

# Phantom Menace

THE WASHINGTON AGENCIES of national security display a distressing detachment from the realities of the American situation in the Middle East.

The Army, its Reserve, and the Marine Corps are overcommitted, with deteriorating morale. The volunteer military cannot find the recruits it needs. Conscription is politically unthinkable but could become the only alternative.

In these circumstances, the Defense Department, which has been unable to supply body and vehicle armor in adequate quantities, is preoccupied with new nuclear weapons and space wars. It wants vast new expenditures on projects with no relevance to present realities—new and “more usable” nuclear weapons, including earth-penetrating “bunker busters.” The need is highly debatable, and the political costs of developing new nuclear weapons enormous.

The Air Force wants a national-security directive to “establish and maintain space superiority,” a project on which it seems already to have spent billions, and on which it wants to spend more, up to an estimated trillion dollars (and beyond, as experience of such estimates suggests).

Quite beyond the project’s feasibility, cost, foreign policy implications, and likelihood to inspire countermeasures, it is another demand for a military capability irrelevant to the present and realistically foreseeable future security needs of the country.

On May 9, a lost light plane entering Washington airspace produced a panicked evacuation of Congress, the White House, and most of the rest of official Washington. We are urged to control outer space, but one errant light plane terrorizes our nation’s capital. The one is costly fantasy. The other is reality.

A new Bureau of Reconstruction and Stabilization in the State Department is charged with organizing the reconstruction of countries where the United States has deemed it necessary to intervene in order to make them into market democracies. The bureau has 25 countries under surveillance as possible candidates for Defense Department deconstruction and State Department reconstruction. The bureau’s director is recruiting “rapid-reaction forces” of official, nongovernmental, and corporate business specialists. He hopes to develop the capacity for three full-scale, simultaneous reconstruction operations in different countries.

He told a recent conference on this subject (according to Naomi Klein in *The Nation*) that some of these American corporations will be given “pre-completed” contracts for reconstruction work in countries currently unaware that they are candidates for destruction/reconstruction. Getting the paperwork done beforehand, he said, could “cut off three to six months in your response time.”

This occurs at the same time American military forces still are unable to pacify Iraq or Afghanistan, agricultural societies of less than 25 million people each, both largely in ruins. The billions Washington already has spent on reconstruction have yet to produce reliable electric power, clean water, or a functioning sewer system in Baghdad itself.

The creation of an official capability for reconstructing 25 countries, at a time when anonymous senior army officers are quoted as saying that the United States could be defeated in Iraq, is the most egregious Washington example of a pathological disconnection from reality.

However, it is a logical bureaucratic response to the announced administra-

tion intention to overturn tyrants and spread liberty throughout the world.

The United States suffers a hypertrophy of irrelevant power in a policy context of unrealizable ambitions and unacknowledged or morbidly denied failures: in Iraq, Afghanistan, and in the War on Terror, where the Taliban fight to return in Afghanistan and Osama bin Laden and the Mullah Omar remain at large.

One is inclined to dismiss all this as product of institutional delusion or bureaucratic make-work. However, it responds to the expressed interests of the president. As one of his associates said, “we make reality.” This was in response to a question about realism. The remark unknowingly echoed one of Hannah Arendt’s acute observations about totalitarianism. One of the most significant aspects of the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century was that they “made reality” out of fictions. They were based on ideological fantasies that were false, but these fantasies were made into the reality upon which national policy was based. They thus came catastrophically true—until their inner falsehood brought disaster.

If the machinery of American government is put to work on the premises that the nation faces new wars, new dangers that will require the use of new nuclear weapons, and faces threats from space that it must pre-emptively counter with weapons that pose radical new threats to other nations, then “realities” will be created that foster disorder and war. Others will not like this falsified American version of truth. In the long run, Americans might not like it either. ■

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# Arts & Letters

## FILM

[*Cinderella Man*]

### Glass Jaws & Glass Slippers

By Steve Sailer

THE ARTISTIC accomplishments of film directors may be overstated by the hero-worshipping *auteur* theory, but any man who can shoulder a director's workload and responsibilities deserves a little respect. And if, like Ron Howard, he can deliver quality movies for a quarter of a century after starting out as a child star—the most warping upbringing imaginable, as the trials of Michael Jackson and Robert Blake attest—then he merits a lot more.

If Howard weren't so recognizable from "The Andy Griffith Show" and "Happy Days," he'd almost be the modern equivalent of William Wyler, the epitome of the hardworking but nearly anonymous craftsman director. Wyler earned a record 12 Oscar nominations, yet due to his lack of a signature style, he is now frequently mistaken for the second-most-nominated director, Billy Wilder.

The boxing biopic "Cinderella Man" is Howard's best film since "Apollo 13." It's an improvement over his first collaboration with the formidable star Russell Crowe and the hack screenwriter Akiva Goldsman (of the universally despised "Batman and Robin"). In their Best Picture-winning "A Beautiful Mind," the brutishly masculine Crowe almost overcame being miscast as the youthful

mathematical prodigy John Nash. Goldsman moved the Nobel Laureate's mental breakdown from 1959 to 1953 so he could pretend Nash was driven mad by anti-Communist paranoia during the McCarthy years. The Red Scare-obsessed academy gave Goldsman an Oscar for his deceptiveness.

Luckily, the true story of pugilist James J. Braddock's comeback is such a perfect vehicle for Howard's family values—he and his wife of 28 years have four children—that not even Goldsman can wreck it.

A popular Irish-American fighter during the prosperous 1920s, Braddock's career collapsed in 1929 as quickly as the economy. To keep food on the table for his wife (played well by Renée Zellweger) and three kids, he soldiered on with a bad hand, losing 18 of his next 33 fights. By 1933, he was out of boxing, an intermittently employed stevedore reduced to sometimes farming out his children to relatives so they wouldn't catch pneumonia in their unheated basement apartment.

In 1934, Braddock's faithful manager (portrayed by Paul Giamatti, a lock for an Oscar nomination after being stiffed over "Sideways" last year) signed him up on only a day's notice to play human punching bag to a heavyweight contender. Despite having gone without food so his kids could eat, Braddock knocked out the big galoot. He then upset two more prominent names. Braddock's purses allowed him to reimburse the government for his family's welfare payments, a gesture Joe Louis later emulated.

Finally, Braddock went off as a 10-1 underdog against the fearsome heavyweight champ Max Baer Sr. "Cinderella Man" unfairly portrays Baer as a Mike Tyson-like brute, when he was a kind-

hearted joker hoping to get out of boxing and into showbiz. (His son Max Baer Jr. fulfilled his dad's hopes by playing Jethro Bodine on "The Beverly Hillbillies.")

Yet while Baer's macho preening was novel and amusing in the 1930s, when athletes were still supposed to act like self-effacing Victorian sportsmen, and it was fun when Muhammad Ali turbocharged Baer's act, by now we've all seen where it leads: to the countless jerks infesting big-money sports today.

In contrast, when asked why he was risking his life against Baer, who had administered (unintentionally) fatal beatings to two strong men, Braddock replied, "Milk." Braddock came to symbolize the battered but still game fathers who did whatever it took to get their families through the Depression. Fortunately, "Cinderella Man" avoids political sermonizing, unlike former Clinton speechwriter Gary Ross's "Seabiscuit," a dopey allegory in which a thoroughbred represents the New Deal.

That Crowe, a hard-drinking hothead who broke up Meg Ryan's marriage to Dennis Quaid, isn't anything like the saintly Braddock only adds to the power of his impersonation. We admire the high-testosterone man who could play the cad but instead chooses to be the dad more than the low testosterone fellow without that option.

The other bit of forgivable phoniness is that Howard stages the climactic bout as a thrilling donnybrook, with Braddock valiantly trading right hooks to the jaw with Baer for 15 rounds. In reality, the calculating family man, ahead on points, spent the last three rounds prudently dancing away from the out-of-shape Baer. One ring historian called the actual match "one of the most unexciting title fights of all time." ■