

Platoon and the 1980s

[This is an inquiry about my review of the movie *Platoon* which I received from a college student who had been in the Iraq War, together with my reply. -S.H.]

----- Original Message -----

From: Jerry ...

To: Scott H.

Sent: April 11, 2009

Subject: platoon

hi scott, i was wondering if you could give me some insight in how the movie platoon relates to the 80's. what issues were portrayed in the that reflected some of the issues in that time period (the 80's) does that make sense? i'm writing a term paper on this and i need something to start my opening argument. and after reading your response to 'pip' i would respect your ideas. i probably don't have the mental capacity to formulate such a complex argument but maybe further along the road i will be as smart as you guys. i was in Iraq - and u didn't have to be intelligent to fight - just physically fit - so now i'm working on getting smart. so can u help me? i just drank a beer and probably killed two brain cells - that being said this email is time sensitive - cause if u take too long to respond i could be cave man status. ok i'm rambling..

jerry

Reply sent: April 12, 2009

Hi Jerry,

I'm afraid I can't provide much help to you. For one thing, it's been so long now since I've seen *Platoon* that I really don't remember it all that well.

Just some general comments about the 1960s and the 1980s, though. As I'm sure you're aware, what we call "the 1960s" period actually lasted well into the 1970s, though it was tapering off rapidly after the end of the Vietnam War. Many of the young college kids who were radicalized during the 1960s (because of the Vietnam War and the draft, and because of the Black Liberation struggle in the U.S.) sort of eased back into their fairly comfortable middle class lives. They didn't so much change their ideas (against U.S. wars, against discrimination towards Blacks, and for equality for women, etc.), but most of them became much less *active* about actually doing anything about these sorts of problems.

This trend toward helpless acquiescence on the part of the recently radicalized strongly intensified during the 1980s. The whole Reagan period marked a further qualitative shift away from political activism on the part of the youth. Of course there were always some (especially

those of us who had become Marxists) who kept trying to change things, but for society as a whole—even among the youth—there was a shift to the right.

Movies like *Platoon* that would have been harshly criticized by radicals as excuse making for imperialism if they had appeared in the early or mid-1970s, now seemed fairly progressive in the more reactionary climate of the late 1980s.

This comparatively reactionary period was at its peak under Reagan and the first Bush, but continued to a considerable degree afterward. It started to dissolve with the anti-globalization demonstrations and the new century, but then the 9/11 attacks led to a several-year period of additional right-wing jingoism and “anti-terrorist” fanaticism in the U.S. Even so, there was a huge resurgence of anti-war feeling as Bush II cranked up the U.S. war machine to invade Iraq. The core of this resurgence was actually us old-farts “60s people”, though it was reinforced by sections of the youth.

Of course now we’re into a really new period as the U.S. and world economy sink into a second Great Depression. This will undoubtedly lead to a great new wave of radicalization, especially on the part of college students and other youth, but also quite likely on the part of adults who are having their illusions smashed as they lose their jobs and homes. The objective situation is rapidly become far more conducive to mass radicalization once again.

Congratulations to you personally for seriously looking into these social questions after your experience in Iraq. It is the unpleasant reality of such experiences that lead to some real thinking and investigation of society.

If you have some other specific issues you’d like to get into, I’d be happy to discuss them with you!

Best wishes,
Scott Harrison

bcc: A few friends