



## Hollywood's bad guy problem

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When you think about it, World War II was far from black and white. Sure, the German and Japanese militarists were evil, but Britain and the United States did terrible things too. They killed hundreds of thousands of German and Japanese civilians, and they allied themselves with the Soviet Union, which was every bit as awful as the Axis. The outcome was ambiguous because, although Germany and Japan were defeated, the Iron Curtain descended from Eastern Europe to North Korea.

Yet for 60 years, Hollywood has had no problem making movies that depict World War II as a struggle of good versus evil. Rightly so. Because for all the Allies' faults, they were the good guys.

For some reason, Hollywood can't take an equally clear-eyed view of the war on terrorism. The current

conflict, pitting the forces of freedom against those of Islamofascism, is every bit as clear cut as World War II. Yet fashionable filmmakers insist on painting both sides in shades of gray, as if Israeli secret agents or American soldiers were comparable to Al Qaeda killers. Two of the most serious holiday flicks – "Syriana" and "Munich" – are case studies in mindless moral relativism and pathetic pseudo-sophistication.

"Syriana" purports to shed light on the relationship between oil, terrorism, the United States and the Middle East. Unfortunately, the plot makes almost no sense. Even the title is puzzling. Writer/director Stephen Gaghan claims that he heard "Syriana" used in "think tanks in Washington" to refer to a "re-drawing of the boundaries in the Middle East." I work in a think tank with a large D.C. office, and I've never heard that term. Neither have

Middle East experts I consulted. In any case, the movie has nothing to do with redrawing boundaries. In short, the title is an attempt at a knowing insider allusion that only illuminates Gaghan's cluelessness.

To the extent that "Syriana" has any message, it seems to be that greedy oil companies, corrupt politicians and malevolent CIA big shots are the bad guys in the Middle East. Two of the most positive characters are a Hezbollah kingpin, who offers CIA operative Bob Barnes (George Clooney) safe passage, and a Pakistani laborer who is driven to become a suicide bomber after being laid off by an American oil company.

The Bob character is said to be based on former CIA officer Robert Baer, but "Syriana" has nothing in common with his memoir, "See No Evil," which depicted his struggles in the 1980s against Hezbollah and in the 1990s against Saddam Hussein.

In real life, Baer got into trouble for plotting to kill Hussein, a terrible dictator. In reel life, Bob gets in trouble for trying to kill a nice Persian Gulf prince who apparently offends Washington by wanting to sell oil to a Chinese, not an American, firm. That's quite a difference. News flash to Gaghan: Canada has agreed to sell oil to China, and the CIA isn't bumping off Canadian leaders.

"Munich" is a more compelling film but just as specious morally. It tells

the story of a Mossad hit team sent to avenge the murders of 11 Israeli athletes at the 1972 Summer Olympics by eliminating 11 Palestinian terrorists. The Israelis become tortured by their assignment. As one team member says: "All this blood comes back to us." The movie reinforces this cycle-of-violence theme with constant references to all the terrorist attacks carried out by the PLO after the Olympics. The implication is that if the Israelis weren't killing PLO operatives, they would stop killing Jews.

Director Steven Spielberg has made clear that's his view, telling Time magazine: "A response to a response doesn't really solve anything. It just creates a perpetual-motion machine.... The only thing that's going to solve this is rational minds, a lot of sitting down and talking until you're blue in the gills."

Where has Spielberg been for the last 15 years? Israel tried his "blue in the gills" approach in the 1990s, but the Oslo process only led to greater bloodshed. Israel defeated the second intifada not by chatting with terrorists but by fighting them. "Munich" depicts assassinations as pointless. In reality, Israel's policy of targeted killings has dramatically reduced the threat from Hamas and other extremist groups.

The lesson of World War II still stands: Civilized countries must use violence to defeat barbarians. Why is that so hard for Hollywood to understand?

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