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The Galactic Vietnam: Technology, Modernization, and Empire in George Lucas's *Star Wars*

Has any work of popular culture seeped into U.S. public consciousness like *Star Wars* has? Rivals are hard to even think of. It's not just the billions in revenues from films, novels, television shows, video games, and merchandising, it's that *Star Wars* has acquired the sort of cultural heft more common for religious scripture. It passes from parents to children, it's quoted like catechism, and it grows more pervasive with time.

Star Wars intrudes into high politics, too. In 1983, Ronald Reagan famously called the Soviet Union an "evil empire."[1] His speechwriter claimed no reference was meant to the "evil galactic empire" described in the first *Star Wars* film's opening crawl, but the resonance was hard to miss—that film had just debuted on cable, and *The Return of the Jedi* was about to hit theaters. A month later, Reagan would propose a space-based defense system, which quickly earned the nickname "Star Wars." "The Force is with us," Reagan boasted, quoting the films.[2]

He's not the only major politician to have done so. In 2001, Vice President Dick Cheney told NBC's *Meet the Press* that the government would need to work through "the dark side" to defeat al Qaeda, thereby supplying an oft-quoted metaphor for the global war on terrorism's tactics.[3] George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Hillary Clinton all referenced *Star Wars* in speeches. Donald Trump ran a special episode of his television show, *The Apprentice*, on it, and Joe Biden recruited *Star Wars* lead actor Mark Hamill to headline a high-profile campaign fundraiser to defeat Trump.

This doesn't happen with most films. But the *Star Wars* films were never just films. They were, their creator George Lucas claimed, "a conscious attempt at

[1] Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals, 8 March 1983, *American Presidency Project*, www.presidency.ucsb.edu (hereafter *APP*).
[2] Remarks at the National Space Club Luncheon, 29 March 1985, *APP*. And see Peter Krämer, "Star Wars," *History Today* 49 (1999): 41–47.
[3] *Meet the Press*, NBC, 16 September 2001.

creating new myths."[4] They've done that well, becoming a shared template for thinking. The Force, the Jedi, the Empire, the Dark Side—these can be mapped onto nearly any set of circumstances.

Yet there's one situation where *Star Wars* references are especially apt. In ways both shallow and deep, the original *Star Wars* trilogy—*A New Hope* (titled *Star Wars* at its 1977 release, then renamed), *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), and *Return of the Jedi* (1983)—is about U.S. foreign relations. Not only do the films tell of wars, empires, and foreign places, they also address the underlying tenets of U.S. postwar hegemony: that technology is the basis of world power, that traditional societies ought to be modernized, and that the United States is exceptional for being powerful without being imperial. Lucas didn't stumble onto these themes. He started writing the original trilogy during the Vietnam War. That war haunted him, and *Star Wars* was his response.[5] To the degree that Lucas succeeded in "creating new myths," he did so by rejecting the principles that, in his view, had driven his country to war in Southeast Asia.

Wildly popular cultural artifacts offer windows onto ideologies. The stories that most "make sense" or "feel right" to audiences reflect something important about those audiences' worldviews. In the case of *Star Wars*, the films show how the Vietnam War was not just a military crisis but an ideological one, too. Lucas staged a frontal assault on the midcentury intellectual foundations of U.S. supremacy and, surprisingly, filmgoers loved it. They cheered, too, for what he proposed in its stead: a new basis for U.S. power, rooted in a culturally flexible form of anti-imperialism. Lucas proposed heroes whose claim to greatness didn't rest on their modernity, civilizational achievements, or command of advanced technologies, but from their leadership of a scrappy rebel alliance against a homogenizing form of hyper-modernity. That mythology would endure after the Vietnam War. Writing of far-off times and distant galaxies, Lucas captured his own country in a moment of profound cultural change.

THE PLACE TO START is with technology. Science fiction, in exploring advanced technologies, often imagines a sunny future.[6] Certainly, that's the sort of science fiction that Lucas imbibed as a child. Space adventurers Buck Rogers, Tommy Tomorrow, and Flash Gordon from the 1930s and 1940s made a deep impression on him with their ray guns and rocket ships. Lucas would begin his first feature film,

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[4] Interview by David Sheff, 1987, in *George Lucas: Interviews*, ed. Sally Kline (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 153.

[5] I've relied especially on three works that place Lucas in the context of the Vietnam War: Chris Taylor, *How Star Wars Conquered the Universe: The Past, Present, and Future of a Multibillion Dollar Franchise* (New York: Basic Books, 2014); Benjamin Hufbauer, "The Politics behind the Original 'Star Wars,'" *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 21 December 2015; and Brian Jay Jones, *George Lucas: A Life* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2016).

[6] On progress in science fiction, see John Rieder, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), chap. 2.

THX 1138 (1971), with clips from a Buck Rogers serial, set in the "wonderful world of the future." It was a world, the clips explained, where "a lot of our scientific and mechanical dreams come true."[7]

Lucas didn't need Buck Rogers serials to glimpse that world. He was born in 1944, at the end of a war that had propelled the United States to world leadership and done so by science. The Second World War ended not as the last one had, with brutal trench fighting, but with the debut of a spectacular new technology: the atom bomb. The whole war was a scientists' fight, won as much with radar and penicillin as with bullets and artillery shells. Afterward, Dwight Eisenhower, boasted of the "world technological leadership" his country had attained—the "unique technological ability to use science" for national defense and for "the improvement of human living."[8]

Men like Eisenhower promised that technology would transform daily life, and it did. Lucas's generation grew up with transistor radios, plastic toys, miracle drugs, dishwashers, and jet planes. As a teenager, Lucas tinkered with cars, souping them up to race. As a filmmaker, he used groundbreaking technologies. *Star Wars*' special effects dazzled audiences, and Lucas would go on, through his various firms, to oversee many breakthroughs in contemporary filmmaking. Lucas's Industrial Light and Magic handled special effects not only for *Star Wars* but also for such trailblazing movies as *Terminator 2* and *Jurassic Park*. His firm Pixar led the industry in computer animation. THX, another arm of Lucas's business empire, transformed theater sound. And his prequel *Star Wars* trilogy (1999–2005) played a large part in converting cinema to digital shooting and projection.

It's easy, given all this, to see Lucas's films and especially *Star Wars* as "a celebration of American progress and technology," as Peter W. Lee has argued.[9] Yet there was a surprising amount of distance between Lucas's oeuvre and the Buck Rogers serials. Though Lucas began his first feature film, *THX 1138*, with clips from Buck Rogers set in the "wonderful world of the future," he quickly cut away to a horrifying dystopia. His high-tech future was one where workers were kept at their miserable jobs by a combination of sedatives, surveillance, and force—the last administered by robotic police officers with unmoving steel faces.

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[7] This is from the director's version; the theatrical release used a different opener. "*THX 1138*," www.movie-censorship.com/report.php?ID=541751.

[8] Statement by the President on Establishing the National Committee for the Development of Scientists and Engineers, 3 April 1956, *APP*. On U.S. technological leadership, I've learned much from Michael Falcone, "The Rocket's Red Glare: Global Power and the Rise of American State Technology, 1940–1960" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 2019).

[9] Peter W. Lee, "Periodizing a Civil War: Reaffirming an American Empire of Dreams," in *A Galaxy Here and Now: Historical and Cultural Readings of* Star Wars, ed. Peter W. Lee (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2016), 168.

THX 1138 showed Lucas's wariness of advanced technology. "I'm not a technological guy at all," he confessed.[10] The original *Star Wars* trilogy features gleaming, futuristic machines, but the state-of-the-art ones belong to the villains. In the first film, the Galactic Empire menaces the rebels with the "technological terror" of the Death Star, a moon-sized battle station that can vaporize planets. As the "ultimate power in the universe," the Death Star has enabled the emperor to dissolve the Senate, abolish the Republic, and rule the galaxy by fear. Alongside it, the Empire deploys a huge starship fleet and an army of storm troopers, who resemble the robot police of *THX 1138*. The villain, Darth Vader, is kept alive by a shiny robotic suit. "He becomes a machine and loses his compassion," Lucas summarized.[11]

The heroes, by contrast, spurn large, capital-intensive technologies. They use spaceships, blasters, and droids but in a markedly different way. Their relationship to technology is artisanal; they're constantly adjusting or fixing their second-hand machines. Lucas shows the act of tinkering over and over, nearly to the point of fetishization. In one of his first scenes, the hero Luke Skywalker repairs droids in his "cluttered and worn" garage (in the screenplay's words).[12] Han Solo and Chewbacca work endlessly on their ship, the *Millennium Falcon*. Even Princess Leia picks up an arc welder. Lucas took evident pleasure in showing the grease stains—the marks of labor. "George kept emphasizing that he wanted the ships to look like hot rods; they need to look used, greasy, maintained with spare parts, sort of held together with wires and chewing gum," Lucas's art director remembered.[13]

Chewbacca and Han Solo repair the *Millennium Falcon* in *The Empire Strikes Back*

All this flowed from Lucas's teenage years as a hot-rodder, when he "lived, ate, breathed cars," as he recalled.[14] He chronicled those years in his second film,

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[10] Michael Rubin, *Droidmaker: George Lucas and the Digital Revolution* (Gainesville, FL: Triad, 2006), 3.

[11] Laurent Bouzereau, *Star Wars: The Annotated Screenplays* (New York: Del Rey, 1997), 12.

[12] Bouzereau, *Annotated Screenplays*, 24.

[13] Joe Johnston, quoted in Bouzereau, *Annotated Screenplays*, 102.

[14] Interview by Kerry O'Quinn, 1981, in Kline, *Interviews*, 108.

American Graffiti (1973). Car culture wasn't about revering powerful technology, though. It was, the historian Jefferson Cowie has argued, a form of protest against automation—"the last place for armchair craftsmen to use their hands against the swelling tide of the 'degradation of work.'"[15] By the time *Star Wars* premiered, tinkering with and racing modified cars had become a way for blue-collar men to reclaim in their garages a life that, thanks to globalization and auto plant closings, was slipping rapidly away. It's not hard to connect the nostalgic portrayal of gearheads in *American Graffiti* and *Star Wars* to Bruce Springsteen's mournful one in *Born to Run* (1975) and *Darkness on the Edge of Town* (1978).

Lucas dabbled in Springsteen-style pessimism with *THX 1138* but then switched to making upbeat films. Still, *Star Wars'* bright optimism didn't come from Buck Rogers–style promises of a gee-whiz future. It came from imagining the gearheads winning. The *Millennium Falcon* "may not look like much," but it's the "fastest hunk of junk in the galaxy." "I made a lot of special modifications myself," Han proudly explains while holding a rag. Indeed, the *Millennium Falcon* fires the shot that triggers the second Death Star's explosion in *Return of the Jedi* and helps to destroy the first one in *A New Hope*. Again and again, jury-rigged garage technologies triumph over the spotless, expensive ones preferred by the Empire.

That garage-versus-corporation dynamic resonated with Lucas's own life. From early on, Lucas felt tremendous frustration with the power of Hollywood studios. As Michael Rubin has argued, a main reason why Lucas backed digital technology was to wrest the means of production away from them.[16] With his own workshop in Northern California—the Skywalker Ranch, a super-garage where techies toyed with computers—Lucas could liberate himself from the "sleazy, unscrupulous" executives (as he called them) in Southern California.[17]

Lucas took joy in showing the Empire's expensive technologies fail. The first Death Star is a sophisticated planet-killing machine, but it can be destroyed by a single shot to its thermal exhaust port. In the second film, the rebels down a giant imperial walker with tripwire and a harpoon. The trilogy ends with a battle on Endor, when Ewoks capture an imperial base using catapults, slingshots, and bows and arrows. "The whole point was to show how a primitive culture . . . could overcome highly technical people," Lucas remarked. "That was the theme; you have these woodland creatures that are completely nontechnical overcoming the Empire."[18]

The Jedi, too, eschew high technology. They rely instead on the Force, an organic energy field that "binds the galaxy together." When the Jedi fight, explains Luke's mentor Obi-Wan Kenobi, they don't use anything as "clumsy or random as a

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[15] Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 341.
[16] Rubin, *Droidmaker*.
[17] Interview by Jean Vallely, 1980, in Kline, *Interviews*, 93.
[18] George Lucas, quoted in Bouzereau, *Annotated Screenplays*, 15.

blaster." They use the lightsaber, "an elegant weapon for a more civilized age," which the Jedi have wielded for "a thousand generations"—each Jedi crafts his or her own. Though Luke flies spaceships, he destroys the first Death Star by turning off his ship's computerized targeting system and using the Force for guidance. "*Star Wars* has more to do with disclaiming science than anything else," Lucas told a reporter the year the film came out. Its heroes have a "totally different way of thinking."[19]

And where did that way of thinking come from? Many sources informed the Force, but there is one Lucas mentioned numerous times: the teachings of Don Juan Matus, a Yaqui shaman from the arid Sonora region of Mexico. Don Juan had been the subject of a series of (possibly fabricated) books by the anthropologist Carlos Castaneda. George Lucas read them all, as did Irwin Kershner, *The Empire Strikes Back*'s director.[20] The books describe how the elderly sorcerer Don Juan trained Castaneda to shut out his rational, scientific mind and gain mystical powers by attuning himself to nature. Lucas told a reporter that the Force was "a Castaneda *Tales of Power* thing" (a reference to Castaneda's fourth volume) and described Obi-Wan as someone who could "do magic, read minds, talk to things like Don Juan."[21] Also like Don Juan, Obi-Wan is "a shabby old desert rat of a man," in the screenplay's words.[22] Luke's training at the hands of Obi-Wan and Yoda (whom Lucas initially conceived as "an old Indian in the desert type") closely resembles Castaneda's own apprenticeship.[23]

Whether by artisanal technologies, Stone Age tools, or gnostic teachings, the heroes best the most advanced military in the galaxy. This is a space fantasy, but it's a far cry from the future of Buck Rogers.

IN FACT, *Star Wars* isn't the future at all. One of Lucas's most surprising choices was to introduce every *Star Wars* film with these words: "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away . . ." That opening, placing the action in the distant past rather than the far future, offered the films' first hint that they would bear a different relationship to historical time than their progress-oriented science-fiction predecessors.

Historical time mattered in Lucas's world because it had served as the backdrop for a great deal of thinking about the United States and its role in the world. So much of U.S. foreign relations since World War II, including the Vietnam War, had been carried out under the banner of modernization. This was the idea that breaking

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[19] Interview by Stephen Zito, 1977, in Kline, *Interviews*, 48.
[20] Leonard M. Scigaj, "Bettelheim, Castaneda and Zen: The Powers Behind the Force in *Star Wars*," *Extrapolation* 22 (1981): 218.
[21] Paul Scanlon, "The Force behind George Lucas," *Rolling Stone*, 25 August 1977, www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-news/george-lucas-the-wizard-of-star-wars-2-232011; J. W. Rinzler, *The Making of Star Wars* (New York: Del Rey, 2007), 49.
[22] Bouzereau, *Annotated Screenplays*, 32.
[23] J. W. Rinzler, *The Making of the Empire Strikes Back* (New York: Del Rey, 2010), 22. Connections between the Force training and Castaneda's apprenticeship are documented in Scigaj, "Bettelheim, Castaneda and Zen."

poor societies free of tradition would make them prosperous and stable. Thus, for modernization theorists, the solution to global instability and poverty was to usher foreign countries through the various historical stages until they became, as W. W. Rostow put it, "high mass-consumption" societies, like the United States.[24]

Modernization theory had guided policymaking through the Vietnam War, yet it held little sway over Lucas. The heroes of his films aren't progressives seeking to replace a traditional past with a modern future. They're conservatives, aiming to "restore" what was, as *A New Hope*'s opening text explains. At original trilogy's start, the Jedi are nearly extinct, the "Old Republic" has fallen on "dark times," and an Empire has arisen. The Jedi seek to revive their order, dismantle the Empire, and re-establish the Republic.

The films' preference for old times comes up again and again. The Jedi practice an "ancient religion," their lightsabers are "ancient weapons," and the script describes their base as an "ancient temple."[25] In a galaxy where hyperspace travel is possible, their society is a bizarrely feudal one of knights, lords, and princesses. Their outfits are based on traditional Japanese attire. Lucas was particularly influenced by the period films of Akira Kurosawa, set in Japan in the age of the samurai. The Jedi's preference for lightsabers over blasters echoes a Kurosawa trope of samurai nobly sticking with swordfighting, even as their enemies use guns.[26]

Remarkably, the fount of wisdom in this science fiction epic is not a scientist. It's Yoda, a sage who has trained Jedi for eight hundred years. Yoda's teachings stress mastering ancient techniques, not adapting to a new technologies. He chides Luke for looking "to the future, to the horizon." In *Star Wars*, the past, not the future, is the privileged epoch.

It wasn't only in *Star Wars* that Lucas looked backward. His breakout film, the wildly popular *American Graffiti* (1973), was set in 1962—the last days of sock-hop. The Italian word "graffiti" in Lucas's odd title referred not to spray-paint art (which was only just becoming widespread) but to the etchings that captured daily life in the ancient city of Pompeii before a volcanic eruption buried it.[27] Pompeii was an unexpected reference, yet it underscores just how wrenching and destructive Lucas took the decade after 1962 to be, particularly the Vietnam War. "It was billed as a completely harmless war over *there*; no bomb was ever going to fall on United States soil," he told *Rolling Stone*. "But a huge psychological bomb landed on United States soil, and it changed it forever."[28] *American Graffiti* showed what the country had lost.

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[24] W. W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 10. The literature on modernization theory is large; see Daniel Immerwahr, "Modernization and Development in U.S. Foreign Relations," *Passport*, September 2012, 22–25.

[25] Bouzereau, *Annotated Screenplays*, 88.

[26] On Japan and Kurosawa in the films, see Wetmore, *Empire Triumphant*, chap. 3.

[27] Taylor, *Star Wars*, 84.

[28] Sheff interview, Kline, *Interviews*, 151.

From the vantage of the early 1970s, the film's producer Gary Kurtz explained, *American Graffiti*'s age of innocence seemed like "ancient times."[29]

If modernizers sought to improve traditional societies, Lucas had a different idea. Immediately after *A New Hope* premiered, he began work with his friend Steven Spielberg on the *Indiana Jones* films, which Lucas conceived and plotted. Harrison Ford starred as Indiana Jones, an archaeologist and expert on lost civilizations. In the films, Jones frequently encounters traditional societies, from bow-and-arrow–wielding Natives in South America to villagers in rural India. Yet Lucas never suggests that Western contact will improve these societies. Jones destroys some ancient sites and restores others, but development, the progressive change that underpinned modernization theory, is entirely off the table.[30]

The same is true of *Star Wars*. In the third film, *Return of the Jedi*, the heroes travel to the forest moon of Endor and encounter what Lucas called a "really primitive" society.[31] He named that society the Ewoks, after the Miwok people, Indigenous inhabitants of the California area where Skywalker Ranch was situated.[32] The Ewoks act like children and are religious to the point of superstition. But *Return of the Jedi* never proposes developing their traditional society. Rather, the Ewoks prove capable of bringing down the Empire with slingshots.

The film ends with "the little fuzzy wuzzies having a party," as Lucas put it during a story conference.[33] The Ewoks drum and dance, having freed their home from the high-tech Empire. Restoration, not improvement, is the hopeful note on which the original trilogy ends. Lucas would repeat that ending a year later in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984), with Jones celebrating alongside jubilant Indian villagers whose religious artifacts he has returned.

THE BATTLE OF ENDOR didn't just show a traditional society fighting a high-tech one; it conjured something more specific. "You can look at *Jedi* and see the Vietnam War," noted Lawrence Kasdan, who co-wrote the screenplay with Lucas. "You can see the Ewok guerrillas hiding in the jungles, taking on this improper force of mechanized bullies—and winning."[34]

That understanding of the Vietnam War—"mechanized bullies" losing to guerrillas—was common. The United States brought the world's most advanced weaponry to the battlefield: body-heat sensors, laser-guided bombs, planes with wingspans the length of football fields. But nothing worked. "We have the power to

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[29] Lawrence Meyer and Joel Garreau, "Making Movies with the Same Message as John Wayne and Buddha," *Washington Post*, 30 December 1984.

[30] Analyzed in Daniel Immerwahr, "Ten-Cent Ideology: Donald Duck Comic Books and the U.S. Challenge to Modernization," *Modern American History* 3 (2020): 1–26.

[31] J. W. Rinzler, *The Making of Return of the Jedi* (New York: Del Rey, 2013), 44.

[32] Eric P. Nash, "The Names Came from Earth," *New York Times*, 26 January 1997.

[33] Rinzler, *Return of the Jedi*, 77.

[34] Charles Champlin, *George Lucas: The Creative Impulse* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Publishers, 1992), 96.

destroy most human life on the planet within a matter of minutes," wrote the journalist Ronald Steel, "yet we cannot win a guerrilla war against peasants in black pajamas."[35]

Such thoughts were familiar to George Lucas. As a young man in the San Francisco Bay Area, he lived at the protest movement's epicenter. "We grew up in the '60s protesting the Vietnam War," Lucas remembered.[36] "The draft was hanging over all of us, and we were bearded, freako pre-hippies."[37] Antiwar politics surrounded him. "We all know what a terrible mess we have made of the world," he told *Rolling Stone*. "We all know how wrong we were in Vietnam."[38]

George Lucas's collaborator John Milius remembered that he and Lucas had been "great connoisseurs of the Vietnam War."[39] Indeed, the war cast a shadow over Lucas's early corpus. As Chris Taylor has argued, Lucas in the 1970s had in mind a triptych: three films that would, by examining the past, present, and future, show how much damage the Vietnam War had dealt.[40]

The first was *American Graffiti*, set in the innocent moment just before the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Resolution led the United States to send combat troops (rather than "advisors") to Vietnam. It's a joyful film, but Lucas throws ice water into the warm nostalgia bath at the end, when he reveals the fates of his four teenage male leads. One, Curt Henderson, moves to Canada, choosing exile, presumably to avoid the draft (as Lucas had considered doing himself).[41] Another, Terry Fields, goes "missing in action near An Loc in December 1965."

The second film in Lucas's intended triptych, dealing with the present, was to be *Apocalypse Now*, a documentary-style adaptation of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* set in Vietnam. Planning to direct the film, Lucas developed it with John Milius for four years, to the point of drafting a screenplay and scouting locations.[42] It would be, Lucas told interviewers, a "very political film" and he identified his own politics as left-wing.[43] In essence, he explained, it would be more about "man against machine than anything else." It was the story of "technology against humanity."[44]

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[35] Ronald Steel, *Pax Americana*, rev. ed. (1967; New York: The Viking Press, 1970), 13. An excellent overview of the Vietnam War's "techno-hubris" is Michael Adas, *Dominance by Design: Technological Imperatives and America's Civilizing Mission* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), chap. 6.

[36] Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex-Drugs-and-Rock 'n' Roll Generation Saved Hollywood* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 317.

[37] Hufbauer, "Politics behind 'Star Wars.'"

[38] Scanlon, "Force behind Lucas."

[39] Margot Norris, "Modernism and Vietnam: Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 44 (1998): 732.

[40] Taylor, *Star Wars*, 87.

[41] Hufbauer, "Politics behind 'Star Wars.'"

[42] Jones, *Lucas*, 168–169.

[43] Robert Benayoun and Michel Ciment, "Entretien avec George Lucas," *Positif*, September 1977, 60.

[44] Scanlon, "Force behind Lucas."

Lucas never made *Apocalypse Now*. Hollywood backers at first resisted, and, by the time funds were found, Lucas had become absorbed in *Star Wars*. So he passed, leaving his friend Francis Ford Coppola to take over the film. Lucas nevertheless found ways to use his ideas. While working on *Star Wars*, he plotted and produced *More American Graffiti* (1979), which followed Terry Fields to Vietnam. Though Lucas didn't direct the film, he took over the director's chair for most of the Terry plotline, and he shot it in the grainy documentary style that he'd planned for *Apocalypse Now*.[45] Alongside Terry's dismal plight in Vietnam, the film shows Terry's friends Steve and Laurie back in California turning from PTA parents to police-fighting protestors. The Bay Area band Country Joe and the Fish appear, singing their antiwar anthem, "I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin'-To-Die Rag."

A police helicopter menaces the protesting protagonists of George Lucas's *More American Graffiti* (1979)

Lucas also found that he could fold his *Apocalypse Now* ideas into *Star Wars*, the final part of his triptych. One reason he felt comfortable handing *Apocalypse Now* over to Coppola is that "a lot of my interest in *Apocalypse Now* was carried over into *Star Wars*," he recalled. "I would essentially deal with some of the same interesting concepts that I was going to use and convert them into space fantasy."[46] Lucas's *Apocalypse Now* would have been "about this totally insane giant technological society that was fighting these poor little people," Lucas said. "They have little sticks and things, and yet they completely cow this technological power, because the technological power didn't believe they were any threat." Lucas adapted this for *Star Wars* by writing the Battle of Endor, which he'd slated originally for the first film.

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[45] Marcus Hearn, *The Cinema of George Lucas* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2005), 129.
[46] Rinzler, *Star Wars*, 8.

The Viet Cong became Ewoks, "so the main theme of the film was that the Imperial Empire would be overrun by humanity in the form of these cute little teddy bears."[47]

The key is that Lucas saw his own country as the Empire. In his early notes, Lucas described the Empire as "like America ten years from now."[48] Hence *Star Wars'* place at the triptych's end. *American Graffiti* was the past he yearned for, *Apocalypse Now* was the present he detested, and *Star Wars* was the future he feared. Lucas made a point of noting how the Emperor Palpatine's throne room was designed to evoke the Oval Office in the White House.[49] He claimed that the corrupt Palpatine was based on Richard Nixon.[50]

While he identified the Empire with the United States, Lucas also coded the rebels, particularly the Jedi, as vaguely Asian—Asia having been the setting for the United States' most violent twentieth-century wars. The names *Obi-Wan Kenobi* and *Yoda* sounded Japanese, and Lucas took the word *Jedi* from *jidai-geki*, Japanese period dramas. The name *Han*, by contrast, seemed Chinese.[51] Lucas considered casting Asian actors to play Luke and Leia and wanted Akira Kurosawa's favorite actor, Toshiro Mifune, for either Obi-Wan or the fallen Jedi Darth Vader.[52] In his 1973 draft of the first film, Lucas described Leia's imperiled home planet as "a small independent country like North Vietnam."[53]

That film premiered right as dissenting Vietnam War movies began to hit screens. Before, Hollywood's main depiction of the war had been the gung-ho John Wayne production, *The Green Berets* (1968). The late 1970s brought a burst of critical films, some set in Southeast Asia, others following disturbed vets back home. These included *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Tracks* (1976), *Heroes* (1977), *Rolling Thunder* (1977), *The Boys in Company C* (1978), *Coming Home* (1978), *Deer Hunter* (1978), *Go Tell the Spartans* (1978), *Who'll Stop the Rain* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), and Lucas's own *More American Graffiti* (1979). *A New Hope*, released in 1977, set itself apart from the pack with its bright-lines morality and outer space setting. But reviewers could nevertheless decode it. "'Star Wars' is in many respects a film about Vietnam," wrote the *Washington Post*.[54] "The Vietnam parallel is never far," agreed the *London Spectator*.[55]

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[47] Rinzler, *Return of the Jedi*, 11.
[48] Rinzler, *Star Wars*, 17.
[49] Lindesay Irvine, "In the Shadow of Evil," *The Guardian*, 7 November 2005.
[50] Biskind, *Easy Riders*, 324; Rinzler, *Empire Strikes Back*, 24.
[51] John Baxter, *George Lucas: A Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 158. See also Kevin J. Wetmore Jr., *The Empire Triumphant: Race, Religion and Rebellion in the* Star Wars *Films* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2005), chap. 3 and Julien Fielding, "Beyond Judeo-Christianity: *Star Wars* and the Great Eastern Religions," in *Sex, Politics, and Religion in* Star Wars, ed. Douglas Brode and Leah Deyneka (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 25–46.
[52] Bouzereau, *Annotated Screenplays*, 197; Taylor, *Star Wars*, 146; Rinzler, *Star Wars*, 69.
[53] Rinzler, *Star Wars*, 16.
[54] Jim Hoagland, "The Politics of 'Star Wars,'" *Washington Post*, 11 December 1977.
[55] Clancy Sigal, "Anodyne," *London Spectator*, 24 December 1977.

TECHNOLOGY, MODERNIZATION, AND EMPIRE wove together in George Lucas's telling. The United States had grown reliant on large-scale technologies and, rather than progressing with the years, it had declined, becoming an empire. But *Star Wars* served up hope. The films imagined that small bands of "freedom fighters"—schooled in ancient ways, adopting Asian practices, controlling technology personally, and allying with Indigenous societies—could restore the fallen republic. This vision, though peppy, reflected profound divergence from the postwar tenets of U.S. foreign relations. It rejected modernization, techno-optimism, and faith that the most powerful country on the planet was also the most virtuous.

To say that Lucas replaced the worldview of his parents' generation with an anti-imperialist vision, however, is not to say that he offered liberation for all. Scholars have been quick to note the racism and sexism that pervade *Star Wars*. The droids—clumsy figures of fun who address their owners as "master"—draw heavily on old minstrel tropes. Han Solo's loyal Wookiee companion Chewbacca, who participates fully in the action but is sidelined from the honors, is a trusty native. "The Wookiees are more like the Indians, more like noble savages," Lucas told a reporter.[56] The Ewoks offer a cuddlier version of the same stereotype ("I basically cut the Wookiees in half and called them Ewoks," Lucas admitted).[57] And despite her handiness with a blaster, Princess Leia, the sole female lead, appears more as a reward for male heroes than a hero in her own right.[58]

At the heart of the matter is Lucas's decision to tell the story of U.S. imperialism as a story of white men. Though the Empire's violence is on display as a sign of its moral bankruptcy, the films rarely linger on the victims of that violence. In this, Lucas exhibits a sort of anti-imperialist solipsism. He strenuously opposes empire yet takes little interest in the viewpoint of the colonized who, in the form of the Ewoks, speak only in grunts and gurgles. That is because Lucas's chief objection to the Vietnam War was not what it did to Vietnam. It's what it did to the United States.

A case in point is the fate of Alderaan, Princess Leia's home planet—the planet, under a different name, that Lucas likened in a draft to North Vietnam. In *A New Hope*, the Empire destroys Alderaan with the Death Star, to test the weapon's capabilities. This act establishes clearly the Empire's depravity. But what of Alderaan? Leia is initially distraught, yet by her next scene she seems to have forgotten it. As Lucas shows Alderaan only from space, the viewer gets no sense of the lives lived and lost there. An entire planet's obliteration becomes just a backdrop for a moral struggle within the Skywalker family.

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[56] Scanlon, "Force behind Lucas."

[57] Bouzereau, *Annotated Screenplays*, 281.

[58] Useful overviews of race/gender include Wetmore, *Empire Triumphant*; Carl Silvio and Tony M. Vinci, *Culture, Identities and Technology in the* Star Wars *Films: Essays on the Two Trilogies* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2007); Brode and Deyneka, eds., *Sex, Politics, and Religion*; and Lee, ed., *A Galaxy Here and Now*.

Lucas showed a similar lack of interest in imperialism's victims in his one film explicitly about the Vietnam War, *More American Graffiti*. The film is biting in its antiwar politics, especially in its Lucas-directed plotline following Terry Fields to An Loc. Terry undergoes a dramatic shift there. He enlists eager to "kick ass, take names, and eat Cong for breakfast," but a year later, he concludes that this "isn't my war," fakes his own death, and escapes into the jungle, never to be seen again. It's a Vietnam War story, and it's set in Vietnam, yet Lucas manages to tell it without a single Vietnamese character. The sole glimpse of a Vietnamese person is a photo that Terry's commander proudly displays of a prisoner whom he'd killed. Otherwise, *More American Graffiti* is a Vietnam film immaculately free of Vietnamese people.[59]

THERE IS ANOTHER, related distinguishing feature of George Lucas's take on Vietnam. After *THX 1138* failed to win audiences, Lucas had a realization. "People don't care how the country's being ruined," he decided. "All that movie did was to make people more pessimistic, more depressive, and less willing to get involved."[60] Though Lucas continued to believe that "we've got to change the way we live," he no longer saw frank social criticism as the means to that end. "So then I said, 'Well, maybe I'll take that message and wrap it up in a completely different guise.'" He started making "positive" films. *American Graffiti* and *Star Wars* were set in different universes, but they shared an "effervescent giddiness," Lucas said.[61] And they were massive, industry-changing hits.

The buoyancy in *American Graffiti* comes from its setting in a more innocent time, before the Vietnam War ruined the country. In the original *Star Wars* trilogy, it comes from the belief that the Old Republic is not irretrievably lost. When a reporter asked Lucas what *Star Wars* was "ultimately about," Lucas answered with a single word: redemption.[62] The original trilogy starts with "a new hope" in dark times and concludes with what Lucas called the "redemption of a fallen angel," Darth Vader, a.k.a. Anakin Skywalker, Luke's father.[63] Though Anakin tries to tempt Luke to the Dark Side, Luke instead turns his father away from it, and Anakin renounces the Dark Side in his final moments. The trilogy ends with Anakin's absolution. After dying, he returns as a smiling apparition, standing benevolently beside the specters of Jedi knights Obi-Wan and Yoda.

From the Skywalkers' perspective, it's a stirring ending, suggesting that innocence can be regained, the nearly extinct Jedi can return, and the son can "redeem his father," as Lucas put it.[64] As a parable for U.S. foreign policy, the tone

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[59] The sole Asian character is a photographer with one line of dialogue. However, he speaks fluent English and wears U.S. fatigues—nothing suggests he's Vietnamese.
[60] Farber interview, Kline, *Interviews*, 42.
[61] O'Quinn interview, Kline, *Interviews*, 115, 119.
[62] Interview by John Seabrook, 1997, in Kline, *Interviews*, 204.
[63] Lucas quoted in Bouzereau, *Annotated Screenplays*, 271.
[64] Bouzereau, *Annotated Screenplays*, 271.

is similarly hopeful. Republics that have become empires are not doomed, the film insists. The idealistic baby boomers can expiate their parents' sins. The original anti-imperialism of their country can be restored.[65]

Yet, here again, Lucas's solipsism matters. He interprets the theme of empire as an epic moral struggle among would-be imperialists, with everyone else serving as scenery. This allows him to tell *Star Wars* as a "son saves father" story. But consider the original trilogy's ending from a wider perspective. Anakin has participated actively in the Empire's crimes. He's complicit in mass murder on an inconceivable scale—millions or billions on Alderaan alone, one presumes. His decision to reconcile with Luke and rise up against Emperor Palpatine at the end is surely a step in the right direction. But only by leaving the Empire's victims out can Lucas turn Anakin's story into one of absolution. Seen from Alderaan, Anakin is a galactic *génocidaire*, his last-minute change of heart notwithstanding.

Lucas cares about imperialists' souls, not their deeds. Souls can be saved, hence Lucas's emphasis on hope. This was, after the Vietnam War, a welcome message, as it suggested that the United States might reclaim its ideals, no matter how many lives its wars had needlessly taken. The message fit well with the regenerative rhetoric of the Reagan administration. "It's morning again in America," Reagan's television ads announced. He embraced "the Force," railed against the "evil empire" of the Soviet Union, and backed "freedom fighters" in Afghanistan and Nicaragua, who did indeed resemble the ragtag rebels of *Star Wars*.[66] Reagan's missile defense program, "Star Wars," would offer, he promised, "a new hope."[67]

Lucas hated this. He unsuccessfully sued over the identification of Reagan's Death Star–like space program with his films. He produced a film, *Latino* (1985), criticizing the Reagan-supported Contras in Nicaragua. But, having created a new mythology, Lucas could not control its use. *Star Wars* galloped on. Under its obliging terms, even the imperialists could imagine themselves as the rebels.

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[65] An interpretation advanced in John Hellmann, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 209–220.

[66] Remarks at the National Space Club Luncheon, 29 March 1985; State of the Union Address, 6 February 1985; Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals, 8 March 1983; all *APP*.

[67] Address to the Nation on Defense and National Security, 23 March 1983, *APP*.