

**THEATERS OF WAR**  
HOW THE PENTAGON AND CIA TOOK HOLLYWOOD

[TRANSCRIPT]

**INTRODUCTION**

BARACK OBAMA: I 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, at the moment of our choosing.

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 loving feeling 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 all those aircraft carriers and 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.

ARMY FILM NARRATOR: 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 that the DOD 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 a Man of Steel, the Superman movie.

ROGER STAHL: When that door blew open, I got a glimpse of something way bigger than I 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. 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.

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.

SEBASTIAN KAEMPF: Some people probably would say, well, yeah, I've heard of this, like with 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 material, 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.

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 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 screen writers 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. You would have to ask yourself as someone who goes to the cinema whether I want to pay to actually watch some propaganda stuff.

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 they're in some way unrealistic. 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.

*DANGER ZONE: THE MAKING OF TOP GUN CLIPS:*

- The idea that people chase people around, trying to get Sidewinder tones, particularly down in the dirt, is not reality at all.
- It's not realistic compared to what we do every day.
- 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. It would all be midair collisions, and crashes, and everybody'd die. Nobody would ever graduate from Top Gun.
- It's very anti-Top Gun. Maverick as a character is anti-Top Gun. It's all about being together. So it was a dramatic license. And I think it worked. 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.

The issue of realism comes to a head with films written by vets themselves. Surely they must pass the authenticity test if Top Gun did. Jarhead was based on the celebrated book by Marine vet Anthony Swofford and adapted for the screen by another marine vet. The DOD has one look at the script, though, and finds too many serious concerns. They don't want audiences to see what Swofford saw, like a sniper trainer 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.

*JARHEAD CLIP:*

- 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 its realism.

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 bestselling 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 where everyday occurrences." Yes these things happen, but mostly not. "Consider making substantive changes." The Marine Corps, for its part, disagrees and asks him to reconsider. 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, I pictured it going down something like this.

*JFK CLIP:* I assume if you've come this far, what I have to say interests you. But I'm not going to name names and tell you who or what I represent, except to say you're close.

ROGER STAHL: I wasn't prepared for this.

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-- 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: It would have made for an easier start on a career. While Top Gun was opening up the after burners with full military support, Platoon and Born on the Fourth 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.

OLIVER 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 fetishize 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.

## **HOW WE KNOW**

ROGER STAHL: Before we go any deeper, you might wonder how it is we came to know what goes on in that office. I'll tell you one thing, we didn't learn about it from the news. On the exceedingly rare occasions when the issue does get press attention, this is the kind of thing you get.

NEWS CLIP: Phil Strub reviews scripts, deciding if a script has the glimmer of realism or fun he's looking for.

ROGER STAHL: Realism and fun. Sounds innocent enough. If you wanted to know any more than that, though, for decades, there was just one place to look.

MATTHEW ALFORD: There was one guy, basically, one historian who totally dominated this field in the '70s, '80s, '90s, all the way up into the 2000s.

NEWS CLIP: The film and military historian, whose book, *Guts and Glory*, is recognized as the definitive study of the relationship between the military and movie industry, Lawrence Suid.

MATTHEW ALFORD: And he was the person who had all of the relevant documentation on this. But Suid was the only person writing about it. And so scholars didn't even bother looking into it.

ROGER STAHL: Suid largely bypassed any concerns about steering public opinion and instead told a story about the military constantly fixing Hollywood's mistakes. Eventually, though, someone else came along and did a little muckraking.

MATTHEW ALFORD: It was in 2004 that a journalist, a kind of maverick journalist who I quite like called David Robb decided that he was going to investigate this.

ROGER STAHL: Robb interviewed a bunch of industry folks and combed the few public documents the DOD had made available to Georgetown University and the National Archives. He somehow persuaded the Marine Corps Office in LA to give him a peek, too.

MATTHEW ALFORD: He acquired much of the initial documentation. And he was able to punch a big hole in what Lawrence Suid had been saying for the previous 30 or 40 years.

ROGER STAHL: It was nowhere near a comprehensive picture, but this was the first time someone had made the case that the Entertainment Office was a sophisticated propaganda machine. Suid did not like this at all. He wrote a scathing review that all but charged Robb with fabrication and

dismissed the idea that the office wielded any influence over movies beyond making them more accurate. Robb shot back, calling the review libelous. It has to be the most contentious exchange I've ever seen in an academic journal. But Robb's work inspired other researchers like Matthew Alford, who set out to get a full sense of the operation.

MATTHEW ALFORD: And this is two decades, three decades after these things should have been investigated. I started looking into it. And of course, I contacted the Department of Defense. I contact Phil Strub. And Strub can say to me, oh, we don't have that documentation. We've given it to Lawrence Suid.

ROGER STAHL: So he picked up the trail himself, just across the pond and just up the river from the Pentagon at Georgetown University Library.

MATTHEW ALFORD: You asked if I was nervous. And a little bit nervous. Not really nervous about being on camera. But nervous because I've just spent a large amount of money to come over to a library. And I've spent over \$1,000 to come to a library.

ROGER STAHL: There, he found the public collection of DOD donated documents, which he could access no problem. But then there was Suid's personal collection, which Georgetown held quite separately. This was the real prize, the documents the DOD had given exclusively to Suid.

MATTHEW ALFORD: So every time anyone wanted to go into that private collection, which as far as I can tell, no one ever did, because it was never advertised, it was never-- there was no kind of publicity or awareness of this whole thing, but when I tried to get into that archive and when a couple of my colleagues tried to get into that archive, Lawrence Suid was able simply to say no. I'm using that.

ROGER STAHL: What do you do if you get stonewalled like this? Well, you need a real bulldog. Enter another enterprising Brit, freelance journalist Tom Secker. Having read Robb's work, too, he had been carpet bombing the DOD with Freedom of Information Act requests.

TOM SECKER: Hey guys, we've got some new documents. These are some DOD script notes on the film Pitch Perfect 3.

MATTHEW ALFORD: In fact, the government was so annoyed at the amount of document requests that Tom Secker put in that they labeled him a vexatious requester. And so Tom, and I think Tom actually found out that he was called a vexatious requester, because he put in a request for any information about himself in emails. And so from that point, I think I said to Tom, well, maybe you should put in more requests. And Tom said, oh yeah, I'd quite like to do that. And then, it just snowballed from that point. And we ended up having thousands and thousands of pages of documentation come in.

ROGER STAHL: Internal correspondence, activity reports, line by line script changes. The world was opening up. Then another break. In an email, Phil Strub offhandedly mentioned the existence

of an incomplete database. So Tom put in a request for it. First, the army denied having it. And then later that year, the request came through. This was the Rosetta Stone. Although missing lots of entries, the database listed 900, all the way to the present, films and TV shows. It was a bit of a shock. When we interviewed Strub, a few years back, he denied even keeping count.

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

ROGER STAHL: Before all these document releases, you had to assume that the DOD and CIA had affected only a couple hundred films. Now we could account for 10 times that many, more than 2,500 films and television shows. Count up the individual TV episodes, and it's thousands more. Naturally, the CIA files have been harder to crack.

TRICIA JENKINS: It's tough, because the CIA has been less transparent than the Department of Defense in terms of how they work with Hollywood, because so much of their stuff is done in the pre-production stage. It happens in conversations over the phone. There's not a paper trail. There are emails that are exchanged. But you have to get access to those emails through a FOIA request. Sometimes those are denied. Sometimes those take years to come to fruition. And so this relationship, and exactly how it works, and what scenes the CIA has objected to, what scenes they were pushing in order to have them incorporated into the final product is a very murky world that's very hard for academics to penetrate.

ROGER STAHL: While the CIA material trickled in, the DOD story took a dramatic turn. I knew Suid had been ailing. But in late 2019, Georgetown Library informed me that he passed away. I would never get to meet him. I would get to meet his archive, though. I was shocked to learn that his estate had opened it to the public. And I was the first to have a look. The collection truly took my breath away, a mountain of official documents that blew the lid off the whole operation. But a few other things caught my eye, too. There were these little notes from the Pentagon Office that suggested Suid just had to ask, and they'd hand the documents right over. There was also a big stash of audiotaped interviews. It struck me that the ones with Phil Strub seemed pretty chummy. Strub promises to give up files. And you can hear him tapping away at the Pentagon database.

LAWRENCE SUID: GI Jane has a file?

PHIL STRUB: Probably, yes.

LAWRENCE SUID: OK, but no cooperation. Tuskegee Airmen, you gave them some help?

PHIL STRUB: Oh, yeah, big time. What was the one I was just going to look up? Forrest Gump.

LAWRENCE SUID: Yeah, Forrest Gump.

ROGER STAHL: Apparently Strub gave Suid database login privileges. I found a screenshot in the collection. That's some high level clearance.

LAWRENCE SUID: I have that written. You'll see the manuscript, The Siege.

ROGER STAHL: Hold on, did he just tell Strub you'll see the manuscript? Then I discovered older taped interviews with Donald Baruch, who ran the office before Strub. He's giving notes on the Guts and Glory manuscript.

DON BARUCH: At the top of page 5, you say "filled with historic--" this is in regard to Deer Hunter. Now, we're on page 6, and you say "although the Navy provided--" final paragraph on page 3-- page 7, I would suggest deleting "at the same time" and starting "the studios recognized the value of Department of Defense cooperation." Now you're saying here--

LAWRENCE SUID: Page 12?

DON BARUCH: Page 12.

ROGER STAHL: I had to wonder, how deep was Suid's relationship with the Pentagon Office? So I headed to New York to Don Baruch's personal archive, kept at Baruch College founded by his uncle, the financier. In a box of Office memorabilia, they happened to have Baruch's Rolodex. Right alongside Clint Eastwood and other Hollywood heavyweights, there was Lawrence Suid. Baruch also kept a Suid file. In it, I found his letter recommending the Guts and Glory project for a Guggenheim Fellowship. He even kept early drafts of its chapters and clippings of its reviews. So there it was. For decades, the Office had been trading access to influence not just the big screen, but also its very own story. It was starting to become clear why we had known so little for so long.

## **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. Take something obvious, like recruiting, which runs deeper than you think. This kind of thing has a long history. But of course, Top Gun took it to new heights. They even set up recruiting tables outside theaters. This function of the film was not lost on Director Tony Scott.

TONY SCOTT: All these kids must hate me, because they all signed on thinking they're going to be fighter pilots pulling breads all over the world. And they all ended up in 11 stories down in some shitty old aircraft carrier, stuck in the Indian Ocean.

ROGER STAHL: More recently, there have been even bigger leaps into this territory. Act of Valor literally started life as a recruitment ad before the Navy decided it would make a good feature film. Captain Marvel was also a recruiting bonanza, a vehicle for the Air Force to reach young women.

ANNA BODEN: The Air Force was welcoming and amazing. It was important for Brie to go up in the F-16 and discover who Carol Danvers is.

BRIE LARSON: It's going to be fun. The core of her is the Air Force. It's the spirit of the Air Force. But more than anything, it was like the spirit of the Air Force and the spirit of being a pilot.

ROGER STAHL: Even the CIA is in on the game. Its involvement in the show *Alias* went far beyond support. Jennifer Garner, who played the main character, did a series of recruitment pitches.

JENNIFER GARNER: Right now, the CIA has important exciting jobs for US citizens.

ROGER STAHL: Then there's *The Recruit*.

*THE RECRUIT CLIP:*

- You're kidding.
- Applications for the CIA are up tenfold.
- Would I have to kill anyone?
- Would you like to?

ROGER STAHL: Not too subtle, right? But you'd still never guess how large of a role is played by Chase Brandon, the longtime head of the CIA's Entertainment Office.

TRICIA JENKINS: And almost nobody knows this, but Chase Brandon wrote the entire treatment and like 80 pages of the original draft of *The Recruit*. And he is not listed as a screenwriter at all in those credits. The only thing he is listed as is a technical consultant.

*THE RECRUIT CLIP:* You have all just stepped through the looking glass. What you see, what you hear, nothing is what it seems.

ROGER STAHL: Beyond the recruiting pitch itself, these institutions are also keen to sweep persistent internal problems under the rug. The Pentagon is very sensitive about depicting mental health issues. For example, 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.

*TUSKEGEE AIRMEN* CLIP: 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've enlisted their long running partners, *Army Wives* and *NCIS* to run a counter plot line. The problem in this alternate universe 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.

*NCIS* CLIP:

- 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 you.
- 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 stepping in, and timely and effective engagement by those in charge.

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

ROGER STAHL: 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.

*THE BIG PICTURE 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.

*SECRET ACCESS: SUPERPOWER CLIP:* 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.

*THE FATE OF THE FURIOUS CLIP:* 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.

*TRANSFORMERS: BEHIND THE SCENES CLIPS:*

- What the Air Force has done in this show has shown us all the good toys, brand new stuff that really hasn't even been put into the field yet.
- 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.
- 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.

*IRON MAN CLIP:* 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 business and become an emissary of the military industrial complex himself. Flipping the storyline cleared the runway for all of this.

*MAKING OF IRON MAN 2 CLIP:* 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.

ROGER STAHL: On a broader scale, the military and CIA also want to sell the public on the image that they are the ones who save the day. Take the alien invasion film Independence Day.

TRICIA JENKINS: Like, there are some things that they objected to which had nothing to do with historical accuracy. One of the things that they were upset about is the guy who ultimately defeats the aliens is a civilian and is not a military hero. They wanted the heroes of that film to have military backgrounds. They also didn't like how the aliens, even though they're supposed to have advanced technology, were able to so thoroughly decimate the American military.

ROGER STAHL: The Office listed the damage, which included 30 F-18s, one B-2 bomber, and one whole Pentagon. Although they denied the film in the end, director Roland Emmerich got gun shy about that last one. So we famously got the Empire State Building, White House, and Capitol, but not this ultimate showstopper. Same thing with Rampage where giant mutants attacked the city. The Pentagon rejected this one after the filmmakers failed to incorporate their script notes. The problem? The mutants rampage all over the military.



Sci-fi is one thing, but the stakes go up when it comes to revising the memory of actual missions gone wrong. Take the 1993 battle of Mogadishu, Somalia that eight years later became the basis for *Black Hawk Down*. At the time, it was universally regarded as a debacle, a needless sacrifice of 19 American troops, not to mention the slaughter of 1,000 Somalis.

BILL CLINTON: Today, I want to talk with you about our nation's military involvement in Somalia.

ROGER STAHL: Afterward, the Entertainment Office was on high alert for anything that looked like it in its scripts. So for *Clear and Present Danger*, they worried about a scene where Colombian militias overwhelmed US special forces. "Rangers in Somalia just went through a real world fiasco that made the military look ridiculous," they wrote. "The DOD is not about to cooperate on a movie that does the same thing." In this case, they made changes to ensure the film would ultimately turn out to be, in their words, "more of a commercial for us than damage control." But with *Black Hawk Down*, high level leaders saw an opportunity to recast the memory of Somalia altogether.

JERRY BRUCKHEIMER: We got full cooperation from the Defense Department through two administrations, William Cohen who was the outgoing Secretary of Defense was a big fan of the book and said he would help us in any way to get the movie made.

ROGER STAHL: All that essential equipment gave the DOD tremendous leverage. Director Ridley Scott said it would have been hard to make the film without it.

RIDLEY SCOTT: And so we went right to the wire in terms of negotiation with the Pentagon about their requirements as to how they wanted to be perceived during the film. But that negotiation took a long time.

ROGER STAHL: First, the Pentagon negotiated away a few unheroic things.

MATTHEW ALFORD: The original book was actually very good. And there was loads of things changed in that. But the most obvious thing was that one of the veterans who came back from Somalia, he was convicted of sexually assaulting a child.

ROGER STAHL: It got out that they had pressured the filmmakers to change the character's name.

MICHAEL ALFORD: So they created-- the only composite character, the only totally fictionalized character in that film, was Ewan McGregor.

ROGER STAHL: With those messy details out of the way, all they had to do was focus on the story of the rescue and avoid any bigger questions.

ROBIN ANDERSEN: The filmmakers grabbed victory out of the jaws of defeat, a symbolic victory, where that film did just that. The soldiers say, I don't care about the politics. I'm just in it to fight next to the guy beside me. And we're not going to leave anybody behind.

*BLACK HAWK DOWN* CLIP: You know what I think? It don't really matter what I think. Once that first bullet goes past your head, politics and all that shit, just goes right out the window.

OLIVER STONE: But Somalia was a mess from beginning to end. We had-- America had three or four abortive missions there that had not worked before. We'd set up a scenario that was like this, that the people started to distrust us and hate us. And then we covered it all up with this nonsense movie. It's a typical whitewash of a military-- military corruption, typical.

ROGER STAHL: From then on, the film became a model for restoring public faith when overseas interventions go wrong. It turns out, you can always rescue history with a rescue story.

The CIA tried it too with *Argo*. The film is based on a rescue that occurred during the Iran hostage crisis, how the CIA smuggled Americans out by pretending to be a Canadian sci-fi movie production company. The Entertainment Office had been pushing this storyline for a while. Five years earlier, the Office had recommended it to Hollywood and TV producers on what it called its Now Playing page. Eventually, Ben Affleck picked it up as director and star. He was already in the pipeline, as he had previously starred in another CIA sponsored film, *The Sum of All Fears*.

The CIA's exact role in *Argo* had been something of a mystery, though. They took eight years to respond to Matt Alford's Freedom of Information request. And when we finally got the internal emails, they didn't include script negotiations. We got a peek into how cozy the relationship was, though. The CIA knew it had a keeper. "We are hoping to develop a close working relationship with the filmmakers on this project," they wrote. After his first couple of visits to Langley, Affleck was obviously keen to stay in the CIA's good graces. "We love the agency and this heroic action. And we really want the process of bringing it to the big screen to be as real as possible." Over the course of this gushing relationship, the CIA Public Affairs Office reviewed multiple versions of the script. "The Agency comes off looking very well, they wrote." The synergy couldn't have been more perfect. The CIA working with Hollywood to tell a story about how the CIA worked with Hollywood to save the day. The irony was thick with scenes like this.

*ARGO* CLIP:

- The United States government has just sanctioned your science fiction movie.
- Thank you, sir.

ROGER STAHL: You could say it turned out pretty well for both parties.

MICHELLE OBAMA: And the Oscar goes to--

ROGER STAHL: Hey, the First Lady of the administration that helped produce the movie.

MICHELLE OBAMA: *Argo*. Congratulations.

ROGER STAHL: And hey, it's Jennifer Garner, from that other CIA show, *Alias*. *Argo* was on a whole different level, though, reframing history for a new generation. Some parts of the story just got buried, like the fact that it was the CIA that led the coup that set the whole crisis in motion, which they finally acknowledged a year later after the documents were declassified.

NEWS CLIP: That is the coup that toppled Iran's democratically elected prime minister.

ROGER STAHL: And the fact that the CIA failed to see the crisis coming.

TRICIA JENKINS: Even by Tony Mendez's own admission, the Iranian hostage crisis was an intelligence failure. For those six people, absolutely, the CIA was their savior. Too bad for the other hostages who remained in captivity for over a year.

ROGER STAHL: 52 of them to be exact. And they just kind of fall out of the script.

TRICIA JENKINS: And so the story is not on the failure. It is on the success. And so *Argo* really becomes a story of redemption for the CIA in the face of one of its biggest intelligence failures.

ROGER STAHL: Another rescue story in the bag.

BEN AFFLECK: Yeah, I think probably Hollywood is full of CIA agents. And we just don't know it. And I wouldn't be surprised at all to discover that this was extremely common.

ROGER STAHL: Yeah, I doubt he would be surprised.

## **ON THE ROAD**

ROGER STAHL: I have to confess that at one point, 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. 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 over it, opening up Fort Hood, Texas for shooting virtually the entire thing. In particular, they allowed the producers to renovate an urban combat training site to look like Sadr City.

*MAKING OF 'THE LONG ROAD HOME' CLIP:* This is more than three football fields long. It is the largest set working in North America today.

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

*MAKING OF 'THE LONG ROAD HOME' CLIPS:*

- 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.

PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICER (ON PHONE): I guess the first question I have is, one, have you talked to the 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.

STAHL (on camera): 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. (LAUGHS) 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 in the episode devoted to him. This was significant, because his story was that of the early peace movement. Paralyzed by a bullet, he went on to become one of the most visible war protesters, alongside Cindy Sheehan, whose son died in the same ambush. Young's own death became a symbol of 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 Fourth, 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.

STAHL (to vet): 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 douche bag.

*THE LONG ROAD HOME* CLIP: 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 vetted 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's 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: It was a question on my mind, too. It seemed likely that he'd played some role in the show's development. There he is on set, telling everyone to break a leg. And it just so happens

that he served as 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. 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 he looked at it as a bad thing in the Army, he lost his job for it. But now, to show civilians of it, now something heroic, 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-- was 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-- it was just a total-

DUNCAN KOEBRICH: Mechanized infantry against 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. We didn't see those in charge needlessly sacrificing the lives of these soldiers or Young's fight to make sure it doesn't happen again. 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? 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 haven't touched. What about certain unsavory historical realities that the CIA and Pentagon would rather keep tucked away? Consider war crimes. In short, they want you to know that there's nothing to see here. For example, the CIA has always been sensitive about its associations with torture. For a long time, it was the number one showstopper, no joke.

MATTHEW ALFORD: So in *Meet the Parents*, for example, Ben Stiller walks into Robert De Niro's office-- Robert De Niro is the CIA character. And in the original script, he is meant to see CIA torture manuals on the desk all around, as a way of-- as part of the script. It's a way of making Robert De Niro's character look frightening. However, the CIA itself did not like this. And because they were consulting on the film, they asked for it to be changed. And so that's why when Ben Stiller goes into that office in the finished film, it's just pictures of Robert De Niro meeting famous people like President Clinton. It's watered down, basically.

*MEET THE PARENTS* CLIP:

- Looking for something, Greg?
- Oh.

ROGER STAHL: Things changed after 9/11, though. The CIA teamed up with shows like *24*, which did depict torture, lots of it, but as a justified and effective measure to keep America safe.

*24* CLIP: You got information, Paul, I need it now.

ROGER STAHL: By the time *Zero Dark Thirty* arrived, the CIA's use of torture was an established controversy. The red flags went up when it went public that the Obama administration was involved in the film.

NEWS ANCHOR: What has some on Capitol Hill so angry?

JOHN MCCAIN: You believe, when watching this movie, that waterboarding and torture leads to information that leads then to the elimination of Osama bin Laden. That's not the case.

ROGER STAHL: What we do know is that behind the scenes, the CIA was busy leveraging the film not only to justify US torture, but to soften its image. The agency demanded that the screenwriters remove the torture dogs, despite the fact that the CIA did use dogs routinely. And they politely asked that the script keep to those torture techniques already in the public domain.

The Pentagon has also done its best to suppress any suggestion of war crimes. For example, in the original script for the World War II movie *Windtalkers*, there was a character called The Dentist who pulls gold teeth from the mouths of dead Japanese soldiers. The Marine

entertainment officer wanted it gone. "The dentist character displays distinctly un-Marine behavior," he wrote. But it's no secret that this kind of racism fueled trophy taking was commonplace in the Pacific. Eugene Sledge describes the practice as widespread in his famous memoir, which is required reading for Marine officers. Gold teeth were the least of it, too. Soldiers raided bodies for bones and ears. They developed techniques for boiling of flesh off of severed heads. These grim souvenirs flooded the home front, even showing up in Life Magazine. But the Marine Office didn't want the film to bring any of that up. Phil Strub at the Pentagon concurred. "Stealing gold teeth, yep, has to go." So it went.

Lone Survivor got the treatment, too. There's the pivotal scene where the platoon captures some Afghani goat herders and tries to decide what to do with them. 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.

*LONE SURVIVOR* CLIP: 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 goat herders. 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.

ROGER STAHL: Yeah, of course, not every detail.



What about crimes of aggression, like overthrowing foreign governments? Well, in recent years, you see a pattern of support that normalizes these kinds of interventions. Of course, you have Iron Man running ops in Afghanistan. But you also have The Suicide Squad. Here, the US military sends in a team of B-list superheroes to overthrow a fictional Latin American government. So a long history of illegal US military action in Central and South America ends up as not much more than a punch line. Or take Jack Ryan, the most popular series on Amazon Prime to date. Season two got off with a bang by demonizing Venezuela, a longtime US foreign policy target.

*JACK RYAN CLIP:*

- Your concern is that the Russians are secretly selling weapons to Venezuela?
- It would fit a pattern.
- This ends up in the news, it's just going to cause panic.
- A nuclear Venezuela you will not hear about in the news, because we'll already be dead.

ROGER STAHL: The central plot is the CIA trying to tip a Venezuelan election. The agency seeks to topple a dictator and put a liberal, populist, human rights candidate into power. The thing is, something was actually happening there in Venezuela at the time. US foreign policy leaders were doing their best to delegitimize an election by stoking an insurrection. But unlike in the show, their favorite candidate was less populist and more the empire friendly kind. So with CIA and DOD help, you might say that Jack Ryan put a pretty face on the whole operation in real time.

CRISTINA UMANA: My character is Gloria Bonalde. It's an amazing character because she's a family woman. And she's not very interested in politics.

ROGER STAHL: The Pentagon also wants you to forget all about certain policies of mass destruction. Consider Agent Orange in Vietnam. This was a vast toxic spraying program designed to kill the jungle and make Vietnamese resistance fighters easier to bomb. It poisoned a whole country, including many US troops. One of these poisoned vets wrote a book about it, along with his father, who happened to have been in charge of the spraying. Eventually, a script for a TV movie landed on the Pentagon's desk. You guessed it. The movie is "inflammatory," they wrote. Besides, "the exposure of most Vietnam veterans to herbicide orange was not very great." Mind you, this was three years after Agent Orange manufacturers had paid out a huge class action settlement in a case that drew out over 100 medical studies. Luckily, the film got made in the end. Without it, throngs of suffering vets would have remained invisible for much longer. As time went on, it also became clear that Agent Orange was having near genocidal effects on the Vietnamese population.

NEWS CLIP: An epidemic of birth defects, brain damage, and rare cancers still affecting hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese today.

ROGER STAHL: For the Entertainment Office, any reference to Agent Orange was a problem, even if the program's codename appeared years later in some comic book movie.

MATTHEW ALFORD: There was an Operation-- Operation Ranch Hand was designed to capture the Hulk. But the Pentagon didn't like it, because of course, Operation Ranch Hand was the name of a real operation using chemicals in Vietnam. So they were trying to avoid any kind of association with any of these sorts of things.

*HULK CLIP:* I'm requesting a National Command Authority Override. Angry Man is unsecure.

MATTHEW ALFORD: You could call it petty. But in a way, it's just-- it's the Pentagon operating like a slickly oiled PR machine. But it's a slickly oiled PR machine that is not just advertising toothpaste. It's advertising the most violent and powerful organizations on the planet.

ROGER STAHL: The Office is also touchy about nuclear weapons. There's a long history of rejecting movies that suggest they might not entirely be under control. Take one from the Cold War, *The Day After*, which envisioned the outcome of a nuclear exchange. It happened to be the highest rated TV movie in history. Nearly half the US population tuned in. President Reagan even watched it. He wrote in his diary that it left a powerful impression on him. And its influence led directly to nuclear disarmament talks. The Pentagon denied this one because it didn't like the image of an accidental nuclear war, a skirmish that gets out of control. They wanted it to be crystal clear that the Soviets started it. They had a problem with this scene in particular.

*THE DAY AFTER CLIP:*

- Well, maybe they'll contain it. After all, I've still got symphony tickets for tonight.
- The thing that bothers me is that damn launch on warning.
- What's that?
- That's when one side tells the other that they're going to fire their missiles as soon as they think the other guy's missiles are already on the way.
- Use them or lose them.

ROGER STAHL: The Pentagon wanted this out. "We do not have a launch on warning policy," they wrote. "And the public should not be misled that we do." But they did. Launch on warning was an official policy in *The Single Integrated Operational Plan* beginning in 1979. And because of it, the US came dangerously close to launching in a few occasions. Thankfully, the filmmakers stood their ground. Had the Pentagon successfully changed the script to lay all fault at the feet of the Russians, the film might have served to drive nuclear buildup instead.

The Pentagon's view of nukes has reshaped entire franchises. 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, they switched that from American to Russian, as not to give the impression that we could ever lose control of our arsenal.

The whole attitude toward nukes had to change, too. There was a scene in the original script where one of the characters tells a harrowing story about his grandfather 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.

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

ROGER STAHL: There's more. The bomb goes from being the threat to helping solve the problem. It turns out, the nukes weren't the monsters but were actually being used to blow up monsters back in the day.

*GODZILLA CLIP:*

- 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. A planned explosion supercharges Godzilla to fight the good fight. It's hard to imagine a more complete reversal. This long time warning about the dangers of proliferation is now an extension of the US military and something of an advertisement for the bomb.

## **MISSION CREEP**

ROGER STAHL: These days, it's not just about war movies. The Pentagon has managed to colonize the entire entertainment landscape. They've always had their toe in sci-fi, for example., But now it's a major part of the game. Consider that Transformers was the first franchise to cooperate with all four branches. Sci-fi and comic book movies served as a refuge from all those real and hugely unpopular overseas occupations.

TANNER MIRRLEES: The science fiction and fantasy creates kind of an imaginary space for the various melodramas of the military to be scripted and played out without ever having to address the real motives of foreign policy in the world today, nor the consequences for those that fight on its behalf and die in its wake.

ROGER STAHL: If this embrace of sci-fi strikes you as a bit strange, you're not alone.

ROBIN ANDERSEN: When Philip Strub or anybody in the Entertainment Liaison Office says that it has to be accurate, we're just changing these scripts to make it accurate, what I love about that is now we are battling space invaders. That's not a very accurate portrayal of the Department of Defense and the role of the Department of Defense.

ROGER STAHL: Once you've conquered fantasy, where do you go? Reality, of course. This is probably the most surprising thing about the documents. The Pentagon has staked a flag in every little strange corner of reality TV. They've had their hand in game shows, like The Price Is Right

for a while. Despite all the yelling and running around, the military carefully manages these events. This includes handpicking participants. And audience participation is out, because they regard it as too spontaneous. On these game shows and especially daytime talk shows, you'll see a ton of reunions. The office is constantly arranging them. Then there are the many military themed home makeover shows. You can also invite the Dude Perfect influencers to romp on your aircraft carrier.

DUDE PERFECT: I've wanted to do something like this since I saw the movie Top Gun.

ROGER STAHL: Or have the Rachael Ray Show put a bunch of service people through a cooking challenge. Cooking shows are an astonishingly big part of Pentagon assistance with TV. Cake shows, especially. Boy, do they love cake shows, lots of different kinds of cakes, fighter jet cakes, tank cakes. You have competition shows that serve as recruiting vehicles. Then there's what you might call harder TV documentary fare, the kind of stuff on the History and Discovery channels. These are those programs that celebrate weapon systems, sniper rifles, Apache helicopters, F-35s, and what it's like to drive what will probably replace the Humvee. So that's what Jay Leno has been up to.

JAY LENO: Well, that was pretty cool.

ROGER STAHL: This also includes shows like Taking Fire and Inside Combat Rescue that embeds you with the troops overseas, usually through the eye of the helmet cam. The guy behind this pivot to reality TV was David Evans. He took over as director of the Pentagon office in 2018, but before that, his job was to manage assistance for documentary and unscripted television. Shows like Inside Combat Rescue represented a big turn in that direction, a winning formula.

DAVID EVANS: It was a huge success for Nat Geo. They saw the ratings go through the roof on it. A year later, two years later, three years down the line, other filmmakers coming to us, wanting to do-- or wanting to do something like a Nat Geo show. And they'll say as much. Yeah, we want to do another Inside Combat Rescue.

ROGER STAHL: Striking out into all this new territory has required that the Office take a more aggressive posture. These days, they're not just waiting around for producers to come to them. They're out there pounding the pavement and drumming up deals. Suddenly, the Air Force is producing an ad for its services and circulating it among industry types.

AIR FORCE PROMO CLIP: The Air Force Entertainment Liaison Office is the industry's gateway to an extraordinary arsenal of aircraft, equipment, incredible personnel, and locations.

ROGER STAHL: They're hitting the road to conferences and trade shows to reach new markets.

KEN HAWES: And the reason that we are here today is to inform filmmakers about our capability, about our office, and what we can do to help them help us tell our story.

ROGER STAHL: They're presenting at Comic-Con and a bunch of other industry conferences. They're going to military tech expos, not to advertise their services, but to find out what cool new gadgets are out there to pitch to producers. Publicly, they claim they don't pitch. Here's the new head of the Pentagon office at that Navy webinar.

GLEN ROBERTS: We don't ever pitch. We don't have an active pitch where I will call a studio and say, hey, have you guys thought about this.

ROGER STAHL: You have to wonder why he's saying this when they clearly do. Recall, they had pitched Act of Valor to the studios and pitched episodes about sexual assault to NCIS, what they internally called the Navy's big request. But there's a whole lot of day to day pitching, too. They sent a congratulatory letter to the new head of Fox Team Programming and requested a meeting to pitch him potential Air Force ideas. They pitched a story of a Marine and her bomb sniffing dog to film studios, Animal Planet, Letterman, and Extreme Makeover Home Edition. And they took the opportunity while working on an episode of Extreme Makeover Home edition to pitch an idea about doing it again with a different Air Force team.

In the past few years, you start to see entire sections of the weekly reports categorized under outreach. The military worries when they notice a production for which they were not approached. So they often reach out to offer assistance. Back when he headed up the office, David Evans summarized this role on his own LinkedIn account. Engagement runs through the entire spectrum of production, beginning all the way back with concept and script development.

So we're at a unique point in the evolution of military propaganda in the US. On the one hand, the Office has managed to evade scrutiny and insinuate itself more deeply than ever. But on the other, we can finally see the big picture and do something about it.

## **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 more or less continually since World War II, and with a staggering legacy of human suffering.

TEXT ON SCREEN:

U.S. Wars since 2001: 200,000 killed in Afghanistan, 1 million+ killed in Iraq, 37,000 killed U.S. soldiers (combat and suicide), 59 million refugees, \$8 trillion spent.

U.S. 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, speeding through 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?

ROBIN ANDERSEN: Why do Americans not hear Voice of America or any of the other identified propaganda formats distributed around the globe?

ROGER STAHL: It turns out that the US has some long standing propaganda laws that, at the very least, prohibit its use on domestic audiences. And the DOD's own public affairs directives prohibits selective benefit, that is favoritism toward a particular ideological movement or commercial enterprise. So it seems like abolishing the Office might have some legal justification.

But what if these deals could just 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. Take this typical military supported episode of Rachael Ray that featured military themed Suave products. At the end, Suave is required to disclose, but not the military. That could change. So you might see something like this. OK, maybe something more like this. The point is--

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: If 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--

ROGER STAHL: --where we don't have to.

[END]