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**American Ways of War and Strategic Culture: A
Reflection in Domestic and Foreign Cinematography**

Master's thesis

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Declaration

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Abstract

This thesis examines the portrayal of American strategic culture in movies from the USA and two countries with which the USA has been in conflict with - Vietnam and Afghanistan. The research focuses on comparing them with official US strategies and contrasting the different national portrayals among themselves. The aim is to discover how the USA and its way of war is depicted at home and abroad through movies - a popular medium with the power to shape perceptions. The research is anchored in the international relations theory of post-structuralism and the concepts of strategic culture and national ways of war. They serve as a lens through which the most popular war movies from each country are analyzed. The findings showed that American movies were more precise in depicting their real-life strategic approaches and tended to be more derogatory in their portrayal of their adversaries. They also showed a more critical depiction of US conduct in Vietnam compared to Afghanistan. When it comes to the foreign movies, Vietnamese films were more critical of the USA than Afghan films, but not as disdainful of the enemy as the USA. Afghan depictions exhibited the dual nature of their opinion of the USA, showing antagonism but also acknowledging co-dependence. Overall, the findings were not too surprising and mirrored realistic attitudes of the examined nations.

Abstrakt

Tato práce se zabývá zobrazením americké strategické kultury ve filmech ze Spojených států amerických (USA) a dvou zemí, s nimiž byly v konfliktu - Vietnam a Afghánistán. Výzkum se zaměřuje na jejich porovnání s oficiálními americkými strategiemi a na srovnání těchto národních zobrazení mezi sebou. Cílem je zjistit, jak jsou Spojené státy a jejich způsob válčení zachyceny doma i v zahraničí prostřednictvím filmů - populárního média se schopností utvářet vnímání. Výzkum je zakotven v teorii poststrukturalismu a v koncepcích strategické kultury a národních způsobů válčení. Tyto koncepty slouží jako vodítko, skrze které jsou analyzovány nejpobulárnější válečné filmy z vybraných zemí. Zjištění ukázala, že americké filmy znázorňovaly své strategické přístupy v reálném životě přesněji a ve zobrazení svých protivníků inklinovaly spíše k opovrřlivosti. Ukázali také kritičtější zobrazení chování USA ve Vietnamu ve srovnání s Afghánistánem. Co se týče zahraničních filmů, vietnamské filmy byly vůči USA kritičtější než afghánské filmy, ale nebyly tak pohrdavé, jako americké. Afghánská zobrazení ukázala dvojí povahu jejich názoru na USA - vykazovala antagonismus, ale také uznala vzájemnou závislost. Závěry celkově nebyly příliš překvapující a odrážely realistické postoje zkoumaných národů.

Keywords

Strategic culture, way of war, cinematography, movies, USA, Vietnam War, War in Afghanistan

Klíčová slova

Strategická kultura, způsob válčení, kinematografie, filmy, Spojené státy americké, Válka ve Vietnamu, Válka v Afghánistánu

Title

American Ways of War and Strategic Culture: A Reflection in Domestic and Foreign Cinematography

Název práce

Americké způsoby válčení a strategická kultura: reflexe v domácí a zahraniční kinematografii

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1. Introduction

Motion pictures have come a long way since their birth in the 1800s. Their journey from a scarce commodity to a multi-billion-dollar industry has turned them into an integral part of everyday life around the world. However, movies are not just forms of entertainment; they are cultural mementos, with the power to influence people's perceptions and beliefs¹. They are unlike any other medium, providing a way for the masses to experience real-life events or fantastic imaginary worlds in a matter of minutes. Yet, despite their rising popularity and ubiquity, movies are vastly understudied in connection to other fields, including international relations (IR) and security studies (SS).

The author of this thesis, being both an avid movie fan and a dedicated student of IR and SS, decided to combine these fields of interest, in hopes of creating something original and worthwhile. This thesis bridges the gap between film studies and IR, between art and politics, and between entertainment and academics. The topic may be unconventional, but that does not make it unworthy of examination; quite the contrary. This work expands the relatively small body of similar existing literature, contributes new insight, and may serve as inspiration for other researchers, looking to reach out from the traditional confines of their disciplines.

This thesis explores the portrayal of American strategic culture and ways of war in popular movies from the USA, Vietnam and Afghanistan. Through the analysis of selected movies, two research questions are examined: How has the American strategic culture and way of war been presented in movies in the USA and abroad? Is there a mismatch between the USA's official strategic doctrines, the way they are presented to the American public, and the way they are portrayed by their adversaries via popular motion pictures?

To address these questions, the thesis starts by building a solid conceptual foundation. Chapter 2 introduces it, starting with the ethos of *post-structuralism*, followed by the explanation of two complementary concepts - *strategic culture* and *national ways of war* (NWoW). Chapter 3 applies these concepts jointly to the evolution of the USA's strategic thought, ending with a concise summary of its principal enduring characteristics. Chapter 4 closes the thesis' theoretical portion by providing a literature review, which demonstrates the power of movies to shape public opinion, as well as a review of the existing publications thematically similar to this thesis. The chapter closes with a contemplation on this work's contribution to existing research.

Chapter 5 commences the 'practical' portion of this thesis. It explains the methodology with which movies were selected for analysis, and the way in which they were analyzed. Next, chapter 6 provides the analysis of two American and two Vietnamese movies depicting the Vietnam War, finishing with a comparison of their portrayal of the USA's strategic characteristics. The same is done for the USA and Afghanistan in the context of the War in Afghanistan in Chapter 7. Finally, before reaching the Conclusion, Chapter 8 is dedicated to the ultimate comparison of the analyzed

¹ For proofs of this statement, see chapter 4.

movies across time and borders, identifying the general patterns of how the USA's way of war tended to be cinematographically portrayed at home and abroad.

At the end of this thesis, the reader should be well-acquainted with the theoretical concepts of strategic culture and NWoW, understand the USA's evolution through their prism, and learn how it was portrayed by American, Vietnamese and Afghan filmmakers in the context of the wars they have waged.

2. Theoretic background

The following chapter develops the theoretical basis of this thesis. Its three sections are structured as follows:

Section 2.1 introduces the broad theoretical anchorage, i.e. the mode through which international relations are perceived in this thesis: the theory of *post-structuralism*. Its core tenets, connection to movie analysis and reasons for its selection are discussed. The second section discusses the concepts of *strategic culture* and *national ways of war*. First, the development of these concepts is outlined, followed by a specification of the concepts' iteration that is utilized in this thesis. Ultimately, section 2.3 summarizes and concludes this chapter.

2.1 Post-structuralism

Post-structuralism is one of the newer strands of IR theory². It originated in the 1980s as a reaction to the prevalent structural and modernist logic in IR scholarship (Ellis, 2006). Surfacing from the 'Fourth Great Debate' of IR as a post-positivist theory, it drew from the writings of postmodern thinkers like Michel Foucault, Paul Bourdieu, or Jacques Derrida and rejected the idea of the existence of single universal truths we can unearth. Rather than *discovering* knowledge, post-structuralists suggest we actively *produce* it, by interpreting the world around us (McMorrow, 2018). They believe 'reality' does not exist independently of our interpretations, all of which are valid, despite (or rather thanks to) being inherently subjective. These multiple permissible interpretations thus mean there are "multiple realities" existing at once (Pereira-Ayuso, 2015; Mease, 2017, p. 11).

Nonetheless, post-structuralists are not blind to the fact that, despite their accounts of the validity of subjective interpretations, certain narratives are prevalent and accepted as 'universally true'. They explain this through the existence of prominent actors - elites, who have the *power* to impose their 'truths' onto others (McMorrow, 2018). They do this through the use of *language* – by manipulating discourse and shaping the public's opinion into what the elites find desirable, further reinforcing their power. Discourse here is understood as a "series of representations and practices through which meanings are produced, identities constituted, social relations established, and political and ethical outcomes made [...] possible" (Dunne et al., 2016, p. 236). This discourse is

² However, most authors prefer not to refer to it as a theory, seeing as it does not formulate its own principles or a "paradigm through which everything is understood" (Dunne & Smith, 2016, p. 225). Post-structuralism is more akin to a 'critical ethos', defined by what it is *not*, rather than what it is (Young, 1982). Nonetheless, for reasons of simplicity, it will be referred to as a theory here.

“performative” - it constitutes the objects it talks about (ibid) and “facilitate[s] the process by which certain information comes to be accepted as unquestionable truth” (McMorrow, 2018). By reinforcing certain discourses, we create what Foucault calls ‘regimes of truth’ (Pereira-Ayuso, 2015). “Reality hence cannot exist outside discourse and must be understood ‘from within’...; its analysis always requires an abstraction or interpretation” (Engert & Spencer, 2009, p. 94).

Usually, these ‘elites’ who hold power over the prevalent discourse are high-ranking government officials, policymakers or experts, whose social statute puts them in a power-laden position. However, not all power can be traced to ‘high politics’. A great deal of power - power to change opinions and thus shape the world - lies in the underlying layers of ‘low politics’ - in matters of economy, gender, class, race, or culture. Nowadays, there are more potential streams of influence of peoples’ opinions than there were decades or centuries ago, when power was almost exclusively monopolized by persons in prominent leading roles. Today, anyone can have their voice heard by millions, at virtually no cost, with no expertise or authority in any subject matter. Opinions and the means to distribute them are as plentiful as weeds. Certainly, there are still those better equipped to push their discourse more forcefully than others, but they have a much harder role safeguarding that position against the countless outlets of expression - printed, audio-visual, digital, or social, with such low barriers to entry (Enloe, 1996; Weldes, 2005).

This thesis argues that the media also have the capacity to be ‘elites’ and create ‘regimes of truth’. Whether used as mere enforcers of the discourse set by higher authorities, or acting of their own accord, the media are well-equipped for influencing the minds of the masses. The typical image of this would be the tabloid newspaper with their alarmist news on migration, which echo infinitely across the public and fuel anti-migratory sentiments; or social media with their carefully crafted algorithms that enclose us in informational echo chambers, limiting our exposure to opposing views and fortifying existing opinions. Nonetheless, media in the form of *movies* can have this power as well. Quite inconspicuously, by giving us fictional stories about fictional people, seemingly only providing entertainment, they can serve as discourse-shaping elites who hold a certain power over status quo opinions. Moviemakers can control the discourse by presenting some ‘version of reality’, which may become overwhelmingly popular and begin to represent the general public's belief of an ‘objective’ reality. Studies showcasing this phenomenon are presented in more detail in Chapter 4.

The potential of movies (or moviemakers) to be seen as elites, is part of the reason why post-structuralism was chosen as the primary ideological anchor of this thesis. Moreover, post-structuralism has a unique approach to the subject-object dichotomy, which is beneficial for the study of movies and their impact on public opinion: it believes “the relations of inside and outside [are] mutually constructed” (Dunne & Smith, 2016, p. 226). Applied to movies, this logic allows us to examine how our experience constructs movies and how movies reciprocally construct our historic memory, cultural identity, and perception of ‘self’ and ‘the other’.

Additionally, there is one other, perhaps more pragmatic reason for choosing this theory. Post-structuralism is one of the few IR approaches that allows the examination of the representation of

security issues through the *subjective* eyes of artists and their audiences. The prevalent theories of IR follow positivist logic and favor ‘objective’ accounts over subjective or marginal ones. That logic rarely allows researchers to venture outside the bounds of traditional methodologies and objects of inquiry, closing them off from finding potentially noteworthy connections between IR, security studies and other realms. By choosing to see the world as a post-structuralist, the author of this thesis is free to perform an inherently subjective movie analysis and explore how movies may be tied with strategic culture and perceptions of it, all while staying within the bounds of IR theory. This way, “the subjectivity inherited in movies” is not seen as a mistake, but “a crucial advantage that allows us to develop an ‘epistemology of perspectives’” (Engert & Spencer, 2009, p. 91).

In conclusion, the fusion of post-structuralism and movie analysis for IR is a suitable, mutually enriching match for two reasons. One, as this thesis hopes to demonstrate, the media - and popular movies in particular - ought to be seen as potential ‘elites’ that shape discourse, or at least as very powerful tools that elites may use to achieve their ends. It seems to be a rather understudied relationship that, in the author’s opinion, is worth greater academic focus. Second, post-structuralism allows this thesis to remain anchored in the field of international relations and security studies, while branching out to other disciplines and studying matters classical IR scholars rarely turn their attention to.

2.2 Strategic culture and National ways of war

The concept of strategic culture is quite contested, one might even say controversial, among IR and SS scholars. Its multiple definitions tend to be criticized as too broad and ambiguous to have sufficient explanatory power. However, a number of authors adapted the concept by tweaking its definition or combining it with other concepts, making its scope narrower, more concrete and better usable for research. The following paragraphs follow this transformation; they first outline the initial evolution of strategic culture and then showcase one of its most famous adapted iterations, which this paper uses as a tool for movie analysis.

2.2.1 The evolution of the concept of strategic culture

The first person from the realm of IR and SS to define strategic culture was Jack L. Snyder, in his 1977 RAND Corporation report prepared for the US Air Force. Titled ‘*The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations*’, it sought to provide “a context for a better understanding of the intellectual, institutional and strategic-cultural determinants” that bound Soviet decision-making in crises, and speculate on what motivated or constrained Soviet behavior, specifically with respect to the use of nuclear force (Snyder, 1977, p. iii).

Snyder recommended to examine Soviet strategic thinking “as a unique strategic culture”, explaining that there is an omnipresent national approach to strategy that people are born into, and which shapes their “general beliefs, attitudes and behavioral patterns”. This overarching approach creates a “perceptual lens” that forms all strategic thinking and should therefore be understood “on the level of ‘culture’ rather than mere ‘policy’” (ibid, p. v). Snyder’s definition of the concept goes as follows:

“Strategic culture can be defined as the sum total of ideas, conditioned emotional responses, and patterns of habitual behavior that members of a national strategic community have acquired through instruction or imitation and share with each other with regard to nuclear strategy” (ibid, p. 8).

Even though Snyder initially framed the concept only in terms of nuclear strategy, it was rejected as unusable altogether and caused a wave of uproar and frustration among other political scientists, including established IR thinkers like Ken Booth (1979) or Kenneth Waltz (1979). The main stumbling block of Snyder’s conception was the enumeration of the things he considered part of strategic culture – ideas, responses and *behavior*. The breadth of his conceptualization would later become the main differentiating point of subsequent definitions from other authors.

Against an overwhelming realist backlash, the concept was soon picked up by Colin Gray, a member of President Reagan's *General Advisory Committee on Arms Control and Disarmament*. Instead of using it just to better understand the Soviet mindset in theory, he applied it in practice - to US nuclear strategy. Through him, it materialized in policymaking as part of the underlying logic behind Reagan’s *Strategic Defense Initiative* (also known as Star Wars).

Throughout the late 1980s and 90s, the concept gained traction. More scholars - including those who previously opposed its validity, like Ken Booth - began using and re-defining it. Even though it had not become mainstream in IR and SS thinking, it did commence a small “cultural revolution in strategic studies”, as Sondhaus put it (2006, p. 123). This period also gave rise to one of the most influential authors on strategic culture, A. I. Johnston.

Johnston set out to create a less contestable, falsifiable definition of strategic culture. Specifically, he chose to narrow down the initial broadness of Snyder’s conceptualization and removed behavior from the equation altogether – something that no other scholar before him had attempted. The main way in which Johnston differentiated his understanding of strategic culture from those of the past, was seeing it merely as an ideational milieu that *may affect* behavior but does *not include* it. His interpretation was centered around symbols - something that Ken Booth had brought into the definition before him (1990) but did not develop quite as profoundly.

Besides this novel outlook on strategic culture, Johnston’s contribution to the study of the concept extended further; he classified the authors who wrote about strategic culture into three groups. These three generations of thought are now accepted as the default periodization of strategic cultural thinking:

The first generation is comprised of authors with the widest definition of strategic culture, including behavior. Johnston ‘accused’ its members – namely Snyder, Gray and Jones – of providing definitions that were “unwieldy”, deterministic and too broad, allowing almost anything to be used as an input variable for strategic culture (Johnston, 1995, p. 37). Johnston further disagreed with the notion that a nation’s strategic culture was homogenous across time, especially given the multitude of inputs that constitute it under this definition, seeing as each of the inputs could produce a completely different strategic leaning (ibid).

The second generation, with authors like Bradley Klein or Robin Luckham, sees strategic culture as “a tool of political hegemony” that “legitimizes the authority of those in charge of strategic decision-making” (ibid, p. 39). In other words, this generation believes strategic culture is formed by authorities who ‘hijack’ a nation’s historical experience and interpret it through their own lens, to be able to justify certain strategic choices. Of all three generations, this one takes the most critical approach to strategic culture, but fails to explain the workings of the ‘interpretation chain’ in sufficient detail. Even more importantly, it does not specify how this constructed strategic culture affects behavior, which is what Johnston (1995) criticized most about it.

Finally, the third generation, of which Johnston himself is part of, is “both more rigorous and eclectic” than the previous two. More rigorous, because it strives to make strategic culture a testable and methodologically stronger concept, with a narrower definition. More eclectic, because all the authors in this group - Johnston, Jeffrey Legro, Elizabeth Kier and others - use different input variables (Johnston, 1995). Nonetheless, what connects all its members is the omission of behavior from the definition altogether. These authors see strategic culture only as an ideational milieu, constructed by the security community (as opposed to the whole nation, which is what the first generation believes). Strategic culture is given less explanatory power; it is seen as only one of the multiple variables that shape strategic thinking and foreign policy. However, despite the more methodological and coherent approach, this generation is not without problems. It is criticized for oversimplifying the meaning of culture and the elements that constitute it, and for seeing culture as too dynamic – too easy to change, as it is largely dependent on the ideological fluctuations of a country’s security community.

This brief overview of how the concept of strategic culture evolved over time is by no means complete. However, it serves the purpose of showing that neither of its iterations is ‘perfect’ on its own. As seems to be the trend in current literature, these deficiencies are being addressed by using strategic culture in combination with other concepts, like *national ways of war* (Sondhaus, 2006; Buley, 2008), *grand strategy* (Neumann & Heikka, 2005), the notion of *subcultures* within one strategic culture (Bloomfield, 2012), and more. These combinations, elevating the original concept beyond the definitional debate on which it is stuck, seem to be working well and open novel ways of looking at IR.

The following section examines in greater detail one of these ‘fusions’ – specifically the one that has been getting the most attention – the concept of *national ways of war*. It begins with a brief historical background, followed by a demonstration of how it can work with strategic culture to create a new, improved perspective of the cultural study of national strategies.

2.2.2 *The concept of national ways of war and its combination with strategic culture*

The concept of *national ways of war* is older, albeit not necessarily better known than the concept of strategic culture. The term was first coined in the 1930s by a “former British army officer Basil H. Liddell Hart”, who believed Britain had its own, distinct, traditional way of warfare (Sondhaus,

2006, p.1). Even though the concept was localized to the United Kingdom, it was picked up and re-imagined for the USA by Russel Weigley some 30 years later. A number of other authors then followed suit and did the same for countries and regions all over the world (see e.g. Kierman & Fairbank, 1974; Baxter, 1986; Bakshi, 2002; Layton, 2003). Though some still see NWoW as an “invented tradition” rather than an empirical reality (e.g. Danchev, 1999, p. 40), the concept has become quite influential.

As with strategic culture, multiple definitions of the concept exist, though they are not as dissimilar. The definition followed in this thesis sees NWoW as a concept that “encompasses tactics, operational methods, strategy, and all other factors that influence the preparation for, and conduct of, warfare” (Linn, 2009, p. 233).

To some, it may seem that NWoW and strategic culture are merely two names for the same thing. However, in this paper, they are distinguished as follows: Strategic culture takes its primary input variables from older, more basal determinants – like geography, early history, the development of social structures, the influence of religion, etc. The NWoW concept looks primarily at a narrower, more particular set of inputs, mainly from a less distant past. For example, it may analyze concrete strategic doctrines, how battles were organized and wars waged, how different factions of the military developed and influenced each other, or how technologies changed a country’s behavior on the battlefield. The former is broader and more ambiguous than the latter, but they are inevitably intertwined and mutually explanatory. Strategic culture is also more static than NWoW, which can change more dynamically, as it taps into more recent experiences. In a simplified manner, one could think of a country’s national way of war as a product of its deep-rooted strategic culture. Combining the strengths of each gives us ‘the best of both worlds’ and makes for a very appealing approach. This had been noticed by scholars towards the end of the 20th century, when the two concepts first began to be used jointly in literature (e.g. by Sondhaus, 2006; Gray, 2007; Mahnken, 2008; Buley, 2014...). The concepts will be used in similar fashion, and may be used interchangeably, in the upcoming chapters of this thesis.

2.3 Conclusion and summary of the theoretic background

With Chapter 2, the theoretic and conceptual background of this thesis had been introduced.

Firstly, section 2.1 discussed this thesis’ broadest, most basal anchorage, based in IR theory of post-structuralism. By explaining its vision of the world and highlighting how the topics of language and power are of prime importance in it, the author demonstrated its fittingness for analyzing movies while remaining embedded in an IR / SS framework.

Section 2.2 took the theoretical debate one level deeper by introducing two concrete concepts – strategic culture and national ways of war. It expounded the reasons for the creation and development of these concepts, including their flaws. The author then demonstrated how the combination and joint usage of these concepts overcomes some of their drawbacks, and how it makes for a compelling analytical tool.

The ensuing chapter applies the joint concept of strategic culture and NWoW to the USA – the country which is the main object of analysis in this thesis.

3. USA's Strategic Culture and Way of War: An Evolution

This chapter applies the previously introduced theoretical concepts to the strategic evolution of the United States of America. It begins by establishing which definition of strategic culture is closest to how it is conceived in this thesis. Next comes a discussion of the building blocks of American strategic culture and cultural paradigm, followed by a detailed overview of key historical developments that shaped the American way of war (AWoW). The most space is given to the wars in Vietnam and Afghanistan, as those are the conflicts that will be examined in the movie analysis. Finally, this chapter ends with a summary of the main characteristics in the USA's strategic culture and NWoW, cementing the logic of their joint usage.

3.1 Strategic culture: the historical and cultural roots

As had been discussed in the previous chapter, choosing a definition of strategic culture can be a difficult task, as each has its unique pitfalls. Utilizing strategic culture in combination with the concept of NWoW helps remove this definitional baggage, as it shifts its focus to slightly different subject matters, where the input variables for what constitutes strategic culture do not matter as much. Nonetheless, even in their joint usage, the author chose to adhere to the perception of strategic culture as pioneered by the first generation of thinkers, though with a slightly updated definition. Strategic culture is henceforth defined as a “nation's traditions, values, attitudes, patterns of behavior, habits, symbols, achievements and particular ways of adapting to the environment and solving problems with respect to the threat or use of force” (Booth, 1990, p. 121). Compared to Snyder's original, this definition uses clearer wording, relates not only to the use of nuclear force but the “threat or use of force” more generally, and stems from the entire nation, not just members of the security community. This definition is now considered standard in the study of strategic culture (Macmillan & Booth, 1999; Lee, 2008). For even better clarity, the author would complement it with a portion of Gray's definition, which says that strategic culture “derives from perception of the national historical experience” influenced by geopolitical, social, economic, and other realities (Gray, 1981, p. 22).

Why follow the (updated) thinking of the first generation? The reason is two-fold. First, the conceptualization of the first generation is the most compatible with the theory of post-structuralism, which creates the basal layer of this thesis³. Second, the concept will primarily be

³ The third generation attempted to turn strategic culture into a ‘falsifiable theory’ – something than could be ‘objectively’ formulated and tested – which falls into a positivist perception of the world, not the post-positivist logic that pervades this thesis. The second generation - though having a more critical, constructivist ethos that is closer to post-structuralism - was too narrowly focused on the personae of politicians “in charge of strategic decision-making” (Johnston, 1995, p. 39). This thesis attempts to broaden the understanding of discourse-shaping authorities, looking at whether movies could play this role, and the definitions of the second generation did not seem capable of accommodating that.

used as an analytical lens - a sieve through which movies will be viewed and interpreted, to help single out events, motives and symbols that relate to strategy and way of war. For that reason, it is best to choose the definition containing behavior, as it allows a greater number of vital movie elements to be taken into account. The concept of NWoW can 'tame' the broadness of this conception and help route it towards more concrete ideas when necessary. Thanks to their combination, the author can work with the broadness of strategic culture, while minimizing the threat of applying it too liberally, as NWoW helps narrow the thematic scope strategic culture is supposed to help explain.

With the definitional debate out of the way, let us proceed to a discussion of strategic culture in the United States, starting with its geographical determinants.

Tim Marshall writes that the USA had 'won the lottery' when it comes to location. It was built on fertile land with a great system of rivers; it was free to expand from its humble beginnings to enormous areas (despite some resistance from native inhabitants); it shares a land border with only two countries that are mostly amicable (save for the short war with Mexico in the early 19th century); and it is separated from the rest of the world and potential enemies by vast oceans (Marshall, 2016). As Colin Gray and Edward Luttwak point out, this favorable geographic setting was the main reason why the USA had no real need for strategy until the mid-1950s (Gray, 1981). Afterwards, the world had 'shrunk' thanks to the development of new technologies, particularly intercontinental ballistic missiles, and the need for more elaborate strategic thinking arose. However, until then, strategic thinking was not the main component of the American approach to warfare.

When it comes to ideological influences, the US' strategic culture was impacted by the ideas popular in Great Britain at the time of its colonization of America. This included the teachings of British philosophers (like Francis Bacon, John Locke, George Berkeley and others), the Enlightenment movement, and the protestant faith / puritanism (Monten, 2005; Lehmanová, 2010, p. 82). Religion proved especially important, as it pervaded all aspects of life, "reinforced republican and democratic tendencies ... and provided the underlying ethical and moral basis for American ideas on politics and society" (Huntington, 1981, p. 15). Puritanism even "imbued U.S. nationalism with the belief that the United States was a chosen instrument of God" (Monten, 2005, p. 121). The faith also reinforced the importance of America's other strategic-cultural factors, like its geographical distance from the 'corrupt Old World', by introducing the idea that American settlers were chosen to create a world that was better than their homeland. "[T]he concept of separation, and its implicit rejection of Europe, became a major theme in the formation of a U.S. national identity organized around liberal exceptionalism" (ibid).

Moreover, after the Industrial revolution began in Britain, the USA was one of the first countries it spread to, setting the foundation stone for America's technological superiority that arguably lasts till today. The combination of all these influences with the historical experience of settling in the new land, formed the roots of the values generally celebrated in the USA – individualism, orientation on the future, a focus on development and material wealth, assertiveness, and a certain

feeling of superiority and messianism – i.e. the belief that the US system of economy and governance is the best and needs to be spread to the rest of the world (Berlet, 2008; Lehmanová, 2010, p. 83-90). For decades, these values were reflected in American beliefs about war. For example, it was assumed that “good causes tend to triumph - and Americans only wage war in 'good' causes”, or that the USA is omnipotent, capable of overwhelming any enemy and succeeding in any task (Gray, 1981, p. 26). As time went by and the USA’s formidability was challenged, some of these ideas became less prominent. Nonetheless, they played (and continue to play) a role in shaping American strategic culture and NWoW.

3.2 The formation of an American way of war: Civil War to WW2

With the more historically distant determinants of strategic culture covered, let us proceed to a detailed account of the more recent developments that shaped the AWoW. The first influential event was the American Civil War (1861-1865), where both sides favored the *strategy of annihilation*, inspired by Napoleon’s aggressive style of warfare. Despite resulting in heavy casualties, Weigley asserts that it became the “preferred way of war” for the USA in ensuing wars (Soundhaus, 2006, p. 55-58). Indeed, it was soon utilized in America’s next conflict - the Great War (1914-1918), where the US fought with great aggression and numbers. In spite of heavy losses, their preference for the annihilation strategy remained unchanged. Given that the USA joined the war towards its end and did not have to endure years of horrific trench warfare like their European counterparts, their eventual victory worked as a reassertion of their style of war, rather than a call for change (Soundhaus, 2006 p. 56; Weigley, 1973).

The Second World War (1939-1945) soon followed and made the annihilation strategy more evident than ever before. Not only was it practiced by the army, which marched in large numbers (amassing 8.3 million troops at their peak in May 1945), but also by the navy and the air force. The annihilation strategy culminated in the dropping of nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As Weigley writes, at the time, it was seen as “a mere extension of a strategy already in use”, but also represented a strategic revolution, by taking “the strategy of annihilation to the literalness of absurdity” (Weigley, 1973, p. 365).

Looking back at the roots of USA’s strategic culture, one can see that the preference for the annihilation strategy did not really stem from a profound, well thought-out belief in its superiority over other approaches. Rather, American military strategists resorted to it, because it was the ‘easiest’, most evident approach. “The long historical experience of a condition of near-total security, courtesy of transoceanic distance from potential enemies, and industrial pre-eminence, were erosive of what pressure there might otherwise have been for strategic thought” (Gray, 1981, p. 29). “A United States rich in machines, men and logistic support of all kinds, is not a United States obviously in need of clever stratagems, or a needful of a careful balancing” (ibid, p. 30). However, the US would soon be forced to change, as the geographical distance between them and their challengers became less significant. Once other countries started catching up to the American technological prowess, the USA needed to level the playing field.

3.3 American way of war during the first decades of the Cold War

Soon after WW2 ended, the Cold War (CW) (1946-1991)⁴ commenced. Given that this conflict spanned 5 decades, saw the change of 9 US Presidents and encompassed unparalleled technological development, it cannot be taken as a monolith with one single way of war. In fact, military strategy during the Cold War became a much more complex subject, with multiple conceptions vying for primacy and with doctrines changing more dynamically than ever before. More concretely, Ben Buley notes that since the start of the CW “there has been a striking polarization within the American strategic community between those who favoured [sic] the massive use of military power to overwhelm the enemy, and those who favoured [sic] more precisely calibrated doses of force to achieve more limited political objectives” (Buley, 2014, p. 14).

However, in the early years of the CW, the annihilation strategy was still at the forefront. It was reflected in the first proxy conflict between the USA and the USSR - the Korean war (1950-1953), but even more so during the Eisenhower administration (1953-1961) that followed. Sondhaus noted that the Korean war demonstrated the USA’s deep-rooted strategically-cultural preferences - a reliance on technological advantage and a belief in ideological supremacy. “The conviction of US invincibility on the basis of American technological superiority misled American strategists”, who “hardly paid attention to the strategy and tactics” of the local forces (Sondhaus, 2006, p. 58-59). The methods of Korean and Chinese fighters caught them by surprise, but the US - blinded by their self-righteous arrogance and belief of omnipotence - refused to learn from the experience and repeated the same mistakes in Vietnam, just a few years later. Sondhaus adds that the Korean war was “a clear example of American ethnocentrism at work, as American officials demonstrated a strong tendency to see ‘the others’ through their own myths and values” (ibid, p. 58). Such ethnocentrism, which skewed the perception of the enemy, will be addressed in more depth in the movie analysis, as it is a persistent feature that had been imprinted in America’s cultural mementos of wars.

As the Korean war ended, a new paradigmatic debate about US strategy emerged: *Never Again* vs. *Limited War*. Proponents of *Never Again* argued that the USA should never get drawn into a peripheral conflict like the Korean War again and should strive to either not wage wars at all, or, once in a conflict, do everything to secure victory. This view was essentially just an extension / a more cautious use of the annihilation strategy, predominantly used before. The other side of the debate claimed that future wars would be increasingly similar to Korea – smaller, regional and asymmetric, waged for limited political objectives (Cohen, 2009). They argued that such wars were inevitable, and the USA must prepare to fight them. In the end, the former approach prevailed, and the crux of US military strategy remained largely unaltered. President Eisenhower announced that the country would follow a ‘massive retaliation’ strategy, signifying that the US would react to provocations with “the immediate employment of all strategic forces against all listed targets,

⁴ Different authors use different years to delimit the Cold War. This thesis follows the most mainstream approach, taking George Kennan’s 1946 *Long Telegram* as its beginning and the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 as its end.

including the opponent's cities" (Arbatov, 2017, p. 36). Also, at that time, the USA was still greatly ahead in their nuclear capabilities than their Eastern counterpart, meaning they could pursue this strategy without fearing equal retaliation from the Soviets. However, after the USSR demonstrated their ICBM capabilities with the launch of the Sputnik satellite in 1957, the US began to conceive of their nuclear weapons more in terms of *deterrence* than offense (ibid; Gray, 1981).

After the two Cold War powers got frighteningly close to a nuclear disaster during the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962), the focus on nuclear deterrence was further bolstered on both sides. As a result of the Crisis, coupled with policies of the Kennedy administration (1961-1963), the weights of the strategic debate finally shifted from "the massive use of military power" to "precisely calibrated doses of force to achieve more limited political objectives" (Buley, 2014, p. 14). Nuclear policy was changed from 'massive retaliation' to 'flexible response' and more focus had been transferred to conventional forces and to developing a military with "a variety of tools" at their disposal (Sondhaus, 2006). Kennedy's administration increased funding for special operations forces, "doubled the number of ships in the Navy, increased tactical Air Force squadrons, and created five new Army divisions" (Tomes, 2007, p. 45-46).

It is important to note that these developments were largely adopted thanks to the growing number of civilian experts who became increasingly involved in strategy- and policy-making during the late 1950s and 1960s. This civilian insight "fundamentally challenged the traditional American way of war" (Gray, 1981, p. 33). With a strong preference for the non-annihilation strategy, civilian experts helped develop the pillars of America's new strategic bearing: the aforementioned practice of *deterrence*, *limited war* and *arms control* (ibid p. 33-34). There was a growing "faith in the potential of the scientific method and technical ingenuity to manipulate, constrain, and control the course of warfare" (Buley, 2014, p. 41).

3.4 The Vietnam War and its impact on the American way of war

In the midst of these developments, the USA got involved in another proxy war with the Soviets – the Vietnam War (1955-1975)⁵. "American Presidents were unwilling to see South Vietnam conquered by Communist forces" and were committed "to forestall[ing] a Communist victory" at any cost (Germany, n.d.). In hindsight, it can be said that this war represented a break in the novel development of strategy, and a partial return to the 'old ways'. In the first decade, the US tactics revolved around supporting the Army of the Republic of Vietnam by supplying them with advisors and funding, while keeping any major Soviet moves in check with nuclear weapons (Tomes, 2007, p. 56). Yet again, messianism, a reliance on technology and a conviction of the US ideological / moral superiority were evident in the approach. However, in March 1965, the nature of the war changed as President Johnson chose to escalate and sent US troops to the region, in response to the Gulf of Tonkin Incident. "South Vietnam seemed to be crumbling, with the only apparent antidote a massive injection of US troops", as Robert McNamara put it (1995, p. 188). This quote

⁵ The US had been involved in Vietnam even before the war's official start - it supported the French troops fighting for the South since 1947 (Greenspan, 2019). This involvement had been a practical application of the Truman Doctrine, which promised to assist countries threatened by communism.

perfectly demonstrates another aspect of US strategic culture and approach to war – the belief in American omnipotence and irreplaceable role as the world’s guardian of (Western) values.

Since the escalation, the US strategy was “based on the massive application of technology and firepower to launch offensive operations to annihilate the enemy” – not unlike many times in the past (Mahnken, 2008, p. 89). However, there was more to the American approach than the classic ‘annihilation’ element; the nature of the Vietnam War was unlike anything the US had ever experienced, so it required an approach that had never been pursued. Vietnam had “not one battle, but three to fight: first, to contain a growing enemy conventional threat; second, to develop the Republic of Vietnam’s Armed Forces (RVNAF); and third, to pacify and protect the peasants in the South Vietnamese countryside” (Davidson, 1988, p. 354). General Westmoreland, who led the US campaign in Vietnam during the 1960s, aimed to address all these aspects with a three-phase plan, which not only featured strategies akin to annihilation, but also attrition (a slow, sustained effort to break the enemy), counter-insurgency, nation-building and development aid (Daddis, 2015). It was a solid, holistic strategy, but it was not properly implemented. Due to worries about the political collapse of South Vietnam, “American war managers too often focused on short-term, military results” and neglected the longer-term strategies aimed at stabilizing the country (ibid, p. 8). Furthermore, President Johnson was adamant that US operations be limited to South Vietnamese territory, as he feared the Chinese would get involved if the US expanded elsewhere. This stance hampered the use of more holistic attrition tactics that would have weakened the enemy (Bright, 2001, p. 16-17). Thus, even though the US was winning on the battlefield, they were unable to secure a decisive victory. As a result, the situation at home grew increasingly worse. Popular support for the war and the administration faltered. The ‘doves’ and the ‘hawks’ in the US Congress were unable to find common ground on how to proceed (Germany, n.d.); political leaders were sending “military forces to fight without clear objectives, without sufficient resources, and without mobilizing popular support” (Linn, 2009, p. 195). The war was chaos and the deeper the US got in, the more it wanted – and needed – to get out.

In January 1968, the communist forces launched the Tet Offensive - a massive attack on South Vietnamese cities and strategic targets, spanning multiple months. It was an unforeseen turning point - a blow to American prowess, strategy and credibility, which resonated both in Vietnam and in the States and represented a “political and psychological victory” for the North (Dillard, 2012). From then onward, the main ‘strategy’ the Americans had in Vietnam was to leave. This responsibility was undertaken by President Nixon, who came to office in 1969. He promulgated the Nixon (Guam) Doctrine, which asserted that US involvement in allied countries “threatened by communist aggression, subversion, and insurgency” would not be in the form of ground troops, but rather financial and military aid, to avoid another Vietnam-like entanglement (Linn 2009, p. 152; Samuels, 2016). Subsequently, all troops were withdrawn from South Vietnam by 1973. Apparently, Nixon wanted to appease the US public - whose majority detested US involvement in Vietnam - but was not ready to give up America’s role of a ‘messiah’ and protector of the downtrodden completely – hence the Guam Doctrine. Aside from leaving Vietnam, Nixon focused on improving US’ relations with the communist powers – his administration practiced *détente*

towards China and worked out bilateral arms control agreements with the Soviets (ABMT and SALT I).

It seemed that America's post-Vietnam strategic bearing had largely returned to the pre-Vietnam trends – deterrence, limited war, arms control. However, the Vietnam War left significant marks on the USA, which soon became apparent in their foreign policy and approach to warfare. Even though the military had initially been reluctant to reflect on the experience, “convinced that others—politicians, the public, the media—were to blame” (Linn, 2009, p. 194), a period of reflection ultimately transpired. It “revealed the limits of the ‘attitudes and expectations associated with the American way of war’, especially the American emphasis on measuring success in terms of numbers of enemy killed” (Buley, 2007, p. 61). Both of the conceptions that battled for primacy in the 20th century – annihilation and limited war relying on scientific approaches – were discredited, as neither yielded satisfactory results in Vietnam. “Neither approach emphasized the importance of Vietnamese history, politics, and culture”, which had never been part of US strategy-making, as it never seemed necessary (ibid, p. 62). US military officials and civilian experts began to question their firmest beliefs, including reliance on technology or the political utility of force.

The public was equally hit by the experience from Vietnam. After three centuries of pioneering messianism and eagerly supporting their government's involvement abroad for the ‘greater good’, the American people lost enthusiasm for foreign interventions. In their mind, “military force had become ‘obsolete as an instrument of American political purposes’” (Buley, 2007, p. 63). To save their reputation and future, the US military had to react and devise a new approach to warfare that would accommodate the public's grievances. Continuing down the path of the Limited War approach – which appeared as a short-term trend post-Korea and then disappeared in the chaos of Vietnam – was insensible. The better option was to return to the roots of the strategy that had worked so many times in the past – the annihilation / Never Again strategy. However, it needed an update - a new façade that would appeal to the disheartened public and demotivated troops. Hence, in 1984 came the Weinberger doctrine, named after its creator Casper Weinberger - Secretary of Defense under Reagan. The doctrine was more reactive and isolationist than any before; it stated that the military could only be used as a last resort and only in case the vital interests of the USA or its allies were in jeopardy. It reasserted that, once used, the military must be given clear objectives and must be fully committed to achieving them and winning. Despite some opposition, the doctrine helped guide the decisions of President Reagan (1981-1989) and W. H. Bush (1989-1993).

3.5 The Gulf War and the dawn of a ‘new American way of war’

Even though the USA pledged to be more mindful with the use of force, they were still engaged in a cold war with the USSR. Reagan decided to attack the Soviets indirectly, in their most vulnerable aspect – their ideology. His administration launched numerous overt and covert operations in Latin America, Africa and Asia, supporting local anti-communist and resistance movements and reinforcing support for capitalism, freedom and the USA. Through that, the US

stayed true to its strategic roots (e.g. messianism, belief in ideological and moral superiority, etc.), without having to use troops or nuclear weapons.

However, the US would soon need to call upon their military again – not against the USSR, but against Saddam Hussein. In January 1991, President Bush led a coalition of states to liberate Kuwait from Hussein’s occupying forces, in what became known as the First Gulf War. The operation had been a great success. However, the battle that was waged behind the scenes, amid the US security community, was even more interesting. As is a recurring trend in US strategic thinking, two views had clashed and influenced America’s strategy in this war. General Colin Powell wanted to adhere to the Weinberger doctrine (now better known as the Powell doctrine for this very reason) and not engage Hussein militarily. On the other side were the Secretary and Undersecretary of Defense – Richard ‘Dick’ Cheney and Paul Wolfowitz, who advised “a massive military attack” on Hussein’s forces in Kuwait, followed by his overthrow and regime change in Iraq (Lafeber, 2009, p. 75). In the end, President Bush pursued a combination of these approaches – he did launch an attack, but due to pressure from Powell, made sure he amassed truly overwhelming force with the help of his allies, and did not linger in the region longer than necessary. The aim of the mission was clearly set to ousting Hussein’s forces out of Kuwait, but not engage him further, to avoid another “Vietnam-like morass” (ibid). In light of this war, Powell added another condition to the Weinberger-Powell doctrine: before committing troops to battle, “U.S. officials must have worked out an ‘exit strategy,’ in a definite time frame, so the soldiers would not be expected to stay anywhere and fight indefinitely” (ibid, p. 76).

The Gulf War was “a breathtaking military triumph televised around the globe” (LaFeber 2009, p. 76). Not only was it won in record short time with minimum casualties on the US side, but represented “an entire new way of sensing, acting, and achieving on the battlefield by leveraging the power of information technology” (Tomes, 2007, p. 127). It was the first conflict in which the military utilized GPS and “near real-time sensors and intelligence capabilities”, and represented the start of what some call ‘a new American way of war’ (ibid, p. 126-127). Furthermore, soon after the Gulf War, in December 1991, the USSR ultimately crumbled, and the Cold War was over. These two events “revealed the [new] unipolar structure” of the world (Krauthammer, 1990, p. 24), in which the USA emerged as the sole superpower. The 1990s commenced “a new world dominated by U.S. wishes and power”, where American citizens were getting ‘drunk’ on their country’s military and cultural success (LaFeber 2009, p. 76). Their root values - exceptionalism, messianism, assertiveness, a focus on material wealth and development - shone in all their glory.

However, despite the victories, the country struggled to readjust its strategic bearing. After decades of having a clear arch nemesis, there was suddenly no adversary the US could aim its massive offensive capabilities at. The country had been at war for so long that it could not live in a world without it. And under the guidance of the Powell doctrine, it would not be rushing into new military engagements easily. Hence, the war- and power-hungry voices in the US security community grew louder during the Clinton administration (1993-2001). The most prominent of these voices – Cheney and Wolfowitz – created their own strategic document, the *Defense Planning Guidance*

(DPG), which set out a completely opposing path for the USA than the Powell doctrine. They wanted America to dominate the oil-rich areas in the Middle East and put an end to anyone who challenged their supremacy – even their allies. “The Cold War with the Soviets was now to be replaced, apparently, by a Cold War against everyone else” (LaFeber 2009, p. 77). This approach, ambiguously labeled *preemption*, slowly began to prevail over the Powell doctrine and was on its way to becoming a guiding principle for US strategic behavior in the late 20th and early 21st century.

Under the guise of preemption, Clinton “deployed U.S. forces to more locations on more occasions during his presidency than any of his predecessors [...] during any other eight-year period of the Cold War” (LaFeber 2009, p. 77). However, these extravagant military exploits – most notably in Somalia or Yugoslavia - were far from successful; and yet, they “did little to restrain Americans' growing belief that they could exercise their unmatched military power anywhere” (ibid, p. 79). Indeed, the Clinton administration rejected the reactive, isolationist premise of the Powell Doctrine and instead resorted to a “proactive management of international stability” it found better suited for the post-Cold War world (Buley, 2007, p. 82). Nonetheless, the President continued to be constrained by some of the underlying lessons from Vietnam that gave birth to the Weinberger-Powell doctrine and the Overwhelming Force strategy. The American public remained highly casualty-averse and had high, even impossible expectations from their troops: as Admiral William Crowe remarked, civilians wanted “the US military to dominate the situation, to do it quickly, to do it without loss of life, to do it without any peripheral damage, and then not to interrupt what’s going on in the United States or affect the quality of our own lives” (Gaeck, 1994, p. 241). However, these constraints would soon be dropped and a novel approach to war adopted, in light of a new, unprecedented threat.

3.6 9/11 and the War in Afghanistan

The terrorist attacks on American soil on September 11, 2001, “almost instantaneously [...] became a defining reference point for the American national security establishment” (Buley, 2007, p. 84). Already before the attack, President G. W. Bush (2001-2009) and his Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld started an overhaul of America’s armed forces. The aim was to “overturn the Weinberger–Powell Doctrine of overwhelming force and transform the United States army into a smaller, lighter, faster service which, thanks to technology, could accomplish more with less in future wars” (Sondhaus, 2006, p. 61). The 9/11 attacks provided the perfect push and justification for bringing this plan to fruition and testing it in Afghanistan and, soon after, Iraq.

Indeed, the newly emerging security environment full of ‘unknown unknowns’, as Rumsfeld famously put it, required an approach that was very different from the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine. The terrorist threat could not be fought reactively, with overwhelming force, rigid risk-aversion and “restrictive concept of the political utility of force” (Buley, 2007, p. 85). It was believed that this asymmetric, irrational enemy could only be bested by absolute technological superiority, enabling total control of the battlefield. Rumsfeld asserted that technical ingenuity would help overcome “the fog of war through complete situational awareness” and transcend

friction “through complete precision” (ibid, p. 86). War could be rendered *immaculate* – precise, clean, predictable and humane, without unnecessary casualties. Thus, once again, a focus on technological and material development stood at the forefront of US strategy and way of war. So did moral superiority - as Admiral Cebrowski noted, the *Immaculate Destruction* approach had “great moral seductiveness”, as it “[made] it easier to protect the innocent” (Arkin, 2006). The USA, once again convinced of its exceptionality, was ready to assertively march into war. Relying on technological prowess, messianism, and a ‘moral right’, they were ready to not only intervene, but make Afghanistan safer and better (i.e. pro-American) through regime change.

The Afghan people had an understandable historic sensitivity to invading powers. However, at the start of the US-led campaign, they “embraced the US anti-terrorism war” in hopes it would stabilize the war-torn nation (Dorani, 2019a, p. 2). Nonetheless, in spite of warm assurances and grand promises of “peace, prosperity, stability and democracy” from Western leaders - especially President Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair - the real aim of the USA was not to mercilessly help Afghanistan (ibid, p. 1). It was to protect themselves from the evils that were brewing inside Afghan borders, at any cost. Throughout the years, the main goal of all US administrations remained the same:

“to ensure Afghanistan did not turn into a terrorist base from which terrorists plotted another 9/11, and to weaken, and eventually defeat, al-Qaeda and later the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant in Afghanistan and Pakistan to an extent that both were incapable of posing a threat to the U.S. and its allies. Despite the rhetoric, bringing stability, nurturing Western-style democracy, rebuilding Afghan infrastructure, and establishing an efficient centralized government, though desirable, have not been U.S. goals” (ibid, p. 34).

Each administration approached these goals from a different angle.

Bush began with a ‘global war on terror’ policy, which marked a stark change in how terrorism was perceived. It was no longer seen as a mere crime, but an act of war - and war warrants the use of military force and extraordinary measures that would otherwise not be permissible (McIntosh, 2015). Indeed, just 3 days after 9/11, the Congress authorized the President to “to use all necessary and appropriate force” against the individuals or nations that were involved in the terrorist attacks in any way – including countries that merely harbored terrorist (PUBLIC LAW 107–40, Sec. 2A). The first military attacks on Afghanistan started in early October 2001, primarily in the form of air strikes against the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Already in December 2001, the official Taliban regime ‘ended’ as its leaders fled their last stronghold in Kandahar. The US and supporting NATO forces then switched to a counterterrorism strategy, fighting “low levels of insurgent violence” and training Afghan forces to take up the mantle, which lasted until the end of Bush’s second term (Clayton, 2019a, p. 5; Dorani, 2019b). In late 2004, America operationalized its regime change as Hamid Karzai was elected President of Afghanistan. Though seemingly successful in the USA’s eyes, imposing this way of governance on a country with no history of democracy, centralized rule, or modern Western-style statehood, it was destined to fail. Karzai had no authority and thus no real power. Democracy had not taken root. The USA’s narcissistic approach, which ignored the

political, cultural and societal realities of Afghanistan – the same way they once did on Korea or Vietnam – only antagonized the local population and added strength to the arguments of the terrorists. As Jones writes, “[r]ejiggering another society’s institutions and culture inevitably generates resentment and unintended consequences, and all the more so when one is using a crude instrument like military power and trying to do it more or less overnight” (Jones, 2018).

The indiscriminate imposition of America’s values and worldviews was not the only way in which the Bush administration stayed true to the country’s strategic cultural roots. As usual, there was a focus on technology and development, as the massive US air force in Afghanistan was magnified by new technologies and precision-strike capabilities. The intervention was also underlined by the belief that Americans were the ‘good guys’ fighting a ‘just war’ and making the world a better place through their determination and sacrifice. This belief was reinforced by the legality of the intervention, which had approval from the UN Security Council, (unlike the one in Iraq in 2003), and military / financial support from the international community. Hence, a conviction of moral superiority, messianism and exceptionalism were clearly not missing from the approach.

Towards the end of Bush’s second term, the situation in Afghanistan began to worsen. President Obama (2009-2016) thus sanctioned the deployment of more troops in 2009 and officially pursued a counter-insurgency strategy (Dorani, 2019a, p. 6-8). Nonetheless, his administration was criticized for changing opinions too often and not being resolute enough in its actions. In fact, Obama “deployed more troops than needed for a narrow counterterrorism operation, but not enough for a broader counterinsurgency campaign”, which resulted in achieving “neither the economy of the first option nor the ambition of the second” (Miller, 2016). The President ended up withdrawing most of the troops, but cancelled his plan for a full withdrawal as the situation worsened again. Foreign military and financial aid to Afghanistan slowly began to decrease too.

During Obama’s two terms in office, the US government and public became disillusioned with the Afghan war. As the painful memory of 9/11 began to fade, so had the fervor with which they initially entered the conflict. Like so many times in the past, the USA’s approach was overly focused on the war-waging aspect, instead of planning for what came after, resulting in a deadlocked position. That demonstrates another feature typical for the American cultural paradigm – focusing on the future, on gains and improvements, rather than stopping to learn from the lessons of the past.

Currently in office, President Trump proclaimed an “aggressive posture against ‘Radical Islamic Terrorism’” (Dorani, 2019a, p. 8). Nonetheless, so far it seems that his approach does not significantly differ from the previous administrations. In fact, he seems to be returning to some of the abandoned strategies of his predecessors. Trump deployed additional troops to the country (even though Obama fought hard to achieve complete withdrawal) and “gave broader authority for U.S. forces to operate independently of Afghan forces” (despite both Bush’s and Obama’s efforts to fully transfer USA’s current responsibilities to the locals) (Clayton, 2019a, p. 9). In spite of these rather aggressive steps, there was a chance for the war to reach a formal end, as “U.S. officials negotiated directly with Taliban interlocutors on the issues of counterterrorism” and the presence

of US troops (Clayton, 2019b). However, despite advancements in the talks, their conduct was criticized by many. Firstly, because the Afghan government was not involved, leading to worries that “the United States would prioritize a military withdrawal over a complex political settlement” (ibid). Secondly, to some it seemed that Trump was following a “‘decent interval’ process of abandonment”, which sought to “negotiate a peace agreement exposing an ally to certain defeat in the long run, impose it, withdraw U.S. troops, cut aid, and finally refuse to re-engage when those the United States once fought move to take over the country”. That would essentially erase all the progress the US achieved in Afghanistan, however small it may be (Young, 2019).

One could certainly continue to explore the reflection of American strategic culture in the country’s evolving way of war and dig into more conflicts that were not mentioned here. However, for the purpose of this thesis, this overview suffices. What the author wanted to demonstrate in this chapter were the roots and lingering presence of certain characteristics of American culture, which manifest in how the USA thinks about and conducts war. To complete the picture, this chapter’s final section provides a concise overview of these characteristics, which can now be understood in context.

3.7 Conclusion and summary

Ben Buley writes that “[t]he evolution of American military culture has been marked not by a linear transition from one vision of war to another but by a struggle between competing conceptions of war” (2014, p. 8). True enough, in almost every decade since the 20th century, the annihilation strategy or its offshoots stood at the forefront of USA’s war-waging, but were constantly being challenged by alternative conceptions, which tended to grow louder after unsuccessful foreign ventures. However, despite the non-linear, perhaps even chaotic nature of the AWoW, there are certain elements that persisted and continued to appear throughout US history. These would perhaps not be evident if one only examined history solely through the concept of national ways of war, but thanks to the insight from strategic culture, one is able to identify them, along with their basal roots and demonstrations throughout time.

There is perhaps no better classification of these persistent elements of the AWoW / strategic culture than the one provided by esteemed scholar Colin S. Gray. In his article *The American Way of War: Critiques and Implications* (2007), after soundly discussing the potential and limits of the concept, he identifies twelve “characteristics of the American national way of war”:

First, Gray writes that it is *apolitical*. Indeed, many scholars have remarked that Americans never accepted Clausewitz’s teachings about war being a political instrument that should follow the “logic of policy”, with no logic of its own (Buley, 2014, p. 21). As is evident from the preceding historical summary, “the U.S. military has a long history of waging war for the goal of victory, paying scant regard to the consequences of the course of its operations” (Gray, 2007, p. 27-28). This can best be illustrated on the USA’s aversion towards limited wars (i.e. wars fought for limited political gains rather than complete victory). These wars - in Korea, Vietnam or Afghanistan, to name a few – were the ones the USA struggled the most in and did not decisively win, as their

generally preferred, absolute, annihilation-style way of warfare did not apply there (Buley, 2014; Mahnken, 2008; Lewis, 2006, p. 378; Record, 2006, p. 1).

Second, the AWoW is *astrategic*. As had been remarked at the beginning of this chapter, the USA did not initially have a need for strategy, as its other advantages – location, wealth, technological sophistication – sufficed for winning wars. However, even as the need for strategy arose, it never became a primary element of the US' NWoW, precisely due to its apolitical nature. “Strategy is ... the bridge that connects military power with policy. [Since] Americans wage war as a largely autonomous activity, ... the strategy bridge has broken down” (Gray, 2007, p. 28).

The American way of war is also *ahistorical*. Its people prefer to focus on the future rather than the past, which is a habit dictated by its founding religion and underlying philosophy of Enlightenment, both of which firmly believe in human betterment and progress. Even though this setting helped the USA become the technological pioneer and visionary it is today, it also created the penchant for ignoring the country's failures – especially if they misaligned with their vision.

AWoW can also be described as *problem-solving* and *optimistic*. Once again reinforced by its religious and philosophical beliefs, the country has “an optimistic public culture characterized by the belief that problems can be solved”. Hence, “the American way in war is not easily discouraged or deflected once it is exercised with serious intent to succeed” (Gray, 2007, p. 28). However, that does not mean the US bravely faces its imperfections; on the contrary, this optimism often takes the form of ignoring unpleasant facts and not acknowledging developments that would challenge the USA's beliefs. This was perfectly evident after the Vietnam debacle, to which the US responded by returning to its strategic roots and enforcing the Weinberger-Powell doctrine of overwhelming force, rather than recognizing a change in the security environment and building up its counter-insurgency / asymmetric warfare capabilities (Record, 2006, p. 3).

As had already been mentioned, the AWoW is also *culturally ignorant*. Yet again, thanks largely to the religion of the USA's founding fathers and its great early successes in the international field, the American public ideology puts an “emphasis on political and moral uniqueness, manifest destiny, divine mission even, married to the multidimensional sense of national greatness. Such self-evaluation has not inclined Americans to be respectful of the beliefs, habits, and behaviors of other cultures” (Gray, 2007, p. 29). This cultural ignorance led not only to multiple strategic and military failures resulting in unsuccessful protracted struggles (in Korea, Vietnam, Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq...), but also to the destabilization of these countries by rupturing their agelong political and social practices. In the eyes of the USA, the only correct way to do things is their own way. They are the enlightened, the savior, the ‘messiah’, tasked with the holy chore of spreading democracy, Christianity and capitalism to ‘backward-thinking nations’. However, time and time again, these ‘crusades’ fail to bring the desired results and even antagonize whole nations against this modern-day imperialist. Conversely, a disregard for foreign cultures causes America to demonize its enemies to justify further / more aggressive engagement (Mahnken, 2008, p. 4). Also, “no matter what the outcome of a war, America always learned the same lessons through the prisms of American culture”, meaning that any failure or victory serves mostly to reassert the USA's

existing beliefs (Lewis, 2006, p. 378). Cultural ignorance is thus a vicious circle inside America's way of war.

Perhaps most evidently, the AWoW is *technologically dependent*. Overwhelming force of men and / or technology has always been a crucial aspect of the American way of war. This preference began in the early 19th century, "when a shortage of skilled craftsmen ... obliged Americans to invent and use machines as substitutes for human skill and muscle. Necessity bred preference, and the choice of mechanical solutions assumed a cultural significance that has endured" (Gray, 2007, p. 29). However, "[t]echnology is a poor substitute for strategic thinking" and a primary focus on technological development takes away resources from the development of adequate strategies for reaching America's political objectives. Some of the USA's enemies even see their reliance on technology as a sign of weakness, rather than strength (Mahnken, 2008, p. 6).

Connected to technological dependence is America's *focus on firepower*, which permeates most of the country's history and military doctrines. Annihilation strategy, All-or-nothing approach, Overwhelming force... - these all relied on massive firepower. Over the years, and especially in these last few decades, this focus on firepower has shifted from quantity to 'quality', in the sense that very advanced machines are being sent to war instead of humans (Gray, 2007, p. 30). However, this also leads to the dehumanization of war, as with precision-strikes and autonomous weapons systems, taking a life is as easy as pressing a button.

Another related characteristic of the AWoW is its *large scale*. Given the wealth, resources, capabilities and superpower image of the USA, it is hard to imagine them waging wars any differently. This also helps explain their long-standing preference for the annihilation strategy and total wars; they play into the US' strengths and enable them to present themselves in the most flattering light possible (Record, 2006, p. 3). Furthermore, scale is not only evident in the amounts of troops or machines the US sends to war, but also the deep involvement of the US public in its wars. In most cases, the public is not bothered by increased military spending, so long as they believe they are waging a 'good war' for 'just causes'. In other words, "[t]he American army at war is American society at war" (Gray, 2007, p. 31).

Gray also writes that the AWoW is *profoundly regular*, in the sense that it is not geared towards irregular warfare. Once again, that bias is evident in the balance of wars won vs. wars lost / not decisively won / won only with great struggle. While in the wars prior to the CW - which were mostly regular - the USA triumphed, the later ones - increasingly irregular and limited - were less successful.

The USA is also *impatient* in its conduct of war. Americans "have been schooled to expect military action to produce conclusive results" (Gray, 2007, p. 32) and grow weary when they do not see swift actions and victories. The public's unrealistic expectations from warfare are further amplified by the media, which are "all too ready to report a lack of visible progress as evidence of stalemate and error" (ibid). This characteristic often leads US leaders to make hasty or populist decisions that please the public, but are not the most beneficial in the long run. "Rapid victory collapses the

enemy but does not destroy it”, which is exactly what happened in Afghanistan (Berger & Scowcroft, 2005).

Another characteristic of the US way of war is rather positive: it is *logistically excellent*. Stemming from its geographic location and characteristic of its land, the USA was forced to develop great logistic capabilities to continue expanding, not just within its own borders, but also abroad. Logistics were a way to compensate for being so far removed from most theatres of war and areas of interest, as well as lacking strategic capabilities (Gray, 2007, p. 32).

Finally, the AWoW is *sensitive to casualties*. Seemingly in contrast to the annihilation strategy that has been favored by the USA in multiple conflicts, casualty-aversion is a more recent addition to the country’s NWoW. However, though it only emerged prominently after the Vietnam War, it has been one of the guiding principles of USA’s subsequent strategic development – from the Weinberger-Powell doctrine to Immaculate Destruction to the ‘new American way of war’. Aside from the apparent moral and ethical reasons for protecting the lives of American troops, there is the economic argument: soldiers are “are expensive to raise, train, and retain, and are difficult to replace” (ibid, p. 33). Despite the USA’s wealth and preference for large-scale engagements, this is an expense they do not like to waste.

In addition to these 12 characteristics of the AWoW identified by Gray, the author deems it necessary to add two more. First, as had already been mentioned numerous times in the historical accounts the American strategic culture is *messianic* and sees itself as *superior / exceptional*. The American society and decision-makers have largely believed that their way of doing things is the best, and that it is their sacred duty to spread it to other parts of the world. It is in some ways similar to the characteristic of cultural ignorance, but the author chose to identify it as a separate one, for it stretches beyond ‘just’ culture. Drawing from the USA’s religious roots and affirmed by the country’s many past successes – military, economic and ideological – this characteristic is one of the most evident and pertinent elements of the American strategic culture.

The second additional characteristic is the USA’s tendency to *demonize its enemies* (Mahnken, 2008, p. 4). In many past instances, such demonization was not baseless, as the US fought a number of dictators and despotic regimes (Hitler, Hussein, Milosevic...). However, reality is not black and white, and America’s enemies were not the devil incarnate; they were all pursuing their goals, albeit in ways that did not agree with American interests. Nonetheless, the US officials like to project their enemies as pure evil to justify military interventions, or ethically-disputable conduct (e.g. illicit interrogation techniques resembling torture used on captured terrorists). Showing their enemies as being worse than themselves – less ‘evolved’, less civilized, less human – has functioned as a veil, hiding certain questionable actions behind a rhetoric of ‘us vs. them’.

These 12+2 characteristics of the AWoW, rooted in strategic culture and proven by historical experience, constitute the main lens through which movies are analyzed in this thesis. However, before moving further into methodology, the upcoming chapter covers one final ‘theoretical’ topic – i.e. why we can perceive movies as agents that influence opinions and can hence impact politics.

4. Can movies influence perceptions? A review of existing literature

To finalize the explanation of this thesis' theoretical and conceptual underpinnings, chapter 4 demonstrates that researching how movies shape perceptions through the lens of IR / SS, is a viable approach. First, section 4.1 introduces research that deals with the persuasive / opinion-changing power of movies in general (i.e. shows that movies can act as the 'elites' that shape discourse, to use the terminology of post-structuralism). Second, section 4.2 delves into concrete examples of literature that intertwine the realms of cinema and IR. The author identifies two categories to which the existing research can be divided, explains where this thesis falls and how it enriches the debate. Finally, a short conclusion is provided in section 4.3.

4.1 A review of the existing research on how media and movies shape public perceptions

Before moving to movie analysis, the underlying feasibility and validity of this research needs to be addressed. Can movies really shape public perceptions? And conversely, are they a suitable object of analysis for learning how people interpret certain events or actors?

Most of the existing research examining the relationship between modern media and the construction of public beliefs revolves around television, press, or online media. Movies, often seen purely as sources of entertainment with a negligible impact on politics, have been largely dismissed in academic research (Adkins & Castle, 2013). However, the recent years have brought with them a rising interest in researching popular movies as social forces, showing how powerful they can be in influencing beliefs and impacting the 'real world'. The following paragraphs provide a short overview of some of these studies.

In 2013, Adkins & Castle investigated how people reacted to popular movies that addressed a polarizing topic in society and took a political stance favoring one side of the debate. Specifically, the researchers focused on the issue of US health-care reform and had their test subjects view "popular films containing pro-health-care reform messages" (2013, p. 1231). Regardless of the subjects' previous ideology, partisanship, or political knowledge, the study showed they "became significantly more liberal on health-care policy attitudes" immediately after the screening. This attitude change persisted for weeks (ibid). The authors concluded that "popular movies are capable of influencing the attitudes of viewers precisely due to their popular nature: viewers come expecting to be entertained and are not prepared to encounter and evaluate political messages as they would during campaign advertisements or network news programs" (ibid, p. 1242).

Other notable research was done by Calvert W. Jones and Celia Paris, who examined "how dystopian fiction shapes political attitudes" (2018). They argued against the academic status quo of taking fictional stories less seriously than non-fiction, given that:

- a) "the consumption of fiction and entertainment dwarfs that of news and other nonfiction media" by any metric (ibid, p. 969);

- b) people do not process fiction and non-fiction as fundamentally different – they incorporate information from both into their “real-world knowledge structures, emotional commitments, and subsequent behaviors” (ibid, p. 970);
- c) fictional narratives are “known to be exceptionally powerful in shaping cognition and persuasion” (ibid, p. 969);
- d) many fictional stories inherently contain elements of political nature, making them relevant for forming real-world (political) preferences.

By exposing viewers to a selection of popular, recently published totalitarian-dystopian fiction movies and novels (e.g. *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *The Hunger Games*, *The Maze Runner* etc.), the researchers found that the exposure heightened the subjects’ beliefs “in the justifiability of radical political action” (ibid, p. 974). By showing the world in shades of grey rather than black-and-white, movies can expand the “political imagination of viewers” (ibid, p. 983). They can depict situations outside of the realm of democracy we are used to; as a result, our perception of reasonable political (re)action expands accordingly.

Besides these broader researches, there have been studies focusing on the political impact of movies on one particular issue area. These discovered that movies can increase concerns in topics like nuclear war (Feldman & Sigelman, 1985), race relations (Davis & Davenport, 1997), crime and related agenda-setting (Holbrook & Hill, 2006); and shape opinions on gender roles and feminism (Dow, 1996).

The last notable publication to be mention here is a 2003 edited volume by Jutta Weldes. Titled ‘*To Seek Out New Worlds: Science Fiction and World Politics*’, it contains a collection of essays exploring the intertextual relations between “popular culture, science fiction, and world politics” (Weldes, 2003, p. 1). In the introductory chapter, Weldes points out that movies, even the silliest science-fiction ones which seem most detached from reality, influence world politics more than we realize. A couple of the more ‘trivial’ examples of the “pervasive connection[s]” between sci-fi and IR include the naming of the US’ first space shuttle *The Enterprise*, in honor of the famous flagship from *Star Trek*, “in wake of a letter-writing campaign by *Star Trek* fans” (ibid, p. 2). Similarly, the dubbing of Ronald Reagan's 1983 Strategic Defence Initiative ‘*Star Wars*’, after George Lucas’ eponymous movie franchise, carries with it all the baggage of the pop-cultural reference, for both its objectors and supporters.

However, besides these arguably inconsequential examples, Weldes also writes about the more deep-rooted connections between sci-fi and politics. She argues that the future, as depicted by fictional movies and stories, serves as an inspiration for scientists, decision-makers and politicians who shape the ‘real’ reality. Many of the things foretold by science-fiction – cars and flying vehicles, globalization, revolutions in military affairs, advanced surveillance capabilities, the emergence of superweapons... - have indeed been created or came to pass.

One could certainly argue that the writers / directors who prophesized the creation of these things were merely building on fledgling ideas from the real world, which would have been developed

anyways. However, even if that were true, it does not refute the idea of a certain ‘feedback loop’ between the real world and fictional worlds. Fiction builds on reality, reality draws inspiration from fiction, and the cycle repeats. As the famous saying goes, ‘life imitates art’. Books and movies serve as dens of ideas; they push the boundaries of human imagination and show us how things *could* be. The fusion of the creative minds of writers and directors with the practical skills of scientists, engineers and decision-makers, is what creates and re-creates our world as something that was once science-fiction. The link between the two realms and their ability to influence each other, is irrefutable.

Even though this paper is not focused on science-fiction and how it drives development, the logic applies. Research and empirical observation show that movies *do* influence minds and shape opinions, which consequently affects politics and international relations. By no means does this thesis seek to paint the picture with broad strokes and claim direct causalities between watching certain movies and making certain political decisions. However, there most certainly is a link between the two; a link often overlooked and vastly understudied. This paper seeks to correct that, at least partially, by looking at a very particular niche: at strategically-cultural references in war movies, which could shed light on how certain IR events were portrayed to the masses thanks to popular culture.

4.2 A review of the existing research which combines movies with international relations

This chapter addresses the state of available literature addressing the conjunction of IR and cinematography. It shows the directions in which most authors have ventured when examining these two fields, explains how this thesis fits into it, and what unique insights it may bring.

Despite the relative recentness of the attempts to combine IR and film studies, there exists a number of quality scholarly articles, books and edited volumes combining these two areas. Though none of them deal directly with strategic culture and ways of war, their mere existence demonstrates two things: a) the co-dependence of movies and politics is an increasingly popular theme that has penetrated the boundary of legitimate academic research; and b) the thematic focus of this thesis can fill a gap in the existing literature. The author found that the existing works can be divided into two groups⁶:

The first one consists of publications trying to “teach” IR theory, or help us better understand IR practice, by applying it to well-known pop-cultural references, (most often from the sci-fi or fantasy genre). Among the most famous ones is Drezner’s 2011 book *Theories of international politics and zombies* (re-published in 2014). As the name indicates, the author attempts to make IR theory more accessible to students and interested laymen by applying the principles of the most prominent IR theories to a fictional scenario of a zombie apocalypse on Earth. He asks himself the

⁶ Additionally, there is a large number of publications discussing the portrayal of IR and security-related topics in movies (most often wars and armed conflicts). These have not been included in this literature review, as they do not work with international relations as an academic field, but merely with topics that IR is concerned with.

question: How would realists / liberalists / constructivists etc. react to a zombie insurgence and how would they adjust the new ‘international relations’ between mankind and zombiekind, according to their core principles? Given that zombies are not real, Drezner draws his understanding of them from a large body of popular zombie films and books, thus creating a compelling merger of IR and movies (Drezner, 2014).

Other notable publications that fall into the first group include: *The international relations of Middle-Earth: Learning from the Lord of the Rings* (Ruane & James 2012), which too applies IR theories to fictional scenarios, but does so with J. R. R. Tolkien’s fantastic world; the edited volume *Harry Potter and international relations* (Nexon & Neumann, 2006), which analyzes the wizarding world from an IR perspective; or the edited volume titled *Battlestar Galactica and international relations* (Kiersey & Neumann, 2013), where various authors take on important political themes discussed in both the sci-fi series and the real world (like the role of technology, civil-military relations, insurgency, religion and more) and look for potential lessons to be learnt from how these topics were tackled in the series.

The second group of publications that focus on the interplay between movies and international relations, is one that examines how movies explain the reality of IR. In other words, it takes the opposite approach to the first group – it does not apply IR to movies, but movies to IR. This group works with a larger pool of film genres and attempts to draw close parallels between fiction and actuality. Some notable mentions include: *International relations on film* (Gregg, 1998); *To seek out new worlds: science fiction and world politics* (Weldes, 2003); *Imagining America at War: Morality, politics and film* (Weber, 2007); *Cinematic Geopolitics* (Shapiro, 2008); or *The interplay between political theory and movies: Bridging two worlds* (Hamenstädt, 2019).

This thesis falls into the second category, as it examines how movies portray and shape international relations and the security environment. Nonetheless, it stands out from the other publications for two reasons. First, it expands the existing research thematically, by focusing on the uncharted topic of strategic culture and NWoW. Second, it expands the geopolitical / geographical scope, as it analyzes not only American movies, but also Vietnamese and Afghan cinematography, which were overlooked by past researchers. By filling these thematic and geographical gaps, the author believes this work will be an asset in the study of international relations, security studies and cinema.

4.3 Conclusion and summary

Chapter 4 finalized the explanation of the theoretical underpinning of this thesis. In section 4.1, it addressed the question of whether movies were indeed powerful enough to shape public opinion. As the concise, albeit comprehensive literature review demonstrated, there is enough evidence supporting the idea that popular movies have the power to change people’s ideas. Movies can shape our identities and change how we conceive things or form opinions about ourselves and our counterparts – even on an international scale. Therefore, the final findings of this thesis – i.e. the findings on how America was portrayed in domestic and foreign war-related cinematography –

ought to be taken seriously. Section 4.2 positioned this thesis in the existing body of similar literature and explained what makes it stand out – its thematic originality and scope.

To further develop how this research is operationalized, the following chapter discusses the metrics used for choosing movies and the method for their analysis.

5. Methodology

The following paragraphs introduce the practical half of this thesis – the movie analysis. Section 5.1 explains how movies are selected and section 5.2 how they are analyzed.

5.1 Movie selection

Two historical periods, each with a different AWoW and approach to strategy, were picked for analysis: the Vietnam War and the War in Afghanistan. Hence, the adversarial countries whose cinematography from these periods will be compared with the American one, are Vietnam and Afghanistan.

These two conflicts were chosen for multiple reasons. Firstly, each lies in a distinct period of history and state of international relations, providing a degree of variety. Secondly, despite being divided by merely three decades, the two wars have seen a markedly different strategy used by the USA, as had been demonstrated in Chapter 3. Comparing how the distinct strategies were portrayed across time may help shed light on the evolution of the perception of the USA at home and abroad. Thirdly, both conflicts began at a time when the movie industry was already flourishing, and films were being made 'on the march' in all three countries in question. The analysis can therefore lean on sufficient source material. Finally, these two wars represent America's longest foreign military engagements. Vietnam held the record with 17 years and 4 months (even though US troops were not officially present in the country all that time), until it was dethroned by Afghanistan, lasting 18 years and 2 months as of December 2019, and still ongoing. Both conflicts are irrevocably integral parts of America's legacy, foreign policy and identity. They are ingrained in the minds of the American public and represent pivotal moments in their modern history, influencing their present.

The movie selection was done with the use of the International Movie Database (IMDB) – the largest existing online database of films, television and video games. Movies were filtered according to the time period of their release (beginning in the official year in which the war commenced), their country of origin (USA, Vietnam and Afghanistan), and their genre (war⁷). For movies from the USA, another filter had to be added, given the large quantity of war movies they produced in each period, unrelated to the two chosen conflicts. For US movies, the word 'Vietnam' (for Vietnam War films) or 'Afghanistan' (for Afghan War films) had to be included in the movie's plot, to make them available for selection. The chosen movies need not have been published during the conflict, but its events need to be taking place then. To achieve a more cohesive sample,

⁷ The IMDB classifies as war movies even titles that do not have the classic form of the war genre (i.e. limited to battle scenes and troops as the primary subjects). Rather, the war genre acts as a keyword or plot filter, selecting movies that take place during war, even if they do not chiefly focus on it.

documentaries, TV series, short movies and other similar formats were excluded from the selection process; hence, only feature films, TV movies and TV specials are included.

For each period and country, the two most *popular* movies will be analyzed. To proxy popularity, the IMDB metric *Number of votes* is utilized. This metric signifies how many people rated a movie on the IMDB website, which is a subset of the number of people who *saw* the movie. The larger the number of people who saw the movie, the more exposure it got and the bigger chance it had to present its version of ‘truth’ to the public. However, since the IMDB does not provide data on the overall number of screenings / views of a given movie, the *Number of votes* metric is the best substitute for the number of views and, consequently, popularity⁸.

This method of movie selection is not without limitations. The IMDB, though having the word ‘international’ in its name, is an American project. Hence, it may not contain all the relevant movies made in Vietnam and Afghanistan in the chosen time periods. Furthermore, the IMDB is used predominantly by Americans and Europeans, meaning that the chosen metric that proxies popularity has the risk of identifying popularity not for the film’s country of origin, but among US / European citizens. In other words, there is a risk that the movies identified as the most popular in Vietnam and Afghanistan may not be so popular there, and conclusively, influential in shaping the opinions of the local people. However, if put into perspective, these drawbacks are not as significant as may seem. The number of relevant movies made in Vietnam and Afghanistan during the chosen time periods is quite small – especially when compared to Hollywood’s production. According to the IMDB, only 32 war movies were produced in Vietnam since 1955⁹, and only 13 in Afghanistan since 2001¹⁰. Even if just two movies from each country get analyzed, it accounts for 6.25% and 18.18% of the entire set, which is not a trivial portion. Hence, even if the IMDB metrics failed to identify some movies that were popular in Vietnam and Afghanistan, this analysis would still work with a representative, salient sample.

While the IMDB and the chosen metric for movie selection may not be perfect, it is the best one available. In an ideal scenario, the USA, Vietnam and Afghanistan would have their own, dedicated online databases, containing all their movies and data on their popularity, gathered from the number of screenings, sales and media coverage. However, such databases do not exist to the knowledge of the author. By far, the most complete, reliable and accessible movie database is the IMDB. While it may be missing some data, or be biased by American preferences, it remains the most suitable tool to guide movie selection.

⁸ The IMDB has its own metric called ‘popularity’. However, this metric is unique to the IMDB website and shows how popular a movie is among its users – i.e. how many persons visited the movie’s IMDB page in the recent time period. Given the apparent volatility of this metric, the author chose not to utilize it for movie selection.

⁹ The full list is available here:

https://www.imdb.com/search/title/?title_type=feature,tv_movie,tv_special&release_date=1955-01-01,&genres=war&countries=vn&adult=include&sort=num_votes,desc

¹⁰ The full list is available here:

https://www.imdb.com/search/title/?title_type=feature,tv_movie,tv_special&release_date=2001-01-01,&genres=war&countries=af&adult=include&sort=num_votes,desc

5.2 Movie analysis

The author attempted to watch and analyze movies much like a ‘regular person’ would. The analyses will not attempt to read between the lines, nor venture too far beyond what is clearly shown; doing that would take the stance of professional movie critics and not reflect the way the general public watches movies¹¹. Since this thesis examines how the representation of the AWoW might affect ordinary audiences, there is a need to adopt their practices. Furthermore, the chosen movies will not be analyzed through traditional movie-theoretical lenses; instead, the concepts of strategic culture and NWoW are used as a sieve for interpretation.

For the two most popular movies from each country and period, the author looks at the manifestations of the twelve summarizing characteristics identified by Colin Gray (+ two added by the author), outlined in section 3.7. These are: non-politicalness, non-strategicness, non-historicalness, regularity, impatience, problem-solving / optimistic, culturally ignorant, demonizing the enemy, exceptional / messianic, logistically exceptional, technology-focused, firepower-focused, large scale and casualty-averse.

Based upon visual imagery, choice of soundtrack, dialogues, the construction of characters and movie plot in a given movie, the thesis will identify whether and how each characteristic is represented. This will help readers understand how America’s strategic culture was presented and perceived in America and by two of its ‘historical enemies’. Afterwards, the findings will be brought together and the representation of the AWoW will be compared and contrasted among the countries. That will answer all this thesis’ research questions, i.e.: How has the American way of war and strategic culture been presented in movies in the USA and abroad? Is there a mismatch between the USA’s official strategic doctrines, the way they are presented to the American public, and the way they are portrayed by their adversaries via popular motion pictures?

This thesis is *not* attempting to prove how exactly a certain movie influenced a given nation’s opinion of the USA. It explores how the filmmakers from the chosen countries portrayed America and its way of war in a relevant conflict, and how well they captured the ‘theoretical’ elements of the AWoW. As had been demonstrated in chapter 4, movies can have the power to shape perceptions, so these representations of the USA *could* have impacted people’s opinions – that alone makes them worthy of examination. However, this paper only looks at what those representations may be, rather than how exactly they impacted people’s perceptions.

Each movie is analyzed more or less chronologically, with a particular focus on the scenes that either demonstrate a certain characteristic of AWoW, or shed light on a more general understanding of war for the characters / country. Direct citations or references of important scenes are marked with a timestamp in brackets. Some of the citations contain pejorative or grammatically incorrect language which has not been edited, to make sure the underlying emotion and context is maintained.

¹¹ If one’s real-life experience is not enough to support the notion that common audiences and professional critics / analysts view and assess movies differently, see e.g. Rampell, 2013.

6. Movie analysis: Vietnam War

This chapter focuses on movies portraying the Vietnam War. First, the two top relevant American films are analyzed individually, followed by two top relevant Vietnamese films. Afterwards, the portrayal of American strategic culture and NWoW between the two countries is compared.

6.1 American movies about the Vietnam War

The two most popular American movies from the IMDB list, filtered as explained in the previous chapter, are *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979)¹².

6.1.1 *Full Metal Jacket* (1987)

Full Metal Jacket (Kubrick, 1987) is one of the most iconic war movies ever made. Like multiple other in this thesis, it is narrated as a memory of one soldier - an American marine. It has two distinct halves, with the first taking place at a training camp and the second in Vietnam, right around the time of the Tet Offensive.

In the first half, the new recruits are introduced to the training camp with a harsh welcome speech by their drill sergeant. “If you survive this training, you will be a weapon. You will be a minister of death praying for war. But until that day, you are pukers. You are the lowest form of life on Earth.” He adds that unless the troops pass the training, they will be unworthy of joining his “beloved Corp” (2). There are numerous notable things in this speech: first, it signifies that the soldiers will be groomed toward brutality. They will become tools of war and lose some (or all) of their humanity. Second is a certain elitism, or belief in the *exceptionalism* of US soldiers as higher forms of being. That elitism is coupled with ridiculing the recruits before they graduate, to the point where it borders psychological torture and eventually leads one to suicide. Connected to this is a ‘caricaturesque’ portrayal of the soldiers’ obedience and respect for higher military authority, which reappears throughout the movie.

The training itself is also portrayed a bit mockingly. Most scenes show the soldiers merely marching and chanting, or practicing switching their guns from one shoulder to the other (7, 9, 12, 13, 21, 37...). At times, it looks like they are training for military parades, not combat. The way the troops are encouraged to behave toward their rifles is also worth mentioning, as it hints at the famed American obsession with weapons and *firepower*. “Tonight, you pukers will sleep with your rifle. You will give your rifle a girl's name”, says the sergeant (10). He then makes the troops say a prayer: “This is my rifle. ... My rifle is my best friend. It is my life. ... Without me, my rifle is useless. Without my rifle, I am useless” (11). The troops are taught that their worth lies in their weapons, further reinforcing their fixation on technology and firepower.

The movie also exhibits the religious connections between the AWoW and American history / culture. The sergeant implies that the USA, and specifically its soldiers, have been chosen by God to do his bidding and spread democracy throughout the world. “[The chaplain] will tell you about how the free world will conquer communism with the aid of God and a few marines. God has a

¹² The movie list is available in Appendix no. 1, page 64.

hard-on for marines, because we kill everything we see” (32). American *messianism* is presented as a God-given responsibility, and the violence, with which it is pursued, as a virtue.

After the troops graduate, the film follows the path of one of them, nicknamed Joker, who had been assigned to a Military Journalism unit. The unit produces ‘propaganda pieces’ aimed at making the war popular among the US public. They paint the Americans as the good guys and emphasize the inferiority and cowardice of the Northern forces. As the unit’s chief explains: “We give two basic stories here. Grunts [US infantrymen] who give half their pay to buy gooks [the Vietnamese] toothbrushes and deodorants - winning of hearts and minds. And combat action that results in a kill - winning the war” (58). This shows that the USA had employed a variety of strategies in the war – while the classic ‘annihilation’ style was still at the forefront, elements of counterinsurgency were present too. This scene also reflects the USA’s close connection between its armed forces and civilians. The things the country prides itself upon – its democracy, *vox populi*, and system of checks and balances - mean the army needs approval from home and is willing to skew the truth to get it. The initially good values of democracy and accountability have been corrupted in pursuit of power.

However, reporting ‘fake news’ is not enough for Joker and his friend Rafterman. They want to experience battle; we hear them say: “I wanna get some trigger time” (48), or “I am bored to death. ... I ain't heard a shot fired in anger in weeks. ... A day without blood is like a day without sunshine” (53). They are *impatient*, trigger-happy and hungry for blood, driven by an idolized image of war. However, once their camp gets attacked during the first wave of the Tet Offensive, fear marks their faces as they run behind entrenchments and aimlessly fire their machine guns. “I ain't ready for this sh*t”, admits Joker (55). Joker perfectly exemplifies what he himself calls ‘the duality of man’. On the one hand, the learned hunger for battle - the animalistic yearning to unleash the killer he was trained to be, to fire the rifle he was taught to love, and to be a war story hero that his country respects. On the other, there is the natural human inclination toward peace and goodness – one that many of his fellow troops had lost along the way, but that he still holds on to. Joker’s own internal polarization is epitomized by his helmet, which has the words ‘Born to kill’ written on it, and the peace sign pin he wears on his lapel. The two together are a paradox, and yet they represent a background battle that recurs throughout the movie and reflects not only the mindset of many troops (seen e.g. during the interviews at 1:20), but also the sentiments of the general American public.

The start of the Tet Offensive was a large blow to the US image in Vietnam. To counter that, the chief of the Military Journalism unit sends Joker and Rafterman to join a combat platoon and publish encouraging reports straight from the battlefield. The two are being transported to their mission in a helicopter with another soldier, who is aimlessly shooting at the empty fields below. He brags “I've got me 157 dead gooks killed”. “Any women? Or children?”, asks Joker. “Sometimes” he replies (59). These images of massive *firepower* and *scale* reappear multiple times later, during battle scenes (e.g. 1:14, 1:31...). Upon seeing this soldier, Joker realizes he is about

to experience the real war – the one which strips men of their humanity, which transforms battle into a game and killing into a score.

Upon arrival, Joker and Rafterman visit an alleged site of a mass civilian killing performed by the North Vietnamese forces. The movie shows a slow-panning shot of US infantrymen standing on high ground above the large mass grave filled with Vietnamese corpses. It could be interpreted as a symbol: as if the Americans were indirectly responsible for their deaths, by controlling the situation from ‘above’ and pulling the strings in the war.

The following sequence perfectly introduces the ‘madness of war’. As Joker and Rafterman head to their new platoon’s base, the song *Wooly Bully* (by Sam the Sham & the Pharaohs) starts playing (1:06). It is a very quirky song, with nonsensical lyrics that are not remotely connected to the events in the movie. It is sung by an American band whose members dress like Arabs, while producing rock ‘n’ roll music with Latino influences – the ultimate mishmash. The song evidently does not fit the scene; even if one does not know the details about it, it creates the impression that something is not right. *Wooly Bully* is the perfect soundtrack to accompany chaos, absurdity and borderline madness. The same audio-visual contrast is used again later in the movie, after the platoon finds a building where the Viet Cong were hiding. The US troops riddle it with bullets, then shoots the fleeing fighters. It is an intense scene that again draws attention to massive *firepower, scale* and annihilation-style warfare. However, as it ends, the song *Surfing Bird* (also known as *Bird is the Word*, by The Trashmen) starts playing. It is a similarly quirky, nonsensical song that contrasts massively with what the audience sees and hears on screen, suggesting how senseless, phony and mad the Vietnam War was.

After the Joker joins the infantry platoon, the movie shows them in multiple battle scenes which portray some other elements of the AWoW and strategic culture. *Casualty-aversion* is evident in many scenes; as soon as someone gets shot, others run to his aid, tend to his wounds / attempt to revive him, and call the base (1:27, 1:40). After one soldier got shot and stuck in the middle of enemy fire, another did not hesitate and ran to save him, even if it meant certain death (1:34). Next, *logistical excellence* can also be inferred from certain scenes, showing the military as was well-organized and departmentalized, with every troop knowing his place and role. Furthermore, the men in action were in constant contact with their base, suggesting not only great logistics, but also *technological dependence*. That dependence is also evident in the ever-present helicopters and tanks that accompany the troops on almost every mission and serve as ‘shields’ or vanguards to protect American lives. The movie shows how some of the individual characteristics of the AWoW go hand in hand. Annihilation-style warfare historically led to many casualties, which led to the development of new technologies and weapons to mitigate these casualties, which led to the realization that lives could be spared, ultimately causing casualty-aversion. *Full Metal Jacket* does a great job of portraying the interconnectedness of these American war-related characteristics.

There are also multiple scenes suggesting American *cultural ignorance* or disrespect for the locals. For example, we see the chief of the Military Journalism unit dismissing the idea that the Vietnamese would attack during the Tet holiday, because: “Every zipperhead in ‘Nam, North and

South, will be banging gongs, barking at the moon and visiting his dead relatives” (49). The Tet, or the Lunar New Year, is the most important holiday in Vietnam, with a great historic and cultural significance, so needless to say, the chief’s description of it was nowhere close to accurate. In another scene, after Joker joins the infantry, a Colonel says to him: “We are here to help the Vietnamese, because inside every gook, there is an American trying to get out” (1:05). This suggests the Colonel views the Vietnamese as lesser people, but the ‘American in them’ is worth saving. His statement is not only a sign of cultural ignorance / disrespect, but also the belief in American *exceptionalism* and *messianism*. This idea is later expanded by one troop, who is being interviewed by a camera crew. “We’re getting killed for these people and they don’t even appreciate it”, he says (1:20). He sees the Americans, the ‘better people’, as the noble saviors who give their lives so that Vietnam could have the same privileges as the USA, and is shocked and outraged about the apparent rejection of the American ‘helping hand’. It never occurs to him that whatever the US is offering may be unwanted, or that the way they were trying to instill it did more harm than good. Some of the troops are completely blind to criticism, and never think to see things from the other side.

In summary, *Full Metal Jacket* ticks almost all the boxes of the ‘theoretical’ American way of war. It shows the large focus on *firepower* and *scale*, *exceptionalism* and *messianism*, *cultural ignorance*, *impatience*, *technological dependence*, *logistical excellence* and *casualty-aversion*. As the most popular Vietnam-war film from the USA, it is also a valuable probe into how the Americans chose to remember and represent the war in their cultural mementos. The movie is cynical, exaggerated and critical of the war, but in a rather charming way. It brings attention to the war’s madness and terrifying impact on the human mind and soul, but also helps explain its allure and paints it a somewhat ‘cool’ part of US history.

6.1.2 *Apocalypse Now* (1979)¹³

Apocalypse Now (Coppola, 1979) is a retrospective narration of Captain Willard of the US Army, who is called on a secret mission to find and terminate an American colonel gone rogue.

The opening scene reveals some of the most striking characteristics of the AWW. We see shots of a calm Vietnamese jungle, with US jets flying over and dropping napalm. Dramatic explosions engulf the jungle in flames, while the song *The End* (by The Doors) plays (1). Similar scenes are shown multiple times throughout the movie – helicopters in the air, burning napalm, machine guns firing at rapid speed (26, 40, 49, 1:33...). The American preference for *large scale* and *massive firepower* are vividly present throughout the movie. US troops are shown shooting aimlessly and massively without thinking (e.g. 1:17, 1:39), suggesting the preference for annihilation tactics, rather than restraint and precision.

The opening scene transitions into shots of the main character, Captain Willard, in his hotel room in Saigon, where he awaits instruction for his next mission. Drugs, alcohol and cigarettes lie near

¹³ The movie has two variants: the original 1979 version, which is 2.5 hours long, and the ‘redux’ / final cut version from 2001, which is almost a full hour longer. This analysis works with the original version.

his bed, and a gun under his pillow. He is anxious, mentally unstable and lonely, with a certain 'withdrawal syndrome' from battle. "Every minute I stay in this room I get weaker. And every minute Charlie [code name for Viet Cong] squats in the bush, he gets stronger", says Willard (5). *Apocalypse Now* is one of the few movies simultaneously portraying battle and PTSD / the war's psychological aftermath - not only in these early scenes, but also in Willard's later monologues (50), or in the persona of the rogue colonel.

Willard is taken to an army camp and briefed about a secret mission to capture and kill Colonel Kurtz. Kurtz had allegedly slipped into madness and "his ideas, methods, became unsound" (14). "He's out there operating without any decent restraint, totally beyond the pale of any acceptable human conduct", says the briefing general. A tape recording of Kurtz's voice is played, showing that Kurtz had seemingly gone to hate the US for their conduct in the war and the hypocrisy with which they treat him. In his view, the American approach to the Vietnamese is that: "We must kill them. We must incinerate them. Pig after pig. Cow after cow. Village after village. Army after army... And they call me an assassin" (13). Kurtz's view is provocative; seeing as he was a highly decorated army-man, such derogatory, disapproving statements about his own country and its way of war, were not welcome. These scenes show a contrast between the 'desired theory' (i.e. the necessity for 'decent restraint' and 'human conduct' that the general talks about), and the reality of the war (described by Kurtz as indiscriminate killing and destruction). This epitomizes the divide that existed among the US military, government officials and the public during the war, about whether and how to continue fighting it.

After the briefing, Willard stipulates the ethicality of this mission. "How many people had I already killed? It was those six that I knew about for sure. But this time it was an American, and an officer... That wasn't supposed to make any difference to me, but it did", he says to himself (19). Willard suggests he does not see all human life as equal, hinting to the perceived exceptionalism of the USA over other nations, and casualty-aversion, but only when it comes to Americans. This discriminate casualty aversion is later seen in multiple battle scene (e.g. 44), where medical care was being given to injured Americans right on the battlefield and great efforts were made to pull troops out of overly dangerous situations. However, the USA's Vietnamese allies were not treated the same way.

Willard takes a boat to reach the presumptive location of Colonel Kurtz. On the way, he meets up with the US air cavalry, who immensely enjoy the war. Their approach is epitomized by their commander who disregards authority, ignores rules, and cares little for the safety of his men or the locals; he is simply there to have fun. The movie shows him distributing playing cards onto the bodies of the dead Vietnamese, so that the enemy would know the US was there (29); he confesses to loving the smell of napalm, because it "smells like victory" (49); and his battle strategy revolves around finding a good surfing spot, rather than actual strategic necessities. When he takes his men into battle, they play Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries* on speakers, ominously announcing their arrival to the civilians they are about to decimate (39). This choice of soundtrack is interesting not only for its grandeur, but also because *Valkyries* were Norse mythical creatures that got to decide

who lived and who died in battle. In Vietnam, the air force were the modern-day Valkyries; with their vastly superior technology, firepower and scale, their enemies had no chance of defeating them. These men were another testimony of the psychological horrors of war. They were utterly consumed by it, having lost their moral compass and taken a step too far beyond humanity. Willard was left to wonder why men like them were praised by the generals, while men like Kurtz – who could clearly see the evils of the war – were being hunted.

Apocalypse Now also shows the *impatience* of the US military. Everyone wants things done quickly, both in and out of battle. The soldiers that sail with Willard are impatient and trigger-happy, relying on their guns rather than their wits, when things go south (1:16, 1:38). The movie also hints at the *astrategic* nature of the AWoW. Some scenes show apparent chaos on the battlefield, with missing command and troops lacking direction, just trying to survive. In one scene, Willard reaches one such battlefield and asks: “Who is the commanding officer?”. One of the troops replies: “Ain’t you?” (1:26).

In terms of the portrayal of the Vietnamese people and culture, the author would not describe the American approach as *culturally ignorant*, in the sense that the troops were uninformed about local customs. Rather, they were completely uninterested and showed no regard for the locals – not just their way of life, but their mere existence. The US soldiers often referred to the Vietnamese with derogatory names, like ‘gooks’, ‘slopes’, ‘dinks’ or ‘savages’. In US eyes, Vietnamese lives had no value. Their wants and needs were neglected. The war was portrayed as a very American effort – a show of force and a ‘crusade’ to reach the USA’s goals, not to help Vietnam. Even the central mission itself, around which the entire story revolves, has nothing to do with the Vietnamese, or with fighting for their independence from the Soviets. It is a mission where one broken American soldier is sent to kill another, even more broken American soldier. The film is less of a testimony about the Vietnam War, and more of a demonstration of the USA’s mode of thinking and operating, primarily to serve its own interests.

Furthermore, the entire mission Willard is on - to secretly kill one of his own - and the path he takes to achieve it, could be interpreted as a metaphor for what happened to the USA as such. The US journeyed to Vietnam for a seemingly good cause at the start, but as they went deeper, their moral high ground started collapsing. Ultimately, just as Willard kills one of his own, the US ‘killed’ a part of itself in the warring process; stabbed itself in the back. Their war effort collapsed on itself, because it was built on weak foundations, which crumbled as the weight of the conflict increased. That left the US weakened, shook, and in need of rebuilding their strategic foundations again – through the Weinberger Doctrine.

There is certainly a lot more that could be said about *Apocalypse Now* – it is a masterfully shot movie with a lot of symbolism. Nonetheless, in terms of American strategic culture and portrayal of the Vietnam War, these were the main messages the movie showed. The most well-pronounced characteristics of the AWoW were the focus on *firepower* and *large scale*, followed by *technological dependence*, *casualty-sensitivity* (albeit only for their own people), *exceptionalism*, *impatience*, *astrategic* nature, and partly *cultural ignorance*. The movie was unique in its critical

elements and in drawing attention to the long-term psychological damage war creates. Its portrayal of the ‘greatness’ of America’s war efforts felt more like criticism and mockery than a patriotic praise of the USA’s excellence, which many American war / action movies like to show.

6.2 Vietnamese movies about the Vietnam War

The top movie from the generated IMDB list, titled *The Quiet American* (2002), had to be omitted from this analysis, due to its insufficient connection to this thesis’ topic. It is a British, American and Vietnamese co-production, with the main characters being British and American and played by actors from their respective countries. Even though the events of the film *do* take place in Vietnam during the War, it is a ‘Westernized’ movie made primarily for European and American audiences, not by and for the Vietnamese. Hence, the following most popular movies, occupying positions 2 and 3 in the IMDB list, are analyzed herein¹⁴.

6.2.1 *Cánh Dong Hoan (The Abandoned Field: Free Fire Zone) (1979)*¹⁵

The movie (Nguyen, 1979) tells the story of the Ba Do family – a North Vietnamese man, his wife and toddler son, who live in a flooded rice field in the Mekong delta. They are civilians, but they help maintain the lines of communication between the Northern armed forces. Most scenes show the family going about their daily lives and being frequently interrupted by American helicopters bombing the field and attempting to gain control over the area.

The Ba Do family and the other civilians living in their proximity are portrayed as good, caring people. They avoid conflict, but are ready to protect their homes and nation if necessary. The Americans and the South Vietnamese are the ‘bad guys’ in this story, unlike in all American movies. However, they are not portrayed as completely evil and there are scenes humanizing them.

This movie emphasizes the American focus on *firepower, technology* and *scale* / disproportionate use of force. In one scene, Ba Do’s wife takes out her boat to collect flowers and fish, but gets tipped over by a US helicopter. She manages to swim to safety, only to watch the troops throw a grenade at her ship and fire at it from a machine gun, even though it was already blown to pieces (17). The woman’s day’s work and livelihood were destroyed in a manner of seconds. She was unarmed and posed no immediate threat, but she was ‘in the way’ of American plans and thus had to be eliminated, by any means necessary. There are numerous similar scenes throughout the movie, showing the Vietnamese citizens hiding from US air raids. In later scenes, the US troops arrive not only in helicopters, but also on speedboats, equipped with radios, constantly in contact with one another. That is a nod to the American *logistical* excellence, which is another asset they used to balance out their shortcoming in the asymmetric war. After one of these attacks, Ba Do tells his wife: “Today they shot many times, but they did not have a specific target... They shot aimlessly!” (27). The American preference for the ‘annihilation’ strategy and mass is clearly expressed, and so is the desire to get things done quickly, even at great expense, suggesting *impatience*.

¹⁴ The movie list is available in Appendix no. 2, page 64.

¹⁵ The movie is available with English subtitles here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cBpZUCrAXTk>

The reliance on *firepower* and *technology* is also reflected in scenes showing the US troops in their base. In one such scenes, two troops build their battle plans around satellite imagery, which shows human settlements in the Mekong delta they seek to control. They must rely on technology the enemy does not possess, to make up for the skills and knowledge the US lacks. The soldiers agree that Ba Do must be destroyed “in any way possible”, but also express respect and admiration for his strong spirit and dedication. “From now on, your only mission is to kill this person with a fully-equipped helicopter”, says the US commander to his subordinate. Notice the emphasis on *fully-equipped*, which means disproportionate force would be used to capture or kill a single, poorly-armed civilian. The commander adds: “You should achieve this victory and give it to your wife as a present” (28). This suggests that the Vietnamese saw the Americans as ‘trophy-hunters’ - as if war was a game and killing an honor for them. This draws a parallel with the air cavalry from *Apocalypse Now*. Both the troops in this movie and the air force in *Apocalypse Now* waged their battles from air, possessed superior technology and firepower, and greatly outmatched their enemies. They were predators, maintaining a ‘safe distance’ from the battlefield and having the luxury of seeing war as a sport.

The next scene shows a meeting of the Vietnamese villagers in the delta. Their leader says: “The enemy is increasing their force to destroy our delivery road. They are trying to keep our spirits down. But they are wrong. ... We are military deliverymen. We are the veins which deliver blood from the heart to other parts of the body. If the veins are blocked, the body will be disabled” (28). The villagers are proud to serve their country and willing to face the risks. They are portrayed as the noble heroes – the everyday men and women without whom victory would not be possible. This scene, aimed at the civilian masses, is empowering and inspiring. If there were more such scenes, the movie would feel much like propaganda.

Their leader ends the meeting with these words: “I believe everyone will overcome their difficulties. Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom. Even if we have to sacrifice everything, we will not become their slaves” (30). That is ironic, seeing as freedom and independence were the values under the guise of which the USA entered the war. These values were what supposedly differentiated them from the Soviets. As it seems, the North Vietnamese saw it the other way around. The US was the *culturally ignorant* occupier who threatened to take away their freedom and way of life.

A contrast between the ‘cowardice’ of the US troops and bravery of the locals is shown in one of the final scenes, where the troops exit their helicopters and want to capture Ba Do on the ground. It only takes a couple seconds of muddling through the difficult terrain, looking out for dangerous snakes and hidden enemies, before they give up, climb back into the helicopter and return to air surveillance and bombing. This demonstrates the American characteristic of *impatience*, total reliance on machinery and *technology*, and unwillingness to step out of their comfort zone. When back in the helicopters, one of troops says to those below: “You have no other option! Drop your guns and surrender, or we will destroy you. American firepower will destroy you” (1:23). Again, notice the emphasis on *American firepower*. Despite these threats, Ba Do does not surrender and

is ultimately shot down. His wife takes his rifle and shoots down one helicopter in return. The movie shows the fallen helicopter with a dead US soldier inside it; a photo of his wife and child lies near his lifeless body. Tears build up in Ba Do's wife's face as she not only mourns her husband, but also realizes she just caused the same grief to another woman and child across the world. With these final scenes, we are reminded that, first and foremost, we are all human, and fighting one another is nonsensical.

Cánh Đồng Hoan is a homage to the brave Vietnamese civilians who fought for their country, and an important glimpse into how Americans were perceived in Vietnam – at least in the north. The USA awakened respect, but not fear; the locals acknowledged America's superior *logistics, scale, firepower* and *technology*, but also their weaker spirit, *impatience, cultural ignorance* and partial unpreparedness for the specific perils of Vietnam. Ultimately though, even though this movie did not reflect a very profound understanding of the Americans, it did not fully demonize or mock them – unlike many American portrayal of their enemies do.

6.2.2 *Mùi cỏ cháy (The Scent of Burning Grass) (2012)*

Mùi cỏ cháy (MCC) (Muoi, 2012) tells the story of four friends, young North Vietnamese university students, who enlist in the army in the 1970s. Just like in both the American movies from this period, the story is told as a memory, in this case of the only friend who survived. The movie is primarily focused on North Vietnamese soldiers and their side of events, with few references to American strategic culture or way of war. Nonetheless, the way the story progresses and the topics it discusses are in many ways similar to *Full Metal Jacket* (FMJ); hence, besides interpreting the portrayal of the AWoW, this analysis compares the imagery of the two films.

Like FMJ, this movie has two very distinct halves. The first shows events before the recruits get sent to their first battle. Most scenes are shot during the day; the mood is light, the boys are joyful, full of hopes and dreams. The second half starts the moment they arrive to the battleground in South Vietnam. There, many scenes are shot in the dark, the mood is grim, and the boys are shown slowly slipping into fear and despair.

One of the first apparent differences between the FMJ and the MCC is the treatment of the troops in training. While in FMJ they underwent psychological torture and extremely harsh handling, the training in MCC was much more humane. The Vietnamese officers' interactions with the troops resembled teacher-pupil relationships, in which they tried to imbue values, inspire confidence and provide a helping hand. The officers also made efforts to engage the recruits outside of the traditional training drills – they had them help out in a local village, or held a poem contest for them. However, these positive portrayals may have been influenced by the narrative structure of the movie. Since the film is told as a memory of a lone surviving soldier, whose friends were still alive during the training phase, his memories could have been tainted with nostalgia and portrayed the past nicer than it truly was.

Aside from training, the personas and natures of the American soldiers in FMJ and Vietnamese soldiers in MCC are also painted differently. Most of the North Vietnamese soldiers are rather immature, with a boyish demeanor and very little life experience. There are multiple scenes in

which they express fear or reluctance to fight, or reminisce about the pre-draft days. Most soldiers, junior and senior alike, do not want to be involved in the war and only endure it for the good of their nation. On the other hand, the marines in FMJ appear older, more mature, and rarely express dissatisfaction with participating in the war. Most of them even look forward to battle and find enjoyment in fighting, rather than in noble service for their country. This divide is nicely reflected in the songs the soldiers sing while training. In FMJ, most songs are silly, vulgar, and either unrelated to war, or mocking the enemy - e.g. "Ho Chi Minh is a son-of-a-b*tch! Got the blue balls, crabs and the seven-year-itch" (8). On the other hand, the MCC troops sing about the love for their country, desire for freedom, and bravery to stand up to their enemies: "Free the south... Kill the American invaders and kill all the cowards who sold our country. Even when our bones have dissolved, and our blood is spilling... We will devote ourselves to saving our country. ... We will build up our glorious country for eternity" (33).

The movies also show differences in how the war impacts the troops. In FMJ, most go crazy in their unique ways – they become desensitized towards death and killing, lose respect for life, even become addicted to violence. In MCC, even though the soldiers lose some of their ideals and innocence, they never lose their humanity and desire to live a 'normal life'. In the breaks during battle, they get back to their youthful selves and sing and dance. When they encounter the body of a southern soldier, they decide to give him a proper burial, despite the fact that he tried to kill them before.

As striking as these differences are, they must be taken with a grain of salt, as the broader context of the movies must be accounted for. Stanley Kubrick, the director of FMJ, was not a proponent of the war and intentionally emphasized its silliness. The movie exaggerates America's infamous traits and balances on the edge between realism and ridicule. On the other hand, MCC was made as a retrospective homage to the fallen soldiers and their hard-won independence. It wants to appear realistic, but cannot help be a little idealistic.

Battle scenes and the use of weaponry / technology are also portrayed differently - though in this case, that is mostly based on reality rather than an emotional tainting of the portrayed events. MCC shows how technologically outmatched the North Vietnamese troops were against their southern US-backed enemies. Their guns tend to fail them. They run out of ammunition fast. Their shelters by the battlefield are poor and provide little protection. They have an unstable connection to their base, using an ancient wind-up phone that does not work half the time; no radios, no GPS, no satellite connectivity. Their medical equipment is equally insufficient. Furthermore, a lot of the battlefield scenes are dedicated to showing the soldiers being shot or blown to pieces, and corpses being carried away. On the other hand, the US soldiers in FMJ are surrounded by the latest tech and weapons. Their guns never fail them, there is always enough ammunition, their shelters are well isolated and protected, their radios well-functioning and their medical teams work around the clock to save anyone who has been injured. Very few American deaths are shown. Despite these differences, the worse-equipped team achieved its goals in the end, showing that wars are not just about technology, but about spirit and the 'righteousness' of the reason for fighting.

Moving away from the comparison of the two movies and towards the portrayal of the AWoW in MCC, it is important to note that the events of this movie take place around the time of the ‘Second Battle of Quang Tri’, in 1972. At the time, most US troops had already been withdrawn from Vietnam, so their presence in the movie is very limited. Not a single US soldier is shown on screen – the South Vietnamese provide all troops on the ground, but US weapons and air force are present. *Firepower*, *large scale* and *reliance on technology* are the most prominent characteristics, as the battlefield is constantly being bombarded from above. Bombs are even being dropped seemingly ‘preventively’, without targeting, just to keep the North Vietnamese from advancing (45). America is only represented through the shots of wreckage their bombs cause on the ground. They are like an invisible grey eminence, an unreachable being in the sky that delivers hits with God-like destruction. That also suggests the USA’s *casualty-aversion*, albeit only when their own troops are concerned. The US soldiers are kept further from battle, while the more ‘expendable’ locals get to fight in the mud. After one particularly difficult night, during which the northern forces had to cross a river under constant bombardment and lost over half of their unit, their commander looks up at the sky and says: “We've lost so many people. That's all because of Fleet 7. If only we had a chance to fight them face to face” (56). The US was portrayed as cowardly for fighting solely from a distance, and the commander was confident that his men would triumph if they faced the US in ground battle.

Aside from these characteristics, other elements of AWoW are not represented or implied in MCC. On the contrary, there is a scene that goes against the notion that the AWoW is apolitical and astrategic. The North Vietnamese commander receives a call, saying that “in the next few days, the enemy will focus their strongest and most skillful forces to attack us [the northern forces], so they could put more pressure on us at the Paris conference. . . . Never before have the military battle and the political battle had such a tight connection” (1:08, 1:10). This suggests that the USA’s advancements, at least in this particular mission, were strongly inspired by higher political and strategic goals that went beyond just winning a battle.

Mùi cỏ cháy portrays the American way of war and strategic culture quite superficially, not going too far beyond the most apparent focus on *firepower*, *scale*, *technological reliance* and the connected *casualty-aversion*. However, when compared and contrasted with the *Full Metal Jacket*, a movie with a very similar narrative structure, the audience can uncover interesting differences in the depictions of each country, its soldiers and their approach to war.

6.3 Comparison of the American and Vietnamese cinematographic accounts of the Vietnam War and AWoW

The American and Vietnamese movies are first compared more broadly, focusing on their general tone and portrayal of war. Afterwards, their depiction of the AWoW’s characteristics is compared and finally, the US movies are contrasted with the official US policies from the Vietnam War era.

Starting with the broader comparison, the first difference between the selected movies was the breadth of their thematic orientation. American movies were more narrowly focused, dealing only with the lives of US troops and only during the war. The Vietnamese movies were more holistic;

not only did they show the civilian side of events in *Cánh Dong Hoan*, but also provided a pre- and post-war glimpse into a soldier's life in MCC. Vietnamese films approached war not merely as a series of battles, but as a historical event that changed their country's day-to-day life.

Secondly, American movies were more subliminally critical of the war and the USA's involvement in it. That makes sense, seeing as the American participation in the war was a conscious decision - a political choice that can be criticized. On the other hand, the Vietnamese were dragged into the war by the Cold War superpowers, with no choice and hence little decision-making to assess. Since both US movies were made after the war's end, the society and filmmakers had enough time to reflect on its events and aftermath, both home and abroad. Knowing how the war shook US beliefs in their righteousness, capabilities, and in warfare as such, it is understandable that the two most popular movies portrayed it with a critical, almost parodic tone. FMJ is especially strong in this respect, showing the absurdity of the war and USA's conduct in it through dialog, troop behavior, or choice of soundtrack on multiple occasions. *Apocalypse Now* (AN) is a bit more subtle, taking a darker, more psychological route to showcase the war's preposterousness, but is equally prone to exaggeration of the USA's unflattering characteristics.

American movies are also more ambiguous in identifying the 'bad guy'. In Vietnamese films, the North Vietnamese civilians and troops are clearly put into positive roles, showing that any bad thing they did was done out of necessity and with great reluctance. However, American portrayals of their own troops depict many as deranged, stripped of humanity and remorse. Numerous scenes show US troops reveling in violence, while their adversaries are scarcely even shown. Even if they are, they tend to be in the form of defenseless civilians, not ruthless military men. This further underlines America's critical portrayal of itself in the war, acknowledging that their reasons for participating were self-centered and likely caused more harm than good.

Moving on to the 12+2 characteristics of the AWoW, Table 1 summarizes their occurrence in the four analyzed movies. For better lucidity, similar characteristics have been grouped. Each tick represents the appearance of a given characteristic / group of characteristics in a movie. If two ticks are present, the characteristic(s) appeared in both movies from a given country.

	Apolitical Astrategic Ahistorical Regular	Impatient	Problem- solving Optimistic	Cultural ignorance Demonization of enemy	Exceptionalism Messianism	Technology Logistics	Firepower Scale	Casualty- aversion
US movies	✓	✓✓		✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓
VIET movies		✓		✓		✓✓	✓✓	✓

Table 1: Overview of the representation of the AWoW’s characteristics in American and Vietnamese movies

The Vietnamese movies most prominently featured the characteristics of firepower, scale, and technological dependence, seeing as American presence was mostly conveyed through helicopters and bombs. At the same time, they did not portray US hubris very profoundly; the Americans were not depicted as self-proclaimed messiahs who saw themselves as exceptional and demonized their enemies. US power dominance was shown, but their motivations, stemming from these rather negative characteristics, were unaddressed. The American presence was shown as a ‘necessary evil’ – as a simple force that arrived in Vietnam and had to be expunged, without a need to understand it. This suggests that the crux of the AWoW and strategic culture was not understood, and the US was only perceived through its literal actions and tangible legacies - death and destruction. Hence, even though US troops were not outright demonized in the movies on a personal level, they are depicted as an unwanted alien presence that wreaked havoc and had to be defeated by forces of ‘goodness’. The Vietnam War from the northern perspective is shown as a classic tale of good vs. evil, where the weaker underdog triumphs thanks to his perseverance and righteousness.

American movies were more accurate in identifying their country’s NWoW characteristics, having portrayed all groups except for the problem-solving, optimistic nature. The apolitical / astrategic / ahistorical / regular traits were also represented quite weakly; however, to be fair, they are hard to show in the span of movies with a narrow focus and from a single time period.

With regard to the comparison of the USA’s actual and movie strategy in the Vietnam War, the films did a good job of staying true to reality. As chapter 3.4 explained, US strategy in Vietnam was mostly “based on the massive application of technology and firepower to launch offensive operations to annihilate the enemy” (Mahnken, 2008, p. 89), but also contained elements of more ‘innovative’ approaches akin to counter-insurgency or development aid. FMJ captures all these partial strategies, as it traces the journey of a marine, who first gets to write propaganda news and later moves to armed combat. The chief of the Military Journalism Unit talks about ‘winning the hearts and minds’ of the locals and giving them gifts, which hints at the application of the two alternative approaches on a smaller scale. Later, when battle is shown, massive firepower aiming to annihilate the enemy is depicted clearly.

In *Apocalypse Now*, annihilation-style warfare is apparent too, especially in the segment where the main character, Willard, meets the air cavalry. The movie also hints at certain irregular approaches utilized by the US - Willard is sent on a covert mission to kill another American, who previously conducted other small-scale covert operations. What the film does especially well is portray the organizational chaos and certain 'intellectual and moral decay' on the US side. There are multiple scenes showing confusion, lack of capable command or clear instruction. Willard's mission exemplifies the US turning on itself - killing its own product, because it turned out exactly as twisted as the war led him to be. *Apocalypse Now* epitomizes the slow crumbling of America's faith in its capabilities and perceived moral superiority, which was answered with even more destruction and violence before ultimately admitting defeat.

6.4 Conclusion and summary

American movies about the Vietnam War were very precise in capturing elements of the AWoW, as well as actual events and policies. Both movies were critical of the US involvement in the war, acknowledging their mistakes and strong negative effect the war had on their nation.

The Vietnamese movies portrayed the war more holistically, focusing less on battle and more on personal civilian and military life during the conflict. The films do not show a profound understanding of US strategic culture, nor motivations for engagement, and only portray the superficial marks the US left on Vietnam. The enemy is painted as an evil force, but not fully dehumanized.

7. Movie analysis: War in Afghanistan

7.1 American movies about the War in Afghanistan

The two most popular American movies from the appropriately filtered selection were *Lone Survivor* (2013) and *War Dogs* (2016)¹⁶.

7.1.1 Lone Survivor (2013)

Lone Survivor (Berg, 2013) tells the true story of *Operation Red Wings*, in which a group of navy SEALs embarked on a reconnaissance mission to confirm the whereabouts of a notorious Taliban leader. However, the mission got out of hand, leaving only one 'lone survivor'.

The movie is a classic American war drama, with strikingly real visual effects and a strong patriotic undertone. There are a couple recurring elements attempting to make the film more 'believable', and US troops more 'likeable'. First, the way in which many shots are made resembles documentary-style shooting. Extreme closeups showing the soldier's micro-emotions, wobbly footage from battle - as if shot with a hand-held camera, and realistic shots of explosions or bullet wounds are very frequent. Also, at the beginning of the movie, there is a sequence of real-life archival footage of navy SEALs training, showing its great difficulty and aiming to awaken respect and admiration in the audience. Second, viewers are constantly reminded that US soldiers are *human*. The movie shows snippets of their private lives and their gentler sides, as they talk to their

¹⁶ The movie list is available in Appendix no. 3, page 65.

wives, joke around, or discuss relatable civilian issues. Even the tensest moments - e.g. when travelling to the site of the mission (20) or laying hidden in the mountains and observing the enemy (32) - are constantly interrupted by light, entertaining chit-chat. It serves as a contrast to the nefarious battlefield, where the troops are sometimes forced to make disputable decisions. Their 'inhumanity' in war is being balanced out by their 'humanity' in civilian life, which is not done for their enemy counterparts.

Before leaving for the mission, the troops are briefed about the details of the operation. *Logistical excellence* and *astrategic / apolitical* thinking can be inferred from this segment, as the troops discuss tactical details, equipment, terrain and schedule, but a broader context for the mission is missing. Surely, one could argue that such briefings must be down to the point, and talks of broader strategies and policies are better left to some other time and place. However, the feeling of a lacking context, strategic or political, can be felt throughout the entire movie. A very interesting part of this segment is a series of scenes in which the troops discuss the rules of armed combat for the mission. The navy's PowerPoint presentation, detailing the Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC), is crosscut with shots of the Taliban cruelly beheading an Afghan man with a machete. "Only combatants and other military objectives can be attacked," says one of the Americans. "If you do come under attack, use the *appropriate* force necessary to deter that threat" (14). His words are contrasted with the Taliban's brutal, disproportionate killing of a civilian. The enemy is clearly being demonized, while US moral *superiority*, virtue, and rule-following nature is emphasized. The aforementioned documentary-style camera is very apparent in this segment, reinforcing the viewers' beliefs that this was indeed how things came to pass.

When the briefing ends, the movie shows a slow-panning wide shot of a table loaded to the brim with weapons, with all the SEALs preparing their guns in perfect unison. A voiceover - a pledge of one of the SEALs - says: "There ain't nothing I can't do. No sky too high, no sea too rough ... Anything in life is worth overdoing. Moderation is for cowards" (18, 19). This single pledge, later reinforced with the troop's conduct in battle, epitomizes the AWoW's characteristics of *optimism*, *exceptionalism* and *large scale*.

As the mission begins, the American *reliance on technology* is evident. The troops, despite being merely a reconnaissance unit, are equipped with a variety of gadgets and weapons. The mission goes as planned until a group of shepherds, apparently connected to the nearby Taliban camp, stumbles upon the soldiers' hiding spot. The troops capture them and discuss their options - if they let the shepherds go, they would notify the Taliban, endangering the mission and the lives of the troops; however, the LOAC says they are not allowed to kill the shepherds. One soldier reminds them that the Taliban leader they were tracking, "killed twenty marines last week. ... We let him go, twenty more will die next week" (42). *Casualty-aversion* is clearly present in this thinking; however, it suggests that an American life is worth more than an Afghan life, which suggests a conviction of *exceptionalism* among the troops. The movie creates an impossible situation - a moral dilemma of only being able to choose between two evils (killing civilians to protect the mission and their unit vs. sparing the civilians, but likely causing the deaths of other troops).

Ultimately, the commanding officer decides to let the shepherds go. However, the deciding argument for this verdict is not to protect the Afghans, but a fear of repercussion for breaking the LOAC.

As the SEALs withdraw, their *reliance on technology* turns back on them. They are unable to call for help, as their radio signal gets trapped in the mountainous terrain. They soon find themselves surrounded by Taliban fighters, whom they take down one-by-one with precise shots. Their rifles and the way they engage in combat are very different compared to Vietnam; Vietnam was more akin to the ‘annihilation’ style of warfare, with machine guns and massive firepower being preferred over precise one-off shots. The characteristics of the ‘new American way of warfare’ are well portrayed.

The US troops are shot multiple times and keep tumbling down steep mountain sides to escape the Taliban’s reach. In spite of their injuries, they do not give up and have no doubt they will pull through and defeat the enemy. This signals the famed American *optimism* and *positive thinking*. The troops also show great unity and toughness – they let no one from their team stay behind, even if it endangers the rest of them. Nonetheless, one of the troops is heavily injured and captured by the Taliban. Once again, the movie crosscuts shots of the Taliban stripping the captured American of his possessions (his rifle, radio, wedding ring), with emotional shots showing one of the US soldiers sacrificing himself to call reinforcements. The Talibs are the bad guys, with no dignity or respect for human life, while the Americans are brave, selfless and relentless. The dying scenes of the Talibs are quick and emotionless, while the dying scenes of the Americans are in slow motion, with dramatic music playing in the background (1:10 – 1:15).

In the end, only one American remains. Wounded and weak, he is discovered by an Afghan father and his kids, who take him to their village, help him send a message to the American base, and protect him from the Taliban. The US air force soon arrives and, with their *massive firepower*, decimate the fleeing Talibs. The efforts and resources put into saving the life of this single survivor are another testimony to how *casualty-averse* the USA is, though exclusively when it comes to their own people.

The film ends with a sequence of photographs depicting the real men who died in *Operation Red Wings*. Most photos are from their personal lives, showing them on their wedding days, or playing with their kids, which is another attempt to humanize them and underline the evilness of the Talibs who took their lives. One of the final screens explains the behavior of the friendly Afghans: “*The Afghan villagers who protected Marcus did so out of duty to their 2,000-year-old code of honor, known as Pashtunwali. Pashtunwali requires a tribe to undertake the responsibility of safeguarding an individual against his enemies and protecting him at all costs*” (1:56). This helps create greater contrast between the good, virtuous Afghan civilians, who live by a code and are hence not too different from the Americans, vs. the evil Taliban that knows no mercy and follows no rules. This final message of the movie feels like a justification to continue the war in Afghanistan, as the USA are not doing it for themselves, but for the good Afghans who need protection.

In sum, this movie does a wonderful job of highlighting some of the AWoW's most striking characteristics. From *logistical excellence* to *astrategic thinking*, *exceptionalism*, *demonization of the enemy* and preference for *large scale* shown in the preparatory phase, to *technological dependence*, *optimism* and *casualty-aversion* demonstrated during the mission, this movie ticks almost all the boxes. On the other hand, it does not affirm the characteristics of impatience and regularity. However, that may be due to the fact that it tells the story of a very specific unit - the navy SEALs - which are, by definition, used mostly for unconventional missions.

7.1.2 *War Dogs (2016)*

War Dogs (Phillips, 2016) is inspired by a true story of two young Americans who turned the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq into a business opportunity and became arms dealers. The film is not a traditional war movie - it does not show combat and its main characters are not soldiers. Nonetheless, it provides a more civilian, business-like perspective of America at war, and thus adds an important piece into the mosaic of USA's pop-cultural portrayal of itself.

One of the movie's first scenes shows real-life footage of American troops in action, while a voiceover says: "What do you know about war? They'll tell you it's about patriotism, democracy, or some sh*t about the other guy hating our freedom. But you wanna know what it's really about?" (2). Money – at least according to David Packouz, the movie's narrator and main character. David, knowing nothing about weapons and being profoundly against the USA's engagement in the Middle East, meets his childhood friend Efraim, who eventually brings him into his arms dealing business. They work by monitoring the US military's website which lists all their pending weapons orders, and look for small contracts they could fulfill. As David explains: "We're middlemen. We don't touch the guns, we don't see the guns. We never even leave the office" (34). They merely buy and sell with a profit. Ultimately, things become more complicated as they take on larger contracts – they are required to travel to Jordan to smuggle guns to Iraq, or to Albania to repackage illegal Chinese ammunition for US troops in Afghanistan. However, regardless of where the two men are, their conduct provides glimpses into the AWoW through civilian eyes and, conversely, a glimpse into how the American war culture impacts civilian culture.

Among the most clearly-shown characteristics of the AWoW is the American focus on *firepower* and *scale*. This is evident both on the military side and the civilian side. For the military, these characteristics are epitomized by the largest contract David and Efraim have worked on – the so-called 'Afghan deal'. "The Pentagon is arming the Afghans for the next 30 years. They are building a whole army", notes David as he skims through the enormous quantities of the required weapons and ammunition (56). This contract showed not only the US preference for large *scale* and *firepower*, but also their *messianism* and eagerness to export their approach to war. On the civilian side, the love for weapons and firepower is embodied by Efraim, who has a tendency to solve problems with guns (11), profoundly enjoys aimlessly shooting from an AK-47 (1:06), and has an enormous picture of the iconic machine gun scene from *Scarface* hanging in his office (14). Besides these characteristics, *logistical excellence* is also emphasized. The bulk of the main characters' business is centered around planning, transportation and paperwork related to arms

dealing, without which the war would be impossible to maintain. Just like some of the previous movies, this one shows how interrelated the characteristics of the American strategic culture are; war built around scale and firepower would not be feasible without exceptional logistical effort.

Similarly, the famed American *optimistic* and *problem-solving* nature are shown, once again embodied by Efraim, who never gives up on a contract and deals with all hiccups with a ‘can-do’ finesse. The movie also portrays the US approach to war as rather *apolitical*. At least for the main characters and the people they deal with, war is just business. David puts aside his political opinions and disagreement with the war, once he realizes how much money he could make on it. “This [job] is not about being pro-war. War is happening. This is about being pro-money”, explains Efraim to David (21). David ultimately learns that “war is an economy” (2), which is a message that further reinforces the *apolitical* perception of the Afghan / Iraqi war. This notion of war as enterprise, detached from greater political aims, is also wonderfully demonstrated by the ‘Vegas X’ – a military convention held in Las Vegas “where the military and manufacturers come together to unveil the latest in warfare” (57). David describes it as “a Comic-Con with grenades” - a sort of fun fair centered around weapons, where are all looking to make money, and none are concerned with the political or ethical implications of war.

The movie also shows subtle signs of *cultural ignorance*, albeit not as strongly as the movies depicting the Vietnam War. The stance of the main characters and some secondary characters towards other nations is perhaps better described as a feeling of *exceptionalism* and superiority, rather than complete ignorance or disregard. The people involved in the arms dealing trade need to know their way around other cultures at least a little, as it is necessary for business. Nonetheless, there are signs that the Americans think of themselves more highly than of the Afghans or Iraqis, or of their trade partners from Eastern Europe.

Finally, a very interesting motif in the film is religion and the way the main characters connect it to war. Efraim is a master manipulator, capable of utilizing his Jewish ancestry and America’s Christian roots as bargaining chips to get what he wants. He attracts an investor from his local Jewish community by acting pious and persuading him that the only reason he got involved in the arms business was to make sure Israel’s enemies were destroyed. “We’re doing God’s work”, asserts Efraim (22). In another scene, Efraim tries to straighten out a problem with a delayed weapons delivery by appealing to the US Commander’s Christian spirit of patience and forgiveness (33). The US efforts in the Middle East are also shown as intertwined with the USA’s perceived religious duty to ‘enlighten’ others and export their values; in other words, the portrayal of American *messianism* is not neglected.

In conclusion, *War Dogs* provides an insightful, unique look into the American way of war by focusing on civilians entangled in the war’s business side. The movie demonstrates the American characteristics of *firepower* and *large scale, logistical excellence, problem-solving nature, non-politicalness, exceptionalism* and *messianism*. Not all of these traits are shown directly through the conduct of the US military – however, that only shows that civilians who get involved with war

are likely to take on some characteristics of the AWoW. After all, whether one contributes to the war effort as a soldier or a ‘mere’ supplier, they are all part of how it is waged.

7.2 Afghan movies about the War in Afghanistan

According to the IMDB, Afghanistan produced 13 war movies since 2001¹⁷. However, upon closer inspection, the author found that very few of them follow ‘classic’ war topics or show combat and US troops. Rather, the vast majority focus on telling the stories of regular Afghan people, especially from the most vulnerable groups – women, children and the elderly. Their stories are not centered on their lives in relation to the ongoing war, but on more long-lasting societal issues (e.g. social stigma, poverty, religion...). Hence, the final selection of movies does not align perfectly with the top two ‘most popular’ IMDB titles, but had to be slightly altered to provide a suitable selection for this thesis’ subject matter.

The most popular movie from the list, *Syngué sabor, pierre de patience* (2012) had been excluded from the analysis for two reasons. First, the author was unable to find it online. Second, even if the author had access to it, it would be thematically unsuitable, seeing as it tells a story of an Afghan woman who takes care of her paralyzed husband, while falling in love with another man. Even though it takes place during the post-2001 war with the USA, it would likely be unable to provide insight into the portrayal of American strategic culture. The second movie on the list, *L’etoile du soldat* (2006) takes place during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and is hence irrelevant to this thesis. The fourth and fifth movies, *Utopia* (2015) and *Kabullywood* (2017), are similar cases to the first movie: they are hard to access and tell stories unrelated to the war. *Utopia* is about an Afghan woman who travels to the United Kingdom to get an artificial insemination; the movie examines the aftermath of this decision in the conservative Afghan society. *Kabullywood* is a dramatic comedy about a group of artists who decide to open a cultural center in Kabul. Hence, the two movies from the list that are analyzed in this thesis – the two most popular, while at the same time accessible and relevant to the war and the American presence in Afghanistan – are numbers three and six: *Opium War* (2008) and *An Apple from Paradise* (2010).

7.2.1 *Opium War* (2008)¹⁸

Opium War (Barmak, 2008) is officially described as a black comedy. It was shot by an esteemed Afghan director and has a fully local cast, with the exception of two Americans, who portray US soldiers. In the story, an Afghan boy discovers these two soldiers in a fallen helicopter in the middle of the desert. The film traces their journey as they attempt to find their way back to civilization, smoke poppy-heads to ease their pain, and interact with the boy and his family living in an abandoned Soviet tank. The movie reads like a caricature - not only of Americans, but also of the Afghans, the Taliban, and Afghanistan as a whole. Its imagery should hence be taken with a grain of salt, but nonetheless provides valuable insight into Afghan perceptions / portrayals of the USA.

¹⁷ The movie list is available in Appendix no. 4, page 65.

¹⁸ The movie is available with English subtitles here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qdYS3ZIA96w&t=2424s>.

In the opening scene of the movie, a young boy comes up to a human skeleton in the desert. He says: “Bastard, you said you would keep the evil eye away from us, but we were cursed. ... I'm going to p*ss in your can, rest in peace” (1), and proceeds to urinate in a bucket next to the skeleton. We never learn whose remains those were, but it is safe to assume they belonged to an American soldier, as two others are soon found near there. The boy was likely expressing his anger and frustration from the unfulfilled promises the USA and the West made to Afghanistan when the war started.

As the boy wanders through the desert, he discovers a wrecked helicopter with two unconscious American soldiers. The visual imagery creates a stark contrast between the vast, calm sand dunes, whose peace was disrupted by a large, metal, steaming ‘carcass’ of a helicopter, seemingly ‘polluting’ the immaculate desert (3). The boy is uninterested in the soldiers – he does not attempt to find out whether they are alive and leaves the scene, telling his dog “You have meat for at least two months. Either you will eat them, or some vultures will” (5). As the soldiers come to their senses, they leave to explore their surroundings. The older one (Don) needs to be carried by his younger, African-American subordinate (Joe) due to his leg injury. They both carry guns, despite being seemingly alone and out of danger from armed enemies, which seems to be a comical hint at the American *reliance on technology* and obsession with weapons. Furthermore, Don, who is depending on Joe to carry him, keeps belittling him with racist remarks. At one point, Don even fires at him. Notwithstanding the movie being a black comedy, these scenes paint quite a strong picture of Americans as bad, intolerant people, who look down on those who are not ‘like them’, even if they are on the same team.

Joe soon collapses from the heat and fatigue right in the middle of an opium field. “I am scared. I am dizzy”, he says. He passes one poppy head to Joe, saying: “Eat this. This is good for your pain” (10). Again, overlooking the comical tone of the movie, this scene seems to suggest weakness and cowardice of the Americans, who are brought down by the natural conditions in which millions of Afghans normally live, and who resort to drugs at the slightest discomfort. Following are various random scenes showing the soldiers struggling in the desert, or smoking opium and seemingly enjoying the situation they found themselves in. Even in their unenviable state, they maintain their *optimism* and resourcefulness, despite not being particularly bright. They do not seem to have an actionable plan and just erratically do the things that come to mind. This may be overstressing, but it could be interpreted as a reflection of the *astrategic* nature of the AWoW, or general mode of thinking of the American population. A happy-go-lucky, hopeful and confident mindset that deals with problems on the go, not before.

Equally erratically, the soldiers’ opinions of Afghanistan keep changing, likely depending on their level of drug intoxication. While in the beginning Don referred to the country as “the sh*thole of the universe” (8), he later compares it to a beach in the Bahamas (47). Joe agrees: “This is paradise ... It would be a beautiful place ... if there wasn’t a war going on” (25). By having the Americans praise Afghanistan and acknowledge the evils of the war, it appears as if the filmmakers created

some subliminal apology from the US to Afghanistan - admitting they should have done more, or better yet, not enter the war in the first place.

There is another striking scene that seems to be sending a similar message. The soldiers discover a pair of donkeys and want to use them to get out of the desert. A drone flies over their heads and drops a bomb on their donkey, destroying their only means of escape (40). It seems as if technology – the one the Americans so rely on – turned back on them. The soldiers get to experience the despair and helplessness of a precision strike, which is as simple as pressing a button for a drone operator, but completely destructive to an Afghan civilian. The Americans got a taste of their own medicine and they did not like it.

Throughout the movie, there are also instances showing America's *cultural ignorance* / a belittling stance towards the Afghan way of life. For example, upon seeing a crowd of women in burqas walking through the desert, Don asserts that "a burqa is like a tent they put over their women, so me and you can't see them" (48), which completely disregards the religious and cultural meaning of the garment. Another example of cultural ignorance can be seen in the film's confusing ending, when an American helicopter arrives to the desert, accompanied by local officials with ballot boxes. "Welcome to the land of democracy, free speech and national unity", they announce as they force the Afghan family to cast their votes (1:23). The locals look flabbergasted. Being completely uninformed about the significance of voting, or the candidates they could choose from, this scene shows how ill-fitting the forced enforcement of democracy is. This ignorance towards local customs, systems and natural authorities has created more chaos than good. The scene shows that democracy in Afghanistan is only 'pro forma' – a mere veneer with insufficient ties to the citizens' lives.

The Americans also seem quite startled by the civilian women and children they find living in an old Soviet tank in the desert. Throughout most of the movie, they try to avoid contact and are unsure of how to communicate with them. Through this and the other aforementioned imagery (succumbing to the climate, being lost in the desert), the audience is reminded that the Americans are foreigners who do not belong in Afghanistan. However, towards the end of the film, the soldiers and the Afghan family grow closer. After the soldiers are captured, the father of the family lets them go and 'employs' them on his opium farm, saying: "They are part of God's creation too. The Russians came and left after a while. They will too. God is gracious" (1:08). In the end, the Afghans are portrayed as the good guys, still capable of virtue and of good deeds, in God's name. The Americans and the Afghan family are seen smoking opium, working, and solving problems together, notwithstanding their language or cultural barriers. The film seems to want to end with the message that people are not so different from each other - that good men can be found all around the world, and that human compassion should take precedence over ethnic or religious differences.

In spite of the comical tone of the movie, *Opium War* shows that the Afghans have picked up on some characteristics of the AWoW. There is a clear reliance on *technology*, *astrategicness*, *cultural ignorance*, and *optimistic / problem-solving* attitude. The movie mocks the Americans

and shows them as foreign elements that do not belong and fare well in Afghanistan; however, it does not completely demonize them, or blame them for the difficult life in the country.

7.2.2 *An Apple from Paradise (2010)*¹⁹

An Apple from Paradise (Morowat, 2010) tells the story of an old Afghan man, Yaqub, who travels to Kabul to see his son Yusuf, who studies at a madrassa there. However, Yaqub learns that his son left the school to become a suicide bomber, like his two older brothers before him. These news break Yaqub's spirit and test his faith. The movie follows his desperate journey to save his son from a martyr's fate.

Due to the nature of the movie, this analysis will be different from the others. American soldiers are never shown in the film and the war is barely referenced; hence, not many characteristics of American strategic culture can be identified. Nonetheless, this movie provides valuable insight into how Afghan filmmakers deal with the topics that mar their society and are related to war and foreign occupation - especially the issue of religious extremism.

The movie shows the Afghan people as mostly warm, welcoming, polite and helpful. Yaqub, as an elderly, is shown great respect. Nonetheless, he ideologically clashes with some other men with regard to their opinion on suicide bombings. Yaqub, being a very religious man, whose two sons were martyrs during the Soviet occupation, sees the act as noble and righteous. However, most other people despise suicide bombers; a man on the bus refers to them as "godless people" (3) and a taxi driver in Kabul as "filthy low lives" (15). At first, Yaqub is outraged by these notions. However, his belief is shaken when he learns that his last remaining son had been brainwashed into martyrdom. "Yusuf is on his way to paradise. He has gone to sacrifice himself for the truth ... You should be proud", reveals a local mullah to Yaqub (19).

Yaqub wanders through the streets in despair. It feels like God has failed him. He is denied shelter at the mosque and forced to sleep out in the cold. In his weakened state, temptation creeps in. Yaqub is offered drugs, participation in lottery and gambling card games, which are impermissible in the Islamic faith (45). Yaqub is torn apart, as the main foundation stone of his life, his faith, begins to collapse. Not only has its twisted interpretation corrupted his son, but it also seemed to be disappearing from civilian life. Ultimately, while still searching for his son, Yaqub gets entangled in a suicide bomber attack in the center of Kabul and taken prisoner by the local armed forces. During his brief time in jail, the movie finally touches the topic of American presence in Afghanistan.

Yaqub is being questioned by a detective. The discussion turns to suicide bombers, whom the detective dislikes as much as the other people Yaqub had talked to. He blames Yaqub's generation for building a weak society that relied on foreign aid, consequently making their country vulnerable. "Your generation is to blame. You elders. All our ruin is your fault. ... It's your fault for inviting foreigners into our country. ... Your generation was illiterate and kept its sons illiterate too. ... It is because of your ignorance that we have to ask for hand-outs from the internationals",

¹⁹ The movie is available with English subtitles here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B6__wyFdUBM&t=1132s.

says the detective (1:03). To that, Yaqub replies: “If you [meaning the foreign armed forces the detective works with] hadn't destroyed my home and offended my religion, this country would not have been destroyed like this. We would not be where we are now. I would not be desperately searching for my son” (1:06). These words suggest cultural ignorance and messianism of the American forces, whose ignorance and belief in their ways’ superiority contributed to Afghanistan’s problems.

If this discussion is representative of the general opinions in the society, it points to an interesting divide. The detective, a member of the younger generation, blames the elders for having made the first wrong step – allowing the Soviet invasion in 1979. On the other hand, Yaqub, representing the older generation, sees the main crux of Afghanistan’s current problems much later - in the US-Afghan war that has taken too long and caused too much damage, provoking radicalization among the youth, ultimately leading to the loss of his youngest son. Notice that Yaqub does not seem troubled by having lost two other sons to martyrdom during the Soviet invasion, but is very bothered by the idea of losing his last son ‘now’.

Resentment towards the Soviets / Russians and their 1979 invasion of Afghanistan seems to be a topic the country has not yet recovered from, as it was mentioned not only in this movie, but also in *Opium War*. Letting the Soviets in may be seen as the first wrong step in a series of bad decisions. The invasion commenced an era of almost constant war, helped create and arm the future Taliban (through US support for the anti-communist mujahideen), and left Afghanistan polarized, broken and dependent on foreign aid. It seems that outsiders are not welcome, but at the same time are necessary for Afghanistan’s survival. Hence, despite the Americans seeing themselves as messiahs and exceptional saviors, doing godly work in the Middle East, their presence seems to be just another unavoidable bad step in a series of bad steps for Afghanistan. One would perhaps expect to see a much harsher opinion of the USA expressed in Afghan movies, but this film suggests that the general Afghan public is more critical towards the Taliban and extremist forces, and of all foreign occupiers in general – not just / particularly the US.

Yaqub’s stay in prison ends with the detective saying: “I did not start the war and neither did you. We are not in control of our own destiny. There are larger powers, greater games. We both have been destroyed and we have caused destruction. We're both pawns” (1:06). That suggests a certain defeatism in the spirit of the Afghan public. The detective seemingly sees no way out of the vicious circle of the simultaneous reliance on and resentment of foreign aid. He sees himself, the people of Afghanistan, and by extension the whole country, as “not in control”, which is likely part of what creates the ambiguous stance towards America. On the one hand, the US has a grip on Afghanistan, but if it were released, there is a chance the country would crumble even more. It seems that choosing between the existence and non-existence of US control is a choice between a bad option and an even worse one.

The movie ends tragically. After Yaqub is let go from prison, he gets in touch with a terrorist cell training Yusuf. However, they refuse to let the boy go. Yaqub ends up losing his mind, begging on the streets Kabul.

An Apple from Paradise does not contain many observations about the Afghan perception of the AWoW, with the exception of Yaqub’s mention of US *messianism* and *cultural ignorance*. However, the film does provide insight into the general Afghan perception of America and its presence in the country. Based upon this movie, the opinions are not as clear-cut as one might think; there does not seem to be universal hatred for the USA in Afghanistan. However, the society seems to be greatly polarized in their opinions on religion and the extent to which jihad can be pursued, as well as on where the fate of their country took the first wrong turn and who the main enemy is.

7.3 Comparison of the American and Afghan cinematographic accounts of the War in Afghanistan and AWoW

Comparing these four movies from a more general perspective is a difficult task, as each film had a vastly different genre and focus. One was a classic war movie centered on troops and battle, one was a biographic comedy from the civilian world, one was a quirky dark comedy, and one a personal drama. Nonetheless, even this variety can be telling, as it emphasizes the great complexity of the Afghan war and its ability to affect other areas of life. The one general observation that can be made is that American movies were more focused on the war’s military and economic aspects, while the Afghan films were geared towards its social aspects and effects. However, more significant information can be uncovered by looking directly at the representation of the AWoW, which is summarily shown in Table 2.

	Apolitical Astrategic Ahistorical Regular	Impatient	Problem- solving Optimistic	Cultural ignorance Demonization of enemy	Exceptionalism Messianism	Technology Logistics	Firepower Scale	Casualty- aversion
US movies	✓✓		✓	✓	✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓
AFG movies	✓		✓	✓✓	✓	✓		

Table 2: Overview of the representation of the AWoW’s characteristics in American and Afghan movies

Before delving into the comparison, it must be noted that the selected Afghan movies were unconventional representations of the war genre. Both were more ‘private’, focused on the lives of Afghan civilians in a war-struck country, and both avoided showing battle and troops in combat. This approach makes sense; the war has been the status quo in Afghanistan for almost two decades and the nation has been profoundly shaken by it. Showing battles on screen while they are still raging in the country is understandably not as attractive for filmmakers and audiences, as producing movies that address people’s frustrations. However, even despite the focus on local issues rather than foreign invaders, the two movies say something about the USA and its strategic culture. They best captured the USA’s cultural ignorance / demonization of the enemy, but also its

astrategic ethos, optimistic problem-solving nature, messianism, and focus on technology. Despite that, a more profound understanding of the AWoW, or motivation for the USA's conduct in Afghanistan, are not demonstrated and only their more apparent elements are portrayed. Most importantly though, both Afghan films showed an interesting relationship between the Afghans and the Americans – a simultaneous sulkiness and tolerance for their presence. US soldiers were mocked in *Opium War*, but towards the end portrayed as helpful and friendly. In *An Apple from Paradise*, they were identified as the root of all evil by one character, but defended as a necessary force by another.

US movies portray AWoW with much greater precision. All its theoretical elements are shown at least in one movie, with the exception of impatience. *War Dogs*, having been focused on the economic and civilian side of the war, was more limited in its portrayal of US strategic culture; nonetheless, its civilian perspective enriched this analysis by showing a wider picture of the war's far-reaching effects.

With regard to USA's actual military strategy and the way it was portrayed in movies, the filmmakers did a decent job of staying true to reality. Key elements of the 'new way of war' – smaller units, overwhelming technological superiority, situational awareness, and a focus on precision rather than scale - as presented in chapter 3.6, were well depicted, especially in *Lone Survivor*. At the same time, a reinvigoration for American messianism was apparent in *War Dogs*, where the export of American weapons to Afghanistan went hand-in-hand with the export of certain ideas, particularly about war-waging. The movies did not reflect the policy changes that were adopted under the different presidencies. However, that is understandable, as the events of neither film spanned long enough to accommodate that.

7.4 Conclusion and summary

The selected films portraying the War in Afghanistan were exceptionally varied. The Afghan films were not particularly focused on the USA, or the war as such, but rather its effects on people's lives. Their portrayal of the AWoW characteristics was limited, showing that the Afghans do not much understand American methods, motivations and values. However, Americans were not demonized or dehumanized, and were even depicted positively in some scenes. The main takeaway from the movies was the duality of the relationship between the Afghans and Americans.

On the other hand, American films were very precise in portraying the characteristics of their way of war, as well as the doctrinal changes it underwent in response to 9/11.

8. Comparison of the AWoW in American, Vietnamese and Afghan movies

This chapter provides a final, concluding comparison of how the American way of war / strategic culture was portrayed by a) American movies across time; and b) Vietnamese vs. Afghan movies.

The first noticeable difference among the American movies was that those depicting the Vietnam War were more critical of the USA, than those depicting the Afghan War. Besides the general tone

of the movies, this discrepancy is also well visible through the main characters. Those in Vietnam (Joker and Willard) were good men, but unstable and unsure, torn apart by doubt of the correctness of their conduct and the horrors of the war they had seen. Conversely, the main characters in Afghanistan (in *Lone Survivor*) were depicted like regular men, whose greatness had been elevated through military training and whose moral compass, bravery and tenacity were second to none. In *War Dogs*, the main characters were a bit less noble and more crooked, but still shown mostly in good light - as savvy entrepreneurs who persisted and achieved the impossible, against all odds. Shortly put, despite the USA's belief in its moral superiority and exceptionalism, despite seeing itself as the messiah and supporter of good causes, US filmmakers have been critical of their country in the context of the Vietnam War, but not the Afghan War.

Why? In actuality, both wars proved quite divisive for the American public. However, Afghanistan has retained more popular support, which would explain its more tactful cinematic depiction. The reasons for participating in Afghanistan were much clearer and more appealing to the public than those in Vietnam (pioneering a war against global terrorism vs. fighting a distant and non-tangible spread of communism). Likewise, the results of the US campaign in Afghanistan were better than those from Vietnam, (albeit not stellar), fueling popular support for longer. The American movies seem to reflect the general sentiments of the public and further reinforce them. Hence, at least these most popular titles may have gained their popularity by giving the public what it wanted.

Another difference among US movies was the breadth of their focus. Movies about the Vietnam War exclusively depicted battle and training. There were no portrayals of civilian life, nor economic or political issues the war introduced. On the other hand, one of the movies from the Afghan War was solely focused on the civilian view of war and the business opportunities it generated, thus greatly differing from the rest. That shows that the War in Afghanistan may be perceived by the public more broadly - not as a mere war, but as an effort that has changed the USA in more ways than just militarily.

The American movies from the two eras also had some similarities. First were their narrative styles; both Vietnam War films were told as soldiers' memories, while both Afghan War films were inspired by real events and people. US filmmakers apparently wanted their movies to feel realistic and relatable through their personalness, even though the topics they portrayed are distant to the average civilian viewer. Second, they depicted the AWoW and reflected the real doctrines and policies with great precision, suggesting that US filmmakers, and by extension US audiences, have a good understanding of their country's strategic culture and way of war.

Moving on to the comparison of Vietnamese and Afghan accounts of the AWoW, this analysis uncovered surprising similarities.

Firstly, the movies from Vietnam and Afghanistan were similarly precise in identifying characteristics of the AWoW; in the summarizing table, they amassed 7 and 6 'ticks' respectively. However, while Vietnamese movies were focused on the more visible, 'tangible' elements of the AWoW - firepower, scale, technology, casualty-aversion etc. - the Afghan portrayals went one

level deeper, showing the more ‘personal’, less apparent characteristics like non-strategicness, optimism or messianism.

Second, both countries kept their portrayal of the USA quite civil. Americans were not dehumanized, nor depicted as purely evil in either of the foreign movies, but also not as noble saviors. Vietnamese films tended to be more pragmatic in their depiction of US troops, either showing them as regular men with their own legitimate agenda (in *Canh Doang Hoan*), or as some distant force that was only present in the war through weapons, not a dedicated presence (in MCC). Afghan movies expressed a dual opinion of the USA - animosity mixed with the acknowledgement that they are needed to protect civilians from the *real* enemy: terrorists and religious extremists.

At the same time, the portrayal of the US, though similarly non-evil in both countries, also constituted the greatest difference among the foreign movies. The difference lay in the degree of negativity attached to the USA. The Vietnamese have been more critical of it than the Afghans, and looking at the circumstances of the two wars, this difference is understandable. For North Vietnam, from whose perspective both Vietnamese movies were told, the USA was a clear enemy - a foreign invader seeking control over them. The situation in Afghanistan was and continues to be different. The USA is not fighting the country, but the dangerous extremists it harbors. Hence, America is not a clear-cut enemy that needs to be bested, but an ‘ally’ in the fight against terrorism. Sure enough, millions of Afghan civilians have suffered as a result of the US intervention; however, they were collateral damage, not targets. The Americans have caused a lot of destruction, but at the same time acted as partners, providing protection, funds and training to the locals. The US presence in Afghanistan is a double-edged sword and is portrayed as such in the movies.

Another difference among the Vietnamese and Afghan movies were their approaches to portraying the war. The Vietnamese films were more traditional representations of the war genre, showing combat, US troops (in *Canh Doang Hoan*) and Vietnamese troops (in MCC). Even though they were not exclusively focused on the military, having shown civilian life and the emotional struggles of being a soldier, their storylines were built around battle. On the other hand, the Afghan movies were much less centered on war and its military aspects, and rather explored civilian life in the country in a broader context. As had already been discussed, the preference for showing peoples’ struggles instead of battle, was likely caused by the fact that the war is still ongoing.

9. Conclusion

This thesis explored the portrayal of American strategic culture and ways of war in American, Vietnamese and Afghan war movies. It was looking for answers to these questions: How has the American strategic culture and way of war been presented in movies in the USA and abroad? Is there a mismatch between the USA’s official strategic doctrines, the way they are presented to the American public, and the way they are portrayed by their adversaries via popular motion pictures?

The analysis found that there was no significant mismatch between the USA’s theoretical way of war, official strategies, and their representation in movies. However, it did find that its portrayal

of America's conduct in the Vietnam War was rather critical, which does not align with the USA's standard lack of self-criticism, historic belief in superiority and war-waging solely for good causes.

In terms of the USA's adversaries' movies, they mostly reflect opinions that could be expected, given the circumstances of each war. Vietnamese filmmakers were more negative in their depiction of the USA, since north Vietnam was in an actual war against the south (which was supported by the US), while in Afghanistan, the USA fights against terrorists, not the country itself. The Afghans were not overly critical of the USA and rather expressed disdain for the Taliban and other extremist / terrorist factions. Nonetheless, somewhat surprisingly, the Vietnamese and Afghan movies were overall less negative in their portrayal of the US, than the US movies in the portrayal of the Vietnamese and Afghans. Cultural ignorance, demonization of the enemy, or demonstrations of superiority over 'the other' were prominent in all analyzed American films, showing that the USA is likely less open and tolerant as the countries they intervene in.

Summary

This thesis explored the portrayal of American strategic culture and ways of war in movies from the USA, Vietnam and Afghanistan. First, the work's theoretical framework was presented. Going from broader paradigms to more concrete concepts, the chapter began with the IR theory of post-structuralism, whose focus on subjective interpretations of reality and the power of discourse proved ideal for this research. Next, the concepts of strategic culture, national ways of war, and the logic of their joint usage were explained. These concepts were then applied to the historic evolution of the USA, focusing especially on the periods of the Vietnam War and War in Afghanistan. Afterwards, to affirm the importance of movies and their power to influence people's (political) opinions, existing research on that topic was presented.

After the thesis' theoretical background had been covered, the methodology for the ensuing movie analysis was introduced. The analysis began with movies depicting the Vietnam war, followed by movies from the War in Afghanistan. Their depictions of the American way of war had been compared and contrasted with the real course of events and US strategic doctrines. The analysis proved that American movies were precise in the portrayal of the USA's ways of war. Foreign movies exhibited a less profound understanding of American strategic culture, and did not portray the USA purely positively, but also not as evil. The Vietnamese depictions were more critical, reflecting the real animosity between the two countries during the Vietnam War. The Afghan depictions were more ambiguous, expressing a dual relationship of animosity and co-dependence towards the USA.

This thesis did not investigate how certain movies influenced other nation's opinions of America. It examined how the most popular relevant movies portrayed the USA, highlighting the differences in how Americans see themselves and how they are seen by others. The usefulness of these findings is underlined by previous research, as presented in chapter 4, which showed that movies *can* be powerful in shaping perceptions.

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List of abbreviations

AWoW	American way of war
FMJ	Full Metal Jacket – a 1987 movie
IR	international relations
LOAC	Law of Armed Conflict
MCC	Mui co chay - a 2012 movie
NWoW	national way(s) of war
RVNAF	Republic of Vietnam’s Armed Forces
SS	security studies

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Master’s thesis summary

This thesis explored the portrayal of American strategic culture and way of war in movies from the USA, Vietnam and Afghanistan, from the periods of the Vietnam War and War in Afghanistan. The research focused on comparing these portrayals and contrasting them with official US strategies in the chosen periods. The movie analysis was anchored in the IR theory of post-structuralism and concepts of strategic culture and national ways of war. From each country and period, two of the most popular war movies were analyzed. The findings showed that Vietnamese movies had a more negative portrayal of the USA than Afghan films. American films exhibited cultural ignorance and / or disdain for the other nations, but were also critical of the USA’s conduct in the Vietnam War. Furthermore, American movies showed great precision in portraying their country’s strategies and way of war in both analyzed conflicts.

Appendices

Appendix no. 1: The most popular American movies about the Vietnam War (table)

Source: IMDB. (2019). *Feature Film/TV Movie/TV Special, Released at least 1995-01-01, War, United States, Plot Matching "Vietnam", Including Adult Titles (Sorted by Number of Votes Descending)*. Retrieved October 15, 2019, from https://www.imdb.com/search/title/?title_type=feature,tv_movie,tv_special&release_date=1995-01-01,&genres=war&countries=us&plot=Vietnam&adult=include&sort=num_votes,desc.

Order	Movie title	Year of publication	Genre(s)	Included in analysis
1	Full Metal Jacket	1987	Drama, war	✓
2	Apocalypse Now	1979	Drama, mystery, war	✓
3	Platoon	1986	Drama, war	
4	Tropic Thunder	2008	Action, comedy, war	
5	The Deer Hunter	1978	Drama, war	

Appendix no. 2: The most popular Vietnamese movies about the Vietnam War (table)

Source: IMDB. (2019). *Feature Film/TV Movie/TV Special, Released at least 1955-01-01, War, Vietnam, Including Adult Titles (Sorted by Number of Votes Descending)*. Retrieved October 15, 2019, from https://www.imdb.com/search/title/?title_type=feature,tv_movie,tv_special&release_date=1955-01-01,&genres=war&countries=vn&adult=include&sort=num_votes,desc.

Order	Movie title	Year of publication	Genre(s)	Included in analysis
1	The Quiet American	2002	Drama, romance, thriller	
2	Canh dong hoang	1979	Drama, war	✓
3	Mui co chay	2012	Drama, war	✓
4	Koordinaty smerti	1986	Drama, war	
5	Dat Kho	1973	War	

Appendix no. 3: The most popular American movies about the War in Afghanistan (table)

Source: IMDB. (2019). *Feature Film/TV Movie/TV Special, Released at least 2001-01-01, War, United States, Plot Matching "Afghanistan", Including Adult Titles (Sorted by Number of Votes Descending)*. Retrieved October 15, 2019, from

https://www.imdb.com/search/title/?title_type=feature,tv_movie,tv_special&release_date=2001-01-01,&genres=war&countries=us&plot=Afghanistan&adult=include&sort=num_votes,desc.

Order	Movie title	Year of publication	Genre(s)	Included in analysis
1	Lone Survivor	2013	Action, biography, drama	✓
2	War Dogs	2016	Biography, comedy, crime	✓
3	Alexander the Great *not related to the War	2004	Action, biography, drama	
4	Brothers	2009	Action, drama, thriller	
5	12 Strong	2018	Action, drama, history	

Appendix no. 4: The most popular Afghan movies about the War in Afghanistan (table)

Source: IMDB. (2019). *Feature Film/TV Movie/TV Special, Released at least 2001-01-01, War, Afghanistan, Including Adult Titles (Sorted by Number of Votes Descending)*. Retrieved October 15, 2019, from

https://www.imdb.com/search/title/?title_type=feature,tv_movie,tv_special&release_date=2001-01-01,&genres=war&countries=af&adult=include&sort=num_votes,desc.

Order	Movie title	Year of publication	Genre(s)	Included in analysis
1	Syngué sabour, pierre de patience	2009	Drama, war	
2	L'étoile du soldat *not related to the War	2006	Drama, history, war	
3	Opium War	2008	Drama, war	✓
4	Utopia	2015	Drama, war	
5	Kabullywood	2017	Comedy, drama, war	
6	An Apple from Paradise	2010	Drama, war	✓