

he observed that deterrence—"a state of mind rather than a state of affairs on the ground or at sea"—had broken down as a defense for the Falklands, and that unless Britain showed the will to retaliate, its deterrent posture no longer would be credible "in Berlin, on the Elbe, in the North Sea, or in the North Atlantic." He praised the government for dispatching the fleet to the South Atlantic, adding, though, that "diplomacy must be given a chance and it is always important in strategy to leave your adversary room to retreat."

When reasonable efforts at diplomatic solutions failed, Douglas-Home did not hesitate to urge that the Royal Navy act to retake the islands. At the same time, though, he cautioned the British public against the "nonsense of burning effigies, irrelevant spite, or public hysteria." Moreover, during the heat of the battle in the South Atlantic, he wrote an ironic, meditative editorial on the "paradox of Christians at war," urging his countrymen to ponder in their minds and hearts the just war teachings propounded by Augustine and Aquinas. "Just war," he wrote, "can only be just if it is caused by injustice—for the greater good of the world as a whole; and if its conduct is conditioned by the doctrine of minimum force."

Douglas-Home showed clarity and commitment, too, in his treatment of issues affecting the freedom, security and unity of the West. Unfashionable as it was, even among some of the conservative politicians in Europe at the time, he stood solidly in support of Ronald Reagan's vision of American leadership in renewing Western strength and self-confidence. He vigorously supported the Strategic Defense Initiative, praising President Reagan for the insight that, in Douglas-Home's words, "existing nuclear strategies cannot indefinitely command the respect, understanding or acceptance of democratic societies." Of Western European skittishness about SDI he wrote: "It is ironic and paradoxical that the age of deterrence has so confused the strategic mentality of many commentators that their reaction to a purely defensive system is to suggest that it increases the danger."

When Ronald Reagan took the bold step to rescue Grenada from the Communists, Charles Douglas-Home applauded. Again he chided Mr. Reagan's West European critics, urging the West "not to feel hang-dog about this rescue, but to develop a coherent and multilateral approach to further rescues." On other occasions, he called for increased understanding in Europe that Central America and the Caribbean were important not simply as America's southern border but as NATO's strategic rear.

Douglas-Home was a perceptive analyst of political pathologies in the democracies. Just following President Reagan's landslide reelection, he noted "a recurring and world-wide attempt" to induce the President to change his policies. This Douglas-Home ascribed to the "pervasive cultural refusal in the Western liberal establishments to recognize and accept the hard simple principles of Mr. Reagan's leadership." Another disorder that he found in many Western minds was the illusion "which equates the exercise of Soviet power and personality with those of the United States leadership"—a way of thinking that leads to the notion that the two countries pose an equal threat to world peace. A penetrating critic of detente, Douglas-

Home did not flinch from calling the Soviet Union an evil empire.

Faith in God was integral to Charles Douglas-Home's understanding of man. "It is faith, not reason," he wrote, "which gives an individual the independent standpoint from which to evaluate the external conditions of his life, however adverse they may be." With Solzhenitsyn he agreed that one of the greatest threats to the survival of the West comes from Western man's tendency to ignore his own spiritual life.

Douglas-Home's religious imagination was powerful, even courageous. In an Easter editorial one year, he took on the problem of anti-Semitism in Christian lands, but not in the usual sanitized and secularized terms. He challenged his readers instead to put themselves in direct contact with the Cross and the Person of Christ. "There is a hum of desire," he wrote, "to overcome the unmentionable fact—on both sides—that Jesus was a Jew." Douglas-Home's visionary hope was that "Jesus, the Jew, may become a symbol of some ultimate unity in the quest for truth between Christian and Jew, just as he is between Christian and Christian."

The editorials in *No End of a Lesson* speak eloquently to the leading international issues of our generation as well as to some perennial topics of the human spirit. They make valuable reading for students and practitioners of journalism and politics. They deserve wide attention, especially in America, which Charles Douglas-Home understood and loved so well.

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## The Enemy Is Us

*Platoon*, directed by Oliver Stone

Reviewed by John V. N. Philip

**T**he new hit movie *Platoon* seems to represent the definitive view of the Vietnam War and to explain the reasons both for our defeat and for our domestic civil strife. People are flocking to it in droves because the word is out that this is the way it really was. But, in fact, it is not. For while the film is extremely moving in the intensity with which it pays tribute to the sacrifices of American GI's, it perpetuates the very myths which reduce the significance of their heroism.

*Platoon* dramatizes the tragedy which befell our army in Vietnam; unable to decisively engage a largely unseen enemy, our soldiers turned on themselves. This failure to combat the enemy effectively and defeat him was a consequence of multiple failures of leadership which eventually destroyed our army's will to win. The political leaders of the U.S. at the time failed to prepare the American people for the sacrifices necessary for a long-term struggle. The military leaders failed to provide the politicians with a proper accounting of enemy strength and a comprehensive

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strategy for victory. The American public, itself adrift, increasingly ceased to identify with both the war and our own soldiers involved.

The film follows the movements of a platoon of American infantrymen, 'grunts,' patrolling near the Cambodian border from approximately 1967 through February 1968. Writer-director Oliver Stone directs with intensity and effective use of visual metaphor. In rapid fire in the first scenes Stone underscores the overwhelming terror of new recruit Chris Taylor (Charlie Sheen) in his first patrol in "The Nam." Nature itself becomes a malevolent force in league with the enemy against him and his platoon. The roots of the fantastic shrubbery trip him. Insects leach his strength. Snakes cross his ankles when he tries to rest. Even the ground beneath his feet is laced with the enemy's secret tunnels. Only the air is safe. Helicopters and planes deliver the troops, resupply them, rescue the wounded, retrieve the dead, and finally carry those lucky enough to "make it" back to their base camp and eventually the U.S. In the movie's last battle even this final stronghold is overrun as the American commanding officer must call in a strike by U.S. fighter planes to avoid defeat. His forces hold the position after the strike. But the platoon has been decimated.

Out of this chaos Stone creates the harrowing internal moral struggle of the army. The two sergeants, Barnes (Tom Berenger) and Elias (Willem Dafoe), control two sides of a bitterly divided platoon. Barnes leads some of the men, enraged at the killing of a fellow soldier, in a rampage through a farming village which results in the slaughter and rape of innocent civilians. Elias, out of moral outrage, tries to stop him. Yet it is Elias that most of the platoon eventually turns on. For it is Barnes who represents survival—Barnes, who has been shot seven times and lived; Barnes, who, in the eyes of most of the men, can "see them through." When Barnes kills Elias for threatening to report him for his actions in the village, most of the platoon suspect Barnes and acquiesce in their silence to this murder. For these soldiers in Vietnam, the ultimate moral tragedy is that it is necessary to become a Barnes to survive.

Stone uses his story to illuminate other broader and recognized generalities about American involvement in the War. The soldiers fight a largely unseen enemy with little understanding of long-term strategic objectives. Positions for which they are wounded or die are quickly overrun, even as the helicopters lift them away from the battlefield. The command structure is debilitated and ineffective. The young and well-intentioned lieutenant shows disastrous lack of judgment in the field. At one crucial moment he calls for rear artillery fire to repel an ambush and unnecessarily destroys some of his own troops. Black and white tensions fester. Drugs are pervasive in the ranks.

But at the same time the director portrays powerfully and cogently the particular hell of Vietnam, he reinforces a central myth of the war: that the only struggle between good and evil in Vietnam was within the American Army. The struggle with the North Vietnamese (NVA) and Viet Cong (VC) has virtually no moral quotient at all. By extension, the domestic controversy which still rages concerning the American involvement, and of which this film is very much a part, is encapsulated in the same self-involved

rationale; the moral struggle concerning an interpretation of Vietnam lies only between conflicting definitions of America's conduct in the War. The director's conclusion appears to be that the only coherent meaning to be drawn from the American experience is personal revelation. As Taylor says in his final monologue, "We did not fight the enemy, we fought ourselves." He resolves in future "to find a goodness and meaning to this life".

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**At the same time Stone portrays powerfully and cogently the particular hell of Vietnam, he reinforces a central myth of the war: that the only struggle between good and evil was within the American Army.**

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Further evidence of the film's very partisan position in the ongoing Vietnam debate is the director's complete dismissal of the last 20 years of history. If the policy of containment was ineffectively applied in Vietnam, the tragic history of the region since suggests that many of its precepts were valid. All the dominoes in Southeast Asia did not fall. But it is certainly evident that the American presence in Vietnam blunted the export of revolution to other ASEAN nations and allowed a crucial period of stabilization for many of those countries. In effect, as Henry Kissinger was later to say, the American army in Vietnam "defended the possibilities of freedom." *Platoon* only refers once, and with disdain, to overall American strategy for which, for better or worse, the soldiers in the film are risking their lives. As the heroic Sergeant Elias remarks to Taylor, America will lose because it's time that the U.S., which has been "kicking ass" so long, is itself punished.

More complicated is the misconception reinforced concerning U.S. technological superiority in Vietnam. The American leadership and especially the American public expected this expertise would allow us to prevail. The fact that it did not subtly impugned the fighting ability of the American soldiers on the front lines. It was not sufficiently understood that the technology was only barely able to help even out the tremendous odds against which American soldiers were forced to enter combat. The men in *Platoon* bristle with infrared-scopes, powerful flares and sophisticated rifles. American jets scream overhead. But never mentioned in the script is the corollary implied by the elaborate tunnel complexes the platoon encounters. Since the North Vietnamese regime's unilateral declaration of hostilities in 1959, men, materiel, and political cadres had poured into South Vietnam and neutral Laos and Cambodia. The Americans of *Platoon* seek shelter in fox-holes they have built overnight. The enemy attacks from

strongholds they have been constructing for many years. Only in the final battle scene of the film do we see the NVA in large numbers. But, their General Giap, by his own admission, had lost over 500,000 men by 1968, approximately the time portrayed in the film. An equivalent American casualty ratio would have resulted in almost seven million dead GIs. Extrapolating logically from these numbers, it is evident today that the American army was overwhelmingly outnumbered.

Finally, and most disturbingly, the film continues to revive the My Lai incident as a symbol of American degradation. Outrageous and brutal actions committed by Americans against civilians were certainly recorded in Vietnam. The platoon's destruction of a Vietnamese farming village is clearly reminiscent of the My Lai affair and other contemporary news footage of 'search and destroy' missions. But there is only passing mention in Stone's work of the far more numerous and bloody depredations of the NVA and VC against innocent civilians from the first days of their infiltration in 1959. In this film it is only the Americans we see as cruel. In addition, their bloody actions in the village will be covered up despite the protests

of Elias. Lieutenant Calley was tried by an American military court for his actions at My Lai.

In effect, *Platoon* purports to tell us how Vietnam was through the eyes of the common soldier. It does indeed tell us the story of what would happen to that soldier in the American Army, or any army, which had lost sight of why it was fighting and killing the enemy. But the director has stripped from the story a breadth of moral and historical perspective. Ultimately, and disappointingly considering its artistic promise, the movie does not offer us the hymn to the sacrifice of American GIs in Vietnam which its author intended. Instead it strengthens some of the misunderstandings which debase their memory. In so doing Oliver Stone brings us not Vietnam as it really was, but only another small part of the story which, standing alone, cannot constitute true understanding. *Deerhunter* and *Apocalypse Now* have presented the Vietnam War in surreal imagery; *Platoon* presents the conflict in narrow and therefore distorted focus. Somewhere beyond lies the epic of American involvement in the Vietnam War and the conflict's place in the broader historical context. But it hasn't been written yet.

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## LETTERS

### James D. Theberge, Lord Kennet, Anne Cohn, Steve Hanke, Ann Wroblewski, John Chettle, Robert Higgs

#### Contra Realism

Dear Sir:

The article by Timothy Ashby—"The Road to Managua" (Winter 1987)—encapsulates an intriguing thesis: that the contras could overthrow the Sandinista regime in the next two years by the combined action of an expanded contra military force (invigorated by another \$100 million in U.S. aid in 1987), a destabilizing popular uprising, and a debilitating power struggle between rival ruling factions.

Ashby deserves our congratulations for his imaginative efforts to ascertain under what set of conditions it might be possible for the contras to collapse Nicaragua's Marxist-Leninist regime. But is this scenario—which discounts the need for U.S. military action in support of the contras—a realistic one? It strikes me as highly improbable.

Suppose the U.S. Congress authorizes the \$105 million in aid for the contras requested by the Reagan Administration for fiscal year 1988—which is by no means certain—would this improve the military balance in some decisive way? It might have a chance to do so if the Sandinistas stood still and watched the expanding, better-armed contra forces produce an unfavorable shift in the political-military buildup that will lead to a predictable off-setting Sandinista military escalation and stalemate. As in the past, the Sandinistas will request, and receive, a major inflow of Soviet bloc-supplied arms (as they did in 1986), and they

can increase their own armed forces and militia from the current level of about 120,000 to whatever force level—perhaps in the 150,000-200,000 range—that is required to contain the contras. As long as the United States takes no action to halt military supplies from reaching Nicaragua, the Sandinistas can count on the Soviet bloc to sustain the buildup. Unlike the contras—who must suffer the whims of the U.S. Congress—the Sandinista forces have a reliable support network that provides arms, aircraft, training and combat advice. The clandestine introduction of additional Soviet bloc, and especially Cuban, military advisers, and even combat forces (which may have already begun), can also be expected. This has been the historical pattern, and we should not delude ourselves.

Under conditions of a Marxist-Leninist regime, the notion of a "popular uprising" has limited practical relevance. Such regimes have demonstrated, historically, an impressive capacity—brutal repression, admonitory executions, and detention of opposition leaders (undergirded by an extensive army of informers)—for holding tightly to power in the face of massive public repudiation and hostility. Widespread "counter-revolutionary" protests normally are not permitted to take place, and if they do, sooner or later are crushed. In the past, U.S. policy-makers have underestimated the immense repressive resources of Marxist-Leninist regimes. The abortive "popular uprising" that was to

accompany the Bay of Pigs landing comes to mind. It is too much to expect that a significant urban resistance movement—comprised of poorly armed, if not defenseless, civilians confronting well-armed and determined military and security forces—is a serious option. The Somoza era analogy is misleading, and the Somoza experience is unlikely to be repeated in "revolutionary" Nicaragua.

The most notable feature of the Sandinista regime is not the "internal contradictions" (which do exist) but the surprising relative cohesion of the collective leadership, in which "some are more equal than others." Personal rivalries and jealousies, political and tactical differences, were present amongst the Sandinista guerrilla leaders even before they seized power. They murdered each other over these differences during the revolutionary drive to power. Despite frequent rumors to the contrary, the evidence indicates that the Sandinista ruling elite—dominated by the Ortega brothers—has been able to overcome centrifugal forces and maintain a rough unity of purpose and action. They recognize the maxim: "Either we hang together or we assuredly will hang separately"—a notion that marvelously concentrates the mind. Furthermore, the Sandinistas' "big brothers"—Cuba and especially the USSR—have enormous leverage to impose unity since the regime, without their military and economic aid, could not last six months.

Sandinista leaders are fully cogni-