

## Buffalo Scam

It would be easy to go after *Buffalo Soldiers* for being unpatriotic. But that would be giving the filmmakers too much credit. Skittish and unsure of itself, *Buffalo Soldiers* may tell the story of a drug-dealing military clerk at a poorly disciplined U.S. Army post, but it doesn't even have the courage to follow through on its unpatriotic premise. Instead, this is cowardly filmmaking—a movie with the moral fiber of a deserter.

In truth, the film isn't as rebellious as its marketing strategy suggests. After repeatedly delaying the movie's release for fear of a backlash during wartime, the suits at Miramax Films have decidedly gone in the other direction. Now *Buffalo Soldiers* is out, and proud: The poster features smirking star Joaquin Phoenix giving the peace sign while wearing fatigues, a nonsensical clash of symbols that's about as pertinent as the picture's title. A rant about this movie's lack of respect for the military would only bolster its feigned counterculture posture.

Set on a United States Army post in 1989 West Germany, and based on news reports of AWOL behavior at that place and time, the movie is irreverent, to be sure. While *Patton* used Old Glory as a grand backdrop, *Buffalo Soldiers* features a shot of the flag painted on the ground, where marching troops stomp all over it. Meanwhile, Phoenix's Ray Elwood, the drug dealer and our narrator, describes the modern military as composed of "criminals and high-school dropouts" who are "fighting the dull fight."

In the movie, the dullness of peace leads to drug use and crime. The more

harmless of Elwood's Army buddies are zoned-out druggies—though they do drive their tanks through a German market

when they're high—while the more conniving ones, like Elwood, sell arms to the black market. All of this takes place under the clueless nose of Col. Wallace Berman (Ed Harris), a buffoon who runs his base as if it were an import-export business.

For all its exaggerations and inaccuracies—the movie condemns the entire U.S. military for the real-life sins of a few—*Buffalo Soldiers* could at least be written off as a misguided, satirical pot-shot if it stuck to its own worldview. After all, if we didn't have unpatriotic movies, we wouldn't be living in a democracy worth being patriotic about.

Yet Australian director Gregor Jordan, who's working from Robert O'Connor's 1993 novel, doesn't have the conviction of a true satirist. His worldview waffles throughout the film. One minute he gleefully documents Elwood's crimes and the next he condemns them. Things get even more confusing when a military police sergeant (Scott Glenn) shows up bent on catching Elwood. This sergeant is presented as an old-school, hard-line military man—until he admits he ran similar scams as a young soldier in



Joaquin Phoenix, right, and Ed Harris in Gregor Jordan's *Buffalo Soldiers*.

Vietnam. By this time *Buffalo Soldiers* has created a moral universe that's nothing short of ridiculous.

Fittingly, you can see the hypocritical, moralistic ending—in which our anti-hero gets his due—coming from the moment of the first frame. It arrives as expected, but then Jordan adds a silly coda that lets Elwood off the hook. It's less a case of playing to two crowds than being afraid to take a stand.

It's nothing new for a Hollywood movie to want to have it both ways, of course. *Buffalo Soldiers*, though, is striving not to be seen as a Hollywood movie, but as a rude gesture in the face of the establishment. It likes to think of itself as the class clown, the smart-aleck private destined for a dishonorable discharge. In the end, the only thing the three share is a lack of discipline.

If *Buffalo Soldiers* is commercially embraced, it will be only because the marketing campaign has succeeded in selling a lazy, cheap-shot action flick as social satire. That's a scam of which the likes of Ray Elwood would be proud.

—Josh Larsen

# D. the Digest

Summaries of important new research from the nation's universities, think tanks, and investigative publications



## POLITICS

### Keep Congress Going

Lloyd Cutler, et al., *Preserving Our Institutions: The First Report of the Continuity of Government Commission*, June 4, 2003, the American Enterprise Institute and the Brookings Institution ([continuityofgovernment.org](http://continuityofgovernment.org))

On September 11, 2001, two hijacked planes slammed into the World Trade Center towers, another one rammed into the Pentagon. A fourth airplane, however, crashed in a Pennsylvania field thanks to the heroism of passengers on board. People with ties to terrorist groups have stated on al-Jazeera and CNN that the plane's target had been the United States Capitol.

Had the plane hit the Capitol, a significant number of members of Congress would have been killed. This, in turn, could have resulted in a real Constitutional crisis: While governors can fill Senate vacancies as they arise, only special elections can fill open seats in the House of Representatives. In normal circumstances, this does not pose a problem but if a large number of House members were to die, the nation would be left with a rump body with little legitimacy. New elections could take months to hold; in the meantime, Congress might have trouble acting decisively. AEI and the

Brookings Institution have formed the Continuity of Government Commission to address this problem. In the first stage of its work, the Commission held a series of public hearings to determine what Congress should do to make sure that the House continues to operate.

The Commission recommends a Constitutional amendment to give Congress the power to fill vacancies "in the event that a substantial number of members are killed or incapacitated."

It also proposes a number of more complex alternatives such as requiring state governors to appoint replacement members of Congress from lists provided by each person running for office.

The Commission argues that the amendment would both allow Congress to function after a catastrophic attack and, just as important, "send a message that we have addressed issues in the continuity of government and that an attack on Congress would not produce chaos and inaction."

## SCIENCE AND MEDICINE

### Let the Market Fix Medicare

Newt Gingrich, *The Future of Human Longevity: How Markets and Innovation Can Transform Medicare*, June 3, 2003, Senate Special Committee on Aging ([thomas.loc.gov](http://thomas.loc.gov))

In testimony before a special Senate committee on aging, AEI senior fellow Newt Gingrich opines that the United States currently stands "at the dawn of an explosion of knowledge that will change everything we know about science and, therefore, the human body." He outlines new technologies that promise to improve medicine through better understanding of man's genetic makeup, technologies which can grow new types of cells, and efforts to customize other treatments to fit individuals' precise genetic codes.

Gingrich argues that making these new treatments available to baby boomers will require an overhaul of the "bureaucratic, red-tape-ridden, regulatory, third-party-payer system," that constitutes Medicare (the primary health insurance program for elderly and disabled people). Medicare, Gingrich believes, is based on 1960s policy decisions and technologies and cannot hope to cope with today's medical realities.

Gingrich describes himself as an optimist and states that a combination of improved patient safety, better technology, new management techniques, and personal responsibility can transform Medicare for the better. He argues that the current system fails to protect patients by allowing an unacceptable number of medication errors, and failing to give customers enough information. Electronic systems for writing and filing prescriptions