

# arts & letters

## MOVIES

Reviewed by John Hospers

### First Blood

A Vietnam veteran hitchhikes to the Pacific Northwest to see one of his few surviving war comrades; it turns out that the man has died (the death is attributed to Agent Orange, though it's not clear how the deduction was made). On the way out of town he is mistaken for a hippie by the local police chief, who orders him out of town. The veteran sees no reason why he should go, not having harmed anyone. The policeman then charges him with vagrancy. He is beaten up in police headquarters; he escapes; and the remainder of *First Blood* is an extended hunt-and-chase, as the seasoned veteran, trained to live off the land and construct defensive weapons out of whatever is available, is pitted in a deadly struggle against recapture by increasing hordes of searchers deputized by the vindictive police chief.

Sylvester Stallone, always better at self-expression through gesture and motion than through words, does so in spades in this film; he is almost totally inarticulate. His performance as the loner who is still not attuned to civilian life is convincing enough, especially with the aid of flashbacks (when he is being imprisoned by the local cops, there are flashbacks to his imprisonment in an underground cell in Vietnam, and so on).

There are several flaws in this picture, however. (1) It is hard to believe that for the simple charge of vagrancy, American policemen would beat up a prisoner, cut him up, hose him with cold water, and use other forms of torture. They are depicted as such ruthless villains that the Gestapo was almost merciful by comparison. (2) Stallone's commander in Vietnam (Richard Crenna) suddenly appears on the scene—one does not know why or from where. He is presumably there to give verbal articulation to Stallone's side of the conflict, but his presence in the film is a strained tour de force. (3) The film, taken from a 1972 book, seems dated. Vietnam veterans are being reinstated in public opinion, and to hear them condemned as torturers and child-killers seems now, 10 years later, almost quaint.

Perhaps none of this matters much.

The film is an old-fashioned chase movie with the Vietnam theme thrown in to make this one seem different from its predecessors. We have here a celebration of the lone individual pitted against the collective armed might of the state. The feeling aroused in the audience becomes so strong that even when the hero engages in killings and mutilations, the audience's sympathy remains with him. After all, they asked for the strug-

except for a bit at the beginning (and this was done much better in the recent film *Poltergeist*). Rather, it soon turns into a story of demon possession. It seems that the devil—or evil spirits or whatever—infect the house; as in *Poltergeist*, the souls of the dead are for some reason angered because a house was constructed on their graves. In retaliation they (it?) take forcible possession of the son of the family, compelling him to kill the entire re-



Sylvester Stallone, a former Green Beret, in *First Blood*

gle, he didn't; they were the ones to draw first blood.

Whether all this blood was really necessary is something the film never invites us to think of: it could presumably have been prevented by a single sentence by Stallone to the policemen at the beginning, saying that he was a war veteran who had come to town to visit a friend. But such a logical way out of the mess would have left the producers without a movie, just as, if Hamlet had killed his uncle in Act I as there was every reason to do (hence the "Hamlet problem"—why didn't he?), Shakespeare would have had to look elsewhere for a subject for a new play.

### The Amityville Horror II

*The Amityville Horror II* is not a successor to the original *Amityville* film. It's about the same house, but its action precedes in time the action of the earlier film. Moreover, it isn't a poltergeist story

remainder of the family. But the infinitely patient family priest, saying "He couldn't help it," seeks him out to exorcise the devil from him, and when he fails, he cries "Take me! Take me!" (a direct steal from *The Exorcist*).

All these goings-on are about as unconvincing as they were in *Amityville I*, though the plot of the new film is somewhat better constructed. Assuming, however, that one is interested in seeing a film about demon possession, one cannot do better than to see *The Exorcist*, in which every hypothesis to explain the victim's behavior is systematically eliminated save one (literal demonic possession); that film at least was a vivid exercise in inductive logic. *Amityville II*'s treatment of the same theme is not only derivative; it is episodic, uninvolved, and on the whole extremely thin soup without discernible redeeming features.

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BOOKS

Islands of Survival

Life After Nuclear War

By Arthur M. Katz  
Cambridge, Mass.: Ballinger Publishing.  
1982. 422 pp. \$27.50/\$14.95.

The Final Epidemic: Physicians and Scientists on Nuclear War

Edited by Ruth Adams and Susan Cullen  
Chicago: University of Chicago Press.  
1982. 254 pp. \$4.95 paper.

Reviewed by Max Klinghoffer

*Life After Nuclear War* and *The Final Epidemic* are, in a sense, companion pieces. Arthur Katz, in *Life After Nuclear War*, describes the consequences of such a war, based on the scientific information now available plus the use of projections. He has compiled an impressive array of tables and maps. But some of its conclusions are based on theory rather than on fact, and many of his projections assume an act of war encountered with little or no preparedness. To this extent, Katz's book is as much an argument for increased preparedness as it is an argument against nuclear war. He is undoubtedly correct, however, when he points out the "chain reaction" effect produced by the loss of vital supplies, transportation, energy, and skilled personnel.

According to Katz, the degree of centralization that has made us such a powerful industrial nation has now become a major weakness in the age of nuclear war. It is clear that our decentralized structure a century ago—with greater dispersal of our supplies and our manufacturing; with each dwelling more or less self-sufficient with regard to water, lighting, and heat; and with food supplies stored in or near each community—might have made us better able to withstand an attack. From reading Katz's book, one may conclude that our survival could depend on returning to some degree of decentralization—with, of course, adequate shelter.

No thinking person would deny that nuclear war would be the most devastating experience the human race has known. No thinking person wants to see a nuclear war. But Katz does note that the arithmetical increase in the megatonnage of a bomb does not result in a comparable increase in the scope of damage.

Will there not, then, be "islands of survival"? And is that not the real essence of the matter?

When Katz criticizes the lack of planning and the failure of the government to provide shelter and various services, he raises valid concerns. The shelter program in this country is, in fact, decades delayed. But again, Katz's arguments may be interpreted as a plea for shelters, food stores, depots of medical supplies, and various programs for distributing essential items after an attack, thus implying that some will survive. He is correct in pointing out that our medical facilities are highly centralized and largely in urban areas. But there is a trend now to establish smaller medical facilities in outlying areas, and this has, to some extent, attracted physicians to these areas.

*The Final Epidemic* is a book of many contributors, all writers of prestige. Again, it would be impossible to deny the horrors of nuclear war as described in this book. But the various writers do not produce any realistic answers—only the suggestion that we should prevail upon government leaders to avoid nuclear war.

The book begins with Albert

Einstein's warning to President Roosevelt, in 1940, that weapons of unprecedented destruction might result from research then being conducted in Nazi Germany. What would have happened to the world if the United States had not embarked on an intensive program to develop nuclear fission, and what would have been the result if Hitler had been the first to master this new and destructive power?

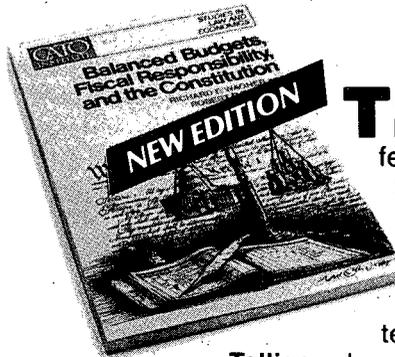
To bring this up to date, what would be the state of the world if the Soviet Union had these weapons and we did not? Fissionable materials and nuclear weapons are now within the reach of many smaller nations with considerable wealth and, too often, with irrational leadership. While both books correctly describe the magnitude of nuclear war, and the desirability of preventing it, they tell nothing of the consequences if some of the deranged leaders of nations were to have access to such weapons.

*The Final Epidemic* speaks of "exaggerated fears of the Soviet Union." But are these fears exaggerated? And what of the avowed intention expressed repeatedly by Soviet leadership to extend their own brand of government to the entire world?

*The Final Epidemic* ridicules some of

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