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| |  | | --- | |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | | [John Denvir](http://docs.google.com/bios.htm#denvir)         |  | | --- | | [Readers' comments](http://docs.google.com/user_feedback3.htm#comsav) |     Bush's ingestion of images from popular culture might have shaped his perception of the terrorist attacks and suggested appropriate responses to them or he might just have used the vocabulary of the "savage war" to explain his decision in terms that would resonate favorably with the American people. I'm not sure which thesis is more frightening. | **Bush's "Savage War"**  by John Denvir  Movies not only entertain, they instruct. Films help shape our interpretations of the significance of new events and suggest appropriate responses. In other words, films help create the "slots" into which we place new events, each slot calling for a different response. For instance, members of the Bush administration were shocked by the Al Qaeda attacks on the World Trade Center and quickly had to determine the attacks' significance and plan an appropriate response. Should the United States interpret the attack as an outrageous crime whose perpetrators must be found and prosecuted to the limits of the law or as an act of war that merited a military rather than a legal response? Was the attack more like the terrorist bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City or the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor?  President Clinton had interpreted the earlier attack on the World Trade Center as a horrendous crime, not an act of war. There are indications that Secretary of State Colin Powell was at first also thinking of the attacks in terms of the "crime " slot. Powell was in Peru attending a conference of foreign ministers when he heard of the attacks and he told the assembled diplomats "you can be sure that America will deal with this tragedy in a way that brings those responsible to justice." But President Bush immediately interpreted the attack as an act of war. He later told reporter Bob Woodward that his first reaction was "They had declared war on us, and I made up my mind at that moment that we were going to war." I believe that that mythic images drawn from films might have influenced this crucial "slotting" decision.  Just as there are "law" movies like *To Kill A Mockingbird* that implicitly argue that the disciplined logic of law provides the best template for dealing with social conflict, there are other "lawless" films that argue that law incapable of handling certain conflicts and, therefore, violence is society's necessary recourse. These "lawless" films present a negative view of law, identifying it with weakness, femininity, corruption, and impersonality. The weakness of law requires reliance on the efficacy of "honorable" violence. And since life copies art just as art copies life, perhaps we should not be surprised if this same preference for lawless, honorable violence influenced political decisions like the American response to 9/11.  Consider the image of law portrayed by Don Siegel's *Dirty Harry*. *Dirty Harry* shows us a society in law is so weak that that violence has infiltrated the rule of law itself, blurring the distinction between legal and lawless violence. *Dirty Harry* tells the story of how a maverick police detective Harry Callahan (Clint Eastwood) saves San Francisco from the violence of a vicious sociopath named Scorpio who has murdered several local women. From the outset Harry makes it clear that he is engaged in a "dirty war" with incarnate evil that justifies any effective method. Cruising through the red light district, he comments to his partner, "I'd like to put a net over the whole bunch of them." He finally captures Scorpio with a gunshot and elicits a confession from him by means of torture. Harry feels proud of a job well done, but that is not a view shared by the film's representative of the rule of law, District Attorney William T. Rothko (Joseph Summer). Rothko illustrates the inability of the law to deal effectively with the type of incarnate evil the homicidal sociopath represents. Rothko is a captive of the rule of law, so constricted by procedural requirements that he has no time or energy to protect honest citizens.  Callahan is called to the District Attorney's office after the killer's arrest expecting an expression of gratitude. Instead Rothko informs him that the suspect will be set free because Callahan has not followed all the technical rules the U.S. Supreme Court has laid down for the arrest of alleged wrongdoers. Rothko pompously reminds Callahan that "the defendant has rights," but the audience instinctively feels he is not talking about rights, but rules that must be slavishly followed irrespective of context. Callahan replies that he is more interested in the rights of the women the defendant has already killed and the others he will kill when released. Rothko is unmoved; Callahan has not obeyed the law, a comment to which Harry replies "Then the law is crazy". The audience is likely to agree. Law as represented by Rothko is both cold and ineffective, the product of a tired bureaucracy that has given up on its mission to protect honest citizens.  Harry Callahan in contrast is both hot-blooded and, as Scorpio discovers at the end of the film, deadly effective in his pursuit of justice. Played by *The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly* star Clint Eastwood, Callahan is an icon of machismo feared but respected by colleagues and criminals alike. Unlike lawyer Rothko, Harry takes evil personally. It's a fight to the death. He knows that criminal suspects are scum and he hopes that they will "make his day" by provoking his deadly wrath. Once you know that your adversary is not only guilty, but evil, then the procedural obstacles the law sets up to conviction do seem "crazy." The serial killer Scorpio must be more than prosecuted; he must be exterminated. There is no room for doubt in Harry Callahan's mind. He knows that when law is too rule-bound to obtain justice, it is only natural that society call on the legal vigilante to get the job done. What Harry does not realize is that a legal vigilante is more dangerous than a sociopath criminal because there is no legal check on his violence. A "lawless" state has much greater capacity for violence than a hundred Scorpios.  To approach the question of popular films might influence public policy decisions like Bush's response to 9/11/ I think we first have to determine exactly how images in popular culture interact with society. Simply stated, images drawn from popular culture both inform our perceptions of new events and shape our list of possible responses to them. This is what I call the "slotting" function of popular culture.  Richard Slotkin in his classic *Gunfighter Nation* studies how popular films both reflect and motivate social action. He also sets out a particular myth drawn from popular culture that, as we shall see, neatly tracks much of what we know of how the Bush "war" decision was actually made. Slotkin calls it the "savage war" metaphor. Throughout the 20th century, American popular culture has often relied upon the metaphor of a "savage war" to mediate the tensions between America's democratic ideology and its imperial destiny.  The " savage war" myth can be unpacked to show several related components. First, it always involves a battle to the death between two races, one primitive and one civilized. Usually it is a battle between the "civilized" white settlers and the "primitive" red Indians. Secondly, The battle is provoked by an atrocity committed by the primitive race; the primitives commit a massacre or make captives of civilized innocents, usually women or children. This savage act demonstrates that the group is beyond the moral pale, evil incarnate, and therefore no attempt at compromise is acceptable. Once begun, the battle is to the death so no quarter can be given.  The primitive race initially has the advantage over its civilized foe for two related reasons. First, it retains a ruthless capacity for violence that has been drained from its civilized foe and also is not hampered in its tactics by civilized codes of behavior, like law, that impede effective action. The tide of battle turns when the civilized race turns to "the man who knows Indians"; this hero bridges the cultural gap by combining the civilized virtues of his race with the primitive capacity for lawless violence of his foes. The denouement is a victory for the civilized race that has been spiritually and morally regenerated by its symbolic infusion of primitive energy.  It is easy to see ( as Slotkin does) *Dirty Harry* as 1970's urban variant on the "savage war" theme. There is a war between the "good" people of San Francisco and their "degenerate" foes. The battle begins with Scorpio's sadistic kidnapping and killing of young women. District Attorney Rothko represents how the civilized society is unfairly disadvantaged in this war, both because of irrational legal codes of behavior (U.S. Supreme Court decisions) and a morally flabby mindset that refuses to engage the enemy on his own terms. Harry Callahan is clearly "the man who knows Indians". He not only acts to further the civilized goal of protecting the innocent, but has no qualms about using whatever tactics, no matter how violent or illegal, necessary to achieve success.  When we read Bob Woodward's insider account of how President Bush and his colleagues reacted to the 9/11 attacks, it is impossible to ignore the parallels between actual events and the "savage war" narrative. First, we have the "atrocity;" the massacre of three thousand innocents in the World Trade Center. The lines are drawn between the opposing groups in stark terms, not of race, but of ethnicity and religion. In an early meeting with Congressional leaders, President Bush said of the Muslim Arab terrorists that "they hate Christianity. They hate Judaism. They hate everything that is not them." Secretary State Powell soon joined in: "This is not just an attack against America; this is an attack against civilization…." Bush went even further in a talk at the National Cathedral Washington, D.C.: " But our responsibility to history is already clear: To answer these attacks and rid the world of evil." The attackers were clearly beyond the moral pale, like Scorpio candidates for extermination, not prosecution.  Woodward also reports that Bush felt Cllinton has shown himself morally flabby when confronted with terrorist attacks. Consider these comments by Bush about Clinton's decision to only launch a cruise missile in response to the embassy bombings in 1998:  "The antiseptic notion of launching a cruise missile into some guy's , you know, tent, really is a joke. "  " I mean, people viewed that as the impotent American…. a flaccid, you know, kind of technologically competent but not very tough country that was willing to launch a cruise missile out of submarine and that'd be it."  " I do believe there is the image of America out there that we are so materialistic, that we're almost hedonistic, that we don't have values, and that when struck, we wouldn't fight back."  Besides the moral flabbiness, the Bush people were also upset about the bureaucratic legal restraints on effective action. CIA director George Tenet complained that in the pre 9/11 era his agency had been "lawyered to death." Tenet felt that after 9/11 " there can be no bureaucratic impediments to success. All the rules have changed." President Bush agreed: " I had to show the American people the resolve of a commander in chief that was going to do whatever it took to win. No yielding, No equivocation, No, you know, lawyering this thing to death, that we're after them."  In the "savage war" myth, this is where the " the man who knows Indians" appears, the bold hero who can give the primitives a dose of their own medicine. And CIA Director Tenet seemed ready to play the part. Here is how Woodward summarizes the CIA proposal:  "At the heart of he proposal was a recommendation that the president give what Tenet labeled 'exceptional authorities' to the CIA to destroy al Qaeda in Afghanistan and the rest of the world. He wanted a broad intelligence order permitting the CIA to conduct covert operations without having to come back for formal approval for each specific operation. The current process involved too much time, lawyering, reviews, and debate. The CIA needed new robust authority to operate without restraint. Tenet also wanted encouragement from the president to take risks."  Specifically he wanted CIA authority to use the full range of covert instruments, including deadly force. He also wanted to financially support key foreign intelligence services to expand the CIA"s reach. Tenet warned Bush that some of these groups had dreadful human rights records with reputations for using torture to obtain confessions. Woodward reports: "Bush said he understood the risks." Perhaps CIA operative Cofer Black best summarized the new virile attitude: "We're gong to kill them. We're going to put their heads on sticks."  The "savage war" metaphor could have affected policy in either or both of two ways. It could have been a motivating factor or a technique of justification. Bush's ingestion of images from popular culture might have shaped his perception of the terrorist attacks and suggested appropriate responses to them or he might just have used the vocabulary of the "savage war" to explain his decision in terms that would resonate favorably with the American people. I'm not sure which thesis is more frightening.  But let me end with a caveat. The fact the images from popular culture might have influenced our response to 9/11 does not demonstrate that those decisions were wrong. It might be that "savage war" metaphor encapsules important truths that we ignore at our peril. Then again the "savage war" myth might be no more than a story we tell ourselves to project our own aggressive instincts onto a dehumanized "other" in perpetuation of an endless cycle of reciprocal violence.  If this latter proposition is true, maybe it's time to move beyond the "Man Who Knows Indians" to alternative heroic narratives. One might be a more muscular view of law like that shown on *Law And Order*, one where public safety and due process are not seen as incompatible. Another might forego victim myths to see us as part of a large world that we have helped and with other will continue to create.  Posted January 9, 2004  **Would you like to comment on this article? 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