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The Bitter Truth: An Analysis of the Fallacies Found in *The Green Berets*

Ignorance is bliss. A cliché, yes, but true nonetheless. The Mai Lai massacre, for instance, shows how the public's perception of the Vietnam War is completely different from the truth. American citizens blindly cheered on the government's decision to send troops into Southeast Asia not knowing that many of Vietnam's civilians were being tortured by U.S. soldiers. It was not until the real accounts of the war leaked out to the public that people realized the bitter truth. This naiveté is not surprising considering how much propaganda is used, not only by the government but by the media as well. To turn skeptics into believers, John Wayne's film, *The Green Berets*, portrays a romanticized perception of the Vietnam War. He asserts that there is a purpose for the U.S. troops' presence there. Director Oliver Stone's *Platoon*, however, presents a darker version of the war by exposing the flaws within the U.S. Army. An analysis of the *The Green Berets* juxtaposed against the more realistic *Platoon* reveals the fallacies within John Wayne's propaganda war film.

Throughout the entire duration of *The Green Berets*, director John Wayne is guilty of using various forms of ad populum fallacy to convince viewers. Ad populum fallacy is when one "... assumes that their claim can be adequately defended without further support if they emphasize a belief or attitude that the audience shares with them" (Rottenberg and Winchell 293). One form of ad populum appeal that is constantly present in the film is Wayne's use of patriotism. This is seen through two of his characters, Peterson and Beckworth. The earlier

parts of the film portray Peterson to be indifferent towards the war. As far as he is concerned, he only earns his position because Colonel Kirby sees resourcefulness in his acts of thievery. Meanwhile, Beckworth, a skeptical journalist, represents those who question the country's involvement in Southeast Asia. He merely follows the troops to Vietnam for work purposes. Their transformation from apathetic characters into patriotic soldiers is dramatically depicted near the end of the movie. Viewers note that Sergeant Peterson finally finds his purpose in being there when he chooses to lead the troops out of the forest, a dangerous task that few people take on. Likewise, the movie indicates that Beckworth's opinion of the war changes when he enlists in the army to go back to Vietnam and fight. Having these two stubborn characters undergo this change of heart leads the film's audience to believe that even the most dubious can be convinced that U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War is the best course of action. Contrast this situation with *Platoon's* protagonist, Sergeant Chris Taylor, who, rather than being drafted into the war, actually chooses to enlist. Delving deeper into the story, however, shows Taylor gradually regretting his decision to fight in the war. The glory that he once saw in fighting for his nation disappears more each day he remains in Vietnam, as he becomes more exposed to the flaws within his own comrades. Contrasting the two movies indicates that being part of the battlefield will not necessarily make one more patriotic, nor justify the reasons for being involved in the war.

Another form of ad populum fallacy is seen through John Wayne's use of heroism. He cleverly casts himself as Colonel Mike Kirby, relying on his own personal image as the iconic American war hero to persuade the audience. Having Colonel Mike Kirby show no sign of evil strongly appeals to the audience and is effective in convincing them that they too can be considered heroes if they join the war. On the other hand, *Platoon* introduces multiple characters

who do not possess Kirby's virtuous qualities. One of them is Sergeant Barnes, an atypical father figure for the troops. Unlike Kirby, Barnes is driven by his own incentives more than goals that would benefit the majority. He is a true disciple of Machiavelli in that he sees no problem using unethical methods so long as he gets what he wants. For example, as Barnes feels threatened by his ally, Sergeant Elias, he runs into the forest pretending to save him, but in reality, goes off to kill Elias himself.

Sergeant Red O'Neill also displays attributes unlike those shown in *The Green Berets*, such as cowardice. When Sergeant Barnes denies his request to leave Vietnam, Sergeant O'Neill's tough façade cracks and reveals a man overcome by fear. The rejection puts O'Neill in a state of frenzy, worried that he would die if he stays in Vietnam any longer. Contrast this with Bunny, another soldier in *Platoon*, who finds pure pleasure in being in the war. This is evident when Bunny tells Junior, "I told the padre the truth man, I like it here. Get to do what you want, nobody fucks with you." He abuses his role as a soldier to indulge in immoral behavior like committing brutal murders and rape—something that he would not be able to get away with if he was a civilian. The extreme differences in personality among Colonel Kirby and the characters in *Platoon* prove that merely serving in the war will not automatically make someone admirable.

The Green Berets is also liable of portraying a false dilemma fallacy of the Vietnam War. False dilemma occurs when the audience is presented an either-or situation, creating a "simplification of a complex problem" (Rottenberg and Winchell 290). According to *The Green Berets*, the victims of the war need the U.S. soldiers in order to live freely and reach political stability. The movie argues that without receiving help from America, the Vietnamese would never attain a civilized lifestyle and be forever trapped in communism's oppressive government. Although the reasons are convincing, *Platoon* shows the inconvenient truth that the army's

presence does not ensure that the situation can be solved. Unlike *The Green Berets*, the soldiers in Oliver Stone's film have no specific purpose in being there. In fact, most of the scenes in the movie are of the troops wandering aimlessly within the forests of Vietnam. Common recurrences of these scenes emphasize that the U.S. involvement in the war is not enough to rescue Vietnam from its problems.

In addition to the previous fallacies, the use of faulty emotional appeals, such as pity, is evident in *The Green Berets* as well. The film introduces Hamchunk, an innocent and fragile Vietnamese boy residing in the soldiers' campsite. Throughout the duration of the film, Hamchunk is orphaned three times: beginning with the death of his parents, his dog, and finally, Sergeant Peterson, who becomes a father figure to the child. Bearing witness to his hardships results in the audience taking pity not only for Hamchunk, but for those who are in a similar situation as he. The movie takes advantage of this emotional connection and suggests that this problem could be prevented with the help of the U.S. army. This is evident in the very last scene with Hamchunk and Colonel Kirby. Devastated after Sergeant Peterson's death, Hamchunk finds comfort through Colonel Kirby's words when he says, "You let me worry about that Green Beret. You're what this is all about." This line clearly represents how the movie preys upon the audience's emotions to justify the government's reasons for being in Vietnam. *Platoon*, however, reminds viewers that emotional appeals should not hinder one's judgment. Moreover, the movie demonstrates that U.S. involvement could in fact bring more harm to the innocent. This point is emphasized in one scene where soldiers come across a small village. Immediately, the soldiers display a show of unnecessary violence by torching the villagers' homes and brutally abusing its inhabitants. Sergeant Taylor is no exception to this act of cruelty, as he forces a mentally challenged local to dance by firing shots near his feet. Having the lead character participate in

the rampage successfully proves that the U.S. army's presence in Vietnam does not guarantee safety for its people.

Unmasking the multiple fallacies found in *The Green Berets* through an in-depth analysis of the film and its counterpart, *Platoon*, illustrates how propaganda is prominent throughout the entire movie. Furthermore, it points out that the war is not a truly effective method for helping out those in need and displaying acts of patriotism and heroism. Contrasting the two is not meant to deter the viewers from putting their complete trust on the government. While it may be more convenient for the public to blindly put its trust on a single source, the differences between the two movies reveal that it is imperative for society to practice precaution and do some research.

Works Cited

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