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Don't Let the Spin Make You Dizzy

Anyone who reads or watches news today is familiar with spin; “a special point of view, emphasis, or interpretation presented for the purpose of influencing opinion” (m-w.com). People can pick the news they want to see based on political ideology, gender, race, sexual orientation or socio-economic status. We *expect* our news to be politically influenced, it has become commonplace.

What we may not expect, however, is the *reach* of political or governmental influence. Even though the entertainment industry has made a cliché of celebrities airbrushed to near-unrecognizable proportions, such as actress Keira Knightly’s varying endowment in posters for the 2004 release of the movie “*King Arthur*,” (Fig. 1) governmental influence is often less obvious, more stealthy, and reflects the political leanings of the time, as opposed to what’s hot or what’s not.

While governmental influence in entertainment isn’t always as blatantly obvious as an enhanced starlet, it has, nonetheless, been around for well over 100 years. During the United States Civil War, Alexander Gardner, Timothy O’Sullivan, and Mathew Brady’s exhibitions of shattering battlefield and casualty photographs shocked citizens of the day. Instead of seeing romanticized artistic renderings, or painstakingly made woodcuts, the public saw the horror of war- dead soldiers, destroyed homes, bloody injuries, and carnage. Some historians argue that

people's reaction to the gory battlefield photographs changed or hastened the outcome of the war.

Whether or not Brady, Gardner, and O'Sullivan aided the Union's victory, war photos, and how war is presented to the public, remained on the U.S. Government's mind for decades. During World War II the Roosevelt administration censored all photos of war dead in news reports as well as in exhibitions. More recently, in 2009, then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates finally lifted a ban on media-generated photos of flag-draped coffins returning from Afghanistan and Iraq. By censoring wartime photographs, the Government was "spinning" war's impact on the public, a powerful tool during turbulent political times.

However, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, the United States was on an upswing, politically. According to Professor Emeritus of History (NYU) and former presidential advisor McGeorge Bundy:

"1989 has made it clear that the Soviet Union and the United States now have it in their power to put an end to the cold war- the most important, expensive and dangerous phenomenon of the second half of our tumultuous century." (1)

Ronald Reagan was finishing his presidency, turning over the reins to fellow Republican and former Vice President George H.W. Bush. The United States and the Soviet Union agreed to end production of chemical weapons and destroy most of their stockpiles. The Vietnam War was fifteen years in the past, and the Gulf War had yet to begin. It was a time of relative peace.

It was during this time that the movie "*Air America*" was released in 1990. Based on the book of the same name, the film follows the adventures and misadventures of two American pilots (Mel Gibson and Robert Downey, Jr.) flying for Air America in Laos during the Vietnam War. The film was marketed as a comedy- a lighthearted look at a sometimes touchy subject.

The tagline “The Few. The Proud. The Totally Insane.” plays off both the Air America slogan of “Anything, Anywhere, Anytime” as well as the United States Marine Corps slogan “The Few, the Proud, the Marines.” Whether a conscious decision or not, by using a slogan that evoked more famous or patriotic sayings of the era, the movie poster (Fig. 2) led viewers to believe there was tacit approval for what the United States did in Laos, and by extension, in the Vietnam War, whether or not the film itself showed that.

Fifteen years after the end of the war, people were beginning to look instead to Central America, with the Oliver North trial in full swing, and to the Gulf States in unrest. Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in August of 1990 would be the catalyst for the United States’ participation in the Persian Gulf War. With focus being elsewhere, a lighthearted take on a dark spot in American history was well received, with “*Air America*” opening on almost 2,000 screens and earning over \$32,000,000 in its first run. It’s also interesting to note that the Political Film Society nominated the film for an “Exposé” award, although it didn’t win. (IMDb.com)

Fast forward to 2009. The Persian Gulf War, just gearing up twenty years prior, concluded in 1991 with the United Nations Security Council Resolution 687. The Resolution “demands that Iraq and Kuwait respect the inviolability of the international boundary” and led to the formation of a “Special Commission, which shall carry out immediate on-site inspection of Iraq’s biological, chemical and missile capabilities...” (UN Security Council, April 1991) Sadly, by 2009, the US and its allies found themselves once again embroiled in war in the Middle East, with controversies surrounding Resolution 687 leading to the Iraq War in 2003.

It was during this tumultuous time that Carolco Pictures re-released “*Air America*” on DVD. Special features included an expanded score, interviews with key players, and a brand new cover. (Fig. 3) Gone were the goofy grins and catchy slogan of the first release, replaced

instead by stone-faced Gibson and Downey, and the new catch phrase “It was someone else’s war, but it was their sky.” Instead of concentrating on the madcap antics, the production company seemed to be focusing on the more “heroic” aspects of the film. Instead of showing an Air America that was filled with “borderline psychotics” (Leary) and compromised by drug-running allies, the new cover showed an Air America worthy of praise, not protests.

As during the Vietnam War, protests arose during the Iraq War. In 2009, the year *Air America* was re-released, thousands of protestors marched in Washington, D.C. and Arlington, Virginia, carrying mock coffins and demonstrating against defense contractors. It is important to note that, in contrast to most Vietnam protests, the Iraq War protestors were also taking non-combatant agencies who were working in the war zones for various reasons to task for their participation. During the Iraq War, Halliburton, a company with backing from Vice President Dick Cheney, was equivalent to the CIA-backed Air America during Viet Nam, and was considered vital to the war efforts, as was Air America. According to William M. Leary, Professor of History at the University of Georgia, in his 2008 article “CIA Air Operations in Laos, 1955-1974”

“Air America, an airline secretly owned by the CIA, was a vital component in the Agency’s operations in Laos...Without Air America’s presence, the CIA’s effort in Laos could not have been sustained.”

Compare that with this excerpt from *Hard Lessons: The Iraq Reconstruction Experience*, in which the office of the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction reported:

“In World War II, one contractor was deployed for every seven soldiers. During the 2003 invasion, that number had increased to one for every 2.4. By 2006, contractors outnumbered soldiers in Iraq.” (44)

These parallels put the film's producers in a potential hard spot. No longer could Air America's involvement in Laos be played off lightly. In fact, that original focus drew ire from Leary:

“Air America's public image has fared poorly. The 1990 movie *Air America* is largely responsible for this...The connection among Air America, the CIA, and the drug trade in Laos lingers in the public mind.”

No longer could the filmmakers portray US contractors in war zones as “a wildly unprofessional menagerie of party animals” (Leary) without implicitly saying the same thing about Halliburton and other contractors. An unpopular war was no longer in the past, as during the late 1980s when the film was originally released. By the time “*Air America*” was re-released in 2009, the United States was embroiled in another war that many thought they could not win.

By changing the focus from the wacky to the stoic, from the humanitarian aid (and drug) drops to the fiery rescues, Carolco subtly changed the draw of the film. By stating “It was someone else's war” the company managed to play up the fact that these men were non-combatants, but that they were drawn into fight anyway. Innocent bystander heroes, much like any number of contractors in the war zone in Iraq.

The “hero-izing” of the Air America pilots, and by extension, of contractors during the Iraq War, tied in with the movement to (rightly) separate the combatants from the combat.

Unfortunately, that was something many were unable to do during the Vietnam War. One returning veteran, Dennis J. Stauffer, phrased it this way: “The Viet vet became a scapegoat for our country's involvement in an unpopular war. We faced rejection and verbal, sometimes physical assault.” (1) By the time soldiers began arriving home from the various Gulf Wars; their country welcomed them much differently. “Freedom is not free, thank a soldier.”

“Remember our Soldiers, Bless them All.” “Have you hugged a soldier today?” A far cry from

the shouts of “Baby killer.” By showing non-combatants as heroic figures, Halliburton and other contractors were now heroes just like our troops, emphasized on the movie poster by the image of Gibson’s character carrying a wounded “local,” rescuing the native from their danger; just as American troops (and contractors) rescued “locals” from Saddam Hussein.

It is important to support our troops during wartime. It is important to keep the combatants and the combat separate, especially in the case of “A dumb war. A rash war. A war based not on reason but on passion, not on principle but on politics” (to quote former Senator Barack Obama). It is equally as important, however, to be aware of what we’re being told in subtle ways, how images ostensibly made for our entertainment can actually be spun to tell a much different story.

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Fig. 1

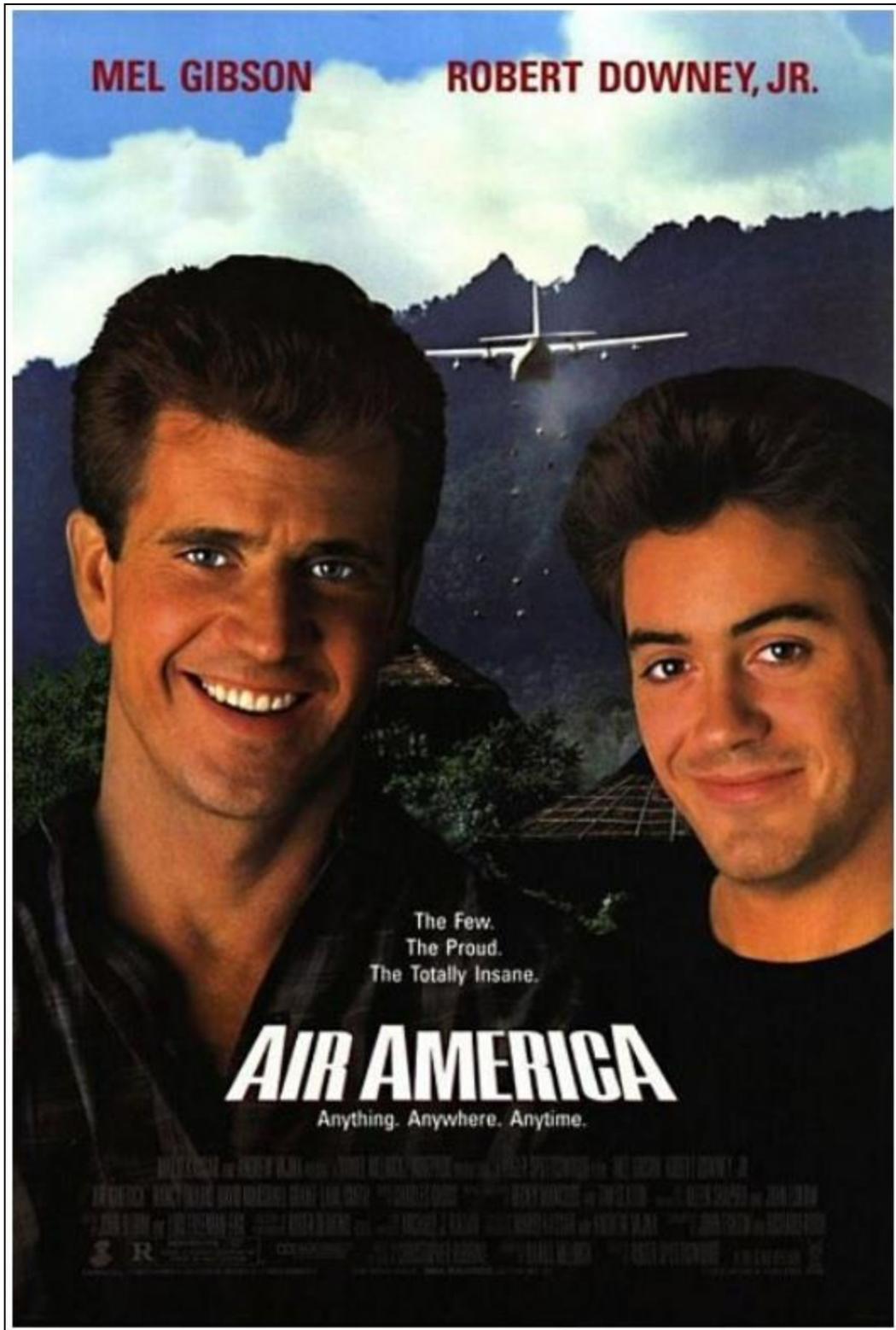


Fig. 2



Fig. 3