

Script

Reel Impact: Movies and TV that Changed History - "Patton" and Nixon

A well-written movie can not only change a person's viewpoints, but also have the potential to change history. Frank Deese explores President Richard Nixon's fascination with "Patton" and the potential impact of the movie on Nixon's decisions regarding the Vietnam War.

FRANK DEESE · JUL 1, 2020

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As screenwriters, our work has the capability to reach millions, if not billions – and sometimes what we do actually shifts public opinion, shapes the decision-making of powerful leaders, perpetuates destructive myths, or unexpectedly enlightens the culture. It isn't always "just entertainment." Sometimes it's history.

Bingeing on Patton – Richard Nixon and the Cambodian Invasion

In April of 1970, the United States was five years and roughly 50,000 battle deaths into its eight-year war against communist forces in the Cold-War-divided Southeast Asian country of Vietnam. Although American involvement in the region went back to the late 1940s when France re-colonized what was then called "French Indochina," U.S. ground combat forces did not arrive in country until Marines landed at Da Nang in March of 1965. The American fight was defending the South Vietnamese government against the North Vietnamese led by the very popular (in the North and in the South) Ho Chi Minh who had already defeated French Colonial forces in 1954 and, by 1968, was about to do the same to the United States. After the costly communist Tet Offensive and the soon-to-be-revealed horrific massacre by U.S. forces of hundreds of Vietnamese women and children at My Lai village, it was widely understood by most Americans that the war against communist hegemony was likely unwinnable at any reasonable cost. Richard Nixon was elected president after Lyndon Johnson promising "Peace with Honor" and by April of 1970 he had already begun gradual troop withdrawal under his program of "Vietnamization" – handing over the defense of South Vietnam to the South Vietnamese Army. But peace talks with North Vietnam had been stalled for months preventing his desired negotiated settlement. Nixon felt a strong need to break the stalemate and *end* the unpopular war without escalating the unpopular war. It was in this moment that the president saw for the first time the new 20 Century Fox biopic *Patton* based on the career of the controversial but tactically effective World War II general, George S. Patton – and was profoundly inspired.

Patton was a Hollywood movie conceived in a patriotic era and filmed in a cynical one. Producer Frank McCarthy, who had served as the secretary to the War Department's General Staff during World War II, had since the late 1950s wanted to make a movie about the flamboyant but effective General Patton who had successfully defeated German forces in North Africa, Sicily, and in Western Europe while subordinately serving under General Dwight D. Eisenhower. ("Let Ike learn what we're doing when he sees it on his map." – Patton defiantly said in the field.) The project about the "old blood and guts" general went through several permutations, at one time starring John Wayne, and then Burt Lancaster and originating with screenwriter Calder Willingham (*The Graduate*) who wrote a draft that was never used. As the development roulette pushed into the mid-1960s, which included a change of studio leadership at 20 Century Fox and a change in the cultural attitude toward the very idea of a popular war and a heroic general, Frank McCarthy turned to the young Francis Ford Coppola who had recently won the Samuel Goldwyn award for screenwriting as a film student at UCLA. Coppola was not interested in writing a script celebrating the WWII hero but desired to create a work with more dimensions which the real George S. Patton supplied in abundance. (Ironically, Coppola took as inspiration for his script about the dogged anti-Communist Patton Sergei Eisenstein's Soviet-celebratory film *October: Ten Days that Shook the World*.) Not the final writer on the project, Coppola's most significant contribution was the timeless-placeless, and therefore almost surreal, opening speech to unseen troops in front of a giant U.S flag – compiled and edited by the young writer from existing Patton speeches. Coppola was eventually replaced by a more traditional and conservative screenwriter, Edmund North; but when self-described pacifist George C. Scott came on board to star, he insisted that Fox, McCarthy, and recently-hired director Frank Schaffner return (mostly) to Coppola's draft.

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The contradictory directions in film's development perfectly suit the contradictions of the character of George S. Patton who in the film is a very flawed man perfectly suited to his moment in history. He has a foul mouth, but is a stickler for order and military discipline all while he sincerely believes himself to be a reincarnated warrior from ancient times chosen by destiny for his role in the war. He flouts congressional authority when he promotes himself to Lieutenant General before U.S. Senate approval. ("They have their schedule, and I have mine.") He is personally courageous under fire when he shoots at low-flying Luftwaffe fighter planes strafing field headquarters with his ivory-handled revolver as bullets pass between his legs. He gives no quarter to frightened soldiers and repeatedly slaps a shell-shocked G.I. who breaks down in front of him, an action for which he is excoriated by the American press and forced to issue an apology. Like Nixon, the Patton in the film believes he is misunderstood by his contemporaries and frustrated to serve under the much-beloved General Dwight D. Eisenhower just as Vice President Nixon had been frustrated to serve under the much-beloved *President* Dwight D. Eisenhower. Patton is depicted with contradictions and serious flaws, in large part thanks to Coppola's writing, and therefore much more believable a hero for Richard Nixon who first screened the film in the White House on April 4, 1970.

He was immediately enthralled and excited by *Patton*, telling his aide Bob Haldeman: "You should go see Patton. He inspired people! Charged them up! Bob, that's what a chief of staff should do."

The film seemed to deliver to Nixon a model of bold and courageous behavior. He was a man he wished to emulate even though that man was an adapted character – not exactly real, but the creation of screenwriter, actor, and director.

That month, Nixon's primary dilemma – except for a few days mid-month when the nation was captivated by the peril and safe return of the Apollo 13 astronauts – was breaking the stalemate in Vietnam. On April 20, Nixon announced plans to withdraw one hundred and fifty-thousand more U.S. troops, gradually transferring the war burden to the South Vietnamese. But the day before he had spent nearly two hours with Admiral John S. McCain Jr. (whose Navy pilot son John S. McCain III was a prisoner of war in Hanoi) who prevailed upon Nixon to invade Cambodia to drive out Vietnamese communist forces. It was the only way to withdraw troops honorably without giving in immediately to defeat and, maybe – just possibly – bring the war to victorious conclusion.

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After the meeting with McCain, Nixon spoke increasingly of seizing the advantage by invading neutral Cambodia and destroying the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong "sanctuaries" used to launch attacks against U.S and South Vietnamese forces. He confided to Haldeman: "Cut the crap from my schedule. I'm taking over here." And: "Troop withdrawal was a boy's job. Cambodia is a man's job."

Nixon wrote out a list of pros and cons for the Cambodia invasion and watched *Patton* again on the 24th (keep in mind Nixon was not streaming this on Netflix or sliding in a DVD but was watching what was likely ten projected reels of 35mm film) and then again on the 25th with George C. Scott's Coppola-curated opening speech in front of the flag:

"Americans love a winner and will not tolerate a loser."

"That's why Americans have never lost and will never lose a war. Because the very thought of losing is hateful to Americans." And:

"We are advancing constantly and we are not interested in holding on to anything, except the enemy. We are going to hold on to him by the nose, and we're gonna kick him in the ass. We're gonna kick the hell out of him all the time, and we're gonna go through him like crap through a goose!"

On April 30th, Nixon gave another speech to the nation, this time with a map of South Vietnam and Cambodia to delineate his fateful decision.

"If, when the chips are down, the world's most powerful nation, the United States of America, acts like a pitiful, helpless giant, the forces of totalitarianism and anarchy will threaten free nations and free institutions throughout the world."

And, finally:

"I would rather be a one-term President and do what I believe is right than to be a two-term President at the cost of seeing America become a second-rate power and to see this nation accept the first defeat in its proud 190-year history."

Nixon immediately solicited approval from friends and friendly members of the press regarding the speech and invasion, but found little. He watched *Patton* again the day after the speech, and then again on May 2nd – quite possibly to convince himself he had done the right thing – but maybe also to find comfort in the words of the beleaguered general also criticized by his contemporaries as Nixon was now being torn apart by the press. The angry reaction to the invasion on America's college campuses, which had recently seen significantly fewer anti-war protests, was just as immediate.

In Kent, Ohio, students raged through the downtown breaking windows, setting fires, and ultimately burning to the ground the ROTC building on the Kent State University campus. On Monday, May 4th, when classes were resuming from the weekend, the Ohio National Guard formed a line on a grassy hill on campus and launched tear gas canisters into the student protesters, some students boldly throwing them back. As the line of gas-masked guardsmen, most all close in age with the students and most all serving in the Guard to avoid being sent to Vietnam, mistakenly marched into a fenced dead end, confusion reigned on the line and twenty-seven of the guardsmen dropped to one knee and fired sixty-seven rifle bullets into the crowd. Nine students were injured and four were killed.

Nixon's invasion of Cambodia, and now the Kent State shootings, accelerated the angry reaction on campuses across the United States. On May 10th, twenty-three-year-old George Winne Jr., marched into Revelle Plaza on the UC San Diego campus wearing gasoline-soaked rags and a sign that read "In God's Name, End this War" He set himself on fire.

On May 15th, Mississippi Highway Patrol officers fired for a full thirty seconds into a crowd of African-American student protesters at Jackson State College killing two and injuring twelve.

Following Kent State, National Guardsmen were posted on twenty-one campuses in sixteen states while four hundred and eighty-eight universities and colleges closed completely, along with the entire public high school system in New York City. There were demonstrations and disruptions all over the country along with violent counter demonstrations in support of the President.

The invasion of Cambodia by the American and South Vietnamese temporarily achieved its goal, but the Vietnamese communist forces adapted by moving deeper into Cambodia which may have, along with the secret American bombings of eastern Cambodia, helped the Khmer Rouge rise and ultimately topple the U.S.-friendly Cambodian government in 1975 leading to two million deaths in the subsequent Cambodian genocide. American troops fighting in Vietnam remained until 1973 and, in 1975, communist forces finally took over the entire country creating a unified Vietnam.

President Nixon denied that his repeated viewing of *Patton* leading up to the invasion had any effect on his decision. That doesn't seem, however, like something a president would want to admit. As there is no record of him screening the film again for the remaining years in the White House, it seemed to be meaningful to him only at the time of his decision.

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The film itself has since been recognized as a classic with the [opening speech](#) as one of the most remembered scenes in film history. George C. Scott won the Oscar for his performance, but did not accept it, referring to the Academy Awards as a "goddamned meat parade." (The film earned Coppola his first Oscar for adapted screenplay. It also won Best Picture for 1970.)

Though seemingly balanced – and therefore a credible portrait – the film's depiction leaves out aspects of the actual George S. Patton that are far from admirable, if not hateful. After the war, Patton showed an unexpected sympathy for the defeated Nazis and repeatedly voiced disgust with the recently liberated Jews, referring to them in his diary as "locusts," "lost to all decency," and "a subhuman species without any of the cultural or social refinements of our times."

Before the war, in 1932, Patton assisted Douglas MacArthur, under the orders of then President Herbert Hoover, in destroying the encampments of World War I veterans seeking early payment of their bonuses during the economic crush of the Great Depression. One of the displaced veterans was Sergeant Joseph T. Angelo who won the Distinguished Service Cross for carrying a wounded Patton away from certain death during a battle in World War I. When the Angelo approached Patton after the raid against the veterans, Patton dismissed him, saying: "I do not know this man. Take him away and under no circumstances permit him to return."

These events, and other examples of anti-Semitism, his cruelty toward soldiers in desert training, and his privileged upbringing in Pasadena, California, fall outside the chronology of the film. But one can't help but imagine a fuller version of the actual George S. Patton, one revealing more narcissism than patriotism, would not be so readily admired by so many, and possibly not had the catastrophic impact it very likely did on President Richard Nixon.

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