

Pearl Harbor, Pearl Harbor, and American Innocence

THOUGHTS ON THE FILM

By Richard H. Minear



Pearl Harbor movie poster: copyright © 2001 Touchstone Pictures.



National Archives photo of the "... shattered Arizona, her flag still flying. Tennessee (left) had to keep her screws turning to keep Arizona's fires away."

*"... innocence is like a dumb
leper who has lost his bell,
wandering the world,
meaning no harm."*

—Graham Greene, *The Quiet American* (1955)

Hollywood has as its goal entertainment, not education. Still, we know that many Americans, both children and adults, learn their history more from Hollywood and the other media than from textbooks or from our classrooms. (Not, of course, that either our textbooks or our classrooms are less suspect than Hollywood and the media!) Over the past several years, much of the Hollywood/media focus has been World War II. *Saving Private Ryan* is blockbuster exhibit #1, with Tom Brokaw's best-selling book *Greatest Generation* in a support role, and the monument soon to appear on the Mall in Washington, D. C. is part of the same phenomenon. Now comes *Pearl Harbor*.

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Pearl Harbor offers misleading history. As with the made-for-TV feature *Shogun* in the 1970s, we who teach Asia will be dealing for years with students for whom *Pearl Harbor* is part of their prior education. For me, *Pearl Harbor*'s most damaging *specific* historical errors are the following:

- that in 1941 in the Territory of Hawaii there were so few Asians;
- that—in the words of Josh Hartnett's Danny Walker during the attack—"I think World War II just started"; and
- that—in the words of Jon Voight's President Franklin Delano Roosevelt—the U.S. after Pearl Harbor was "on the ropes."

In our teaching we should alert our students to each of these errors.¹

AMERICAN INNOCENCE

Still, the central issue *Pearl Harbor* poses for us as teachers is not specific errors of historical fact, but the film's insistence on American innocence as both starting point and ending point. In its visuals, the film traces an arc from a crop-dusting plane of 1923 in Tennessee (a politically safe border state?) to the same plane in the late 1940s. The visuals start us out at home, lead us away from home, then take us back home—from rural America to war and then back to rural America (Tennessee is warm and fuzzy both times). We begin with the boyhood friendship of Rafe McCawley and Danny Walker; we end with the father-son relation of Rafe and Danny, Jr., biological son not of Rafe but of Danny.

A number of commentators have picked up on this use of innocence as starting point. Here is Tom Carson, writing a film review in the *New York Times*: "To quote the ad campaign for *Pearl Harbor*, what happened that Sunday morning in 1941 was 'the end of innocence.' Not least because this formula is applied to virtually every traumatic event in our history, it must be cause for some derision from the surviving Iroquois, among others; yet we're in earnest every time."² And we hear it as well from the film's star Ben Affleck: "I talked to a variety of survivors and pilots, and after a while it became like *Rashōmon*, with everyone remembering things slightly differently. In the end, I relied a lot on radio shows of the period for the language and letters written by the servicemen. What I came across repeatedly was this innocence. So I said, 'OK, this is about a loss of innocence.'"³

In *Saving Private Ryan* it was the soldiers and General George Marshall who demonstrated American virtue; here it is the flyers, General Jimmy Doolittle, and President Roosevelt. During Rafe's heroics in the Battle of Britain, his British commanding officer says to him, "If there are any more back home like you, God help anyone who goes to war against America." And as Doolittle's Raiders sail toward Japan, Doolittle himself (Alec Baldwin) comments that the U.S. will win because of men like the Raiders—"volunteers." Virtue inheres in the men and, by extension, in their nation; indeed, the men epitomize the nation.



Pearl Harbor Japanese movie poster. copyright © 2001 Touchstone Pictures.

The Japanese poster for *Pearl Harbor* may not be wide of the mark in substituting love for history: "The drama of the century, dedicated to the hearts of the whole world. On the day when the blue of the ocean and sky were stained a deep crimson, in an instant love was the last remaining haven for the young."

But this focus on individual courage drains history from *Pearl Harbor*: Pearl Harbor becomes a time of trial and something that complicated the lives of two men and a woman. As they part after Pearl Harbor, Kate goes to Rafe to explain that she loves him and always will, even though she is now pregnant with Danny's child: "But then all this happened." "All this" includes, apparently, the Battle of Britain, Pearl Harbor, and the pregnancy. The Japanese poster for *Pearl Harbor* may not be wide of the mark in substituting love for history: "The drama of the century, dedicated to the hearts of the whole world. On the day when the blue of the ocean and sky were stained a deep crimson, in an instant love was the last remaining haven for the young." And, in 2001, it is the last remaining haven for Hollywood.

INNOCENCE DEFINED

Innocence has many meanings. According to the *Random House Dictionary of the English Language* (second ed., 1987), those meanings include: (1) “freedom from sin or moral wrong,” (2) “guiltlessness,” (3) “absence of guile or cunning,” (4) “lack of knowledge or understanding,” (5) “harmlessness,” and (6) “chastity.” It is definitions #3 and #4 that concern us here. Normally, “innocent children” mature into guileful or knowing adults; if they don’t, they—and we—are in trouble. *The Quiet American* is still the best novel to come out of the French-American and American wars in Indochina; in it Graham Greene says of Pyle, his title character: “Innocence always calls mutely for protection when we would be so much wiser to guard ourselves against it: innocence is like a dumb leper who has lost his bell, wandering the world, meaning no harm.”⁴ An innocent adult is a danger to himself and to all around him. Late in the book Greene’s alter-ego thinks to himself about Pyle: “What’s the good? He’ll always be innocent, you can’t blame the innocent, they are always guiltless. . . . innocence is a kind of insanity.”⁵ Innocence that does not mature into understanding—that is the problem.

What is the transition in *Pearl Harbor*? From innocence to trial by fire and then not to maturity but back to innocence. Randall Wallace, the film’s screenwriter, gets credit for the “novel” *Pearl Harbor* (he did both script and book for *Braveheart*, too). The book’s Part I (chapters 1–15) is “Innocence”—up to December 6; Part II (chapters 16–34) is “Infamy.” There is no part III. The movement is not toward development or maturation or understanding, but from U.S. innocence to Japanese infamy—and back to U.S. innocence. In chapter 34—the final lines in the book and the final visuals in the film—Rafe takes Danny Jr. for a flight in that old plane.

“Hey, Danny,” Rafe said to him. “You wanna go up?”

The boy had no idea what the man he called daddy was saying. But he smiled, like the first Danny once did, a smile full of wonderment, joy, and life eternal.

*Evelyn stood beside Danny’s monument . . . and watched Rafe lead the boy toward the bright plane, and knew she had found that one place on earth that she would always know as home.*⁶

Yet in reality, if Pearl Harbor is a turning point in U.S. history, it is a turn *away from* rural America and its values *to* the internationalism of the wartime Establishment and the postwar military-industrial complex. The concluding voiceover—the voice is a woman’s—speaks vaguely of events that “tried our souls.” The book (few will read it) is more forthcoming: “. . . it was a war that changed the world. Before it, America could watch Hitler storm across the whole of Europe and say it was a local problem; after it, even a civil war in a place as remote as Vietnam would seem to be an American problem.”⁷ Pearl Harbor marked the end of isolation and the beginning of America’s role as global policeman, a role that leads not back to Tennessee but to Korea and Vietnam and the Gulf War. The crop-duster of the 1920s leads rather to the fire-

bombers over Tokyo and other Japanese cities, to the B-29 *Enola Gay* over Hiroshima, to the B-52s of Curtis LeMay’s Strategic Air Force, to ICBMs, to Cruise missiles over Baghdad, and to George W. Bush’s “strategic missile defense.”⁸

INNOCENCE AND NATIONS

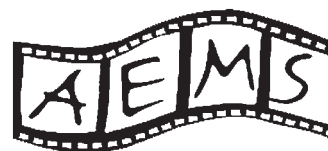
During and soon after World War II, it was possible to create the impression of American innocence in part by painting the home team as innocent, in part by painting the “Japs” as treacherous and fanatic sub-humans; witness virtually all Hollywood’s “Japs” from 1942 up to *Tora, Tora, Tora* in 1970. But a subhuman enemy is no longer acceptable—especially given the role the Japanese market plays in Hollywood’s balance sheet. (Apparently the filmmakers plan significant changes for the Japanese version, most notably in the final voiceover—less America, more love story.) *Pearl Harbor*’s Japanese are not particularly likeable, but they do have reasons for acting as they do—the oil embargo, children flying kites on a hill, the thought of parents.⁹ But as the antagonist—the Other—becomes less a caricature, the depiction of the protagonist has to carry more image-building weight. In *Pearl Harbor*, American innocence is the key.

Can innocence be a trait of *nations*? Surely not. By December 1941 the United States had on its record: the fate of indigenous peoples; Black slavery; Asian exclusion; wars of expansion,

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Detail from another poster advertising *Pearl Harbor*. copyright © 2001 Touchstone Pictures.

F. D. R. was looking for a pretext to intervene in Europe, and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor provided it. The phrase “A day which will live in infamy” is great propaganda but poor history. Individuals not in the know—Rafe and Danny and Kate—could feel innocent when Japan attacked; officials in the know—Stark and Stimson and Roosevelt—could not.

including brutal military suppression in the Philippines; and so on. More narrowly, it had backed Japan into a corner with the oil embargo (July 1941). On July 21, days before the administration’s decision to cut off Japan’s oil, Admiral Harold R. Stark, Chief of Naval Operations, had forwarded to the president a memo from Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner, Stark’s Director of the War Plans Division of the Navy Department: “An embargo would probably result in a fairly early attack by Japan on Malaya and the Netherlands East Indies and possibly would involve the United States in early war in the Pacific.”¹⁰ Five months later Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson wrote in his diary for November 25, 1941: “[The president] brought up the event that we were likely to be attacked perhaps next Monday, for the Japanese are notorious for making an attack without warning, and the question was what we should do. We conferred on this general problem. The question was how we should maneuver them into the position of firing the first shot without allowing too much danger to ourselves.”¹¹ F. D. R. was looking for a pretext to intervene in Europe, and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor provided it. The phrase “A day which will live in infamy” is great propaganda but poor history. Individuals not in the know—Rafe and Danny and Kate—could feel innocent when Japan attacked; officials in the know—Stark and Stimson and Roosevelt—could not.

Innocence since 1941? In the years since 1941, the United States has added to its record Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Korean War, Vietnam, the Gulf War, covert wars, and so on. Nations aren’t innocent; we only want to think that our own nation is innocent.

In apotheosizing the fliers and moving from “innocence” to “infamy” and back, *Pearl Harbor* serves a purpose that is perhaps unintended but nonetheless critical: to wipe the slate clean. As individuals, as groups, we remember selectively. The sundial records only the sunny hours; *Pearl Harbor* is a national sundial. Here is columnist Ellen Goodman: “This is nothing if not a tale about America’s loss of innocence, circa 1941. But *Pearl Harbor* is more than that. It’s a conscious restoration of our innocence about war itself, circa 2001. . . . [S]itting in a darkened theater, I sense dangers in getting ‘past’ the ambiguity of wartime right and wrong, dangers in getting ‘over’ an understanding of the essential brutality of combat. Dangers in retreating to a belief in the good war.”¹² *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich has referred to the film’s “virtual patriotism” (virtual as in virtual reality): “At the same time, this virtual patriotism helps us repress more recent memories of our own war, Vietnam—a debacle that, not so incidentally, was cooked up by dogtag-wearing members of the greatest generation, including J. F. K. No matter how much we talk about World War II, it’s still the Vietnam ghosts that most haunt the country. They leapt out of the closet again with the revelations about Bob Kerrey, but boomer politicians and journalists alike couldn’t wait to lock them up again—which we did with remarkable speed by throwing up our hands and saying ‘Who are we to judge?’ and ‘War is war’ and ‘Everybody did it.’”¹³ Focusing on Pearl Harbor is one way *not* to focus on other events; portraying America as innocence is one way *not* to portray America’s dirty hands.

Stay in your seat as the lengthy credits roll, and listen to the film's final music (not the love song as the credits begin). It is ethereal music, accompanied voices singing words that are not intelligible. Though not specifically identified in the credits, the music is imitation sacred music. (Similar music occurs at least twice earlier: in the desperate hospital scenes at Pearl Harbor and as Danny dies in China.) This virtual cantata is fitting, for *Pearl Harbor* is less reality than myth, less history than American triumphalism and master-narrative, less entertainment than a service in the church of America's civil religion. O come, all ye faithful! Innocence awaits!

It's one thing to alert our students to factual errors in *Pearl Harbor*. It's quite another—and far more difficult—to alert them to its broader function in embodying American triumphalism, the American master-narrative. But, as with the textbooks we use in our classrooms, so with the film: much of our effort should be to identify triumphalism as triumphalism, master-narrative as master-narrative, to help our students see what triumphalism and master-narrative are, how they function, and what they must ignore. ■

SUPPLEMENTAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

On Hollywood and World War II these are the major monographs: Jeanine Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

Philip D. Beidler, *The Good War's Greatest Hits: World War II and American Remembering* (Athens: University of Georgia, 1998).

Bernard F. Dick, *The Star-Spangled Screen: The American World War II Film* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1985).

Thomas P. Doherty, *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

Robert Fyne, *The Hollywood Propaganda of World War II* (Metuchen: Scarecrow, 1994).

Roy Hoopes, *When the Stars Went to War: Hollywood and World War II* (New York: Random House, 1992).

Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits, and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* (New York: Free Press, 1987).

Lawrence H. Suid, *Guts & Glory: Great American War Movies* (Reading [MA]: Addison-Wesley, 1978).

On American popular culture: Tom Engelhardt's essay of 1971 is still useful in dealing with Hollywood and American racism: "Ambush at Kamikaze Pass," in *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 3.1:64–83. His *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation* (New York: Basic Books, 1995) broadens the focus and brings the story into the 1990s; the fate of *Pearl Harbor* will indicate whether Engelhardt is unrealistic in speaking of *The End of Victory Culture*.

NOTES

1. On these three points:

- In 1941 the population of the Territory of Hawaii was only 24.5 percent Caucasian; of the population under 15 years of age—presumably those playing baseball before 8 a.m. on that Sunday morning, only 15.1 percent were Caucasian. (See *1950 Census of Population* Vol. II Parts 51–54 ["Territories and Possessions"], p. 52–35; the 1940 Census does not include these figures.)
- By most accounts, World War II starts with the German invasion of Poland in September 1939; Ienaga Saburō (*The Pacific War, 1931–1945*; tr. Frank Baldwin; New York: Pantheon, 1978) is among those who consider the Japanese seizure of Manchuria to be the start of the Pacific War.

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The first interview will be held in Long Beach, California, in September 2001. A second interview will be held in April 2002.

For an appointment and/or further information, please send a letter of application to:

**Professor Arnold Springer
Ulan Bator Foundation
PO Box 3059
Venice, California 90294**

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■ Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987) suggests (p. 352) that because of the vast disparity in economic resources, the outcome of World War II was a foregone conclusion: "But unless the Allies for their part had committed equally serious strategic and political mistakes, it is difficult to see how their productive superiority [over all the Axis powers] would not have prevailed in the long term."

Alas, these three points are far from the film's only untruths. Other non-mechanical errors: that the U.S. had not broken the Japanese naval code by December 7; that in a cabinet meeting F. D. R. stood up from his wheelchair; that Admiral Kimmel was on a golf course at the time of the attack (he *did* have a golf date that morning); that Admiral Yamamoto sailed with the task force; that active-duty officers in the American Army flew with the R. A. F. in the Battle of Britain; that fighter pilots were among the pilots of Doolittle's bomber-plane raid; that Doolittle's raiders stuck together and targeted Tokyo, not also other cities; that a DC-3, without refrigeration, could have brought Danny's body in a wooden coffin back to Hawaii in 1942 (from where?). See Anne Angstadt's posting of June 1, 2001 on H-War, and later comments. Movie-mistakes.com lists over 40 technical flaws ("gaffes")—a category largely separate from the errors I've listed.

2. Tom Carson, "Groping for Something Inspirational in a Sneak Attack," *New York Times*, May 20, 2001, AR21. Carson continues: "In dramatic terms, however, it hasn't been easy to thrill American moviegoers with a story in which the people we root for are sitting ducks. The awkwardness of Pearl Harbor as movie material is that America's role in it is inescapably pathetic. Even the moving episodes of stunned but courageous United States servicemen struggling to get into action only add to the pathos." Cf. John W. Dower's comment that *Pearl Harbor* is "a paean to patriotic ardor and an imagined American innocence—beautifully choreographed, sweetened with romance, sanitized to an attractive level of virtual violence." Dower, "The Innocence of *Pearl Harbor*," *New York Times Op-Ed*, June 3, 2001, p. WK17.

3. Quoted in Jay Carr, "Affleck Stands Tall for *Pearl Harbor*," *Boston Globe*, May 24, 2001, D-7.
4. Graham Greene, *The Quiet American* (London, 1955; Penguin, 1962), p. 37.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 163. Greene *does* extend the concept of guilt and innocence to the United States: "Oh, I know your motives are good, they always are . . . I wish sometimes you had a few bad motives, you might understand a little more about human beings. And that applies to your country, too, Pyle" (p. 133).
6. Wallace, Randall. *Pearl Harbor: A Novel* (New York: Hyperion, 2001), pp. 338–9.
7. Wallace, *Pearl Harbor*, p. 307.
8. See particularly Michael S. Sherry, *The Rise of American Air Power: The Creation of Armageddon* (New Haven: Yale, 1987). Cf. the statement attributed to director Michael Bay (quoted in *Daily Telegraph*, April 22, 2001): "This film couldn't end with a downer, like the Titanic did. America needed to win this one. People needed to walk out happy." Commented Tom Carson wryly, this is "a bit like wrapping up *Titanic* by having Kate Winslet hunt down and kill the iceberg." (Tom Carson, "Groping for Something Inspirational.")
9. Those looking for an even-handed portrayal of Japan and the U.S. are still better off with *Tora Tora Tora* (1970). John Dower has written eloquently about *Pearl Harbor*'s one-sidedness—its depiction of the human damage of the Japanese bombs of the Pearl Harbor attack force but its failure to do likewise with the American bombs of Doolittle's Raid; (Dower, "The Innocence of *Pearl Harbor*"). Note that Japanese bombs fall on hospital and chapel while U.S. bombs fall only on military targets.

Imagine the difficulties in marketing in Japan if, as originally planned, the filmmakers had had Danny die by execution at the hands of his Japanese captors! (The substitute ending, fuzzy both in conception and in execution, is one of many throwbacks to Hollywood films of the wartime and early postwar era.) In fact, the Japanese tried the Doolittle's raiders they captured and executed three of them. The very threat of trial, which the Japanese issued in October 1942, led to one of Dr. Seuss's most vicious editorial cartoons; see my *Dr. Seuss Goes to War: The World War II Editorial Cartoons of Theodor Seuss Geisel* (New York: New Press, 1999), pp. 120, 152.

According to the film distributor's head of marketing, Hideo Suzuki (in *Daily Telegraph*, April 22, 2001): "If the movie portrays Japan in too harsh of a light, then it will not be a hit here [Japan]. We are targeting all ages from 18 to 80 because this movie is focused on a love story and a human drama. Those elements will work for all age groups."

10. "Study of the effect of an embargo of trade between the United States and Japan," R. K. Turner to H. R. Stark, July 19, 1941; in *Foreign Relations of the United States, Diplomatic Papers 1941*, 4:840. Stark noted: "I concur in general." Cf. Jonathan Marshall, *To Have and Have Not: Southeast Asian Raw Materials and the Origins of the Pacific War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), Paul W. Schroeder, *The Axis Alliance and Japanese-American Relations 1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958), and Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, & Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), esp. Part III ("War and Strategy").
11. *The Henry Lewis Stimson Diaries in the Yale University Library* (microfilm) (New Haven, 1973), November 25, 1941.
12. Ellen Goodman, "Covering Horrors with Heroics," *Boston Globe*, June 3, 2001, C-7. Cf. Frank Rich: "But for all its liberties, *Pearl Harbor* is an essential historical document—not of its purported period, but of our own. However off base about 1941, *Pearl Harbor* is spot-on about 2001" ("The Best Years of Our Lives," *New York Times Op-Ed*, May 26, 2001).
13. Frank Rich, "The Best Years of Our Lives."

RICHARD H. MINEAR is Professor of History at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. He has translated the writings and poetry of atomic bomb survivors of Hiroshima: *Hiroshima: Three Witnesses*, 1990; *Black Eggs*, 1994; *When We Say 'Hiroshima'*, 1999. His latest translation is of Ienaga Saburō's autobiography, *Japan's Past, Japan's Future: One Historian's Odyssey*, (Rowman and Littlefield, 2001).

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