THEATERS OF WAR: HOW THE PENTAGON AND CIA TOOK HOLLYWOOD

[ABRIDGED VERSION TRANSCRIPT]

INTRODUCTION

BARACK OBAMA: I've directed our military to take targeted strikes.

DONALD TRUMP: Tonight, I ordered a targeted military strike.

JOE BIDEN: We will respond with force and precision at our time, at the place we choose, and the moment of our choosing.

TEXT ON SCREEN: Since WWII, the U.S. military has intervened in more than 70 countries – and in more than 2,500 entertainment productions.

ROGER STAHL: Well, they finally did it.

NEWS CLIP: It's been more than 30 years, but Maverick is back.

ROGER STAHL: It was hard to miss the news.

NEWS CLIPS: Maverick is back. Maverick is back. Maverick is back. Maverick Mitchell is back. He's back. Maverick is back. Maverick is back. He is back. Maverick is back. Maverick is back, baby. He's back in action. He's back in the film.

TOM CRUISE: I definitely feel that lovin' feelin' up here from you all.

ROGER STAHL: The Pentagon was feeling the love, too. Beneath all the noise was a quiet little contract that allowed the US military to weave in key talking points, oversee the script, and require an official screening before its release. Of course, it wasn't the first time. You may not remember the original film as an instrument for engineering public opinion, but the Pentagon does. The office that supplied that aircraft carrier and all those F-14s said as much in its own database. The film completed rehabilitation of the military's image, which had been savaged by the Vietnam War. You might wonder how often they do this and how deep the influence goes.

ARCHIVAL CLIP: This is the Army Air Force's first motion picture unit in Culver City, California.

ROGER STAHL: Propaganda. I've been studying it the better part of my adult life, especially the war variety. I've written the books, taught the courses. I knew the military had an office for helping with movies. But we didn't even know basic things about it. How many films? Were there really script changes? And what were they? It might as well have been a broom closet locked up in some dusty corner of the Pentagon. Then documents started to get out, some real revelations. The paper trail led me to a couple of British researchers who

had been filing countless Freedom of Information Act requests. I didn't quite know what I was getting into, but they were delivering thousands of pages, eye popping news, just about every day.

TOM SECKER: Hi, guys, some new documents arrived this morning. These are some of the US Army script notes on the Man of Steel, the Superman movie.

ROGER STAHL: When that door blew open, I caught a glimpse of something way bigger than I'd thought possible. But this journey was just getting started.

TRICIA JENKINS: The Pentagon is powerful in the film and TV industry because they have expensive toys, right? They have submarines. They have aircraft carriers. They have extras. They have pilots. They have helicopters.

MATTHEW ALFORD: That is going to give them rights, usually contracted in, to change the script.

OLIVER STONE: You can call it censorship. You can call it propaganda. It's all of these things.

TANNER MIRRLEES: But this is more insidious than actually sort of state-controlled and state-produced propaganda because it passes off as just entertainment.

FILM CLIP (*MAN OF STEEL*): Are you the ranking officer here?

TRICIA JENKINS: And that's when propaganda is the most effective. You're a little bit more open to incorporating those ideas, because your defenses are down.

FILM CLIP (*BATTLESHIP*): Hit it.

SEBASTIAN KAEMPF: Some people probably would say, well, yeah, I've heard of this, like you know Top Gun, maybe Black Hawk Down, maybe some of the Marvel series.

MATTHEW ALFORD: But what they don't know is how systematic this has been and how huge this operation has been.

SEBASTIAN KAEMPF: Now these Freedom of Information requests that have been successful allow us to actually look at that list. And it's stunning.

MATTHEW ALFORD: What we've found is that thousands upon thousands upon thousands of products have been affected and are often rewritten at script level by the national security state in the United States. Do normal people know about that? No, of course they don't.

[OPENING CREDITS]

THE DEAL

MATTHEW ALFORD: So say you're a producer and you want to make a war film.

SEBASTIAN KAEMPF: You would walk into the Entertainment Liaison Office in downtown Los Angeles.

MATTHEW ALFORD: You say I want to film an Air Force base, or I want an aircraft carrier, or I want some Black Hawk helicopters, or whatever it is.

SEBASTIAN KAEMPF: And they would tell you straight away, give us your entire script. They're not stupid. They're not saying, just give us those sections where some dialogue takes place about the military. They want to have the entire manuscript. So that they can get a sense of the broader context in which the military is being portrayed.

TRICIA JENKINS: If they go through the script and say, we don't really look that heroic on page 18, we're going to need you to change page 18, the filmmaker either usually has to acquiesce or the Pentagon says, that's fine. You have the freedom to not change it. But we're going to take our toys and go home.

SEBASTIAN KAEMPF: Now, it's up to the filmmaker to decide, do I want to accept and make these changes?

MATTHEW ALFORD: You'll end up signing a contract. And then you're locked into that. You're making a film with the DOD, the Department of Defense, as your ally. And they are a really important collaborator within that. They're effectively like another producer.

ROGER STAHL: You might wonder what the military's own rules say about this. It turns out, for decades, the directive was to promote authenticity and dignity of military representation. Such a thing is open to interpretation, of course. But after 1988, the list expanded. Now, they were to promote something called public understanding, recruiting, and official policy positions. It's still a bit abstract on paper. Whose interests are being served in practice?

MATTHEW ALFORD: Producers are able to get cut-price helicopters, cut-price tanks, cut-price aircraft carriers, as well as men, and materiel, and advice.

SEBASTIAN KAEMPF: And the more realistic, of course, a film can be, the bigger the chances are for being big box office hits.

TOM CRUISE: You just can’t create this kind of experience unless you shoot it live.

TANNER MIRRLEES: And the DOD says this is a wonderful opportunity to present ourselves before the public in a positive light through a medium that is mass, that is commercial, that isn't inflected with negative connotations of propaganda.

ROGER STAHL: Just listen to how the Pentagon itself puts it in the weekly activities entry for the 2013 film Lone Survivor. "Entertainment feature films like this reach far greater audiences than any single news media story. Audiences going to see the film will voluntarily sit through a two-hour infomercial." If you're a producer who can deliver this kind of thing, you just might have a career on your hands.

SEBASTIAN KAEMPF: There are particular types of directors and filmmakers the Pentagon really likes to work with and has been working with repeatedly, because they know that they can trust them: people like Jerry Bruckheimer, people like Michael Bay.

PHIL STRUB: We've worked with Mr. Bay here since Armageddon, if I'm not mistaken, and hope to do more of the same.

ROGER STAHL: That's Phil Strub. He directed the office for 30 years. You'll be seeing a lot of him. The name of the game in his world is leveraging military access to tilt the narrative and to maintain persistent relationships with the Michael Bays out there.

MICHAEL BAY: I've got a direct line to the Pentagon.

ROGER STAHL: For them, it's a matter of greenlighting projects the office will like.

SEBASTIAN KAEMPF: They know that their scripts are going to get vetted. So what the effect quite often is is that filmmakers already write their scripts in ways that they know will ultimately please the Pentagon.

JACK EPPS, JR.: Once we said we're interested, then we met with Simpson/Bruckheimer. They very much wanted us. We were concerned about will the military allow us to do it. Because I didn't want to get involved in a movie that didn't get made. I just-- I really wanted to get something made. Because we had written six pictures before this, and not one of them got shot.

SEBASTIAN KAEMPF: People self-censor and tame down any potential critical view, because they know otherwise, it's going to get a desk reject straight away.

ROGER STAHL: The CIA essentially copied this model when it opened its own office in 1996.

TRICIA JENKINS: But what they figured out is that they can be really effective in the pre-production stage. And so they work a lot with screenwriters as ideas are being formed or drafted in order to be able to have a say in how the agency is going to be represented.

ROGER STAHL: As you might imagine, no one involved in these deals, whether it be the CIA, DOD, or entertainment industry at large, is exactly clamoring to talk about them publicly.

SEBASTIAN KAEMPF: And perhaps that's not surprising, right? You would have to ask yourself as someone who goes to the cinema whether I want to pay to actually watch some propaganda stuff.

ROGER STAHL: Hmm, sounds innocent enough. Same thing if you were going to interview Phil Strub yourself, as we did before we had all the documents.

PHIL STRUB: And what we get out of it is an opportunity to influence the military portrayals.

ROGER STAHL: He seemed open enough about the Pentagon's motives but vague on the details.

PHIL STRUB: Well, I don't have an exact number that would describe what pictures the department was involved with or—

MATTHEW ALFORD: This relationship is not secret. It's just that they don't want to make a big thing of it. What they don't want anyone to know is that this is done systematically. And they also are particularly wary of the public knowing about script rewrites.

ROBIN ANDERSEN: If people actually saw a script and then looked at the kind of blue bowdlerizing lines that the military had done on the script, I think people would begin to realize how dangerous and how censorious this kind of activity is.

SHOT DOWN

ROGER STAHL: To see how all this works, just look at how the Entertainment Office has used the biggest weapon in its arsenal: rejection. It can put a production at a distinct disadvantage. Say you want to make a film based on the Kennedy White House tapes about how military leaders almost got us into a nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis. That'll earn you a solid one. You'll have to go to the Philippines for old planes to repaint and military bases. You'll have to construct U2 sequences from scratch and beg a museum for a destroyer. Rejections like this have become more common over the years. On the heels of World War II, the Pentagon assisted a long list of films. But it rarely flat-out denied filmmakers. As Americans began to deal with a more controversial history of military intervention, though, the rejections started to come, first with films that failed to celebrate US military action in Vietnam and continuing with the Cold War, Gulf Wars, and issues way beyond war films. But these were only the rejections that were lucky enough to still be made. Many more weren't. That is, no military assistance often means no show. Producer Jerry Bruckheimer said that without military help, he couldn't have made Pearl Harbor. It apparently means a lot when the Navy pulls more than 20 Vietnam-era destroyers out of storage for you to blow up. There wouldn't have been a Top Gun without support either, he said. Most of the time, it comes down to the studio's need to keep costs low. Take The Hunt for Red October. Producer Mace Neufeld said Paramount straight-up told him if you don't get cooperation, we won't make the movie. And they put it in the

contract. It was a good thing for Neufeld that the script was an easy sell. It set him up for the long Jack Ryan franchise. In contrast, consider another '90s film, Countermeasures. If it doesn't ring a bell, it's probably because it was never made. Sigourney Weaver had signed on to play the lead role. But that didn't matter as much as what the Entertainment Office thought. They didn't want a story about weapons smuggling on an aircraft carrier.

MATTHEW ALFORD: That was rejected explicitly on the grounds that we don't want to denigrate the White House. We don't want to remind the public of the Iran-Contra scandal, which involved illegal arms sales, and drug running, and arming of Contra rebels, and all sorts of horrendous things in the '80s.

ROGER STAHL: In this case, the Pentagon got its wish. The public was not reminded. The Office's own database is littered with these denials never made. So no Eagle in the Sky. Denied, and never made. And no Recovery. It's clear from its own notes that the Pentagon knows a denial can shoot down a film. The entry for A Moral Issue concludes that since the film was never produced, the answer must have been no. Here's a sample of titles from the '80s and '90s, all denied and never made, so you can see what you missed. What themes can earn a film a denial, you ask. We start to see a clear pattern when you look through the documents. The office internally calls these showstoppers. And yeah, sometimes they can stop the show. The Pentagon publicly says it denies films because its job is to promote accuracy. But you don't have to be an expert to scratch your head when it comes to something like Top Gun. Just listen to what the consultants and writers admitted in retrospect.

PETE PETTEGREW: The idea that people chase people around, trying to get Sidewinder tones, particularly down in the dirt, is not reality at all.

PETE PETTEGREW (in archival clip): It's not realistic compared to what we do every day.

PETE PETTEGREW: And I said, well, there's no trophy. I said, if there was a Top Gun trophy, no one would ever graduate. You don't understand the intensity of these guys.

JACK EPPS, JR: It's very anti-Top Gun. Maverick as a character is anti-Top Gun. It's all about being together. Never let the truth get in the way of a good movie.

ROGER STAHL: None of these concerns appeared in the Pentagon's list of requested script changes. In fact, a memo from the Marine Corps later admitted that the Pentagon had supported lots of unrealistic scenes. In Top Gun, they said, buzzing the tower wouldn't have happened without career-ending consequences. And the famous inversion scene simply couldn't happen. The Marine Office assembled this list not to keep everyone honest, but rather to justify an unrealistic scene of its own, a Harrier jet flying through a cave for a Top Gun-style film they hoped to develop. So you'd think films written by vets themselves would pass the authenticity test. Take Jarhead, which was based on the celebrated book by Marine vet Anthony Swofford and adapted for the screen by another Marine vet. The problem was that this one wasn't exactly a flattering picture of the U.S. war in the Persian Gulf. Naturally, the Entertainment Office has one look at the script and

finds too many serious concerns. They don't want audiences to see what Swofford saw: like a sniper instructor praising the Kennedy assassination as the perfect shot, Marines getting excited for war, boasting about killing ragheads and shooting Bedouin camels, references to friendly fire, and attempted suicide, and an abusive drill instructor.

FILM CLIP (*JARHEAD*): What the fuck are you even doing here? / Sir, I got lost on the way to college, sir!

ROGER STAHL: In fact, the Pentagon sees the movie as such a threat that it moves to block the director from recruiting any off-duty military personnel as extras. When the film premieres, the Office explains to the press that it denied Jarhead assistance because it was not a quote, "feasible interpretation of military life." Reporters from NPR and the LA Times ask if they can take a few Marines to the film and get their reactions. "Absolutely not," says the Entertainment Office. But eventually outlets like the San Diego Tribune do manage to scare up some Marine vets, who guess what? Universally laud the film for capturing the absurdity of military life in the Gulf War. Or take Fields of Fire from the early '90s, which was denied and ultimately never made. This one was notable because it had some real muscle behind it, Jim Webb, a highly decorated Marine Vietnam vet who had written a best-selling novel and would go on to be a US Senator. At the time, he had just come off a stint as Secretary of the Navy. Now, that's some credibility, right? Not enough for Phil Strub at the Pentagon office. The script, he says, makes it look like fragging, burning villages, executing prisoners, and drug abuse were everyday occurrences. Yes, these things happen, but mostly not. "Consider making substantive changes." The Marine Corps disagrees with Strub and asks him to take another look. Webb's book is required reading for Marine officers and is generally acknowledged by Marine Vietnam veterans as the most genuine fictional account of the war. Webb himself had some strong words. "It appears to me that what you're really saying is that when it comes to Vietnam, DOD will support only sterile documentaries or feature films that amount to nothing more than dishonest propaganda." Sorry, says Strub. And it became a Vietnam film we didn't get to see. I kept thinking about Oliver Stone, too. Before becoming a filmmaker, this was a guy who had volunteered specifically for combat duty in Vietnam and emerged a decorated vet. His early breakouts are still lauded as the most realistic of the post-Vietnam wave. But it was a real uphill battle with the Pentagon, rejection after rejection. Platoon for a long list of unacceptable themes. Born on the Fourth of July because it made a strong statement against participating in the Vietnam War. Both were put on hold for years. I'd give my right eye to hear what the man himself had to say about all this. Luckily, he had read some of Alford and Secker's early work and was impressed. Matt was able to shake a few trees and get an interview for me. Military veteran, Hollywood veteran, he had to be all over it.

OLIVER STONE: Obviously, I was shocked by some of these-- what these films had to go through to get what they call weapons of war, Pentagon cooperation, as well as CIA cooperation. It's a gigantic iceberg that you've touched.

ROGER STAHL: Wait, Oliver Stone can't believe how deep the story goes. It raises the question, could the industry be in the dark as much as the rest of us? I guess you know what they say, the best PR is invisible. But what about his firsthand experience?

OLIVER STONE: I wrote Platoon as a naive young screenwriter, because it was the truth of what I saw in Vietnam. Of course, it was dramatized. And at some point, I forgot exactly when, we sent in the script and asked for their cooperation. We got a pretty definite turndown from them, saying this was an unrealistic portrayal of GIs.

ROGER STAHL: It was about this time that Top Gun paid a visit.

OLIVER STONE: I was offered the script when it was a magazine article or something way back by Don Simpson. I just couldn't do it. I thought it was-- I knew-- at that point, I was accepting that Platoon would never get done. You have to understand, I had shelved Platoon. I put it out of my mind. I had written Born on the Fourth of July and Platoon and I shelved-- both projects had died.

STAHL (to Stone): It is astonishing that you were offered the Top Gun script. That is an astonishing fact. And I'm still trying to process that.

ROGER STAHL: Of course the military helped to launch that one into the stratosphere. And when it was done, they couldn't wait for the producers to "roll ahead with their new ideas for other DOD stories." Meanwhile, Platoon and Born on the Fourth of July barely made it out of the jungle alive. It's not the only factor in play, I know, but this is how the military's invisible hand moves over Hollywood.

STAHL (to Stone): Do you recognize this? I wanted to bring a gift for you, blast from the past.

ROGER STAHL: I had his Platoon rejection letter framed.

STONE: I never saw this. It's funny they mention what I mentioned, the murder and rape of innocent Vietnamese villagers. Well, I saw both. The cold blooded murder of one US soldier by another. Did not see that, but certainly there's reports of it up and down. They have admitted to fragging, how many were killed in fragging incidents, I imagine they minimized it. And the "portrayal of the majority as illiterate delinquents." "The entire script is rife with unrealistic and highly unfavorable depictions." So I'm glad you got this. That's 1984. That would be the second time I tried to do the movie with Dino de Laurentiis. I'd love to get a copy of that, by the way. Oh, thank you so much. The whole ethos of that office, Pentagon, is that they're supposed to provide accuracy to the filmmakers, accuracy. And they do the opposite. They provide inaccuracy and lies. You show the bad side as well as the good side. We keep making military movies, especially since 2001, glorifying the American soldier, glorifying our patriotism, nationalism, homeland, all this nonsense. We make it into this fetish. We've fetishized the military. No one can say a bad word about them. This is wrong. This is wrong. You have to point out evil when it happens.

PROJECTING THE INSTITUTION

ROGER STAHL: If you really want to dive into these script negotiations, a good place to start is how these offices project the institution itself on the screen. The Pentagon is quite keen to sweep persistent internal problems under the rug. Take the depiction of mental health issues. They denied Home of the Brave due to the "vein of suicide, domestic violence, chemical abuse, and depression." They didn't like the image of vets having a miserable time readjusting to life. It was unfortunate. The Pentagon was making it harder to produce this film exactly when vets needed the public conversation the most.

NEWS CLIPS: Record high military suicide. Military suicides are on the rise.

ROGER STAHL: Over the next decade, way more military personnel would die by suicide than combat. The Office has also worked to downplay any impression that the military has struggled with institutional racism. A good example of how they typically approach the issue is the Laurence Fishburne movie The Tuskegee Airmen. It was based on the real life experiences of the first African-American air squadron in World War II. How did the Office deal with the story of racism in the military? By containing the racism to a bad apple, of course, who then has to be dressed down by his superior officer. This meant also making sure there was no racism depicted coming from the top of the chain of command. They reversed characters to make the senator, rather than the general, the source of the bigotry.

FILM CLIP (*THE TUSKEGEE* AIRMEN): I'm General Stevenson. This is Senator Conyers.

ROGER STAHL: So with this new storyline, what about the scene in the original script where a baseball game breaks out into racist taunts and a fistfight? It appears in this scene that race was and remained a major factor to the troops, which it did not, the Office declared quite confidently. So the fight is out of place and has to go. Maybe the office doesn't get the irony that its habit of covering up institutional racism is institutional racism. Like racism, the Entertainment Office has done its best to make you forget all about sexual harassment and assault in the ranks, which includes a pattern of leaders retaliating against victims who complain. The problem first went public in 1991 with the Tailhook scandal. This is where hundreds of Navy servicemen assaulted more than 80 servicewomen at a convention in Las Vegas. A congressional investigation flagged a Top Gun mentality as a major factor. The fallout from Tailhook is what delayed a sequel for so long. Since then, the Office has treated sexual harassment and assault more like a PR problem than an actual one. They denied GI Jane because it dared to depict a high officer harassing with impunity. And in more recent years, they have actively endeavored to whitewash the issue. They enlisted their long running partners, Army Wives and NCIS to run a counter plotline. In this alternate universe the problem is the victim, who refuses to admit that an assault has occurred. The military leadership is so eager for justice, though, that they launch an investigation anyway.

TV CLIP (*NCIS*): Zero tolerance is no slogan around here, agents. It's a moral imperative. If that officer was harmed on this ship, we'll move heaven and Earth to help them. / I only

wish Farrell had said something at the time. We could have done something about it. / We're doing something now.

ROGER STAHL: Given that the Navy reviews every NCIS script, what would happen if the producers were to drift from this official plot? Well, at one point, the Navy received a script that more closely resembled what targets had repeatedly described: harassment by numerous crew members and unresponsive leadership. The Entertainment Office sounded the alarm. A panicked conference call and a day later, the Navy had revised the entire storyline. When the episode eventually aired, it was a tale of sailor bystanders helping out and timely and effective engagement by those in charge.

TV CLIP (*NCIS*): A matter as sensitive as this required immediate action. During our transit, I ordered an investigation.

ROGER STAHL: He even wins over a skeptical detective in the end after she sees him go the extra mile to nab the perpetrator. See, no institutionally enabled rape culture here.

THE SOFT SELL

ROGER STAHL: Another main job of the Office is to sell regular Americans on pouring vast resources into these institutions. All those weapons can get expensive. Pushing them had always been a staple of old-style propaganda films like The Big Picture series.

ARCHIVAL CLIP: One example. The F-111, the greatest innovation in aircraft design of recent years.

ROGER STAHL: But over time, the Entertainment Office took over this function. The everyday workhorses became those ubiquitous weapons documentaries on the Discovery, History, and National Geographic channels. This kind of boosterism is especially important for systems like the F-35, which gained a trillion-dollar reputation as the most wasteful project in Pentagon history. The goal is normalizing these huge expenditures.

TV CLIP (*SECRET ACCESS: SUPERPOWER*): To remain a superpower, the US needs to constantly update its technology and military hardware.

ROGER STAHL: It's all over their notes. A primary reason for assisting is the opportunity to showcase these weapons. Projects like these, they say again and again, support modernizing the force.

MATTHEW ALFORD: And this means that they're able to show off how sexy and how wonderful and how useful and how targeted their new products are. Which means that the public is going to be less liable to criticize the arms industry as something that is messy, unpleasant, dark, cruel.

ROGER STAHL: Of course, Hollywood has played a lead role in selling weapons, too. They rewrote the Hulk so he climbed on an F-22 and rode it into the sky. They got the F-35 to fly alongside Superman. And got Ludacris to show off the new Ripsaw vehicle.

FILM CLIP (*THE FATE OF THE FURIOUS*): 6.6 liter V8 DuroMax engine with an M-153 CROWS remotely operated weapons station on top. See, the Army's developing machines like this the soldiers can drive from a mile away so they can stay safe and alive.

ROGER STAHL: Or consider the Transformers franchise, which might as well have been a military parade. The Air Force excitedly listed everything to be filmed. The Army, too.

MICHAEL BAY: I've always been like some of the first to shoot military hardware. In Armageddon, I was the first to shoot the B-2 bomber. Then this movie was the F-22s.

CHRISTIAN HODGE: It's just very fitting that Starscream was the air commander and second in command takes that form of literally the baddest weapon system in the world right now.

ROGER STAHL: The Iron Man franchise was an outright celebration of the arms industry. It started out as the exact opposite. The original script for the first movie was all about Tony Stark going to battle against the arms manufacturers, including his own father, who he says was stealing his ideas and twisting them into truly destructive weapons. By the time the film went into production with the DOD, however, the whole thing was gone. Co-star Jeff Bridges told the press they didn't have a script and were getting regular notes from what he called the suits at Marvel, who were, of course, getting notes from the brass at the Pentagon.

FILM CLIP (*IRON MAN*): Today, Tony Stark has changed the face of the weapons industry by ensuring freedom and protecting America and her interests around the globe.

ROGER STAHL: When it was all said and done, Stark had happily inherited his father's weapons business and was even running a few ops in Afghanistan himself. Flipping the script cleared the runway for all of this.

JEREMY LATCHAM: B-2 bombers, C-17s, and F-22s, and F-35s, I mean, you could literally pause the screen and tally it up, and it would probably come out to a billion and a half dollars.

ON THE ROAD

ROGER STAHL: I have to confess that I got pretty wrapped up in one of these deals. In 2017, the National Geographic Channel aired a popular miniseries called The Long Road Home. It was about a 2004 ambush of US soldiers outside Baghdad in Sadr City. At the time, they called it Black Sunday, and it put the first big crack in the US public's faith in the occupation. Eventually, ABC correspondent Martha Raddatz wrote a bestseller about it,

and it was optioned for a series. The Army was all in, opening up Fort Hood, Texas for shooting virtually the entire thing. Like this scene to set everyone straight.

TV CLIP (*THE LONG ROAD HOME*): Right now, our orders are to go to Iraq. / Why? So we can have cheaper gas? / Where we're going, Sadr City, over two million people lived under a dictator's boot for twenty-four years. We can build a better future for them, for the whole country. That's why we're going.

ROGER STAHL: And for the battle scenes, they allowed the producers to renovate an urban combat training site to look like Sadr City.

TV CLIP (*MAKING 'THE LONG ROAD HOME'*): This is more than three football fields long. It is the largest set working in North America today. / Thank you everybody, positions please.

ROGER STAHL: There you have it, the largest film set on the largest military base. So naturally, there was a lot of talk about accuracy.

TV CLIP (*MAKING 'THE LONG ROAD HOME'*): It's been amazing having the Army as our advisor, because I always wanted this to be as authentic as possible. / National Geographic is famous for telling the truth. I love that they're making honest, real, hard-hitting television.

ROGER STAHL: I wondered how honest. So I contacted a couple of vets who had been wounded in the firefight. I had the idea to rendezvous with them at the base and maybe tour the site. I thought the Army might jump at the chance to show some Purple Heart heroes around. After all, they had trained at that very facility before shipping out. And this was their story. No dice.

U.S. ARMY FORT HOOD MAIN GATE | PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICE VOICEMAIL: I guess the first question I have is, one, have you talked to the Office of Chief of Public Affairs folks out in Los Angeles? That needs to be the first stop before we can allow you guys to come in and film. Essentially there has to be a production assistance agreement between yourself and the Army.

ROGER STAHL: If you're curious, yeah, I did send them a formal request.

ROGER STAHL (to cameraperson): Do you think I should tell them there's a part in the movie where I talk about them changing the parts of movies they don't like? I just think they're going to want to change that part.

ROGER STAHL: Well, I eventually did tell them, and they stopped writing me back. In the meantime, the vets and I could only meet in Killeen, Texas, just outside of the base, hang out in a modest motel, and watch the show together. I wondered whether they'd recognize themselves and what they went through.

DUNCAN KOEBRICH: It was traumatic. It hurt to see this. No, it wasn't that. It didn't inspire any flashbacks or anything. No, it should have. Had it been done properly, maybe I would have gobbled it up and had different feelings about it, also intense feelings, but not anger.

TRAVIS WALKER: Yeah, I felt like a liar, because the story that I have been telling my family was not what was shown on the show.

ROGER STAHL: For starters, the guys mentioned that the show wasn't too kind to their friend and fellow GI Tomas Young. This was significant, because his story was that of the early peace movement. Driven to enlist after 9/11, and then paralyzed in the ambush, Young came home to become one of the most visible war protesters. His journey was a symbol for the anguish and betrayal felt by many vets.

NEWS CLIPS: Unable to swallow pills, unable to pull a trigger, unwilling to implicate anyone else, Tomas plans to starve himself to death. / Wounded April 4th, 2004, his fifth day in Iraq, shot in Sadr City, is now writing a letter on this 10th anniversary called the last letter, a message to George W Bush.

TOMAS YOUNG: You are each guilty of egregious war crimes, of plunder, and finally, of murder, including the murder of thousands of young Americans, my fellow veterans, whose future you stole.

ROGER STAHL (to Duncan Koebrich): Yeah, how did they depict Young?

DUNCAN KOEBRICH: As a pussy. And he wasn't. He was cool. He was well read and a cool guy. Yeah.

TRAVIS WALKER: I think they depicted him as a douchebag.

TV CLIP (*THE LONG ROAD HOME*): What do you know about it? War? You ever even been shot at? Well, then do me a favor and shut up.

ROGER STAHL: The show carefully controls Young's image, especially his anti-war activities. We see him protesting, but you come away with the sense that he's just bitter about having been wounded. We never get to hear any of his speeches. According to the documents, the Army even approved each of the protest signs' slogans. And of course, they completely avoid mentioning his suicide. But there's more. The show also went to work correcting any impression that Black Sunday was a strategic blunder. This was curious, because in the book, it's clear that command failed to anticipate the uprising and may have provoked it. They also failed to anticipate the need for armored equipment. Scores of soldiers had to head into the firefight in unarmored Humvees and fish-in-a-barrel supply trucks. But the show lets the man in charge, Battalion Commander Gary Volesky, entirely off the hook and even makes him the hero. The series puts him where he wasn't, in a Humvee at the vulnerable front of the rescue convoy. This was a spot that, in reality, had been occupied by Captain George Lewis, a big part of the book. Lewis disappears from the story entirely.

DUNCAN KOEBRICH: I wrote to one of my buddies about it. I said, I think they're going to put Colonel Volesky in Captain Lewis' spot. And he said, that would be a serious deviation from the book. And then the next episode aired, and sure enough, he gives a speech in a motor pool and climbs in and leads us from the front, which he did not.

ROGER STAHL: Turns out, Volesky's character does a lot of valorous things up there.

DUNCAN KOEBRICH: I don't know how involved General Volesky was-- this is part of why I want to hear his thoughts on being depicted, imbued with the valor of Captain Lewis.

ROGER STAHL: While there's no evidence that Volesky himself had any influence, he was definitely within earshot. Here he is on set, telling everyone to break a leg. And it just so happens that he was Chief of Army Public Affairs during a critical period, between the first script reviews, and the show's broadcast. There was one more thing gnawing at me, too. Remember Captain Lewis, whom Volesky replaced in the show at the front of the rescue convoy? The guys mentioned that Volesky had made him the primary scapegoat after the ambush and relieved him of duty.

TRAVIS WALKER: When we looked at it as a bad thing in the army, he lost his job for it. But now, to show civilians of it, now it's something heroic, it's something good.

ROGER STAHL: I had to track Lewis down and ask him about all this. He was working for the Army as a civilian at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He confirmed that Volesky had indeed removed him from his post. But what did he think about Volesky taking his place in the convoy on the show?

GEORGE LEWIS: Yeah, I don't know why they did that. It doesn't make much sense to have a battalion commander leading a convoy of a company. I mean, that's a pretty simple thing. I think most people who have any military experience would say, wait a sec, that doesn't make a whole lot of sense.

ROGER STAHL: And what would he want to say to Volesky?

GEORGE LEWIS: Yeah, I'm just wondering how it happened and whether he had any knowledge or involvement in it. And I hope he didn't. I mean, because if he did, I mean it'd completely trash any respect I had for him.

TRAVIS WALKER: I don't think the blunder came with Captain Lewis, who was the one who took the brunt of it, who got relieved of duty. I think the blunder came from way up top, because I mean, we didn't have armored vehicles. Some guys had armor that didn't fit. Some guys, you know-- it was just a total--

DUNCAN KOEBRICH: We're mechanized infantry and that's a supply truck.

TRAVIS WALKER: We didn't do anything that we trained for.

DUNCAN KOEBRICH: Yeah.

ROGER STAHL: That's not the story we got, though. It was a story of a good war and a misguided peace movement. It was a story of enemies who come out of nowhere and a battalion commander who puts his own life on the line to get his guys back. That's how Black Sunday goes from a black eye to something more like Black Hawk Down.

DUNCAN KOEBRICH: I have to wonder, OK, why are they doing this? Why are they depicting these scenes that contradict what happened? And I don't think that's creative license. I think that's a cover-up.

SKELETONS IN THE CLOSET

ROGER STAHL: There's still one big issue that we've barely touched. What about certain unsavory historical realities that the CIA and Pentagon would rather keep tucked away? Well, one strategy for dealing with war crimes is to paint the US military as above the law. It's hard to imagine a movie that would casually endorse any other country's unprovoked bombing of, say, an unnamed superpower. Turn the tables, though, and the DOD just might offer its support. That's how you get Top Gun: Maverick, a masterclass in how to normalize US flouting of international law with a feel-good summer hit. When it comes to the ugly facts of how these operations go down in the field, however, they want you to know that there's nothing to see here. There's the pivotal scene where the team captures some Afghani goatherders. According to Marcus Luttrell's firsthand account, the commanding officer argued that they should kill them quietly, hide the bodies, and keep a pact of silence. He eventually put it to a vote, though. And in a split decision, the group let them go. The Pentagon didn't like this image of military leaders advocating war crimes and had a long discussion about changing it. In the final version, it's the commanding officer who unequivocally orders the group to let the captives go.

FILM CLIP (*LONE SURVIVOR*): This is not a vote. This is what we're going to do.

ROGER STAHL: How would the Office justify twisting the story like this if you were to, say, put them on the spot? Well, as luck would have it, I had the chance to ask. The Navy held a webinar about how it works with Hollywood, a sort of advertisement for its services. Dennis Moynihan was the chief information officer while Lone Survivor was in production. He'd been talking about how authentic they were able to make it. I couldn't believe the moderator picked up my question, but being a military ethics professor, he took an interest. Trigger warning: there's going to be a fair amount of squirming.

SHAUN BAKER: I have one more. This is an interesting one, too. And this is a question for you, Admiral Moynihan. "How does the military deal--" and this is Roger Stahl, by the way, providing this question. "How does the military deal with the suggestion of war crimes? I'm thinking about Marcus Luttrell's book, where the CO suggests they kill the captured

goatherders. This suggestion goes missing from the film. This change seems like it compromises the principle of authenticity." What do you think of that?

DENNIS MOYNIHAN: Look, it gets to, again, a lot of the things that we talked about. Does it reflect well on the military? Can it be used for recruiting? And can people like David, and in this case, Peter, still tell a credible story? So is everything that ever happened in that situation reported on included in the movie? No, it's not. But I think that's OK. Because in the end, you got a very credible product that certainly, the service I think was proud of, and I think that Peter was proud of as well. So every detail? Absolutely not, for all the reasons that we talked about before. But I don't have a problem with that.

SHAUN BAKER: OK, good. And I have a question for the--

ROGER STAHL: Yeah, of course, not every detail. The Pentagon also wants you to forget all about certain policies of mass destruction. Nuclear weapons are an especially touchy subject. There's a long history of rejecting movies that suggest they might not entirely be under control. Consider Godzilla. The monster began as an explicit allegory for the US nuclear bombing of Japan. And these critical associations held all the way through the 1998 version with Matthew Broderick. By 2014, though, the DOD was fully involved. So things had to change. The nuclear sub one of the monsters carries off into the jungle: in the original script, that was the USS Alabama. But the Pentagon didn't like the suggestion that it could ever lose control of its own arsenal. Okay, say the filmmakers. "Per our discussion," we'll make it a Russian sub instead.

FILM CLIP (*GODZILLA*): Guardian Three, we located your Russian sub.

ROGER STAHL: The attitude toward using nukes had to change, too. Originally, a Japanese character was to tell a gruesome story about his father surviving the bombing of Hiroshima. The Office wanted it gone. "If this is an apology or questioning the decision to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki, that will be a showstopper for us." So we got this speech instead.

FILM CLIP (*GODZILLA*): The arrogance of man is thinking nature is in our control, and not the other way around.

ROGER STAHL: There's more. The bomb also goes from being the monster to helping solve the monster problem.

FILM CLIP (*GODZILLA*): All those nuclear bomb tests in the '50s. Not tests. / They were trying to kill it.

ROGER STAHL: And they were still our best hope. Beautiful, isn't it? Godzilla was different after this. The 2019 version didn't have DOD help. But it nevertheless stuck with the nukes-as-heroes theme. So this longtime warning about the dangers of proliferation is now an extension of the US military and something of an advertisement for the bomb.

THE BIG PICTURE

MATTHEW ALFORD: I think the reason it's important, and perhaps the reason it's important to me, is because whenever there is American and British military action around the world, particularly over the last 20 years, that military action has been extremely destructive.

ROGER STAHL: The stakes are high. We're talking about dominant representations of the most powerful military on the planet, bigger than the next dozen countries combined, that has been bombing other countries continually since World War II, and with a staggering legacy of human suffering.

TEXT ON SCREEN: US wars since 2001: 200,000 killed in Afghanistan; 1 million+ killed in Iraq; 37,000 US soldiers killed, including combat and suicide; 59 million refugees; $8 trillion spent; US military active in 85 countries (2018-2020).

MATTHEW ALFORD: The mood music for that is our popular culture.

ROGER STAHL: This is the cinematic universe that's been operating under the radar for decades in which there isn't a problem the US military can't solve, and where alternative stories get sucked into a black hole. It's a universe of officially prescribed threats and target nations.

SEBASTIAN KAEMPF: This is not just a concern to the United States. It is a concern to the world. These are highly censored, politically motivated portrayals of the American empire, if you wish.

MATTHEW ALFORD: We're just a bit affected by that, which means that we're a bit more confident about how great military action will be. And we're a bit more confident that those evil Iranians, or those evil Chinese, or evil Venezuelans, or whatever it is, we're just a bit more confident that they're a bit less human. And that kills thousands, tens of thousands, or even in Iraq's case, a million people.

ROGER STAHL: It eventually hit me. This isn't just a collection of script changes. We're inside of it, this world created in the image of the military-industrial complex. And with razor-thin margins of public support for some of these disastrous wars, this skewed image of the world might just be nudging us over the edge. So what questions should we be asking if we want out?

TRICIA JENKINS: Why shouldn't we know what they're doing?

NEWS CLIP: They shut down a battleship, put up a giant 22 foot tall movie screen--

TRICIA JENKINS: And actually, should we even be paying these organizations to generate propaganda that's going to be bounced back to us at the movies?

ROGER STAHL: At the very least, these deals could be made more transparent. It's clear that the Freedom of Information Act isn't quite cutting it. For example, Tom Secker asked the Navy for the past decade of script notes. They said they didn't keep them. Two years, over 100 emails, and three formal appeals later, they admitted they did keep them, 240,000 pages. But they said they couldn't release them, because they contained trade secrets. They're giving us the runaround more and more these days. It's getting to the point of absurdity. Like the time when Tom put in a request for documents related to a dozen productions and the DOD came back with 1,000 pages -- redacted, and I mean blank. It may take legal action to get these offices to comply with public information requests. But on the most basic level, shouldn't we at least know if they've had their hands on a production? After all, rules for commercial entities have been around since the 1930s.

SEBASTIAN KAEMPF: The public has a right to know. And I think the Pentagon should be legally obliged to make that information available to the public.

MATTHEW ALFORD: Not at the very end of a 3-minute credit run.

TRICIA JENKINS: Not in the scrolling credits, somebody listed as a technical advisor.

MATTHEW ALFORD: At the start of the film.

SEBASTIAN KAEMPF: It wouldn't be particularly popular either with the film industry or with the Pentagon, because people, I think, would not necessarily be prepared to pay money to see a film like that.

TRICIA JENKINS: The CIA wrote a movie. Do you really want to go see that? I mean, is that what's going to pull in box office numbers? No.

MATTHEW ALFORD: Then we get a culture that is greater-- with a greater degree of transparency. And then the public will vote with their feet and vote with their wallets.

TRICIA JENKINS: I think at the end of the day, because I'm a media educator, I really just want people to be critical media consumers. The problem is that you can't be a critical media consumer unless this relationship between your war movies and the military or your spy movies and the CIA is made transparent. Because the moment you become aware of it, you can go to the movies and be far less subject to the propaganda messages that the government is trying to get you to believe, or to accept, or to act upon. I guess that's really what I want for people.

ROGER STAHL: For a decade now, I've been asking myself the same question over and over. Has the long arm of the security state refashioned this one? And how about this one? Now you're asking it, too. Imagine living – (movie trailer voice) in a world – where we don't have to.

[END]