

‘Diversity. America. Leadership. Good over evil.’ Hollywood multiculturalism and American imperialism in *Independence Day* and *Three Kings*¹

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ABSTRACT In the 1990s and 2000s a highly selective idea of multiculturalism became central to the imagining of American national identity in Hollywood cinema, one that was closely related to the political discourses of the nation surrounding the presidential election campaigns. Davies’s focus here is on two significant films, *Independence Day* and *Three Kings*, which, despite their very different genres, registers and politics, typify the 1990s Hollywood trajectory of articulating what has been called ‘vulgar multiculturalism’ to exceptionalist and even, arguably, imperialist US nationalism. At the centre of both films is a quartet of male figures configured according to quite specific ideas about ethnic and racial difference: for example, in *Independence Day* Jewishness is associated with intelligence, blackness with verbal ‘smarts’ and physical strength. Through this composite but selective image the United States is portrayed as a site of ethnic and racial diversity, whose unique ability to cohere the qualities conferred by difference enables and legitimates its global military primacy. The latent meanings of *Independence Day* have been interpolated differently into American political discourse by President Bill Clinton, Senator Bob Dole and President George W. Bush. While Clinton responded explicitly to the film’s evocation of a Eurocentric Second World War ideology, the film subsequently provided Bush with a more powerful, globalized legitimation for US power. If *Independence Day* utilized a highly selective version of multiculturalism in the service of American imperialism, *Three Kings* offers itself by contrast as an embedded critique of the aims and conduct of the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Yet this critique is itself shaped by the contours of an exceptionalist discourse of the American national project, one in which, again, images of racial and ethnic difference play a crucial role. *Three Kings* decries the economic motivation of a war fought solely to protect oil supplies, while making a strong plea that military intervention should have included helping Iraqi rebels overthrow Saddam Hussein. This plea is made most powerfully in a crucial ‘recognition scene’ in which the central GI

1 I would like to thank the anonymous readers for *Patterns of Prejudice* for their advice and suggestions on an earlier draft of this essay, and to give special thanks to John Carlos Rowe, Donald Pease, Liam Kennedy, Scott Lucas, Leighton Grist, Lisa Merrill and Andrew Pepper for sharing their considerable insights in various discussions. My greatest thanks as always to Carol R. Smith and, for the first time, to Rosa.

protagonists come to realize that Iraqi refugees, whom they have been taught to view as Other, share values and aspirations that are strongly coded as American. As such, *Three Kings* anticipates the Bush White House's rhetorical manoeuvre whereby the 'war on terror' is rendered as the bringing of liberation to oppressed peoples, but the film is also readable as portraying humanistic, cross-national obligations. These ideological tensions are unpacked by reference to a structured discussion of the film that took place in 2003 between students at universities in the United States, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Davies finally argues that the film ultimately contests the rhetoric of imperialism, and seeks instead to open up a space in which the desire to escape from oppression is not immediately coded as a wish to become American.

KEYWORDS American exceptionalism, George W. Bush, imperialism, *Independence Day*, international education, multiculturalism, national identity, *Three Kings*, war

... We can't be consumed by our petty differences any more. We will be united in our common interests ... And should we win the day the Fourth of July will no longer be known as an American holiday, but as the day the world declared we will not go quietly into the night. We will not vanish without a fight. We're going to live on. We're going to survive. Today we celebrate our independence day.

—President Thomas Whitmore (Bill Pullman) in *Independence Day*

The story of America is the story of expanding liberty: an ever-widening circle, constantly growing to reach further and include more. Our nation's founding commitment is still our deepest commitment: In our world, and here at home, we will extend the frontiers of freedom.

—President George W. Bush²

There should be no surprise to see Hollywood film performing cultural work that prepares the ideological ground for a particular political discourse regarding the American nation. Nations are, in Benedict Anderson's influential formulation, 'imagined communities', while the direct influence of film on the political imaginary of the United States goes back as far as D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), hailed by President Woodrow Wilson as like 'history writ with lightning'. The presidential speeches quoted above as epigraphs, one cinematic and the other actual, share a certain logic that imagines the global dominance of the United States as the natural result of its privileged status as a multicultural nation. By this

2 Speech to Republican National Convention, New York, 2 September 2004: 'Text of Bush's RNC speech', available on the CBS News website at www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/09/02/politics/main640596.shtml (viewed 23 August 2005).

logic, the outward flow of American power, whether the imagined globalization of the Fourth of July, the extension of the frontiers of freedom or the intervention in Iraq coded in that phrase, is predicated on an earlier, inward flow of racial and ethnic diversity into the United States in search of independence, self-fulfilment and freedom.

The cultural work performed by the 1996 blockbuster *Independence Day* (dir. Roland Emmerich) was arguably to imagine the United States as fitted for global leadership and military pre-eminence by ascribing to it the status of *the* privileged site for the integration of racial and ethnic difference. As such, the film marks a recent refinement of the longstanding ideological formation that scholars have identified as 'American exceptionalism'. But if *Independence Day* appropriates a version of multiculturalism in the service of an imperialist national discourse, other filmmakers working in the margins of Hollywood have attempted to contest such imperialist and militarist imaginings of the American nation. David O. Russell's *Three Kings* (1999) is overtly critical of American military adventures in the Persian Gulf, addressing itself specifically to the 1991 Gulf War, and later revived by Russell in protest at the 2003 invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq. Yet even this avowedly oppositional film struggles to overcome the nationalistic ideological pull of a revitalized American exceptionalism based on the depiction of the United States as a privileged site for the integration of ethnic difference.

Both films evince a marked concern with the relationship between race/ethnicity and nation-building, reflecting the changed historical circumstances following the end of the Cold War and the emergence of a 'new world order' with the United States as the single global superpower. Among the many critical responses to these developments, a significant 1998 essay by Nikhil Pal Singh delineated the internal dynamic of American nation-building as the result of two complementary ideologies of difference. On the one hand, according to Singh, 'the United States has operated in the way in which every successful nation-state would want to, not by erasing differences, but by relativizing some differences and categorizing others'. On the other hand, 'the universality of the "state" founded by the "nation" has been predicated upon dividing practices that retroactively produce "the people" (over and over again) in specific cultural terms'.³ In the first of these, we might say, difference is managed by various processes of constructing hierarchies, marginalization and assimilation, while the second refers to the cultural formation of the United States as a universal nation by the highly selective representation of its ideal or exemplary citizens. The tension between these antithetical tendencies can be regarded as a key dynamic of post-Cold War US culture.

3 Nikhil Pal Singh, 'Culture/wars: recoding empire in an age of democracy', *American Quarterly*, vol. 50, no. 3, September 1998, 471–522 (509).

Diversity in the service of imperialism: *Independence Day* and the 'indispensable nation'

The ideological power of *Independence Day* derives from resolving this tension, via the mobilization of a markedly multiethnic United States to lead worldwide resistance to alien attack. In the film's climax, actors Will Smith and Jeff Goldblum embody stereotypically racialized traits of Jewish brains and the powerful physicality of African-American masculinity to help save the world. Jewish 'smarts', in the form of the computer expertise possessed by Goldblum's character, enables them to penetrate the alien mother-ship and disable its defences; the final *coup de grâce* is administered by Smith by punching out the last alien combatant. In between, the mother-ship is attacked by the remnants of US air power: fighter planes piloted by a hastily assembled group that includes the president himself (a veteran of the 1991 Gulf War) and alcoholic Vietnam veteran and one-time alien abductee Russell Casse (Randy Quaid), the father of two Chicano children. Quaid's character, alone among these four American heroes who save the world, does not survive. The bomb release mechanism on his plane jams, so he chooses to crash directly into the alien mother-ship, thereby bringing about its destruction.

On its release in the summer of 1996, *Independence Day* struck a chord with American cinema audiences generally and, as we shall see, with Republican presidential candidate Senator Bob Dole, whose breathless enthusiasm for the film is quoted in the title of this essay. However, as several critics have pointed out, the film's depiction of the quartet of heroes, and of a few highly marginal Asian figures, presents 'diversity' in a highly limited and specific manner, that is, in terms of the Black-Jewish relationship central to the politics of the New Deal forged in the 1930s, prominent during the struggle for civil rights in the 1950s and fragmented since the 1960s. As Michael Rogin puts it in the definitive critical discussion of the movie: 'Nostalgia for the Jewish-Black alliance takes the place in this film of equal opportunity for those post-1960s multicultural groups, Latinos, Asians, women and gays.'⁴

These exclusions are all the more significant given that the climactic presidential speech announces the dissolution of ethnic and other differences. 'We can't be consumed by our petty differences any more', states President Whitmore, promising rather that 'We will be united in our common interests'. This not only echoes the right-wing attack on multiculturalism as the politicization of identity responsible for fragmenting the nation, but also triumphantly—and many would argue prematurely—announces the completion of the American national project. It is on this basis of an asserted national unity that the United States can be evoked

4 Michael Rogin, *Independence Day, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Enola Gay* (London: British Film Institute 1998), 41, see also 51–2.

as the universal nation and the global hegemon. 'Perhaps it's fate that today is the Fourth of July', Whitmore continues,

and you will once again be fighting for our freedom, not from tyranny or persecution, but from annihilation. . . . And should we win the day the Fourth of July will no longer be known as an American holiday, but as the day the world declared we will not go quietly into the night. We will not vanish without a fight. We're going to live on. We're going to survive. Today we celebrate our independence day.

The collapsing of 'petty differences' for the sake of national and global unity envisaged at this climactic moment is predicated on exactly the processes of 'relativizing some differences and categorizing others' described by Singh. Racial and ethnic difference is explicitly categorized by stereotyping—Smith's performance of physical strength and verbal dexterity and the geeky smarts of Goldblum's character—while the post-racial synthesis envisioned by Whitmore is made possible because the film has already narrowed racial difference to the domain of the personal via romance narratives. Immediately before setting off to battle Will Smith's character goes through a marriage ceremony with his African-American girlfriend, while Goldblum's is reconciled with his estranged (Gentile) wife. Homosexuals are excluded from this multiracial heterosexual synthesis both implicitly and explicitly. The only identifiably gay character in the movie (Harvey Fierstein in a camp/sissy role) is killed off early on—in a scene in which audiences are positioned to care more about the survival of a pet dog—while the alien invaders are depicted in terms that trope homophobic constructions of male homosexuality. As often in 1990s Hollywood, discourses of heterosexuality, and the gendered distinction between public and private spheres, provide structures for what Nikhil Pal Singh would term the relativizing of racial difference. In turn, the integration of difference thus attained becomes visual and narrative evidence for a belief in the exceptional nature of the American nation, and its fitness for global leadership.

In the context of Hollywood cinema, *Independence Day* can be placed at the intersection of two trajectories that emerged in the 1990s. To elaborate a theme broached by Michael Rogin, many elements of the film's *mise-en-scène*—especially the calculated use of B-movie generic conventions and treatment of technology (because the aliens have knocked out electronic communications and weaponry, they have to be fought with Morse code and fighter planes), and the depiction of the United States as leading military defence against a potentially annihilating totalitarian threat—all position it alongside the Second World War films of the 1990s such as *Schindler's List* (1993) and *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). At the same time, the film's knowing deployment of identity representations situate it within the stream of 1990s Hollywood films that manipulate discourses originally forged in the debates over identity politics. A brief list might include films as various as *Pretty Woman*

(post-feminist marriage plot plus corporate regeneration), *Thelma and Louise* (feminist-informed road movie/Western), *Falling Down* (white male in crisis), *Disclosure* (white male, and US business, in crisis), *Forrest Gump* (regeneration of the white male as central historical figure, and perhaps the most significant forerunner of *Independence Day* in its use of White–Black male friendship and heterosexual romance narratives to regenerate national unity against what it depicts as the divisive identity politics of the 1960s and 1970s), *Philadelphia* (normalizing gay identity via the courtroom drama), and *Malcolm X* (studio-funded biopic of one-time black separatist leader).⁵ The positioning of *Independence Day* at the intersection of these cinematic histories suggests in turn its ambivalence with respect to American exceptionalism. Read one way, it looks back to the Second World War/Cold War ideologies of the United States as the saviour of democracy; read another way, it looks forward to American global leadership predicated on its own successful integration of ‘diversity’. The film’s highly limited depiction of multiethnic America via its White–Black–Jewish trio of surviving male heroes is the fulcrum on which this ambivalence pivots; the closeting of homosexuals and redomestication of women are its scaffolding.

This no doubt explains why *Independence Day* had the rare distinction for a 1990s movie of being approved by both the incumbent, Bill Clinton, and the Republican challenger, Senator Bob Dole, during the 1996 presidential election campaign. Clinton watched the film at the White House with its authors, producer Dean Devlin and director Roland Emmerich, and actor Bill Pullman, who played the role of the American president on screen. Clinton publicly recommended the movie the following morning, a sentiment echoed before the end of the month by Dole, who went on to urge: ‘Bring your family too. You’ll be proud of it. Diversity. America. Leadership. Good over evil.’⁶ Dole’s enthusiasm for a film that depicts a human death toll of holocaust proportions, as well as the destruction of landmarks such as the White House, the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty and US

5 For accounts of this development, see Jude Davies and Carol Smith, *Gender, Ethnicity and Sexuality in Contemporary American Film* (Edinburgh: Keele University Press 1998); Sharon Willis, *High Contrast: Race and Gender in Contemporary American Film* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 1997); Robyn Wiegman, ‘Whiteness studies and the paradox of particularity’, in Donald E. Pease and Robyn Wiegman (eds), *The Futures of American Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2002), 269–304 (280); and Hernán Vera and Andrew M. Gordon, *Screen Savors: Hollywood Fictions of Whiteness* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield 2003).

6 Dole quoted (and other information) in Rogin, *Independence Day*, 9, 12. See also John Shelton Lawrence, ‘Interplay between popular myth and American foreign policy’, paper presented at the American Culture Association, New Orleans, 17 April 2003, available at www.americansuperhero.com/myth-aca.pdf (viewed 23 August 2005); Susan Knabe, ‘“Such a nice, smart boy”: race, class and intelligence in *Independence Day*’, in Murray Pomerance and John Sakeris (eds), *Closely Watched Brains*, 2nd edn (Boston: Pearson Education 2003), abstract available at www.ryerson.ca/mgroup/cwbguideknabe.html (viewed 23 August 2005).

inner-city neighbourhoods struck a populist note given his previous criticism of Hollywood values in general and film violence in particular. But the appeal of Emmerich and Devlin's film transcended the overheated atmosphere of the 1996 election contest. Rogin's 1998 book understandably termed it 'the defining motion picture of Bill Clinton's America'.⁷ Yet subsequently, as Davide Girardelli has shown, the film's terms of reference were imported wholesale by George W. Bush and the dominant mass media in order to understand the attack on the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001, making sense of it as the work of alien evil born of a hatred of civilized values, and defining the United States as the natural world leader in combating such evil due to its longstanding status as a repository of those values.⁸

There is nevertheless a significant difference between the discourses of global leadership enunciated by the fictional President Whitmore and President George W. Bush himself, a difference that can be seen by looking again at the two epigraphs at the head of this essay. As befits the safe fantasy of annihilation proffered by the B-movie alien invasion genre ('safe' because viewers always know in advance that the aliens will be defeated), Whitmore explicitly distinguishes between the historical struggle for 'freedom' that is taken as the essence of the American project, and the struggle for 'survival' itself. As such, and again with a nod to the Cold War context that so decisively shaped the alien invasion genre of Hollywood B-movies, the cinematic president's speech justifies US global leadership primarily in terms of fighting simply to exist. A comparable defensive rhetoric has been used by George W. Bush in the wake of 11 September 2001 and, especially, to justify the Patriot Acts, the internments in Guantánamo Bay and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. However, in the aftermath of 11 September, Bush can also be seen as progressively revitalizing the discourse of freedom as a positive value in ways that have more in common with the spectacular show of multicultural nationhood in *Independence Day* than with Whitmore's emphasis on mere survival. In his famous speech to a joint session of Congress on 20 September, Bush characterized the 9/11 attacks as the product of hatred of 'our freedoms—our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other'.⁹ What still needed explaining was, as Bush had put it himself in the speech, in a phrase that resonated across the United States in the immediate aftermath of 9/11: 'Why do they hate us?'

⁷ Rogin, *Independence Day*, 13 and repeated on the back cover.

⁸ Davide Girardelli, "'Just like Independence Day!'" Intertextuality as hegemony: a postmodern reading of the September 11th tragedy', 19 June 2002, available on the Disinformation website at www.disinfo.com/archive/pages/article/id2296/pg1/ (viewed 23 August 2005).

⁹ 'Address to a joint session of Congress and the American people', 20 September 2001, available on the White House website at www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html (viewed 24 August 2005).

Serious consideration of this question might lead to a productive rethinking of US economic and foreign policy, and there is some evidence of this in Bush's second administration.¹⁰ In general, however, Bush's post-9/11 rhetoric has depended on forestalling the question, narrowing it down to the simple assertion of America's innate goodness and the consequent implicit answer: 'because they are evil'. Interestingly enough, in his 20 September speech Bush's first response was to invoke the old binaries of the Second World War and the Cold War, explicitly assimilating the 'terrorist threat' to twentieth-century, secular precursors: 'We're not deceived by their pretenses to piety. We have seen their kind before. They are the heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the 20th century ... they follow in the path of fascism, and Nazism, and totalitarianism.'¹¹

Evidently, though, this national/political mapping was felt to be insufficient, and Bush returned to the topic during a press conference on 11 October 2001:

How do I respond when I see that in some Islamic countries there is vitriolic hatred for America? I'll tell you how I respond: I'm amazed. I'm amazed that there is such misunderstanding of what our country is about, that people would hate us. I am, I am—like most Americans, I just can't believe it. Because I know how good we are ...¹²

Although the assertion of personal knowledge of America's goodness was perhaps not by itself sufficient to compel belief, it pointed the way for Bush to resolve the question 'Why do they hate us': by downplaying the outward-looking, messianic Second World War/Cold War discourse and instead by looking inwards at the United States, focusing on the 'diversity' that Dole had identified as a key theme of *Independence Day*. And this has been a key theme of the discourse of the 'war on terror' ever since, encapsulated in the September 2004 speech quoted in the epigraph. The association of the extension of American military power with highly selective images of the nation's internal diversity has proved extremely valuable to the Bush administration in legitimating an imperialist project previously framed in terms of economic self-interest. The militarization of the United States that has taken place since 9/11 was already being promoted in the late 1990s by the Washington, D.C. think tank, the Project for a New American Century

10 See, in particular, 'Why do they hate us', available on the SourceWatch website at www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Why_do_they_hate_us%3F (viewed 24 August 2005). See also, belatedly, the rhetoric employed by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in April–May 2005 as domestic support for the occupation of Iraq waned.

11 'Address to a joint session of Congress and the American people'.

12 'President holds prime time news conference', 11 October 2001, available on the White House website at www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/10/20011011-7.html#status-war (viewed 24 August 2005).

(PNAC), many of whose members, including Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Richard Perle and Paul Wolfowitz, were appointed to key positions in the Bush administration. But, whereas the PNAC discourse of the 1990s was nakedly nationalistic and economistic, the rhetoric of the 'ever-expanding circle of freedom' bestows upon the same agenda the glow of universal progress.

Much as this rhetoric echoes that of twentieth-century presidents such as Franklin Delano Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy, its linkage of liberties at home to those abroad is markedly different from—and arguably much more compelling than—the discourses employed by Bill Clinton's White House to justify its own military interventions. Often cited in this context is Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's declaration in defence of attacking Iraq with cruise missiles in February 1998: 'If we have to use force, it is because we are America. We are the indispensable nation. We stand tall, and we see further into the future.'¹³ What is less often understood is the importance, dominance even, of a Eurocentric notion of the Second World War in articulating the foreign policy of Clinton's second-term administration. Albright enunciated high ambitions in foreign policy but, from the first, the phrase 'indispensable nation', as well as the historic opportunities created by the end of the Cold War, were glossed by reference to the Second World War rhetoric with which she surrounded herself, as a refugee from Hitler and from Stalin whose family had found freedom in America. In announcing his choice back in December 1996, Clinton stated:

... Madeleine Albright embodies the best of America. It says something about our country and about our new Secretary of State-designate, that a young girl raised in the shadow of Nazi aggression in Czechoslovakia can rise to the highest diplomatic office in America. She watched her world fall apart. And ever since, she has dedicated her life to spreading to the rest of the world the freedom and tolerance her family found here in America.¹⁴

For her own part, Albright referred to her family's migration to the United States 'after being driven twice from our home in Czechoslovakia, first by Hitler and then by Stalin', and added:

The story of my family has been repeated in millions of variations over two centuries in the lives not only of immigrants, but of those overseas who have been liberated or sheltered by American soldiers, empowered by American assistance, or inspired by American ideals. As the history of this century and the story of my

13 Quoted in Mark Hertsgaard, *The Eagle's Shadow: Why America Fascinates and Infuriates the World* (London: Bloomsbury 2002), 69.

14 'President Bill Clinton announcing new cabinet officers', 5 December 1996, available on the PBS Online NewsHour website at www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/white_house/december96/cabinet_12-5.html (viewed 24 August 2005).

life bear witness, the United States is, as the President has said, truly the world's indispensable nation.¹⁵

The price for defining the United States as the saviour of democracy was that, in the rhetorical production of the 'indispensable nation', if not actually on the ground in Bosnia, Central Africa, the Middle East and the other flashpoints of the late 1990s, attention was focused on the end of the Cold War as an opportunity to roll back the clock to 1945 and begin again, rather than to engage with the emerging geopolitics of oil, ethnic nationalism and religious fundamentalism. Crude as it seems, given the personalization of US politics after the intense struggles for civil rights, Albright's own persona played a part here. It was not simply that Clinton introduced her as 'embod[y] the best of America' by virtue of her immigrant background, self-made success and the interweaving of her biography with the liberating effects of US foreign policy. Albright subsequently framed her foreign policy ideas by reference to her own biography, and specifically to the 'new start' provided by post-Second World War America.¹⁶ By appointing African Americans Colin Powell and then Condoleezza Rice as successors to Albright as Secretary of State, Bush symbolically broke the link with the Second World War, not least since the former's racial identity would have prevented him from serving alongside white soldiers in the American forces during that war. The obvious abilities and achievements of Powell and Rice, and their own public dismissal of the importance of racial/ethnic identity (in contrast to Albright's self-presentation), demand, however, that their appointments not be seen as symbolic.

I have tried to suggest that the revitalization of American exceptionalism envisioned in *Independence Day* was interpolated into the project of imagining the nation at a political level, and served to prepare the ideological ground for George W. Bush's 'war on terror', specifically, the invasion and occupation of Iraq from 2003 to the present. The remainder of this essay examines David O. Russell's *Three Kings* as a film that attempts to contest the intervention of the US military in Iraq during the 1991 Gulf War, while engaging, in complex and somewhat contradictory ways, with the exceptionalist ideology defined by *Independence Day*.

***Three Kings*: finding solidarity beyond the limits of the nation?**

Three Kings reproduces some of the white-centred and nationalistic tropes traced above, but also makes a significant attempt to revise these traditions

15 Ibid. See also Martin Walker, 'Present at the solution: Madeleine Albright's ambitious foreign policy', *World Policy Journal*, Spring 1997, available at <http://worldpolicy.org/walker2.html> (viewed 24 August 2005).

16 See Walker, 'Present at the solution'.

of representation. Set in occupied Iraq in the immediate aftermath of the 1991 Persian Gulf War, the film stars George Clooney (as Archie Gates, a disillusioned career soldier on the verge of retirement) and, as reservists, Mark Wahlberg (Troy Barlow, an archetypal WASP with wife and young child at home in the Midwest), Ice Cube (Chief Elgin, a devout Christian African American) and Spike Jonze (Conrad Vig, an uneducated white racist from the South). After a treasure map is found in the anus of an Iraqi prisoner, Gates involves the others in a plan to steal gold bullion that had been looted from Kuwait by Saddam Hussein's army. In the process of taking the gold, they witness an Iraqi woman being shot dead by soldiers loyal to Saddam Hussein, and decide to take a group of Iraqi refugees with them. As they make their escape, the Iraqi soldiers retaliate by launching a gas attack. In the ensuing confusion Barlow/Wahlberg is taken prisoner, while the rest are rescued by a resistance group allied with the refugees. It turns out that these are not simply victims but a well-organized group involved in an uprising against Saddam Hussein, whose leader speaks English and attended university in the United States. Intercut with these revelations, Barlow is shown being tortured according to techniques originally taught to his Iraqi captors by the CIA, culminating in oil being poured down his throat as his mouth is held open with a CD case. Clooney's men negotiate a series of deals with the rebel Iraqis, during which the Americans develop a respect for their aspirations and Muslim customs. Together they engage in further skirmishes with the Iraqi conscripts, during which Wahlberg's character is freed and Jonze's character, who by now has adopted various Islamic practices, is fatally shot. The film climaxes in a scene at the Iraq/Iran border where, in defiance of the military hierarchy and with the help of a Latina journalist (played by Nora Dunn), the remaining 'three kings' succeed in helping the Iraqi dissidents escape to Iran, at the personal cost of giving up their share of the gold to the military authorities. To the soundtrack of U2's 'In God's Country', the Iraqis, exchanging various meaningful looks with the Americans, take with them a gold bar each, and Vig's body is prepared for a Muslim burial.

This narrative summary shows why Hernán Vera and Andrew M. Gordon view *Three Kings* as a politically liberal but still deeply flawed example of what they call the 'white saviour' genre.¹⁷ Moreover, John Carlos Rowe has powerfully argued that the film is fatally compromised by its generalized portrayal of Iraqis, so that 'the four Americans act out liberal multiculturalism' in ways that reinforce nationalistic ideologies of US imperialism. For Rowe, the film is symptomatic of the culture of American imperialism that works not by moving out from a national centre, as other imperialisms have done, but by 'work[ing] steadily to "import" the world and to render global differences aspects of the US nation ... to internalise

17 Vera and Gordon, *Screen Saviors*.

and “hypernationalise” transnational issues’.¹⁸ Simply put, the film criticizes the 1991 war as a nakedly economic intervention undertaken to maintain levels of consumerism in the United States, and as a betrayal of the Iraqis who rose up against Saddam Hussein at the behest of US propaganda. Thus it could be seen as calling for American imperialism to be moralized rather than rejected, and as being ideologically complicit with the occupation launched in 2003, if not actually demanding it as a means of national redemption. While this is a compelling argument, it is important to find ways of differentiating *Three Kings* from the overtly imperialistic agenda articulated by films such as *Independence Day*. Further, various strategies can be identified in *Three Kings* that seem deliberately to resist containment within the exceptionalist, national and imperialist framework. Such strategies are not always successful, but they do raise the question as to whether the American soldiers’ changes of heart, and subsequent relationships with the Iraqi rebels, should be seen as a fulfilment of or a break with the national project of America.

Their shift in motivation, triggered by witnessing the shooting of an Iraqi woman in cold blood, drives the narrative, as the four Americans abandon their selfish pursuit of gold to join forces with the Iraqi rebels and, finally, sacrifice the gold for the latter’s safety. A series of clearly marked changes offer film audiences a coherent narrative centred on the Americans, interpolating an African-American character (Ice Cube as Chief Elgin) into the ‘white saviour’ framework. So far, so nationalistic. However, director Russell deliberately sets out to unsettle audiences by denying them easy identification with the US soldiers. Early scenes show them as racist, incompetent and irresponsible in their handling of Iraqi prisoners who are humiliated and made to strip naked in the desert. Later, the Americans strike fear into guards at an Iraqi checkpoint when they arrive covered in blood. Although the audience knows what the guards do not, that they were spattered with the entrails of a cow that had strayed into a minefield, audiences may well be aware of the mass bombings of retreating Iraqi troops that make the guards’ reading of them as ‘butchers’ not inappropriate. If and when audiences do begin to identify with the American soldiers, they are implicated in a series of perspectival shifts, as for example in a series of scenes directly after the gas attack in which Gates, Elgin and Vig take refuge in a bunker, having been rescued by Iraqis hostile to Saddam Hussein, while Barlow is being tortured. These scenes crystallize the film’s debatable relationship to exceptionalist ideology.

The dramatic point of the bunker scenes, as Russell has made clear in his commentary on the film, is to shatter the illusion of invulnerability held by the Americans who have been fighting a war by digital technology. At the same time, Iraqis initially portrayed simply as victims are revealed as self-

18 John Carlos Rowe, ‘Culture, US imperialism, and globalization’, *American Literary History*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2004, 575–95 (588, 576).

directed rebels against Saddam. Thus, a man first seen being tortured by Iraqi soldiers, husband to the murdered woman, proves, to the astonishment of the Americans, to be not only fluent, articulate and assertive in English, but also to have a distinctly American entrepreneurial outlook, having attended Bowling Green University in order to pursue his goal of running a hotel. (As the film goes on, several of the Iraqi refugees and resistance fighters will demonstrate similarly assertive qualities: a pair of twins aims to open a hairdressing salon, for example.) For the terrified and slightly wounded Conrad Vig, it is a lesson in the fallacies of racial and national pride: not all Iraqis are the same and Americans are vulnerable. Vig is comforted, reluctantly, by Chief Elgin, whose Christian mysticism now comes to the fore in offering tolerance and forgiveness to the white former racist. For Archie Gates, the refugees have suddenly become potential partners in a negotiation about ownership of the looted gold and survival. A deal is struck whereby the gold will be shared, and the Americans will escort the Iraqis to the Iranian border in return for help with navigation and security.

While this may illustrate a liberal desire to represent the Iraqis as active agents rather than passive victims, the scene also seems to suggest that it is right to help the refugees because they have already embraced the good American values of entrepreneurship; they are already Americans in a spiritual sense and, concomitantly, American values are universal. This would simply reiterate American exceptionalism at its Cold War extreme. As Yonka Krasteva has argued in respect of such discourses concerning Vietnam:

One need only remember Sergeant Gergheim's words in Gustav Hasford's *The Short-Timers*—'We are here to help the Vietnamese, because inside every gook, there's an American trying to get out'—in order to understand that it is not so much the defeat of communism that is at stake as the propagation of 'American-ness', assimilation and annihilation of ethnic and racial difference through military aggression.¹⁹

Such nakedly universalist assumptions are disavowed by the George W. Bush White House.²⁰

19 Yonka Krasteva, 'Popular culture and political discourse in American narratives about Vietnam', in George McKay (ed.), *Yankee Go Home—(and Take Me with U): Americanization and Popular Culture* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1997), 104–16 (110).

20 'I sent American troops to defend our security, not to stay as an occupying power. I sent American troops to Iraq to make its people free, not to make them American. Iraqis will write their own history and find their own way': 'President outlines steps to help Iraq achieve democracy and freedom: remarks by the President on Iraq and the war on terror, United States Army War College, Carlisle, Pennsylvania', 24 May 2004, available on the White House website at www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/05/20040524-10.html (viewed 8 September 2005).

Central to this issue is the film's weakness in identifying Iraqis, which appears to derive from exigencies of production and audience. Although in Russell's screenplay the Iraqi rebels are explicitly identified as Shi'ites, for some reason, perhaps to make itself more immediately legible to western viewers, the released film dispenses with this distinction. The screenplay even has Vig ask, 'What exactly is a Shiite?', to which Gates replies: 'They make up the ethnic majority but they don't have any power. When Bush pulled us out, he told them to start a civil war to bring Saddam down, and now they're getting wasted.'²¹ In the film as released, the term 'Shi'ite' is avoided, and Gates's explanation deals only with the actions of the United States: 'Bush told them to rise up against Saddam. He told them they had our support. They don't.'

In the absence of strong ethnic or regional signifiers, Iraqis are presented in vague, general terms as a Muslim or Arabic Other. The problem is exacerbated by the casting of a range of non-American leading actors, including New Zealander Cliff Curtis as the leader of the resistance and the French actor Saïd Taghmoui as the soldier who tortures Barlow, alongside Iraqi immigrant non-professionals. Viewers can only differentiate between Iraqis on the basis of their support for or resistance to Saddam Hussein, which quickly collapses into whether they are anti- or pro-American. Even the alternative labels suggested by the film, the values of small businesses (hotels and hairdressing salons) versus corporate capitalism (oil and CD cases), run the risk of reasserting American universalism by mapping Iraqi identity according to an internal American distinction.²²

Though the bunker scene largely succumbs to exceptionalist ideology, for all its being imbricated within American generic forms and modes of address, *Three Kings* attempts to open up a space in which the wish to escape domination can be construed as something other than the wish to be American. It is, after all, Iran that occupies the destination of escape. The bunker scene is itself intercut with scenes of Barlow's imprisonment, in which Russell strives to articulate a critique of the United States from the outside. When Barlow is captured and tortured, the first question asked by his interrogator is: 'What is the problem with Michael Jackson?' The interrogator (Taghmoui), known as Captain Saïd, goes on to make an explicit connection between the racial prejudices that apparently led Jackson to 'cut up his face', and the Americans' disregard for the lives of Iraqi women and children bombed during Operation Desert Storm.

21 See David O. Russell's 'draft' screenplay, dated 22 June 1998, of *Three Kings*, available on the Internet Movie Script Database at www.imsdb.com/scripts/Three-Kings.html (viewed 24 August 2005).

22 John Carlos Rowe makes a similar point, though he sees *Three Kings* as routing the American-Iraqi relationship through still more reactionary forms associated with nineteenth-century imperialism; see Rowe, 'Culture, US imperialism, and globalization', 586-7.

Although brutal, the figure of Captain Saïd is legitimated in this scene by what he has in common with his American prisoner. Responding to Saïd's own disclosures, Barlow remarks on their similarity in both having been trained by the United States and joining up to provide for their families, when Saïd cuts him off, reminding him that he is no longer a father, his baby son having been killed by an American bomb. While it makes its own telling point, this refusal to complete a circuit of identification is symptomatic of the film's depiction of identity: Iraqis must be understood not as Americans *in potentia* but as the objects of American power.

Saïd's view of the United States is amplified visually and verbally elsewhere in the film. Footage of the beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles policemen is showing on a television set in the soldiers' bunker, and the film opens with the senseless and bloody shooting of an Iraqi soldier. More tellingly, an exchange between Vig, Barlow and Elgin ten minutes into the movie has anticipated Saïd's reading of American militarism as an extension of American racism. Elgin (Ice Cube) picks up on the overtly racist language used by Vig (Spike Jonze) to describe Iraqis. The offensive terms, 'sand-nigger' and 'dune coon' are clearly derived from traditions of white racism within the United States, adjusted for the desert context. Not for the last time, excuses and apologies are made on Vig's behalf on the grounds that he is basically Southern white trash who never finished high school. He is advised to use 'perfectly acceptable substitutes' such as 'towelhead' and 'camel jockey'.

There are strong comedic undercurrents to this scene and to Vig's subsequent misconceptions. He has trouble getting beyond 'Arab' as a unitary category, and hence finds it hard to distinguish between Kuwait and Iraq, let alone to understand the concept of an Iraqi civil war. Even after his adoption of Muslim customs, Vig commits *faux pas*. The film also portrays racial tensions in the army comically, whether it is Gates being carpeted by an African-American superior officer (Mykelti Williamson) or an argument between Vig, Elgin and Barlow over the relative merits of black and white quarterbacks, a debate subsequently resolved when Elgin downs an Iraqi helicopter by throwing a football filled with explosives at it. This comedy tends to present the US army as a site for the articulation and subsequent resolution of racial tensions via masculinized banter and, hence, while 'liberal' in a sense, it is largely directed towards white viewers and makes for uneasy viewing.

Yet, *Three Kings* also uses comedy to ironize the very imperialistic deployment of multiculturalism that we saw operating in *Independence Day*. Some way into the film, the Americans try to persuade Iraqi resistance fighters to loan them some luxury cars (again originally looted from Kuwait by Saddam's forces). Gates and Elgin pantomime racial togetherness, working themselves into a frenzy: 'George Bush wants you—many nations.' After humouring the Americans, the resistance leader quietly insists that, if they want the cars, they will have to pay for them. Here, as with Vig's

trajectory from white racist to would-be Muslim, rather than the soldiers bringing out a latent Americanness in the Iraqis, ideological structures of sameness and difference continue to play along and across the film's narratives to create multiple and sometimes contradictory poles of Americanness. Gates is an American archetype, but the complexity of his reactions, and his situation with respect to the other central figures in the film, belie any straightforward ideological or hegemonic reading.

Indeed, in spite of the direct narrative drive of the film, the motivation of Gates and the other Americans remains ultimately an open question. This returns us to the issue of the recuperation of their heroism in terms of fulfilling, as opposed to contesting, the national project of America as conceived in exceptionalist discourses. In the essay discussed earlier, Nikhil Pal Singh attempts to theorize forms of human solidarity that are not subject to recuperation within the bounds of the nation. The problem, simply put, is that to name such solidarity as humanitarian or universalist risks falling back into the discourse of American exceptionalism. Singh therefore utilizes and develops a distinction made by Etienne Balibar between two forms of universalism. Balibar defines 'fictitious universalism' as the 'effective processes of institutions and representations ... [that] liberate individual subjectivity from narrow communitarian bonds, and at the same time impose normal, that is, normative and normalized patterns of individual behaviour'.²³ As the primary means by which citizens are created, this is one of the crucial ideological forms of the nation-state. Against it, Balibar counterposes something he terms the 'ideal universal': the universalism of the emancipatory demand, or 'the introduction of the unconditional into the realm of politics', which as Singh explains must be experienced as a break with, and never an extension of, any national ideology.²⁴ These terms suggest a way of understanding the change of heart undergone by the 'three kings' as a shift from the nationally sanctioned forms of material acquisitiveness to an acknowledgement of a wider duty to help other human beings in need. It is unlikely that Russell is familiar with Balibar's work, but it is nonetheless striking that, in lieu of explaining this duty, the film has Archie Gates name it as 'necessity': a universal obligation that evades being categorized in terms of religion, humanitarianism or nation.

***Three Kings* and the embodiment of national identity**

Admittedly this is only one reading of *Three Kings*, albeit one that benefits from director Russell's account of his intentions. It remains to be seen what meanings about ideal or normative Americanness were put into circulation by the film, and how these might be shaped by different national

23 Singh, 'Culture/wars', 507.

24 Ibid., 508.

perspectives. As a way of beginning to sketch out some of the possibilities, I will refer to an international discussion of the film that took place via the Internet in November 2002 between groups of undergraduate students from the United States, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.²⁵ The discussion was structured by thirteen questions to which students responded individually; such responses initiated debates of various length. At the height of debate over a mooted second US-led invasion of Iraq (the intervention formally started the following March), several participants reported being influenced by *Three Kings*'s depiction of the results of the 1991 American bombing campaign. As one put it:

As an American, I think the director did a great job showing such an approach that is not what I would call your 'everyday' Hollywood flick. A prime example that really impacted me was when the Iraq soldier talked about how the Americans killed his newborn with a stray missile. That, along with other Americans that I talked to outside the class described that scene as something to really think about, and surprisingly most have changed their minds and now are against the U.S. going back to the war.

But the film also clearly resonated beyond the debate over renewed military intervention in Iraq. Participants engaged in lengthy discussion of its depictions of race relations within the United States, racism towards Arabs and American values, each taking up approximately the same space as the discussion of US policy. Some were quite critical of the film's portrayal of identity, bemoaning the apparent distinction between victimized and oppressed Iraqi women and liberated, assertive American women, or calling attention to the Americans' inability to distinguish between Iraqis of different political affiliations or ethnicity. In response to 'Who best in the

25 The students were following courses at Howard University, Washington, D.C., the University of Amsterdam and King Alfred's University College, Winchester (now the University of Winchester). For a full account of the undertaking, see Jaap Kooijman, Jude Davies, Linda Berg-Cross, Laura Copier and Aisha Asby, 'International education, the Internet, and the *Three Kings* experiment', *Journal of Studies in International Education*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2004, 207–23. I would like to thank Linda Berg-Cross and Jaap Kooijman for initiating the virtual discussion of *Three Kings* and for allowing me on board. Thanks also to all the students who participated. Of the thirteen Socratic questions that we set for the virtual discussion, issues of race and American values attracted most responses. Some interesting differences of opinion emerged along national lines; for example, Dutch students tended to regard the film's depiction of race relation in US society as trivializing, while many Americans saw in the same material an exposé of self-delusions about race. This further indicates the complexity of seeing *Three Kings* as a 'contestatory' intervention within a globally hegemonic culture. Hence, while Dutch students were ready to conflate its version of American multiculturalism with that of more conservative films such as *Independence Day*, a distinction between the two was significant for the Americans.

film exemplifies “American values”?, respondents touted the claims of each of the ‘three kings’, with, in addition, a single voice in favour of Conrad Vig.

Several participants argued for Archie Gates on the grounds of Clooney’s star status and charisma, and his character’s intelligence, resourcefulness, success and reward, and by virtue of having made ‘the typical hero’s journey’ from selfishness to service. However, the early front-runner was Troy Barlow, who scored over Gates mainly by virtue of his paternalism; his humanist credentials are established early on in his contestation of Vig’s racism and his ability to calm trigger-happy soldiers, while his domestic situation as ideal husband and father was summed up as ‘the real American Dream-life’: ‘married to a nice woman, has a little daughter, a nice house and at home has a job in an office.’

A useful way of expressing this difference is that Barlow travels much less far than Gates, both intellectually and in terms of social position, and his trajectory poses fewer questions. After all, Gates is something of an outsider whose devotion to sexual and mercenary gratification is portrayed initially as the product of disillusionment with the duplicity of the war and those in authority. It is from this position, rather than the dutifully socialized role adopted by Barlow, that Gates is able to think and act outside both self-interest and duty to family, authority or nation.

That the majority of contributions cited Barlow would suggest that, for these groups of students, the emotionally articulate, familial masculinity embodied by Wahlberg’s character superseded Clooney’s more calculating and estranged version as an emblem of ideal American masculinity. This could well be taken as an index of the shifts in Hollywood representations of masculinity in the 1980s and 1990s, in particular, the displacement of the so-called ‘big bad wolves’ by more socialized and emotionally literate figures. However, we must also allow for the ambiguity between cultural and social exemplars; it would be perfectly possible to regard Barlow as conforming more to ‘American values’ by virtue of his more complete socialization (circumstantially in the United States), while Gates may remain an exemplar of American fantasies of rugged, self-sufficient and resourceful masculinity.

Nevertheless, three contributors, all American, cited neither Barlow nor Gates, but instead Ice Cube as Chief Elgin, in ways that suggested he was seen both as a ‘positive image’ of African-American masculinity, and as a figure who mediated between the other two, combining the independence and integrity of Gates with the emotional warmth of Barlow. As the first to make the case for Elgin/Cube put it:

While Marky Mark’s character [Troy Barlow] presents a perfect *picture* of American values—his wife, his kid, and, most importantly, his whiteness—Ice Cube is doubtless the film’s Ideal American: upstanding, calculating, compassionate, empathetic, and both physically and mentally strong, he is the man that Americans would have home to dinner. If they were color blind ...

Later comments confirmed this sense of Elgin as symbolically mediating between Gates and Barlow. One regarded Elgin as 'responsible for keeping the "team" together' and, in his role as 'peacemaker', best approximating an ideal of American foreign policy. For another, the key term was 'honesty', the possession of which distinguished Elgin from Barlow, whom she perceived as lacking 'sincerity', with a tendency to 'do and say things that [people] DEEM correct to say and do'. Here Barlow appears as being over-socialized. Gates is not mentioned but his intelligence and emotional coldness may be taken as placing him at the opposite pole, leaving Elgin as the dialectical synthesis.

As the discussion developed, a consensus began to form based on the compromise position that all three central characters embodied different facets or dimensions of ideal American values. Interestingly enough, however, the figure who most explicitly embraces ideologies of commerce, entrepreneurship, hard work, innovation and social mobility, and identifies them as American, is an Iraqi, Amir Abdullah, the leader of the resistance. For whatever reason, he was not cited as a possible contender by anyone.

Perhaps part of the reason for that is the continued centrality of images of male multiethnic solidarity for American nation-building. From this point of view, after all, the quartet of Gates, Elgin, Barlow and Vig bears a striking resemblance to the heroic *Independence Day* quartet played by Pullman, Smith, Goldblum and Quaid. Both groups, obviously, are exclusively male, both end up welding solidarity out of difference, both feature inspirational leaders and other figures for whom the film narrative is a means of gaining the self-confidence that allows them to fulfil themselves. And, in both cases, just like in that apparently defunct national myth, the Western, the troubled, blue-collar white guy gets killed.

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