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Star Wars

Peter Kramer tells how the popularity of the sci-fi epic proved timely for Ronald Reagan and the Strategic Defense Initiative.

When the special edition of George Lucas's film Star Wars was released in January 1997, the distributor's press book proclaimed:

While Star Wars was a defining event for one generation, it has been embraced by new generations, assuring its place as a timeless epic of grand design and boundless fun.

This claim was confirmed by articles in Time, Newsweek, the New Yorker and the New York Times which stated that the film was 'part of the culture' and its 'lessons' about good and evil, humanity and technology, hubris and redemption were 'a very powerful force indeed'. These publications noted that contemporary mass media are full of references to the film and that many words and phrases from it have entered into everyday language, but they mentioned Ronald Reagan's appropriation of the Star Wars term 'evil empire' only in passing, and none of them pointed out that for several years in the mid-1980s the film's title had been identified with the former President's missile defence programme. When other publications did discuss this connection, they incorrectly assumed that it was Reagan himself who had attached the term 'Star Wars' to the programme. With popular memory so unreliable, it is timely to look back at the origins of Reagan's missile defence programme and its association with Star Wars.

In a televised speech of March 23rd, 1983, President Reagan asked the American public for its support of the defence budget he had submitted to Congress. To gain this, he explained the key principle of military strategy in the nuclear age ('deterrence of aggression through the promise of retaliation') and highlighted the dramatically increased military power of the Soviet Union. This power, he claimed, undermined the ability of the US to guarantee retaliation and thus to maintain deterrence:

The Soviets ... have enough accurate and powerful nuclear weapons to destroy virtually all of our missiles on the ground.

In response to this threat, Reagan called for a continuation of the 'major modernisation program' of conventional and nuclear forces which he had initiated after taking office in January 1981.

The President framed the main body of his speech with a futuristic vision. At the beginning he promised to reveal 'a decision which offers a new hope for our children in the twenty-first century', and at the end he outlined 'a mission to counter the awesome Soviet missile threat with measures that are defensive'. He asked:

What if free people could live secure in the knowledge that their security did not rest on the threat of instant US retaliation to deter a Soviet attack; that we could intercept and destroy strategic ballistic missiles before they reached our own soil or that of our allies?

Reagan acknowledged that ‘this is a formidable technical task’, but he was confident that ‘the scientific community who gave us nuclear weapons’ could now ‘turn their great talents to the cause of mankind and world peace; to give us the means of rendering these nuclear weapons impotent and obsolete’. As an important first step, the President initiated a long-term research and development program to begin to achieve our ultimate goal of eliminating the threat posed by strategic nuclear missiles. Reagan’s vision of missile defence turned this address into one of the most controversial and influential presidential speeches of the 1980s. Some political analysts argue that by dramatically raising the stakes in the military competition between the US and the Soviet Union, Reagan’s missile defence programme paved the way for the success of later arms reduction talks. However, when Senator Edward Kennedy first attached the ‘Star Wars’ label to Reagan’s vision in comments made on the floor of the Senate the day after the speech, it was to accuse the President of ‘misleading Red Scare tactics and reckless Star Wars schemes’. Kennedy’s comments were meant to point out the fantastic nature of Reagan’s missile defence programme and the real dangers of his escalation of the arms race into space. Yet, despite these critical intentions, the ‘Star Wars’ label was so evocative and ambivalent that it was immediately embraced by some of Reagan’s supporters, and henceforth the programme, which did not acquire its official – and rather uninspiring – title Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) until the spring of 1984, was universally known as ‘Star Wars’.

How did this convergence of politics and science fiction, reality and fantasy, Washington and Hollywood come about? In his psycho-biographical study Ronald Reagan, the Movie, Michael Rogin traces Reagan’s vision of missile defence back to the 1940 Warner Brothers movie Murder in the Air. In this film, Reagan plays a Secret Service agent who prevents a foreign spy from stealing the plans for a powerful new defensive weapon. By being able to stop and destroy any attacking vehicle or missile, this weapon will, according to one of the film’s characters, ‘make America invincible in war and therefore be the greatest force for peace ever invented’. Rogin’s central thesis is that the future president was ‘made’ in 1940s Hollywood. It is not only that Reagan extensively referred to movies in his later speeches, quoting, for example, Clint Eastwood’s famous line ‘Go ahead, make my day’ from one of the Dirty Harry movies in Congress with reference to his promised veto to tax increases, or stating in July 1985 after American hostages held in Lebanon had been released: ‘Boy, I saw Rambo last night.... Now I know what to do next time this happens.’ More worryingly, according to Rogin, the President’s identity and his conception of reality had been shaped by Hollywood films to such an extent that he was unable to step outside the fictions he had once inhabited.

In sharp contrast to this psychological critique, military historian Donald Baucom’s exhaustive study The Origins of SDI shows that, far from being a Hollywood fantasy, Reagan’s vision of missile defence was in line with an important strand in US strategic thinking. Soon after the German launch of the first V-2 ballistic missile against London in September 1944, the American military initiated a research and development programme to create defences against future missile attacks on the United States.

In subsequent decades, the notion of effective missile defence was gradually displaced by the principle of nuclear deterrence (appropriately known as MAD, for Mutually Assured Destruction). However, in the late 1970s, interest in strategic defence systems re-emerged in certain scientific, military and political circles which exerted a strong influence on Reagan, who was already opposed to the concept of offence-based nuclear deterrence and genuinely concerned about the vulnerability of the US in the event of a nuclear attack. During a visit to the North American Air Defense Command centre in the summer of 1979, Reagan was dismayed when confronted with a screen display of the simulated tracks of nuclear missiles moving towards targets in the US without the American military being able to stop them. He became interested in the development of a missile defence system, a project that gained some urgency early in his presidency, when he could not find an acceptable basing mode for the new MX intercontinental missiles, meant to guarantee retaliation

after a Soviet attack.

Reagan was also affected by increasing religious opposition to the principle of nuclear deterrence. In October 1981, twenty Catholic bishops declared that it was immoral to possess nuclear weapons, and in May 1983 the National Conference of Catholic Bishops announced the publication of a pastoral letter on war and peace which was expected to reinforce this declaration. Then there was a broad-based nuclear-freeze movement which demanded an end to the testing, production and deployment of nuclear weapons, and culminated in the success of freeze proposals in several state referenda. Public support for Reagan's defence policy, in particular his massive military build-up, was eroding rapidly. Furthermore, following the 1981-82 recession and the attendant rise in unemployment, Reagan's popularity reached a low point. With a record budget deficit of $200 billion and inevitable cuts in social programmes, Reagan's budget for the fiscal year 1983-84, submitted on January 31st, 1983, which included a 10 per cent increase in defence spending, met with strong opposition in Congress. This forced the President to postpone budget deliberations in Congress and to appeal directly to the American public in his speech of March 23rd.

In the context of this crisis in his presidency, Reagan's remarks on missile defence made eminent political sense. In response to criticism of nuclear deterrence and military spending, Reagan re-defined American defence strategy, offering hope for a non-nuclear future, which could be achieved only through enormous investments in military research. Reagan's vision was also a rhetorical masterstroke, worthy of the man known as the 'Great Communicator'. He gave an optimistic spin to what was otherwise an often quite negative speech about American decline and the increasing Soviet threat, setting up a heroic task for the American people and expressing confidence that, as before, they would rise to the occasion. The President also simplified complex political issues, bringing them down to the level of common sense, and asking 'Would it not be better to save lives than to avenge them?', 'Is it not worth every investment necessary to free the world from the threat of nuclear war?'

Putting it this way, Reagan made it difficult for the American people to answer 'No' – and they didn't. Numerous opinion polls taken after the speech showed overwhelming support (around 70-80 per cent) for Reagan's missile defence programme. However, polls taken a few months before the speech had already indicated that while most Americans were unaware of the fact that the US had no defence against missile attacks, once they were told this, they were strongly in favour of developing a missile defence system. Thus Reagan only told the American people what he knew they wanted to hear. And he did so at a time when the Star Wars films had popularised the notion of space-based weapons systems.

Following its release in May 1977, the original Star Wars movie had quickly become the highest grossing film of all time at the American box office. The film was accompanied by an unprecedented merchandising craze which would eventually earn billions of dollars, while its sequel The Empire Strikes Back, released in May 1980, became the second highest grossing film of all time. This was followed by the successful launch of the Star Wars video in May 1982 and the film's first appearance on pay-TV in February 1983, which whetted public appetite for the forthcoming release of the second sequel, Return of the Jedi in May 1983. When Reagan addressed the nation on March 23rd, 1983, therefore, 'Star Wars' was on everybody's mind.

In fact, the film seems to have been on Reagan's mind, too, as one of his most notorious speeches, given to the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals on March 8th, suggests. In this speech, Reagan characterised Communism as a totalitarian ideology in which 'morality is entirely subordinate to the interests of class war', leaving no place for God or religion. Because of this, he declared the Soviet Union to be 'the focus of evil in the modern world'. Reagan urged his audience not to ignore the facts of history and the aggressive impulses of an evil empire, to simply

call the arms race a giant misunderstanding and thereby remove yourself from the struggle between right and wrong and good and evil. He argued that, 'while military strength is important..., the real crisis we face today is a spiritual one; at root, it is a test of moral will and faith.'

Reagan's controversial application of religious categories to the rivalry between the two superpowers was encapsulated in the phrase 'evil empire', which had been popularised by the Star Wars films. This link encouraged the press and the public to see Reagan's future speeches through the prism of Star Wars, which helps explain why, two weeks after this speech, people tried to make sense, or nonsense, of his announcement of a missile defence programme with reference to the movie. The fact that Reagan slipped an oblique reference to the film into his address, might have further encouraged such a response: When he referred to 'a new hope for our children in the twenty-first century', he quoted, probably inadvertently, the subtitle of the first Star Wars film: 'A New Hope'.

The extreme popularity of a Hollywood film such as Star Wars derives not so much from any fixed message it may be said to convey, or any single response it aims to provoke, but from the multiplicity of meanings that can be extracted from it, and from the multiple uses it can be put to. Referring to the Soviet Union as an 'evil empire', or labelling Reagan's missile defence programme 'Star Wars' are two such uses, which may mobilise any of the meanings previously attached to the film or the term, and may also add new meanings to the existing repertory.

A useful starting point for the exploration of this repertory, is the pre-release market research for Star Wars. Researchers found that, when asked to give their response to the film's title and to judge a brief description of the film, potential movie-goers, with the exception of males under twenty-five, expressed their lack of interest in seeing it, because it was associated with the science fiction genre, combat and technology, aliens and robots, and was therefore expected to lack a human dimension. To overcome the resistance of older and female audiences, the advertising campaign that was developed from these tests emphasised the film's epic scope, its echoes of classic mythology, as well as the centrality of its human characters. The campaign characterised Star Wars as a science fiction fairy-tale; hence the tag line: 'A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away...'. In this way, the film's appeal was opened up beyond the core audience of young males to reach all sections of the cinema-going public. Each of these audience sections was encouraged to see something different in Star Wars. The introductory text which scrolls across the screen at the very beginning of the film already lends itself to a range of political interpretations:

It is a period of civil war. Rebel spaceships, striking from a hidden base, have won their first victory against the evil Galactic Empire. During the battle, Rebel spies managed to steal secret plans to the Empire's ultimate weapon, the Death Star, an armored space station with enough power to destroy an entire planet.

A poll conducted in 1986 found that about half of all respondents saw the Empire, abstractly, as an embodiment of 'evil', whereas 24 per cent saw it representing right-wing dictators and 12 per cent saw it representing Communism. The real life equivalents of the rebels, as identified by respondents, ranged from the heroes of the American revolution and leftist revolutionaries in contemporary central America to right-wing so-called 'freedom fighters'. When asked whether 'the movie is in favor of the conservative idea of "peace through military strength"', conservative respondents overwhelmingly said 'yes', whereas the majority of moderate and liberal respondents said 'no'. This poll suggests that Star Wars allowed everyone to extract from it precisely the political meaning they were most comfortable with. It is no surprise, then, that people started using terms from the movie in political debates, often ignoring values and meanings explicitly attached to those terms in the film. Arguably, the film's story demonstrates the primacy of the spiritual power of 'the Force' over the technological power of space weapons, that is, the primacy of metaphysics over

physics (which, in fact, was very much in line with Reagan's beliefs as expressed in his 'evil empire' speech). However, the film itself was celebrated as a great technological achievement, its special effects being put to their most impressive use in the space battle sequences. Drawing on the original associations of the film's title, therefore, people began to employ terms from the movie in discussions of technological and military issues.

One of the key proposals in the revival of strategic defence in the late 1970s was to set up space stations which were equipped with laser weapons able to shoot down missiles launched against the US. When this weapon system was first proposed in an article in Aviation Week in October 1978, it was called 'battle station' – the very term used in Star Wars for the Evil Empire's Death Star. Like the Death Star, the planned space stations were a kind of 'ultimate weapon', and supporters of this research programme obviously felt that it would profit from its association with the movie, despite the fact that this association inverted the moral judgements of technology made in the film. After all, the Death Star is an offensive weapon employed by the bad guys.

When the missile defence schemes of the US military gained wider circulation in the early 1980s, commentators in the general press immediately criticised them with reference to the movie in articles entitled 'No Need for Star Wars' or 'Make Way, Please, for Star Wars'. These articles prefigured the rhetorical intervention made by Edward Kennedy: Missile defence systems were disqualified as a dangerous science fiction fantasy. In subsequent debates about the Strategic Defence Initiative, Star Wars references continued to be used effectively by Reagan's opponents to undermine his credibility as a politician and military strategist.

In various political cartoons, Reagan is associated with characters from the film, so as to indicate his inability to distinguish between Hollywood fantasy and political reality. The San Diego Union showed Reagan at his desk, making a televised speech on 'space-age defence', while surrounded by, as he says, 'a crack team of experts to advise us', including C3PO and R2D2 as well as ET. The Boston Globe portrayed him posing with a sword in a Darth Vader costume in front of his wife Nancy, telling her: 'And then I'd yell to Andropov: Lasers at dawn, you commie fink.' This cartoon did not only suggest that Reagan was living in a childish fantasy world, but also identified him with the force of evil in the manichean universe of the Star Wars movies. This further implied that, if it ever worked, Reagan's defence system would be used for offensive purposes, eventually leading to the destruction of the whole planet (which is what the Death Star is used for in Star Wars).

However, in line with the differing political readings of the original movie, Star Wars references could also be used to support the Strategic Defense Initiative. A cartoon in the Indianapolis News portrayed the Soviet missile defence programme as a huge Death Star dwarfing a tiny spaceship representing SDI, while the Dayton Daily News portrayed Andrei Gromyko as Darth Vader. Phyllis Schlafly welcomed the identification of SDI with Star Wars, because, like the movie, Reagan's vision was a 'drama of the battle between good and evil, and of the triumphs of good over evil through adventure, courage and confrontation'. These comments indicate the close connection between the two speeches Reagan had given in March 1983. In the minds of his supporters, the technological and strategic vision presented in the President's 'Star Wars' speech was ultimately justified by the moral vision he had outlined in the 'evil empire' address. Like the popularity of the movie, then, the cultural impact of Reagan's two-part vision derived from its successful combination of spectacular technology and profound spirituality.

While opponents of missile defence programmes had originally introduced the 'Star Wars' label in the early 1980s for the purpose of ridicule, by the mid-1980s it was generally acknowledged that the association of SDI with Star Wars worked in its favour. Reagan himself disliked the emphasis on large-scale war that the film reference brought to his initiative, yet he also acknowledged the compatibility of the film's spirituality and moral vision with his own world-view. In comments

made in March 1985, he first rejected the ‘Star Wars’ label by saying that SDI ‘isn’t about war. It is about peace’. But then he added: ‘If you will pardon my stealing a film line – the force is with us’.

The fact that the President stole this line from Star Wars and numerous SDI supporters used references to the movie in their publicity and advertising campaigns, distressed Star Wars creator George Lucas, a typical Hollywood liberal, who had actually written the part of the Evil Emperor with Reagan’s Republican predecessor Richard Nixon in mind. In 1985 Lucas brought a suit against two advocacy groups that campaigned for SDI, intending to forbid them the use of the ‘Star Wars’ label. However, in November 1985 US District Judge Gerhard Gesell ruled that anyone could use the term ‘Star Wars’ in ‘parody or descriptively to further a communication of their views on SDI’. As far as Lucas was concerned, the dark side of the Force seemed to have won. But it did not prevail. Just over eleven years later, the Strategic Defense Initiative was no longer a matter of intense public debate, and the suprisingly successful re-release of Star Wars took place without any unpleasant echoes of Reagan’s programme.

For Further Reading

Donald R. Baucom, The Origins of SDI, 1944-1983 (University Press of Kansas, 1992); Paul D. Erickson, Reagan Speaks: The Making of an American Myth (New York University Press, 1985); Edward Tabor Linenthal, Symbolic Defence: The Cultural Significance of the Strategic Defence Initiative (University of Illinois Press, 1989); Keith B. Payne, Strategic Defence: ‘Star Wars’ in Perspective (Hamilton, 1986); Dale Pollock, Sky Walking: The Life and Times of George Lucas (Samuel French, 1990); Michael Rogin, Ronald Reagan, the Movie, and Other Episodes in Political Demonology (University of California Press, 1987); Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film (Indiana University Press, 1988).

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