

"The Flashpoint of Political Anxiety": *Star Wars* in 1980s American Political Culture

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WRITER'S COMMENT: Most would agree that movies offer a way to escape the mundane rhythms of everyday life and become transported into an entirely new world, or in the case of the massively popular Star Wars franchise, a whole new galaxy. I wrote this paper for my Writing for History (UWP 102C) class with professor Jillian Azevedo to explore the give-and-take when a movie so distantly imagined is based (loosely) on American political events, such as the Vietnam and Cold Wars, could unmistakably alter entertainment as well. I was interested in exploring this topic because of Star Wars' treasured place in American popular culture and my own curiosity in the historicity beyond the story on the film screen. Ultimately, the sway of Star Wars to mark American political culture is telling of the way in which politics and entertainment are inextricably mixed in American culture, for better or for worse.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: In my UWP 102C: Writing in History class, students write a research paper on a historically based topic of their choosing. As one might expect, this freedom in topic selection inspires some very interesting papers, but perhaps none as exciting as Macyn's paper on Star Wars and 1980s U.S. politics and culture. From the beginning, her enthusiasm for the project was evident and when she discussed it in class her peers were abuzz with enthusiasm and support. Fellow classmates wanted to be in peer review groups with Macyn so they could read her paper; during poster presentations on our last day, students swarmed around her and were visually enraptured with her research. Of course, some of this curiosity was

because of the cult-like fandom Star Wars has gained over the years; more than that, though, it was Macyn's skillful analysis of the films and her attention to detail when considering Reagan's 1980s rhetoric. Her essay ends with a well written and thought-provoking conclusion, excellently capturing Macyn's skill as both a historian and writer.

—Jillian Azevedo, University Writing Program

Star Wars burst onto American movie screens in the spring of 1977 with an accompaniment of horns and a striking cosmic opening crawl. The film's release grew to epic proportions, soon becoming the third-highest grossing movie in the world.¹ The trilogy's successive mega hits, 1980's *The Empire Strikes Back* and 1983's *Return of the Jedi*, supplemented the fully imagined galactic universe. However, *Star Wars'* fantastic locales showcased a place very much like the world beyond the silver screen. Outside the laser blasters and lightsaber battles, the Cold War between the United States and Russia persistently seethed. Director George Lucas, an outspoken opponent of conservative ideals, created *Star Wars* to protest American involvement in foreign wars and global politics. Although Lucas' purpose was political dissent, the popularity of the film transformed *Star Wars* into an instrument incorporated into every facet of American culture. Amid the tensions of the late 1970s and 80s *Star Wars* could be seen as the American "flashpoint for political anxiety."² Political events such as the presidential election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 worsened fears of nuclear extinction in the American public's minds. With *Star Wars* terminologies in hand, Reagan would not dissuade fears, but set the direction of American politics towards weaponization during the 1980s. While numerous technological and political agendas were introduced ideologically linking *Star Wars* to

1 Ray Walters, "*Star Wars: A New Hope* would have cost \$40 million to make today," *Geek.com*, January 16, 2012, accessed December 5, 2017, <https://www.geek.com/geek-cetera/star-wars-a-new-hope-would-have-cost-40-million-to-make-today-1458987/>.

2 Aja Romano, "*Star Wars* has always been political. Here's why the alt-right is claiming otherwise." *Vox*, December 31, 2016, accessed November 12, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2016/12/31/14024262/star-wars-political-alt-right-backlash>.

political counterparts, Ronald Reagan's 1983 "Evil Empire" speech and divisive Strategic Defense Initiative solidified *Star Wars* within the Cold War's political moment.

***Star Wars* as a Political Entity**

Director George Lucas understood the political resonance of his project while writing the synopsis of *Star Wars: A New Hope* in 1973: "A large technological empire going after a small group of freedom fighters."³ The film's opening credits constitute the first signifier of its political stance. The movie begins during "a period of civil war" between the massively fortified Galactic Empire and a few resolute, albeit poorly armed, rebels. Although the dark-clad legion of the Galactic Empire is supposed to evoke totalitarian uniformity—think Nazis as well as communist China and the Soviet armies—the Empire acts as a representation of American militant expansionism in the Vietnam War. The Empire's construction of their weapon of mass destruction, the Death Star, as both "battle station" and barracks for Stormtroopers, amalgamate as a demonstration of the ultimate industrial empire.⁴ Further, the faceless homogeneity of the antagonistic Stormtroopers' black and white armor fused both the physical elimination of individuality with an awe-inspiring show of armed fortification. The Rebel Alliance embodied the heroic aspects the Empire lacked: individuality, morality, spirituality, and self-determinism. The rebels' guerilla tactics, battered weapons, and piecemeal collection of soldiers (some human, some alien) indicate the power dynamic of Lucas's imagined representation of imperial America against the Vietnamese.

The rebels' embodiment of Vietnamese soldiers is further presented through their refusal to participate in galactic armament. Although connected to the larger organization of the Rebel Alliance, the film's trio of freedom fighters—Luke Skywalker, Han Solo, and Princess Leia

3 Kyle Smith, "How *Star Wars* Was Secretly George Lucas' Protest of Vietnam," *New York Post*, September 21, 2014, accessed November 19, 2017, <https://nypost.com/2014/09/21/how-star-wars-was-secretly-george-lucas-protest-of-vietnam/>.

4 Edward G. Carvalho, "Star Wars and *Star Wars*: Teaching Pre-9/11 Literature as Post-9/11 Reality," *Modern Language Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Summer 2011), pp. 77.

Organa—succeed despite being unequipped compared to the Galactic Empire. Throughout the film, the group's paltry weapons—such as Solo's spaceship, described by Luke as "a piece of junk"—and salvaged blasters concentrate the film's critique on American armament, especially during the Vietnam and Cold War-era.⁵ Surprisingly, this ideal is echoed through the villainous Darth Vader as well, as Vader declares to the Galactic Empire's officers, "Don't be too proud of th[e] technological terror you've constructed. The ability to destroy a planet is insignificant next to the power of the Force."⁶

Star Wars' critique of the use of American weapons of mass destruction is emblemized by Luke's development as a Jedi. As the series progresses, Luke's transformation into a Jedi master positions him as equal in power and weaponry to his enemy, Darth Vader. However, Luke's maturation is characterized through his comprehension that true power is not exercising authority "but rather [it is] marked by the ability to lay the weapons down."⁷ Luke's actions in the decisive battle between the Rebel Alliance and the Galactic Empire's Death Star, suggest the moral advantage of disarmament. As the Death Star can only be destroyed through a small weakness in its core, the Rebels' attack on the ship with their scant forces fails until Luke turns his computational scope off. Only by trusting in the Force, a quasi-spiritual belief about moral stability and neutrality, can Luke (and disarmament) succeed. He fires, and the Death Star is destroyed. *Star Wars* imagined a war in which the technologically inferior can win without the excessive weaponry of an industrialized enemy. Additionally, *Star Wars'* incorporation of the Vietnam War in vital plot imagery integrated the rhetoric of conflict between technology and morality inherent in the Cold War.

The Death Star's very presence in *Star Wars: A New Hope* locates the film as "fixat[ed] with nuclear cataclysm."⁸ Outside the movie theater, the Cold War, and with it, the fear of nuclear annihilation, was paramount in

5 Lucasfilm Limited Production, 20th Century Fox, *Star Wars: Episode IV, A New Hope*, 70 mm film. dir. George Lucas, prod. Gary Kurtz, 1977. Beverly Hills, California: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2015.

6 Ibid.

7 David S. Meyers, "Star Wars, *Star Wars*, and American Political Culture," *Journal of Popular Culture* 26, Vol. 2, 1992, accessed November 9, 2017, 114.

8 Edward G. Carvalho, 77.

American culture by the time of *Star Wars*' debut in 1977. The period's nuclear colloquialism appears as if out of the film's opening titles. As Spencer Weart describes in his novel, *The Rise of Nuclear Fear*, "a widely read anti-nuclear book in the late 70s warned . . . 'the nuclear industry is driving us into a robotic slave society, an empire of death.'"⁹ Despite the Cold War-era United States' enthrallment with larger and more fatal technological weapons, the Death Star's construction as the "Empire's ultimate weapon . . . an armored space station with enough power to destroy an entire planet" was meant to evoke American anxieties of global destruction.¹⁰ The realization of this fear is played out in the film, as Leia's home planet Alderaan is destroyed before her eyes. Nick Desolage describes the scene as a moment "indicative of the fears of most people during the Cuban Missile Crisis" of 1962, displaying the apprehension "that people had almost no influence over the fate of the world."¹¹ Beyond visualizing the Death Star as a nuclear nightmare, the utilization of its imagery would spur the political battles of the 1980s past its cinematic scope.

***Star Wars* in the American Political Scene**

Much like the "disarray" of the Galactic Empire in *The Empire Strikes Back* after Luke's destruction of the Death Star, Ronald Reagan's election "reflected the political upheaval of 1980" as Reagan's strongarm stance on nuclear armament jettisoned his less bellicose presidential rival, Jimmy Carter, out of the White House.¹² Under Reagan's administration, increased use of atomic imagery in his policies in the 1980s was immediately compared to its *Star Wars* counterpart. Reagan did not make the connection difficult, as his 1983 speech to the National Association

9 David Ropeik, "The Rise of Nuclear Fear-How We Learned to Fear the Radiation," *Scientific American*, June 15, 2012, accessed November 28, 2017, <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/guest-blog/the-rise-of-nuclear-fear-how-we-learned-to-fear-the-bomb/>.

10 Lucasfilm Limited Production. *Star Wars: Episode IV, A New Hope*.

11 Nick Desolage, "*Star Wars*: An Exhibition on Cold War Politics," in *Sex, Politics, and Religion in Star Wars: An Anthology*, eds. Douglas Brode and Leah Deyneka, (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 55.

12 David S. Meyer, "Star Wars, *Star Wars*, and American Political Culture," 103.

of Evangelicals conjured Russia as "an evil empire" remnant of the Rebel Alliance's enemy, similarly clothed in "totalitarian darkness."¹³ Likewise, Reagan's equation of American armament was presented as "a test of moral will and faith," again evoking the heroic journey and spiritual adherence to the Force at the core of *Star Wars*.¹⁴ However, Reagan's use of *Star Wars*' terminology seemed to polarize and simplify the strain of armament on American-Russian relations, complicating American citizens' support of the administration. Two weeks later, the introduction of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) publicized the massively increased United States defense budget for the creation of a theoretical armed spaceship, inaugurated with Reagan's blessing as America's "new hope."¹⁵

As befitting a former film star, Reagan sloganized his new Strategic Defense Initiative: "Wouldn't it be better to save lives than to avenge them?"¹⁶ For some, the imagery of the Reagan-supported spaceship was both monetarily wasteful and scientific make-believe. The day after Reagan's 1983 SDI speech, Senator Ted Kennedy responded to Reagan by berating the increased budget as "misleading Red Scare tactics and reckless *Star Wars* schemes," bestowing the program its most famous moniker.¹⁷ Kennedy's remark signified the influence of *Star Wars*' ideologies for political usage, but most particularly, the growing annexation of media references into the political sphere. Besides Reagan, other political movements exploited "associations of the film's title . . . [and] began to employ terms from the movie in discussions of technological and military issues."¹⁸ As the *Star Wars* proposal conveyed, the political appropriation of the film's terminology was effective for attracting the public's attention—and indeed, its support. Although

13 "Ronald Reagan, 'Evil Empire' Speech' (8 March 1983)," Voices of Democracy: The U.S. Oratory Project, accessed November 10, 2017, <http://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/reagan-evil-empire-speech-text/>.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 "President Reagan's SDI Speech, March 23, 1983," Atomic Archive, accessed November 19, 2017, <http://www.atomicarchive.com/Docs/Missile/Starwars.shtml>.

17 Chris Taylor, *How Star Wars Conquered the Universe: The Past, Present, and Future of Multibillion Dollar Franchise* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 282.

18 Nick Desolage, "Star Wars: An Exhibition on Cold War Politics," 61.

the Reagan administration initially did not claim its connection to *Star Wars*, the semantic fastening of the policy with the term united a conservative reading of the film with the SDI. In this case, rhetorical appropriation was reciprocal. Arguments made for the SDI conjured imagery of *Star Wars* to tout the necessity of the defensive spaceship's construction. As conservative lawyer Phyllis Schlafly explained, the SDI had the potential to enact Reagan's vision of the "drama of the battle between the forces of good and evil, and of triumphs of good over evil through adventure, courage and confrontation."¹⁹ Schlafly implicitly demonstrated that the political annexation of cinematic terms could be utilized to support political policies *Star Wars* did not, if it echoed the film's other terminologies.

Although there is generally a degree of exchange between politics and popular culture, the pervasiveness of *Star Wars* in the 1980s political sphere established the film's importance to its epoch's distinct political moment. *Star Wars* and the SDI suggested—perhaps to some degree even inaugurated—a movement of American interchangeability of media and politics. As Reagan had shown, the political co-option of media brought the public's attention to its cinematic connection, signifying the political power inherent within American entertainment. Reagan's own ascent to the presidency signified the confluence as well, since Reagan's former position as a film star equipped him with "the skills he used to excel in politics and inspire the nation."²⁰ However, cinematic associations could result in political consequences. Finding fault with the SDI's fantastical qualities and massive budget, critics of the SDI emphasized its military inaccuracies and fictional namesake to deter its passage. The combination of realistic fantasy and fantastic reality reflected the "shift[ing] political reality in a nearly imperceptible cultural transition."²¹ The transposition of *Star Wars* into the 1980s political sphere suggested cinema's ability to reshape American "political realities."²²

19 Ibid., 72.

20 Tevi Troy, *What Jefferson Read, Ike Watched, and Obama Tweeted: 200 Years of Popular Culture in the White House* (Washington D.C.: Regnery History, 2013), 13.

21 Carvalho, p. 74.

22 Ibid., 77.

The Battle Continues: *Star Wars* and Politics Today

Although *Star Wars* is set in “a galaxy far, far away,” the film suggests the proximity of intergalactic conflict is never too distant.²³ By interpreting the original *Star Wars* trilogy through the fears of the Cold War-era’s consistent warfare, nuclear desperation, and political letdowns, the utilization of entertainment as a political intermediary is established. However, the *Star Wars* franchise can again be co-opted to other distinct political moments in American history. Similarly, the Bush administration can be equated to *Star Wars* with the era’s aggressive foreign policy. Lucas himself remarked, “[t]he parallels between what we did in Vietnam and what we’re doing in Iraq . . . are unbelievable.” Lucas elaborated: “George Bush is Darth Vader. Cheney is the Emperor.”²⁴ Contemporary political critiques emphasize 2015’s *The Force Awakens* with the current governmental turmoil of the United States as the struggle between tradition and progress. Most particularly, the film’s villains hearken back to the Nazi-like First Order, evoking the faceless Galactic Empire of the 1977 film. However, instead of portraying the anxieties of communist totalitarianism, the film’s villains, General Hux and Kylo Ren, suggest the rise of white nationalists and incarnations of solitary men “indoctrinated into a reimagined history where the Empire wasn’t monstrous, but something to be envied.”²⁵ This connection with the current political scene is reinforced, as one critic remarked, “[t]heir slogan might as well be Make the Galaxy Great Again.”²⁶ Cultural critics often connect this characterization of the film’s antagonists to the increase of modern conservative (and typically white) fears of the inclusion of minorities and women in the political sphere. This reading is bolstered by *The Force Awakens’* care to showcase liberal identity-based ideologies. As the film centers its heroes on black ex-stormtrooper Finn, played by John Boyega, and the resourceful and Force-powerful scavenger, Rey, played

23 Lucasfilm Limited Production. *Star Wars: Episode IV, A New Hope*.

24 Benjamin Hufbauer, “The Politics Behind the Original *Star Wars*,” *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, December 15, 2012, accessed November 26, 2017.

25 Stephen Kahn, “Kylo Ren From *Star Wars* is More Politically Relevant Than You Think,” *Washington Examiner*, November 11, 2017, accessed November 26, 2017.

26 Ibid.

by Daisy Ridley, *The Force Awakens* subverts many archetypes seen in political figures as well as other cinematic franchises.

The various *Star Wars* films have both conveyed and participated in the commentary of the American political arena over three distinct political periods. While *Star Wars* fans continue to celebrate subsequent releases of content, with each decade or so the films' conclusions take on the troubling aspect of Nietzsche's eternal return: conflicts begin anew, with the similar opposition of rebels set against a legion of oppressive forces. This cyclic pattern of conflict and resolution reflects the United States' own tragic political history. Eras appear to shift and diverge distinctly, but one detects strong echoes of earlier, troubled times. In the end, it seems that *Star Wars* was never in "a galaxy far, far away" but, rather, in a world very much like our own.

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