

# Arts & Letters

## FILM

[*Glory Road*]

### Basketball As It Wasn't

By Steve Sailer

AT LEAST SINCE 1967's Best Picture-winning "In the Heat of the Night," in which Rod Steiger's bigoted Southern sheriff and Sidney Poitier's angry Northern detective reluctantly team up to solve a murder, movies aimed at guy audiences have often astutely promoted racial harmony not as an end in itself, but as the most efficient way for real men to work together for important manly goals. A canonical illustration is the Jerry Bruckheimer-produced 2000 hit "Remember the Titans," in which the black and white football players at a tense newly integrated Virginia high school in 1971 learn to play as a team to win the big game.

Bruckheimer's new basketball movie "Glory Road" purports to be similar. Yet this story of the 1966 Texas Western Miners, the first squad to win the NCAA championship game with an all-black starting line-up, actually exemplifies more unsettling historical trends: the beginning of the *de facto* re-segregation of basketball and of the triumph of recruiting over coaching.

Josh Lucas, who exhibited ornery charm as Reese Witherspoon's redneck husband in "Sweet Home Alabama," gruffly plays new coach Don Haskins, who in 1965 brings to the benighted Southern school—now the U. of Texas at El Paso—the radical idea of recruiting

blacks. Although his seven Northern newcomers are the victims of racist violence and vandalism, they persevere to the NCAA Final, where they confront august coach Adolph Rupp and his mighty all-white Kentucky team, backed by their Confederate flag-waving fans. To make a civil-rights statement, Haskins chooses to play only African-Americans. Their astonishing victory finally opens the doors to black basketball players.

Unfortunately, that paragraph is mostly Hollywood hooey.

For example, it was 1961 when Haskins arrived in El Paso, which is so far from Fort Sumter that it's west of Denver, and Texas Western already had three black players. In the 1966 Final, Haskins didn't bench his white and Latino players as a political gesture—he'd barely played them all season. Not only was there no violence, but relatively few fans noticed he'd started five blacks in the 1966 Final—after all, three blacks had started for CCNY's championship team way back in 1950—until 25 years later when *Sports Illustrated* mythologized the game as an epochal triumph over racism.

Because college sports are more decentralized than professional leagues, they had never been fully segregated and thus lack national desegregation milestones like Jackie Robinson breaking big-league baseball's color line in 1947. Indeed, at UCLA before World War II, Robinson himself had starred in basketball, football, track, baseball, golf, and swimming.

By the mid-'60s, blacks were playing virtually everywhere except the South, where white boosters were denying themselves victories by insisting on all-white teams.

From today's perspective, the remarkable story in 1966 was not Texas Western's triumph but how far Rupp got with

such a physically inferior Kentucky team. "Rupp's Runts" were so short that they had to use 6'-4" Pat Riley, the future NBA coaching legend, for the opening center-jump.

Kentucky's old-school coach Rupp was called the "Baron of Bluegrass" because more than 80 percent of his players were Kentuckians. Yet he molded these local lads into four NCAA winners. Rupp thought it unseemly to pester high-school stars to accept valuable scholarships. When Rupp unsuccessfully tried to sign big Wes Unseld to be his first black player in 1964, the future Hall-of-Famer was offended that Rupp paid only one visit to his home.

In 2006, Rupp's faith in nurture over nature seems hopelessly outdated. The younger Haskins, in contrast, scoured distant cities for superior black talent rather than cultivate El Paso's white and Mexican players.

Today, African-Americans outnumber white Americans in the NBA by an order of magnitude. Yet has American basketball improved by evolving from integrated to overwhelmingly black? In 1992, the two-thirds black Olympic "Dream Team" thrilled the world with its overwhelming virtuosity. But by the 2004 Olympics, the all-black American squad of squabbling, gangsta-rap-loving NBA stars lost to Argentina, Puerto Rico, and Lithuania.

As entertainment, "Glory Road" offers respectable family fare, with a strong, amusing first half. Eventually, however, the script locks into the well-worn grooves of the inspirational sports movie genre and loses its distinctiveness. Also, the decision to focus on all seven black players was a mistake. Audiences find it hard to keep straight more than four characters of the same sex, age, and race. ■

"Glory Road" is PG-rated for some bad words.

## BOOKS

[*Devil's Game: How the United States Helped Unleash Fundamentalist Islam*, Robert Dreyfuss, Metropolitan Books, 370 pages]

# The Devils We Knew

By Leon Hadar

THE TWILIGHT YEARS of the Cold War were a lot of fun for guys like me who imagined that killing a few commies was kind of cool, especially if you could cover it from the safety of Washington. Think of us as "Chickenhawks: The First Generation." So there I was, on a cold but sunny day in Washington, Feb. 11, 1985, a young reporter standing on the White House lawn. And like Dean Acheson and Robert Kagan—*vive la différence*—I was Present at the Creation.

Sam Donaldson's toupee was blocking my view as I witnessed history. The Leader of the Democratic West, Custodian of the U.S. Constitution, and a former gay divorcee—"gay" like in the famous Fred Astaire movie—was schmoozing with a Muslim King, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques in Arabia, the ruler of a medieval theocracy where gay men—"gay" as in "Brokeback Mountain"—were stoned during lunch breaks. The two were proclaiming their commitment to shared ideals and pledging their support for Muslim guerrillas fighting an atheistic Evil Empire. Opposites attract. And love was in the air.

"I'd like to take this opportunity to express admiration for the responsible manner in which Saudi Arabia has conducted its economic affairs," was the way President Ronald Reagan welcomed King Fahd bin Abdul Aziz. "King Fahd and other Saudi leaders, conscious of the global impact of their financial and economic decisions, have earned our

respect and gratitude. Their many humanitarian contributions touch us deeply, as well," Reagan said. Yes, indeed. Thanks for that 1973 oil embargo.

And then, like in the final scene from "Casablanca," when Rick and Captain Renault decide to join the Free French to fight the Nazis—Renault even throws a bottle of Vichy water into the bin—Reagan turned toward his new pal Fahd and asserted that the two were now blood brothers. "The people of the United States share with the people of Saudi Arabia a deep moral outrage over the continuing aggression and butchery taking place in Afghanistan," Reagan declared. "The citizens of the Western democracies and the Muslim world, by all that they believe to be true and just, should stand together in opposition to those who would impose dictatorship on all of mankind," he said, suggesting that we were in a midst of a Clash of Civilizations pitting all Christians, Muslims, and Jews against those nonbelievers in the Kremlin. "Marxist tyranny already has its grip on the religious freedom of the world's fifth largest Muslim population. This same grip strangles the prayers of Christians, Jews, and Muslims alike. We all worship the same God. Standing up to this onslaught, the people of Afghanistan, with their blood, courage, and faith, are an inspiration to the cause of freedom everywhere." And

the young chickenhawks who in 1985 were watching cartoons instead of following Sam Donaldson's reports probably imagine that my When-Ronny-Met-Abdul recollections are a "Saturday Night Live" parody. After all, at a time when the warblogs are warning us of the coming war of civilizations between the Judeo-Christian West and Islam, the notion that the leaders of the Abrahamic civilizations were once joined together in support of the ideological forerunners of today's "Islamofascists" sounds like a bad joke.

As Dreyfuss makes clear, it was certainly not a joke. It was all dead serious: like thousands of dead Soviet soldiers, hundred of thousands of dead Afghans, and eventually, on that tragic day of 9/11, more than 3,000 dead Americans. In short, it was the devil's game. And ironically or paradoxically, not only did some of the same radical Islamists that we had trained in Afghanistan mastermind the 9/11 attacks, Saudi citizens carried them out. As Dreyfuss sees it, the same kind of mindset and cast of characters that helped cement the alliance with the mujaheddin as part of the Cold War strategy and created the conditions for the blowback of 9/11 have been driving our policy of ousting secular Saddam Hussein and forming a partnership with the radical Shi'ites—who we are putting in power in Baghdad to assist us in spreading secular democracy in the

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then Ronny and Abdul started fading into the sunset, holding hands and on their way to the Khyber Pass. And bin Abdul Aziz threw that Stolichnaya bottle into the bin.

Those were the days when the Cross and the Crescent would shine together and overpower the Sickle and Hammer. And they were coming back to life 20 years later as I was reading Robert Dreyfuss's *Devil's Game: How the United States Helped Unleash Fundamentalist Islam*. The Soviet Union is no more. And

Middle East even as we continue working with the same Saudi theocracy.

But forget about ironies or paradoxes, and welcome to the "Mullah Horror Show," where Dr. Frankenstein—played by British imperialists, State Department officials, CIA spooks, Cold War ideologues, and Israeli leaders—helped give life to and energize the monster that is now haunting us. Dreyfuss, providing a valuable history lesson to the ignorant chickenhawks, explains that U.S. officials "found political Islam