

Saving Public Myth

Movie Review of Saving Private Ryan

Directed by Steven Spielberg; Reviewed by Michael A. Hoffman II

"Saving Private Ryan," Steven Spielberg's latest cinematic entry in the canon of Hollywood "history," is not a "holocaust" film. It's about World War II combat on the Western front and the alleged honor and compassion of the U.S. government.

Mr. Spielberg would have us believe that after 54 years, the Allied myths about World War Two continue to hold true—Studs Terkel's pivotal reference point—"The Good War"—is confirmed. There are good wars, by golly, and WWII was it. Hip, hip, hooray!

Don't look for shades of moral gray or the existential self-doubt that attends retrospective accounts of Korea and Vietnam. Those were bad wars (we were fighting Communism) and American vets are supposed to grieve in a fit of collective nervous breakdown for even having participated.

So how does Spielberg go about celebrating the "values" of the "good war" in a time of slackers, grunge and Generation X?

He plays on the heart-strings of the same type of naive draftees who marched to Omaha Beach in the first place, the heartland kids who, in 1998, are desperately weary of the sickness of soul afflicting America and who want heroes and something to believe in again.

Spielberg imagines he has the antidote to our ennui. Hollywood is always willing to wave its celluloid wand of approbation over the killing fields of the Gulf War and World War Two because the enemies of Zionism were "our" enemies in those conflicts.

Patriotism, bravado and faith in army generals are conditionally legitimate here (whereas in Korea and Vietnam such attributes among America's fighting men were just shy of a war crime).

After a brief preface at an Allied cemetery, "Saving Private Ryan" opens with the U.S. infantry landing on the blood-soaked beaches of Normandy, where those "German SOBs" actually had the gall to shoot at the invading Americans.

The nearly-psychedelic scenes of gore and carnage—perhaps the most thrilling and beguiling ever staged—will surely hook a mass audience. The premise of the film is a huge slice from the dusty dish of "Capra-corn" (after pro-Soviet sentimentalist Frank Capra). It seems that Uncle Sam cares about his troops. No less a figure of "sterling manhood" than FDR's General George C. Marshall takes a personal interest in Private Ryan, the sole survivor among four brothers who marched off to make the world safe for Communism.

Marshall touchingly recites by heart the words of that other champion killer of white men—Abe Lincoln—to set the sentimental stage for a search-and-rescue operation for the surviving Private Ryan—a parachutist who landed off-course in enemy-occupied France.

A special team of Army rangers is dispatched. The team is deliberately comprised of one of those multi-ethnic American units that were staples of B-movies and Marvel comic books. There's a timid egghead, a dumb Italian, a pushy Jew, a surly Yank from Brooklyn and a Sgt. York type from the South.

The Jewish trooper waves his "Star of David" necklace at German POWs and taunts them with shouts of "Juden, Juden." This is the only hint of the underlying conflict in the film. But there are no depictions of any husky German grunt spitting on the necklace. There is no sense that a "holocaust" is transpiring a few thousand miles eastward in Poland.

Why Spielberg didn't hit this angle harder is anyone's guess. It's my hunch he intuits how weary American audiences are of "holocaust" themes. He chose to advance his agenda by less transparent means.

One of these is the suggestion that the Wehrmacht—mostly conscripts, if we recall our history—are practically war criminals just for fighting the Americans.

Spielberg telegraphs an unambiguous message about the necessity of shooting unarmed German POWs and how foolish it is to spare them (the Jewish soldier

eventually dies as a result of his captain having failed to authorize the murder of a German POW).

One of the most compelling figures in the film is Jackson, the Sgt. York character who's a rabid German-hater. When a POW speaks to him in German, he erupts in a rage, screaming, "Shut that filthy pig Latin!"

"Pig Latin"? Is Spielberg mocking the presumed ignorance of the servants of the New World Order? German being the language of philosophy and rocketry, among other stellar Teutonic achievements, Spielberg would seem to be both applauding and mocking the anti-German bigotry of this "hick," who mutters a psalm every time he blasts any German who gets in his sniper rifle's sights.

How the Germans ever conquered Europe and North Africa and fought the Red Army to the gates of Moscow is certainly a mystery if one credits their portrayal in "Saving Private Ryan."

They fight with basic soldierly resolve only as long as they have the advantage—a fortified pill box, a machine gun nest or a Tiger tank. But as soon as the tide turns, the German soldiers toss their arms up in surrender and jabber in hysterical fear and pleading.

They fight with the same wooden stupidity as did the extras on the set of the old 1960s TV series "Combat"—whenever they're in American sights they get hit and drop, whereas, once off the beach, Americans can run in front of a legion of German rifles and dodge bullets with miraculous invulnerability.

There is just one swastika visible in the film (a graffito painted on the Atlantic Wall). Even an SS tank commander appears sans monocle and armband. Spielberg obviously sought to avoid hyperbole and schlock.

He makes his anti-German point with a much lighter touch, but he makes it all the better by this near-subliminal technique. It's simple, really, an old trick from the propaganda manual: he endears us to the American troops by showing them griping and complaining, joking, sobbing and gambling.

We share their life stories and their jests. We “bond” with them. They are not robots. They gripe about “Fubar”—an acronym for an expletive for U.S. government incompetence and high command absurdity (the government is incompetent even in its great compassion and goodness—a concession to combat infantry “realism”).

The Germans are mere ciphers, however. Never does Spielberg take us to their campfire to hear their songs and stories. We almost never glimpse their humanity. No German words are ever translated into sub-titles. German becomes an unintelligible clamor—a “pig Latin.” We are glad whenever the German boys die and Roosevelt’s troops prevail.

The closest Spielberg comes to humanizing the German troops is in a brief standoff between an American and a German, when they both run out of ammo and hurl their helmets at each other; and in a quick flash of a German soldier making a hurried gesture resembling the Catholic sign of the cross (blink and you miss it).

In a nearly three hour film, those 15 seconds do not counter-balance the straw men Spielberg has fashioned. He has shown even these skimpy scenes only to make his point more convincingly—yes, he grudgingly seems to be saying in these snippets—the Germans are sort of human, maybe—but not anywhere on par with the noble and lovable Americans.

This would not wash in a 1990s war film about Korea or Vietnam. Asian soldiers would have to be painted in the full strokes of their humanity or the filmmaker would risk charges of racism. Germans? A bunch of “krauts.”

Spielberg’s defenders will claim he humanized them in a scene with a German POW who babbles about “Betty Boop” and “Steamboat Willie.” But his mutterings are grotesque, not poignant. This is not a means for humanizing Germans, it’s a demonstration of how supposedly weak and disgusting the German soldier—the “Hitlerian superman”—really is once he’s disarmed; his behavior being perilously close to that of a coward.

There is not a single good German in “Saving Private Ryan,” just as every single one of the hundreds of German soldiers depicted in Spielberg’s “Schindler’s List” were, to a man, nothing but homicidal robots.

“Saving Private Ryan” is a whitewash of the ignominious record of George C. Marshall and a celebration of senseless fratricide and jingoism. This war-mongering emanates from that compassionate paragon of humanitarianism—that bearded and bespectacled teddy-bear—Steven Spielberg, “repository of warmth and wisdom.”

Sweet dreams, kiddies. Sooner or later it will be your turn to die for the New World Order in another Glorious Crusade against “tyranny.” The killing fields await another generation of American manhood, prepped and primed by the latest Hollywood enchantment.

Prepare the prosthetics and wheel chairs, puff up the pillows at the Veteran’s hospitals, speed up production at the body-bag factories, the U.S. World Police Force Inc. is on a “patriotic” roll—across the technicolor screen and around the world.

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