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The Politics of the Relationship Between the Motion Picture Industry and the Pentagon

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Images of rolling tanks, large explosions, and heroic tales have captivated American audiences of military-themed motion pictures for over fifty years. Those audiences, however, seldom realize the painstaking political processes involved in crafting Hollywood military masterpieces. This process is the result of a long-standing relationship between the movie industry and the Department of Defense. Economic concerns convince many film producers to rely on the U.S. military to provide the necessary equipment and venues for a compelling story in exchange for a thorough script review and adherence to military protocol. This process gives the Pentagon a powerful position in crafting America's military perspective at the box office. It is also the subject of criticism by those who claim that the process conflicts with fundamental democratic principles. This paper argues that the U.S. government's involvement in shaping the scripts of military-themed films creates a unique and contrasting nexus with characteristics of both open-market capitalism and monopolistic control, and that at its core the process of making a military-themed film is more political than the finished product, regardless of the film's message or the writer's intent, because of this symbiotic relationship.

The intricate relationship between the military and film began early in the twentieth century. "The U.S. Navy, the first service to see the potential of this visual medium, sent pseudo-documentaries portraying its activities to the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis. Later, these were used to recruit farm-boys in the Middle West" ("US Military History Companion"). The relationship quickly transitioned from the military making documentaries to the military supplementing the motion picture industry in the making of military-themed films. The debate regarding the careful consideration of the military's interests began almost as early as the relationship itself. The 1916 film *Submarine Pirate* benefited from the government with a loaned naval submarine. In contrast, however, the Navy denied a similar request, in the name of a battleship, to the film *Madame Butterfly*, in 1915. "Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels felt the story did not reflect credit on the Naval Service" ("US Military History Companion"). The agreement between Hollywood and the Pentagon is basic. "On many occasions films have been changed so that the U.S.

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