-Saddam uprising who felt rage against the United States for abandoning them. The members of the Iraqi military were relentless in their mission to eliminate resistance, going as far as murdering women, assaulting children, and shooting Iraqi citizens seeking refuge.

The representation of the terrorist in Under Siege is dramatically different from all of the films included in the analysis section. In Under Siege, the main antagonist, Strannix, is an American and an ex-CIA operative. Strannix stands as a unique representation of terrorism because his motivation is not due to a religious or political conviction but stems from his plan to sell the stolen nuclear weapons from the ship on the black market. The complexity of his plan contrasts from any terrorist activity in the other films because they were selfish and, furthermore, drove him to turn against his own country. While Under Siege and The Delta Force make use of a soldier as an American archetype, they differ greatly with the development of the terrorist threat that the archetypal hero must defeat. The representation of terrorism in Under Siege is the result of the fact that the film was released prior to the September 11th terrorist attacks and, due to a lack of real-world instances of terrorism in the United States as it is presently known, a creative concept of terrorism was developed where a former
United States officer turns on his own country.

IV. Ambiguity

Ambiguity can be understood as a lack of certainty or exactness of meaning. In terms of this analysis, ambiguity can be thought of as terrorist or state actions which go against their nature which has already been established within the imagined world of the film. Examples of ambiguity include blurring the lines between "good and evil," such as the misconduct of United States military personnel, showing the United States during a moment of weakness, and terrorists establishing personal relationships with their enemies, changing the dynamic between the state and the terrorist.

Zero Dark Thirty shows the United States being foiled by suicide bombers and showing the severe lack of morale that resulted. Zero Dark Thirty creates ambiguity not only by showing a lack of morale in the United States government, but also by emphasizing Dan's emotional distress from torturing detainees and Maya's deteriorating mental state from repeated defeat. Despite the graphic nature of the torture sequences in the film, Zero Dark Thirty differs from Delta Force due to the humanization of United States military personnel. Dan eventually grows tired of interrogating detainees which results in an early retirement, and Maya, the protagonist of the film, shows clear signs of disturbance, disgust, and a deteriorating psyche as the film progresses.

Upon completion of the mission to locate Osama Bin Laden, the Navy SEAL who neutralizes Osama Bin Laden goes into shock before realizing the gravity of his action. In the final scene, Maya is shown crying on a military transport. Zero Dark Thirty also makes a clear point of avoiding political alignment by avoiding references to the Bush and Obama administrations, and with a CIA official saying that if the mission were political, it would have taken place during an election. This moment in particular is ambiguous because the film makes a point of legitimizing the United States while also attempting to remain neutral in order to appeal to the shared sentiment against terrorism in the United States, refusing to take sides on the political spectrum despite the issue having political implications and consequences.

Ambiguity is created in the beginning of the Three Kings when the protagonists of the film recognize that the Iraqi people still live in peril and question whether or not they accomplished anything. Although the war is over, they help refugees throughout the film and even reconcile with those who captured and tortured them due to their perceived hypocrisy after establishing interpersonal relationships with their captors. This is similar to the ambiguity created in The Delta Force when Mustafa recollects having a daughter and helps a pregnant woman. Although these scenes portray the terrorist as having a kinder side, Mustafa is killed at the hands of Major Scott McCoy to further legitimize the United States as a military power. The ambiguities created in these films conflict in that they show the United States as both forgiving and unforgiving in the face of a terrorist threat.

Under Siege presents perhaps the most ambiguous representation of terrorism due to the main antagonist of the film being an ex-CIA operative who hijacks a heavily armed battleship on its route to be decommissioned. This differs greatly from The Delta Force because the film portrays the United States military in a more unfavorable manner: instead of terrorism acting as an outside force to be fought against, it comes from within the military as an unexpected act of betrayal. The United States military is shown as very polarized in Under Siege, which can be seen by the treatment of officer Ryback by his fellow sailors when he is beaten and forced into imprisonment despite his captain preferring
him to be free at all times due to his skill as a soldier.

While *Under Siege* represents terrorism ambiguously, *Jarhead*, released in 2005, represents the United States military ambiguously. By attempting to focus on the experiences that soldiers have as they go through training and deployment rather than the clash between the military and terrorists, *Jarhead* both humanizes the United States military and asks the viewer to sympathize with soldiers instead of attempting to directly legitimize the government or demonize terrorism. The first hour of the film focuses on Anthony Swofford's initiation into the United States Marine Corp. The opening scene of *Jarhead* shows Swofford being humiliated by his drill sergeant, saying that he only joined the military because he "got lost on his way to college."

The film highlights the sacrifices that soldiers make for their country, especially during a scene where Swofford offers commentary on the term "Jarhead," likening Marines to empty vessels and repeating the mantra that "without my rifle, I am nothing." *Jarhead* is different from the films in this analysis because it portrays the United States military as a group of normal people who struggle with self-doubt and finding acceptance, attempting to convince its audience that they can relate to the military instead of portraying it as an all-powerful machine. *Jarhead*, above all else, shows the United States military in a constant weakened state with fluctuating morale, which can be seen during the firefights between Swofford's squad and Iraqi insurgents. Instead of conquering their threat, the squad often suffers casualties and Swofford urinates on himself out of fear during his first real battle.

V. Historical Context

What role does the political climate that existed during the time that each films was released play in shaping their content? *The Delta Force, Under Siege and Three Kings* were all released before September 11th. *The Delta Force* stands as the oldest film in this set, having been released in 1986: eleven years after the end of the Vietnam War and four years before the start of the Gulf War. *The Delta Force* occupies an interesting period of time in-between major United States wars. *The Delta Force* was, however, released two years after the Multinational Peacekeeping Force in Lebanon was assembled for peacekeeping during the Lebanese Civil War. The M.N.F. lasted for two years, during which United States and French barracks were attacked by suicide bombers. The terrorists in *The Delta Force* were Lebanese and resented United States involvement in the mission.

Three Kings and *Jarhead* share interesting similarities and differences. Both films deal with the Gulf War but were respectively released before and after September 11th. *Three Kings*, standing as a satirical war comedy, criticizes the United States military with humor. *Jarhead*, however, is a character study based on a memoir. How are these two films affected by their respective chronologies? *Three Kings* highlights issues that were present during the Gulf War such as the Iraqi uprising against Saddam Hussein, crimes against human rights, and displaced refugees. *Jarhead*, in keeping with the established theme of being less ambiguous, creates a vicarious experience of what soldiers went through during the Gulf War. For example, the dangers of chemical warfare are alluded to before a major battle during the climax of the film.

*Team America: World Police* and *Zero Dark Thirty* both take place in a post-September 11th America and are clearly shaped by their historical contexts. *Team America: World Police* deals primarily with the cultural impact that the September 11th attacks had on the United States, paying special attention to the fear-mongering and identity politics which were spawned by the
attacks. *Zero Dark Thirty*, however, shows a dramatized fight against al-Qaeda and the mission to capture Osama Bin Laden. *Zero Dark Thirty* is the least ambiguous film discussed in this analysis due to being released most recently, especially during the ongoing war on terror. The lack of ambiguity in *Zero Dark Thirty* is the result of the end of a major chapter of the war on terror. With the real-world defeat of Osama Bin Laden, *Zero Dark Thirty* takes a no-holds-barred approach in presenting a specific narrative directly from the CIA.

Conclusions

To conclude my study on film and terrorism, my argument has been confirmed. The shift from the "American singularities" such as Casey Ryback and Major Scott McCoy to human characters such as Maya and Anthony Swofford shows a change from ambiguous and one-sided representations of the United States government to fully fleshed out characters with struggles and emotions of their own rather than serving as simple tools of the government. Furthermore, the depiction of terrorism has become less ambiguous since September 11th as well. For example, the rogue militant group which hijacked the plane in *The Delta Force* and the defectors who hijacked the USS Missouri in *Under Siege* have been replaced by al-Qada and the Iraqi army as specifically identified, real threats in all three post-September 11th films. The role of satire in this study has served to blur lines and above all else, criticize both the United States and the terrorists that it fights against.

Films such as *Three Kings* and *Team America: World Police* exist to exaggerate concepts such as nationalism, racism, sexism and insubordination in order to promote critical thought and ontological displacement. With this in mind, satirical film serves a function that was unexpected at the beginning of the study: to walk the line between legitimization and criticism and provide a vastly different, alternative commentary on political issues. Despite its mockery of the United States, satire is essentially the most ambiguous and subtle form of political commentary and acts as an outlier when analyzing state and terrorist depictions.

In summation, film has become less ambiguous and more willing to criticize the United States since September 11th. However, the more contemporary films in this study use criticism and legitimization in conjunction in order to make the representations of the United States and terrorism more complex. The disappearance of the American archetype is due to the humanization of agents of the United States. The ambiguous representation of terrorism as rogue factions was replaced in contemporary film due to terrorism becoming a real issue for Americans after September 11th. With this in mind, the representations of the United States government and terrorism have become less ambiguous due to the reification of terrorism as a threat to American freedom.

References


