

How the Pentagon Dictates Hollywood Storylines. “War Propaganda Passed off as Entertainment”

New documentary discloses the ways western publics are softened up for aggressive, global US militarism through the Defense Department's influence over thousands of US films and TV shows

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In what should have been an extraordinary television confession this month, [John Bolton](#), national security adviser in the previous administration of President [Donald Trump](#), admitted to CNN in passing that he had helped to plot the overthrow of foreign governments while in office.

Dismissing the idea that Trump had attempted a coup at the Capitol with the January 6 riots, Bolton [told anchor Jake Tapper](#):

“As somebody who has helped plan coups d’etat, not here [in Washington] but, you know, other places, it takes a lot of work.”

It was an admission that he and others in the administration had committed the “[supreme international crime](#)”, as the Nuremberg trials at the end of the Second World War defined an unprovoked attack on the sovereignty of another nation. But Tapper treated the comment as largely unremarkable.

Washington can do out in the open what is denied to other countries only because of an exceptional assumption that the normal constraints of international law and the rules of war do not apply to the global superpower.

The US is [reported](#) to have carried out “regime change” in more than 70 countries since the Second World War.

In recent years, it has been involved either directly or indirectly in wars in [Afghanistan](#), [Iraq](#),

[Libya](#), [Syria](#), [Yemen](#) and Ukraine. Bolton himself has boasted of his involvement in efforts through 2019 to oust Nicolas Maduro's government in Venezuela, [trying to install](#) as president Washington's own preferred candidate, Juan Guaido.

The Pentagon [outspends](#) the next nine countries combined and maintains some [800 military bases](#) dotted across the globe. And yet, Congress is [poised once again](#) to add tens of billions of dollars to the defence budget.

A new documentary suggests why western publics remain so docile both about the US being in a state of almost permanent war, and about it expending ever-vaster sums on its war machine.

Secret guiding hand

According to [Theaters of War](#), the US Department of Defense does not just subtly influence Hollywood's depiction of US wars to present them in a more favourable light. **The Pentagon actively demands script oversight and dictates storylines. In practice, it has been waging a full-spectrum propaganda war against western audiences to soften them up to support aggressive, global US militarism.**

The documentary, based on data uncovered by recent Freedom of Information requests from UK investigative journalist Tom Secker and academic Matthew Alford, reveals the astonishing fact that the Pentagon has been the secret, guiding hand behind thousands of films and TV shows in recent decades.

Many more movies never reach the screen because the Defense Department's entertainment liaison office refuses to cooperate, believing the wrong messages are being promoted.

Pentagon objections - usually the kiss of death - relate to any suggestion of military incompetence or war crimes, loss of control over nuclear weapons, influence by oil companies, illegal arms sales or drug trafficking, use of chemical or biological weapons, US promotion of coups overseas, or involvement in assassinations or torture. In fact, precisely the things the US military is known to have been doing.

How does the Defense Department exert so much control on film productions?

Because expensive blockbusters are far more likely to recoup their budget and turn a profit if they feature the shiniest new weapons. **Only the Pentagon can supply aircraft carriers, helicopters, fighter jets, pilots, submarines, armoured personnel carriers, military extras and advisers. But it does so only if it is happy with the dramatic messaging.**

As one academic observes in *Theaters of War*, **propaganda works most effectively when it can be passed off as entertainment:** "You're more open to incorporation of those ideas because your defences are down."

How many viewers would take seriously a film if it was preceded by a sponsorship logo from the Defense Department or the CIA? And for that reason, Pentagon contracts usually specify that its role in a film be veiled.

This is why few know that the Defense Department and the CIA have had a controlling hand in such varied projects as [Apollo 13](#), the [Jurassic Park](#) and [James Bond](#) franchises, the Marvel movies, [Godzilla](#), [Transformers](#), [Meet the Parents](#) and [I Am Legend](#). Or how the military regularly gets involved in baking and quiz shows.

The reality, *Theaters of War* argues, is that many Hollywood movies are little more than advertisements for US war industries.

Selling war

This summer, Hollywood released the long-awaited [sequel to Top Gun](#), a Tom Cruise movie about ace airforce pilots that came to define back in the 1980s how to sell war and make killing look sexy.

Top Gun's makers got access to US navy aircraft carriers, a naval airbase and a host of F-14s and other jets. As the Washington Post [reported](#): "It's unlikely the [original] film could have gotten made without the Pentagon's considerable support. A single F-14 Tomcat cost about \$38 million." The film's entire budget was \$15m.

The Pentagon got plenty in return. Its database records that the film "completed [the] rehabilitation of the [military's](#) image, which had been savaged by the Vietnam War". It stationed [recruitment desks](#) outside cinemas to take advantage of that new credibility.

Top Gun was so successful in marketing war machismo [that it was implicated](#) in the [Tailhook scandal](#) a few years later, in which more than 80 servicewomen were sexually assaulted by fellow officers at a convention in Las Vegas. That scandal delayed the follow-up, *Top Gun: Maverick*, for 36 years. Nonetheless, the Pentagon's conditions for approving the new film were even stricter.

The agreement explicitly stated that the Defense Department would be able to oversee the script, "weave in key talking points", and censor scenes it did not like. The US military also [demanded a veto](#) over actors appearing in the film and an official screening before *Maverick* could be approved for release.

The Pentagon could punish any violations of the agreement by deleting footage involving its hardware, thereby killing the film. It could also deny "future support", effectively killing the careers of *Maverick's* filmmakers.

There is nothing unusual about *Top Gun's* treatment. It is, argues *Theaters of War*, standard for US blockbusters, the films likely to have the most impact on popular culture and western perceptions of war.

The premise of one of the most popular franchises, Marvel's [Iron Man](#), was rewritten following Pentagon intervention. The main character, Tony Stark, played by Robert Downey Jr, was originally an outspoken opponent of the arms industries, reinventing his father's empire so that Iron Man technology could stop wars.

But after Pentagon rewrites, Stark became the ultimate evangelist for the weapons industries: "Peace means having a bigger stick than the other guy." In one [early scene](#), he makes a fool of a young female reporter who criticises his business empire - before bedding her to underscore that she is also a hypocrite.

Military fiasco

The Pentagon has been particularly sensitive to portrayals of the US military following a [fiasco in 1993](#) in which one of its helicopters was downed in Mogadishu. That led to a prolonged firefight that killed more than a dozen US soldiers and hundreds of Somalis.

The following year, the Defense Department insisted on major revisions to the Harrison Ford vehicle [Clear and Present Danger](#) – especially in a scene where a Colombian militia overwhelms US special forces. As documents unearthed by *Theaters of War* show, US officials worried that the Mogadishu events had made the US military “look ridiculous” and officials refused to “cooperate in a movie that does the same thing” in a different combat zone. It [demanded changes](#) to make the film “more of a ‘commercial’ for us”.

When in 2001, Hollywood turned its attention to the book [Black Hawk Down](#) – specifically about the Mogadishu incident – the Pentagon insisted on heavy script changes that transformed the drama. Just eight years after the actual events depicted, the Defense Department had turned a story of its own incompetence into an all-American tale of military valour in the face of overwhelming odds at the hands of a savage, faceless enemy.

Similar deceptions were achieved with [Argo](#) (2012), a film about the 1979 hostage crisis in [Iran](#). In fact, according to *Theaters of War*, it was the CIA that hawked the book to Hollywood five years earlier on its website in the section “Inspirations for future storylines”. The tale was so appealing to the CIA because it focused on its sole success following the Iranian Revolution. The agency smuggled a handful of US hostages out of Tehran by pretending they were a visiting Canadian film crew.

Censored documents presented by *Theaters of War* show the CIA’s public relations office reviewing multiple versions of *Argo*’s script before [finally agreeing](#): “The agency comes off looking very well.”

That is because of what *Argo* ignores: the CIA’s long-running meddling in Iran, including its [overthrow of the elected government in 1953](#) to install a US puppet, which ultimately provoked the 1979 revolution; the CIA’s intelligence failures that missed the looming revolution; and the fact that the six hostages the CIA freed [were overshadowed](#) by a further 52 who spent more than a year imprisoned in Tehran. A story of the CIA’s crimes and gross incompetence in Iran was reinvented as a tale of redemption.

The CIA managed a similar public relations coup the same year with [Zero Dark Thirty](#), after the Obama administration had lost the battle to conceal its routine use of torture in Iraq and elsewhere.

The filmmakers had to acknowledge that the CIA resorted to waterboarding, a torture technique that by then was in the public domain, but under pressure, they agreed to conceal [the less well-known fact](#) that the agency also used dogs to torture detainees.

Nonetheless, waterboarding was falsely presented as a vital tool in the CIA’s battle to extract needed information to supposedly keep Americans safe and help hunt down and kill the author of the [9/11](#) terror attacks, [Osama bin Laden](#). That was such a distortion of the historical record that even the right-wing politician John McCain, a decorated war hero, went public to [disparage the film](#).

Product placement

The Pentagon has such sway over Hollywood that it has even managed to turn around the anti-war message at the heart of a monster movie staple, *Godzilla*.

Back in the 1950s, it was an allegory about the horrors unleashed by the US dropping nuclear bombs on Japan at the end of the Second World War. But in the 2014 version, Defense Department meddling meant a reference to Hiroshima was excised and [Cold War dynamics introduced](#) instead: a lost Russian nuclear submarine triggers a confrontation with Godzilla.

Even more astonishingly, in both the 2014 and 2019 versions, the story is switched 180 degrees. Nuclear weapons become mankind's salvation rather than a threat; the only possible way Godzilla can be destroyed. Nuclear proliferation sponsored by the Pentagon is no longer a problem. In *Godzilla*, it is integral to human survival.

Theaters of War also makes a plausible case that the Pentagon has been an important driver behind Hollywood's move into sci-fi and fantasy territory.

The imaginary worlds of the Marvel universe, for example, offer a pristine showcase, demonstrating the need for the Pentagon's shiniest weapons against implacable, other-worldly foes. Hollywood and the Pentagon can sweep aside real-world concerns, like the value of human life, the commercial motives behind wars, and the battlefield failures of military planners.

The challenge of superhuman enemies with superhuman powers has proved the perfect way to normalise extravagant, ballooning military expenditures.

That is why the Pentagon regularly insists on product placement rewrites, such as the Incredible Hulk riding an F-22 in the 2003 [Hulk](#) film, Superman flying alongside an F-35 in 2013's [Man of Steel](#), and the glorification of a Ripsaw armoured vehicle in 2017's eighth instalment of the [Fast and Furious](#) franchise.

Paying dividends

Theaters of War concludes that the promotion of US militarism pays dividends. It means bigger budgets for the Pentagon and its contractors, greater prestige, less oversight and scrutiny, more wasteful wars, and more profiteering.

Donald Baruch, the Pentagon's special assistant for audio-visual media, [has noted that](#) the US government "couldn't buy the sort of publicity films give us". In laundering the US military's image, Hollywood encourages not only western publics, but the Pentagon itself, to believe its own hype. It leaves the US military more confident in its powers, less critically aware of its vulnerabilities, and more eager to wage war, even on the flimsiest of pretexts.

With Hollywood's stamp of approval, the Pentagon also gets to define who are the bad guys. In *Top Gun: Maverick*, it is a barely disguised Iran supposedly trying to develop a covert nuclear bomb. [Russia](#), China and generic Arab states are other template baddies.

The constant dehumanisation of official enemies, and contempt for their concerns, makes it easier for the Pentagon to rationalise wars that are certain to lead to death and displacement - or to impose sanctions that wreak suffering on whole societies.

This gung-ho culture is part of the reason there has been no public debate about the consequences of the US pouring [billions of dollars of weapons](#) into Ukraine to fight a proxy war against Russia, even at the risk of nuclear conflagration.

As *Theaters of War* convincingly argues, the Pentagon's covert influence over popular culture can have a decisive role in raising support for divisive wars, such as the [US invasion of Iraq in 2003](#). It can make the difference between public approval and rejection.

How different things might be if Hollywood was ring-fenced from Pentagon influence is illustrated by a case study.

[The Day After](#) was a 1983 Cold War film made for US TV over Defense Department objections. The Pentagon rejected the script after it depicted a nuclear exchange between the US and Russia following a series of misunderstandings. According to *Theaters of War*, the Defense Department demanded that Moscow be squarely blamed for starting the fictional war. Unusually, the filmmakers held their ground.

The Day After was watched by nearly half the US population. The president at the time, Ronald Reagan, recorded in his diary that the [film had left him "greatly depressed"](#). It created political momentum that drove forward nuclear disarmament talks.

A single film that stepped outside the Pentagon's simple-minded "US good guy" narrative generated a debate about whether the use of nuclear weapons could ever be justified.

The Day After was [widely credited](#) with slowing down the build-up of the two military superpowers' nuclear arsenals. And it treated Russians not simply as a foe, but as people facing the same existential threat from the bomb as ordinary Americans. In a small way, *The Day After* made the world a safer place.

Theaters of War leaves audiences with a question: What might have been possible had the Pentagon not meddled in 3,000 movies and TV shows to promote its pro-war messages?

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