

Third-Force Influences: Hollywood's War Films

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ABSTRACT: This article discusses the role of movie images in influencing the public's perceptions of servicemembers. The implications of these findings are relevant to policymakers responsible for balancing servicemembers' needs with public perceptions.

Due to its role during America's long wars and its effect on perceptions of US military prestige, the entertainment media can be considered one of the *third forces*—"organizations that can influence the outcome of armed combat."¹ This article explains the ability of combat films to influence civilian and military perceptions of servicemembers and veterans. By understanding Hollywood's depictions of servicemembers in combat and veterans at home, military leaders can respond better to media-influenced perceptions of military institutions and the people who provide our nation's defense.

The film *American Sniper*, based on the autobiography of Chris Kyle, a veteran US Navy Seal sniper with 160 officially confirmed kills during four tours in the Iraq War, serves as a fulcrum for this article.² Although the book and film were criticized for inaccuracies, the film was nominated for several Academy Awards, and Kyle's murder by Eddie Ray Routh accelerated the notoriety of both productions. The mutually generated interest in the film and the trial presented a unique opportunity to study not only civilian perceptions of servicemembers portrayed in Hollywood movies but also the potential impact on jurors' perceptions of "Routh," a former Marine with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) who was depicted in the film prior to the trial.³

Hollywood's War Films

The *Oxford Dictionary of Film Studies* defines a combat film as one that features "scenes of combat that are dramatically central and that determine the fate of the film's principal characters."⁴ Such films may include home-front dramas, veterans' stories, service comedies, basic training films, spy films, prisoner-of-war movies, and partisan films. While the American Civil War and international conflicts may be included,

1 US Army War College, *Key Strategic Issues List, 2016–2017* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College Press, 2016), 5.

2 Jason Hall, Chris Kyle, Scott McEwen, and Jim DeFelice, *American Sniper*, directed by Clint Eastwood (Warner Brothers, 2014).

3 A defense of not guilty by reason of insanity was mounted based on the defendant's PTSD. The Texas jury found Routh guilty, and he was sentenced to life in prison without parole. See Mike Spies, "Inside the Tortured Mind of Eddie Ray Routh, the Man Who Killed American Sniper Chris Kyle," *Newsweek*, November 23, 2015.

4 Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell, *A Dictionary of Film Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 449.

the genre is usually associated with representations of twentieth-century wars. Edison Company films of the Spanish-American War are said to be the first war films. *Wings* (1927), a World War I film named Best Picture at the first Academy Awards ceremony in 1928, is an early example of an antiwar movie.⁵ America's Office of War Information exercised a great deal of control over scripts during World War II, resulting in prowar propaganda films that came to characterize the combat genre.

Despite some cynical Vietnam-era films in the 1960s and 1970s, such as *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*, the pro-American, prowar conventions established during World War II largely remain.⁶ Films such as *First Blood* and subsequent titles in the Rambo series provided audiences with a revisionist version of Vietnam.⁷ Contemporary films—such as *The Hurt Locker*, *American Sniper*, and *Brothers*—shift the focus from the squad or platoon perspective of World War II combat films to the impact of the Iraq War on the individual soldier, both during the war and upon returning home.⁸

Saving Private Ryan and *The Thin Red Line* ushered in the current era of the genre, in which advancements in digital cinematography and computer graphics technology offer audiences increasingly dramatic and violent images of combat.⁹ The films use visual realism to disguise heightened moral assertions: should soldiers be proud or devastated about killing the enemy? Some critics assert films like *Saving Private Ryan* and *Black Hawk Down* are based on contrived plots, relying on combat sequences more like those from action movies, rather than realistic depictions of twenty-first century combat.¹⁰ Unlike combat films of the 1980s—such as *Platoon* and *Hamburger Hill*, which were lauded for their realism—contemporary films set in Afghanistan and Iraq are more entertainment than history.¹¹ The visual style of the new Hollywood combat film presents a realistic and graphic image of combat, but does not present a true story. Such films appear to be founded in realism, while actually reinforcing common myths of heroism and war.¹²

A 2011 book about contemporary war films argues these realistic looking fictions offer audiences a cast of ordinary folks they can relate to in extraordinary circumstances. Frequently, soldiers are depicted as

5 John Monk Saunders et al., *Wings*, directed by William A. Wellman and Harry d'Abbadie d'Arrast (Paramount Famous Lasky Corporation, 1927).

6 Michael Cimino, Deric Washburn, Louis Garfinkle, and Quinn K. Redeker, *The Deer Hunter* (EMI Films, 1978); and John Milius, Francis Ford Coppola, Michael Herr, and Joseph Conrad, *Apocalypse Now* directed by Francis Ford Coppola (Zoetrope Studios, 1979).

7 David Morrell, Michael Kozoll, William Sackheim, and Sylvester Stallone, *First Blood* directed by Ted Kotcheff (Anabasis N.V. and Elcajo Productions, 1979); and Kuhn and Westwell, *Dictionary of Film Studies*.

8 Mark Boal, *The Hurt Locker*, directed by Kathryn Bigelow (Voltage Pictures et al., 2008); and David Benioff, Susanne Bier, and Anders Thomas Jensen, *Brothers*, directed by Jim Sheridan (Lionsgate et al., 2009).

9 Robert Rodat, *Saving Private Ryan*, directed by Steven Spielberg (DreamWorks et al., 1998); James Jones and Terrence Malick, *The Thin Red Line*, directed by Terrence Malick (Fox 2000 Pictures, Geisler-Roberdeau, and Phoenix Pictures, 1998); and Philippa Gates, "Fighting the Good Fight: The Real and the Moral in the Contemporary Hollywood Combat Film," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 22, no. 4 (2005), 297–310, doi:10.1080/10509200590475788.

10 Mark Bowden and Ken Nolan, *Black Hawk Down*, directed by Ridley Scott (Revolution Studios, Jerry Bruckheimer Films, and Scott Free Productions, 2001); and Gates, "Fighting the Good Fight."

11 Oliver Stone, *Platoon* (Hemdale and Cinema 86, 1986); and James Carabatsos, *Hamburger Hill*, directed by John Irvin (RKO Pictures, 1987).

12 Gates, "Fighting the Good Fight."

uneducated grunts, not always clear on why they are fighting, but fighting for survival and from a sense of patriotism.¹³ This article explores the relationship between servicemembers' perceptions of the realism of combat films, civilians' perceptions of the same, and the impact of those perceptions on real servicemembers. This is known as the phenomenon of third-person perception.

Third-Person Perception

In lay terms, third-person perception (TPP) is the belief that media messages influence others more than oneself. The concept was introduced more than 30 years ago regarding a service unit consisting of mostly African American troops and white officers on Iwo Jima island.¹⁴ The Japanese dropped propaganda leaflets over the island encouraging the "colored soldiers" to stop risking their lives for the white men. Despite no evidence that the leaflets had an impact on their intended audience, the troops were withdrawn. The example was interpreted to illustrate how people act on their perceptions of media influence rather than on reality.¹⁵ Dozens of studies have documented the phenomenon across a variety of contexts. Some contexts, such as press coverage, advertising, and pornography have received a great deal of attention.¹⁶ Given the origins of the theory, it is surprising to note there have been no published studies on TPP regarding contemporary warfare until this exploration.

While no previous studies of TPP regard depictions of servicemembers, a few studies have focused on film. In 2006, a small study of college students found reverse TPP, or first-person perception, regarding the documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*.¹⁷ Participants believed they were more likely than their peers to be influenced by the film. First-person perception was related to the willingness to promote the film and to make personal changes toward a more sustainable lifestyle. These behavioral effects and attitudinal changes are referred to in the literature as third-person effects, which are important when documenting TPP because people act on their perceptions. First-person perception tends to emerge when participants believe it is good to be influenced; TPP emerges when media influence is perceived to be bad. A study of adults in Singapore, for instance, found participants believed they were less influenced than others by films with homosexual content.¹⁸ An earlier study of college students documented TPP regarding alcohol

13 Martin Barker, *A Toxic Genre* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), 4–68.

14 W. Phillips Davison, "The Third-Person Effect in Communication," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (1983): 1–15, doi:10.1086/268763.

15 Baker, *Toxic Genre*.

16 Nikos Antonopoulos et al., "Web Third-Person Effect in Structural Aspects of the Information on Media Websites," *Computers in Human Behavior* 44 (2015): 48–58, doi:10.1016/j.chb.2014.11.022; Guang-Xin Xie and Jessie M. Quintero Johnson, "Examining the Third-Person Effect of Baseline Omission in Numerical Comparison: The Role of Consumer Persuasion Knowledge," *Psychology and Marketing* 32, no. 4 (April 2015): 438–49, doi:10.1002/mar.20790; and Lijiang Shen et al., "A Social Comparison Explanation for the Third-Person Perception," *Communication Research* 42, no. 2 (2015): 260–80, doi:10.1177/0093650212467644.

17 Davis Guggenheim, director, *An Inconvenient Truth* (Lawrence Bender Productions and Participant Media, 2006); and Sue-Jen Lin, "Perceived Impact of a Documentary Film: An Investigation of the First-Person Effect and Its Implications for Environmental Issues," *Science Communication* 35, no. 6 (2013): 708–33, doi:10.1177/1075547013478204.

18 Shirley S. Ho, Benjamin H. Detenber, Shelly Malik, and Rachel L. Neo, "The Roles of Value Predispositions, Communication, and Third-Person Perception on Public Support for Censorship in Films with Homosexual Content," *Asian Journal of Communication* 22, no. 1 (2012), 78–97, doi:10.1080/01292986.2011.622775.

content in films.¹⁹ While the TPP literature on film remains small, a larger body of literature on television consistently documents similar findings. Participants believe others are more influenced by television content unless that content is perceived to be positive.²⁰

Analysis and Findings

After the release of *American Sniper* and during jury selection for Routh's trial, this study examined servicemembers' perceptions of how Hollywood films depict servicemembers and veterans and how those depictions shape civilian perceptions and attitudes. Participants were recruited through email listservs and social media. Two large mid-Atlantic universities shared a link to an online survey with veterans and students currently serving in the military. Veterans of Foreign War posts in the same regions were also asked to share the link. Participants were asked to complete the survey and share the link with colleagues who have any type of military service. A smaller control group of civilians was collected in a similar way from the same universities.

Demographics

Servicemembers participating in the study were 23 to 76 years old with a mean age of 36.2 years; civilians, 23 to 56 years old with a mean age of 27.4 years. Seventy-seven percent of servicemembers and sixty-five percent of civilians participating in the study were male. The majority racial groups of both types of participants was similar: whites comprised 84 percent of servicemembers and 87 percent of civilians; blacks 5 percent for both groups. Hispanics (5 percent) and Asians (2 percent), however, only participated in the servicemember group. Four percent of servicemember participants and 8 percent of civilian participants identified as mixed or other racial backgrounds.

Military Experience

Servicemembers gained their experience over 1 to 30 years, with 10.2 years being the group's mean length of service. Veterans' end of service dates ranged from 1978 to 2015, with a mean of 2009. Forty-eight percent of servicemembers experienced as many as nine combat deployments lasting up to 50 months—an average of 1.6 deployments lasting 14.7 months. Servicemembers participating in the study attained the following ranks: officer (25.6 percent), warrant officer (3.6 percent), and enlisted (69.6 percent). Sixty-two percent of servicemembers served on active duty and fourteen percent in reserve components. Individuals affiliated with the US Air Force comprised 35.7 percent of the servicemember group; Army, 30.4 percent; Navy, 3.6 percent; Marine Corps 21.4 percent; Coast Guard 0 percent; and National Guard 7.9 percent.

Method

Researchers asked qualitative, open-ended questions to gain insight into participant perceptions of Hollywood combat films. Queries asked for names of three combat films participants believed to be inaccurate

19 Dong-Hee Shin and Jun Kyo Kim, "Alcohol Product Placement and the Third-Person Effect," *Television and New Media* 12, no. 5 (2011): 412–40, doi:10.1177/1527476410385477.

20 Shen et al., "Social Comparison."

portrayals of war, soldiers, and veterans and three films believed to be accurate. Additional questions revealed inaccuracies or accuracies about the films. Then, participants were asked about common misperceptions regarding servicemembers and veterans that may have been influenced by combat films.

Quantitative measures established participant levels of third-person perception in relation to the influence of *American Sniper* on civilian jurors for the Routh trial.²¹ If participants had seen *American Sniper*, they were asked to rate the accuracy of the film as well as the accuracy of other Hollywood combat films. Participants were provided with a statement about Routh's military experience and PTSD. Then researchers asked participants how likely they would be to accept a defense of not guilty by reason of insanity if they were a juror. Scores of 0, not very likely, and 6, very likely were assigned.

After these questions were administered, the demographic information noted above was collected. Civilians were also asked if they had a close family member or friend with military experience that significantly influenced their perceptions. Answers from participants who responded "yes" to this item were excluded from analysis.

Researchers used IBM SPSS software for the statistical analysis. T-tests and correlations were used for hypothesis testing. To analyze the qualitative research questions, responses were grouped into categories and direct quotes were documented. Two military servicemembers provided insight and analysis based on independent reviews of the qualitative data.

Findings

Do servicemembers believe depictions of war, soldiers, and veterans in Hollywood movies are accurate? Servicemembers rated the accuracy of Hollywood's depictions from 1, not at all accurate, to 6, very accurate, with a mean of 4.0 and standard deviation of 1.1. The accuracy of *American Sniper* was rated higher, with a mean of 4.7 and standard deviation of 1.3. For perspective, this equates to a D rating for the accuracy of most Hollywood combat films and a C+ for *American Sniper*.

When asked to name up to three titles for inaccuracy, participants listed 37 combat films. Out of those productions named by more than 2 percent of participants, servicemembers identified *Hurt Locker* (25 percent), *Top Gun* (6 percent), *A Few Good Men* (5 percent), *American Sniper* (5 percent), *Brothers* (4 percent), and *Jarhead* (4 percent). Civilians chose *American Sniper* (35 percent) and *Jarhead* (14 percent). Notably, nearly a third of servicemembers did not name films, specifically saying they did not or could not watch combat films after serving. A few explained they only named older films such as *Top Gun* and *A Few Good Men* because they enjoyed the film as an adolescents, but could not watch them now.²²

21 Davison, "Third-Person Effect."

22 Jim Cash, Jack Epps Jr., Ehud Yonay, and Warren Skaaren, *Top Gun*, directed by Tony Scott (Paramount Pictures and Don Simpson/Jerry Bruckheimer Films, 1986); and Aaron Sorkin, *A Few Good Men*, directed by Rob Reiner (Columbia Pictures Corporation and Castle Rock Entertainment, 1992). One participant specifically said these films influenced his decision to enlist, but he soon learned their stories were nothing like the reality of military life.

The inclusion of *The Hurt Locker* on the list of inaccurate films is startling because it also earned more than \$15 million in the US box office and the 2009 Academy Award for Best Picture. Moreover, 25 percent of servicemembers' responses recognized its inaccuracies while military consultants likewise dismissed the production as fiction.

When asked to name accurate films, 30 percent of participants wrote in "none" or "almost none" instead of suggesting titles. Of participants who listed films, 22 titles were perceived to be accurate, but few were listed by more than one person. *Lone Survivor*, *Black Hawk Down*, and *Jarhead* were frequently listed with comments about accurate depictions of military life, solitude, and why people fight.²³ Many qualified their comments with "but" statements such as "*Black Hawk Down* captures the brotherhood of military service, but the battles are exaggerated and unrealistic."

Which aspects of combat films do servicemembers find to be the most accurate and least accurate? In terms of inaccuracies, the smallest details are often the most irritating. Uniforms were the clear leader (20 percent). Film characters wearing hats indoors, not wearing hats outdoors, and uniforms not matching characters' ranks were commonly cited. Similarly, small details were often mentioned about weapons capabilities and handling, as well as limitless supplies of ammunition. Servicemembers mentioned that everyone in the movies seems to be not only expert marksmen but also experts in multiple areas such as explosives and tactics. Battles orchestrated by Hollywood were often described as more dramatic than those in real life: soldiers were too macho, and situations and circumstances were exaggerated to keep audiences on the edge of their seats. Specifically, depictions of soldiers were described as exaggerations: macho mavericks disregarded rank and authority in ways that would never be seen in real life, and enlisted men were depicted as ignorant, uneducated racists.

When asked about the details combat films get right, 20 percent of servicemembers who responded said "nothing" or "almost nothing." The only aspect many agreed on was the comradery or brotherhood of the people who serve together, especially in combat. Some say military life is captured well, especially the boredom of waiting and the depiction of gallows humor. Servicemembers also say their service takes a toll on their family lives; 9 percent say Hollywood accurately captures the struggle.

How much influence do servicemembers believe inaccurate combat films have on civilians' perceptions of soldiers and veterans? Servicemembers commonly respond civilians perceive everyone is broken: "Everybody has PTSD, is crazy, or has a screw loose; we're all ticking time bombs." Likewise, there are misperceptions that soldiers are bloodthirsty alcoholics, addicted to killing, and devoid of human emotions. These associations are likely related to misperceptions that all servicemembers have participated in combat missions and killed people. Enlisted servicemembers believe Hollywood portrays them as uneducated racists who joined the military

23 Peter Berg, Marcus Luttrell, and Patrick Robinson, *Lone Survivor*, directed by Peter Berg (Film 44 et al., 2013); and William Broyles Jr. and Anthony Swofford, *Jarhead*, directed by Sam Mendes (Universal Pictures, Red Wagon Entertainment, Neal Street Productions, and Motion Picture KAPPA Produktionsgesellschaft, 2005).

because they were not smart enough to get into college, and who returned home broken and potentially dangerous.

How do perceptions differ among servicemembers and civilians? In some cases, the differences between the perceptions of servicemembers and civilians are marked. Servicemembers struggled to identify accurate films whereas civilians named only nine films inaccurate; only three titles were named more than once. Both feature films civilians considered accurate were deemed inaccurate by servicemembers. *Restrepo*, mentioned by 12 percent of civilians, was actually a documentary that aired on HBO.²⁴ Two misperceptions influenced by films were recognized by both servicemembers and civilians: all servicemembers have been in combat and killed people, and soldiers are bloodthirsty adrenaline junkies addicted to killing.

The most interesting point of disagreement is PTSD. Servicemembers cited the misperception that everyone is broken, everyone has PTSD mostly. Among civilians, 16 percent also believe PTSD is overrepresented, but 11 percent believe the misconception is that soldiers come home fine, with no PTSD, and seamlessly reunite with their families. Eleven percent of civilians also believe the depiction of heroes fighting for a just cause is the biggest misconception.

Civilians believe Hollywood combat films, at their best, illustrate the pointlessness of war through the internal struggles of enlisted men and women. They balance patriotism and love of control with simple acts of kindness in war, showing not all Muslims are terrorists and not all American soldiers are racists. Civilians believe Hollywood's version of combat, at worst, presents realistic battles in historically inaccurate contexts that simplify global politics and glorify American heroes.

Conversely, servicemembers assert battle scenes are inaccurate: the average engagement is brief; 20 minutes of engagement are followed by an hour or more wondering if it is over, if it is safe to move. Military participants say *Lone Survivor* captures this well, arguing there is no time for politics or context during combat. All that matters is that the person to your left, the person to your right, and you go home safely.

Servicemembers' Third-Person Perception and the Trial of Eddie Ray Routh

While everyone exhibits TPP, it was more pronounced in this study among servicemembers than civilians. This finding matters because people act on their perceptions not reality. The trial of Eddie Ray Routh provides a perfect example.

Servicemembers were mostly unwilling to accept the proposed defense of not guilty by reason of insanity; in fact, 40 percent indicated they would definitely not accept it. Only 6 percent said they would be very likely to accept the defense. Civilians were less extreme, with 11 percent definitely not accepting the defense and 11 percent very likely to accept it. Consistent with the literature, participants who exhibited higher levels of TPP were more likely to presume the defendant guilty. Thus, the trial represents a microcosm of public opinion and an excellent

²⁴ Tim Hetherington and Sebastian Junger, directors, *Restrepo* (Outpost Films, Virgil Films & Entertainment, and Passion Pictures, 2010).

example of media influence—*American Sniper* proclaimed Routh guilty prior to jury selection.

Conclusion

Media depictions can be a powerful third force that not only motivates young men and women to serve their country but also sways public support for lengthy military engagements. Public relations battles at home affect more than just public opinion; it impacts recruiting, retention, and morale, as well as policy. Similar to the previous example of the perceived impact of leaflets on minority servicemembers on Iwo Jima, this study—the first of its kind—measures TPP regarding the perceived impact of Hollywood combat films on civilians' perceptions of servicemembers and veterans. The study documented TPP and third-person effect—the presumption of guilt or innocence of a defendant in a high-profile, real-life murder case depicted in a popular film.

From the many differences in perceptions of servicemembers and civilians, the most likely explanation for the verdict differing among the research groups is related to PTSD. Films like *Brothers* and *American Sniper* portray veterans struggling to reunite with loved ones. *Brothers* paints a hopeless picture of a doomed marriage that escalates to violence. *American Sniper* shows a rocky start, followed by process of healing cut short by another veteran suffering from PTSD killing his would-be mentor. Servicemembers find both films unrealistic and say the myth of the broken soldier with PTSD is Hollywood's latest legacy. Civilians are torn: some agree PTSD is overemphasized in combat films and others argue happy reunions with well-adjusted veterans are the myth. Civilians' willingness to accept and servicemembers definitive rejection of Routh's PTSD defense underscores the different perceptions. Alternatively, military consultants suggest servicemembers are quick to support one another and would not accept the defense because they would not want the killer of one of their contemporary heroes to go free.

Many veterans and servicemembers of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars say 1980s films like *Top Gun* and *A Few Good Men* influenced their decision to serve, but quickly assessed the productions to be inaccurate at best. While military participants recognized contemporary combat films capture the brotherhood of soldiers, most of them are discontent with being depicted as uneducated, ignorant, bloodthirsty racists in need of counseling for PTSD. Civilians, on the other hand, see the films as accurately portraying the sights and sounds of war while simplifying why America sends men and women to fight in the first place.

Implications for Strategic Communications

To understand how third forces such as the media can influence servicemembers' morale as well as garner public support for extended wars, commanders must be aware of portrayals of servicemembers and combat in Hollywood films. Common myths and misperceptions must be addressed not only within the Department of Defense but also in the Department of Veterans Affairs. Public affairs offices can be create and distribute national messaging strategies to dispel myths. Encouraging film screenings and discussions within the military and initiating external media campaigns focusing on the accuracy of film depictions,

misconceptions about PTSD, and perceptions of “broken” veterans can shape public opinion.

One technique called “Message of the Day” could be used to initiate social change. The Defense Department and the Department of Veterans Affairs could adopt a communications strategy that presents a unified message about the inaccuracies of Hollywood films. The messages might start with “it’s not like the movies” and provide a detail such as “we care about our community.” The message needs to be repeated, particularly when addressing policy and budget issues. The message can be reinforced through public speaking events and targeted social media campaigns such as #NotLikeTheMovies.

As the message gains traction, it is important to address the common myths about PTSD specifically. Critical incidents, especially those occurring stateside, get a lot of traction. Credible spokespeople must be prepared to respond to media requests with accurate information about PTSD, explain what it looks like, and provide realistic estimates of its prevalence. Such events also need to be followed by positive stories about successful veterans from all walks of life. The public as well as the military community deserve to know men and women who served their country are not broken.

The best tool to shape opinion through Hollywood films is film. Pentagon support for combat films dates back to the 1920s. The most successful of these were *The Green Berets*, *Top Gun*, and *Black Hawk Down*.²⁵ *The Green Berets* was a prowar film starring John Wayne made to counterbalance Vietnam War protests. The film did not hold up over time because of the simplistic viewpoint, but it drew an audience and generated discussion during its run in theaters. *Top Gun* was produced with the full support of the Navy, including fighter jets and aircraft carriers. The popularity of the film increased recruitment by 400 percent. Servicemembers in the study mentioned *Top Gun* as a film that encouraged them to enlist or that contributed to their positive perceptions about the military. *Black Hawk Down*, also frequently named in the current study, provided a quick, symbolic response to September 11, 2001, and continues to inspire.

25 James Lee Barrett and Robin Moore, *The Green Berets*, directed by Ray Kellogg, John Wayne, and Mervyn LeRoy (Batjac Productions, 1968).

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