

**DYING HARD: REASSERTING AMERICAN STRENGTH THROUGH  
POPULAR ACTION FILMS, 1984-1989.**

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## Abstract

“Dying Hard: Reasserting American Strength through Popular Action Films, 1984-1989” investigates the ways in which action films of the 1980s articulated federal policy through the gendered rhetoric of the male, white, heterosexual hard-body hero. Embodying foreign and domestic policies of the Reagan administration, the hard-body hero was deployed as a collective symbol of the promoted normative national body. Through an examination of selected action films – *Red Dawn*, *Rambo: First Blood II*, *Rocky IV*, *Die Hard*, and *The Package* – this Major Research Paper delineates the desired traits for the normative national body, the federal policies and rhetoric housed. Furthermore, the MRP will investigate the development of a hypermasculine characterization of American strength and identity.

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## INTRODUCTION

"I'm reminded of a recent very popular movie, and in the spirit of Rambo, let me tell you we're going to win this time."<sup>1</sup>

- Ronald Reagan, 1985

The 1980s present fascinating years of study for historians interested in the Cold War. During this decade, the intense ideological tension between the two superpowers, the United States of America and the Soviet Union, reached both potentially dangerous heights and a peaceful resolution. Generally speaking, the Cold War was a propaganda war "fueled on both sides by the belief that the ideology of the other side had to be destroyed."<sup>2</sup> The arsenal of propaganda used throughout the Cold War harnessed a variety of media including political cartoons and newspaper articles. As Donald Fishman states, "[the Cold War's] battlefields were the ideas, symbols, and iconography that each side utilized to bolster its virtues and to influence public opinion."<sup>3</sup> Chief among the battlefields of the Cold War was popular film. As media historian Tony Shaw has demonstrated, much can be learned through the study of film produced during the Cold War era both for the messages it housed and for the willingness of political leaders to incorporate this ideology into their construction of the Cold War.<sup>4</sup> The above quotation derived from President Ronald Reagan's remarks at the 1985 Santa-Cali-Gon Days Festival in Independence, Missouri demonstrates the connections between popular film and conceptions of foreign and domestic policies. President Ronald Reagan often referred to popular films in his speeches during his two terms in office. In fact, Reagan's own Hollywood past, partnered with his affinity for employing film while discussing federal policy, is representative of the relationship between popular film and Cold War politics in the 1980s. By drawing on imagery and narratives presented in popular film, President Ronald Reagan was able to make his administration's federal policies accessible to the public.

Academic discussions of the Cold War have shifted overtime as a result of evolving perspectives and approaches. These historiographic approaches can be categorized as

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<sup>1</sup> "Remarks at the Santa-Cali-Gon Days Celebration in Independence, Missouri – September 2, 1985," *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library*, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1985/90285a.htm> (accessed June 11, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> John W. Mason, *The Cold War, 1945-1991* (New York: Routledge, 1996): 71.

<sup>3</sup> Donald Fishman, "The Cold War: Three Episodes in Waging a Cinematic Battle," in *War and Film in America: Historical and Critical Essays*, ed. Nancy Lynch Street Marilyn J. Matelski, 43-66 (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, Inc. , 2003): 43.

<sup>4</sup> Tony Shaw's works include: Tony Shaw and Denise J. Youngblood, *Cinematic Cold War: the American and Soviet Struggle for Hearts and Minds* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010); Tony Shaw, *Hollywood's Cold War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007); and Tony Shaw, *British Cinema and the Cold War: The State, Propaganda and Consensus* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2001).

orthodox, revisionist, and post-revisionist. Most prominent in the early stages of the Cold War, Orthodox historians argue that Soviet aggression in Eastern Europe caused the development of the Cold War; citing the influence of the broken wartime alliance, the Korean War, 'losing' China to communism, and American society's anti-communist hysteria.<sup>5</sup> In this view, Americans had no choice but to respond to the challenges presented by the Soviet Union and prevent ideologically driven expansionist behaviours that were seen as detrimental to global order. As the United States became involved in Vietnam in the 1960s, a revisionist view began to gain credibility. Revisionist historians began openly questioning the motives of the American government and big corporate business, and shifted blame towards the United States believing that ending a wartime alliance should not have spawned a Cold War. Grounding arguments in the Soviet Union's national best interests, revisionist Cold War historians are more sympathetic towards the Soviet Union's behaviours in Eastern Europe, placing their hostilities within the larger context of a nation responding to aggressive American demands for ideological supremacy.<sup>6</sup> Finally, since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the opening of Soviet archives, historians such as John Lewis Gaddis have been reviewing past academic arguments and discussions with a post-revisionist lens. In this view, both sides had faults and brought the other further into competition.<sup>7</sup> While the resulting work produces many counter-arguments, not every claim made by revisionists is refuted – in fact the post-revisionist work leans towards a healthier middle ground between the two. My own position lies within the post-revisionist category, and this particular project's focus does not place blame but rather is interested in examining the effects of such practices on culture and politics in the period. As "Dying Hard" will demonstrate, the Republican ideals promoted in the 1980s by the Reagan administration and popular action films are largely akin to the arguments presented by orthodox historians – placing blame on the Soviet Union for hostile events and increased tensions. The orthodox approach of the films must, however, be examined through a post-revisionist lens because these films emerged as enculturated artifacts and as such need to be placed in the larger context in order to understand their development and the messages they housed.

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<sup>5</sup> Examples of these early "orthodox" writings include: Herbert Feis, *Churchill, Roosevelt, Stalin: The War They Waged and the Peace They Sought* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957); Herbert Feis, *From Trust to Terror: The Onset of the Cold War* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1970); and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "Origins of the Cold War," *Foreign Affairs* 46 (October 1967): 22-52.

<sup>6</sup> Examples of the revisionist view of the Cold War include: William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1959); Thomas G. Paterson, *Soviet-American Confrontation: Postwar Reconstruction and the Origins of the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975); and Gabriel Kolko and Joyce Kolko, *The Limits of Power: The World and United States Foreign Policy, 1945-1954* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

<sup>7</sup> See: John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1997).

In historical writing, popular film produced during the last decade of the Cold War has received little attention even as historians who have engaged with film as a historical source have demonstrated its legitimacy in adding to discussions of history, politics, and gender. Ronnie D. Lipschutz is one of the few historians to address the latter years of the Cold War on film. In *Cold War Fantasies*, Lipschutz offers a brief glimpse into the usefulness of film in historical studies, stating “films ... that address themes and ideas drawn from the times in which they appeared can give us a sense of what people living in those times feared and hoped, alone and together. In this sense, they can...be windows to the past.”<sup>8</sup> As this statement suggests, films allow historians to determine contextual understandings of populations. *Cold War Fantasies* offers a glimpse into how foreign policy was reflected in film from 1945-1995 with emphasis placed primarily on independent American films; however, the discussion of films from 1980-1995 is underdeveloped and in need of further exploration. Moreover, the prominence of independent film over popular film is representative of the existing historiography which tends to ignore popular film. Tony Shaw is another media historian who has contributed to the scholarship on Cold War film and foreign policy. Shaw’s studies of British and American films produced during the Cold War era are often cited and highly influential in developing both methodology and theoretical frameworks for studies of film and media histories. Thus far, Shaw’s monographs have not discussed the 1980s in great detail; however, his most recent study with Denise J. Youngblood, *Cinematic Cold War*, provides the most cohesive beginnings of research on film in this decade to date. Currently Shaw’s work largely focuses on independent films, as well, leaving studies of popular American 1980s films as untapped sources for historical study. This is a noticeable gap in the history of Cold War film and a gap that this research seeks to reduce. Shaw’s scholarship, much like Lipschutz’s, also relies solely on foreign policy to provide its analytical framework. “Dying Hard” will expand the scholarly discussion by using the methodology outlined by Shaw to examine both American domestic and foreign policy in relation to popular film in an attempt to present a more inclusive study of themes addressed in action films from 1984 to 1989.

This project examines the intersection between gender conceptions, the confidence of the American public, and film representations in action films from the late 1980s. While media historians have focused primarily on the connections between film and foreign policy, gender historians have begun investigating the ways in which domestic American constructions of gender also influence representations of foreigners and foreign policy in film. In many ways,

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<sup>8</sup> Ronnie D. Lipschutz, *Cold War Fantasies: Film, Fiction and Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001): 5.



1980s American Cold War iconography was dominated by hard-body imagery.<sup>9</sup> Tied in with the White House's claims that the Carter administration in the 1970s had weakened the United States government, Reagan's administration began fostering the creation of a new, strengthened, predominantly masculine image for the nation through their rhetoric yet specifically and exclusively aimed at white, heterosexual, working-class males. The masculine hard body was the emblem of the Reagan administration's philosophies and policies. Serving as a collective symbol, the hard body demonstrated the favoured hypermasculine qualities for American men as well as the nation – muscular, unfaltering, and committed. Furthermore, the promotion of hypermasculinity served as a powerful rejection of the women's movement of the 1970s. A *Time Magazine* article in February 1977 claims that men in the 1970s had begun "feeling guilty and sexually threatened" by the advances being made by women, an issue cleanly resolved in popular film by demonstrating the female's dependence on an American male hero for salvation in the hard-body narrative.<sup>10</sup> As a result, minorities and special interest groups were categorized as "soft bodies" along with a generation of passive Americans who had allowed for America to become weak and vulnerable under President Carter in the 1970s. In many ways, soft bodies can be understood as simply what the hard bodies are not.

Linking gendered conceptions to their own ideology and policies, the Reagan administration, by referencing action films in various speeches, connected the national character and individual masculinity, which action films symbolically represented through the hard-body hero. As the distinction between soft and hard bodies identifies, individualism exists in two ways for the Reagan administration with key differences being found in the motivation for individualism and the groups which sought individualism. As will be further discussed in Chapter 2, Michael Kimmel's idea of masculine self-controlled individualism provides the clearest definition of Reagan's individualism and states that "straight, white men" prove their masculinity when it has been challenged by asserting control over their own bodies and lives.<sup>11</sup> The Reagan administration, as we will see, strongly opposed the individualism of Carter's 1970s that sought self-interest goals for all including those who existed outside of the classification of white, heterosexual, republican America; but promoted individualism in the 1980s through the hard body which was motivated through a collective desire for national strength and prosperity.

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<sup>9</sup> See Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994) as well as Drew Ayers, "Bodies, Bullets and Bad Guys: Elements of the Hardbody Film," *Film Criticism* 32, no. 3 (Spring 2008): 41-67.

<sup>10</sup> *Time Magazine*, "The Sexes: Really Socking it to Women," February 07, 1977, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,914772,00.html> (accessed July 7, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: The Free Press, 1995): 6.

Special interest groups such as feminists and African Americans could not experience individualism for Reagan's administration as they directly opposed the Judeo-Christian values espoused by the Republican Party. In this sense, the Reagan administration heralded hard bodies as national identities for the male heads of working-class families visible through Hollywood film.

Susan Jeffords remarks that in many ways, the imaging and narrating of hard-body heroes through "their confrontations, actions, decisions, and victories" developed a sense of national unity and diverse forms of identification between characters, scenarios, and audiences.<sup>12</sup> This relationship promotes a sense of mass unity whereby the audience experiences personal and national power through their identification with the hard-bodied hero. Jeffords asserts that the audience gains individual power throughout the plot as the hero masters his surroundings and overcomes his fictional adversary through violent physical altercations while simultaneously demonstrating national strength by defeating identifiable national enemies through the same violent means.<sup>13</sup> The hard-body hero articulated the challenge to national confidence and identity in gendered terms that concentrated primarily on the plights of men as well as the reconstruction of men. Drew Ayers' refines Jeffords' framework by creating three distinct categories: developing, fully-formed, and repressed hard bodies.<sup>14</sup> In doing so Ayers argues that the three categories of hero inform plot development and the ways in which the films represent national discourse.

"Dying Hard" focuses on the action genre as these films housed important messages about threats to American confidence, capabilities and normative masculinity. While teen films and comedies were also positioned high on the box office charts, action films in the 1980s engaged with political realities not often found in other genres and offered solutions through the male body. *Red Dawn* (1984), *Rambo: First Blood II* (1985), *Rocky IV* (1985), *Die Hard* (1988) and *The Package* (1989) all feature an American hero defined in contrast to the Soviet threat and were the most popular films of their respective years in the hard-body action genre. Both this genre and these films were selected for their popularity and significance as determined through domestic box office figures collected through the Internet Movie Database: *Red Dawn* grossed \$35,866,000; *Rambo: First Blood II*, \$150,415,432; *Rocky IV*, \$127,873,716; *Die Hard*,

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<sup>12</sup> Jeffords, 27.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>14</sup> Ayers, 46-51.

\$137,400,000, and *The Package* \$10,647,219.<sup>15</sup> *The Package* earned much lower figures in 1989 and represents a fall in popularity for the hard-body genre that this paper will address. In general, the immense popularity of these films with American audiences makes them worth examining. Although this project does not examine audience response through recorded commentary of the audiences, the audience remains central to this project in that they paid to see these films as demonstrated through their box office standing and the huge amount of money they drew. While the box office figures indicate that the genre had mass appeal, the gender composition of this audience is difficult to pin down. For the most part we can acknowledge that these films were aimed at men, but likely drew in female viewers as well.

Drew Ayers' previously mentioned categories of hard-body films, along with box office earnings, mirror the life cycle of the hard-bodied action film genre. Early 'developing' hard-body films of the 1980s borrowed from past Cold War narratives, and then morphed into the action film genre that developed its own version of the Cold War narrative through the hard-body hero. *Red Dawn* (ranked 20 in the top films of 1984) is an example of this and co-opts the invasion narratives most popular in 1950s Cold War films.<sup>16</sup> In 1985 the genre began reaching its peak period of popularity with *Rambo: First Blood II* and *Rocky IV* ranking second and third respectively.<sup>17</sup> Both films employ the hard-body formula of fetishized hypermasculine male bodies and a symbolic battle between the American hero and a Soviet foe. This fully-formed version of the hard-body action film genre carried into 1988 where *Die Hard* became the seventh highest grossing film of the year.<sup>18</sup> As the decade neared its close, the hard-body genre began losing favour with audiences. Action films employing versions of the hard-body formula were unable to garner a large theatre audience. As the Cold War neared its close and the Soviet threat was demonstrably neutralized through Soviet sponsored policies of cooperation, films which positioned an American hero against a Soviet foe were incapable of capturing audience attention leading to the repression of the hard-body action film genre. *The Package*

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<sup>15</sup> "Red Dawn (1984)," IMDb.com, Incorporated, accessed 03 30, 2011, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0087985/>; "Rambo: First Blood II (1985)," IMDb.com, Incorporated, accessed 03 30, 2011, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0089880/>; "Rocky IV (1985)," IMDb.com, Incorporated, accessed 03 30, 2011, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0089927/>; "Die Hard (1988)," IMDb.com, Incorporated, accessed 03 30, 2011, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0095016/>; "The Package (1989)," IMDb.com, Incorporated, accessed 03 30, 2011, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0098051/>.

<sup>16</sup> "1984 Yearly Box Office Results," *Box Office Mojo*, <http://boxofficemojo.com/yearly.chart/?yr=1984&p=.htm> (accessed May 9, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> "1985 Yearly Box Office Results," *Box Office Mojo*, <http://boxofficemojo.com/yearly.chart/?yr=1985&p=.htm> (accessed May 9, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> "1988 Yearly Box Office Results," *Box Office Mojo*, <http://boxofficemojo.com/yearly.chart/?yr=1988&p=.htm> (accessed May 9, 2011).

demonstrated the growing ineffectiveness of the genre, charted at 82 in the yearly box office domestic grosses of 1989, marked itself as distinctly unpopular, and signaled the genre's end as well as the end of the Cold War.<sup>19</sup> While *The Package* can hardly be considered popular, its importance lies in its symbolism of the demise of the hard-body action genre of 1980s film.

The first chapter of my MRP will focus primarily on mapping the Reagan administration's foreign and domestic policies onto the plots of the selected action films and determine the relationship between the two. It will discuss the ways in which the secondary characters in each of these films reflect understandings of Soviet power and American weakness. The second chapter will discern the process of regaining confidence and masculinity through the creation of a hard-bodied American hero. "Dying Hard" will show, by analyzing top grossing films of the popular hard-body action film genre, that the policies and rhetoric of the Reagan administration fostered the development of a normative national body, which was then reflected in the popular symbol of the hypermasculine hard-body hero. As foreign and domestic national enemies were established by the Reagan administration, the hard-body action film genre articulated prescriptions of how to repel their threats through symbolic battles against the hard-body hero. Chapter 2 will discuss these prescriptions in great detail while contextualizing them within federal policies of the time. Overall, the American box office numbers of each of the selected films in the action genre demonstrate the viability of the popular genre as a lens through which threats to public confidence were reflected. These films are representative of how the audiences experienced challenges to national confidence and gender constructions beginning in the 1970s and how the foreign policy and rhetoric of the 1980s sought to resolve these tensions through symbolic battles in popular action films.

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<sup>19</sup> "1989 Yearly Box Office Results," *Box Office Mojo*, <http://boxofficemojo.com/yearly.chart/?yr=1989&p=.htm> (accessed May 9, 2011). For comparison, the top three films were *Batman* (\$251,188,924), *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (\$197,171,806), and *Lethal Weapon 2* (\$147,253,986).

## CHAPTER 1: SOFT BODIES & AMERICAN WEAKNESSES IN HARD-BODY FILM

The 1970s, for the United States, was a decade characterized by low economic growth, high inflation and interest rates, energy crises, campaigns for women's rights, and Watergate. Foreign and domestic affairs faced a growing sense of malaise that cemented public opinion that the United States was losing its former glory. Economically, the United States struggled in the 1970s following the 1973-1974 OPEC embargo. As OPEC steadily increased the international price of oil, the American stock market fell further into a paralyzing recession with the New York Stock Exchange losing \$97 billion in just six weeks.<sup>20</sup> America's economic vulnerability in the 1970s was reinforced by the nation's declining manufacturing productivity. Further to this, the United States faced a number of domestic crises such as Watergate, escalating protests about the government's handling of Vietnam, as well as an organized and highly visible campaign for women's rights. As the 1980 Presidential election approached, the Tehran hostage crisis only sharpened public perceptions of the need for change.<sup>21</sup> The election would be a contest between the incumbent Democrat Jimmy Carter and the Republican opponent, and former Hollywood star, Ronald Reagan. Each campaign would take on a different outlook. For Reagan, the Republicans would promise a national renewal and a return to the city on a hill mentality which invoked national rhetoric stretching back to the American Revolution. Reagan sought to emphasize upbeat optimism in a campaign that appealed to American voters desperate for strong American leadership. This leadership would be overwhelmingly bestowed upon Ronald Reagan.

The Reagan administration's political agenda was quickly unveiled during Reagan's Inaugural Address in January 1981. Addressing the challenges facing America, President Reagan outlined three distinct areas of concern: enemies of freedom, corrupt government and

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<sup>20</sup> Walter Lafeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-2002*, 9th Edition (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 2002): 292.

<sup>21</sup> The Tehran hostage crisis developed after President Carter allowed the deposed and exiled Shah of Iran to be admitted to the United States to seek medical treatment for a fatal cancer. Islamic radicals grew outraged with the American action and retaliated by seizing the staff and Marine Corps guard of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran. Following a botched attempted rescue mission in which 8 Americans were incinerated, Iranian authorities brought the bodies to Tehran and put them on display at the U.S. Embassy where militants poked at them for the benefit of television cameras. For more information see: Peter G. Bourne, *Jimmy Carter: A Comprehensive Biography from Plains to Postpresidency* (New York: Scribner's, 1997); Robert M. Collins, *Transforming America: Politics and Culture in the Reagan Years* (New York: Columbia University, 2007); and Seymour Martin Lipset and William Schneider, *The Confidence Gap: Business, Labor, and Government in the Public Mind* (New York: The Free Press, 1983).

institutions, and the American economy.<sup>22</sup> Reagan asserted throughout the speech that, while events of the past had allowed for the weakened American state, American strength could and would be restored. Through the “idealism and fair play which are the core of [the American] system and [American] strength” the Reagan administration believed that America would once again be a recognizably prosperous world power.<sup>23</sup> Employing backward looking rhetoric, Reagan championed the people to fulfill the nation’s Manifest Destiny. Hoping to once again have the American flag be an honoured emblem of “freedom and a beacon of hope for those who do not now have freedom,” the Reagan administration sought to revive American national strength and confidence at home in order to be “seen as having greater strength throughout the world.”<sup>24</sup> The goals and policies of the Reagan administration outlined within the Inaugural Address are clearly reflected in the action films in the 1980s. Encountering the same three points outlined within President Reagan’s Inaugural Address, the action films of the 1980s would employ hypermasculine bodies as a means through which to articulate both the challenges faced by Americans and resolutions to these challenges.

The Reagan administration’s renewal strategy rested upon the resurrection of concepts of labour, responsibility, and courage – characteristics which are representative of hard-bodied hypermasculinity. The American people, according to Reagan, had been overwhelmed with the concerns of “special interest groups” in the 1960s and 1970s; however, the Reagan administration believed that in doing so the real “special interest group [had] been too long neglected.”<sup>25</sup> This special interest group was “everyday Americans.” While touted as being a group with “no sectional boundaries or ethnic and racial divisions,” the statement implied that special interest groups in the prior decades were distracting from the greater good of the many.<sup>26</sup> Ongoing civil rights protests against Vietnam, gender inequality, and on-going racial inequality had presumably been weakening American confidence and specifically the prosperous middle-class. As a result, the means by which to regain American strength was to harden the soft, individualistic bodies developed by the passivity of the previous decades. Self-sufficient Americans, such as the “professionals, industrialists, [and] shopkeepers” mentioned by Reagan, held the key to regaining national strength and confidence.<sup>27</sup> In order for the shift from individual to national bodies in the 1980s to be successful, each of the three outlined

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<sup>22</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Inaugural Address – January 20, 1981,” *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library*, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1981/12081a.htm> (accessed June 16, 2011).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

concerns (enemies of freedom – particularly the Soviet Union, government and institutional corruption, and the economy) would require careful consideration. This consideration and a solution to American weakness was reflected in the action films under discussion here, as we shall see.

### *Foreign Enemies of Freedom*

In order to effectively convey the threat of maintaining the individual American bodies of prior decades, the Reagan administration needed to demonize the Soviet Union and demonstrate their perennial challenge to American strength. Speeches and election advertisements served as tools by which the Soviet Union could be recast as an active Cold War foe seeking to challenge the forces of freedom, even as the Soviet Union itself was moving towards a democratic system. While Reagan's administration promoted rhetoric stating the strength of their Cold War foe, this was not the reality. Figures that showed the Soviet Union piling money into weapons development have since been confirmed; however, much of the Soviet Union was crumbling.<sup>28</sup> Viewed by many as a stepping-stone to Soviet global advancement, the 1979 Soviet takeover of Afghanistan was threatening to America's international position; however, in the end the struggle became the Soviet Union's Vietnam. The holy warriors combating the Soviet Union, supported heavily by the Reagan administration, would cost the Soviet Union nearly eight times as much as Vietnam had cost America years prior.<sup>29</sup> While the struggle had unforeseen future consequences for Americans, the assistance provided to the holy warriors successfully created a quagmire from which the Soviet Union did not easily escape. In the early 1980s Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko led the Soviet Union until their deaths and were succeeded by Mikhail Gorbachev. Gorbachev's ascension to power proved unable to revive a stagnated Soviet economy and initiating communist reform. Due to the high oil prices, which threatened the American economy in the 1970s, the Soviet Union had not been forced to review their economic strategies and instead continued to rely on oil to drive their financial system. Once Reagan began working to reduce the flow of American and Western technology into the Soviet Union as well as the Soviet natural gas exports into Western Europe, it seemed clear that the Soviet economy's last leg was the target. Continuing

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<sup>28</sup> For more information see: Robert Strayer, *Why Did the Soviet Union Collapse? Understanding Historical Change* (New York: United States Congress, 1998); Richard F. Kaufman and John P. Hardt, ed., *The Former Soviet Union in Transition*, ed. Richard F. Kaufman and John P. Hardt (New York: United States Congress, 1993); Michael Ellman and Vladimir Kontorovich, ed., *The Destruction of the Soviet Economic System: An Insiders' History*, ed. Michael Ellman and Vladimir Kontorovich (New York: United States Congress, 1998).

<sup>29</sup> See: Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Union's Last War* (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 2001).

along Carter's projected goals of phasing out oil price regulations by the fall of 1981, Reagan was able to generate a lowering of the price of oil and effectively deny the Soviet Union the inflows of capital they had been depending on throughout the 1970s.<sup>30</sup> By emphasizing the threat of Soviet military advancement, weapons development, and the 1979 takeover of Afghanistan and ignoring its actual economic state, both the Reagan administration and the hard-body action films used gendered terms to articulate the necessity of transforming American soft bodies as a means to overcome challenges to national strength and confidence.

Emphasizing the Soviet Union's potential strength and threats to American soft bodies was a tactic employed in Reagan's campaign for Presidential re-election. One such advertisement by the Reagan administration in 1984 employs the imagery of the Soviet bear: "There is a bear in the woods. For some people the bear is easy to see. Others don't see it at all. Some people say the bear is tame; others say it is vicious and dangerous. Since no one can be sure who is right, isn't it smart to be as strong as the bear... if there is a bear?"<sup>31</sup> The message of the Reagan administration was clear, that defense spending would be a priority and that the Soviets still posed a potential threat to the United States of America. Finding opportunity in the weakened American position, the Reagan administration perpetuated fear that the Soviet Union had developed an "evil empire" which included nations in Europe, the Middle East, and Central America focused on preparing an attack.<sup>32</sup> Should this be the case, containment would not suffice. Instead, communism would need to be rolled back – a strong, active, anti-communist approach to foreign affairs which would break free from a future which would otherwise result in mutual assured destruction. For the Reagan administration, periods of relaxed tensions between the two world powers provided the Soviet enemy opportunities to surpass American capabilities and gain further international influence. Reagan's administration warned that while the Americans had become passively involved and comfortable in the Cold War, the Soviet Union had begun preparations for battle. Speaking at the East Room of the White House in 1984, President Reagan addressed America and other nations:

[During] the decade of the seventies, years when the United States seemed filled with self-doubt and neglected its defenses... the Soviet Union increased its military might and sought to expand its influence by armed forces and threat.

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<sup>30</sup> Julie Connelly, "Energy: Oil for the Lamps of Reagan," *Time*, December 22, 1980.

<sup>31</sup> *Ronald Reagan TV Ad: "The Bear,"* YouTube Video, 0:31, Posted by Avmorgado on November 12, 2006, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NpwdcmjBgNA&feature=related> (accessed 04 03, 2011).

<sup>32</sup> Reagan often referenced the "evil empire" in speeches – the reference is believed to have originated from George Lucas' popular *Star Wars* film series. The scenario is outlined in Alexander Haig, *Inner Circles: How America Changed the World: A Memoir* (New York, 1992): 550.



Over the last 10 years, the Soviets devoted twice as much of their gross national product to military expenditures as the United States, produced six times as many ICBMs, four times as many tanks, twice as many combat aircraft. And they began deploying the SS-20 intermediate-range missile at a time when the United States had no comparable weapon. History teaches us that wars begin when governments believe the price of aggression is cheap. To keep the peace, we and our allies must be strong enough to convince any potential aggressor that war could bring no benefit, only disaster. So when we neglected our defenses, the risks of serious confrontation grew.<sup>33</sup>

By rearticulating the Soviet threat, the Reagan administration's rhetoric would be justified in claiming that the soft American bodies would require a similar hardening to meet such a menace or surely face an uncertain, yet destructive, war.

In order for the Reagan administration to deploy masculine hard bodies as a new normative national body, the Soviet Union had to be presented as an opportunistic hardened enemy prepared to attack the "forces of freedom" in their moment of weakness. As previously discussed, in the hard-bodied action film genre the hero is defined against a Soviet 'other' who serves as both the adversary the hero must overcome and the catalyst for the hardening of America's own soft bodies. In each of the films, the Soviet threat is shown to have a distinct advantage over the American hero. In *Red Dawn*, the strength of the enemy lies in sheer numbers as a Soviet-sponsored invasion occurs due to American unwillingness to perceive the Soviet Union as a threat. *Red Dawn* begins with a 23-second, silent preamble in which simple sentences flash in yellow text over a black background outlining the fictional events which have led up to the invasion of America:

Soviet Union suffers worst wheat harvest in 55 years.  
Labor and food riots in Poland. Soviet troops invade.  
Cuba and Nicaragua reach troop strength goals of 500,000. El Salvador and Honduras fall.  
Greens party gains control of West German Parliament. Demands withdrawal of nuclear weapons from European soil.  
Mexico plunged into revolution.  
NATO dissolves. The United States stands alone.<sup>34</sup>

Following the invasion of the town high school by Soviet sponsored troops, *Red Dawn* focuses on the frontlines of World War III in Calumet, Colorado. It is in this small town, quickly overtaken by the Soviet Union and their allies, that American freedoms are stripped away and democracy

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<sup>33</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation and Other Countries on United States-Soviet Relations – January 16, 1984," *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library*, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1984/11684a.htm> (accessed June 16, 2011).

<sup>34</sup> *Red Dawn*. Directed by John Milius. 1984.

is challenged on a global scale. Having successfully escaped the grasp of the invading troops, a group of teenagers adopt the moniker “the Wolverines,” after their high school mascot, and begin launching attacks on the invaders. Over time the Wolverines gain momentum and confidence, becoming a true threat to the Soviet-sponsored forces. While the heroic group is unable to repel the enemies themselves, American troops do ultimately win the war due to their contributions.

These events, while fictional, represent the fears that the Reagan administration hoped to instill within the American public. In fact, the scenario was crafted by the film director John Milius in cooperation with General Alexander Haig.<sup>35</sup> Haig had served as former President Nixon’s White House Chief of Staff and the commander of NATO forces throughout the 1970s, before becoming President Reagan’s first Secretary of State. Haig’s appreciation of the propaganda value of popular film led him to his collaborative efforts with MGM studios. As he later states in his memoirs, *Red Dawn* provided a unique opportunity to press home to the American public the “genuine threat” posed by “Marxist-Leninist guerrillas” in Central America, who were being encouraged by Nicaragua’s Sandinista government, Havana, and Moscow.<sup>36</sup> These threats to American national security were shared by Reagan’s administration and formed the basis of the 1984 advertising campaign previously discussed. *Red Dawn*’s nightmare scenario of a Soviet-inspired invasion, or worse, World War III on American soil, born out of military weakness is a reflection of the Reagan administration’s ploy to focus on increased defense spending during his terms in office.

In the sequel to the 1982 box office hit *First Blood*, *Rambo: First Blood II*, American audiences were introduced to another reflection of the Soviet threat. *Rambo* begins with its title character being recruited for a clandestine mission to Vietnam to determine whether American Prisoners of War (POWs) remain in reportedly empty camps. While John Rambo, a Vietnam veteran himself, is ordered to do nothing more than take photographs as evidence, he is quickly embroiled in a battle with both Vietnamese and Soviet forces when he discovers that many American soldiers have been forcefully held in the camps since the war’s conclusion. Through brute strength, cunning, and determination, Rambo is able to successfully bring the POWs back to a safe American base and singlehandedly defeat his aggressors. Whereas in *Red Dawn* a foreign evil empire in the form of numerous troops capitalizing on the weakness of the forces of freedom, of which only America remains, invades the United States, in *Rambo*, the Soviet threat

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<sup>35</sup> Tony Shaw, *Hollywood’s Cold War: Culture, Politics, and the Cold War*, 271.

<sup>36</sup> Haig, 550.

is represented in the body of Sergeant Yushin, an assistant to the Soviet colonel who interrogates Rambo after he infiltrates a hidden POW camp. Yushin is physically overwhelming. Presented next to the heroic figure of John Rambo, Yushin's muscles are noticeably larger seemingly providing evidence to the Reagan administration's fearful claims that Soviet Russia had indeed encouraged the continued development of the defensive body while America had promoted laziness during détente. Furthermore, Yushin's physical presence is shown to be much harder than the equally antagonistic foes in the American government in sheer size and demonstrations of strength. *Rambo* invites the audience to produce the prescribed national bodies as a response to the fear that otherwise there would not be enough *Rambo*-like bodies to defend the United States from a Soviet attack. Other American bodies throughout the film are demonstrably passive or ignorant of the number of American men being held hostage in a former warzone. Rambo is determined and willing to return the men home and mark victory for his country. Showing that the Soviet threat is equal to, or stronger than the average American's capabilities encourages an urgent response from the American people.

During the 1980 election campaign, Reagan responded to the 60% of Americans that felt military spending was too low through well received promises of significant funding increases.<sup>37</sup> *Rocky IV* (1985) demonstrated why such increased spending would be necessary. Following the successes of the character Rocky Balboa's career, profiled in the three prior installments of the *Rocky* series, *Rocky IV* presents a new, foreign challenge to the boxing champion. Promoted through an orchestrated media blitz, Captain Ivan Drago is introduced to American boxing fans as an "international sportsman and ambassador of good will."<sup>38</sup> Underlying apprehensions are present in the media coverage, often using the term "invasion" to explain the emergence of the Soviet athlete on the American boxing scene. In a press conference with American media outlets, Drago's wife and press handler issue an open challenge to Rocky, claiming that they would be honoured to challenge the premier American boxer. Apollo Creed, Rocky's former opponent and current trainer and friend, sees the press conference on a news broadcast. Deciding to accept the challenge himself, in an effort to recapture his own former glory, Creed commits to an exhibition boxing match against Drago in Las Vegas. It is here that Drago is revealed to be a robotic and destructive weapon. The boxing match is punctuated with a fatal blow dealt by Drago to Creed, killing the legendary boxer. Motivated by the loss of his friend, Rocky accepts Drago's earlier challenge and agrees to a match on Christmas Day in the Soviet Union. Many montages depict training sessions, individual motivations, and the national

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<sup>37</sup> David Frum, *How We Got Here: The '70s* (New York: Basic Books, 2000): 344.

<sup>38</sup> *Rocky IV*, directed by Sylvester Stallone, Twentieth Century Fox, 1985.

importance of the contest in the lead up to the fight. Without the home field advantage, Rocky is able to withstand the punishment dealt by Drago and defeat the invincible Soviet threat. Throughout the match the crowd's respect for the American representative increases and in the end his victory is heralded by the Soviet audience. Overcoming the physical challenge of Drago and the mental challenge presented by competing in front of a hostile crowd, Rocky is able to win over the Russian people and present hope for peace through strength.

Inviting the media to Captain Drago's American training quarters, Drago's wife Ludmilla, who is his manager and also possesses the same masculine buzz cut as Drago, introduces the viewers to "a small portion of the advances our country [Soviet Russia] has made in new technology of human performance."<sup>39</sup> The cameras pan to showcase various machines and monitors displaying scans of Drago's body. Doctors monitor Drago's performance with clipboards while others turn various knobs. Ludmilla speaks for Drago throughout the film and explains that all of the technology makes Drago a better man, harnessing all of his strength. The media question Drago's "freakish" stature and make insinuations of illegal steroid use, both of which are quickly refuted by Ludmilla through a humorous reference to Popeye; however, exchanged glances between Drago's team of handlers tell another story. Following the discussion, Drago demonstrates his power by punching a red button attached to a machine. Viewers are told that this machine measures the amount of pressure per square inch delivered by each punch and that the average man delivers seven hundred pounds of pressure per square inch. With cameras and doctors watching, Drago delivers an average of 1850 pounds. The message being presented is clear: the Russian import is a devastating synthetic man. The accusations of illegal steroids draw simple parallels to the Reagan administration's claims of a misspent détente. Drago represents the need for American military spending – while America had cut military costs during a seemingly peaceful period between the two superpowers, the Soviet Union was building up their weapons base and making technological advances with which the United States is unable to compete.

In 1988, *Die Hard* presents yet another form of the Soviet threat. Hans Gruber, an expelled member of a radical German group known as the Volksfrei movement, leads a group of international terrorists in an attempted robbery of the Nakatomi Corporation. The Volksfrie movement, roughly translated as the Free People's movement, possesses loose ties to the Soviet Union and seemingly seeks to end the American occupation of Germany before admitting it is primarily interested in money. Present at the time of the attempted robbery is John

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<sup>39</sup> *Rocky IV*.

McClane, a New York police officer visiting Los Angeles to visit his estranged wife and their children for Christmas. Able to avoid being rounded up with the Nakatomi employees by the robbers, McClane sets out to determine their plans and save his estranged wife, successful business woman Holly Generro, and her co-workers from harm. Maneuvering his way around the building, McClane is eventually able to gain information on the group's objectives and plans. Throughout the process McClane calls for outside assistance; however, that proves to be more beneficial to the villains than the hero. Engaging in direct confrontations with individual members of Gruber's crew, McClane slowly eliminates the group of terrorist robbers until he gets to their leader. Having discovered that Generro is McClane's wife, Gruber takes Holly as a personal hostage as a means to lure McClane towards his death. Unfortunately for Gruber, this plan does not come to fruition and instead it is he who plummets to his death. Successfully and singlehandedly defeating the group of invading robbers, McClane demonstrates the superiority of an American hypermasculine body over that of a morally corrupt villain.

This version of the hard-body hero's adversary represents a combination of foreign and domestic enemies of President Reagan's administration – terrorists, foreigners, communist governments, criminals, and even American citizens skeptical of the Republican right. Similar to Drago, Gruber comes to America with advanced technological understandings. His sophisticated use of technology, complex planning, and manpower allow him to portray himself as a common terrorist while clandestinely attempting to rob the corporation of \$640 million of negotiable bearer bonds which they have stored in their highly secured vault. Gruber, unlike the villains presented in the previously discussed films, is a sophisticated, well-groomed character. Gruber arrives at the Nakatomi Corporation in an expensive black suit, white shirt, and red tie. Gruber's appearance remains in stark contrast to the file image later used in a news broadcast which details his group's takeover; however, the messy hair and baggy, dirty clothes in the file image represent his progression from his grassroots terrorist past to higher levels of crime demonstrated in *Die Hard*. Gruber's intelligence and appearance indicate the type of sophisticated enemies which President Reagan's administration meant to defy – the German villain is representative of economically and technologically advanced nations which could prove more capable than America. In this way, Gruber and Drago present similar messages to the American audience - reflecting a divergence between American capabilities and those of other, unfriendly nations.

The two villains also share degrees of feminization on film. While Drago's physique clearly signifies the same hypermasculine conception of the hero, the camera's panning shots

are akin to those reserved for females in film. The same longing shots are used on the bodies of the hypermasculine heroes; however, the difference is demonstrated in the morality of the character. Strong, moral, and hypermasculine men belonged to the Reagan administration's articulation of the national body. Similar looking men with loose morals and lacking conservative qualities were cast as an "other" and deemed social undesirables. Drago is further feminized through his emasculated relationship with the dominant female wife. They have the same haircut which emphasizes both his feminization and her masculinization - a general blurring of boundary lines. Gruber's attention to fashion, hygiene, and speech is contrasted against McClane's masculinity and is feminized in the process. Such feminine articulations of Gruber require the presence of his eleven accomplices in order to be seen as a masculinized threat, which also provides a consistent symbolism between the Reagan administration's soft identification of 1970s individualism and materialism. The reliance on technology is further cast as 'soft' or feminine furthering criticisms of nations that had developed an economic advantage through technology which stood in contrast to the Reagan administration's rhetoric which emphasized the value of masculine hard work and labour. Throughout the hard-bodied action films of the 1980s it is clear that economic, military, and strategic strength together are required to ensure peace and American stability against the advanced Soviet hard-bodied threat. Significantly however, by 1988 when *Die Hard* is released, the film shows Gruber as more economically than ideologically motivated in his actions against an American corporation. The Soviet threat is morphing ever so slightly into common criminals.

A common thread linking *Red Dawn*, *Rambo: First Blood II*, *Rocky IV*, and *Die Hard* is the 'orthodox' presentation of the villain. The Soviet threat, in its various incarnations, is shown to be the aggressor in the Cold War. The films' recommendation is clear: the United States needs to bolster its strength in order to repel the foreign enemies of freedom. Unique to the genre, *The Package* (1989) leaves the orthodox arguments behind and adopts a more 'revisionist' outlook. In this film decorated Army Sergeant John Gallagher is assigned the task of accompanying a prisoner named Thomas Boyette (referred to as a package) back to the United States. Following their flight, while at the airport, the duo is attacked in the public washroom leaving Gallagher unconscious and the prisoner missing. As Gallagher investigates further, he finds that the prisoner was not Boyette at all, but rather an assassin hired to kill the Soviet leader following a meeting in Chicago with the President of the United States. Conspiracy theories and tales of corruption unravel as Gallagher and his estranged wife Army Lieutenant Colonel Eileen Gallagher attempt to discover the truth and thwart a plan designed to once again

renew Cold War tensions. Rather than pit an American hero against a Soviet enemy as seen in the earlier films, *The Package* blurs the black and white contrast by demonstrating the corruption on both sides. Members of the American and Soviet military have colluded to create this plan while other members must work together to stop it. The absence of a clear, foreign-sponsored enemy marks the shift away from the hard-body narrative. Embracing a theory of mutual hostility, the post-revisionist conception of the Cold War refocused blame and misguided intentions domestically. Rather than demonstrate that strength needed to be gained solely to thwart potential foreign attacks on freedom, *The Package* demonstrated that domestic threats were equally dangerous. While the film was largely unpopular in comparison to the earlier films of the decade, the modified messages that it housed reflect the changing realities as the Cold War neared its end marking the death of the hard-body hero and the genre's orthodox interpretations.

### *Domestic Enemies of Freedom*

The "enemies of freedom" vaguely cited within President Reagan's Inaugural Address were not so vaguely identified in much of the administration's later rhetoric. Beginning primarily with domestic enemies of freedom who clung to the softness promoted during the Carter administration, the enemies of freedom were claimed as seeking the destruction of the American people and fostering the rise of an evil empire. The highly conservative Republican agenda was driven by a desire to correct the skewed American moral compass. Drug use, sexuality, and childbearing had been treated too lightly by the Carter administration and as such began drawing the attention of Republican supporters. To Republicans, the light treatment of loose morals demonstrated the ill effects of Carter's soft, individualistic leadership and American vulnerability to external threats. While the hard-bodied action film genre responded to the events of the 1970s which shook public confidence and raised questions about how to conceive American masculinity, it also provided more contemporary critiques of American weakness which had developed in the 1980s. Strong representations of the Soviet threat required a strong, heroic response; however, not every American in hard-bodied film fit the heroic hard-bodied mold and these films located a weakness in the excess of consumption in the 1980s. In the action films, the secondary characters are often portrayed as soft bodies that embody the American weaknesses that the hero must symbolically overcome in order to defeat the Soviet threat. In each of the films, the secondary characters personify the soft characteristics (such as a connection to the national embarrassment suffered in Vietnam) that challenge American strength, confidence, and even masculinity from within. These secondary characters comprise

the national plot present in the films of the genre and can be categorized as soft-bodied domestic threats to American superiority and strength.

Chief among the themes in early hard-bodied narratives is Vietnam. Based on the domino theory that characterized much of the American perceptions of Soviet policy, American involvement in the Vietnam War sought to prevent further advances of communism. By entering Vietnam and crushing Vietnamese communism, the Americans hoped that they would send a strong message to other communist states, particularly China.<sup>40</sup> Rather than demonstrate America's determination to prevent the spread of communism and strength in the global community, Vietnam had shown the world that America, a great power, was fighting communism in a small country and failing with mass casualties.<sup>41</sup> The impact of Vietnam was troubling. George C. Herring writes, "As no other event in the nation's history, [the Vietnam War]... challenged American's traditional beliefs about themselves, the notion that in their relations with other people they have generally acted with benevolence, the idea that nothing is beyond reach."<sup>42</sup> Dreams of defeating communism were shrouded with concerns over the limits of American intentions and capabilities. Throughout the 1980s, President Reagan often told the American people that Vietnam had been a noble cause which the leadership had lacked the will to win.<sup>43</sup> This Vietnam syndrome had played a significant role in the development of a weakened national confidence, and for Reagan, was a factor that had to be dealt with in order to ensure America's capability to prevent the Soviets from taking advantage of American pacifism.

*Red Dawn* responds to America's Vietnam syndrome by seeking revenge for their loss and allowing American victory. The message seems to be clear that the indecisiveness of the parents of the teenage band of heroes', the Wolverines', opened America up to the invasion. While the Wolverines enter battle to avenge the maltreatment their parents receive at the hands of Soviet sponsored invaders, it is not lost on them that in some ways their parents are at fault. Midway through the film, the teenage boys make their way back into town in order to replenish their supplies. Upon their arrival they learn that an old drive-in theatre has been turned into a fenced re-education centre for potential resistors – among them is Jed and Matt's father. As the group approaches anti-capitalist slideshows are shown on the old drive-in screen while a voice is heard through the PA system attacking "whorehouse America." While Mr. Eckert and his sons

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<sup>40</sup> Gabriel Partos, *The World that came in from the Cold: Perspectives from East and West on the Cold War* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1993): 142.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>42</sup> Herring, 304-5.

<sup>43</sup> Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York, 2000): 11.



share memories and express their love for each other, the harsh reality of the camp is evident. Jed and Matt are stirred by their father's words that "one way or another, one reason or another, we're all gone. It's all gone."<sup>44</sup> Mr. Eckert's seeming guilt and defeat upsets the boys but Mr. Eckert rallies them, encouraging that no more tears be shed, that they abandon him at the camp and go out and avenge him. The Wolverines, within a Vietnam perspective, reflect the American sense of guilt and lost purpose overseas. The film's director, John Milius, re-casts Vietnam with the Wolverines in the role of the Viet Cong partisans and the Soviets and Cubans as the foreign invaders. While the Wolverines do not achieve victory themselves, those who follow their lead do. Throughout the film, statues are used as symbolic signposts for the viewers. In early scenes the camera focuses on a Rough Rider statue. Quoting Theodore Roosevelt, the attached plaque reads: "Far better it is to dare mighty things than to take rank with those poor, timid spirits who know neither victory nor defeat."<sup>45</sup> The plaque signifies to the viewer that there is a choice to be made. Pacifism in the not so distant past has led those Calumet citizens into re-education centres and to becoming prisoners in their own homes. The teenagers who are more strong-willed remain free and are able to fight for the democratic and capitalist ideologies of their nation. Following the war, Erica introduces us to a landmark commemorating the Wolverine effort: "In the early days of World War III, guerillas, mostly children, placed the names of their lost upon this rock. They fought here alone and gave up their lives so that this nation should not perish from the Earth."<sup>46</sup> The use of the two landmarks serve as a moral compass for the American people, demonstrating that active, loyal, and courageous citizens lead to American strength and renewal and the passivity generated in the 1970s has hazardous consequences.

While *Red Dawn* presents a re-written ending to the Vietnam War, *Rambo* is the quintessential Cold War Vietnam text. The main character and hard-bodied hero, John Rambo, is a veteran of an elite United States Army Special Forces unit that served in Vietnam. In the first film of the *Rambo* series, *First Blood* (1982), Rambo's return to America following the Vietnam War demonstrates the difficulties veterans faced as they attempted to reintegrate into a changed American society. Following the horrific war, Rambo feels misunderstood and mistreated – feelings that are confirmed through various scenes demonstrating the parallels between his war experiences and the treatment he receives by local police forces. *Rambo: First Blood II* presents another aspect of the Vietnam narrative. As the film begins, Rambo is relieved of his internment sentence which he receives in *First Blood*. Rambo is then sent back to

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<sup>44</sup> Cannon, 11.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> *Red Dawn*.

Vietnam to complete a military investigation of Prisoner of War camps rumoured to be housing American soldiers. While the emphasis in *First Blood* is on the torture and hardships cast on Rambo, the national body is the focus of *Rambo*. Rambo's hard body is needed in order to rescue the national body from falling prey to their Vietnam syndrome. The identification of the American POWs in *Rambo* as the national body is easy to distinguish due to the similar presentation of POWs in the Reagan administration. Reagan characterized POWs during his two terms as representative groups – labeling them as American POWs rather than by their individual names.<sup>47</sup> This tactic was used to assert that America itself was being held captive, a strategy Reagan also successfully employed in 1983 with the Grenada invasion: "American lives are at stake. We've been following the situation as closely as possible. Between 800 and a thousand Americans...make up the largest group of foreign residents in Grenada."<sup>48</sup> In *Rambo* the audience is never introduced to any one POW long enough to form any level of attachment beyond one with the collective. Referred to as simply American POWs the audience is provided a story which ignores the potential history of the group and focuses solely on what they represent in the present and future. In many ways, the group in the film demonstrates the same feelings of neglect faced by John Rambo in *First Blood* as they are shown to be a collective of hard bodies forgotten by the American national body and seemingly needs recognition and renewal if America is to overcome its confidence gap and regain national strength.

### *Corrupt Government and Institutions*

While *Rambo* is a form of Vietnam narrative, it also speaks to the Reaganite fear of government and bureaucratic corruption. With Watergate, in the 1970s, faith in American leadership was shaken. As Elizabeth Drew, American political journalist and author, writes just four years after the beginning of the scandal in 1972:

[Watergate]... shook our confidence. We had had a kind of faith that we would never elect a really bad man as president – an incompetent or a fraud, perhaps, but not a man who would preside over criminal activities and seek to take away

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<sup>47</sup> Most easily recognized in the July 2, 1985 speech declaring: "None of you were held prisoner because of any personal wrong that any of you had done to anyone; you were held simply because you were Americans. In the minds of your captors, you represented us." Throughout many of the speeches regarding hostages of any sort individual names are rarely used and rather a collective image is portrayed. Ronald Reagan, "Remarks to the Freed Hostages From the Trans World Airlines Hijacking Incident – July 2, 1985," *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library*, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1985/70285b.htm> (accessed June 24, 2011).

<sup>48</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Remarks of the President and Prime Minister Eugenia Charles of Dominica Announcing the Deployment of United States Forces in Grenada – October 25, 1983," *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library*, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1983/102583a.htm> (accessed June 24, 2011).

our liberties. We had a deep unexamined confidence in the electoral system. The system was messy, but we had come to depend on it to keep us well within the range of safety. And then it didn't.<sup>49</sup>

Responding to this weakened perception of American leadership, at home and abroad, Reagan began to attack big government and incompetent bureaucracies. Speaking on government expansion in his Inaugural Address Reagan stated, "We are a nation that has a government -- not the other way around. ... It is time to check and reverse the growth of government, which shows signs of having grown beyond the consent of the governed."<sup>50</sup> Further, "It is no coincidence that our present troubles parallel and are proportionate to the intervention and intrusion in our lives that result from unnecessary and excessive growth of government."<sup>51</sup> Domestic corruption was as much a threat to American wellbeing as foreign invasion and policies that indicated such remain among Reagan's most known. The issue of big governments was, for the Reagan administration, the various incarnations of social welfare rather than the Presidential leadership as indicated by Drew. Shifting the focus of government criticisms away from the Presidential role and towards welfare and civil rights, Reagan concentrated on addressing Republican concerns of morality and family within the body such as abortion, sexuality, and child rearing. The Republican voting public's clear stance against abortion and focus on the family indicated that the feminist movement that had been growing since the 1970s was posing a challenge to the family. The bureaucratic corruption was best typified for Reagan by the welfare state – what he saw as slacker Americans who were double dipping and taking financial assistance from the government without any need. Such conceptions of soft-bodied weaknesses were also addressed through secondary characters in the action films of the 1980s.

Marshall Murdock, the key figure in Rambo's return mission to Vietnam in *Rambo*, is a characterization of soft-bodied leadership. Jeffords discusses the symbolic contrast of Murdock and Rambo: Murdock, wearing a long-sleeved dress shirt and tie, is visibly perspiring and uncomfortable demonstrating his physical weakness in contrast to Rambo who is shown in military gear emphasizing his muscular build differentiating between the hard and the soft.<sup>52</sup> Murdock's ineffectiveness is captured in his attire and mannerisms and he surrenders his body

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<sup>49</sup> Elizabeth Drew, *American Journal: The Events of 1976* (New York: Random House, 1977), 3 as quoted in Collins, 11.

<sup>50</sup> "Inaugural Address – January 20, 1981," <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1981/12081a.htm>.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Jeffords, 37.

and will to Rambo upon his successful return from Vietnam.<sup>53</sup> Such weak-willed leadership points to the potential that America could have won Vietnam the first time as President Reagan claimed. The Vietnam criticism is reinforced by the presence of American POWs who remind the American audience of the forgotten hard-bodied heroes of the recent past and demonstrate the corruptive presence of soft bodies within the government. Presumably, the POWs are not truly forgotten by their families or a fairly large portion of the American public. In fact, Murdock even insists that Rambo take pictures of the presumed empty camps in order to silence a rumour which indicates that the mission is a response to members of the public who still actively remember this collective of men. Therefore, if these men have not been completely forgotten by the American public, why would the government not have attempted to locate them sooner? The answer is revealed to be that Congress has refused to appropriate the money required to launch a rescue for these men. Rather than having been forgotten, the American POWs have been repressed by the weakened American government. Given that the POWs are representative of the national body as referenced in the Reagan administration's own speeches, and can be considered formerly hard-bodied heroes prior to their capture, torture, and starvation, *Rambo* claims that the soft-bodied leadership in charge of American affairs is corrupt and is sabotaging American potential by subverting the types of men required to respond to the Soviet threat. Even Colonel Podovsky comments while torturing Rambo, "It seems you were abandoned on direct command."<sup>54</sup> Seemingly, this is a spoken recognition of the negative effects of Vietnam on the public mind – military failures and embarrassments have allowed for the suppression of an important aspect of the national body. Such pressures have forced to the ostracizing of remaining heroes like Rambo and the ascension of corrupt soft-bodied leadership such as Murdock's. The lack of passion for the national body as shown in the film through the American POWs and for American strength through Murdock, demonstrates how internal weakness forced defeat in a winnable war.

Contemporary critiques of corrupt bureaucracies are most pronounced in *Die Hard*. Much like Reagan insinuated in his Inaugural Address, John McClane's attempts to combat the twelve terrorists led by Hans Gruber in order to save the hostage employees of the Nakatomi building are continuously impeded by incompetent bureaucracies. The first incident occurs when McClane is able to capture one of the terrorist's radios and attempts to call for help. A female dispatcher receives the call and rather than assist McClane, she informs him that the channel he is using is reserved for emergencies only and should he continue to use it she will report him

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> *Rambo: First Blood II*. Directed by George P. Cosmatos. 1985.

to the FCC. Only when she hears gunshots does she grudgingly send a single car to drive by the building to investigate the call. Sergeant Al Powell receives the instructions and enters the scene. As he drives up to the building all seems normal. Frustrated by the lack of assistance being provided, McClane throws a dead terrorist's body, from whom he took the radio, onto Powell's car. Establishing that in fact there is cause for concern in the building, Powell calls for backup. Unfortunately for McClane, it is not enough to appease the deputy chief of police Dwayne Robinson. Robinson insists to Powell that it is nothing more than a crank call and that the body was simply a depressed stockbroker. With Powell as his only ally, and one that is stuck on the outside due to orders from a superior officer, McClane is forced to defend the building and employees from the terrorist thieves alone.

*Die Hard* is rife with bureaucratic criticisms. Throughout the film layer after layer of bureaucratic authority (street cop, deputy chief of police, assault team, and FBI) shows up to the Nakatomi tower and interferes in, rather than assists, McClane's attempted rescue of the hostage employees. Furthermore, as each level of bureaucracy gets involved, more damage is done to the situation and the innocent lives are put at greater risk. In many ways, there are parallel criticisms in *Die Hard* and *Rambo* as the bureaucratic failures and interference prevent the heroes from doing their job much in the same way that Congress prevents President Reagan from being fully able to implement his economic reforms. While Reagan's claims of such prevention were often more veiled, the reflection remains. *Red Dawn* also presents a similar scenario of how corrupt bureaucracies can prevent productivity and American victory. In fact, the Mayor of Calumet, one of the boys' (Daryl) fathers, cooperates with the invaders and seems to continuously hinder the Wolverine's advancement. Mayor Bates is shown standing by the Soviet-sponsored troops as they murder his own constituents. The corruption is not just limited to the Mayor however, as his son Daryl is also demonstrably weak in his betrayal of the Wolverines when the KGB captures him after sneaking into town without the group's knowledge. Once captured, Daryl is forced to swallow a radio transmitter that leads the Spetsnaz commandos to the Wolverine's hideout using radio triangulation. Daryl's betrayal leads to his execution by the Wolverines and serves as a grim reminder of the potential of corruptive power. Without confronting such negative influences, the pattern will continue into the next generation. This outlook is in line with the Reagan administration's approach to big government and bureaucratic corruption – that it needs to be eliminated to ensure American strength and capability to repel the Soviet threat.

*The Package* bridges the narrative of government and bureaucratic corruption on its release in 1989. Col. Glen Whitacre, the American officer colluding with Soviet officials to assassinate their leader in hopes of rekindling Cold War hostilities, is a prime example of the internal corruption afforded by government and institutional expansion. The relationship between Whitacre and Soviet officials is seemingly easily kept under wraps due to liberties taken by the Colonel in both reporting and censoring of military documents. The employment of armed and dangerous hit men serves as an insurance policy for the unlikely co-conspirators, keeping tabs on both the classified evidence pertaining to their plans and files regarding related parties. As Sgt. Gallagher, the unsuspecting hero, gets closer to unraveling the evil plot, more levels of the government and the military are shown to be unable to detect and combat corruption within their ranks. Without a hard-body hero such as Gallagher, the assassination attempt would have been successfully carried out from within and the world would once again be engaged in total warfare. As Colonel Whitacre says to Gallagher following the foiled plot, "There hasn't been a war in over 50 years Sergeant. You know why? Because spooks like you keep messing things up."<sup>55</sup> As one of the closing lines in the film, Whitacre's words hold force. In one reading, the statement indicates that the Cold War was an unnecessary conflict which had potentially been created by internal collusion on both sides as a means to advance technology and the economy. Such a reading further demonstrates the revisionist transformation of the hard-body narrative and the movement away from the orthodox presentation of the Cold War in the previous films.

### *The Economy*

These United States are confronted with an economic affliction of great proportions. We suffer from the longest and one of the worst sustained inflations in our national history. It distorts our economic decisions, penalizes thrift, and crushes the struggling young and the fixed-income elderly alike. It threatens to shatter the lives of millions of our people.<sup>56</sup>

Focusing primarily on economic renewal at home during his first term, President Reagan implemented supply-side economics as a means to invigorate the American economy. The above quotation, taken from the Inaugural Address, demonstrates the frustrations facing the American people and incoming administration. President Reagan discussed the economic situation in the 1980s as one of eventual prosperity: "A recession is when your neighbour loses

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<sup>55</sup> *The Package*.

<sup>56</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Inaugural Address – January 20, 1981," <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1981/12081a.htm>.

his job. A depression is when you lose yours. And recovery is when Jimmy Carter loses his.”<sup>57</sup> With Reagan at the reins, America seemed poised to reassert its global standing and discard the indulgences of the 1970s. Indeed, the Reagan administration was able to usher in an era of economic recovery in the 1980s which brought its own version of excess and consumption.

Reaganomics, or supply-side economics, is built on a four-pillar approach: (1) reduce growth of government spending, (2) reduce taxes, (3) reduce government regulation, and (4) control monetary supply to reduce inflation.<sup>58</sup> Both President Nixon and President Carter had seemingly cemented the stagflation that had caused great damage to the American economic system during the 1970s during their terms in office. The Reagan administration’s plan provided a unique approach to resolving the financial strains that they believed had weakened the level of national confidence and strength. Beginning by targeting the oil crisis, the Reagan administration lifted controls on both domestic petroleum pricing and lowered taxes on oil profits.<sup>59</sup> The Tax Reform Act of 1986 set out to complete the project – primarily focusing on removing loopholes and exemptions at the tax base.<sup>60</sup> Reaganomics would become recognized as bringing about one of the largest economic expansions in American history. Between the years 1980 and 1988, the American Gross Domestic Product experienced a growth of 4.4% and the unemployment rate was reduced by 1.6%.<sup>61</sup> The promised increase in military and defense expenditure was carried out totaling an estimated \$100 billion dollars; however, critics point out the figures regarding Americans living below the poverty line – which actually faced a small increase.<sup>62</sup> Regardless of the future ramifications of the supply-side economic structure, Reaganomics successfully ushered in an era of American recovery in terms of their financial strength. How some Americans dealt with this recovery conflicted with the Reagan

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<sup>57</sup> Kiron K. Skinner, Serhiy Kudelia, Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Condoleezza Rice. *The Strategy of Campaigning: Lessons from Ronald Reagan and Boris Yeltsin* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2007): 185.

<sup>58</sup> Derived from: William A. Niskanen, *Reaganomics: An Insider's Account of the Policies and the People* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

<sup>59</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Executive Order 12287 – Decontrol of Crude Oil and Refined Petroleum Products,” *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library*, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1981/12881a.htm> (accessed June 25, 2011).

<sup>60</sup> For more information on the Tax Reform Act of 1986 see: Joint Committee on Taxation, “General Explanation of the Tax Reform Act of 1986,” U.S. Government Printing Office, May 04, 1987, [www.jct.gov/jcs-10-87.pdf](http://www.jct.gov/jcs-10-87.pdf) (accessed June 25, 2011).

<sup>61</sup> Bureau of Economic Analysis, *Gross Domestic Product*, U.S. Department of Commerce, <http://www.bea.gov.national/xls/gdpchg.xls> (accessed June 25, 2011); U.S. Department of Labor, *Employment Status of the Civilian Non-Institutional Population, 1940 - date*, Bureau of Labor Statistics, <ftp://ftp.bls.gov/pub/special.requests/lf/aat1.txt> (accessed June 25, 2011).

<sup>62</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, “Historical Poverty Tables,” <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/histpov/perindex.html>, table 7 (accessed June 25, 2011).

administration's projected goals for the normative national body articulated during the Inaugural Address. Much like the other domestic threats to American potential, these contradictions would be represented in the hard-body action films through secondary characters.

Following the economic recovery afforded by Reaganomics, Americans were once again tempted by the materialist culture rooted in post-World War II recovery. While not explicitly targeted by the Reagan administration's rhetoric, the action films of the 1980s did offer a connection between the decade's growing materialism and the potential effects on national strength. In many ways, the overconsumption by characters in the action films demonstrated the divergence between the hard-bodied hypermasculinity of the proposed normative national body for the 1980s and the threat of the quick return to the individualistic soft bodies of the 1970s. By drawing parallel criticisms between 1970s individualism and excessive impulses of the 1980s, action films were able to distinguish the divergence between the republican ideals of strength and a consumer culture which threatened that strength. Such consumer culture was often promoted in other forms of popular media in the 1980s, particularly television with shows like *Dynasty*, *Dallas*, and *The Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. The gendered discourse in these criticisms becomes clearer as the materialistic tendencies of the characters are shown as feminizing – illustrating how self-identification through material possessions rather than self-controlled individualism threatens the hypermasculinity necessary to confront national threats.<sup>63</sup> As with other criticisms housed in the action film genre, the secondary characters serve as the greatest representation of the film's critique and women, as well as some feminized men, overwhelmingly represent the excesses of consumption. Certainly the gender relations depicted in the 1980s hard-body films spoke to the political and economic reality of American women in the 1970s and 1980s, even if they largely rejected them.

The 1970s saw a shift in the role of American women. Encouraged by the civil rights movement and the desire for their own female emancipation, American women began entering the workforce in large numbers and by the early 1970s the movement had gained enough steam to attempt to amend the constitution so as to confirm legal recognition of equal rights in the workplace. The 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court case further provided arguably the most significant victory for the women's rights movement in America by sanctioning a woman's right to abortion at the early stages of pregnancy. As previously alluded to, such gains for the women's movement directly threatened the republican ideals of family and traditional female

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<sup>63</sup> Self-controlled individualism refers to a process theorized by Michael Kimmel in which masculinity is asserted through self-development and competition. Further elaborated on in Chapter 2.



gender roles. Vehemently anti-abortion and focused on returning women's attention solely to their families, the continued success of women outside of the home seemed largely contradictory to the republican goals of the Reagan administration and personified by the hard-body hero. As a result women such as the successful businesswoman Holly Generro in *Die Hard* and Army Sergeant Eileen Gallagher in *The Package* were encouraged to shed the gains of their feminism in favour of subjugation to the hard-bodied hero. In an article published by *Time Magazine* in 1977, the efficient redirection of these apparent feminists within hard-bodied film is clarified. The article quotes psychiatrist Ruth Tiffany Barnhouse who claims that women themselves subscribe to such blatant anti-feminism as a form of "compensation for succeeding in a man's world" suggesting a latent internal guilt that can be exploited by such representations in media.<sup>64</sup> The films themselves provide examples of this including Generro's longing for a reunited family as indicated through family photos present in her office and Gallagher's similar familial desires represented in her joy shown while fulfilling the traditional maternal role by making eggs for a male friend's children while her ex-husband attempts to overturn the assassination attempt.

Both female characters become endangered and physically threatened by the film's villains and while seemingly independent women prior to the film's beginning, are noticeably weakened and unable to defend themselves by the film's end. Accepting a position in Los Angeles and leaving her husband behind in New York, Holly McClane, now going by her maiden name Generro, chooses the high salary offered by her job over the family values promoted in Reagan's republican rhetoric. Such a decision has costly consequences for Generro as her company, the Nakatomi Corporation, becomes a terrorist thief's target. While the film never specifically draws the conclusion that her decision to divide her family had causal connections to the terrorist takeover, the decision is overtly criticized in it. The torment of the hero, estranged husband John McClane, is evident from the film's opening moments and the tensions have prevented both parents from the true happiness provided by the nuclear family formation. Her attraction to wealth is symbolically released in the final acts of the film as she needs to remove her expensive watch in order to survive when Gruber attempts to drag her down with him as he hangs out the skyscraper window. The assertion being that the feminine attraction to wealth and luxury leaves America vulnerable and weak, such characters who exhibit an affection for the consumer culture and are unable to develop a hard body by which to confront the enemy must begin expressing a willingness to change in order to be saved by the hard-bodied hero.

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<sup>64</sup> "The Sexes: Really Socking It to Women," *Time Magazine*, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,914772,00.html>.

*The Package* offers a parallel narrative with Sgt. Gallagher's ex-wife – Eileen Gallagher. Since separating from Army Sergeant Johnny Gallagher, Eileen has moved up the ranks herself, achieving the status of U.S. Army Lieutenant. Much like in *Die Hard*, the film implicitly states that in order for women to become more successful in their careers families must become secondary priorities. The results of such decisions are clear as neither woman's family remains intact. Much like Holly Generro, Lieutenant Gallagher is forced to reconsider her past decisions as she finds herself in harm's way as she begins learning too much about the Army's internal corruption and plans to assassinate the Soviet leader. Becoming a target herself, Eileen Gallagher is forced to strip herself of her Army credentials and remain protected by her hard-bodied ex-husband. Both films indicate that women require the presence of the hard-body hero in order to survive the threats posed to American society by the villains in the film and further serve to articulate the republican administration's ideal gender roles. The criticism lends itself to the economic issues of the 1970s and 1980s as economic motivation for individual success has brought these women to their positions and had been allowed by soft-bodied feminist leadership and society which weakened the American social structure. That is to say that pro-feminist mentalities allowed women such as Generro and Gallagher to become too "hard" for their sex, but their vanity, as represented by Generro's watch, demonstrates their implicit weakness and need to leave the hard-body position to their hypermasculine male counterparts. In other words, by re-accepting their subjugated roles by the films' conclusions, Generro and Gallagher represent the means by which women can reclaim strength for America – releasing themselves from their independent-minded successes and supporting the masculine hard-body heroes in their struggle against identifiable national enemies.

Of the 1980s hard-bodied action films, *Rocky IV* presents the most explicit reflection of the culture's excessive consumption. Early in the film, Rocky arrives home from a training session with various gifts for his wife, son, and friend Paulie. Emphasis is placed on the luxury and comfort of Rocky's life, gained throughout the film series, and increasing celebrity. As Rocky arrives at his suburban home, his son videotapes him as he gets out of the car and enters the house. In Rebecca Bell-Metereau's discussion of Stallone films, she delineates such tendencies as subtle attempts to demonstrate both Rocky and Stallone's real life growing star status.<sup>65</sup> When Rocky enters the house, we learn that he is late for Paulie's birthday party and we see that it is Paulie, as well as Adrian and Rocky who has been tainted by this excess.

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<sup>65</sup> Rebecca Bell-Metereau, "Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger: Androgynous Macho Men," in *Acting for America: Movie Stars of the 1980s*, ed. Robert T. Eberwein, 36-56 (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010): 43.

Apologetic, Rocky approaches Paulie and tells him of an amazing gift which the family has bought for him. A life-size robot enters the room carrying Paulie's birthday cake. Paulie seems taken aback by the robot; however, the emphasis on accumulation of wealth and possessions is clear. Over time Paulie and the robot develop a comedic friendship and the robot develops a more feminine voice in comparison to the masculine voice possessed at its introduction earlier in the film. The use of the robot as a comedic vehicle demonstrates that technology is frivolous and materialistic, that its purpose should be, as shown throughout the film, to serve man. The robot, while a comedic addition to the film, is shown as a servant to Paulie and the family which draws Paulie's infatuation. Paulie's dependence on technology and American luxury continues as he accompanies Rocky to Soviet Russia for the ultimate showdown against Russian fighting champion, Cpt. Ivan Drago. As they arrive to the provided accommodations Paulie complains about the cold climate, unattractive lodging, and lack of American television. Paulie cannot conceive of shedding the comforts of the American lifestyle, even going as far as to question Rocky's sanity for accepting the fight without compensation. Paulie is the personification of the American soft body, someone who is so comfortable with the luxuries afforded to the materialist American society that they are incapable of becoming a hard-bodied hero; instead they need saving by one.

Adrian, Rocky's wife, while less cemented in the luxurious lifestyle celebrity has afforded her family than Paulie, is equally resistant to the changes necessary to repel the Soviet threat. Following Paulie's birthday party Rocky presents an early anniversary gift to Adrian. She opens the package to reveal an expensive watch which coils up her arm like a golden snake. The couple both remark on its elegance and beauty showing their appreciation of expensive items. Rocky is shown in the early part of the film in Hugo Boss leisure suits, demonstrating his own infatuation with luxurious items. His collection of cars and large estate are further examples of his own comfort with the American consumer culture. When Rocky begins to shed his ways of consumption in order to combat the Soviet threat and accepts an exhibition match in Soviet Russia, Adrian expresses her disapproval and begs him to change his mind. As Rocky decides against her wishes and begins training in the Russian wilderness Adrian's absence is noticeable. Eventually, Adrian changes her mind and arrives in Russia to support Rocky as he prepares for his fight; however, she remains a soft-bodied presence that requires Rocky's heroic hypermasculinity to save and protect the materialist culture she holds so dear.

Whether used as a vehicle to respond to events which challenged American confidence in the 1970s or more contemporary criticisms from the 1980s, this chapter has shown that

secondary characters in the hard-bodied action films of the 1980s sought to articulate American weakness and demonstrate the severity of the Soviet threat. The Soviet enemy's representation as a hard-bodied hazard to American safety, capabilities, and masculinity served to encourage the development of an equally hard-bodied hero and American defender. The Reagan administration's rhetorical statements of the need to possess strength as a preventative measure against a brooding, Soviet Union-led evil empire are reflected in the action films in the latter part of the decade. Secondary characters who are closely associated with the heroes of the action films often depict the social weaknesses targeted by the Republican right: materialism, individualism, and corruption among them. Through the eventual subjugation of the secondary character to the hero, the failings of such traits are presented. In the above films, those who subscribe to these flaws are unable to defend the United States as they have become too softened to repel a threat; instead they must admit their failings and demonstrate an awareness of their dependence on the hard-bodied hero or become excluded from the national body. The development of a strong national body would demonstrate American strength and a concentrated understanding of American masculinity which would allow the diplomatic negotiations which the Reagan administration sought by the decade's end. Moving away from invoking the undercurrent of fear of Soviet power and invasion, Reagan's administration sought to improve the American position so that negotiations could be successfully reached. As quoted in Soviet Ambassador to Washington Anatoly Dobrynin's memoirs, Reagan states "there are some problems that can and should be tackled now. Probably, people in the Soviet Union regard me as a crazy warmonger... but I don't want a war... we should make a fresh start."<sup>66</sup> Reagan's desire for strength was not to bring absolute war, but rather to allow for negotiations; however, fair negotiations could only occur when it was clear that both sides were strong enough to pose a threat to the other party. In many ways, Reagan's approach at the end of the Cold War can be characterized as speak loudly and carry a big stick, a play on Theodore Roosevelt's approach earlier in the century. While the above quotation implies Reagan hoped the stick would not be necessary, 1980s action films constructed their strength through the hard-bodied hypermasculine hero – prepared to demonstrate American capabilities and ensure productive negotiations.

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<sup>66</sup> Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to Six Cold War Presidents* (Washington: University of Washington Press, 2001): 517-518.

## CHAPTER 2: PRESCRIBING THE HARD-BODIED SOLUTION

Hard-bodied action films of the 1980s reflect American federal policy, critiques of American society, and articulations of national threats. However, the most important of the action films' functions may have been to provide clear prescriptions on how to repel such dangers. Demonstrating American weaknesses through the soft-bodied secondary characters and representing the hardened national enemies, the films' protagonists would need to be hard-bodied in order to resist their adversaries and save the day. Representing the normative national body, the hard-bodied hero would subscribe to conservative ideals and assert American national strength. American confidence and strength would be regained in these films through the symbolic defeat of an individual and national adversary, allowing for negotiations with the Soviet Union to end the Cold War and demonstrations of American superiority. The hard-bodied film genre conveys the prescribed solutions to threats from the outside and inside by employing hypermasculine rhetoric and imagery as a collective symbol for the movement towards firmer federal policy and international American power.

As previously discussed, Michael Kimmel's theories of individualism assist in our understanding of how the 1980s Cold War American hero is constructed through the action film genre. Within this theory of self-controlled individualism which exclusively exists for straight, white men, Kimmel argues that by developing his body, a man is able to visually demonstrate his superiority over his peers, while sport and war allow physical competitions where men can assert their dominance through marked victory and defeat.<sup>67</sup> Using these two strategies hard-bodied action films seek to resolve tensions in national confidence and identity by employing hypermasculine images and rhetoric as the means by which to identify the hero and his representative dominance over the enemy. The self-controlled individualism of the hero symbolically restores glory and strength to the United States through his role as the normative national body. As Jeffords argues in her development of the hard-body framework, the Reagan administration's focus on promoting conservative ideals and removing outliers from the national body made the visual image of the hypermasculine bodybuilder central to both popular culture and national identity.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Kimmel, 6.

<sup>68</sup> Jeffords, 8.

Hypermasculinity is best defined as a compulsively masculine self-identity that exaggerates the ideal manhood “linked mythically and practically to the role of the warrior.”<sup>69</sup> An extreme interpretation of gendered identification, hypermasculinity envisions ideal manhood in the “exercise of force to dominate others.”<sup>70</sup> Popular 1980s action films present this exercise through sport and war – arenas where struggles take place and where conflicts are resolved. Considered alongside Kimmel’s theory of self-controlled individualism, the national body through the hard-bodied hero needs to physically distinguish itself from its peers as a superior body and then use that body in sport or war to defeat foes and demonstrate primacy. The ideal masculine conception in the 1980s is a man who embodies the applauded conservative characteristics: heterosexual, white, strong, committed, loyal, and unafraid of labour.<sup>71</sup> This collective symbol of the national body was made visually discernible through an inflated muscular body by which individuals could position themselves in relation to their nation. The hard body is designed to express controlled aggression towards others, disavowing vulnerability by concealing inner weakness through the stiff outline and surface.<sup>72</sup> In the films the hypermasculine hero proves superiority through acts of aggression and dominance over his foe, similar to the mythic warrior, possessing conservative ideals and an inflated hard-body which serves as a comparative measure for the individual, a symbol of the national body, and American strength.

While the inflated hypermasculine hard body visually depicts the hero in most of the films in the action genre, *Red Dawn* serves a precursor to these later films – focusing on early conceptions of the traits that would become embodied in the hypermasculine hard-bodied hero. Despite the absence of a fetishized muscular body, *Red Dawn* still works out the qualities of the hard-bodied hero through its plot and characters. In this way, *Red Dawn* serves as a unique approach to Drew Ayers’ categorizations of the hard-body framework - particularly the developing hard body. In *Red Dawn*, the hero is not a single heroic, white, heterosexual male figure; rather the heroes are a group of teenage males with two female accomplices who work as a team to repel a Soviet-sponsored invasion. The use of a group of teenagers is significant as it demonstrates the developing aspect of the hard-body hero. All of the adults in the film are either killed, shown to be useless, absent, or the enemy. Clearly, the heroic teenagers in *Red Dawn* reflect a strong response to the bureaucratized baby boomers who had let down their

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<sup>69</sup> Varda Burtsyn, *Rites of Men: Manhood, Politics, and the Culture of Sport* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999): 4.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>71</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Inaugural Address – January 20, 1981,” <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1981/12081a.htm>.

<sup>72</sup> Burtsyn, 192.

children by becoming complacent and passive in the previous decades. It is now up to the younger generation to provide protection to American society and begin developing and promoting a strong articulation of the American national body – to begin conceiving of America's hard-body hero.

The group of teenagers, the Wolverines, are not demonstrably muscular. In fact, they are often bundled up in various camouflaging outfits dependent on the weather in an attempt to conceal their location and effectively use surprise hit-and-run style attacks on their enemy. Regardless of the missing hypermasculine bodies, Drew Ayers' developing hard body category outlines three main plot progressions which can inform our understanding of the ways in which *Red Dawn* presents the conservative ideals and traits which would become embodied in the collective symbol of the hard body. First, the heroes in this version of the hard-body action film begin as untrained, soft bodies that face a set of tragic events that spur the development of the hard body.<sup>73</sup> In *Red Dawn* the invasion and occupation of Calumet serves as the trigger to the group of teenage boys to hide out in the mountains and begin their own training regime. Similar to the Reagan administration's backward looking approach to foreign affairs, *Red Dawn* borrows from American folklore in its construction of the Wolverines. Joined later by two girls hiding from Red Army rapists, the group slowly progresses into a guerilla movement which challenges the Soviet-sponsored foothold in Calumet. At first the group simply attempts to become one with the land. Hiding out in the mountains, the teenagers ride on horseback and live a rough lifestyle akin to frontier woodsmen. Jed, the oldest of the boys, becomes the leader of the group and encourages them to work together in order to survive. Among the strategies necessary for continued survival is the rejection of their current materialistic mindset and the embracing of a harder, wilderness lifestyle. Given that the film was produced before the economic recovery was easily identifiable in the early 1980s, this film stands out as one in which the discussion of materialism and excess is grounded in urgent necessity rather than cautionary reminders. As the boys begin fishing and hunting for meat to supplement canned goods retrieved from Morris Market, it becomes clear that they are transforming.

In one instance Jed leads some of the boys on a deer hunt; once the deer is killed he encourages them to drink the blood as his father had him do. Jed explains that there's "something different about you once you drink the blood."<sup>74</sup> This statement is confirmed as an initially reluctant boy seems to begin smiling as he drinks more. Initiations such as this, and

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<sup>73</sup> Ayers, 46.

<sup>74</sup> *Red Dawn*.

urinating into the radiator of their truck when it runs out of water, mark parallels between the images of traditional cowboys living off the land and the proposed normative national body for the 1980s. Much like the Reagan administration's backward looking rhetoric and conceptions of America, *Red Dawn* demonstrates that progression occurs through regression. Returning to the land hardens the boys' previously weakened bodies and begins the transition into hard-body heroes.

The second act of the film begins with a second triggering event. Becoming accustomed to living in the wilderness, the boys are forced to return to town to replenish their dwindling supplies. When they make it into town, the Calumet of old seems a distant memory. Red banners and pictures of Lenin are everywhere and suspect books are being burned in the streets. The unsettling images of the re-education centres and the occupied town inspire the birth of the Wolverines, who begin to physically challenge their individual and national foe. Two months into the war, Erica finds a downed United States Air Force pilot named Andrew Turner. From him, the Wolverines gain their first true insight into the war. Key communication centres have been attacked by nuclear weapons, America's Strategic Air command was attacked by undercover Cuban forces, and the paratroopers which seized Calumet and other areas were dropped from fake commercial airliners. The Soviet, Cuban and Nicaraguan forces have occupied a vast amount of territory relatively fast and the struggle to prevent complete takeover of the United States continues. The cynical air pilot furthers the Wolverine's training by assisting in developing strategic offensive attacks against the enemy which continuously improves their capabilities and supplies. Overtaking various Soviet and Cuban strongholds, the Wolverines' momentum is strong. While attempting to get Turner to Free America after he decides to escape the life of turmoil and battle, both Turner and Arturo, one of the boys, are killed by Soviet attack. With supplies once again running low, the Soviets bait the remaining Wolverines by leaving food on the side of the road leaving them open to an ambush. The ambush employs an elite Soviet unit's helicopter gunships and claims Robert's life as well as fatally wounding Toni. Toni is able to convince Jed to leave her a grenade and uses it to booby-trap her body; however, the psychological and physical damage done to the Wolverines has been exponential. It is clear that the Wolverines and the invading forces are due for a final battle.

The final mission of the Wolverines, now down to four members, marks the third of Ayers' plot progressions. In this act, the hard-bodied hero, after enduring the enemy's onslaught, eventually bests their foe claiming victory for the individual, reclaiming masculinity and national strength. *Red Dawn's* final battle differs from this prescription, however; given the



remaining members of the Wolverines there are too many heroes for individual glory and one of the members is female. The sex of the hero is important as the hero must be a white male, a normative figure which encompasses both heterosexual hypermasculinity and national strength. The resolution to this problem is reached as the Wolverines decide to split up into two teams. One team, of which Erica is a member, will be sent to escape to Free America so that at least two of the Wolverine members will survive. Matt and Jed, the Eckert brothers, will launch an attack on the enemy base to serve as a distraction to ensure the other two's safe arrival. The use of two brothers also seems to present a problem in the hard-bodied framework; however, that too is resolved as Matt is quickly maimed by the Soviet commander.

The attack is a successful distraction with lots of explosions and claimed enemy lives. The Soviet commander, soon after presumably fatally wounding Matt, is shot by Jed. As the scene progresses it becomes clear that Jed too is severely injured. The boys come across Bella, a Cuban Colonel, who prior to the attack had been writing a letter of his own disillusionment in the Soviet invasion. A long moment passes where it is unclear if Bella will kill the boys or not. Seeing Matt cradled in Jed's arms, Bella allows them free passage. Maybe Bella knows that they won't survive, or maybe his previous experiences as an insurgent military force have fostered a form of grudging respect. Regardless of the motivation, Matt and Jed make their way to a park where the boys hold each other making it clear that neither of them will survive. While the film never tells the audience what happens to the two, the implication is clear as Erica's voiceover tells us that she never sees the Eckert brothers again but that following their attack, the United States eventually was able to repel the Soviet-sponsored invasion. The heroes in this case do not survive, but they do best their foe. The film implies that due to the final attack, the Soviets and their allies were weakened and left prey for American forces. Moreover, the defeat of the Soviet-sponsored occupational forces demonstrates the failure of the soft body and the successes possible with the proposed normative hard body. The unfaltering, strong characteristics of the Wolverines, and particularly the Eckert brothers, were able to do what their parents' soft generation could not: they physically removed communism from American soil and renewed American strength. Hard work, determination, and perseverance as well as focus on self-controlled individualism through training and self-sacrifice allowed the Wolverines to transition from soft teenagers to hardened heroes.

While hypermasculinity is important, the establishment of heterosexuality also plays an integral part in the action films. While the Wolverines have two female members, their roles are much different from their male counterparts. Typically, Erica and Toni are used as bait to lure in

Soviet soldiers allowing the Wolverines to sweep down on the occupying forces with devastating results. In one example, a Russian tank arrives at a local gas station as Toni rides up on a bike. One of the younger soldiers quickly tries to have his way with her, but a voice interjects from the tank telling him to “forget the broad, just take her stuff.”<sup>75</sup> The soldier, while disappointed, complies ripping the basket off of her bike. After he passes the basket to a man inside the tank, he returns his attention to Toni. As the soldier calls out, a bomb explodes from inside the tank. The three surviving men run after Toni who has obviously set them up, but the soldiers are met by gunfire from the incognito Wolverines hiding under lightly covered dug out holes in the adjoining field. As the enemies are shot down, patriotic music plays signifying a national victory. The use of the female members as bait demonstrates their weakness and dependence on male protection. Further, it shows audience members that the heroes needed are white heterosexual hypermasculine males. The presence of the females also serves to emphasize the heterosexuality of the hero. Much like in the other action films, the females are either romantically linked to the hero, as Toni is with Lt-Col. Andrew Tanner, or have a past romantic connection so as to dispel any potential homosexual identification. Given that the Wolverines lived in the Calumet wilderness, the female presence ensures viewers that no homosexual acts or longings are conducted under the cover of darkness amongst this initially all male group. The Republican emphasis on heterosexuality in the normative national body required such highlighting of the importance of the heterosexuality of the hero – deviating from this norm would demonstrate softness and disease. The widespread fear of the AIDS epidemic and the aura of the unknown surrounding homosexuality in this period provided the justification for such clear distinctions.

While *Red Dawn* did not provide hard bodies, the Wolverines did transition into a hardened group of heroes. By returning to the land and shedding materialist excess, the Wolverines transitioned from helpless teenagers to capable adults who were able to master their surroundings and use them to their advantage. Developing a soldiering mentality, the Wolverines grew increasingly successful in their strategic assaults on the enemy both securing victories and weakening enemy morale. Insight from Turner, the downed Air Force member the group finds in the wilderness, further extended the Wolverines’ abilities to combat the foreign invaders and improves their confidence. The Wolverines also inspire their fellow Americans: visiting with the Mason family, Jed and the boys are told that stories of their advances have made their way into Free America and that many have begun attempting to provide assistance

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<sup>75</sup> *Red Dawn*.

as soon as possible. These characteristics would become engrained within the visual collective symbol of the hard-bodied hero in the action genre and provided the audience with a clear prescription for dealing with contemporary concerns.

The fully-formed hard body, Drew Ayers' second hard-body category, would become the collective symbol for the normative national body and the identifier of the action film genre in the 1980s through the popularity of both the *Rambo* and *Rocky* film series. Considered the most straightforward of the 1980s action films in terms of plot, this version of the hard-body film emphasizes the hypermasculine body with panning shots of the hero in various forms of undress and consists of continuous action sequences featuring the exploits of the hero. The focus of the films is on the power that the body of the hero possesses and its usefulness in overcoming his adversary in a variety of dangerous scenarios. As with other films in this genre, an important aspect is that an equally hard-bodied enemy must challenge the hard-bodied hero. Doing so allows for the national body to both see the hazard and its capabilities, and for Americans to position themselves against the hero and recognize their necessary improvements.

The first acts of fully-formed hard-bodied films begin with an action sequence depicting the skills and body strength of the hero. In *Rambo*, the film's opening scene reminds viewers that John Rambo's hard-bodied status is indisputable. Surrounded by bodies of men hammering rocks in a prison yard, Rambo's chiseled arms stand out, catching the attention of the panning camera. Rambo, imprisoned following his actions in the previous film, *First Blood*, appears to have been thriving during his sentence, enjoying the labour and further hardening his already muscular body. Ayers asserts that once the hero's skills and strength are demonstrated, the hero will be asked to participate in, or be placed in, a scenario which will require him to use those skills in order to be successful.<sup>76</sup> Such a proposition is quickly presented as prison guards approach Rambo to inform him that he has a visitor – identifiable as Rambo's only true remaining ally and friend, General Trautman. Trautman tells Rambo that a covert operation is being prepared in the "Far East" and Rambo's name was selected by government computers as one of three men who would be most likely to succeed in such a mission. Given that the target area is the same prisoner camp that Rambo escaped in 1971 it seems fitting that he should be the man for the job. While Rambo seems hesitant at first, Trautman explains that he could receive Presidential Pardon if he is successful, with the alternative being another five years of

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<sup>76</sup> Ayers, 50.

confinement. Rambo asks, “Sir, do we get to win this time?”<sup>77</sup> To which Trautman responds, “this time it’s up to you.”<sup>78</sup> Playing off of the Vietnam syndrome experienced by many Americans, the film gives viewers all of the information required for the remainder of the film – Rambo is tough, muscular, and ready to fight and if he is successful America will be able to compensate for past military losses in Vietnam.

The second act of the fully-formed hard-body category truly reflects the conservative ideals developed through the plot and characters in *Red Dawn*. While not discussed in Ayers’ formulation of the category, the fully-formed hard-bodied heroes invoke similar symbolism and traits which were conceived within the developing hard-body category and became housed within the collective symbol of the normative national body. In *Rambo*, the back-to-the-land mentality begins from the film’s outset. Showing Rambo performing strenuous labour alongside fellow prisoners, the way that the camera pans Rambo’s body, seemingly in admiration, shows the viewer that working from the land rather than participating in routine American society has benefitted Rambo and allowed him to increase his strength and size. As Rambo prepares for the mission, Murdoch briefs him on his expectations and asserts that under no circumstances is Rambo to engage with the enemy – he is simply to photograph the camps to determine whether or not the 2500 missing American soldiers are there. In order to accomplish this Rambo is given the most advanced weapons and technology available and told, “avoid the blood and guts routine, let technology do most of the work.”<sup>79</sup> Rambo openly questions this directive, claiming that to him his brain was always his best weapon. Murdoch quickly shuts down Rambo with a curt “times have changed.”<sup>80</sup> Technology, a promoted tool of the military under the Reagan administration, quickly becomes a symbol of 1980s excess that needs to be resolved for Rambo to carry out his mission.

As Rambo attempts to jump out of a helicopter towards the target area in Vietnam, the weapons provided to him are thrown back by the turbulence, hanging Rambo off of the side of the aircraft. Reacting to the dangerous circumstance, Rambo cuts himself free of the equipment and lands with little more than a knife. Using his compass, Rambo guides himself through the wilderness and arrives at the decided meeting point. By removing tools (advanced technology in comparison to his own tenure in Vietnam) which would disallow him to live off of the land, Rambo is able to embody traditional ideals of masculinity. Navigating through the wilderness

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<sup>77</sup> *Rambo: First Blood II*.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

and embracing his soldiering attitude, Rambo is able to act on his own accord rather than through distant orders. While there is a seeming contradiction between promoted Republican ideals in this act, it would seem that rather than serve as a criticism of the Reagan administration's promotion of technological advancement, it was merely a vehicle by which to give more attention to the hypermasculine characteristics of the hard-body hero. As Rambo maneuvers his way towards the alleged POW camp and masters his surroundings, he is the most comfortable he has been throughout the film. Operating within the comfortable context of war and combat, Rambo's body is his only weapon. While Rambo's enemy has yet to surface, the viewer is placated knowing that Rambo's body is powerful and strong, and able to withstand any punishment that will be inflicted.

As in *Red Dawn*, the heterosexuality of the hero is demonstrated through the presence of female secondary characters. In *Rambo*, Co Bao is Rambo's guide to Vietnam. A Vietnamese woman loyal to the cause of freedom, Co accompanies Rambo on his mission and expresses her desire for a quiet life in America. Rambo and Co quickly develop a more personal bond as Rambo confides that when he returned to the United States he "found out there was another war going on. Kind of a quiet war against all of the soldiers returning."<sup>81</sup> Disheartened, Rambo further confides that he feels expendable – a sentiment refuted by Co. As they arrive at the camp, they learn it is not empty, and upon further investigation many emaciated American bodies are found. In their attempt to rescue the American POWs, against direct orders, Rambo is found by the Vietnamese Army and both he and the POW are brought in for interrogation by Soviet advisors. Co, posing as a prostitute, murders a Vietnamese soldier and saves Rambo from further torture. Promising to take her with him back to America, Rambo embraces Co and they kiss. Shortly thereafter Communists arrive and unleash their machine gun fire killing Co. While Rambo is expected to be upset, he seems more incensed when he learns that Murdoch was aware of the likelihood of American POWs being held in Vietnamese camps. Much like in *Red Dawn*, Co serves less as a well-rounded character than an aide to the hero. Her role confirms his heterosexuality and its importance to the strength of the national body. The role of the heterosexual relationship is more of an accent than a primary plot development which serves to promote heterosexuality while simultaneously asserting that while traditional heterosexual family values are important, over-emphasizing the role of the family serves as a distraction to the responsibilities of the national body and the hard-bodied hero.

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<sup>81</sup> *Rambo: First Blood II*.

The last act of the fully-formed hard-body films, as in all three categories of Ayers' hard-bodied action films, is comprised of the final showdown between the hero and the enemy. Given that the last communications between Rambo and Murdoch were held over the radio during Rambo's interrogation and that Murdoch ordered the rescue mission be aborted leaving Rambo to the slaughter, even Trautman is unsure of Rambo's status. Having survived Soviet and Vietnamese methods of torture Rambo plans to exact revenge on Murdoch and the articulated foreign enemy – the Vietnamese and Russian soldiers. One by one Rambo kills enemy soldiers using the wilderness environment to his advantage. Hiding in mud and water, Rambo is able to surprise soldiers who stray too far from their group. Running through a local village, Rambo finds more opportunistic means of killing his enemies. Using a chicken and a gas can, Rambo lures in the enemy troops – killing the chicken and smearing its blood along plants in a field Rambo creates a path for the enemy to follow. Making it to the path's end, the dead carcass is shown beside a gas tank. Realizing their fate too late, flames engulf Rambo's adversaries as he strikes a match. Further destruction occurs as Rambo uses loaded arrows to blow up enemy army trucks and various shelters. Just as it appears Rambo has successfully removed the enemy threat, a Soviet helicopter drops a bomb. Diving underwater, Rambo attempts to avoid Soviet machine gun fire around his point of entry. Unsurprisingly, Rambo survives and fights his way onto the helicopter, bests his enemies through bare-handed combat, and uses the enemy's helicopter to bring the American POWs to safety. Arriving back at the American base, Rambo has not yet defeated all of the national enemies. Knocking out Ericson, Murdoch's second, Rambo destroys the headquarters with machine gun fire of his own, once again removing the technological obstruction to the hard-bodied hypermasculine means of battle. Finding Murdoch, Rambo is once again able to demonstrate the difference between American hard and soft bodies. Murdoch is stricken with fear as Rambo stands strong and confident. Holding Murdoch at knifepoint, Rambo stabs the knife into Murdoch's desk and orders him to find the remaining missing men or Rambo will be back to find him, further enunciating the divergence between the hard and the soft bodied men.

*Rocky IV* follows a similar opening plot structure to *Rambo*, emphasizing Rocky's hard body and demonstrating the skill set required to combat his enemy; however, unlike *Rambo*, his mission is not made immediately clear. Opening with a training session between Rocky and Apollo, *Rocky IV* reminds viewers and fans of the series of Rocky's in-ring prowess and his lean physique. Sparring with former longtime rival and friend, Rocky is shown to be quick and powerful, wearing out Apollo and escaping relatively unscathed. Rocky does suffer a black eye

early during the sparring; however, the film seems to allow this as a fairly insignificant sign of weakness threaded into the criticisms of 1980s excess primarily housed within the secondary characters. Early in the film, Rocky seems caught between the materialist lifestyle enjoyed by his family and friends due to his celebrity and his hard-bodied mentality from which his celebrity grew. Rocky's ability to quickly disregard his materialist tendencies confirm that a fully-formed hard body remains, even if thinly veiled. As with *Rambo*, *Rocky IV* presents the enemy following the action sequences displaying the hero. As previously discussed, Captain Ivan Drago is a hardened Soviet body and an articulation of the threats faced by American society. In *Rocky IV*'s presentation of the enemy, the scenario that will test Rocky's strength and skills is vaguely implied but not yet articulated in the film's early scenes. Unlike *Rambo*, Rocky's mission becomes clear following a triggering event similar to those in the developing hard-body category. Apollo Creed's death at the hands of Drago in an exhibition match forces Rocky to accept Drago's challenge representing both America versus the Soviet enemy as well as the hard-bodied hero's virtue and superiority over a hard-bodied foe.

Following Creed's death in *Rocky IV*, newspaper headlines are employed to remind the viewer of the Soviet threat. "Public Outraged Over Apollo's Death," "People Protest Against Apollo's Killer," and "Public Sees Red, Anger Grows" illustrate that the upcoming fight between Rocky and Drago is not just a bout between individuals but a representation of a much larger cultural battle.<sup>82</sup> As Robert Tepper sings "No Easy Way Out," a montage of Rocky's best moments from the previous three films in the series and worst memories from this installment is played outlining for the viewer both Rocky's abilities, successes, and losses – all of which serve to fuel his motivation for victory. Arriving to train in Russia, Rocky has selected a secluded location which allows him the opportunity to become one with his environment. Ditching the designer leisure suits, Rocky now embraces a full-grown beard and black bomber jacket. Representing his working-class roots and Americana, Rocky trains in the snow, chops wood, runs, and pulls a dog sled. Such non-traditional training methods further accentuate Rocky's connection to the national body. The audience is better able to position themselves alongside the hero and make strides towards hardening their own individual bodies by relating to the working-class chores and jobs Rocky is performing as a part of his training regimen.

The distinction between Rocky and Drago's training methods is made clearer as yet another montage moves back and forth between each fighter's training rituals. Using scientists, machines, and even the steroids denied in the earlier press conference, Drago is often shown

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<sup>82</sup> *Rocky IV*.

as simply a body part connected to a machine. In contrast, Rocky's full body is often highlighted further differentiating between synthetic enemy and natural hero. In many ways, the training montage confirms that while both boxers could be clones, the means by which the hard body is attained signals their difference. Aligning himself with nature, Rocky epitomizes the self-made, hard-bodied hypermasculine hero while the Soviet Union is cheating – confirming the Reagan administration's first-term fears of one-sided détente. Visual cues are not sufficient in distinguishing hero and enemy as the true difference is internalized. Drago, representative of Russia's perceived weapon advances, is built and deployed as a cold killing machine whereas Rocky represents how a built weapon can be characterized as good through self-control. Kimmel's theory of self-controlled identity thus provides the moral character that separates America from the Soviet Union. The training scenes illuminate how fears of Soviet weaponry and technological advancement played in to national discourse – how it would be in winning the arms race and demonstrating control in deployment that America would be able to truly regain national strength.

The international boxing event, which pits Rocky against Drago, is the final battle of *Rocky IV*. Historian Rebecca Bell-Metereau provides an introduction: "In *Rocky IV*, Rocky prays while a Gorbachev look-alike enters the auditorium; when the two fighters enter, Rocky faces universal boos while Drago receives cheers reminiscent of a Hitler rally."<sup>83</sup> Wearing gear that sports the flags of their nations, each sportsman becomes a soldier, fighting for dominance and supremacy. The Cold War tensions are played out in a ring on foreign soil with the imagery blatant rather than concealed. When Rocky is finally able to land a punch on Drago, and subsequently cuts him open, Drago reacts with surprise and confusion. It appears as though his programming has proven effective against other opponents, particularly the soft-bodied men who failed to demonstrate the resolve and conditioning of the hypermasculine hard-body hero. Slowly, through his continued determination, Rocky begins winning over the Soviet crowd. Rocky's assault eventually bests his enemy at which point the crowd rushes, placing Rocky on their shoulders. Through his battle and victory over the product of Soviet technology, Rocky has regained strength and masculinity for America. The triumph of the natural over the synthetic reaffirms the gendered rhetoric of the decade. While the hypermasculine imagery is present in both boxers, only the moral hero is able to demonstrate his dominance and superiority.

Following the match, Rocky depicts the abandonment of the 1970s, 1980s excess, and the shift in Reagan's approach to policy. Through destroying Soviet technological superiority,

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<sup>83</sup> Bell-Metereau, 44.



Rocky has demonstrated the strength necessary to negotiate with the foreign opponent. Rocky takes the microphone and gives a heartfelt speech:

I came here tonight and I didn't know what to expect. I've seen a lot of people hate me and I didn't know what to feel about that so I guess I didn't like you much then either. During this fight I've seen a lot of changing. The way you felt about me and the way I felt about you. In here there were two guys killing each other, but I guess that's better than 20 million. What I'm trying to say is that if I can change and you can change, everybody can change.<sup>84</sup>

Draped in the American flag on the shoulders of the Soviet people, Rocky demonstrates the successful shift in the Reagan administration's diplomatic policy. Following the speech, even the Gorbachev look-alike rises in applause cementing the potential goodwill between leaders. In *Rocky IV*, Stallone presents a narrative where America overcomes the Soviet threat and also wins the hearts and minds of the Soviet people and their leader through one encounter.

As with *Red Dawn*, *Rambo* and *Rocky IV* provide prescriptive messages on how to overcome the confidence gap and reassert national strength. Criticizing the soft bodies of the past, Rambo tells Trautman at the end of the film bearing his name that he wants "what they [American POWs] want and what every other guy who has spilled his guts and gave everything he had wants: for our country to love us as much as we love it."<sup>85</sup> Claiming that Americans have forgotten their hard-bodied roots, the heroes of *Rambo* and *Rocky IV* embody the traits promoted by the Republican right as collective symbols of the normative national body. Mastering their environments with emphasis on returning to the land and performing working-class duties, these heterosexual, white, muscular men personify the Reagan administration's federal policies. Confronting the national enemy with strength and power, while upholding domestic virtues such as family values and heterosexual orientation, action films of the 1980s reflected national discourse through gendered terms – included among them is *Die Hard*.

*Die Hard* is an example of Drew Ayers' third of three categories of hard-bodied action film formats. Belonging best to the repressed hard-body category of the 1980s action film genre, the hero is originally presented as someone tamed by societal demands and who must rediscover his hypermasculinity to successfully overcome the challenges presented by an adversary throughout the film.<sup>86</sup> John McClane fits the mold of the repressed hard-body hero perfectly – a New York street cop restrained by his position, unable to truly express his hard-

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<sup>84</sup> *Rocky IV*.

<sup>85</sup> *Rambo: First Blood II*.

<sup>86</sup> Ayers, 48.

bodied capabilities. Desperately seeking to fit in with the rest of society, McClane is introduced arriving in Los Angeles to join his estranged family for Christmas. It is obvious from the beginning that McClane is out of place through awkward interactions with a hired driver and his inability to seemingly meet his wife's expectations it seems that the average American lifestyle is difficult for him to maintain. The trigger which forces McClane to rediscover his hard-bodied hypermasculinity occurs when his estranged wife and her coworkers are taken hostage by Gruber's group of terrorist thieves during their Christmas party. Narrowly escaping the clutches of the party crashers, McClane is thrust into his comfort zone as a solo hero challenging the enemy plot.

Going largely undetected in the first act of the film, McClane eventually makes the group of terrorist thieves aware of his presence as he steals a radio and C4 explosives. With his identity still a mystery, McClane is forced to dodge the onslaught of Gruber's men sent to retrieve the explosives and remove the heroic threat. As McClane gathers information and begins killing Gruber's men, Gruber's impatience and desperation grows. Conversing with McClane over the two-way radio, Gruber mocks other hard-bodied heroes: "Who are you?! Just another American who saw too many movies as a child? Another orphan of a bankrupt culture who thinks he's John Wayne, Rambo, and Marshal Dillon?"<sup>87</sup> McClane sarcastically responds saying that he is partial to Roy Rogers because of the sequined shirts. In this interesting moment of self-awareness, *Die Hard* makes reference to its own genre's formulaic approach to protagonist characters while also simultaneously subscribing to the very formula it mocks. Due to the timing of the invasion of the staff Christmas party, McClane is forced to move around the building in a white tank top and barefoot – as he was attempting to overcome jet-lag following a fellow passenger's advice. Openly showing his muscular arms, the viewer is directly aware of the hypermasculine hard-bodied status of the hero. Consistently in peril, McClane's hard body seems able to withstand more punishment than the average man's. While McClane appears to be an unwilling hero, he is depicted as the only man who can do it – successfully overcoming both the enemy plots on his life and fumbled bureaucratic assistance.

*The Package*, like *Die Hard*, also presents a repressed hard-body hero. As the film opens, Army Sergeant Johnny Gallagher is shown leading a team of newer soldiers in security patrol in Germany. Prior to beginning the patrol, we are introduced to Gallagher and his team outside of the event. The younger soldiers are joking with each other and sharing a candy bar as grizzled veteran Gallagher approaches. The soldiers scramble to hide the candy bar

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<sup>87</sup> *Die Hard*.

demonstrating an awareness of poor conduct. As Gallagher jokingly reprimands the team, we can visibly see his decorated status through his medals and the respect he receives from those he commands. Soon we learn that the event for which they are providing security is a United Nations treaty signing between Soviet and American officials seeking to end the nuclear threat. Patrolling through the forest, the team comes upon a couple and their dog walking outside of the normal boundaries. As Gallagher is questioning them in German, German police arrive and take the couple into custody. Reporting the incident back, Gallagher informs the main commanders that local authorities have handled the situation. Following the end of the event, the same couple that Gallagher had stopped in the forest before is seen walking along the road. A Soviet Diplomatic Official's car is shown heading their way. As the car approaches, the two unload machine gun fire, killing those inside the car. Still near by, Gallagher and his men attempt to catch the two perpetrators; however, they are able to get away in a car with a United States flag attached.

While the potential for corruption is implied early on, it is Gallagher's mission to transport a human package back to the United States which truly forces him out of his more comfortable position and into accepting the duties of a hard-body hero. As previously discussed, the man Gallagher believes he is transporting home is actually a planted hit man, sent clandestinely through the military system under another soldier's identity to assassinate the Soviet leader at the end of his and the American President's symbolic journey together to mark the beginnings of a new peace. As Gallagher and his ex-wife attempt to discover the human package's true identity and the reason for his inclusion in the mission, both become targets of a group of hired guns. More questions arise for the Gallaghers than answers until Johnny Gallagher is taken hostage by the group and is brought face to face with the man he returned to the United States. As the plan is laid out to Gallagher the audience and characters are introduced to the details surrounding the final battle.

The plans for the event are simple enough. The President of the United States and the Soviet leader will meet and once again announce formally the end of the nuclear threat. Following the announcement, as the Soviet leader heads towards his car, he will be shot in the head effectively providing the Soviet people with reason to reinstate Cold War aggressions. While Gallagher has roughly gained insight into the plans, he pieces the particulars together himself. Once again proving himself as tough and resourceful, Gallagher is able to free himself and survey the area for evidence and clues of the location. Finding pictures of a place nearby the announcement site, Gallagher is able to fight free from the hired guns and heads to where

he hopes the shooter will be hiding. Just in time, Gallagher is able to kill the would-be assassin seconds prior to the planned time of the shooting. Frustrated, the American co-conspirator, U.S. Army Colonel Glen Whitacre heads to the scene to investigate. Once he arrives, the true showdown between hard-body hero and soft-body corruption begins. Recognizing that in spite of his best efforts Whitacre was unable to thwart the advances of Gallagher he desperately explains his reasoning. Believing that igniting a war between the two powers would assure American superiority and financial gain, Whitacre claims that Gallagher is crazy for preventing it and that the world will suffer. Rather than physically engage Whitacre, Gallagher reports the events to the Army and media, making the world aware of the evil plot. While *The Package* subscribes to the repressed hard-body formula it is distinct in blurring the black and white divisions between American hero and foreign enemy by focusing on presenting both sides as equivalent grey areas, in many ways marking the end of the hard-body films of the 1980s.

Each of the three categories of hard-bodied action film present how to confront and overcome challenges to national confidence, strength, and position. Using gendered rhetoric and imagery the action films of the 1980s were able to distinguish between the soft and hard bodies within American society. In particular, the films sought to promote the conservative traits which the Republican right had hoped to establish as normative and house them within the hypermasculine collective symbol of the hard body. By employing visually hypermasculine symbols which espoused strength, commitment, and labour while simultaneously emphasizing heterosexuality and family values, the action films of the 1980s provided insight into the formula for American success in that period. While each film dealt with different settings and locations, each film also illustrated the need for a hardened national body in order to achieve success and repel national threats. In *Red Dawn*, the weakness and pacifism of the previous generations had left America open to foreign invasion. The willingness of the younger generation to abandon material American culture and enter into direct combat with the enemy allowed for the survival of a nuclear war and the defeat of Communism on American soil. *Rambo* continued to deal with the Vietnam hangover by openly criticizing corruption within the American government and the nation's decision to repress the hard bodies of the past and treat them like ghosts. As Rambo makes clear at the end of the film, these are men and their efforts were made to protect the nation and rights they loved as a result the nation should love them back rather than force them into seclusion. *Rocky IV* parallels the Reagan administration's negotiation tactics in the 1980s by asserting that diplomacy only works when you have first demonstrated strength. Press conferences for Soviet-American contests continuously break down into hostile screaming

matches; only when Rocky defeats Drago through his hard body does it seem like the Soviet leadership and people are willing to truly consider honest negotiations with America. *Die Hard* targets domestic issues of corrupt bureaucracy and 1980s excess. Dealing with a less identifiable version of the Soviet threat, John McClane is able to bring American victory. In spite of the misguided attempts of various layers of bureaucracy to assist him, McClane successfully employs his committed, soldiering mentality to overcome the advanced technology and wealth of the invading terrorists. Finally, *The Package* demonstrates that at the end of the decade, the Soviet threat had already been repelled. The message at the end of the film demonstrates that in the end, both parties were acting in their own interests and that in doing so performed their own rights and wrongs. In all of the cases, the hero is identifiable to the audience as a representative of the national body. In the Reagan administration's rhetoric it is these qualities – labour, heterosexuality, and determination - that can renew American power and in the films it takes hardened hypermasculine men to reassert American superiority.

## CONCLUSION

The collective symbol of the hard-body hero in 1980s action films represent both President Reagan's administration's federal policy and the prescription for how the Reagan administration conceived of overcoming threats to the national body. In contrast to the soft leadership of the recent past, the Reagan administration sought to demonstrate how strong leadership could return the United States of America to its former glory – once again making the American flag an emblem of freedom and strength. In many ways, 1980s America was to be powerful; a nation which no longer submitted to foreign enemies but confronted them head on, that battled the “evil empire” led by its Cold War foe, and used its hardened body – military and technological advances – to reject impositions and pursue its own interests. Whether on-screen or in reality, the conservative ideals espoused by the republican right were seen as founding principles for the renewed America: strength, labour, determination, loyalty, and heterosexuality.<sup>88</sup> By subscribing to these principles Americans would be able to shift the normative body from soft to hard, embodying the power necessary to confront and negotiate with enemies. By mapping the policies and rhetoric of the Reagan administration on to popular 1980s hard-body action films it becomes clear that the genre is ideologically republican.<sup>89</sup> The simultaneous criticisms of foreign enemies of freedom, domestic enemies of freedom, economic concerns, and corrupt bureaucracies and government excess outlined in President Reagan's Inaugural Address are also the main themes housed within these popular action films. Ultimately the vehicle by which to promote Republican ideals and the renewal of American strength was an articulated Soviet threat; however, further investigation of the outlined concerns

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<sup>88</sup> Jeffords, 24.

<sup>89</sup> Film critics in *Time Magazine* demonstrate an awareness of the genre's republican leanings; however, they most often lambast the films' use of vulgarity and violence. The critics also note the films' the critiques presented in the genre's messages. An example is seen in a review of *Rambo: First Blood II* where the critic, Richard Schickel, discusses the attempted reconception of collective America: “Whether such victims [American POWs] are real or a fiction, they have been pressed into the service of a dangerous popular fantasy, which is that by saving them, a galling defeat could belatedly be turned into a symbolic victory. What is worse, this childish dream of glory, and the movies that both nourish it and feed off it, vulgarizes a demonstrable anguish: that of the families whose relatives are still listed as missing in action. To put it simply, the films exploit and travesty emotions that a decent movie would try to help us share more deeply.” (Richard Schickel, “Cinema: Danger: Live Moral Issues, *Rambo: First Blood II*,” *Time Magazine* <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,957002,00.html> (accessed July 6, 2011).) A further example of the public's awareness of the republican nature of the films can be seen in a review of *Red Dawn* where Richard Corliss outlines the conflicting representations of feminism, which is ultimately repressed by the female characters. (Richard Corliss, “Cinema: The Gams and Guns of August,” *Time Magazine* <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,926849,00.html> (accessed July 6, 2011).) For further discussions see also: Richard Schickel, “Cinema: Win the Battle, Lose the War, *Rocky IV*,” *Time Magazine* <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1074828,00.html> (accessed July 6, 2011).)

in President Reagan's Inaugural Address makes evident that this threat was increasingly fabricated and instead served to eliminate domestic American softness.

The Reagan administration's diplomatic strategy of demonstrating strength in order to engage in successful negotiations was reflected to some degree in all of the hard-bodied action films of the 1980s; however, the films also served as a means by which the audience could position themselves within the normative national body. Self-identification with the hero may occur most successfully if the viewer possessed the conservative attributes that were promoted through the hero. Should the viewer find themselves as outliers to the national body, their traits would be best reflected in the secondary characters that reflected American weakness or immorality. It would seem that in either scenario, viewing the hard-body hero successfully overcoming his individual and national adversary was meant to encourage the viewing audience to aspire to attain a similar body and mentality as a means to garner national strength. The hard-bodied hero of the 1980s action films responded to cultural criticisms of previous and current decades, revealed how such obstacles could be overcome, and personified the federal policies of the Reagan administration through gendered terms.

In many ways the hard-body heroic action films of the 1980s lived and died along with Ronald Reagan's presidency. Evoking the federal policies and rhetoric of the Reagan administration, the hard-body hero articulated in gendered terms the weaknesses of American society, the strength of national enemies, and the Manifest Destiny of the American nation. Born out of republican fears of America's faltering global position and challenged confidence of the American public, the strong rhetoric of the Reagan administration sought to return prestige to the United States. Facing military and political embarrassments during the 1970s, American public confidence in both their leadership and national capabilities was challenged. Co-opting this sentiment, Ronald Reagan's Presidential campaign sought to confront the issues facing America with a strong platform and reconception of the American national body. Excluding those deemed morally deficient or otherwise undesirable, the new normative national body would seek to undo the wrongs of the past through the collective symbol of the hard body. As a result, the symbol of the normative national body would encourage Americans to position themselves in such a way that they would be empowered to pursue self-controlled individualism as a means to strengthen the American position. Through symbolic battles on-screen, the hard-bodied hero would garner power for the American individual as well as the national body by defeating both their individual and national enemies – be they reflections of foreign policy, domestic policy, or both. Using gendered terms, the films were able to delineate the strengths

and weaknesses of American society and the means by which to regain power. Deploying soft and hard bodies, 1980s action films were able to reassert American national might and engage their Cold War foe in negotiations for future peace. As political realities no longer necessitated such strong, gendered political rhetoric, the hard-body action films of the 1980s also fell out of favour with American audiences. While their presence as a popular film genre was short-lived, the films house clear depictions of popular sentiments, concerns, and perceived resolutions of the time in which they were produced. Partnered with historical context, hard-body popular films of the 1980s serve as time capsules by which scholars can further understand the final decade of the Cold War.



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