



by James Bowman

# Presidentolotry

Nuking Iraq is Hollywood's idea of patriotism.

**H**ollywood cynicism isn't what it used to be. At least not quite what it used to be. True, we can see in *Reindeer Games* or *Eye of the Beholder* further pointless contributions to the genre of postmodern *noir*—a genre already stuffed to capacity, one might have thought, with pointless contributions. Indeed, pointlessness is the point. Traditional *noir* films were only cynical about convention and especially conventional moral ideas. They pitted their little-guy heroes against a pitiless universe that was bound to crush them in the end. Although often referred to as anti-heroes, such little guys were heroes nonetheless. Even non-cynics could admire such these latter-day Prometheuses who challenged what were made to look like the implacable decrees of the gods, even though they were bound to be destroyed in the unequal struggle. But neo-*noir*, postmodern *noir*, is cynical about the heroes (or anti-heroes) as well. Their nobility in suffering is as much a joke as anything else.

In *Reindeer Games*, for instance, Ben Affleck becomes the victim of a plot so fantastically convoluted that even the gods could not have thought of it. As they show the successive strands of treachery unwinding in the dénouement, neither John Frankenheimer (the director) nor Ehren Kruger (the writer) can possibly have expected that anyone would actually believe in such a story. But one of the advantages of postmodern cynicism—at least if you are a writer stuck for an idea—

is that, for the first time in history, belief is no longer necessary. Therefore, as nothing is meant to correspond, at any but the most superficial level, to anything in the real world, criticism is as superfluous as the fake little-guy's fake struggles. There's cynicism for you!

Likewise, in *Eye of the Beholder*, the writer-director Stephan Elliott never thinks it worth his while to explain why the young and pretty Ashley Judd has embarked on a cross-country rampage of seducing and murdering men, nor why Ewan McGregor as a British surveillance expert falls in love with her for it. It all makes as little sense as the role of K.D. Lang (in these pages she'll damn well be upper-cased like everyone else) as MacGregor's control officer in British Intelligence who finds him so unbearably charming that she can deny him nothing. It is enough for Elliott to present us with the clichéd image of Ashley as a little girl abandoned by her father, and to make it correspond to MacGregor's quite literal haunting by a missing daughter of his own. "I'm just a daddy who lost his little girl, and I guess you're just a little girl who lost her daddy," says Ewan to Ashley. "I guess that's it. End of story."

So obviously is this *not* it, the alleged "end of story" (at least not if the story were in any way a real one), that you've got to suppose such an authorial flouting of the most elementary demands of verisimilitude to be deliberate and not merely inadvertent or the result of Elliott's incompetence as a film-maker. Once again, pointlessness is the point. The universe makes no sense, he seems to be saying—not even the kind of malign and oppressive

sense that it made in the old-fashioned *noir* movies—so why should my movie make any sense? Its senselessness is his own little blow struck against the gods for the ultimate affront they offer to suffering mankind, the outrage of their not existing.

Yet it is not quite true to say that the postmodern *artiste* believes in nothing. Like other kinds of cynics, he believes in power, and that is a belief which tends to involve him in a degree of credulity that makes belief in God seem like basic common sense. Consider, for example, the way in which, although Hollywood has implicitly believed in every crackpot conspiracy theory about the U.S. government for decades, it has always been ready to revert to its traditional and sentimental attachment to the idea of the presidency. For every *Clear and Present Danger*, there is a *Dave* or an *Independence Day*, an *American President*, or *My Fellow Americans* to give the president back his lustre. The image of the good king dies hard in the Great American Republic.

Now we have *Deterrence*, written and directed by Rod Lurie, which gives us what is perhaps the weirdest combination yet of conspiracy theory and presidentolotry. Set in the near future, it stars Kevin Pollak as President Walter Emerson, an appointed vice president who unexpectedly succeeds to the presidency and who is now campaigning for election in his own right. As he is fighting and winning the Colorado primary, a sudden snowstorm forces him and his rather abbreviated entourage to seek shelter in a roadside eatery called Morty's Home Style Diner, where are gathered a miscellaneous collection of awe-struck locals. No sooner has the president ordered a chili-burger than word is received that the son of Saddam Hussein, now the man in charge in Iraq, has invaded Kuwait.

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and massacred the tripwire force of U.S. Marines still stationed in that country.

For some reason, the president decides that this is the time for an ultimatum: Either Saddam Jr. pulls his forces out of Kuwait and presents himself at the American embassy where he will be placed under arrest, or our boys drop the big one (100 megatons) on Baghdad. But guess what? Surprise! Saddam Jr. has some nukes of his own and a delivery system with which he can hit American and European cities. We call off our bomb or he orders his missiles into the air. Is he bluffing or are we? I'll not reveal the details, but the president knows something that none of the others knows and that makes it fairly easy for him to remain cool under fire. The really remarkable thing about this movie is that in the end (cover your ears and hum the "Star-Spangled Banner" if you don't want to know this) the prez *does* incinerate Baghdad and with it, presumably, a few million towel heads, but this is obviously meant not to interfere with our admiration for him.

The conspiracy in this film is a benign one (unless you happen to be Iraqi, of course). The presidential secret is kept not only from the people but even from the president's closest advisers—and yet it is a *nice* surprise. The world (and the world's oil supply) is to be made safe for American power *at no cost to you whatsoever!* The sheer cleverness and Yankee ingenuity (President Emerson is Jewish, but I'm not going to be caught indulging in cheap stereotypes) of the conspirators is enough to trick those dumb A-rabs out of their misguided challenge to the American world-imperium. I hate to admit it after years of writing about Hollywood's anti-Americanism, but I'm afraid that the crudest sort of jingoism is never far beneath the surface of Hollywood's much vaunted cynicism.

**Y**ou have to look to foreigners for anything like a true picture of the exercise of power. In *The Terrorist* by Santosh Sivan, an Indian girl (Ayesha Dharkar) becomes a suicide bomber whose mission is to assassinate a prominent politician. Sivan cleverly treats almost everything up to the moment at which the girl is to press the button and detonate the plastic explosives strapped

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around her waist as a propaganda film. Even the unexpected news that the girl is pregnant could be a symbolic amplification of her sacrifice: Her loins are to bring forth not just one new life but a new birth of freedom for her people. When the time comes to do the deed, however, even this most political of beings shows that she is capable of being pulled back into the world of ordinary people for whom powerlessness itself is a kind of saving grace.

This rather spiritual view of power is missing from the Chinese film *The Emperor and the Assassin* by Chen Kaige (who as a child ratted his parents out to the thugs of the Cultural Revolution), but the moral difficulties confronted by the king (Li Xuejian) who unified the six Chinese kingdoms under a single emperor in the third century B.C. are impressively dealt with. We are never allowed to keep for very long the comfortable illusion on which American power is based, that world domination comes without any, or any serious, costs. True, the power game at the time involved rather more razing of cities and slaughtering of women and children than we have been used to for some time, but *Deterrence* suggests that those happy days may be due for a comeback, now that machines can do the slaughtering from a long way off.

In fact, the enormities which war makes routine lie at the roots of postmodernism. These can be traced back through existentialism and absurdism and surrealism and other sub-varieties of modernism to the wholesale slaughter of the First World War. And postmodernism at its best has the truly subversive effect of undermining the false pieties of both sides—those who forget the human cost

and those who promise an easy way of avoiding it. There is something of this quality, I think, in the Movie of the Month, Julie Taymore's *Titus*, which persuades us that Shakespeare himself was, at least until he learned some better tricks, the greatest of the postmodernists.

As the fledgling playwright he was when he wrote *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare was understandably inclined to indulge in exaggerated and theatrical effects. Miss Taymore tricks out this grisly circus of a play with even more of them. Her weird and jokey amalgam of ancient and modern ("Thousands Mourn Death of Caesar" a tabloid headline reads, while Andronicus's grandson appears in a high school jacket with the image of the Roman she-wolf embroidered on the back) delights in the implausible as much as does Stephan Elliott in *Eye of the Beholder*. But in this context the implausible seems not only plausible but inevitable. Anthony Hopkins plays Andronicus as a combination of Hannibal Lecter (more postmodernism there) and King Lear, and the scene in which, dressed in a chef's toque and jacket, he serves up to Tamora the Goth (Jessica Lange) her two sons baked in a pie is a classic of black comedy.

It has always been difficult to take this play seriously, but its comic excesses are the very essence of postmodernism. In Miss Taymore's production, it also uses a framing device of a child playing at warfare with his toy soldiers to suggest a becoming skepticism about the codes of honor and revenge according to which the subsequent action is to be played out—without at the same time becoming self-righteous about it. This point of view may or may not amount to "cynicism," but, to me at any rate, it does not show up as being at all like the contempt for the audience I saw in *Reindeer Games* and *Eye of the Beholder* or the breathtaking moral obtuseness of *Deterrence*. Like all the best postmodernism, its absurdities do not easily allow us to feel superior to them, and that humility is the beginning of belief. ❀

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# Code Name: The Friend

## Fire in the Night: Wingate of Burma, Ethiopia and Zion

John Bierman and Colin Smith  
Random House / 419 pages / \$29.95

REVIEWED BY  
Edward Grossman

Some MTV viewers just possibly have a clue what the British Empire was. But is there a single one who knows that it—the empire, that is—was picked up in a fit of absentmindedness? Not likely, and maybe that's good. Irony died back in the twentieth century, around the same time as the empire, so a youngster hearing Lord Palmerston's quip today might believe Gibraltar and India, Tanganyika and Kuwait and Ireland and Hong Kong and Fiji and Jamaica and the 13 Colonies and the Falkland Islands and Malaya and the rest of the grandest portfolio of holdings ever built was stumbled over. Yet what makes the irony so nice is that quite a few unusual men and women carried the White Man's Burden. They did it never aiming to get wealthy.

Among the strangest has to be a man famous once in the U.S. but now practically unknown, despite lying in Arlington National Cemetery: Major-General Orde Wingate (1903-1944). Here was an individual who'd spend afternoons in the Holy Land naked except for a pith helmet, munching onions, reading the Bible and grooming himself with a horse brush. There came a night when he tried to end it by slitting his throat with a Bowie knife. His ill-wishers might have been even gladder if he'd done a better job. They were plentiful, for if the volunteer Brits, Ethiopians, Gurkhas, and Jews under Wingate's command loved him, cherishing his oddities, and if big names like

Churchill, Wavell, Mountbatten, and Ironside valued his gifts, the officer caste he belonged to detested him. "Military apes," he called its members. But his unpopularity was already quasi-official at Charterhouse school, where, as John Bierman and Colin Smith tell us, his nickname among the boys was "Stinker." And to this day, mention of Wingate fires up 80-ish retired colonels and brigadiers. You'll hear two judgments: He was a mentally unbalanced, impossible, disruptive, not all that loyal self-promoter, or the last great man produced by England.

Bierman and Smith—two Englishmen living on Cyprus—avoid hero-worship while espousing the great man view. Theirs isn't the first biography. What is by now a small library of pro and con writings began appearing soon after Wingate's plane dropped into the Burmese jungle. *Fire in the Night* may rank as the best, combining vivid storytelling with a grasp of the most important thing in Wingate's life, the "political idea that made him whole."

This idea, this movement, was Zionism. It happened to depend on England just when Wingate found his mission. But at his death, when he was a 41-year-old star, his obsession and his dream of returning to help bring it to fulfillment weren't known to the world at large. Nor was his suicide attempt. The front-page story in the *New York Times* reporting the crash of his B-25 noted some exploits in Palestine but dwelled on his creation and leadership of the Chindits, an English-Indian force spreading havoc behind Japanese lines. "Wingate's Raiders" the Chin-

aits were known as stateside, where, since the plane was American and the ripped up bodies intermingled, the young celebrity was buried. "A man of genius," his patron Churchill orated. Later, experts would quarrel about that. Was he luckier than he deserved, not only in Burma but Ethiopia where, as the obituaries said, he'd first exploded into the news by defeating an Italian army much bigger than his and restoring Emperor Haile Selassie? One way or the other, the sneaky, daring methods winning him fame in Burma and Ethiopia had been originated by him in Palestine.

Or rather, in a country Wingate knew as "Zion." This both was and wasn't peculiar of him. A fascination with the Bible

used to run through English culture and was one

motive for the Bal-

four Declaration of

1917 promising

the Jews a new

"homeland" in

the old Land of

Israel. By the

time Wingate

arrived on duty

in Palestine his

nation's man-

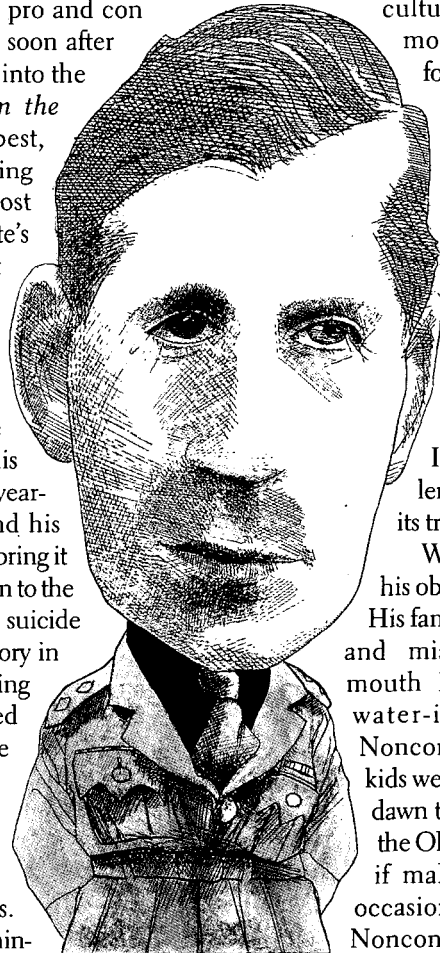
darins had had

second thoughts.

It's this which lends any biography its tragic element.

Wingate came by his obsession naturally.

His family were soldiers and missionaries, Plymouth Brethren, cold-water-inside-and-out Nonconformists whose kids were made to rise at dawn to hear chunks of the Old Testament and, if male, to be struck occasionally by papa. Nonconforming is what



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