

SELLING THE TELEVISION WAR BY USING SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY  
IN VIETNAM WAR MOVIES

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## **Abstract**

So often it is said how powerful Hollywood's influence is on society, but rarely do we look at how effective movies are when altering public perception on political issues. This thesis is meant highlight a very controversial event in United States history which is the Vietnam War, and how Hollywood films have Social Identity Theory present in the movies to alter the perception of the War. In order to effectively accomplish this we need to have a clear understanding of what Social Identity Theory entails, as well as what public opinion and perception of the war was during and soon after it ended. Viewers must also take a step back and interpret the underlying messages movies about the Vietnam War are trying to convey, and if the theory that focuses on the "us versus them" complex is present within the films.

## **Introduction**

Since the birth of cinema, movies have played an integral role in society by depicting noteworthy events that have happened in society. Whether it be wars, political elections, tragedies, or victories, Hollywood has been a key component for being able to allow movie goers everywhere to witness first hand events that they would not have been able to before. This is a great power, because viewers rely on this outlet to determine their perception of each respective event, and if a producer or director wants to alter what actually happened, someone seeing the film could interpret that as fact. It is important to try and determine what type of process these movies create that may cause a viewer to go through some type of idealistic change. In order to effectively determine this, looking at a specific controversial event in history and analyzing the films that have been made about it and specifically address different aspects about it. The Vietnam War is a great example of this, it allows for many different opinions and approaches for how movies about this event were created.

Social Identity Theory is a very strong theory that can be used to establish the frame of thought to look at movies through a different lense. Using a perspective that establishes the characters as movies not only as good guys and bad guys, but also as different groups that the viewers will either be able to see as something they can relate to or look down upon. Having this understanding eases the process of viewing movies not just as entertainment but tools for changing viewers idealistic opinions.

## **Chapter 1: Social Identity Theory**

In order to adequately understand how movies were used to improve the public perception of the Vietnam war, it is essential to understand Social Identity

Theory and how it plays a part in the film process. The main motivation regarding this theory is that individuals have a preference to associate their respective groups in which they belong with a positive image. It was developed to articulate how humans interpret their spot in society. When looking at a person's social identity, there needs to be a focus on three processes: social categorization, social comparison, and social identification.<sup>1</sup> Understanding how these processes work and are affiliated with social identity will allow for a clear idea of how Social Identity Theory is connected to movies playing a role in changing the viewers ideals of the Vietnam War.

Social Categorization is the when someone or a group of people classify another group of people into a specific group due to them having similar characteristics because of some type of personal trait. This is considered to be natural to human nature and social perception. The psychologist that created Social Identity Theory, Henri Tajfel, speaks on social categorization in the sense of race specifically, he writes "It is the assumed need for differentiation (or the establishment of psychological distinctiveness between the groups) which seems to me to provide, under some conditions, the major outcome of the sequence social categorization-social identity-social comparison. Related phenomena can be shown to exist in a large variety of social situations. One major example is provided by the wider social contexts in which the notion of race has become a value-loaded term, a

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<sup>1</sup> Ellemers, Naomi. "Social Identity Theory." Encyclopædia Britannica. January 04, 2019.

notion which has surplus value connotations.”<sup>2</sup> Tajfel is referring to the ideal that people need to feel like they should be individualistic in some sort of fashion, so the first step in meeting new people is categorizing them with a specific groups. People have naturally associated different demographic groups with a certain perception of how much value that respective group has to them. It is human nature to want to feel unique, so of course it is natural to want to associate others with a different group that allows an individual to maintain their self impression.

The next step in social identity sequence is social comparison. The basis of this theory is how people evaluate themselves and their opinions by comparing them to others. This is in an effort to be able to accurately define themselves, and reduce any type of doubt and uncertainty in order to gain self assurances. Humans only have themselves, so this theory sheds light on the natural process of self-enhancement. This relies heavily on people’s self comparison to others constantly, and will be more likely to affiliate themselves with others that they see similarities in. They have created an ideal picture of people they wish to associate with because it resembles themselves. Leon Festinger was a psychologist that made the proposal of Social Comparison Theory stated “The evaluation of the ability does function like other opinions which are not directly testable in “objective reality.” For example, a person’s evaluation of his ability to write poetry will depend to a large extent on the opinions which others have of his ability to write poetry. In cases where the criterion is unambiguous and can be clearly ordered, this furnishes an objective

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<sup>2</sup> Tajfel, Henri. *Human Groups and Social Categories: Studies in Social Psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.



reality for the evaluation of one's ability so that it depends less on the opinions of other persons and depends more on actual comparison of one's performance with the performance of others."<sup>3</sup>To simplify this, if a student were to receive a 93 on a test grade, that is objectively a good score, but if the student next to him received a 97 on the same test, the first student would think the second is smarter than them solely because their test score was better. In that moment of comparison, people do not consider outside influences, they only compare the information that is given to them in that significant moment. People's innate drive to evaluate themselves is an essential part to Social Identity Theory, without this part, the whole of the theory would not be complete.

The last process that needs to be defined in order to understand Social Identity Theory is Social Identification. This process, similar to Self Comparison, involves the idea of self enhancement. The main hypothesis of this theory is that the members of their respective in-group will try and identify negative aspects of an out-group to improve their self-image. Real world examples of this would be racism or certain prejudices, or a more simpler example is brand identification, where you may have a certain preference for Adidas, so if you see another person wearing Nike you may look down on them because they would not be considered in your ingroup. This is the last step in the process and essentially defines when the determination of what kind of social identity a person may have. Two psychologist that specialize over this theory, Michael Hogg and Dominic Abrams, speak on this, making clear "the social categories in which individuals place themselves are parts of a structured

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<sup>3</sup> Festinger, Leon. "A Theory of Social Comparison Processes." 117-40, 1954.

society and exist only in relation to other contrasting categories; each has more or less power, prestige, status, and so on. Further, these authors point out that the social categories precede individuals; individuals are born into an already structured society. Once in society, people derive their identity or sense of self largely from the social categories of which they belong. Each person, however, over the course of his or her personal history, is a member of a unique combination of social categories; therefore the set of social identities making up that person's self-concept is unique."<sup>4</sup> This is very interesting that people want to associate themselves with an ingroup in order to feel a unique self concept. Our histories make up our personal self identification, and the way humans identify themselves is what makes up each of their specific histories.

An individual does not have one single selfhood, it is changing based on the different in-group that they are associated with at the time. For example, a person may be involved in three different organizations on a college campus, so the way this individual acts will differ per the group they are in at the time to correctly fit in with that group. But despite this person adopting this groups way of acting, they are still unique because they have other ways of acting based on the other groups they are in. Being able to associate with a number of in groups while also self enhancing yourself against other outgroups to maintain their perception of themselves is what Self Identity Theory consists of.

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<sup>4</sup> Burke, Peter J., and Jan E. Stets. *Identity Theory*. 225-232. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

With a more clear idea of what processes of Social Identity Theory are present within the movies that will be used, it is important to understand some of the foundational reasons that the movies were made, the public perception and opinion of the Vietnam War.

## **Chapter 2: Public Perception of the Vietnam War**

When a country goes to war, in order for it to be successful, it is essential to maintain the goodwill of the public. Towards the beginning of the Vietnam war, there was a large amount of support for it around the number of 64% believing that

we should send our troops there.<sup>5</sup> These numbers were not preserved, and changed dramatically. A possible reason for this was due to the fact that this was referred to as the first “television war”, meaning stations would use information on the war to get a large majority of their views. This also meant that viewers were able to actually visualize the brutalities of what came with the Vietnam War.

A turning point for public perception of the Vietnam War was the Tet Offensive, which was a campaign that consisted of surprise attacks against the US and South Vietnamese militaries that initially were successful. The US did not technically lose any battles or major ground, and any that was lost they quickly gained by. As a response to this though, they lost political credibility, which is debatably much worse. The reason that they lost this was because of photographs of the war, the Vietcong had attacked a number of American secured areas in Vietnam, and while the US military regained all of that ground, the photo's told the American people that the Government may be lying to them about the war. To add on to this, the CBS news anchor at the time reported that the war was at a stalemate. There was also a famous photo of a South Vietnamese General that was brutally executing a Vietcong soldier, while the Vietcong were the enemy, this still caused a ripple of

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<sup>5</sup> Hillesheim, Jacob. "How the Media Shapes Public Opinion of War." Rewire. February 15, 2019.

distrust with our allies from the American people.<sup>6</sup> At the time, there was not the same level of distrust in reporters that we have today, if there was a news report or article with a picture of the war attached, the majority of viewers or readers would believe it. So when images of the savagery that was the Vietnam War, public opinion towards it shifted against it nationally.

The War in Vietnam was not decided on the battlefield or through a government treaty, it ended because of media's reporting on the war and public opinion based on these reports. Viewers had access to television, so they were able to see up-to-date news on what was happening with the war. Being able to see real pictures of how horrific the war actually was. In the past this was not possible, people knew there was fighting happening, but could not truly experience it through a television screen in their own home. This personalized the experience for a lot of people capturing the fighting and injuries that took place. This led more viewers to become critics of the war. Protesters would also appear on the TV and try and publish their messages to magazines, this being to of the main media outlets made it seem like the overwhelming majority of people were against the war, which in turn increased the number of critics. "The Vietnam experience that the media played a

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<sup>6</sup> Hillesheim, Jacob. "How the Media Shapes Public Opinion of War." Rewire. February 15, 2019.

decisive role not only in the way in which the war was won or lost, but also in the governmental decisions that guided this nation during that period. For the first time in American history, it is reported that a sitting President decided not to run for reelection-effectively stepping from power-because he had lost the support of a television news anchorman. The Vietnam war has been and still is referred to as our first television war."<sup>7</sup> Without the media, the story of the Vietnam war could be very different, if people were unaware of what was actually happening there they may not have been as much of an uproar against it. The US could have possibly even won the war if it were not for the mass push for them to pull the troops back. But with the constant attention from the media and protests, the only thing the government could do was bring the soldiers home.

A direct way to see the change of public perceptions is the approval ratings of the President at the time of the conflict. In 1965 "56% of Americans said they approved of Johnson's handling of Vietnam and 26% disapproved. In February 1968, Gallup's last measure of public approval of Johnson on Vietnam before he announced he would not run for reelection, these figures were nearly reversed: Only

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<sup>7</sup> Patterson III, Oscar. "Television's Living Room in Print: Vietnam in News Magazines." *Journalism Quarterly*, March 1, 1984, 35-39, 136.

32% of Americans approved of his handling of Vietnam and 57% were opposed.”<sup>8</sup>

The high casualty rate of the war really turned the public against the war opposed to their initial majority support. This is the first time in history that America was able to see the power of media in the political process.

### **Chapter 3: Connecting War Movies with Social Identity Theory**

“Film as dream, film as music. No art passes our conscience in the way film does, and goes directly to our feelings, deep down into the dark rooms of our souls.”(Bergman) This quote from the Swedish filmmaker Ingmar Bergman precisely illustrates how the power of film can alter our perception of aspects of the

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<sup>8</sup> Saad, Lydia. "From Vietnam to Iraq: How Americans Have Rated the President." Gallup.com. November 04, 2003.

world. It is extraordinary how a single movie can have such an impact on a person or people that it becomes an experience they never forget, a lesson they will keep with them forever, or an idea that they had not even began to conceptualize.

Because that is what movies are; they teach, they persuade, they expand the mind by bringing movie goers to places that only a three hour film could have allowed them to imagine. It is not often that an entity has the ability to impact every type of human emotion the way that going to the local cinema and escaping the world can.

This is why film is an incredibly compelling way to present a message to the masses without the pushback that a political speech or Ted Talk may have.

Hollywood can use the veil of entertainment to include ideologically altering messages to viewers that they may not even realize.<sup>9</sup> They go into a theater with the expectation of being entertained and could come out with a different view of a prevalent issue. Society puts actors and actresses on pedestals because they portray in film what humans desire, to live lives that have value and leaving a lasting effect on others, the same way the characters in the movies we love do. And that is where the danger of Hollywood's influence becomes relevant; the entanglement of love, sadness, war, laughter, and life lessons that movies provide to viewers throughout

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<sup>9</sup> Rothman, Stanley, David J. PhD. Rothman, and Stephen J. Powers. *Hollywoods America: Social and Political Themes in Motion Pictures*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998.



their lifetimes has also established a credibility factor within viewers minds that has allowed film to change our perspective on historical events and present issues.

A way that this is done comes from the ideals that Social Identity Theory conveys. Viewers are able to use their sense of being in the same categorical group that the protagonist of a movie is a part of, and this allows the movie to have access to their personal belief system. Not only does this allow the message and goals of the main characters to become more attractive, but it makes the antagonist of a film seem even more unappealing. This is even more relevant when addressing movies that main topic is about war. Hollywood has proven to be an outlet to improve the perception of wars that the United States have been apart of in the past.<sup>10</sup>

Often there has been a distinct cohesiveness between the film industry and Government, especially during wartime, when public approval of what actions are being taken can be important for success. Cooperation of the two has been evident since as early as 1917, when the President of National Association of the Motion Picture Industry (NAMPI), William Brady, called together various members of the film industry to explore ways that the motion picture community could aid the Liberty Loan Campaign. This was part of the US Government's effort to sell war

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<sup>10</sup> Dickenson, Ben. *Hollywoods New Radicalism: War, Globalisation and the Movies from Reagan to George W. Bush*. London: Taurus, 2006.

bonds during World War One to help with the expenses of war.<sup>11</sup> Mr Brady also received a letter from the President at the time Woodrow Wilson. Part of the letter states, "It is in my mind not only to bring the motion picture into fullest and most effective contact with the nation's needs, but to give some measure of official recognition to an increasingly important factor in the development of our national life. The film has come to rank as a very high medium for the dissemination of public intelligence and since it speaks a universal language it lends itself importantly to the presentation of America's plans and purpose."<sup>12</sup> Not only does this present proof that the Government and film industry have worked together since as early as motion pictures have been around, but President Wilson articulates how it "speaks a universal language" and is important to the "presentation of America's plans and purpose." He is saying that a film can act as an outlet to create a sense of connectedness with the masses, in other words, a movie can be a way to develop an "ingroup" on a broad scale.

This chapter will address how film uses the idea of an "ingroup and outgroup" and self enhancement that are prevalent with military themes that put effort into making the protagonist relate to the majority of the viewers. They also

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<sup>11</sup> "Liberty Loan of 1917 Button." National Museum of American History.

<sup>12</sup> DeBauche, Leslie Midkiff. *Reel Patriotism: The Movies and World War I*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997.

demonize the antagonist in a way that could possibly make the perception of the group of people that they would be associated with be looked at more negatively. Similarly, this will highlight films created in foreign countries that use these strategies in how their depiction of the main characters and goal for each respective film. In order to get a clarity on the connection between Social Identity Theory being prevalent in films about war, it is essential to see how outside perspectives use this in which their country is the protagonist and America is the antagonist in their eyes.

A specific foreign film that should be highlighted when interpreting this topic is a Japanese anime film created in 1943 called *Momotaro's Sea Eagles*.<sup>13</sup> The creator, Matsuyo Seo, constructs a story that consists of different animal soldiers that are going to battle against the demons of Onigashima, Demon Island. This island in the film was actually a cinematic representation of Oahu, where Pearl Harbor, the US Navy Base in Hawaii was located.<sup>14</sup> Peach Boy, the main protagonist of the film, brings Millet Dumplings in a package with Japanese writing on it with him. He eats the dumplings and then gains muscles, similar to how Popeye the Sailor Man does when he eats spinach. The difference is the dumplings that Peach Boy eats are

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<sup>13</sup> "Momotaro's Sea Eagles." TV Tropes. Accessed April 03, 2019.

<sup>14</sup> "Ted Eshbaugh's 'Cap'n Cub' (1945) – and 'Momotaro's Sea Eagles' (1943)." Ted Eshbaugh's "Cap'n Cub" (1945) – and 'Momotaro's Sea Eagles' (1943) |.

meant to be representative of Japan's power. It also demonstrates that the culture and spirit of Japan will accompany the soldiers wherever they go to give them strength and courage. Through this symbolic imagery, Japan is convincing the viewers of the film that the home nation is powerful.

The film also portrayed the "demons" who were represented by the American soldiers as foolish drunks. They drink alcohol to strengthen themselves, similar to how Peach Boy ate the Millet Dumplings, but instead this makes the demon look like a fool. This is meant to be significant because "That shot demonstrates how the enemy is powerless as a nation. The alcohol here has no match for the millet dumpling of Japan. It gives no spirit and strength to the demons, whereas the millet dumpling is full of determination and courage. That contrast reveals the enemy as an easy target and therefore convincing the audience that this attack will be a guaranteed victory."<sup>15</sup>(Appendix A) They use alcohol as a contrast to the Japanese food to show the inferiority that the Demons have to the culture of the movies protagonist homeland. This comparison of the cultures is a very clear effort to enhance the perception of one and demean the other.

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<sup>15</sup> "Momotaro's Sea Eagle: An Effective Propaganda." Food and Foodies in Japan. February 24, 2012.

*Momotaro's Sea Eagles* is a perfect example of a foreign country having Social Identity Theory present from the perspective of a foreign nation viewing the United States as the antagonist. The United States perspective of Pearl Harbor is very different from what is portrayed in the animated film, to Americans it is one of the biggest tragedies that has happened to in US history. But as shown in the film, the Japanese depict a demonization what is considered to be the US military by comparing them to the strong and courageous Japanese soldiers. This was created to have Japanese citizens feel a sense of comradery and an "ingroup" that they can all be apart of. So the creator of the film did this to unite the society and have a feeling of national pride due to the success of their military. It is human nature to want to be apart of a group that has success, and this film not only accomplishes that feeling but it also develops an outgroup that failed when fighting against the viewers home country.

Another example of this type of film that is created by a different nation to make them the protagonist and the United States as the enemy is *The Detached Mission* (1985) directed by Mikhail Tumanishvili.<sup>16</sup> The movie depicts a group of Soviet Marines that are the "good guys" in the film that are tasked by stopping a

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<sup>16</sup> "The Detached Mission." IMDb. March 19, 1987.

rogue American Officer from creating a worldwide crisis by launching nuclear missiles. The main antagonist is an American Vietnam War Veteran, he suffers with war flashbacks and acts crazed, ready to launch a personal crusade on the Soviets. He goes crazy in the movie and arms a missile with a nuclear warhead, the film even shows him killing his fellow American people. This depicts American veterans in a very negative light, as his henchman are also ex-soldiers too. Major Shatokhin, the main protagonist who “ is often called “the Soviet *Rambo*,”<sup>17</sup> is given the job to do a search and destroy mission on the launch site and the missile with his team, they are portrayed as brave military heroes who save the day against the psychotic and unstable Americans.

This film is very significant because it is seen as a response to the second installment of *Rambo*, which are films very open about Communist governments being enemies to Americans. The cover of *The Detached Mission* even includes a soldier heroically standing over a burning American flag, to symbolize the USA's defeat in the movie against the strength of the Soviet Union (Appendix B). It was also the last anti-American propaganda that the Soviets openly did because the Soviet government did not want to anger the American one. But similar to the

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<sup>17</sup> Vishnevetsky, Ignatiy. "Why Soviet Movies Did Not Have American Bad Guys." Checkpoint Asia. April 04, 2019.

*Rambo* films, which I will address in the fourth chapter, what Social Identity Theory entails is prevalent within the film.

Something that we see in these military films is the categorization of nationalities based on the military and government actions, and this mindset plays a significant role in Social Identity Theory. In this case, it is categorizing the attributes with the Americans as crazed soldiers, and the American citizens in the film are useless and get killed. The only American that has a positive role in the film is the man that actually joins forces with the Soviets, establishing the message that it is a better decision to be apart of the Soviets. Using specific attributes is essential to the theory as “social categorization of self and others into ingroup and outgroup accentuates the perceived similarity of the target to the relevant ingroup or outgroup prototype (cognitive representation of features that describe and prescribe attributes of the group). Targets are no longer represented as unique individuals but, rather, as embodiments of the relevant prototype--a process of depersonalization.”<sup>18</sup> When viewers begin to stop seeing others as unique individuals, they start dehumanizing them. Using attributes that are inherently negative such as a crazy soldier that wants to kill your in-group is a direct example

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<sup>18</sup> Hogg, Michael A., and Deborah J. Terry. *Social Identity Processes in Organizational Contexts*. New York: Psychology Press, 2012.

of how this can be used in films. Also, attributing positive qualities such as brave individuals who are calm and courageous allows people to associate positive qualities with their in-group and a sense of the feeling that they are in the correct place.

These two movies are examples of different countries creating movies that depict the United States in a negative light by having aspects of Social Identity Theory present in films to accomplish this. Chapter 4 will include a various group of movies that was made in the United States about the Vietnam War that make American soldiers look like the heroes and “good guys” of the war. The presence of Social Identity is in all of these movies to try and improve the perception of the war that was largely disapproved during its time.

#### **Chapter 4: Case Study on Vietnam War Movies**

Now that there is an understanding of what Social Identity Theory, the public opinion of the Vietnam War, and being able to identify how movies try and create a modified perception of their respective sides military, combining these subjects to try and answer the question of this thesis is able to be simplified. In doing so, it is important to conduct a case study on a number of Vietnam War films where the ideals of Social Identity Theory are present within them, which can affect the public



perception of the war. The films that will be used will tell many different stories, with diverse character development for the protagonists of the film, but what they all have in common is that they portray the United States military in a way that would cause viewers to naturally want to take their side and believe the other is the enemy.

### **Case Study 1: *Rambo: First Blood Part II***

The first film to look over and analyze is *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, directed by George P. Cosmatos.<sup>19</sup> In this film, John Rambo, played by Sylvester Stallone is set in the context of the Vietnam War, Prisoner of War issues. Rambo is sent to Vietnam to uncover the possible presence of Prisoners of War in Vietnam at the time. This movie was a worldwide blockbuster that averaged around 42 million tickets sold just in the US alone.<sup>20</sup> In this franchise John Rambo is portrayed as a Vietnam war veteran who is struggling with being brought back into the normalcy of civilian life after facing different horrors of the war. The reason to focus more on the second film of the series is because that is where many of the exaggerations of the enemy and how superior certain US soldiers such as Rambo are much more superior than

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<sup>19</sup> "Rambo: First Blood Part II." IMDb. May 22, 1985.

<sup>20</sup> WhatGo. "Rambo: First Blood Part II Camera." Camera Choices. April 01, 2017.

that of the people he is fighting. This movie synthesizes a cycle of movies that focus on “the return to Vietnam” genre that focuses on veterans that are struggling and misfits going back to the place they fought a war as essentially super soldiers. Many of these films, released during Ronald Reagan’s presidency (not all the films that will be mentioned will be during this time) tend to exhibit a very compensating type of response to the military defeat in the war of Vietnam.<sup>21</sup> This approach has been in an effort to sway the public opinion of the war that has idealisms such as Social Identity Theory rampant within them. Movies such as these “post post-Vietnam syndrome films show the U.S. and the American warrior hero victorious this time and thus exhibit a symptom of inability to accept defeat. They also provide symbolic compensation for loss, shame, and guilt by depicting the U.S. as “good” and this time victorious, while its communist enemies are represented as the incarnation of “evil” who this time receive a well-deserved defeat.”<sup>22</sup> This depiction of every person that is associated with the enemy in any way, whether it be from race or culture being perceived as the enemy falls right under the idea of what is categorized as an

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<sup>21</sup> Foster, Gaines M., Siva Vaidhyanathan, Amanda Petrusich, Ryan Bradley, Laura Kolbe, and Jane Alison. "Coming to Terms With Defeat: Post-Vietnam America and the Post-Civil War South." *Coming to Terms With Defeat* | VQR Online.

<sup>22</sup> KeLlner, Douglas. "Film, Politics, and Ideology: Reflections on Hollywood Film in the Age of Reagan." UCLA. March, 1991.

outgroup and then dehumanize them by assuming that all aspects from their respective race or culture apply to every single one of them. In this case it would be associating almost every Vietnamese character in the Rambo films with the “evil” Soviet communists.

A significant part of the film that involves the self enhancement aspect of Social Identity Theory is the torture scene in the movie. When Rambo is being tortured by the Communists “the images are framed in the iconography of crucifixion shots with strong lighting on his head producing halo effects, as in medieval paintings...Focus in the action shots center on his body as the instrument of mythic heroism, while the cutting creates an impression of dynamism that infuses Rambo with energy and superhuman power and vitality.”<sup>23</sup> This scene is crucial to the portrayal of the enemy because the depiction of Rambo in this scene is God like, specifically harping on the symbolism of him being crucified like Jesus. Christianity has been the widely accepted religion in the United States, so having this image of Communists torturing someone that parallels the lord that they worship creates a harsh disdain for the enemy in the movie.<sup>24</sup> This would fall under

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<sup>23</sup> KeLlner, Douglas. “Film, Politics, and Ideology: Reflections on Hollywood Film in the Age of Reagan.” UCLA. March, 1991.

<sup>24</sup> “Music Poster Books.” In *The 80s - Religion in the Eighties*.

the Social Comparing step in the theory. They are not only comparing them as people that look the same and have the similar beliefs (Communism), but as people who are anti-christian, which ultimately will enhance their self image (Democracy) and diminishes the perception of Communists. The victory for Rambo is indicative of redemption from the US defeat in Vietnam and a victory over the “bad guy” communists.

The cover of the movie depicts John Rambo as a strong individual which is meant to personify America’s strength. Another way that this is done by all of the weapons he is holding to defeat his enemies (Appendix C). This puts forth the idea that he is essentially a one man army and beyond superior to the Vietnam/Communists that he is fighting. The goal of this cover is to show American dominance, and have a larger sense of self enhancement just by nationality association.

## **Case Study II: *Missing in Action***

The next film to analyze is the Chuck Norris film *Missing in Action*, a 1984 action movie that was directed by Joseph Zito.<sup>25</sup> This is very similar to *Rambo: First*

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<sup>25</sup> "Missing in Action." IMDb. November 16, 1984.

*Blood Part 2* in the sense that the main protagonist is a Vietnam War veteran who goes back to find Prisoners of War. This movie focuses more on the actual finding of the prisoners and the action that comes with the mission, and not so much on the PTSD that came from the war. While the reviews of the film were not very positive, the movie itself ended up being very popular and successful. The fact that the movie was so popular is further proof that the redemption plotline of the war that was lost is successful in alleviating the sense of shame that has been associated with this defeat.

With these pro-militarist discourses comes a growing sense of hostility for the enemy of the films. This film is set from about ten years from when Chuck Norris's character, Colonel Braddock, had escaped from a prisoner of war camp. But within this time of him being away, the Vietnamese had maintained other US soldiers as POW's. But to differentiate some of the points that were made from the *Rambo* film, as most could apply to this one as well, an aspect that can be looked at this as how it can be viewed as an extremely right wing positions on war and Vietnam and how social identity theory is used to understand this. This film as well was released during Reagan's Presidency, so the public support of war films that fall under his idealism's generally had more support.

Having discussed the “ingroups” and “outgroups” that fall under different countries that have fought wars against each other, it is important to realize that there are also subgroups within a full country’s ingroup. Using *Missing in Action* as an example of this for what was going on with the Reaganism time, and the self enhancement between political parties just from movies about the Vietnam war. This movie has a very militarist agenda, for example, a celebrated scene in the movie is when three Vietnamese soldiers are laughing at him when he is wearing his all green fatigues and headband, and then he shoots them all immediately.<sup>26</sup> This type of reaction to killing was celebrated with the right wing position on war, and the sense that “Vietnamese soldiers and officials, who are depicted as no less unequivocally shifty, villainous and deceitful as their stereotyped Japanese counterparts were in B-movies about World War II.”<sup>27</sup> More liberal films would contest the idea of US intervention, generally used to appease to the ideals of rebels who may be struggling as victim to US imperialism. This is not to say that if someone were liberal that these type of Vietnam films would not be appealing or not be able to alter your perception of the war in any way. But it does highlight that even within

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<sup>26</sup> Jeffords, Susan. *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2004.

<sup>27</sup> Maslin, Janet. "SCREEN: NORRIS IN 'MISSING IN ACTION'." The New York Times. November 17, 1984.

Social Categorization on a broad scale, there are different types of sub categories within social identity theory that can be applied within the viewers of the films. When analyzing films about war, these movies should be looked at as possible ideological texts, and these ideologies that fall within the movies will cause people to compare their preferences of films with others, and use that as a way to categorize which ingroup they fit into. The *Missing in Action* trilogy as a whole not only creates the same demonization of the Vietnamese people, and associates that culture with communism. But it is used as a political tool to emphasize the importance of militarism and the conservative stance on using a lot of funds for a strong military.

The cover of this film has many similarities to *Rambo: First Blood Part II* in the sense of the protagonist being depicted as a superior human being with minimal flaws. Norris is also holding a large gun with many bullets to give the indication that he has the intention of taking down an immense number of adversaries and that he was very capable of doing so (Appendix D). Viewers would want to associate themselves with the person on the cover and categorize themselves with that respective in-group.

### **Case Study III: *Rescue Dawn***

The next film to be looked is *Rescue Dawn*, directed by Werner Herzog in 2006.<sup>28</sup> In this film, the main protagonist Lt. Dieter Dengler, a US Navy pilot is shot down over Laos. He survives the crash but is captured by the peasants of the town (the Pathet Lao), tortured by the Vietcong, and sent to a prison camp. An aspect of this that makes the film very effective in making movie goers feel more inclined to feel more passionately about this movie is because it is based on a true story. Not only does this film portray the main character in a prison after being captured, but it also uses the jungle in Vietnam as a whole being a prison of its own and this torturous environment. As it is "filmed in the jungles of Thailand, there is never the slightest doubt we are in the jungle. No movie stars creeping behind potted shrubbery on a back lot. The screen always looks wet and green, and the actors push through the choking vegetation with difficulty. We can almost smell the rot and humidity."<sup>29</sup> This movie is not only portraying the Vietcong as the enemy of the film, but creating a negative bias towards the country as a whole from the harsh environment that in itself is an enemy to the protagonist of the film. This not only establishes the idea that the people in Vietnam are bad, but that the land that they live on is just as evil and inferior as they are.

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<sup>28</sup> "Rescue Dawn." IMDb. July 27, 2007.

<sup>29</sup> Ebert, Roger. "Rescue Dawn Movie Review & Film Summary (2007) | Roger Ebert." RogerEbert.com. July 12, 2007.



The portrayal of Dieter Dengler is meant to appease the American audience with the symbolism of what it is to be a true American after immigrating to the country. He is essentially the personification of American superiority, not only from his victory from escaping Vietnam, but he also is choosing the United States opposed to Germany since he immigrated here. The film is using him as “an advertisement for capitalist democracy: a German immigrant who survived Allied bombing during World War II, settled in the United States and became a baseball-and-apple-pie American. In early shipboard scenes, the film’s cinematographer, Peter Zeitlinger, lights Mr. Bale like Tom Cruise in “Top Gun,” and Mr. Bale’s gung-ho grin seals the comparison.”<sup>30</sup> Bale’s representation of Dengler is supposed to make American viewers have immense pride in their country. He is someone who would have been considered to be in an “outgroup” during the last war, has now moved himself to be a member of the viewers “ingroup.” He was not someone that they would have been able to identify with, he would have actually have been seen as the enemy. But this represents what can happen when the lead protagonist has switched to our side, the side of “good guys.” He is able to survive in enemy territory and be a military hero, him identifying with the United States and being able to categorize himself as a

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<sup>30</sup> Seitz, Matt Zoller. "A Vietnam P.O.W. Story, Tangling With the Vines of Convention." The New York Times. July 04, 2007.

member of the American military is what creates this sense of self pride and enhancement.

On the cover of this movie, it is a clear depiction of Dieter Dengler and in the background some helicopters and explosions, but most significantly there is a lot of forrest to look at. This clearly depicts the two different types of villains that the protagonist would have to face throughout the movie. The cover is making a clear message to indicate that the terrain would be a significant part in the movie, which as mentioned before establishes perceptions of the land and people as a whole (Appendix E).

#### **Case Study IV: *Uncommon Valor***

The next film to observe is *Uncommon Valor*, directed by Ted Kotcheff in 1983 starring Gene Hackman, Fred Ward, Reb Brown, Robert Stack and Patrick Swayze.<sup>31</sup> This follows the theme of the Prisoner of War issue that followed the Vietnam war and was present in *Rambo 2* and *Missing in Action*. The main protagonist is a retired Marine, Colonel Jason Rhodes (Gene Hackman), who has the goal of finding his son who was deemed missing in action. After years of searching he believes his son Frank is a prisoner of war Laos, and as a response he builds a

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<sup>31</sup> "Uncommon Valor." IMDb. December 16, 1983.

squad of Vietnam war veterans, including members of his old platoon. The team trains together in Texas and face many difficulties such as getting their weapons confiscated and having to use old World War 2 weapons instead. The team goes through some gunfights and eventually are able to free some prisoners of war, one of them being the son of Colonel Rhodes friends. Unfortunately, his son Frank had died from an illness and risked his life saving another prisoner. While the mission as a whole would be seen as a success for freeing prisoners, the main goal of the film ultimately was failed. The result of the success/failure has layered results in how it would be perceived by audiences.

As seen with the understanding of social identity theory is that self enhancement is essential to social identification. *Uncommon Valor* may initially leave viewers with a sad feeling since the goal of the protagonist was not successful which may hurt the idea of their “ingroup” perception.<sup>32</sup> But the movie would actually do more for the enhancement of this group by what comes from this “failure.” Through the movie the depiction of what happens when a group of Americans come together for a common goal, they are faced with various setbacks throughout the story, but they ultimately overcome. This kind of movie is supposed

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<sup>32</sup> Mackie, Diane M., and David L. Hamilton. *Affect, Cognition, and Stereotyping: Interactive Processes in Group Perception*. San Diego: Academic Press, 1993.

to articulate to viewers what the power of American grit can do. This is depicted in the cover of the movie, which is a soldier carrying another, something that has been used throughout film history to symbolize American unity and toughness (Appendix F). The whole movie viewers are rooting for Colonel Rhodes to find his son and have a happy ending after the years of effort he has put into this. When he find out that his son actually passed away during his time as a Prisoner of War it creates an even more harsh perception of the enemy opposed to if the mission was a complete success. When categorizing the antagonist of the film, this being the first step of social identity theory, the viewers will have an extreme inferiority complex towards the “outgroup” (the Vietnamese), not just because they are the enemy, but also because they did not allow us to have the satisfaction of a happy ending. This does not mean the mission was a complete failure though. The team was still able to rescue POW, and kill many of the enemy in the process. This enhances the idea of what Americans and the US military are capable of by just creating a team and an overall successful mission just from pure will.

## **Conclusion**

To be able to identify how Vietnam war films could alter viewers perceptions of the war it is essential to understand Social Identity Theory. In order to effectively articulate that, there needs to be a separation of each of the individual topics at hand before addressing them all together in the final chapter.

The significance of identifying the processes that fall under social identity theory set the foundation to understanding the points made moving forward within the thesis. Being able to clearly identify what process is being used in the film solidifies the argument being made. It is also essential to address the public perception of the Vietnam War and the use of television and photography. This gives a lot of the main context for why the movies that are mentioned were made and used as examples. Before using the Vietnam movies, the use of foreign movies that identify America as “bad guys” is the best way to fully understand the scope of Social Identity Theory because it shows how other countries perspectives of the US. This is

something that American viewers are not used to and would not agree with, which really depicts how effective this theory is when present in movies.

Many arguments against this thesis may include the perspective that there have been Vietnam movies that actually do portray the US military as people that are not actually very good. There are a few movies that actually make viewers feel that the US really should not have been in Vietnam. The main problem with this argument is that in also every Vietnam film, even with the American military not being portrayed in the greatest light, in most instances the Vietnamese and Vietcong were still symbolized inferiority or being just as brutal. Despite the idea of the American's not necessarily being good, viewers would still feel a sense of self enhancement and superiority when the Vietnamese were portrayed in that sense.

Moving forward with this type of research would include looking at other movies that were about wars and trying to identify this type of presence of Social Identity Theory. A great approach would be looking at films that were made about World War 2 and understanding that the Vietnam War is not the only one with these types of usage of the theory. This mindset is not exclusive to just war movies, but in order to solidify the claims made with this type of research there are many different wars that the movie industry has taken advantage of.

## **Appendix**

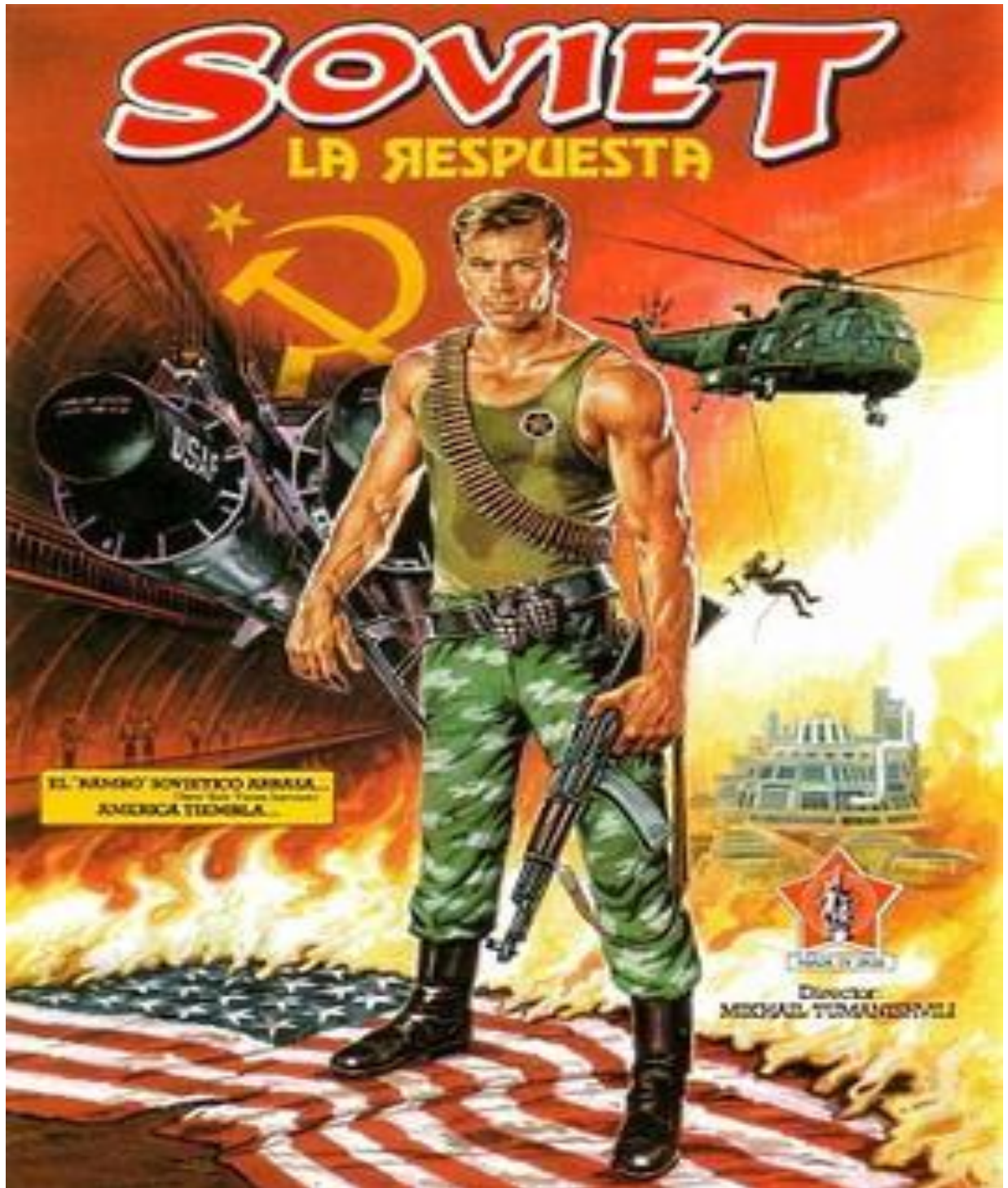
### **Appendix A:** *Momotaro's Sea Eagles*



Source: <https://foodandfoodiesinjapan.wordpress.com/2012/05/02/>

**Appendix B:** *The Detached Mission*





Source: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0089721/>

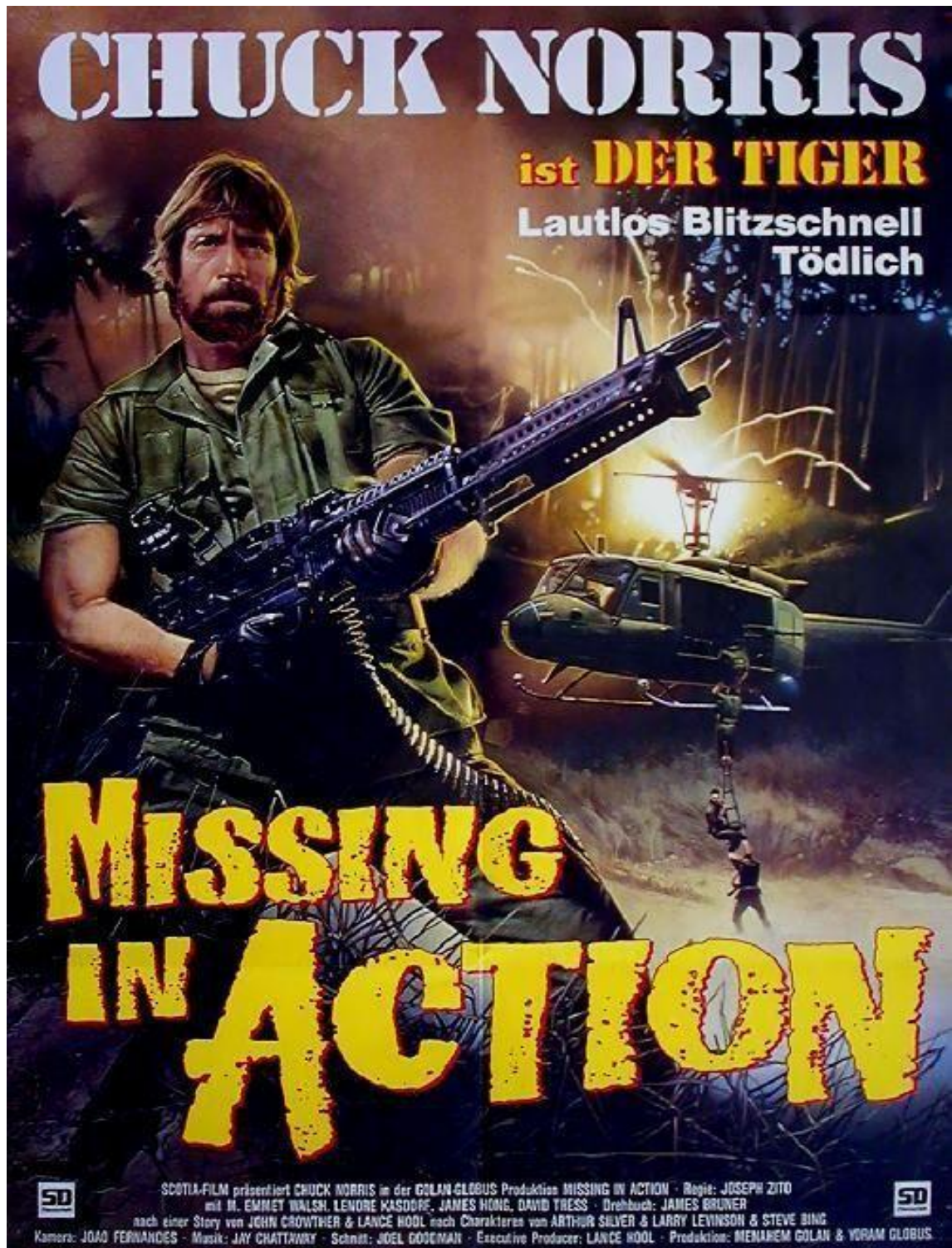
### **Appendix C: *Rambo: First Blood Part II***



Source: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0089880/>

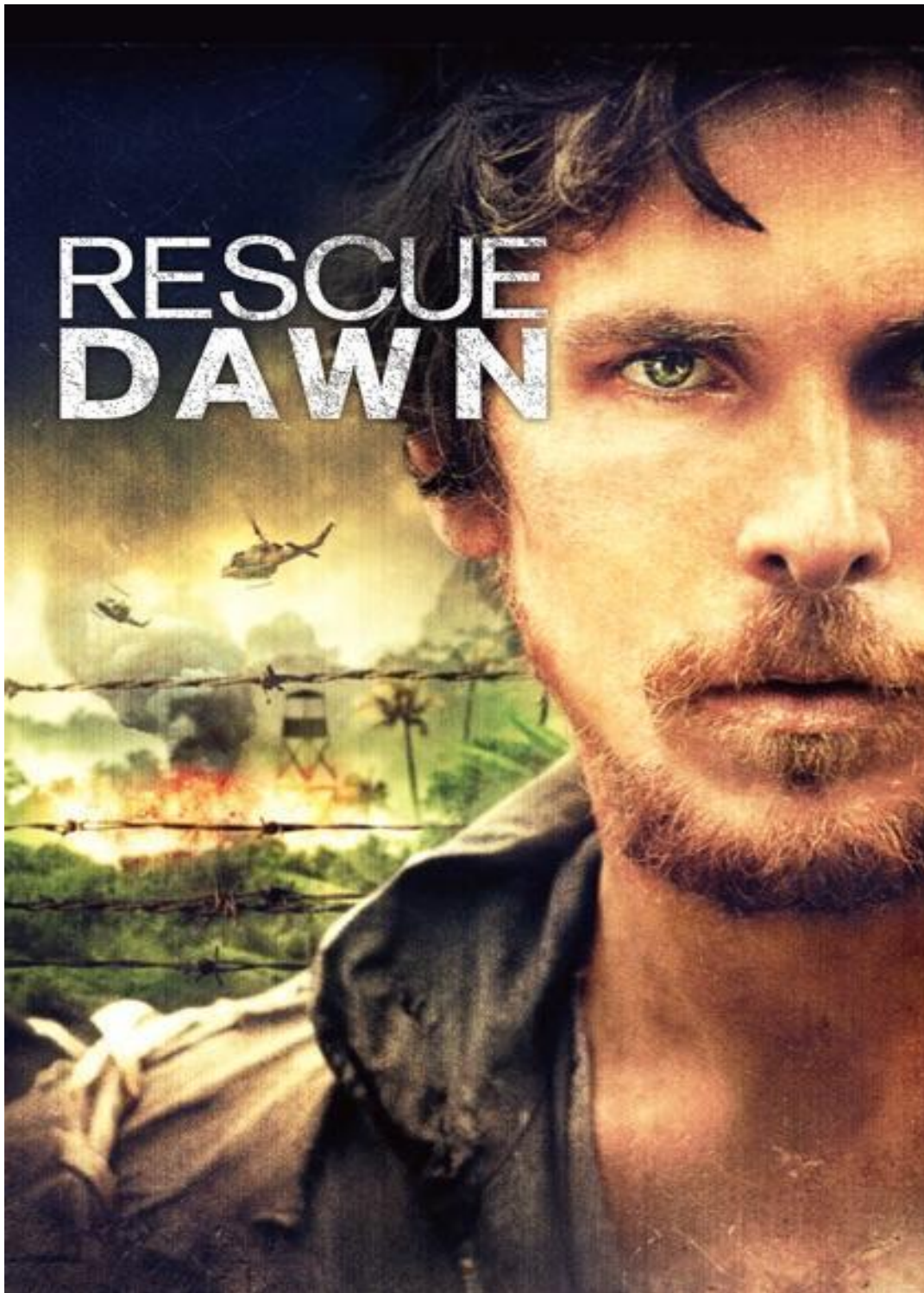
#### **Appendix D: *Missing in Action***





Source: [www.themoviedb.org](http://www.themoviedb.org)

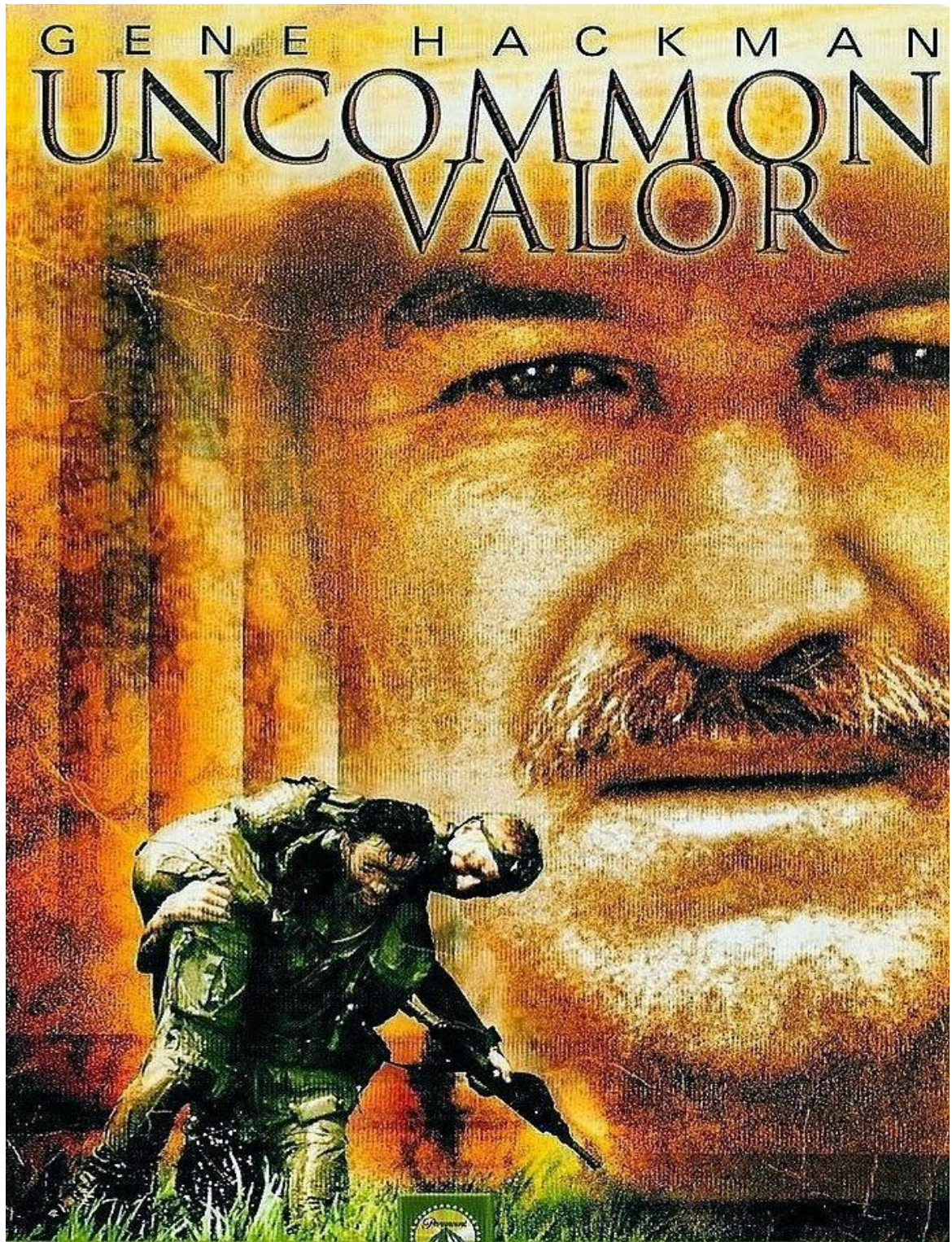
#### **Appendix E:** *Rescue Dawn*



Source: [www.themoviedb.org](http://www.themoviedb.org)

**Appendix F:** *Uncommon Valor*





Source: [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)

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