

The “Good Shepherd”: When Patriotism Murders Humanity

Film Review

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Winter was the perfect season for the release of “The Good Shepherd” which exacerbated December’s icy chill and masterfully depicted the bloodless, emotional vacuity of CIA cold warrior, Edward Wilson. According to [New York Times reviewer, Manohla Dargis](#), Wilson is a composite character, played by Matt Damon, portraying the real-life James Angleton who directed the CIA’s counterintelligence program from 1954 to 1974, after serving the agency from the time it had been the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) during World War II. The movie’s title apparently refers to Jesus’ saying that the “good shepherd” gives his life for his sheep, and give his life Wilson does, albeit emotionally and spiritually, until one is left wondering if there are any last drops of humanity remaining within the shell into which he has devolved.

I heard one reviewer describe the film as an attempt to “take on” the CIA, yet I came away on the one hand in awe of its psychological depiction of Edward Wilson, but also aware of the film’s paucity of information regarding the agency’s sordid machinations before, during, and after the Cold War. In the beginning of the film we see Wilson initiated into Skull and Bones, but mud wrestling is as dirty as it gets, which lets that secret society off the hook entirely. No depictions of the infamous ceremony in which a Bonesman initiate is required to recite his entire sexual history to the group, nor clarity regarding the revolving door between Skull and Bones and the CIA.

True to life, the agency continues to up the ante in terms of what is expected of Wilson, and when he witnesses the murder of his Yale professor-poetry mentor, genuine pangs of conscience surge in an attempt to prevent the atrocity, even as the professor leaves Wilson with a final warning to guard his soul and never allow the agency to extinguish it.

Later, Wilson finds himself in the bed of a German woman co-worker who he suspects is spying against the U.S. government. Subsequently, Wilson and another male colleague show up at the woman’s door, enter her home, and summarily shoot her. Although he comes close, Wilson can never open his heart romantically, never allow the place in his psyche which supercedes governments and cannot be touched by them to become genuinely vulnerable to any of the women in his life. This only happens with his son, until in the final minutes of the film, Wilson denounces matters of his own and other hearts and marches forward dispassionately to become the new head of CIA counterintelligence.

Among other things, the film addresses the issue of former Nazi scientists brought to the U.S. after World War II, but does not touch the reality that many of Hitler’s top intelligence

officers were hired by the CIA ([Operation Paperclip](#)) to assist the agency in spying on the Soviet Union, a reality deeply disturbing to former New York Congresswoman, Elizabeth Holtzman who chaired a Congressional investigation of Paperclip in the 1990s. Nor does “The Good Shepherd” venture into the formidable waters of the CIA’s historic involvement with drug trafficking and money laundering from before the end of World War II and continuing into present time—a reality documented superbly by [Mike Ruppert](#), [Gary Webb](#), [Mike Levine](#), [Celerino Castillo](#), and [Catherine Austin Fitts](#).

While the film superficially depicts CIA intervention in banana republics during the 1950s and ‘60s to ostensibly contain the spread of communism, unless the viewer is familiar with the [ghastly extent](#) of the CIA’s overthrow of governments worldwide, he/she cannot adequately appreciate the horror that Wilson consents to sanction.

“The Good Shepherd” often mixes historical fact with fiction, as in one scene where agents are torturing a Soviet suspected of spying and enhance their sadistic interrogation by giving him a generous dose of LSD to which the suspect ultimately responds by jumping out the window of the building in which he is being detained. The agency’s use of LSD and similar drugs for interrogation and other purposes is detailed in de-classified documents from the [MK Ultra Program](#). This particular scene in the film is reminiscent of the [Frank Olson case](#) in which agents almost certainly slipped LSD into the drink of another agent, Frank Olson, who they suspected of being a double agent, and who experienced a psychotic reaction whereupon he was taken by agents to a New York hotel where he leapt to his death from the tenth floor.

One of the finest resources for background information on the era in which “The Good Shepherd” begins, the Bay of Pigs and the John F. Kennedy administration is the [website](#) of the late Fletcher Prouty who served as the Chief of Special Operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the Kennedy years. Prouty’s practice of Scientology and his collaboration with Oliver Stone on the *JFK* film have been spuriously used to minimize his accounts of CIA dirty tricks, but much of Prouty’s material has been corroborated elsewhere.

Included in “The Good Shepherd” is a reality that Prouty emphasizes in his writings, namely that Kennedy had declared that he would “break the CIA into a thousand pieces”. However, the film does not clarify, as Prouty does, that Kennedy wanted to shift the power to overthrow governments, ensconced at it was in secret CIA operations, into the hands of the Joint Chiefs at the Pentagon where the light of Executive and Legislative branch oversight could shine upon it.

In my recently-published book, [U.S. HISTORY UNCENSORED: What Your High School Textbook Didn't Tell You](#), the reader will find more detailed information regarding the post-World War II activities of the CIA and the relevance of those to U.S. foreign and domestic policy both then and now. As a result of my research, I was sorely disappointed but not surprised, that the makers of “The Good Shepherd”, who ostensibly sought to “take on the CIA” did not in fact do so. But if money from CIA-sanctioned drug profits has found its way into Hollywood, as well as the host of other industries, as Catherine Austin Fitts asserts in her marvelous series, [“Narco Dollars For Beginners”](#), then we should not expect “The Good Shepherd” to offer us more than it did in terms of disclosing the agency’s atrocities. Also explained in my book is the process by which the CIA developed the power to create black budgets for clandestine operations of which Congress and the American people have been

and continue to be unaware—a reality that is inextricably connected with trillions of dollars of “missing” money which Fitts has [superbly documented](#).

What we did receive from the film was a message perhaps as urgent and equally as disturbing as any litany of the CIA’s six-decade history of criminality, namely, as I.F. Stone never failed to remind us, “governments lie,” but worse—that when individuals commit to “serving their country”, their fate is sealed, either in terms of literal loss of life or the total and complete evisceration of their souls. In “The Good Shepherd” we are confronted with the price of patriotism and the toll it takes on one man’s humanity and the well being of innocent individuals close to him.

The film asks us: What is the cost of being a “good shepherd”? No one returns from any country’s wars unscathed, and only a handful of politicians in this country’s history have ever retained their integrity let alone their humanity. Moreover, when we are unwilling to face the criminality of our government and its corporate accomplices—when we refuse to examine and learn from our history, which is not only past but present, we join Ed Wilson in relinquishing another piece of our humanity every day that recalcitrant patriotism rules our lives. The colonial revolutionaries and founders that we call “patriots” were committed not to the established order, but to remaking and transforming it—a far more noble expression of patriotism, which Jefferson underscored when he passionately asserted that he wanted to see a revolution in America every twenty years. Indeed, “good shepherds”, like Ed Wilson, tend to become the walking dead, enshrouding their environment with the stench of their decaying souls while the conscious revolutionaries of history have enlivened and embellished everything around and within themselves, cherishing integrity over patriotism, love before duty, and courage above compliance.

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