

Posted by Joan Russow
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By [Tom Engelhardt](#)

[The following excerpt, from Tom Engelhardt's book, [The End of Victory Culture](#), is posted with permission from the University of Massachusetts Press.

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<http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/175735/>

1. The First Coming of G.I. Joe

It was 1964, and in Vietnam thousands of American "advisers" were already offering up their know-how from helicopter seats or gun sights. The United States was just a year short of sending its first large contingent of ground troops there, adolescents who would enter the battle zone dreaming of John Wayne and thinking of enemy-controlled territory as "Indian country." Meanwhile, in that inaugural year of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, a new generation of children began to experience the American war story via the most popular toy warrior ever created.

His name, G.I. -- for "Government Issue" -- Joe was redolent of America's last victorious war and utterly generic. There was no specific figure named Joe, nor did any of the "Joes" have names. "He" came in four types, one for each service, including the Marines. Yet every Joe was, in essence, the same. Since he was a toy of the Great Society with its dreams of inclusion, it only took a year for his manufacturer, Hasbro, to produce a "Negro Joe," and two more to add a she-Joe (a nurse, naturally). Joe initially came with no story, no instructions, and no enemy, because it had not yet occurred to adults (or toy makers) not to trust the child to choose the right enemy to pit against Joe.

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In TV ads of the time, Joe was depicted as the most traditional of war toys. Little boys in World War II-style helmets were shown entering battle with a G.I. Joe tank, or fiercely displaying their Joe equipment while a chorus of deep, male voices sang (to the tune of "The Halls of Montezuma"), "G.I. Joe, G.I. Joe, Fighting man from head to toe on the land, on the sea, in the air." He was "authentic" with his "ten-inch bazooka that really works," his "beachhead flame thrower," and his "authentically detailed replica" of a U.S. Army Jeep with its own "tripod mounted recoilless rifle" and four "rocket projectiles."

He could take any beach or landing site in style, dressed in "the real thing," ranging from an "Ike" jacket with red scarf to a "beachhead assault fatigue shirt," pants, and field pack. He could chow down with his own mess kit, or bed down in his own "bivouac-pup tent set." And he was a toy giant, too, nearly a foot tall. From the telltale pink scar on his cheek to the testosterone rush of fierce-faced ad boys shouting, "G.I. Joe, take the hill!" he seemed the picture of a manly fighting toy.

Yet Joe, like much else in his era, was hardly what he seemed. Launched the year Lyndon Johnson ran for president as a peace candidate against Barry Goldwater while his administration was secretly planning the large-scale bombing of North Vietnam, Joe, too, was involved in a cover-up. For if Joe was a behemoth of a toy soldier, he was also, though the word was unmentionable, a *doll*. War play Joe-style was, in fact, largely patterned on and due to a "girl" -- Mattel's Barbie.

The Secret History of Joe

Barbie had arrived on the toy scene in 1958 with a hard expression on her face and her nippleless breasts outthrust, a reminder that she, too, had a secret past. She was a breakthrough, the first "teenage" doll with a "teenage" figure. However, her creator, Ruth Handler, had modeled her not on a teenager but on a German tabloid comic strip "playgirl" named Lili, who, in doll form, was sold not to children but to men "in tobacconists and bars... as an adult male's pet." As Joe was later to hit the beaches, so Barbie took the fashion salons, malt shops, boudoirs, and bedrooms, fully accessorized, and with the same undercurrent of exaggeration. (The bigger the breasts, after all, the better to hang that Barbie Wedding Gown on.)

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Joe was the brainchild of a toy developer named Stanley Weston, who was convinced that boys secretly played with Barbie and deserved their own doll. Having loved toy soldiers as a child, he chose a military theme as the most acceptable for a boy's doll and took his idea to Hassenfeld Brothers (later renamed Hasbro), a toy company then best known for producing Mr. Potato Head.

In those days, everyone in the toy business knew that toy soldiers were three-inch-high, immobile, plastic or lead figures, and the initial response to Joe ranged from doubt to scorn to laughter; but Merrill Hassenfeld, one of the two brothers running the company, called on an old friend, Major General Leonard Holland, head of the Rhode Island National Guard, who offered access to weaponry, uniforms, and gear in order to design a thoroughly accurate military figure. Joe was also given a special "grip," an opposable thumb and forefinger, all the better to grasp those realistic machine guns and bazookas, and he was built with 21 movable parts so that boys could finally put war into motion.

Hassenfeld Brothers confounded the givens of the toy business by selling \$16.9 million worth of Joes and equipment in Joe's first year on the market, and after that things only got better. In this way was a warrior Adam created from Eve's plastic rib, a tough guy with his own outfits and accessories, whom you could dress, undress, and take to bed -- or tent down with, anyway. But none of this could be said. It was taboo at Hasbro to call Joe a doll. Instead, the company dubbed him a "poseable action figure for boys," and the name "action figure" stuck to every war-fighting toy to follow. So Barbie and Joe, hard breasts and soft bullets, the exaggerated bombshell and the touchy-feely scar-faced warrior, came to represent the shaky gender stories of America at decade's end, where a secret history of events was slowly sinking to the level of childhood.

For a while, all remained as it seemed. But Joe underwent a slow transformation that Barbie largely escaped (though in the early 1970s, facing the new feminism, her sales did decline). As the Vietnam years wore on, Joe became less and less a soldier. Protest was in the air. As early as 1966, a group of mothers dressed in Mary Poppins outfits picketed the toy industry's yearly trade convention in New York, their umbrellas displaying the slogan, "Toy Fair or Warfare?" Indeed, Sears dropped all military toys from its catalog. According to *Tomart's Guide to Action Figure Collectibles*, "In the late '60s... [f]earing a possible boycott of their 'war-oriented toy,' Hasbro changed Joe's facial appearance and wardrobe. Flocked hair and a beard were added to the figures. Hasbro liquidated strictly military-looking pieces in special sets, and by 1970 the G.I. Joe Adventure Team was created."

Now, Joe was teamed with his first real enemies, but they weren't human. There was the tiger of the "White Tiger Hunt," the "hammerhead stingray" of "Devil of the Deep," the mummy of "Secret of the Mummy's Tomb," and the "black shark" of "Revenge of the Spy Shark," as well as assorted polar bears, octopi, vultures, and a host of natural enemies in toy sets like "Sandstorm Survival." For the first time, in those years of adult confusion, some indication of plot, of what exactly a child should do with these toys, began to be incorporated into titles like "The Search for the Stolen Idol" or "The Capture of the Pygmy Gorilla." Not only was Joe now an adventurer, but his adventure was being crudely outlined on the packaging that accompanied him; and few of these new adventures bore any relationship to the war story into which he had been born.

This hipper, new Joe was, if not exactly gaining a personality, then undergoing a personalizing process. He no longer appeared so military with his new hairstyles and his "A" (for adventure) insignia, which, as Katharine Whittemore has pointed out, "looked just a bit like a peace sign." In fact, he was beginning to look suspiciously like the opposition, fading as a warrior just as he was becoming a less generic doll. By 1974, he had even gained a bit of an oriental touch with a new "kung-fu grip." In 1976, under the pressure of the increased cost of plastic, he shrank almost four inches; and soon after, he vanished from the scene. He was, according to Hasbro, "furloughed," and as far as anyone then knew, consigned to toy oblivion.

Stripping War Out of the Child's World

In this he was typical of the rest of the war story in child culture in those years. It was as if Vietnamese sappers had reached into the American homeland and blasted the war story free of its ritualistic content, as if the "Indians" of that moment had sent the cavalry into flight and unsettled the West. So many years of Vietnamese resistance had transformed the pleasures of war-play culture into atrocities, embarrassments to look at. By the 1970s, America's cultural products seemed intent either on critiquing their own mechanics and myths or on staking out ever newer frontiers of defensiveness.

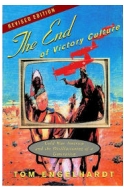
Take Sgt. Rock, that heroic World War II noncom of DC Comics' *Our Army at War* series. Each issue of his adventures now sported a new seal that proclaimed, "make WAR no more," while his resolutely World War II-bound adventures were being undermined by a new enemy-like consciousness. The cover of a June 1971 issue, for instance, showed the intrepid but shaken sergeant stuttering "B-but they were civilians!" and pointing at the bodies of five men, none in uniform, who seemed to have been lined up against a wall and executed. Next to him, a GI, his submachine gun still smoking, exclaims, "I stopped the enemy, Rock! None of 'em

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got away!"

Inside, an episode, "Headcount," told the "underside" of the story of one Johnny Doe, a posthumously decorated private, who shoots first and asks later. "Hold it, Johnny!" yells Rock as Private Doe is about to do in a whole room of French hostages with their Nazi captors, claiming they're all phonies, "if you're wrong... we're no better'n the nazi butchers we're fightin' against!" Of Doe, killed by Rock before he can murder the hostages, the story asked a final question that in 1971 would have been familiar to Americans of any age: "Was Johnny Doe a murderer -- or a hero? That's one question each of you will have to decide for yourselves!"



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Two months later, in the August issue of *Our Army at War*, a reader could enter the mind of Tatsuno Sakigawa in "Kamikaze." Sakigawa, about to plunge his plane into the USS *Stevens*

, recalls "when his mother held him close and warm! He remembered the fishing junk on which they lived... the pungent smell of sea and wind... he was at another place... in a happier time." As his plane is hit by antiaircraft fire and explodes, you see his agonized face. "FATHER... MOTHER ... WHERE ARE YOU?" he screams.

The scene cuts briefly to his parents on their burning junk ("H-help us... my son... help..."), and then to a final image of "the flames rising from Japan's burning cities! Houses of wood and paper... his own home." Tatsuno Sakigawa, the episode concludes, "died for the emperor... for country... for honor! But mostly... to avenge the death of his parents! The destruction of his home! The loss of his own life!" At page bottom, below DC's pacifist seal of approval, was a "historical note: 250,000 Japanese died in the fire raids... 80,000 died in the Hiroshima A-bombing."

Even in that most guarded of sanctuaries, the school textbook, the American story began to disassemble. First in its interstices, and then in its place emerged a series of previously hidden stories. In the late 1960s, textbooks rediscovered "the poor," a group in absentia since the 1930s. By the early 1970s, the black story, the story of women, the Chicano story, the Native American story -- all those previously "invisible" narratives -- were emerging from under the monolithic story of America that had previously been imposed on a nation of children. Similarly,

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at the college level, histories of the non-European world emerged from under the monolithic "world" story that had once taken the student from Egypt to twentieth-century America via Greece, Rome, medieval Europe, and the Renaissance.

These new "celebratory" tales of the travails and triumphs of various "minorities" arose mainly as implicit critiques of the One American Story that had preceded them or as self-encapsulated and largely self-referential ministories like that new TV form, the miniseries. In either case, they proved linkable to no larger narrative, though in the 1980s they would all be gathered up willy-nilly under the umbrella of "multi-culturalism."

Being celebratory, they needed no actual enemy, but implicitly the enemy was the very story that had until recently made them invisible. They were something like interest groups competing for a limited amount of just emptied space. The national story, which was supposed to be inclusive enough to gather in all those "huddled masses," which had only a few years earlier allowed textbook writers to craft sentences like, "We are too little astonished at the unprecedented virtuous-ness of U.S. foreign policy, and at its good sense," had now been cracked open.

By the time Saigon fell in 1975, children like adults existed in a remarkably story-less realm. The very word *war* had been stripped out of children's culture and childhood transformed into something like an un-American event. The subterranean haunted and haunting quality of children in the 1950s had risen to the surface. The young were now openly threatening adults. Some were challenging American power with evidence of the destruction of minority children at home or out there ("Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?"), while others, whether as political radicals, part of the counterculture, or GIs in Vietnam, seemed in the process of defecting to the Eastern enemy.

Yet, paradoxically, that victorious enemy was nowhere in sight -- not in the movies, not on TV (despite the image of Vietnam as a television war), not even in the press. Where the Vietnamese should have been, there was instead an absence. Because it was impossible to "see" who had defeated the United States and hence why Americans had lost, it was impossible to grasp what had been lost. So American victimhood, American loss -- including the loss of childhood's cultural forms -- became a subject in itself, the only subject, you might say, while the invisibility of the foe who had taken the story away lent that loss a particular aura of unfairness.

So, in a final, strange reversal in that era of reversals, American postwar "reconstruction"

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would begin not in Vietnam, the land in ruins, which should have been but was not the defeated country, but at home in a land almost untouched by war, which should have been but was not the victor; and the rebuilding would focus not on some devastated physical environment but on the national psyche. In this postwar passage from John Wayne to Sylvester Stallone, from Pax Americana to Pecs Americana, this attempt to rebuild a furloughed American narrative of triumph, children were to play a special role.

2. Empty Space

On the evening of May 25, 1977, a dazed 32-year-old movie director, with one success to his name, was finishing a Herculean two weeks "mixing" his latest film for European audiences. Breaking for dinner, he and his wife headed for Hamburger Hamlet, a restaurant across the street from Mann's Chinese Theater in Hollywood, only to run into heavy traffic and sizable crowds. Coming around a corner, he spied the title of his new film in giant letters on the theater marquee. It was opening day. "I said, 'I don't believe this,'" he recalled. "So we sat in Hamburger Hamlet and watched the giant crowd out there, and then I went back and mixed all night... I felt it was some kind of aberration."

Director George Lucas had already celebrated his teenage years in *American Graffiti* ("Where were you in '62?"), the surprise hit of 1973, which sparked a wave of nostalgia for the years before Vietnam and inspired the TV series

Happy Days

(1974). As a moviemaker, however, he had had a desire to reach even deeper into his California boyhood, to return to those moments when he had acted out World War II scenarios with toy soldiers, or watched old Flash Gordon serials, cowboy and war films on television.

Like movie audiences (as box office receipts of the time indicated), he wanted to reverse the cinematic cannibalism of the 1960s. In this, he stood apart from directors as disparate as Robert Altman, Stanley Kubrick, Arthur Penn, Mel Brooks, and his own mentor Francis Ford Coppola, who for years had been dismantling space and horse operas, war and detective films; in fact, all familiar on-screen space.

"There's a whole generation," he would later say, "growing up without any kind of fairy tales." Although he undoubtedly identified with the countercultural politics of the time, his was a conservative vision. Instinctively, he wanted to still the mocking voices and return the movie audience not just to his own childhood but to a childlike viewing state.

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Throughout the early 1970s, he struggled to construct a script that would rebuild the missing war story in outer space. The heavens had been empty since, at the end of the 1960s, Stanley Kubrick blasted an American astronaut into a fetal state in *2001: A Space Odyssey*; *Planet of the Apes* took its astronauts on a mocking journey to a post-nuclear Earth where humans were not the dominant species; and the USS *Enterprise* of TV's *Star Trek* left the "final frontier" to be mothballed.

In 1975, Lucas signed on with Twentieth Century Fox to produce a space film that (he reassured his wife) "ten-year-old boys would love." To make it, he had his costume designer study books on World War II uniforms and Japanese armor, while he turned to films ranging from Frank Capra's *Battle of Britain* (1943) to *The Bridges at Toko-Ri* (1954) to construct dogfights in space. In casting, he avoided white ethnics like Dustin Hoffman and Al Pacino, who had played on-screen rebels for years, in favor of unknown WASP-y actors who might bring to mind the one-dimensional whiteness of his movie past.

Summoning up enemies from his screen childhood, he patterned his evil emperor on Ming, ruler of Mongo in *Flash Gordon* (as well as on Richard Nixon), and cloaked his dark Jedi, Darth Vader, in gleaming black visor and body suit. Although there would be no blacks on screen, he hired the black actor James Earl Jones to play Vader's hissing techno-voice. In Chewbacca, the "Wookie" with the Mexican cartridge belts strung across his hairy chest, the Others of the previous decade from ascendant ape to Native American would be returned to their rightful place. This nonwhite would not even be capable of Hollywood-style broken English; only of King Kong-ish howls of frustration or rage (made by mixing bear, walrus, seal, and badger calls).

In early 1977, the almost finished film seemed an unlikely candidate for success. Fox's research showed that the word *war* in a title would turn off women, that robots would turn off everyone, and that science fiction was a dead category. Fox's board of directors had only reluctantly financed the film; and at a special screening, those directors who did not go to sleep were outraged. As movie theater owners showed little enthusiasm, the film opened in only 32 theaters nationwide.

Not in his wildest flights of fancy did Lucas imagine that his cinematic vision would sweep all before it, that his reconquest of a child audience and of "the kids in all of us" would be crucial to the reconstruction of a narrative of triumph, that he would help give a new look of entertainment

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to the design of war and reintroduce the spectacle of slaughter to the many screens of America.

The Look of Star Wars Enters the World of War

About two years before *Star Wars* opened, a 20-year-old MIT student, Peter Hagelstein, applied for a fellowship to the Hertz Foundation. Among its board members was Edward Teller, “father” of the H-bomb and a founder of Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, a government nuclear weapons research facility in Northern California. Although John D. Hertz (of rental car fame) had set up the fellowships to “foster the technological strength of America” vis-à-vis the Soviet Union and some recipients were recruited into Livermore’s weapons research by those interviewing them, the foundation advertised only that “[t]he proposed field of graduate study must be concerned with applications of the physical sciences to human problems, broadly construed.”

Hagelstein was offered a fellowship and a summer job at Livermore by Lowell Wood, his interviewer and head of Livermore’s O Group. Its young scientists were working on designing a “third generation” of nuclear weapons (the first two being the A and H bombs). According to Hagelstein, Wood told him only that they were working on “lasers and laser fusion, which I had never heard of before, and he said there were computer codes out there that were like playing a Wurlitzer organ. It all sounded kind of dreamy... The lab made quite an impression, especially the guards and barbed wire. When I got to the personnel department it dawned on me that they worked on weapons here, and that’s about the first I knew about it.”

In the summer of 1976, he went there full time, while continuing Ph.D. work at MIT. He was a young man who “hated bombs” and “didn’t want to be associated with anything nuclear.” He was even romantically involved with an antinuclear activist who picketed the lab. But he was held by a dream of creating a laboratory x-ray laser that would allow scientists to “see” various biological processes, and by the appealing young men of O Group, with their jeans and long hair, all-night work habits, countercultural élan, and perverse humor. (Once, they even “took up a collection” to buy Lowell Wood a Darth Vader costume.)

The year that *Star Wars* soared into box office heaven, a senior O Group scientist came up with a new concept for using a nuclear explosion to “pump” enough focused energy into a laser to turn it into a weapon. In the summer of 1979, Hagelstein appeared at a meeting where the use of an underground nuclear explosion to test out the idea was being discussed. Dazed from 20 straight hours of work, he made a suggestion -- “The mouth just said it” -- that was to lead to

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a laser device dubbed Excalibur and successfully tested in November 1980. While Hagelstein's dream of a laboratory x-ray laser faded, "his" weapon became the centerpiece of a different sort of fantasy.

In February 1981, the trade journal *Aviation Week and Space Technology* reported the x-ray laser's heavily classified existence, saying that, "mounted in a laser battle station" in space, it had "the potential to blunt a Soviet nuclear weapons attack." The magazine's account was accompanied by a hyper-realistic, futuristic "artist's drawing" showing a snazzy battle station that "bristled with long laser rods," an image the mainstream media picked up, thus marrying the look of war to the look of

Star Wars

By 1982, Teller had taken news of Peter Hagelstein's laser directly to Ronald Reagan. Space lasers and other third-generation weapons, he assured the president, "by converting hydrogen bombs into hitherto unprecedented forms and by directing these in highly effective fashions against enemy targets would end the MAD [Mutual Assured Destruction] era and commence a period of assured survival on terms favorable to the Western alliance." Even a young weapons researcher whose doctoral thesis ("Physics of Short Wavelength Laser Design") mentioned three science fiction novels featuring beam weapons could hardly have imagined that one spaced-out suggestion would become a crucial part of a multibillion-dollar national fantasy to create a "protective shield" over the reconstruction of war on Earth.

[Part 2, "Teenagers in Space" will be posted on Thursday, August 15th.]

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The Secret History of G.I. Joe Barbie, Joe, Darth Vader, and Making War in Children's Culture (Part 1)

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