

The Profound Contradiction of Saving Private Ryan

What was the film really trying to say?

When it was released 16 years ago, I didn't get it.

I knew Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* was supposed to be a masterpiece. The best-known film critics in the country said so. Janet Maslin, for example, hailed it as "the finest war movie of our time." The film and its director both won Golden Globes, Spielberg received an Academy Award for directing, and more than 60 critics named *Saving Private Ryan* the best picture of the year.

The most serious students of the Second World War shared the enthusiasm for the film. Historian Stephen Ambrose, author of *D-Day* and *Citizen Soldiers*, thought it "the finest World War II movie ever made." . . . And I knew that almost everybody else agreed with them.

Like everyone else in the theater, I spent most of three hours wincing involuntarily in my seat, shocked by the unrelenting mayhem of a daylight amphibious assault across a barren killing field, sickened by the sudden hash that light artillery can make of human bodies. . . and—in the end—twitching at even the slightest clatter of mechanized warfare.

Like everyone else, I wondered at the courage or desperation or whatever it was that drove American soldiers across a French beach, codenamed Omaha, under the withering spray of German machine-gun rounds from hilltop fortifications and the flesh-shredding explosions of 105mm howitzer shells lobbed by inland artillery.

And like everyone else, I had to agree that it was brilliant filmmaking—except for the beginning and the end. Spielberg actually opens and closes the film twice, employing two pairs of images to bracket the war movie everyone praised. The first and last thing we see pulsing across the entire screen is a faded, translucent American flag. Can we understand the flag as anything but an announcement of the subject of his epic: patriotism? The fluttering flag, denatured of its color and perhaps of its vitality, is the image with which the film begins and ends. But Spielberg wraps not only the war in the flag but also the cloyingly sentimental frame story of an elderly veteran, followed by his wife, son, and grandchildren, on his pilgrimage to the vast cemetery overlooking the Normandy beachhead, now marked by row after row of simple headstones.

Nearly every commentator criticized this prologue and epilogue. Janet Maslin conceded that these scenes are among the film's "few false notes." Others derided this opening and closing as "maudlin," "completely unnecessary," and "a burst of schmaltzy ritual."

So this is what I didn't get. The opening and the closing of any work should be the two moments of greatest emphasis (as Spielberg's English-teacher hero, Captain John Miller, would no doubt have taught his high-school students back home in Addley, Pennsylvania). How could such a formidable filmmaker have botched the beginning and the end of his film?

But now, looking back as the 70th anniversary of D-Day approaches, I've begun to doubt that the opening and the closing of *Saving Private Ryan* are missteps. In fact, I've come to think that, even if maudlin, they are the whole point of the war story they introduce and conclude.

What is that story? Surviving the bloodbath of Omaha Beach, a handpicked squad of Rangers are sent to extricate a paratrooper, James Ryan, from the intense fighting behind enemy lines because his three brothers have been killed in combat. Despite the efforts of his subordinates to dissuade him from authorizing the

mission, General George C. Marshall determines to save Ryan's mother from a fourth telegram of condolence, quoting as his rationale, at times from memory, a worn letter to a Mrs. Lydia Bixby:

Dear Madam,

I have been shown in the files of the War Department a statement of the Adjutant General of Massachusetts that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle. I feel how weak and fruitless must be any word of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the republic they died to save. I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom.

Yours very sincerely and respectfully,

A. Lincoln

Lincoln, unlike Marshall, does not hint that her grief deserves greater respect than that of any other mother deprived by the war of a son, nor that he would risk, even after Gettysburg, a single other soldier to preserve her from such loss. His eloquent letter expresses sentiment, not sentimentality. Spielberg's Marshall, on the other hand, seems unable to distinguish between sentimentality and morality.

In fact, Lincoln had been misinformed. Mrs. Bixby had protested the enlistment of her sons, and while two were killed in combat, another returned safely home after an exchange of prisoners of war. The final two sons deserted, one even fleeing the country. And, as M. Lincoln Schuster points out in *A Treasury of the World's Great Letters*, the widely circulated letter was denounced by Lincoln's opponents as "cheap and ostentatious." One paper even questioned Lincoln's right to pen such words while his own two sons, one still a child but the other 21, were "kept at home in luxury, far from the dangers of the field."

These details—absent, of course, from the film—are not merely curious footnotes. The great bulk of dialogue in *Saving Private Ryan* not directly connected to the prosecution of battles is dedicated to an ongoing debate about the morality of the squad's mission. No one makes a case that their mission is heroic. It is idiocy and, as far as the soldiers are concerned, immoral idiocy. What of the grief of their mothers, they wonder. The true story behind the eloquent words and heroic sentiments with which General Marshall sends these soldiers to their deaths makes clear that Lincoln's letter is empty, as it turns out, of everything except rhetoric. But soldiers don't need a history lesson to recognize the emptiness of rhetoric when they are about to become its victims. The morality of risking eight men to save one is an equation that makes no sense to a soldier.

Over and over again, the fundamental theorem of war—that one is sacrificed to save many—is examined. When the squad encounters a downed pilot whose troop transport crashed, killing 22 men, because his plane had been made unflyable by the steel plates added to its belly to protect from ground fire a brigadier general on board, everyone understands that to risk the safety of many to protect one (even if he is a general) is wrong and, in war, always dangerous.

Approaching the climactic battle, Spielberg billets his soldiers in an abandoned church. While his men talk about their own mothers, Captain Miller defends the loss of 94 soldiers, one by one, under his command. Reminiscent of Shakespeare's disguised Henry V debating with English yeomen anxiously awaiting dawn at Agincourt a commander's responsibility for the death of his men in battle, Miller justifies his actions to his sergeant (and, obviously, to himself) by insisting upon the 10 or even 20 times more men he has saved by

sacrificing one man. That's what allows him to choose the mission over the man, he explains. But this time, the sergeant responds, the mission is the man. Spielberg could not be more explicit in condemning the effort to save Private Ryan as immoral, at least in terms of the morality of the battlefield.

Henry V is a useful comparison in another regard, as well. The most stirring of battle eve addresses, Henry's St. Crispin's Day speech rallies "we happy few" on to victory against overwhelming odds with images of glory, honor, and patriotic fervor. Despite the flapping flag and swelling music as the credits roll, Spielberg puts in the mouth of his commander, Captain Miller, no praise of homeland, no defense of democracy, no attack on fascism in rallying his troops. Instead, their commander simply says he just wants to go home to his wife. As his men have made clear repeatedly, as far as they are concerned, Private Ryan can go to hell. But if going to hell to save Ryan earns Miller the right to go back to his wife, then he'll go to hell. And hell, a French village named Ramelle, is exactly where he finds the boy, guarding the last remaining bridge across the River Styx, a little stream the French call the Merderet.

The absence of patriotic principles in his defense of the mission becomes quite striking when one compares Miller's speech about the war and his wife to another Civil War letter. A week before his death at the first battle of Bull Run, Major Sullivan Ballou of the Second Rhode Island addressed these words to his wife: "I have no misgivings about, or lack of confidence in the cause in which I am engaged, and my courage does not halt or falter. I know how strongly American Civilization now leans on the triumph of the Government, and how great a debt we owe to those who went before us through the blood and sufferings of the Revolution. And I am willing—perfectly willing—to lay down all my joys in this life, to help maintain this Government, and to pay that debt." Major Ballou goes on to affirm, "Sarah my love for you is deathless, it seems to bind me with mighty cables that nothing but Omnipotence could break; and yet my love of Country comes over me like a strong wind and bears me irresistibly on with all these chains to the battle field."

No less in love with his wife than Miller seems to be, the Union officer finds the words to assert his devotion to the flag under which he fights. However, in nearly three hours, apart from the letter by Lincoln that General Marshall reads and the one that he himself writes to Ryan's mother, *Saving Private Ryan* offers not a single word about love of country. Generals may still talk like their Civil War counterparts, but soldiers in the field have ceased to cloak their duty in such sentiments.

The Germans depicted are just as bewildered, terrified, and anxious to return to their families as the Americans. Of course, there is no shortage of cruelty and brutality. Nazis move through battle-scarred streets indifferently finishing off wounded Americans, but, early in the film, we have witnessed callous GIs mowing down surrendering Germans with a laugh. And the transformation of a cowardly American interpreter who coldly butchers a captured German he earlier has argued to spare is one of the most troubling moments in the film. Spielberg never suggests that we are any better than our enemy or, to put it more generously, that they are any worse than we are. On the contrary, he seems to be at pains to show the equality of men under any flag when the shooting begins. So this is not a patriotic film; if anything, it argues that patriotism is beside the point in modern warfare. Even the mission itself has no heroic or patriotic aim; there is no hill to be taken, no redoubt to be stormed. Its goal, according to Captain Miller, is public relations.

Why then does the film begin and end with Spielberg's flag-waving and a tearful grandfather mourning at the graves of fallen comrades? Are they merely hedges against the insidious argument of the film that even our last "good" war was as meaningless in its brutality and empty in its heroism as the conflict in Vietnam? Though *Saving Private Ryan* amply documents the extraordinary courage of men under fire and suggests the tide of grief their families endured, it never addresses the point of their heroism. How can it honor the horrendous sacrifices our parents and grandparents made when the film seems to demonstrate that neither glory, morality, patriotism, nor any clear meaning attended the slaughter of millions?

Spielberg, aware of this contradiction, told a 1998 gathering of entertainment writers in Los Angeles that the movie is really about how two opposing things can both be true. The mission can't be justified on moral or patriotic grounds, and yet the toughest soldier in the squad, Sergeant Horvath, says saving Private Ryan might be the one decent thing they "were able to pull out of this whole godawful, shitty mess."

This is not the only contradiction in the director's historical works.

How can one explain Spielberg's choice, in his film on the Holocaust, to make its hero a German profiteer and, in his film on slavery, to make its hero a white leader of a slave economy? Of course, a Jewish clerk in *Schindler's List* prods his German employer to outwit the Final Solution and an enslaved African in *Amistad* goads a white former president of the United States to outmaneuver the very legal system (dedicated, as it was, to the preservation of slavery) that his oath of office had sworn him to uphold and defend. But the director leaves no doubt as to which character is the central focus of the narrative conflict: Since monstrous systems of exploitation constrain both Jew and African from independent action, only the beneficiaries of those inhumane systems are capable of change and, thus, able to serve as the protagonists of these dramas. Though we may assume these two films are about suffering—and presented with the vivid depiction of cruelty a camera can offer, an audience may find it difficult to look beyond such graphic images of misery to another, subtler subject—*Schindler's List* and *Amistad* are, in fact, about guilt and responsibility. They are not, as many imagine, noble memorials to the millions of victims of the Holocaust and slavery; rather, they are agonized meditations on all of those somehow implicated in those vast human tragedies.

A similar, though much more complex, contradiction beats at the very heart of *Saving Private Ryan* and accounts for the dissonance noted by virtually every critic between the body of the film and its opening and closing. How can the sentimental tableau of a weeping old man, his wife, his son, his daughter-in-law, and his grandchildren possibly serve as a fit conclusion to so savage and unsentimental a film?

Spielberg himself offered a clue when, continuing his conversation with those entertainment writers in Los Angeles, he described his father's own war stories: "I was supposed to wave the flag and be patriotic and say that without his efforts I wouldn't have the freedoms I had or even the freedom to have the bicycle I was riding." Only later did the director realize that it wasn't "a bunch of bunk he was telling me." John Miller, the high-school teacher from Pennsylvania, teaches Jimmy Ryan the same lesson.

Private Ryan, a dazed kid surrounded by the bodies of men who were absurdly ordered to their deaths to save him, is given the equally absurd command by the dying hero, Captain Miller, to "earn this" and must now bear the terrible, impossible order until his own death.

But don't we all struggle under Ryan's moral burden? And how can Ryan, or for that matter any of us, ever pay such a debt—and to whom? At the end of *Saving Private Ryan*, as a grandfather and his son and grandchildren pay homage to those whose deaths we have just witnessed, the living are called not merely to bear witness to the achievement of fallen heroes; the living are, in fact, the achievement itself. Like Private Ryan, we cannot help but ask what we've done to deserve such sacrifice by others and beg their forgiveness for what we have cost them. And like James Ryan, all we can do to justify that sacrifice is to live our lives as well as we are able.

This is not to suggest Spielberg has made a perfect film. There is a difference between virtuosity and genius, between a tour de force and a masterpiece. *Saving Private Ryan* is flawed, in part because it loses its nerve. Those surviving veterans who actually leapt into the reddened surf of Omaha Beach have attested to the accuracy of the film's depiction of modern war and, particularly, of the Normandy Invasion; for that artistic

accomplishment, the director deserves all the accolades heaped upon him. On the other hand, the flag-waving patriotism it pretends at in its first and last shots is as transparent as the faded flag Spielberg waves across the screen.

But the prologue and epilogue, even if they are embarrassingly sentimental in their presentation and do pander, perhaps, to their audience, pose what remains a fundamental question after the blood-drenched 20th century: What is our responsibility to those who have gone before us? *Saving Private Ryan* is not about those who suffered; it is about those who have been spared suffering. Spielberg's subject, in the end, is not the courage of the soldiers who fought at Normandy; his subject is the debt owed them by their children and their children's children. As we approach the 70th anniversary of the largest amphibious assault in history, we should remember that Mrs. Ryan's son was not the only child those brave men saved.