

A Year at the Movies

by Raymond J. Keating

It's been decades since Hollywood regularly produced films celebrating such notions as liberty, individualism, and hard work. However, a few exceptions periodically make it to local movie theaters. Indeed, 2000 turned out to be a relatively good year for watching individuals take risks and fight tyranny on the silver screen.

In *Gladiator*, for example, Russell Crowe plays a Roman general named Maximus. He not only is a great soldier and warrior, but also is faithful to God, family, and his emperor. His desire after winning the latest military victory is to return to his wife, son, and farm. The filmmakers make a point of clearly noting that Maximus is a man uncorrupted by politics.

However, Maximus's life is shattered when Commodus, the emperor's son, murders his own father to gain power and has Maximus's family butchered. Maximus avoids death himself, but is made a slave and forced to fight as a gladiator.

Commodus, who longed for political power throughout his life, stands out as a glaring example of governmental tyranny and corruption. He is ruthless, perverse, and manipulative, and does not govern according to principle, but instead appeals to the people's most base instincts. The metaphor for today's politics is striking.

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In the end, Maximus returns to face the corrupt Commodus, not only in the name of justice for his family but also for a more principled, republican form of government.

Similarly, in *The Patriot* Mel Gibson portrays Benjamin Martin, who also is spurred to action by an attack on his family, this time during the American Revolutionary War.

The Patriot received criticism from both the political left and right when it was released just prior to Independence Day. Some conservatives did not like Martin's initial unwillingness to go to war against the British. He opposed the tyranny of taxation without representation and favored American independence, but at the beginning of the film would not fight for these ideas. Not only were the memories of his own actions during the French and Indian Wars apparently so painful that he did not wish to shed blood again, but Martin also possessed a strong desire simply to be left alone—in reality, a very American trait.

However, after a ruthless British officer kills one of his sons and takes another away to be hanged, Martin must take action. Eventually, he moves beyond mere revenge as his motive for waging a guerrilla-style war against the British and becomes a true patriot fighting for liberty. In the film's final epic battle, for example, he puts aside a chance to exact justice for his family in order to pick up the flag and urge on the American rebels in inspiring fashion at a crucial moment.

The strength of *The Patriot* is its emphasis on family and the great personal sacrifices made by our forebears in securing freedom. Here is a loving father looking to protect his family, and in doing so comes to see the just nature of the American fight for independence. One would think that conservatives would warmly embrace such a portrait.

The political left was aghast to see Gibson's character hand rifles to two of his young sons, who help in an assault on British soldiers to rescue the son being taken off to be hanged. Martin had taught his sons to shoot—a necessity of the times—and after the attack, he correctly tells his boys that there was “nothing wrong” in what they did.

In today's era of gun phobia, it should surprise no one that this scene generated controversy. Those crusading against the right to bear arms fail not only to understand the U.S. Constitution and history, but also the simple fact that guns are not inherently evil. Like most other tools and instruments, they can be used for good or bad, depending on who carries the weapon and what his intentions are. *The Patriot* makes this quite clear when comparing the acts of the ruthless British officer to Martin's fight for justice and liberty.

X-Men and The Perfect Storm

While *Gladiator* and *The Patriot* deal with the past, *X-Men* is a sci-fi flick about the not-too-distant future, when mutations are appearing more often and are characterized as the next step in human evolution. This film offers a clear anti-intrusive-government message, as well as a celebration of the individual.

Stirring up fear among humans against the Mutants, one U.S. senator calls for a new law to mandate mutant registration, comparing it to federal gun registration. The Mutants oppose this act of invasive government, but their responses split them into two camps. One faction reacts violently and seeks to destroy humans, while the second camp, led

by the X-Men, a group of mutant superheroes, looks to work constructively with mankind. So the primary conflict in the film is not between mutants and humans, but between these two groups of mutants—in a way offering an interesting statement about how various minority groups over the years have reacted against discrimination.

Indeed, by emphasizing a group of individuals as outcasts, *X-Men* serves as a metaphor for issues like race and immigration. But the unmistakable message is one of embracing people as individuals.

The movie is particularly pro-immigration. It is no mere coincidence that the final battle scene takes place on and around the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island, with the newcomer X-Men fighting to save New York City—in fact, mankind—from destruction.

Finally, another big hit of 2000 offers an affectionate look at individuals willing to work hard to make their way in life. After seeing *The Perfect Storm*, I'll never complain about the price of fish again. The movie is based on a true story about fishermen out of Gloucester, Massachusetts, who lost their lives during a massive storm in the fall of 1991 while trying to support themselves and their families.

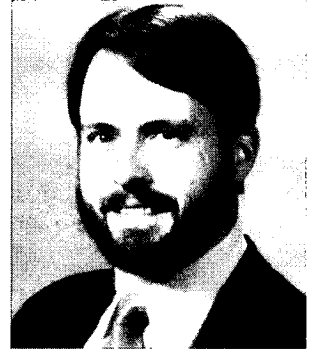
The moviegoer truly gains a feel for the hard and dangerous life of fishermen, and is even treated to a lesson in economics on how a sword boat works. The boat owner, captain, and each member of the crew get paid according to a cut of the final catch. Everybody has strong incentives to work.

While the boat owner in the movie was cast in a less-than-appealing light, overall *The Perfect Storm* was nothing less than an ode to those who work hard and literally risk everything fishing the open seas.

It is a rare year when those who embrace liberty, immigrants, and hard work can respect, to varying degrees, so many top Hollywood films. Perhaps we should enjoy it while we can. □

**IDEAS
ON LIBERTY**
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Forgotten War in a Forgotten Country



From a distance the jungle looks peaceful. Dense, green plant growth covers hills that march endlessly onward. Primitive villages emerge in simple clearings: wood and bamboo buildings, covered by thatched roofs, sitting on stilts, and open to rain, animals, and mosquitoes.

War is everywhere. Two million ethnic minorities have been displaced by 50 years of conflict: 243 of them lived in Law Thi Hta, just across the Moi river from Mae Sot, Thailand.

War consumes their lives. One 22-year-old told me he had been fighting “for many years,” perhaps ten. But General Bo Mya, who also serves as vice president of the Karen National Union (KNU), joined the Karen revolution when it started in 1949.

General Ne Win seized power in Burma, now officially Myanmar, in 1962. Mass democracy protests in 1988 were crushed with martial law backed by bullets. The ruling junta foolishly called elections two years later, which were won by the National League for Democracy, headed by Aung San Suu Kyi. The self-styled State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) annulled the election, put Suu Kyi under house arrest, and arrested many of her followers.

Although international attention has focused on Suu Kyi, the more serious threat to the ruling junta comes from the Karen and other ethnic groups, which have been fighting

for autonomy since Burma won independence. During the last decade some of them have come to terms with Rangoon. But the Karen and several other ethnic groups fight on.

In response, the SPDC has expanded its military to some 400,000. Two years ago 13-year-old Yei Shweh took a bus to Rangoon to see the big city: he was seized by the army when he arrived.

Rangoon maintains numerous bases in eastern Burma and periodically strikes at villages suspected of harboring rebels. SPDC forces impress civilians as porters for months at a time. Refugees report frequent atrocities, stories confirmed by Yei Shweh and other defectors.

As a result, the Karen fight desperately. The battle remains sadly uneven, however. The Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) fields 4,000 to 5,000 ill-equipped guerrillas. The troops I met tended to be in their teens to their 30s. They mix fatigues and boots with ethnic Karen wraparound skirts, flip-flops, and American-language shorts, t-shirts, and baseball caps. Soldiers carry a motley assemblage of arms.

The KNLA forces usually inflict far more casualties than they suffer—they claim a 20-to-1 kill ratio. But they can rarely stop a determined SPDC offensive and are increasingly pressed against the Thai border.

The “Killing Season”

The dry season is known as the “killing season” because steep jungle trails dry out

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