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Both saviour and victim

Black Hawk Down creates a new and dangerous myth of American nationhood

**George Monbiot**

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The more powerful a nation becomes, the more it asserts its victimhood. In contemporary British eyes, the greatest atrocities of the 18th and 19th centuries were those perpetrated on compatriots in the Black Hole of Calcutta or during the Indian mutiny and the siege of Khartoum. The extreme manifestations of the white man's burden, these events came to symbolise the barbarism and ingratitude of the savage races the British had sought to rescue from their darkness.

Black Hawk Down**Release:** 2001**Country:** USA**Cert (UK):** 15**Runtime:** 146 mins**Directors:** Ridley Scott**Cast:** Eric Bana, Ewan McGregor, Ewen Bremner, Jason Isaacs, Josh Hartnett, Ridley Scott, Tom Sizemore[More on this film](#)

Today the attack on New York is discussed as if it were the worst thing to have happened to any nation in recent times. Few would deny that it was a major atrocity, but we are required to offer the American people a unique and exclusive sympathy. Now that demand is being extended to earlier American losses.

Black Hawk Down looks set to become one of the bestselling movies of all time. Like all the films the British-born director Ridley Scott has made, it is gripping, intense and beautifully shot. It is also a stunning misrepresentation of what happened in Somalia.

In 1992 the United States walked into Somalia with good intentions. George Bush senior announced that America had come to do "God's work" in a nation devastated by clan warfare and famine. But, as Scott Peterson's firsthand account *Me Against My Brother* shows, the mission was doomed by intelligence failures, partisan deployments and, ultimately, the belief that you can bomb a nation into peace and prosperity.

Before the US government handed over the administration of Somalia to the United Nations in 1993, it had already made several fundamental mistakes. It had backed the clan chiefs Mohamed Farah Aideed and Ali Mahdi against another warlord, shoring up their power just as it had started to collapse. It had failed to recognise that the competing clan chiefs were ready to accept large-scale disarmament, if it were carried out impartially. Far from resolving the conflict between the clans, the US accidentally enhanced it.

After the handover, the UN's Pakistani peacekeepers tried to seize Aideed's radio

station, which was broadcasting anti-UN propaganda. The raid was bungled, and 25 of the soldiers were killed by Aideed's supporters. A few days later, Pakistani troops fired on an unarmed crowd, killing women and children. The United Nations force, commanded by a US admiral, was drawn into a blood feud with Aideed's militia.

As the feud escalated, US special forces were brought in to deal with the man now described by American intelligence as "the Hitler of Somalia". Aideed, who was certainly a ruthless and dangerous man but also just one of several clan leaders competing for power in the country, was blamed for all Somalia's troubles. The UN's peacekeeping mission had been transformed into a partisan war.

The special forces, over-confident and hopelessly ill-informed, raided, in quick succession, the headquarters of the UN development programme, the charity World Concern and the offices of Médecins sans Frontières. They managed to capture, among scores of innocent civilians and aid workers, the chief of the UN's police force. But farce was soon repeated as tragedy. When some of the most senior members of Aideed's clan gathered in a building in Mogadishu to discuss a peace agreement with the United Nations, the US forces, misinformed as ever, blew them up, killing 54 people. Thus they succeeded in making enemies of all the Somalis. The special forces were harried by gunmen from all sides. In return, US troops in the UN compound began firing missiles at residential areas.

So the raid on one of Aideed's buildings on October 3 1993, which led to the destruction of two Black Hawk helicopters and the deaths of 18 American soldiers, was just another round of America's grudge match with the warlord. The troops who captured Aideed's officials were attacked by everyone: gunmen came even from the rival militias to avenge the deaths of the civilians the Americans had killed. The US special forces, with an understandable but ruthless regard for their own safety, locked Somali women and children into the house in which they were besieged.

Ridley Scott says that he came to the project without politics, which is what people often say when they subscribe to the dominant point of view. The story he relates (with the help of the US department of defence and the former chairman of the joint chiefs of staff) is the story the American people need to tell themselves.

The purpose of the raid on October 3, *Black Hawk Down* suggests, was to prevent Aideed's murderous forces from starving Somalia to death. No hint is given of the feuding between him and the UN, other than the initial attack on the Pakistani peacekeepers. There is no recognition that the worst of the famine had passed, or that the US troops had long ceased to be part of the solution. The US hostage-taking, even the crucial role played by Malaysian soldiers in the Rangers' rescue, have been excised from the record. Instead - and since September 11 this has become a familiar theme - the attempt to capture Aideed's lieutenants was a battle between good and evil, civilisation and barbarism.

The Somalis in Black Hawk Down speak only to condemn themselves. They display no emotions other than greed and the lust for blood. Their appearances are accompanied by sinister Arab techno, while the US forces are trailed by violins, oboes and vocals inspired by Enya. The American troops display horrific wounds. They clutch photos of their loved ones and ask to be remembered to their parents or their children as they die. The Somalis drop like flies, killed cleanly, dispensable, unmourned.

Some people have compared Black Hawk Down to the British film Zulu. There is some justice in the comparison, but the Somalis here offer a far more compelling personification of evil than the blundering, belligerent Zulus. They are sinister, deceitful and inscrutable; more like the British caricature of the Chinese during the opium wars.

What we are witnessing in both Black Hawk Down and the current war against terrorism is the creation of a new myth of nationhood. America is casting itself simultaneously as the world's saviour and the world's victim; a sacrificial messiah, on a mission to deliver the world from evil. This myth contains incalculable dangers for everyone else on earth.

To discharge its sense of unique grievance, the US government has hinted at what may become an asymmetric world war. It is no coincidence that Somalia comes close to the top of the list of nations it may be prepared to attack. This war, if it materialises, will be led not by the generals in their bunkers, but by the people who construct the story the nation chooses to believe.

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