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A Depart from Exceptionalism?
Presidential Discourse and Filmic Representations of US
Troops before and after the Withdrawal from Afghanistan

Autor

Luis Enrique De Mota Núñez

Director

Juan Antonio Tarancón de Francisco

Facultad de Filosofía y Letras

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Abstract:

In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and under the impact of the War on Terror, presidential discourse and certain film representations dealing with US troops seem to rely on a simplistic and damaging approach based on the embrace of the myth of American exceptionalism. This dissertation analyses how this oversimplified perspective can be perceived in the films *American Sniper* (Clint Eastwood, 2014) and *Lone Survivor* (Peter Berg, 2013). Moreover, by analysing the film *Retrograde* (Matthew Heineman, 2022), this paper aims to compare this first oversimplified approach with the one to be found in the different socio-historical context of the withdrawal from Afghanistan; a period when presidential discourse appears to be less dependent on exceptionalism and the film representation of US soldiers incorporates certain criticism and complexity. Offering a more realistic depiction that, although necessary, might not be widespread.

Keywords: American exceptionalism, War on Terror, film representations, presidential discourse, withdrawal from Afghanistan, critique.

Resumen:

Tras los atentados terroristas del 11-S y bajo los efectos de la guerra contra el terrorismo, el discurso presidencial y ciertas representaciones cinematográficas de las tropas estadounidenses parecen tomar un enfoque simplificado y perjudicial basado en la adopción del mito del excepcionalismo estadounidense. Este trabajo analiza la presencia de esta cuestionable perspectiva en las películas *American Sniper* (Clint Eastwood, 2014) y *Lone Survivor* (Peter Berg, 2013). Además, a través del análisis de la película *Retrograde* (Matthew Heineman, 2022), este ensayo pretende comparar este primer enfoque superficial con el contexto sociohistórico que caracteriza la retirada de Afganistán; periodo en el cual el discurso presidencial parece depender menos del excepcionalismo y la representación cinematográfica de los soldados estadounidenses apunta a la incorporación de cierta crítica y complejidad. Ofreciendo una representación más realista que, aunque necesaria, podría no ser generalizada.

Palabras clave: Excepcionalismo estadounidense, guerra contra el terrorismo, representaciones cinematográficas, discurso presidencial, retirada de Afganistán, crítica.

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1. INTRODUCTION

When analysing some of the pillars that constitute US society, the idea of American exceptionalism could be considered a relevant and recurrent element. Present from the country's very foundations, it has frequently shaped how the US citizenry has perceived different events of its history. The term "American exceptionalism" was first coined by Alexis de Tocqueville in his work *Democracy in America*. However, before being properly coined, the ideas of a particular exceptionalism shaping the country's self-perception could be traced back to the first Puritan settlers of the colonies that later developed into the United States. Likewise, as pointed out by Löfflmann (314), this ideology of superiority was also a significant element during the American Revolution.

Concerning the description of American exceptionalism, Mehmood et al. (2) describe it as a feeling of "ideological superiority and the benevolent nature of hegemony"; an idea that, as further pointed out by these authors, is accompanied by a feeling of economic and political superiority and the belief in a superior principle of liberty and democracy. This claimed exceptionalism has been key for the interpretation of different events in US history, and this also seems to be the case with the 9/11 terrorist attacks, or more concretely, with the response to those aggressions. Being the first attacks on US soil after Pearl Harbor, they were an inflection point in contemporary politics and international relations, marking a historically unprecedented event that led to a noticeable change in US foreign and domestic policy.

Between the responses to the attacks and the wars that followed, presidential discourse and film representations of these events could be highlighted. Considering the presidential approach, President Bush promoted a "War on Terror" whose ideological

framework was strictly connected to the ideas of US exceptionalism; ideology that, although with some differences, was also to be found in the Obama administration. Thus, during both presidencies, the official discourse presented military interventionism as a duty, connecting it to the ideas underlying US exceptionalism. In fact, as commented by Löfflmann (315), the launching of warfare has long been a recurrent element in the representation of US exceptionalism. Considering film representations, the invasions launched under the War on Terror seem to be followed by a similar representation, as during this period, several films seem to rely on the myth of US exceptionalism to portray the role of US troops in Afghanistan and Iraq. Appearing to coincide, therefore, with the simplistic approach disseminated by the presidential power.

Although these events took place several years ago and may not seem relevant in the current political scenario, the withdrawal of the last US troops from Afghanistan in August 2021 and the Taliban reconquering of the country re-attracted public opinion. In a quite different socio-political context, the years that preceded the withdrawal from Afghanistan seem to be marked by a quite different approach. If compared with the stance based on American exceptionalism to be found in Bush and Obama's speeches, this period could be said to be characterised by a conflicting economic and social environment, the feeling of hopelessness about the situation in the region, and a certain temporal distance from the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Events that may have led to a presidential approach that is more detached from the ideas behind the myth of US exceptionalism when dealing with the presence of US troops in Afghanistan; a changing approach that appears to be present in some film productions dealing with the conflict as well.

More than 20 years after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the occupation of Afghanistan, there has been a revisiting of the events, and the end of the war in Afghanistan seems to have led to widespread discussions among panellists and

politicians. Attention that, by extension, raised a debate about the United States' role in the invasion of the country and its long-lasting occupation of the region. Thus, after the withdrawal, one may wonder to which extent these events may have affected the traditional representation of the US troops involved in the conflict.

The aim of this dissertation is to compare how the filmic representation of US troops may have changed from the simplistic and damaging approach based on exceptionalism promoted in the years following the 9/11 attacks to a more critical depiction after the withdrawal from Afghanistan in which American exceptionalism seems to be missing. More concretely, this dissertation will discuss how in the aftermath of 9/11 there was a presidential and filmic reliance on the myth of US exceptionalism, something that, in the case of film productions, resulted in the representation of US troops according to ideas of heroism and superiority. This approach will be contrasted with the analysis of the very different socio-historical context to be found in the years before the withdrawal, when both presidential discourse and certain film productions seem to point to an apparent, yet not widespread, decline of US exceptionalism in the representation of US soldiers related to the conflicts.

To further analyse these ideas, this dissertation will be divided into three different sections: The first will provide a more detailed insight into the context of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and how the myth of US exceptionalism was reignited by the Bush administration and continued by Obama's. The second section will analyse how this discourse of exceptionalism was also to be found in film representations, focusing on the portrayal of US troops in two Hollywood productions: *American Sniper* (Clint Eastwood, 2014) and *Lone Survivor* (Peter Berg, 2013), both belonging to the genre Classic Americana and paying special attention to the role of sound and film narrator. Lastly, this essay will analyse the different socio-political context of the years preceding the withdrawal, in

which US exceptionalism seems to be absent in presidential speech and in the representation of US troops in the documentary *Retrograde* (Matthew Heineman, 2022).

2. US EXCEPTIONALISM AS THE PRESIDENTIAL APPROACH IN THE AFTERMATH OF 9/11

The consternation caused by the 9/11 terrorist attacks was followed by the launching of two wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that emphasised the new active and self-proclaimed role of the United States as a fighter of terrorism across the World. The presidential approach taken by the Bush administration, in office when the attacks took place, was largely based on the long-rooted myth of US exceptionalism. As Reese and Lewis (779) affirm, under the name of “the War on Terror”, the Bush administration promoted a rhetoric that presented the United States as a civilized country opposed to the evil planners of the attacks that sought to undermine American core values. This rhetoric attracted public attention, and the Bush administration’s necessity to legitimize these new wars, as well as ensure public support and undermine widespread criticism, resulted in a large-scale fostering of a powerful ideology that consisted in the revival of US exceptionalism.

If this rhetoric based on the myth of US exceptionalism is to be analysed, Greenwald (ix) describes it as “principled and eloquent” and points to how it contributed to the popularity Bush enjoyed during an extended period of his presidency. The alleged exceptionalism of the US was emphasised by the President’s sharp division between “good” and “evil”, and when compared to other countries, the excellence of the US was highlighted by fostering the creation of two opposing groups; one associated with positive traits and related to the US society, and the other full of negative connotations left to the evil-doers. In fact, as Greenwald (xiii) also states, President Bush promoted the idea that there was just goodness to be found at the core of the United States’ destiny and position in the world.

Likewise, the principle of US exceptionalism was also enhanced by the inclusion of a religious component. As Nabers and Patman (169) highlight, the religious component behind Bush's discourse was the result of an evangelical perspective and the use of religious imagery that allowed his administration to approach the War on Terror from a divine and conservative approach. According to Bush, the US, as an exceptional country, a city upon the hill, was thought to have a divine duty that consisted in bringing peace and democracy wherever it was needed. And considering the central position of religion in many aspects of US society, this element could be said to play a key role in the acceptance and perception of the wars launched from the perspective of US exceptionalism.

Thus, in the aftermath of 9/11, the Bush administration seems to have contributed to a plain depiction of the country that was based on the revival of powerful ideas of goodness, exemplariness, and superiority that justified the US foreign policy and position in the world. These ideas may have undermined the possibility of seeing the country, or by extension its troops, as threatening, interventionist, or ethically wrong. Conversely, the US is presented as an exceptional country in charge of providing freedom and seeking justice for the grievances it had been the target of. As an example, these ideas of US exceptionalism can be inferred from the following lines from President Bush's speech in 2001 address to the nation, quote retrieved from Morgans (154):

This nation has defeated tyrants and liberated death camps, raised this lamp of liberty to every captive land. We have no intention of ignoring or appeasing history's latest gang of fanatics trying to murder their way to power. They are discovering, as others before them, the resolve of a great country and a great democracy. In the ruins of two towers, under a flag unfurled at the Pentagon, at the funerals of the lost, we have made a sacred promise to ourselves and to the world: we will not relent until justice is done and our nation is secure.

When it comes to the public's perception and embracing of this ideology above mentioned, according to Huddy and Feldman (457), the fear and perception of being

under threat lead to an ideological intensification and the rising of conservatism among the American population. These aspects may have contributed to increasing the popularity of the President, because, as stated by Ladd (516), his presidential approval escalated from 60% before the attacks to 87% after the aggressions. An exacerbated support and patriotism were also visible in the political responses to Bush's approach. As claimed by Nabers and Patman (180) and Byrd (2), regarding Congress as a whole, far from finding opposition in the passing of these laws, President Bush found a complicit help in Congress' passiveness. Therefore, one could argue that public support for President Bush was high and widespread. And as such, the acceptance of the presidential figure may also involve the approval and internalization of the ideas of US superiority that although revived during his presidency, had long been present in US society.

After two terms, the Bush administration was followed by that of President Obama. During the Obama administration, troops were withdrawn from Iraq and the number of troops deployed in Afghanistan also decreased, as it has been pointed out by Mehmood et al. (489). These actions could be understood as a reaction to the growing unpopularity the war of Iraq enjoyed and a partial decrease in the support for the war in Afghanistan. However, if the public's approach is to be analysed, the results of a Pew Research Poll, reported by Heimlich, show that the support for the war in Afghanistan in January 2009 was still high, with 64% of the US population still supporting it. This result could indicate that, even after a significant decrease, the US average citizen was still influenced by the patriotism and shock caused by the terrorist attacks.

Concerning the administration's approach, despite the commented initial military decisions in the region, Obama's speeches addressing the war in Afghanistan seem to frequently rely on the ideas behind US exceptionalism. As an instance of this ideology of superiority prevailing in his speeches, one can consider the following lines delivered at a

news conference on April the 4th 2009 and published on the White House website; words uttered while discussing the war in Afghanistan and NATO cooperation after the President was inquired if he supported, as his ancestors did, “the school of American exceptionalism that sees America as uniquely qualified to lead the world”:

I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism. I'm enormously proud of my country and its role and history in the world. If you think about the site of this summit and what it means, I don't think America should be embarrassed to see evidence of the sacrifices of our troops, the enormous amount of resources that were put into Europe postwar, and our leadership in crafting an Alliance that ultimately led to the unification of Europe. We should take great pride in that.

Hence, it can be perceived how in the Obama era, despite partisan differences, and even if some changes concerning foreign policy took place, the myth of US exceptionalism was a still relevant component when approaching the remaining conflicts associated with the War on Terror. Therefore, the depiction of the conflict according to the principle of US exceptionalism seems to have been an approach taken both by Bush and Obama, providing a framework for perceiving the events from the perspective of US superiority and decisive role in the world. This depiction took place at a time when the country held a strong political interest in the regions at war after the impact 9/11 had on US society, a society that was highly supportive of the Presidents and their approach: a perspective that could be described as dangerous if one considers how it depicts events from a simplistic point of view, fostering a self-perception of superiority that seldom leaves room for criticism and a reassessment of the US position in the world.

3. FILM REPRESENTATIONS OF US TROOPS BEFORE THE WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN

As stated in the previous section, in the political context that followed 9/11, the presidential discourse of the Bush and the Obama administration was characterised by a

reliance on the myth of US exceptionalism for portraying the ongoing conflicts of the War on Terror. This questionable approach does not seem to be restricted to the presidential context, as it could be argued that it is also present in the cultural domain. In the years following the attacks, there seems to exist a depiction of events that presented the US and, more concretely, the soldiers in charge of invading Asian and Middle Eastern countries as superior, heroic, and sacrificed. A reliance on exceptionalism that, if taken to a broader extent, seems to coincide with the ideas of US superiority promoted by the presidential discourse.

The similarity in the approach taken from the presidential and cultural context had led some critics to argue that the powerful rhetoric revived by President Bush transcended political speech and affected representation. As an example, Reese and Lewis (778) define Bush's rhetoric as a "powerful master narrative" and "organizing principle". Nevertheless, the actual impact the approach of the Bush administration had on the representation of the events is still discussed, and it has to be considered that, as earlier mentioned, despite the possible influence of the President's rhetoric, the myth of American exceptionalism has long been a powerful ideological framework in the US.

If cultural productions are to be considered, the role of Hollywood may be relevant to analyse. Hollywood could be said to hold particular importance in this context, not only due to its wide reach in the US society but also due to its films' capacity of providing further insights into the social reality of the US at specific times. The approach Hollywood took is still unclear and equally discussed by several critics such as Steve Rose. According to this critic, the ideology promoted during these first stages of the conflict of the War on Terror was also embraced and promoted by Hollywood in its role as a powerful cinematographic producer. Besides, this critic adds that instead of helping the public to understand the conflict, Hollywood failed to provide a faithful image of what

was happening during the War on Terror, releasing films that were characterized by “a lack of imagination and judgment on the part of American film-making”.

Contrary to this perspective, other critics such as David Martin Jones and M.L.R. Smith defend that Hollywood’s role was not so clear and that in certain films subtle critiques towards the War on Terror or the presidential power can be perceived. Similarly, Peter Bradshaw argues that the connection between Hollywood and the Bush administration is not clear because several films such as Robert Redford’s *Lions for Lambs* (2007) or Gavin Hood’s *Rendition* (2007) were already critical of the Bush presidency, portraying plots capable of moving the audience’s conscience. Lastly, Jones and Smith (3) point to the emergence of the genre Dark Americana as a genre that acknowledges the complexity and moral ambiguity of characters at the time it avoids simplistic binary oppositions of good and bad, being the director Brian De Palma and his film *Redacted* (2007) an example. However, as Jones and Smith (16) themselves argue, directors such as De Palma do “applaud American values”.

All the perspectives above discussed appear to focus on the role of Hollywood in promoting the values fostered by the Bush administration. However, the approach to be taken in this dissertation is to argue that, regardless of the influence Bush's or Obama's rhetoric may have had on Hollywood, and whether some films may criticize the presidential role, films like *American Sniper* and *Lone Survivor* do rely on the long-rooted myth of US exceptionalism when it comes to the portrayal of US soldiers; a superficial and dangerous portrayal that also seems to undermine the possibility of being critical of the military role of the US as a military superpower and that may show that Hollywood also embraced and promoted these ideas of US exceptionalism at the period.

From now on, the films *American Sniper* and *Lone Survivor*, both belonging to the genre of Classic Americana, are going to be analysed. These films could be said to fit

into the conventions of this genre because according to Jones and Smith (3), the films belonging to this category portray stereotypes of American heroism, virtuousness, and a clear-cut morality, characteristics that, as it will be later commented, are to be found in these films. Besides, these two films have been selected because they could be considered as a clear example of what Löffmann (314) considers to be “military preeminence as a sign of American exceptionalism”. That is, films in which the military supremacy of US soldiers is considered as a sign of US exceptionalism. The analysis will focus on sound and film narrator as two crucial elements that work to emphasise the ideas of US exceptionalism as a way of approaching the wars of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Beginning with *American Sniper*, the plot of the film is based on the memoir of Chris Kyle, a US Navy SEAL member that as a sniper in Iraq became one of the deadliest soldiers in the United States history. From the beginning, the film makes a clear distinction between bad and good, as Kyle’s (Bradley Cooper) father tries to teach his children the difference among “sheep” (good people), “the wolf” (bad people), and “sheepdog” (those in charge of protecting other sheep from wolves). Another aspect that can be perceived from the beginning is the extreme patriotism and the ideas of American exceptionalism that characterize the protagonist. Kyle expresses his will to save his country because “it is the greatest country on Earth”. These ideas of patriotism are also emphasised when the protagonist, portrayed as a self-sacrificing man, even neglects his family for the sake of the security of his nation. Moreover, Kyle’s sense of duty to his country entitles him to kill children if they put at risk the lives of the other servicemen. But portrayed in a good light, he often struggles to do so. He is extremely moved when he confronts this situation for the first time and feels an enormous relief when he can avoid doing it a second time.

Continuing with a more technical analysis, sound and film narrator could be said to help emphasise the ideas of US exceptionalism in *American Sniper*. As stated by Miller (46) “sound is important to film in general and the war film in particular, as it plays a role in actively influencing audience interpretation and perception of image and narrative”. In this respect, in *American Sniper*, non-diegetic sound could be said to work as an enhancer of heroism and US superiority. When the audience is presented with images of the soldiers going on one of their missions through the streets of Iraq, the music is frequently adventurous. Kyle and his fellow military are patrolling the streets under the threat of being shot by an Iraqi sniper, but instead of finding a soundtrack that emphasises the fear and uncertainty they may be feeling, their actions are accompanied by adventurous music that could highlight their fearlessness and superiority as US soldiers. This depiction fits in what Miller (14) calls “the myth of the hero” a common depiction in war films.

Equally important is the presence of non-diegetic sound in the last part of the film. The end of Kyle’s life is announced under the song “The Funeral” by Ennio Morricone, a song that is also present when the protagonist is at the funeral of one of his fallen comrades in Iraq. If connected with the ideas of exceptionalism, patriotism, and heroism commented in the plot, this song adds certain solemnity to the end of the film in which images of Kyle’s real-life funeral and his followers’ reaction to his death are portrayed. Choosing this solemn and saddening song, accompanied by the images of mourning masses, can contribute to the celebration of the role of these soldiers and what they stand for; the ideas of superiority and embodiment of the country’s values of patriotism, sense of duty and moral goodness that are presented by the characters words and actions and apparently acclaimed during the film.

Similarly, although its intervention is limited to the end of the film, the role of an external written film narrator is to be mentioned. The narrator’s words serve to announce

Chris Kyle's death, indicating that he was killed when he was trying to help a veteran. This brief section seems to point to the goodness of Chris Kyle, who died trying to help one of his fellow militaries. Besides, it is this narration that serves to introduce the solemn section composed of real-life images and saddening music already commented on. Thus, one could say that as it happens with the choice of sound, the figure of the film narrator contributes to the positive perception of the soldier, a perception that, by extension, may include the acceptance and promotion of the ideals of US exceptionalism he represents and defends throughout the film.

Secondly, the film *Lone Survivor* is going to be analysed as another example of the genre Classic Americana where US exceptionalism is enhanced, and criticism is difficult to find. Regarding plot, this film is also based on a real story, and it deals with the defeat of almost an entire small group of US soldiers that had to fight an abundant group of Taliban fighters in the Afghan mountains, a group from which soldier Marcus Luttrell, played by Mark Wahlberg, is the only survivor. In this film too, the idea of US soldiers being saviours is emphasised, as the soldiers are committed to persecuting the bad people, fighting the Taliban capable of taking a father from his family and killing him for helping US troops.

The exceptionality of the US soldiers is further portrayed by their actions, as they jump from exceedingly high hills and fiercely fight the Taliban even if they outnumber them. Besides, US soldiers often display certain moral superiority, as they decide not to kill the locals they encounter in the hills even if that means that they are going to be chased by the Taliban right after the prisoners are released. This morality is accompanied by a sense of partnership among the soldiers. They are presented as caring comrades that do whatever is on their hands to defend the rest. A depiction that coincides with the

“brotherhood camaraderie” that Miller (19) identifies as another important convention of the war film.

To further analyse the ideas of US exceptionalism to be found in *Lone Survivor*, sound and the figure of the film narrator are going to be considered as well. The very beginning of the film is formed by real images of US soldiers undergoing harsh and almost inhumane training, images that are accompanied by voice-over voices of military instructors and soldiers and a piece of non-diegetic music that seems to contribute to the portrayal of these soldiers as heroes, as exceptional. Thus, the images of soldiers’ training could be described as shocking, but adding this particular soundtrack seems to work as a complement to emphasise the perseverance and grandeur also transmitted by some of the soldier’s voice-over comments.

Similarly, the soldiers’ bravery and exceptionalism may also be emphasised when, after the failed rescue takes place, a dying Matthew Axelson, played by Ben Foster, confronts all alone a group of Taliban fighters. In this scene, his struggle is accentuated by a low, repetitive melody, and the diegetic sound of the guns momentarily takes a back seat to a lower pitch. Nevertheless, diegetic sound recovers its importance when, to make evident his suffering and the heroism of his actions, one gets to hear a louder and sharpened sound of his breathing.

In the last scenes of the film, while he is being rescued, Marcus Luttrell becomes a voice-over narrator, and in his speech, accompanied by the same emotive music to be found at the beginning of the film, Marcus makes reference to his gratitude for his “brothers”, but more importantly, he makes reference to the harshness and importance of the fight those soldiers were carrying out and how important it is to keep fighting “no matter how much it hurts, how dark it gets, or how far you fall”. These words could be said to show a perseverance and sense of duty that can also be associated with the ideas

of superiority underlying the myth of US exceptionalism. Ideas that could be emphasised, once again, by the choice of sound in the scene following Marcus's narration, in which pictures of the real-life soldiers, their names, ages, or even family members, are accompanied by Peter Gabriel's song "Heroes". As the song's very name and lyrics indicate, the soldiers are portrayed as heroes, and as it happened with *American Sniper*, this positive perception of the soldiers could also include the acceptance and promotion of the ideals of US exceptionalism they embody.

Overall, *American Sniper* and *Lone Survivor* seem to share many similarities if sound and narration are to be considered. Both films appear to follow the conventions of the war film, especially relying on the portrayal of heroism and partnership. Relying on this genre during these times may be evidence of how the US society that these films are supposed to represent relied on the myth of US exceptionalism, disseminated not only through the presidential discourse but also through Hollywood productions. Film productions that, overall, seem to portray a simplistic depiction that may serve as a promoter of the heroism, superiority, and patriotism of US soldiers and US society.

Thus, the approach taken by these films does not only seem to point to the embrace of the myth of US exceptionalism, but also to a lack of criticism that may impede a deeper analysis of the historical period presented. One could argue that in both films, the role of the soldier stands for the role of the US, and portraying US troops from the perspective of US exceptionalism could be said to be a dangerous approach that seems to ignore the questionable role these troops had in the killing of civilians and the invasion of foreign countries. A biased and irresponsible depiction especially if one considers that, as stated by Miller (2), films dealing with a war strongly influence how the represented events are historically remembered.

4. THE WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN: A CHANGE IN DISCOURSE AND REPRESENTATION

The withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan took place in a quite different socio-political context if compared with that to be found during Bush and Obama's presidencies. From a social perspective, the concern about terrorism that defined the first years of the US policy during the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq could be said to have diminished. That is, a certain temporal distance from the attacks could have led to a decrease in the shock they first caused in the US population. Moreover, marked by the Coronavirus pandemic, economic recession, and noticeable inflation, the years preceding the withdrawal could be said to have been tumultuous. Aspects that may have placed the focus on economic matters rather than on the political crusade started to fight terrorism under the claim of US exceptionalism.

Considering the political context, a change of discourse towards Afghanistan may have started with the Trump administration. Marked by his policies of "America first", Trump's presidency could be said to have started a period in which patriotic fervour seems to be mainly focused on domestic policies, prioritizing what the President considered the real interests of the US population. Besides, as stated by Kaura (10), during Trump's presidency, there was already a feeling that the war in Afghanistan had become a "fruitless military effort to keep Afghanistan's fragile democracy alive amidst a brutal Taliban insurgency", a discouraged perception that marked the end of an era and that may have left little room for perceiving the events from the perspective of US exceptionalism.

The Biden administration approach is also to be considered. The withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban *blitzkrieg* in the country took place during Biden's presidency, and, as pointed out by Mehmood et al., during this period, the discourse and policies used to refer to Afghanistan could be considered a total failure (494). In this

context, popular support for ending the war in Afghanistan increased. In fact, as reported by Schaeffer in a Pew Research survey, 54% of the US population considered withdrawing from Afghanistan a good decision. Among the main reasons for supporting the withdrawal, President Biden placed the emphasis on the loss of US lives caused by this war as well as the enormous economic burden it meant. In fact, Mehmood et al. (495) estimate the costs of the US intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq at \$6.4 trillion. Therefore, one could say that, in this context of withdrawal and hopelessness, US exceptionalism may be difficult to find as far as the portrayal of US interventionism in the region is concerned.

Therefore, considering this context, presidential discourse addressing Afghanistan seems to be more pessimist and conformist if it is to be compared to previous years. The apparent absence of US exceptionalism in speeches targeting the existence of US troops in Afghanistan could be described as a changing tendency that marked the last remaining conflict of what was first named the War on Terror. As an example of this changing tendency, one can consider the following lines belonging to a speech delivered by President Biden on August 16th, 2021, and retrieved from Mehmood et al. (494):

American troops cannot and should not be fighting in a war and dying in a war that Afghan forces are not willing to fight for themselves. We spent over a trillion dollars. We trained and equipped an Afghan military force of some 300,000 strong — incredibly well equipped — a force larger in size than the militaries of many of our NATO allies.

A changing approach seems to be also present in some film productions. To analyse to which extent this may be so, this essay will consider the representation of US soldiers in the documentary film *Retrograde*. Released more than a year after the withdrawal, *Retrograde* depicts the last nine months of the United States troops in the country, paying special attention to the impact the last days had on the Afghan population and the remaining US troops in the country. From the beginning, the film points to the

change in presidential discourse through the voice-over speeches of the four presidents that have been involved in the war in Afghanistan. If representation is to be considered, *Retrograde* seems to portray a quite different depiction of American soldiers, as they could be said to no longer enjoy a heroic representation. US soldiers cease to be presented as ferocious warriors that sacrifice their lives for the love of their country. Instead, US troops are mainly presented as resigned and more dependent on political decisions that are, as one of the soldiers confirms, “made way way above us”.

Moreover, the representation of US soldiers also seems to leave room for criticism and humanization. Some soldiers recognize that there had to be a change from the approach taken when they first arrived in Afghanistan, as it was inappropriately based on shooting people that did not deserve to be shot. Overall, the image that seems to transcend from the documentary is the sadness and frustration felt by US soldiers; troops that are not able to help their Afghan collaborators, to whom they show partnership and appreciation. The documentary ends with the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, forcing Major General Sadat, a general directing the Afghan government’s troops from Lashkar Gar, to leave his country and seek asylum in the UK.

After having briefly considered the main events portrayed in *Retrograde*, this part of the analysis will interpret the apparent absence of US exceptionalism in the portrayal of the troops from a more technical perspective focused, once again, on sound and film narrator. When US troops are presented training Afghan soldiers, sound is made of two non-diegetic sources: music and a voice-over voice. In documentary films, music could be said to play a fundamental role (Ruoff, 32). This is also the case in *Retrograde*, where music seems to highlight the tension of the times both US and Afghan soldiers are going through. In this case, it is accompanied by the voice-over sound of what seems to be a TV anchor referring to the length of the war and the difficulties faced by President Biden in

the withdrawal. Therefore, sound seems to be focused on portraying the tension of the moment and the historical importance of such events; an effect that could already point to a change: sound does no longer work to emphasise an apparent heroism or the soldiers' exceptionalism.

Sound is also worth analysing when the US troops bid farewell to the Afghan troops they had been training. Shots from the soldiers are accompanied by saddening and slow-paced music, a non-diegetic sound that may evidence the feeling of sadness and defeat felt by US soldiers. Moreover, music works to accompany the words of the US soldiers as they leave their fellow Afghan military. In this sense, *Retrograde* does seem to rely on some of the conventions of the war film, as a partnership among the soldiers is portrayed. However, this partnership is not presented in a context of ferocious fighting or heroism, but in one of withdrawal, of defeat.

Focusing on the film narrator there seem to be noticeable differences as well. The scene following the abovementioned is marked by the same melancholic music, and in this case, one of the US soldiers becomes a voice-over narrator. In his role as narrator, the soldier questions why the US first invaded Afghanistan, and he analyses the tremendous costs this war had for US lives and economy, similar to the discourse defended by President Biden at the time. This growing criticism could be considered contrary to the ideas behind US exceptionalism, especially if one considers the centrality of "the benevolent nature of hegemony" (Mehmood et al., 2). Besides, the tone of the soldier seems to point to melancholia rather than euphoria. Thus, instead of finding a narrator that praises the exceptionalism of US troops and the importance of keep fighting, one gets a critical voice towards the US role in Afghanistan, a more pessimist and defeatist approach to interpret the end of the country's presence in the region. And an approach

that, as stated by Mehmood et al. (493), could be associated with the sense of failure in the discourse that was first promoted after 9/11 to reach strategic and political objectives.

Narration is also worth mentioning in other scenes of the film. In the last part, a written narration informs the audience about the fall of Afghanistan, a narration that is accompanied by saddened non-diegetic music that leads little room for heroism or hope. At the very end of the film, written film narration can also be found, serving to inform about the terrorist attacks, the number of US soldiers and Civilians that had died during the Afghan war, and General Sadat's intention to begin an armed resistance to attempt to liberate Afghanistan. Ending the film with a written narration could be said to be quite similar to the pattern found in the films analysed in the previous section. These narrations are placed at the end, expanding on the context, or the lives of the soldiers presented. Nevertheless, in this case, the focus is not on the heroism and exceptionalism of the fallen soldiers. Representation is not triumphalist, and it does not seem to emphasise the superiority US soldiers were thought to embody. A feeling that is also highlighted by the same melancholic music present in previous scenes. In *Retrograde*, narration does not seem to be focused on portraying exceptional soldiers, but on the fall of Afghanistan in general terms.

Thus, the representation of US troops in *Retrograde* seems to be different from the previous examples analysed. These troops, whenever present, seem to be marked by a feeling of melancholy and surrender that coincides, to some extent, with the portrayal that was promoted in this context by the presidential power. In this case, US exceptionalism seems to be missing, and instead, a more complex and in some cases critical depiction of the role of US soldiers arises. Furthermore, if one is to think about the conventions of the war genre, although some characteristics such as the partnership between soldiers are present, heroism, which is connected to the idea of US

exceptionalism in *American Sniper* and *Lone Survivor*, seems to be missing in *Retrograde*. Whether this more critical representation of US soldiers apparently distanced from exceptionalism will set an example to future films dealing with the period, it may be too early to say. Especially if one considers the tendency of war films towards heroism and the fact that watching the world from the eyes of US exceptionalism is a long-rooted tradition in US society.

5. CONCLUSION

The context marking the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks was characterised by an enormous impact on the US population. The approach of the Bush and the Obama administrations seems to be based on the embracing of the myth of US exceptionalism as an ideological framework to understand and portray the wars taking place in Afghanistan and Iraq. This reliance on US exceptionalism seems to be present as well in the representation of US soldiers in some Hollywood productions such as *American Sniper* and *Lone Survivor*; a depiction that could be said to be dangerous and superficial due to its focus on portraying an image of US military superiority, exceptional commitment and duty that may impede a deeper analysis of the role of US interventionism in these regions.

On the other hand, the withdrawal from Afghanistan is marked by a quite different socio-historical moment, with a certain temporal distance and increasing numbers of US citizens supporting the withdrawal. The very years preceding the withdrawal were marked by a noticeable change in rhetoric by President Trump. His discourse put emphasis on the economic dimension of the war and the costs in American lives; an approach that was also followed by the Biden administration and that seems to be less dependent on US exceptionalism if the portrayal of the country's role in Afghanistan is to be considered. When it comes to film representation of US troops, the analysis of *Retrograde* has allowed

to reach the conclusion that in this documentary film, US soldiers seem to be no longer represented according to the ideas underlying US exceptionalism. Instead, *Retrograde* appears to allow for a more critical and complex perception not based on enhancing the heroism and superiority of US soldiers.

Therefore, there seems to be a change in rhetoric and in representation if the two periods and tendencies are compared. However, considering how recent the withdrawal was, it may be too soon to confirm that this change is generalized or widespread. Especially if one considers the tendencies of Hollywood and war films, and the omnipresence of the myth of US exceptionalism in many periods of US history. Moreover, this essay has examined how American exceptionalism seems to be absent in the specific context *Retrograde* was released in, and as such, it could be said that the perception of the withdrawal being the disastrous end of an era could have been one of the reasons for leaving little room for this exceptionalism. But considering once again how this myth dates back centuries and how established it seems to be in US society, it may be difficult to think that this particular change can be extrapolated to other contexts or representations of US soldiers.

Nevertheless, analysing the consequences of these wars and how damaging it could be to portray military interventionism from the eyes of a self-assigned exceptionalism, further revision of the role and representation of US troops seems to be needed. As Walt (75) stated, “few Americans have questioned the need for a vigorous response or called for a more far-reaching reassessment of the U.S. role in the world”; a deeper scrutiny that could begin with a more exhaustive analysis of the legacy of these soldiers in the region. Providing a more realistic approach that may set the basis for a healthier self-perception and representation that departs from this detrimental myth of superiority.

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