

Lights, Camera... Covert Action: The Deep Politics of Hollywood

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Global Research, May 25, 2019

Global Research 21 January 2009

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [Media Disinformation](#)

Originally published by GR in February 2009, this article focusses on the role of Hollywood as an instrument of propaganda. The Deep Politics of Hollywood are part of the broader process of media manipulation and disinformation in support of US led wars.

Here we build a prima facie case supporting the idea that Hollywood continues to be a target for infiltration and subversion by a variety of state agencies, in particular the CIA. Academic debates on cinematic propaganda are almost entirely retrospective, and whilst a number of commentators have drawn attention to Hollywood's longstanding and open relationship with the Pentagon, little of substance has been written about the more clandestine influences working through Hollywood in the post-9/11 world. As such, our work delves into the field of what Peter Dale Scott calls "deep politics"; namely, activities which cannot currently be fully understood due to the covert influence of shadowy power players.

The Latest Picture

A variety of state agencies have liaison offices in Hollywood today, from the FBI, to NASA and the Secret Service. Few of these agencies, though, have much to offer in exchange for favourable storylines, and so their influence in Hollywood is minimal. The major exception here is the Department of Defense, which has an 'open' but barely publicized relationship with Tinsel Town, whereby, in exchange for advice, men and invaluable equipment, such as aircraft carriers and helicopters, the Pentagon routinely demands flattering script alterations. Examples of this policy include changing the true identity of a heroic military character in *Black Hawk Down* (2001) due to his real-life status as a child rapist; the removal of a joke about "losing Vietnam" from the James Bond film *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997), and cutting images of Marines taking gold teeth from dead Japanese soldiers in *Windtalkers* (2002). Instances such as these are innumerable, and the Pentagon has granted its coveted "full cooperation" to a long list of contemporary pictures including *Top Gun* (1986), *True Lies* (1994), *Executive Decision* (1996), *Air Force One* (1997), *The Sum of All Fears* (2002), *Transformers* (2007), *Iron Man* (2008), as well as TV series such as *JAG* (1995-2005).

Such government activity, whilst morally dubious and barely advertised, has at least occurred within the public domain. This much cannot be said of the CIA's dealings with Hollywood, which, until recently, went largely unacknowledged by the Agency. In 1996, the CIA announced with little fanfare the dry remit of its newly established Media Liaison Office, headed by veteran operative Chase Brandon. As part of its new stance, the CIA would now openly collaborate on Hollywood productions, supposedly in a strictly 'advisory' capacity.

The Agency's decision to work publicly with Hollywood was preceded by the 1991 "Task Force Report on Greater CIA Openness," compiled by CIA Director Robert Gates' newly appointed 'Openness Task Force,' which secretly debated –ironically– whether the Agency should be less secretive. The report acknowledges that the CIA "now has relationships with reporters from every major wire service, newspaper, news weekly, and television network in the nation," and the authors of the report note that this helped them "turn some 'intelligence failure' stories into 'intelligence success' stories, and has contributed to the accuracy of countless others." It goes on to reveal that the CIA has in the past "persuaded reporters to postpone, change, hold, or even scrap stories that could have adversely affected national security interests..."

These admissions add weight to several reports and Congressional hearings from the 1970s which indicated that the CIA once maintained a deep-rooted and covert presence in national and international media, informally dubbed "Operation Mockingbird." In its 1991 report, the CIA acknowledged that it had, in fact, "reviewed some film scripts about the Agency, documentary and fictional, at the request of filmmakers seeking guidance on accuracy and authenticity." But the report is at pains to state that, although the CIA has "facilitated the filming of a few scenes on Agency premises," it does "not seek to play a role in filmmaking ventures." But it seems highly implausible that the CIA, whilst maintaining a decades-long presence in media and academia, would have shown no interest in the hugely influential Cinema industry.

Indeed, it should come as no surprise that the CIA has been involved in a number of recent blockbusters and TV series. The 2001 CBS TV series, *The Agency*, executive produced by Wolfgang Petersen (*Das Boot*, *Air Force One*) was actually co-written by ex-CIA agent and Marine Bazzel Baz, with additional ex-CIA agents working as consultants. The CIA gladly opened its doors to the production, and facilitated both external and internal shots of its Langley headquarters as the camera gazed lovingly at the CIA seal. This arrangement was comparable to the Feds' efforts on the popular TV series *The FBI* (1965-74) which was shaped by the Bureau in cooperation with ABC and which thanked J. Edgar Hoover in the credits of each episode. Similarly, *The Agency* glorified the actions of US spooks as they fought predictable villains including the Russian military, Arab and German terrorists, Columbian drug dealers, and Iraqis. One episode even shows the CIA saving the life of Fidel Castro; ironically, since the CIA in real life had made repeated attempts to assassinate the Cuban President. Promos for the show traded on 9/11, which had occurred just prior to its premiere, with tag lines like "Now, more than ever, we need the CIA."

A TV movie, *In the Company of Spies* (1999) starring Tom Berenger depicted a retired CIA operative returning to duty to save captured Agency officers held by North Korea. The CIA was so enthusiastic about this product that it hosted its presentation, cooperated during production, facilitated filming at Langley, and provided fifty off-duty officers as extras, according to its website.

Espionage novelist Tom Clancy has enjoyed an especially close relationship with the CIA. In 1984, Clancy was invited to Langley after writing *The Hunt for Red October*, which was later turned into the 1990 film. The Agency invited him again when he was working on *Patriot Games* (1992), and the movie adaptation was, in turn, granted access to Langley facilities. More recently, *The Sum of All Fears* (2002) depicted the CIA as tracking down terrorists who detonate a nuclear weapon on US soil. For this production, CIA director George Tenet gave the filmmakers a personal tour of the Langley HQ; the film's star, Ben Affleck also consulted with Agency analysts, and Chase Brandon served as on-set advisor.

Media sources indicate that the CIA also worked on the Anthony Hopkins/Chris Rock feature *Bad Company* (2002) and the Jerry Bruckheimer blockbuster *Enemy of the State* (2001). However, no details whatsoever about these appear to be in the public domain. Similarly, *Spy Game* director Tony Scott's DVD commentary for said film indicates that he visited Langley whilst in pre-production but, according to one report, endorsement appeared to have been withheld after Chase Brandon read the final draft of the script.

More details than usual emerged about CIA involvement in the Tom Hanks movie *Charlie Wilson's War* (2007) and Robert De Niro's *The Good Shepherd* (2006) – but not many. Milt Bearden had traveled to the Moscow Film Festival with De Niro and claims the pair then “disappeared and hung out with the mob and KGB crowd for a while. I introduced him to generals and colonels, the old guys I had been locked with for so many years.” De Niro later tagged along with Bearden to Pakistan. “We wandered around the North-West Frontier Province,” Bearden recalls, “crossed the bridge [to Afghanistan] I built years ago, hung out with a bunch of guys firing off machine guns and drinking tea.” Still, *The Good Shepherd* didn't fulfill the CIA's earnest hopes of being the CIA equivalent of *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006), which the Agency's official historian says it should have been – all in the interests of what he calls a “culture of truth.”

Charlie Wilson's War depicted the United States' covert efforts to supply arms to Afghanistan to fight the Soviet Union in the 1980s which had the real-life consequence of America's old ally turned against it in the form of al-Qaeda (as Crile explains in the book of the film). However, Bearden, who was the CIA agent who supplied the weapons, worked as consultant on the film and said prior to its release that it “will put aside the notion that because we did that, we had 9/11.” CIA involvement in the film therefore appears to have paid dividends.

The real reasons for the CIA adopting an “advisory” role on all of these productions are thrown into sharp relief by a solitary comment from former Associate General Counsel to the CIA, Paul Kelbaugh. In 2007, whilst at a College in Virginia, Kelbaugh delivered a lecture on the CIA's relationship with Hollywood, at which a local journalist was present. The journalist (who now wishes to remain anonymous) wrote a review of the lecture which related Kelbaugh's discussion of the 2003 thriller *The Recruit*, starring Al Pacino. The review noted that, according to Kelbaugh, a CIA agent was on set for the duration of the shoot under the guise of a consultant, but that his real job was to misdirect the filmmakers: “We didn't want Hollywood getting too close to the truth,” the journalist quoted Kelbaugh as saying.

Peculiarly, in a strongly-worded email to the authors, Kelbaugh emphatically denied having made the public statement and claimed that he remembered “very specific discussions with senior [CIA] management that no one was ever to misrepresent to affect [film] content – EVER.” The journalist considers Kelbaugh's denial “weird,” and told us that “after the story came out, he [Kelbaugh] emailed me and loved it... I think maybe it's just that because [the lecture] was ‘just in Lynchburg’ he was okay with it – you know, like, no one in Lynchburg is really going to pay much attention to it, I guess. Maybe that's why he said it, and maybe that's why he's denying it now.” The journalist stands by the original report, and Kelbaugh has pointedly refused to engage us in further discussion on the matter.

Early Screening

Clandestine agencies have a long history of interference in the cinema industry. Letters discovered in the Eisenhower Presidential Library from the secret agent Luigi G. Luraschi

(identified by British academic John Eldridge), the Paramount executive who worked for the CIA's Psychological Strategy Board (PSB), reveal just how far the CIA was able to reach into the film industry in the early days of the Cold War, despite its claims that it sought no such influence.

For instance, Luraschi reported that he had secured the agreement of several casting directors to subtly plant "well dressed negroes" into films, including "a dignified negro butler" who has lines "indicating he is a free man" in *Sangaree* (1953) and in a golf club scene in the Dean Martin/Jerry Lewis vehicle *The Caddy* (1953). Elsewhere, CIA arranged the removal of key scenes from the film *Arrowhead* (1953), which questioned America's treatment of Apache Indians, including a sequence where a tribe is forcibly shipped and tagged by the US Army. Such changes were not part of a ham-fisted campaign to instill what we now call "political correctness" in the populace. Rather, they were specifically enacted to hamper the Soviets' ability to exploit its enemy's poor record in race relations and served to create a peculiarly anodyne impression of America, which was, at that time, still mired in an era of racial segregation.

Other efforts were made. The PSB tried -unsuccessfully- to commission Frank Capra to direct *Why We Fight the Cold War* and to provide details to filmmakers about conditions in the USSR in the hope that they would use them in their movies. More successfully, in 1950, the CIA -along with other secretive organizations like the Office of Policy Coordination (OPC) and aided by the PSB- bought the rights to and invested in the cartoon of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1954), which was given an anti-Soviet spin to satisfy its covert investors. Author Daniel Leab has pointed to the fact it took decades for the rumours about CIA involvement in *Animal Farm* to be properly documented; this, he observes, "Speaks volumes about the ability of a government agency to keep its activities covert."

Additionally, the production of the Michael Redgrave feature *Nineteen-Eighty Four* (1956) was in turn overseen by the American Committee for Cultural Freedom, which was supervised by the CIA. Key points in the movie were altered to demonise the Soviets.

The CIA also tampered with the 1958 film version of *The Quiet American*, provoking the author, Graham Greene, to denounce the film. US Air Force Colonel Edward Lansdale, the CIA operative behind Operation Mongoose (the CIA sabotage and assassination campaign against Cuba) had entered into production correspondence with director Joseph L. Mankiewicz, who accepted his ideas. These included a change to the final scene in which we learn that Redgrave's anti-hero has been hoodwinked by the Communists into murdering the suspicious American, who turns out not to be a bomb-maker as we had been led to believe, but instead a manufacturer of children's toys.

Behind the Scenes

It would be a mistake to regard the CIA as unique in its involvement in Hollywood. The industry is in fact fundamentally open to manipulation by a range of state agencies. In 2000, it emerged that the White House's drug war officers had spent tens of millions of dollars paying the major US networks to inject anti-drug plots into the scripts of primetime series such as *ER*, *The Practice*, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* and *Chicago Hope*. Despite criticism for this blatant propagandizing, the government continued to employ this method of spreading its message on drugs.

The White House went to Tinsel Town again the following year when, on November 11, 2001

a meeting was held in Hollywood between President Bush's then Deputy Chief of Staff, Karl Rove, and representatives of each of the major Hollywood studios to discuss how the film industry might contribute to the 'War on Terror.' Jack Valenti, president of the Motion Picture Association of America said with a straight face that, "content was off the table", but Rove had clearly outlined a series of requests. It is hard to gauge the consequences of the meeting, but a Rambo sequel, for instance, was certainly discussed, and duly produced. Similarly, several series with national security themes emerged within a short time of the meeting including *She Spies* (2002-2004) and *Threat Matrix* (2003).

The meeting was, in fact, just one in a series between Hollywood and the White House from October to December, 2001. On October 17, in response to 9/11, the White House announced the formation of its "Arts and Entertainment Task Force," and by November, Valenti had assumed leadership of Hollywood's new role in the 'War on Terror'. As a direct result of meetings, Congress sought advice from Hollywood insiders on how to shape an effective wartime message to America and to the world. In November 2001, John Romano, writer-producer of the popular US TV series *Third Watch*, advised the House International Relations Committee that the content of Hollywood productions was a key part of shaping foreign perceptions of America.

On December 5, 2001, the powerful Academy of Television Arts & Sciences convened its own panel entitled "Hollywood Goes to War?" to discuss what the industry might do in response to 9/11. Representing the government at the meeting were Mark McKinnon, a White House advisor, and the Pentagon's chief entertainment liaison, Phil Strub. Also in attendance, among others, were Jeff Zucker, President of NBC Entertainment, and Aaron Sorkin, creator and writer of the White House drama *The West Wing* (1999-2006). Immediately after, Sorkin and his team set about producing a special episode of the show dealing with a massive terrorist threat to America entitled "Isaac and Ishmael". The episode was given top priority and was successfully completed and aired within just ten days of the meeting. The product championed the superiority of American values whilst brimming with rage against the Islamist jihadists.

The interlocking of Hollywood and national security apparatuses remains as tight as ever: ex-CIA agent Bob Baer told us, "There's a symbiosis between the CIA and Hollywood" and revealed that former CIA director George Tenet is currently, "out in Hollywood, talking to studios." Baer's claims are given weight by the Sun Valley meetings, annual get-togethers in Idaho's Sun Valley in which several hundred of the biggest names in American media—including every major Hollywood studio executive—convene to discuss collective media strategy for the coming year. Against the idyllic backdrop of expansive golf courses, pine forests and clear fishing lakes, deals are struck, contracts are signed, and the face of the American media is quietly altered. The press has yet to be granted permission to report on these corporate media gatherings and so the exact nature of what is discussed at the events has never been publicly disclosed. It is known, however, that Tenet was keynote speaker at Sun Valley in 2003 (whilst still CIA head) and again in 2005.

Conclusions

Many would recoil at the thought of modern Hollywood cinema being used as a propagandist tool, but the facts seem to speak for themselves. Do agencies such as the CIA have the power, like the Pentagon, to affect movie content by providing much-sought-after expertise, locations and other benefits? Or are they able to affect script changes through simple persuasion, or even coercion? Do they continue to carry out covert actions in Hollywood as

they did so extensively in the 1950s, and, beyond cinema, might covert government influence play some part in the creation of national security messages in TV series such as *24* and *Alias* (the star of the latter, Jennifer Garner, even made an unpaid recruitment video for the CIA)? The notion that covert agencies aspire to be more open is hard to take seriously when they provide such scant information about their role within the media, even regarding activities from decades past. The spy may have come in from the cold, but he continues to shelter in the shadows of the movie theatre.

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