

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

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. Part 1, "The Secret History of G.I. Joe," can be found by [clicking here](#)

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1. "Hey, How Come They Got All the Fun?"

Now that Darth Vader's breathy techno-voice is a staple of our culture, it's hard to remember how empty was the particular sector of space *Star Wars* blasted into. The very day the Paris Peace Accords were signed in 1973, Richard Nixon also signed a decree ending the draft. It was an admission of the obvious: war, American-style, had lost its hold on young minds. As an activity, it was now to be officially turned over to the poor and nonwhite.

Those in a position to produce movies, TV shows, comics, novels, or memoirs about Vietnam were convinced that Americans felt badly enough without such reminders. It was simpler to consider the war film and war toy casualties of Vietnam than to create cultural products with the wrong heroes, victims, and villains. In *Star Wars*, Lucas successfully challenged this view, decontaminating war of its recent history through a series of inspired cinematic decisions that rescued crucial material from the wreckage of Vietnam.

To start with, he embraced the storylessness of the period, creating his own self-enclosed universe in deepest space and in an amorphous movie past, "a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away." Beginning with "Episode IV" of a projected nonology, he offered only the flimsiest of historical frameworks -- an era of civil war, an evil empire, rebels, an ultimate weapon, a struggle for freedom.

Mobilizing a new world of special effects and computer graphics, he then made the high-tech

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weaponry of the recent war exotic, bloodless, and sleekly unrecognizable. At the same time, he uncoupled the audience from a legacy of massacre and atrocity. The blond, young Luke Skywalker is barely introduced before his adoptive family -- high-tech peasants on an obscure planet -- suffers its own My Lai. Imperial storm troopers led by Darth Vader descend upon their homestead and turn it into a smoking ruin (thus returning fire to its rightful owners). Luke -- and the audience -- can now set off on an anti-imperial venture as the victimized, not as victimizers. Others in space will torture, maim, and destroy. Others will put "us" in high-tech tiger cages; and our revenge, whatever it may be, will be justified.

In this way, *Star Wars* denied the enemy a role "they" had monopolized for a decade -- that of brave rebel. It was the first cultural product to ask of recent history, "Hey! How come *they* got all the fun?" And to respond, "Let's give them the burden of empire! Let's bog them down and be the plucky underdogs ourselves!"

Like Green Berets or Peace Corps members, Lucas's white teenage rebels would glide effortlessly among the natives. They would learn from value-superior Third World mystics like the Ho-Chi-Minh-ish Yoda in *The Empire Strikes Back* and be protected by ecological fuzballs like the Ewoks in *Return of the Jedi*. In deepest space, anything was possible, including returning history to its previous owners. Once again, we could have it all: freedom
and
victory, captivity
and
rescue, underdog status
and
the spectacle of slaughter. As with the Indian fighter of old, advanced weaponry
and
the spiritual powers of the guerrilla might be ours.

Left to the enemy would be a Nazi-like capacity for destroying life, a desire to perform search-and-destroy missions on the universe, and the breathy machine voice of Darth Vader (as if evil were a dirty phone call from the Darkside). The Tao of the Chinese, the "life force" of Yaqui mystic Don Juan, even the political will of the Vietnamese would rally to "our" side as the Force and be applied to a crucial technical problem; for having the Force "with you" meant learning to merge with your high-tech weaponry in such a way as to assure the enemy's

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destruction. Looked at today, the last part of *Star Wars* concentrates on a problem that might have been invented after, not 14 years before, the 1991 Persian Gulf War: how to fly a computerized, one-man jet fighter down a narrow corridor under heavy antiaircraft fire and drop a missile into an impossibly small air shaft, the sole vulnerable spot in the Emperor's Death Star.

Here, Lucas even appropriated the kamikaze-like fusion of human and machine. In Vietnam, there had been two such man-machine meldings. The first, the bombing campaign, had the machinelike impersonality of the production line. Lifting off from distant spots of relative comfort like Guam, B-52 crews delivered their bombs to coordinates stripped of place or people and left the war zone for another day. The crew member symbolically regained humanity only when the enemy's technology stripped him of his machinery -- and, alone, he fluttered to earth and captivity.

At the same time, from Secretary of Defense McNamara's "electronic battlefield" to the first "smart bombs," Vietnam proved an experimental testing ground for machine-guided war. Unlike the B-52 or napalm, the smart bomb, the computer, the electronic sensor, and the video camera were not discredited by the war; and it was these machines of wonder that Lucas rescued through the innocence of special effects.

In James Bond films, high-tech had been a display category like fine wines, and techno-weaponry just another consumer item for 007. For Lucas, however, technology in the right hands actually solved problems, offering -- whether as laser sword or X-wing fighter -- not status but potential spiritualization. This elevation of technology made possible the return of slaughter to the screen as a triumphal and cleansing pleasure (especially since dying "imperial storm troopers," encased in full body carapaces, looked like so many bugs).

The World as a *Star Wars* Theme Park

Not only would George Lucas put "war" back into a movie title, he would almost single-handedly reconstitute war play as a feel-good activity for children. With G.I. Joe's demise, the world of child-sized war play stood empty. The toy soldier had long ago moved into history, an object for adult collectors. However, some months before *Star Wars* opened, Fox reached an agreement with Kenner Products, a toy company, to create action figures and fantasy vehicles geared to the movie. Kenner president Bernard Loomis decided that these would be inexpensive, new-style figures, only 3 3/4-inch high. Each design was to be approved by Lucas

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himself.

Since Kenner could not produce the figures quickly enough for the 1977 Christmas season, Loomis offered an “Early Bird Certificate Package” -- essentially an empty box -- that promised the child the first four figures when produced. The result was toy history. In 1978, Kenner sold over 26 million figures; by 1985, 250 million. All 111 figures and other *Star Wars* paraphernalia, ranging from lunch boxes and watches to video games, would ring up \$2.5 billion in sales.

By the early 1980s, children’s TV had become a *Star Wars*-like battle zone. Outnumbered rebels daily transformed themselves from teenagers into mighty robots “loved by good, feared by evil”

(*Voltron*) or “heroic teams

of armed machines”

(*M.A.S.K.*)

in order to fight Lotar and his evil, blue-faced father from Planet Doom

(*Voltron*)

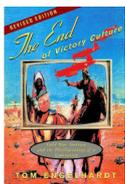
, General Spidrax, master of the Dark Domain’s mighty armies

(*Sectaurs*)

, or the evil red-eyed Darkseid of the Planet Apokolips

(*Superfriends*)

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Future war would be a machine-versus-machine affair, a bloodless matter of special effects, in the revamped war story designed for childhood consumption. In popular cartoons like *Transformers*

where good “Autobots” fought evil “Decepticons,” Japanese-animated machines transformed themselves from mundane vehicles into futuristic weapons systems. At the same time, proliferating teams of action figures,

Star Wars-

size and linked to such shows, were transported into millions of homes where new-style war scenarios could be played out.

In those years, *Star Wars*-like themes also began to penetrate the world of adult

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entertainment. Starting in 1983 with the surprise movie hit
on Valor

Uncomm

right-wing revenge fantasies like
Missing-in-Action

(1984) returned American guerrillas to “Vietnam” to rescue captive pilots from jungle prisons and bog Communists down here on Earth. In a subset of these --

Red Dawn

(1984) and the TV miniseries

Amerika

(1987) are prime examples -- the action took place in a future, conquered United States where home-grown guerrillas fought to liberate the country from Soviet imperial occupation.

Meanwhile, melds of technology and humanity ranging from Robocop to Arnold

Schwarzenegger began to proliferate on adult screens. In 1985-1986, two major hits featured man-as-machine fusions. As Rambo, Sylvester Stallone was a “pure fighting machine,” with muscles and weaponry to prove it; while in

Top Gun

, Tom Cruise played a “maverick” on a motorcycle who was transformed from hot dog to top dog by fusing with his navy jet as he soared to victory over the evil empire’s aggressor machines, Libyan MIGs.

War Games in the Adult World

It took some time for political leaders to catch up with George Lucas’s battle scenarios. In the years when he was producing *Star Wars*, America’s post-Vietnam presidents were having a woeful time organizing any narrative at all. In the real world, there seemed to be no Lucas-like outer space into which to escape the deconstruction job Vietnam had done to the war story. The military was in shambles; the public, according to pollsters, had become resistant to American troops being sent into battle anywhere; and past enemies were now negotiating partners in a new “détente.”

Gerald Ford, inheriting a collapsed presidency from Richard Nixon, attempted only once to display American military resolve. In May 1975, a month after Saigon fell, Cambodian Khmer Rouge rebels captured an American merchant ship, the *Mayaguez*. Ford ordered the bombing of the Cambodian port city of Kampong Son and sent in the Marines. They promptly stormed an island on which the

Mayaguez

z

crew

was not being held, hours after ship and crew had been released, and fought a pointless, bitter battle, suffering 41 dead. The event seemed to mock American prowess, confirming that rescue, like victory, had slipped from its grasp.

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Jimmy Carter, elected president in 1976, had an even more woeful time of it. Facing what he termed a Vietnam-induced “national malaise,” he proposed briefly that Americans engage in “the moral equivalent of war” by mobilizing and sacrificing on the home front to achieve energy independence from the OPEC oil cartel. The public, deep in a peacetime recession, responded without enthusiasm.

In 1979, in a defining moment of his presidency, Carter watched helplessly as young Islamic followers of the Iranian Ayatollah Khomeini took 52 Americans captive in the U.S. embassy in Teheran and held them for 444 days. In April 1980, “Desert One,” a military raid the president ordered to rescue the captives, failed dismally in the Iranian desert, and the president was forced to live out his term against a televised backdrop of unending captivity and humiliation that seemed to highlight American impotence.

Only with the presidency of Ronald Reagan did a Lucas-like reconstitution of the war story truly begin at the governmental level. The new president defined the Soviet Union in *Star Wars*-like terms as an “evil empire,” while the Army began advertising for recruits on TV by displaying spacy weaponry and extolling the pleasures of being “out there” in search of “the bad guys.” In Nicaragua, Angola, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, the Reagan administration managed to portray the forces it supported as outnumbered “freedom fighters” struggling to roll back an overwhelming tide of imperial evil. This time, we would do the hitting and running, and yet we -- or our surrogates -- would retain the high-tech weaponry: mines for their harbors and Stinger missiles for their helicopters.

Meanwhile, planners discovered in an intervention in Grenada that, with the right media controls in place and speed, you could produce the equivalent of an outer space war fantasy here on Earth. No wonder that a group of junior officers at the Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth responsible for aspects of the ground campaign used against Iraq in 1991 would be nicknamed the Jedi Knights.

2. The Second Coming of G.I. Joe

The reversals of history first introduced in *Star Wars* were picked up by a fast-developing toy business in the 1980s. Every “action figure” set would now be a *Star Wars*

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knock-off, and each toy company faced Lucas's problem. In post-Vietnam war-space, how would a child left alone in a room with generic figures know what to play?

Star Wars

had offered a movie universe for its toys to share, but a toy on its own needed another kind of help.

About the time Ronald Reagan came into office, Hasbro began to consider resuscitating G.I. Joe, for the world of war play was still distinctly underpopulated on Earth, if not in space. As the toy company's executives were aware, Joe retained remarkable name recognition, not only among young boys (who had inherited hand-me-downs from older siblings) but among their parents. The question was, what would Joe be? At first, Hasbro had only considered marketing "a force of good guys," but according to H. Kirk Bozigian, Hasbro's vice-president of boys toys, "the [toy] trade said, who do they fight?" Hasbro's research with children confirmed that this was a crucial question.

In fact, blasting an action figure team into a world in which, as Bozigian put it, "there was a fine line between the good guys and the bad guys," called for considerable grown-up thought. Although Joe was to gain the tag line, "a real American hero," the G.I. Joe R&D and marketing group ("all closet quasi-military historians") early on reached "a conscious decision that the Soviets would never be the enemy, because we felt there would never be a conflict between us." Instead they chose a vaguer enemy -- "terrorism" -- and created COBRA, an organization of super-bad guys who lived not in Moscow but in Springfield, U.S.A. (Hasbro researchers had discovered that a Springfield existed in every state -- except Rhode Island, where the company was located.)

Re-launching Joe

But teams of good and bad guys weren't enough. Children needed context. A "history" had to be written for these preplanned figures, what the toy industry would come to call a "backstory." Then a way had to be found for each figure to bring his own backstory, his play instructions, into the home. First, "Joe" was shrunk to 3 3/4-inch size, so that his warrior team could fit into the *Star Wars*

universe. Next, he was reconceived as a set of earthbound fantasy figures (rather than "real" soldiers) and armed with

Star Wars

-style weaponry.

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A Marvel comic book series lent the toys an ongoing story form, while Hasbro pioneered using the space on the back of each figure's package for a collector card/profile of the enclosed toy. Larry Hama, creator of the comics and of the earliest profiles, called them "intelligence dossiers." Each Joe or COBRA was now to come with his own spacy code name (from Air Tight to Zartan) and his own "biography." Each "individualized" team member would carry his story into the home on his back.

Take "enemy leader, COBRA Commander." Poisonous snakes are bad news, but his no-goodness was almost laughably overdetermined. Faceless in the style of Darth Vader, his head was covered by a hood with eye slits, reminiscent of the KKK, his body encased in a torturer's blue jumpsuit, leather gloves, and boots. Here is his "dossier":

"Primary Military Specialty: Intelligence.

Secondary Military Specialty: Ordnance (experimental weaponry).

Birthplace: Classified.

Absolute power! Total control of the world... its people, wealth, and resources -- that's the objective of COBRA Commander. This fanatical leader rules with an iron fist. He demands total loyalty and allegiance. His main battle plan, for world control, relies on revolution and chaos. He personally led uprisings in the Middle East, Southeast Asia and other trouble spots. Responsible for kidnapping scientists, businessmen, and military leaders then forcing them to reveal their top level secrets. COBRA commander is hatred and evil personified. Corrupt. A man without scruples. Probably the most dangerous man alive!"

Other than the telltale reference to Southeast Asia, he was an enemy uncoupled from the war story. Only the profile that came with him separated him from Snake-Eyes, a good guy with Ninja training who also came encased in a blue jumpsuit with slits for eyeholes.

Launched in 1982, the new G.I. Joe was to prove the most successful boy's toy of the period.

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By the mid-1980s, Joe had an every afternoon animated TV show that put special effects battles with COBRA constantly within the child's field of vision. After Joe, war play on "Earth" would be in the reconstructionist mode. Carefully identified teams of good and bad figures, backed by collectors' cards, TV cartoons, movies, video games, books, and comics, as well as a host of licensed products stamped with their images, would offer an overelaborate frame of instruction in new-style war play. All a child had to do was read the toy box, turn on the TV, go to the video store, put on the audio tape that accompanied the "book," or pick up the character's "magazine" to be surrounded by a backstory of war play. Yet the void where the national war story had been remained.

The New Business of War Play

By 1993, Hasbro had produced over 300 G.I. Joe figures with "close to 260 different personalities" and sold hundreds of millions of them. No longer a masked man and his lone sidekick, but color, price, and weapons coordinated masked teams, these "characters" on screen and on the child's floor were byproducts of an extraordinary explosion of entrepreneurial life force, for the business impulse behind war play was childhood's real story in the 1980s. The intrusive, unsettling world of commercial possibility that had first looked through the screen at the child three decades earlier represented the real victory culture of the postwar child's world.

The new war story it produced had only a mocking relationship to a national story, for all "war" now inhabited the same unearthly, ahistorical commercial space. Even Rambo, transformed into an action-figure team for children, found himself locked in televised cartoon combat with General Terror and his S.A.V.A.G.E. terrorist group. While various Ninjas and Native Americans brought their spiritual skills to the good side, everywhere the "enemy" remained a vague and fragile construct, a metallic voice stripped of ethnic or racial character; and everywhere the boundary lines between us and the enemy, the good team and the bad team, threatened to collapse into a desperate sameness.

In its characters, names, and plots, the new war story relied on constant self-mockery. The enemy, once the most serious of subjects, was now a running joke. The evil COBRA organization, as described by Hasbro's Bozigian, was made up of "accountants, tax attorneys, and all other kinds of low lifes that are out to conquer the world." The mocking voice of deconstruction was alive and selling product in children's culture -- as with that mega-hit of the late 1980s, the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.

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In the new war play universe, you did need a scorecard to tell the players apart. In the comic book world, for example, the story had become so self-enclosed that it was nearly impossible to pick up an *X-Man* comic and have any sense of where you were if you hadn't read the previous 20 issues. Here is part of the dossier of a 1991 Marvel Comics supervillain from one of 160-odd similar bubble gum cards. His code name is Apocalypse.

"Battles Fought: 6344

Wins: 3993 Losses: 2135 Ties: 216

Win Percentage: 63%

Arch-enemies: X-Factor

First Appearance: *X-Factor* #5, June 1986

Apocalypse believes that only the strong survive, and that the weak must be destroyed. In his quest to weed out those he deems unfit to live, he manipulates various factions of mutants to battle each other to the death...

Did You Know: Apocalypse's former headquarters, a massive sentient starship, now serves as the headquarters for his arch-enemies, the super hero group known as X-Factor."

Though a sort of story was recaptured and with the help of television made to surround the child constantly, behind the special effects was an eerie inaction -- of which, at an adult level, the war in the Persian Gulf would be symbolic.

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