

Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era

By Susan Jeffords

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Hard Bodies is about Ronald Reagan, Robert Bly, "America," Rambo, Dirty Harry, national identity, and individual manhood. By linking blockbuster Hollywood films of the 1980s to Ronald Reagan and his image, Susan Jeffords explores the links between masculinity and U.S. identity and how their images changed during that decade. Her book powerfully defines a distinctly ideological period in the renegotiation of masculinity in the post-Vietnam era. As Jeffords perceptively notes, Reagan was most effective at constructing and promoting his own image. His election in 1980 and his landslide re-election in 1984 offered politicians and the film industry some insight into "what audiences want to see." Audiences--and constituencies--were looking for characters who stood up for individualism, liberty, anti-governmentalism, militarism, and who embodied a kind of mythic heroism. The administration in Washington and Hollywood filmmakers sensed and tried to fill that need. Jeffords describes how movies meshed inextricably with Reagan's life as he cast himself as a hero and influenced the country to believe the same script. Invoking Clint Eastwood in his speeches and treating scenes from movies as if they were real, Reagan played on his image in order to link popular and national narratives. Hollywood returned the compliment.

Through her illuminating and detailed analyses of both the Reagan presidency and many blockbuster movies, Jeffords provides a scenario within which the successes of the New Right and the Reagan presidency can begin to be understood: she both encourages an understanding of how this complicity functioned and provides a framework within which to respond to the New Right's methods and arguments. Rambo, Lethal Weapon, Die Hard, Robocop, Back to the Future, Star Wars, the Indiana Jones series, Mississippi Burning, Rain Man, Batman, and Unforgiven are among the films she discusses. In her closing chapter, she suggests the direction that masculinity is taking in the 1990s.

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Download and Read Free Online **Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era** By Susan Jeffords

Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Offering close and intriguing readings of movies like Rambo and Robocop, Jeffords (The Remasculinization of America) entertainingly argues that action films with white male heroes "portrayed many of the same narratives . . . that made the Reagan Revolution possible." While Jeffords acknowledges that many films--like E.T. and Blade Runner--countered the dominant ideology, she defensibly chooses to focus on some of the biggest hits. Thus, she finds links between the "hard body," or macho, militarism of Rambo and Reagan's attacks on Libya and Grenada and suggests that Rambo's wounding implies the possibility of repair and regeneration--i.e., the nation can recover from the wounds of the Carter years. In the late 1980s, she observes, masculine sensitivity replaced machismo; films like Casualties of War suggest that white men can still lead us to justice without the wimpishness of the Carter era. She concludes that Clint Eastwood's Unforgiven signals the current masculine model, an action-oriented idealism that invokes the family to justify foreign intervention. Photos not seen by PW.

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From Library Journal

The "Reagan Revolution," the author contends, influenced many of the popular action films of the 1980s. The Rambo (1985), Terminator (1984), and Die Hard (1988) series all featured hard-bodied heroes who singlehandedly fought "against the bureaucracies that had lost touch with the people." The author also examines father-son relationships in the Star Wars (1977) and Back to the Future (1985) series and the "white men save the day" approach of Casualties of War (1989) and Mississippi Burning (1988). This volume is aimed squarely at an academic audience, which should have fun chewing on its highly debatable connections between political styles and popular entertainment. For most academic collections.

- Thomas Wiener, formerly with "American Film"

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From Kirkus Reviews

Something new on the storied relation between Hollywood models and American culture in the Reagan years: an impressively documented, though frequently strained, argument that films like Rambo and Robocop rehearsed the same images of masculinity manufactured for the personal benefit of the era's leading politicians. Crisscrossing between Robert Bly and Richard Nixon, Jeffords (English/University of Washington) contends that the "unified national body" that Americans were seeking after the rudderless years of Vietnam and Jimmy Carter was configured in both blockbuster films and the Reagan White House as a masculine physical body--the hard body whose fitness, purpose, and courage could redeem the nation's individual failures of will. Jeffords traces a progression from Dirty Harry through Star Wars, Lethal Weapon, and Rambo (the apotheosis of the Reagan-Oliver North hard body) to Kindergarten Cop (which recreated Arnold Schwarzenegger as the kinder, gentler fantasy hero of the Bush years) and Disney's Beauty and the Beast (whose revisions from its source excused its male hero for his machismo by making its once-pivotal heroine merely the agency of his redemption). Curiously, the political analysis, bolstered by a formal battery of quotations, is generally more cogent than the close--and often amusingly tendentious--allegorical analysis of films like Back to the Future (Reagan's attempts to define his identity by rewriting history), Twins (like Rambo III, a hopeful view of the Reagan-Bush transition), and Batman (a figure for Bush's schizoid public identity). There's nothing unconvincing, though, about Jeffords's trenchant observations on the Reagan-Bush years as political theater. However Jeffords may stretch in some interpretations of individual films, she gives welcome new definition to the whole idea of the body politic. (Forty-two b&w photographs) -- *Copyright*

Users Review

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