

Flashback

TO KNOW NOTHING OF WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE YOU WERE BORN
IS TO REMAIN EVER A CHILD—*Cicero*

The Blue, The Gray, and Gotham

If the mayor of New York City had had his way in 1861, Jerry Seinfeld, Rudy Giuliani, Al Sharpton, and the Yankees would all be crammed into the “International News” section of your local Gannett paper.

Mayor Fernando Wood was of Welsh-Prussian stock, but his mother was reading a lurid Spanish novel at parturition, thus the exotic name. The enterprising young Fernando sold grog and “segars” with a notable lack of success until his smooth manner and honeyed tongue led him into a political career. Its highlight was three tumultuous terms as Democratic Mayor of New York City.

Wood eventually became rich in the tried and true manners of American statesmen: real-estate speculation and marrying wealth. (His third wife was a 16-year-old heiress.) Tammany Hall’s legendary Boss Tweed marveled of his rival, “I never went to get a corner lot, that I didn’t find Wood had got in ahead of me.”

Wood was equal measures of charm and knavery, principle and deceit. Even a fairly sympathetic biographer, Jerome Mushkat, concedes that Wood “took duplicity to an extreme and made it an integral part of his operations.” His most loyal supporters were Irish and German immigrants—yet he was a secret member of the anti-immigrant Know-Nothings. (When his inconsistency was discovered, he calmly swore out an affidavit denying his membership.)

In the dukes-up age of antebellum American politics, Wood’s more ardent fans included the Dead Rabbits, a brawling Irish gang that was in philosophical agreement with the mayor’s refusal to enforce the statewide prohibition law of 1855.

But for all his picturesque qualities,

Fernando Wood was no mere scamp. This rascal had a vision. On January 7, 1861, as the federal union stood at the verge of dissolution, Mayor Wood suggested that New York City go it alone—secede not only from the rest of New York but from the United States themselves.

He was motivated, in part, by antipathy toward the Republicans who ran Albany and were about to take over Washington. The New York state government meddled intolerably in city affairs, even assuming control of the police department. And like many New York merchants, Wood had Southern sympathies: The mayor supported John Breckinridge over Abraham Lincoln in the 1860 presidential election. He averred that “with our aggrieved brethren of the slave states we have friendly relations and a common sympathy.”

But Wood’s free-city proposal was not simply the pipe dream of a pro-Confederate tobanconist. Wood envisioned New York City as a capitalist oasis, a nineteenth-century Occidental Hong Kong. He wanted New York to be a free port, trading with both North and South, making money, not war. He told the City Council: “As a free city, with but a nominal duty on imports, [New York’s] local government could be supported without taxation upon her people. Thus we could be free from taxes, and have cheap goods nearly duty free.”

“The South is our best customer,” he reasoned, and isn’t the customer always right? Why war upon your most lucrative trading partner? A free nation of New York City would enjoy “uninterrupted intercourse with every section.” Gunfire, cannonade, and the weeping of bereft wives and mothers might fill the air of the dis-united states, but the dominant sound in



Fernando Wood, one-time mayor of New York City, and chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee.

greater Manhattan would be the cheerful sough of money changing hands.

New York City would serve as a beacon during the dark years of war: “Amid the gloom which the present and prospective condition of things must cast over the country, New York, as a free city, may shed the only light and hope for a future reconstruction of our once blessed confederacy.”

Wood was howled down. His only support came from the *New York Daily News*, edited by his brother Benjamin. (Ben was no less colorful than Fernando: he ran lotteries, wrote a pro-secession novel, and helped inspire the city’s anti-draft riots.) Horace Greeley’s *Tribune* raged, “Fernando Wood evidently wants to be a traitor; it is lack of courage only that makes him content with being a blackguard.” Whatever glimmer of hope the free city had was snuffed at Fort Sumter. After that, New York City was in the union, and in the war.

Fernando Wood endured. He became the most respectable of rogues, with a long congressional career culminating in his chairmanship of the House Ways and Means Committee. Chairman Wood was a passionate free-trader, who spent the postbellum years trying to do for his country what he had failed to do for his city: keep open its ports, and do to the dreaded tariff what his Dead Rabbits used to do to the Bowery Boys.

—Bill Kauffman

Just War Pictures

Much of warfare is noisy and chaotic, but it's often in the still, quiet moments that a soldier's true character is revealed. That's certainly the premise of *Rules of Engagement* and *U-571*, two recent military films that portray the act of defending your country as a moral challenge rather than, as is more customary for Hollywood projects, a moral lapse.

In *Rules of Engagement*, based on an original screenplay by former Secretary of the Navy James Webb, the defining moment of silence comes after a slaughter. Col. Terry Childers (Samuel L. Jackson), a career Marine who has been sent to quell a violent demonstration outside the United States embassy in Yemen, orders his men to open fire on the crowd after three of his Marines are shot down. The barrage of U.S. gunfire leaves 80 Yemeni men, women, and children dead—and the square outside the embassy so quiet you can hear the rustle of the desert wind—and Childers is yanked back to a court martial in America where he is accused of murder.

The rest of the film dissects the soldier's actions against the changing landscape of a nation where, as Childers puts it, much of the population is made up of Starbucks drinkers who've never been shot at. *Rules of Engagement* aligns itself firmly with those men who *have* come under fire. Only they, the film argues, understand the impossible decisions that soldiers face during combat, and the gall that it takes for others to play Monday-morning quarterback while safely ensconced in the national sanctuary created through many soldierly sacrifices.

Rules of Engagement also admires the military concept of loyalty. For his defense, Childers doesn't turn to one of the Marines' slick law-school graduates, but to a grizzled veteran (Tommy Lee Jones)



A scene from *Rules of Engagement*.

who served with him in Vietnam. His comrade in arms may not be the best lawyer in the service, but he has something that Childers is finding to be in short supply these days: a trustworthiness born in battle.

The film doesn't blindly exonerate Childers (the best thing about Jackson's performance is the way he implicates himself partly as a victim of his own rage). But if things do get tied up a bit too neatly at the end, it's worth noting that workaday studio meddling in favor of happy endings—and not patriotic propaganda, as some critics have suggested—was behind those decisions. Webb, who received an executive producer and story credit after battling the filmmakers over changes made to his original script, says his version was far more ambiguous than what ended up on the screen.

Things are even more cut and dried in *U-571*—a gripping World War II submarine thriller featuring German sailors so blandly villainous that they may as well have twirling mustaches. Still, the movie effectively forces viewers to grapple with the awesome responsibility that comes with military leadership.

The leader in question is Lt. Andrew Tyler (Matthew McConaughey), an executive officer who takes over a special mission after his ship's captain dies in a German attack. It doesn't take long for Tyler to learn that leading men into battle means the possibility of having to choose which ones to sacrifice for the larger good; one of

his first decisions is to abandon some U.S. sailors so that his submarine—and the men and top-secret cargo aboard—can escape an approaching German destroyer.

Loyalty comes into play in *U-571* as well. As their situation grows darker, some of Tyler's men begin to weigh the importance of the mission against saving their own lives. Just as wills begin to fade, Harvey Keitel's Chief Klough—a weathered veteran of World War I—whips the boys back into shape. If the Navy says it's more important than you and me, he tells a wavering sailor, our responsibility is clear.

Almost every one of *U-571*'s claustrophobically intense action sequences is anchored by a nagging moral question, none more so than the climax, in which Tyler orders a young ensign to make a suicidal dive into a flooded bilge tank to fix a debilitating air leak (the diminutive ensign is the only one who can squeeze past pipes to reach the leak). Powerful scenes such as that shout: What would you do? The burden of making life-and-death decisions in a split second is a truly terrible one, and you can see that weight playing across Tyler's face whenever a German depth charge has been dropped above his submarine and silence spreads, waiting for the inevitable blast. It's in these still moments that military men such as Terry Childers and Andrew Tyler navigate the fine line between becoming a murderer and being a hero.

—Josh Larsen