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| **FEATURE ARTICLE** | | | |
| ***Michael*** [***Asimow***](mailto:asimow@law.ucla.edu), of UCLA Law School, is co-author with Paul Bergman of [Reel Justice: The Courtroom Goes to the Movies (1996)](http://www.law.ucla.edu/faculty/asimow/book), available at local bookstores or through [amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).      Khaled Abou El Fadl is Professor of Islamic Law, [UCLA School of Law](http://www.law.ucla.edu/Faculty/Bios/abouelfadl/). Khaled is about to publish "Rebellion in Islamic Law" (Cambridge Univ. Press). He wrote pieces for *Picturing Justice* on the films *Return to Paradise* and *The Siege*.            **"**  *Rules of Engagement* is not only **unbelievable**, but it also seems to advocate a troubling **moral code**.    **"**                            **"**  But this unexplained salute is not the **worst** of the movie's **cheap shots**. *Rules of Engagement* perpetuates some of the **worst** stereotypes of Arab culture and religion.    **"** |  |  | ***THE MILITARY JUSTICE MOVIE THAT JUST CAN'T CUT IT--RULES OF ENGAGEMENT***  By Michael Asimow and Khaled Abou El Fadl      Military justice movies have always been used to score major political points. Think back to such superb films as *Breaker Morant* and *Paths of Glory* in which brave advocates struggle to save worthy soldiers from being scapegoated for the failures of their superiors. These films pilloried the presence of command influence in military justice. *Billy Budd* lambasted the rigidity and harshness of naval law while *Town Without Pity* focussed on the revictimization of rape victims. *The Caine Mutiny* concerns the dilemma of naval officers whose captain appears mentally disabled in combat. The *Court Martial of Billy Mitchell* told the story of an officer who accepted a court martial to make his point about the need for air power. Other military justice movies were scorchingly effective courtroom dramas and character studies such as *A Few Good Men.*     Like its predecessors, *Rules of Engagement* is a scapegoat story, a political tale, a court martial trial story, a military buddy story, and a crooked military justice story. Unfortunately, it fails badly in all departments. The scapegoating is illogical and unconvincing. The political point is muddy and perhaps downright offensive. The plot is badly flawed and full of loose ends. The characters are poorly developed (the fistfight between the two leads, for example, is totally absurd). The ending is phony. In particular, a fictitious movie cannot get away with captions at the end explaining what happened to the bad guys after the movie is over.  *Rules of Engagement* opens with a well-shot Vietnam sequence. Marines Hays Hodges (Tommy Lee Jones) and Terry Childers (Samuel L. Jackson) are on patrol with their squads and become separated. Hodges' squad is surrounded and in danger of being wiped out. Childers' squad captures some Viet Cong. Childers' executes a POW radio operator to compel the VC commanding officer to call off the attack on Hodges' squad. Thus Hodges owes his life and the life of his men to Childers.     Cut to the present. Colonel Childers is assigned to evacuate the American ambassador to Yemen whose embassy is under siege by a rock-throwing mob (whose reason for being there is never explained). The ambassador (Ben Kingsley in a ridiculous role) is cowering under the table. Childers evacuates him and his family to waiting choppers but his men on the embassy roof come under fire from snipers in an adjacent building. Three Marines are killed. Inexplicably, rather than trying to suppress the snipers, Childers orders his men to "waste the motherfuckers" by shooting directly into the crowd in the square without first firing warning shots. When the shooting stops, 83 are dead, over a hundred wounded.  A scapegoat is needed to satisfy the Arab street. National Security Adviser William Sokal selects Childers as designated victim. In the presence of a witness, Sokal destroys a videotape taken by an embassy surveillance camera that might have disclosed whether the crowd in the square was firing on the Marines--the key disputed point at the trial. Even arrogant bureaucrats aren't really that dumb. The missing videotape, along with perjured testimony by the Ambassador, are the obligatory crooked military justice pieces of the plot.  Childers asks Hodges to represent him. Hodges, a mediocre military lawyer who is near retirement, is petrified at the responsibility. Quite realistically, we see him barfing in the toilet before the trial starts. Like his predecessors in *A Few Good Men, Breaker Morant*, *Paths of Glory,* and *Town Without Pity,* the undistinguished lawyer rises to great heights. Hodges' work as defense counsel for Childers is one of the few good and satisfying elements of this film.     The court martial has numerous rather dubious scenes. For one thing, both prosecutor Mark Biggs (Guy Pearce) and Hodges seem to conduct the entire proceeding by screaming at each other, the witnesses, and the judge. The whole thing sounds like a drill sergeant addressing the troops on the first day of boot camp. To prove that Childers is the loathsome type of person who would kill innocent people, Pearce calls the Viet Cong officer to testify to the POW killing incident. How the officer was identified and located is conveniently unexplained. Evidence experts will shudder at the idea that such wildly prejudicial and utterly irrelevant testimony could be introduced to prove the defendant's propensity for slaughtering women and children.  *Rules of Engagement* is not only unbelievable, but it also seems to advocate a troubling moral code. The Geneva Conventions of 1949 clearly prohibit the execution of prisoners of war or the use of prisoners as hostages in order to obtain any benefit. The film seems to praise Childers as a war hero for executing a POW in cold blood in order to save American lives. What if Arabs captured American soldiers and threatened to kill them if the American army did not call off an impending attack? Remarkably, as Childers emerges victorious from his trial, the Viet Cong officer standing next to his American-looking daughter salutes Childers admiringly. Very forgiving sorts, these Vietnamese.     But this unexplained salute is not the worst of the movie's cheap shots. *Rules of Engagement* perpetuates some of the worst stereotypes of Arab culture and religion. The Yemeni snipers shooting at the American soldiers from an adjacent building are accompanied by their children and wives. The Yemeni wives stand to the side carrying their children as if killing American soldiers is a regular family outing. This makes no sense except to affirm the idea that violence is of no consequence to an Arab. Arabs regularly put their families in harm's way, so you can't be too upset if Arab civilians get hurt.     But the film goes even further to blur the distinction between a civilian and combatant. The film introduces us to a cute, sweet-looking one-legged Arab girl in a red dress. When Hodges visits the scene of the massacre, he sadly follows this girl hobbling along the narrow streets of San'a. The scene reaches a climax when the girl visits her badly injured younger brother in one of the worst looking hospitals in the world. But just as Childers is about to be vindicated at his trial, we learn that our sympathy for the one-legged girl was entirely misplaced. The film resorts to a flashback showing the girl holding a large automatic pistol firing at the embassy. Regardless of how innocent and sweet-looking they may be, you just can't trust those darn Arabs.     In yet another remarkably silly and offensive sequence, while Hodges is visiting Yemen, he keeps running into mysterious black cassette tapes. Hodges finds them in the embassy and under the filthy bed of a badly mutilated Yemeni man. Hodges introduced these tapes into evidence, and what a surprise! The tapes turn out to have a monotone, entirely boring message calling upon all Muslims to kill all Americans and not to distinguish between civilian and non-civilian. The message does not attempt to argue or persuade; it simply repeats itself again and again. Apparently, those pesky Arabs are susceptible to mindless programming once the magic word "jihad" is uttered. Not only are those Arabs convinced by the monotone message, but they need to carry the incriminating evidence everywhere they go, and can't even manage to hold on to it!  *Rules of Engagement* belongs to a proud genre of legal popular culture but, sad to say, is at best derivative and at worst quite offensive. The movie seems to have run out of steam and found no way to propel itself other than by resorting to unconvincing and downright nasty cliches about Arab culture and society.      ***Michael Asimow***[, of UCLA Law School](mailto:asimow@law.ucla.edu), is co-author with Paul Bergman of [Reel Justice: The Courtroom Goes to the Movies (1996)](http://www.law.ucla.edu/faculty/asimow/book), available at local bookstores or through [amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com). Prof. Asimow has published and article entitled "Bad Lawyers in the Movies" - Vol. 24 of Nova Law Review. Michael Asimow's email address is [asimow@law.ucla.edu](mailto:asimow@law.ucla.edu).  **Khaled Abou El Fadl** is Professor of Islamic Law, [UCLA School of Law](http://www.law.ucla.edu/Faculty/Bios/abouelfadl/). Khaled is about to publish "Rebellion in Islamic Law" (Cambridge Univ. Press). He wrote pieces for *Picturing Justice* on the films *Return to Paradise* and *The Siege*.     |  | | --- | | **Other   Articles by Michael Asimow & Khaled Abou El Fadl** |  |  |  | | --- | --- | |  | **Michael Asimow:**   * [**The Winslow Boy**](http://docs.google.com/winslow_boy.htm) * [**The Practice**](http://docs.google.com/articles/ThePractice.htm) * [**Real Court Television**](http://docs.google.com/articles/realcourt.htm) * [**A Civil Action**](http://docs.google.com/articles/Civil_Action-Asimow.htm) * [**Return to Paradise**](http://docs.google.com/articles/ReturntoParadise.htm) * [**Anatomy of a Murder**](http://docs.google.com/articles/anatomy.htm) * [**The Practice II**](http://docs.google.com/articles/ThePractice2.htm) * [**Roxie Hart and The Big Hangover**](http://docs.google.com/articles/RoxieHart.htm) * [**The Gingerbread Man**](http://docs.google.com/articles/gingerbreadman.htm) * [**Knock on Any Door**](http://docs.google.com/articles/KnockonAnyDoor.htm) * [**A Free Soul**](http://docs.google.com/articles/FreeSoul.htm) * [**Body Heat**](http://docs.google.com/articles/BodyHeat.htm) * [**Lynch Mobs in Trial Movies**](http://docs.google.com/articles/LynchMobs.htm) * [**Judgment at Nuremberg**](http://docs.google.com/articles/Nuremberg.htm) * [**Dangerous Beauty**](http://docs.google.com/articles/dangerousbeauty.htm) * [**The Practice**](http://docs.google.com/articles/thepractice1.htm)   **Khaled Abou El Fadl:**   * [**Return to Paradise**](http://docs.google.com/articles/ReturntoParadise2.htm) | |  |  | |  |  | |  |  | |  |  | |  |  | |  |  |  |  | | --- | |  | |

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