

## The depiction of military culture in *Hearts and Minds*

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Although some might disagree with the depiction of the United States military and government administration culture as seen in *Hearts and Minds*, it is in fact a true depiction. Director Peter Davis focuses on the importance of injecting opposing ideology into the marketplace of ideas in order for people to question, to further dialogue, and to influence self-scrutiny. Several scholarly articles refer to *Hearts and Minds* as an antiwar film (Sargant, 2005, pp. 13). Although director, Peter Davis, states various times that his intention is not to create an antiwar film (Davis, 1974). Depending on the feedback from the audience, some can find ways to justify the documentary as being anti-United States through its depiction of the military culture and actions in Vietnam. The United States population is being educated via propaganda from the government that the United States military and government acts with high morality at all times (Begines, 1992, pp. 93). For this reason in the mid-twentieth century, it was difficult to consider the possibility that the military and the government in fact had elements that act in complete opposition to the standards of morality that the United States citizens might expect. Peter Davis visually depicts the lack of moral judgment in areas of the military and government through various scenes in the film. Some of these scenes include the battle field in Vietnam, others are shown throughout Saigon, and additional scenes include policy makers in the United States during the Vietnam War. Elements of the lack of morality in the military, opposite of what the average United States citizen would think of, is shown through subject matter such as war crimes, prostitution, mental manipulation, and drug abuse. Although some United States citizens tend to shy away from such material and quickly label any documentary that shows such acts as being anti-United States or anti-military, there are various Hollywood films that reinforce the military ideology that Davis shows in *Hearts and Minds*. These films include films such as

*Full Metal Jacket* (Kubrick, 1987), *The War at Home* (Silber, 1979), *Platoon* (Stone, 1986), *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola, 1979), and *Hamburger Hill* (Irvin, 1987) (Dittmar, L., Michaud, G., 1990). Other films also depict the same type of immoral military ideology such as *Good Morning Vietnam* (Levinson, 1987) and *Forrest Gump* (Zemeckis, 1994). Many sources reveal the justification of the message that many of these documentaries and films are attempting to show. There is for example direct video footage, as seen in *Hearts and Minds*, and also detailed occurrences that are told by veterans themselves and through the Congressional Vietnam hearings that began in 1966 (Fulbright). These sources account for the strong foundation and basis that describes the military culture in Vietnam and the government misleading in the United States, opposing the idealistic image that United States citizens held about the military and government during the 1950's and 1960's. Elements that become part of the larger picture of the immoral culture depicted by the military include a victory-regardless-of-collateral-damage philosophy, the consideration of what human life is, use of chemical weapons and torture, and drug use along with prostitution.

Davis, in the production of *Hearts and Minds*, is successful at depicting the victory-regardless-of-collateral-damage philosophy of some key individuals in the military. Not only did he achieve this through analogies such as the football scene, but he also achieved this through the interviews of the veterans and prisoner's of war. Obviously, it is assumed that a nation would want its military to win and thus this wouldn't quite justify as an element of immorality, but the degree of collateral damage that is exhibited during Vietnam and depicted by Davis is the foundation that forms the immoral culture based on this ideology. The military personnel and troops are held to a high standard and are expected to win; to some of the troops this is received as having to side-step morals during times of war in order to achieve the mission that they've been trained to do. According to Begines (1992, pp. 93), "They [the troops] are expected to win wars, to secure America's place in the world arena, and to fulfill their moral responsibilities to their soldiers, fellow officers, and the American public". The problem with this mentality is running the risk of deception and not being able to accept the truth or worse, not willing to communicate the truth within the ranks of command and the public. Although it is sometimes necessary for military operation to manipulate the flow of information for strategy and tactical purposes, it is questionable for the government to manipulate information in order to mislead the public and build

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false support. Davis shows this winning mentality through his documentary in order to communicate the risks of this win-at-all costs mentality. Given that the documentary was released in 1974, after the Congressional hearings that began in 1966 and lasted until 1973, and after the commencement of United States troop withdrawal in 1969, (Associated Press, 2005), the documentary took advantage of the opportunity to exploit and comment on a current issue and the regards of immoral actions taken by the military and the administrations during war. The United States, although began withdrawing troops, continued supporting Saigon until it fell to North Vietnam in 1975. The release of the documentary in 1974, after public disagreement with the war had already grown substantially, allowed Davis to depict the ongoing lies told by several administrations about the purpose and the actual situation in Vietnam. By 1971, an opinion poll showed that only 34 percent of the United States population approved the Vietnam War strategy (The Vietnam War). Davis provided a vision of the developing immoral military and government culture to balance out the intensive rhetoric at that time that the President knows best and the military does not make mistakes; something that Davis himself showed in the documentary as some people still believing in. This type of military culture of the win-at-all costs situation has been analyzed by various individuals. According to Kirkland, "Professional ignorance is the mortal enemy of military authority. When a person in a position of leadership does not know what to do, he is embarrassed, and he may often use bluff, lies, and undue emphasis on matters he does understand to cover his ignorance" (Kirkland, 2005, pp. 181). From *Hearts and Minds*, it can be seen how this mortal enemy not only affected the military culture in Vietnam but also affected the communication to the public from the administration. As Davis mentioned in his commentary audio over the documentary, the public has an automatic trust for the administration and the military during the 1950's and 1960's, but the Vietnam War along with documentaries such as *Hearts and Minds* that begged for questions to be asked and *The Pentagon Papers* controversy, began to change people's inherit trust in the administration. *The Pentagon Papers*, exposed in 1971, although briefly mentioned in *Hearts and Minds*, described the true intentions of why the United States was interfering in Vietnam and the lies created in order to gain the support of Congress and the people, to the point that Kirkland stated, "President Lyndon Johnson did not trust the public to understand this purpose of the US intervention, so he espoused justifications, such as a need for Vietnamese oil and South Vietnamese requests for US protection against

North Vietnamese aggressions, that were subsequently demonstrated to be untrue" (Kirkland, 2005, pp. 162). The question of why the United States was in Vietnam was one of the vital questions that *Hearts and Minds* attempted to influence people to think about by displaying some of the immoral and questionable decisions of the military in Vietnam and the administration in the United States.

Another method that Davis uses in his documentary to debunk the belief that government officials and the administration are always in the public's interest, and additionally to cause the viewers to ask questions is via the depiction of the value of human life. A very strong quote from the documentary is that of General William Westmoreland who stated, "The oriental doesn't put the same high price on life as does the westerner. Life is plentiful; life is cheap in the orient. As the philosophy of the orient expresses it, life is not important." Davis symbolically juxtaposes images of Vietnamese grieving for their dead thus contradicting what General Westmoreland is stating. Although some might believe that General Westmoreland's statement is the exception and not the military-culture way of thinking in Vietnam, Davis shows that the General's statement was very accurate when describing military culture. Davis shows this through the various interviews he has with veterans and the film he captured while in Vietnam (1974). For example, during an interview with Lt. George Coker, a returned POW, Lt. Coker stated, "You just have no time for personal thoughts when you're flying around 500 to 600 miles per hour" (Davis, 1974). Davis interviewed another Air Force pilot that iterated the same philosophy as that of Lt. Coker; their emphasis was on their expertise and how proud they were of being able to fly and bomb things accurately and how it is thrilling and exciting to see things blow up, they really didn't think of the people (Davis, 1974). Lt. Coker is filmed while giving a talk to a group of young children and one of those children asks him how Vietnam looks like and Lt. Coker responded, "Well if it wasn't for the people, it was really pretty. The people over there are very back-warded; very primitive, they just make a mess of everything" (Davis, 1974). Additional quotes that reflect the ideology that Davis is depicting include, "I was sitting there at the base of the hill and I was on one of those tanks and I had a M-16 and a stack of magazines and there was two guys going through grass and bang, I dinged in one of them and I nailed him. That felt good, and I wanted more... it wasn't that I wanted more for politics or anything like that. I just wanted them because they were the opposition, they were the enemy" (Davis, 1974). There were

also additional scenes shown in the documentary such as a soldier pushing his gun's barrel into the head of an elderly Vietnamese woman or the scene of a Vietnamese being executed in public. Through all these interviews and depictions, Davis begins to form the separation between the soldiers and the Vietnamese people. It was this separation and the training provided to soldiers that causes them to not think about how many Vietnamese they were killing or who they might have been. Davis also shows how the Vietnamese were dehumanized by the assignment of derogatory names. During one of the interviews with former Corporal Stan Holder, he admits that he was brainwashed by the military and now as he thinks back as being someone who was called derogatory names by his drill sergeant, he couldn't believe how easy it was for him to use derogatory terms against the Vietnamese people (Davis, 1974). This dehumanization and the military culture in Vietnam lead to incidents such as the My Lai massacre in Vietnam in which the members of Charlie Company attacked the village of My Lai and killed, tortured, and raped the inhabitants including elderly women and children (Hersh, pp. 186). Although the massacre was not mentioned in *Hearts or Minds*, Davis depiction of an immoral military culture brings such an incident closer to acceptance within the hearts and minds of the people of the United States and opens the door for more questions to be asked and for the truth to be revealed.

Davis does not stop the depiction of the military culture only at the value placement of life on the Vietnamese; he also portrays the value of women in the view of the military culture in Vietnam. Davis includes two scenes in his documentary showing the treatment of women as sex objects and focuses on the field of prostitution between United States military men and the women of Vietnam. Although some might argue that the prostitution acts shown in the documentary are the exception and not the norm, it has been revealed through veteran stories, Congressional hearings, and the media of the fairly common occurrence of prostitution between military men and Vietnamese women. It is a chilling thought that military men would participate in prostitution that is filmed and acted in a room filled with other prostitutes and men watching (Davis, 1974). It is this type of disrespect and questionable morality that Davis depicts as part of the immoral culture of the military that was definitely different than what a United States citizen back at home would be thinking about when asked about the United States military. Several of the acts involving a separation between the ideological view of the military and the actual military culture also include the use of heroin. In

1971, there was a study conducted by the Special Action Office on Drug Abuse Prevention that showed that at least 45% of soldiers returning had used opium or heroin and 34% had taken heroin at least once (Robins). Prostitution and drug use was common among military men and affected hearts and minds of the Vietnamese and of the United States citizens towards the military.

“Military culture defines the ways an armed force does its business in peacetime and in combat, provides the foundation for relations between ranks, and defines the responsibilities of leaders for the personal, professional, and familial welfare of their personnel.” (Kirkland, 2003, pp. 159). Davis shows and is successful at developing a more realistic military culture than what is normally communicated by the government. Because of this, some individuals might take offense to how the military is portrayed by Davis, but it is this type of opposition that is vital and crucial in the marketplace of ideas. Without opposition and without the basis to influence people to ask questions, the risk of believing in a virtual world created by a political administration will be severe. Being influenced and having knowledge of the immoral components of the military helps the discovery process of truth. Such as how Edward Sowers, one of the deserters who was not in agreement with the military-culture, came forth and exposed the truth, “Instead of helping the Vietnamese people, I saw that we were party to their deliberate and systematic destruction. The Vietnamese were considered less than humans and inferiors. Their lives weren't worth anything to us because we were taught that they were all fanatical and that they were all VC or VC sympathizers, even the children.” (Davis, 1974). Documentaries such as *Hearts and Minds*, serve a very important role in society. The audience receives a different look than what is being sent down the channels of traditional propaganda from the government. It also brings into topics of discussion the importance of military culture and its affect on foreign policy. Davis accomplishment with *Hearts and Minds* even brings the film into current discussions with similarities in the War of Iraq. As Kirkland stated, “A system of credible ethics in the culture of an armed force is an essential foundation for its fighting power” (Kirkland, 2005, pp. 159). According to Rollins, “Vietnam was America's first ‘television war’” (1984, pp. 429). Ever since then, wars have become public and are followed by film crews. It is more vital than any other time to have a clear understanding of what is our military culture and how that affects what the government is communicating so to have it in check because the rest of the world

will be critiquing it. It is only fair to have balanced information about the actions of the military and military-culture in war situations because it will affect foreign policy.

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