

LETTERS FROM IWO JIMA

Directed by Clint Eastwood
Produced by Clint Eastwood, Steven Spielberg and Robert Lorenz
Distributed by Paramount Pictures
Released in 2006

Is it possible to make a WWII movie glorifying the Japanese without insulting Americans? Clint Eastwood attempts, with *Letters from Iwo Jima*, to produce a film that would have been unthinkable in a time when Hollywood power brokers still trusted in America, a time before everything became relative, gray, and suspect. For the Hollywood elitists, every American triumph is an invitation for shame.

The film is presented as a detached look at the Battle of Iwo Jima in which the Japanese goals are not endorsed but the bravery and humanity of the Japanese is. In the film, both Japanese and American soldiers betray their more noble values, but, overall, we are shown both sides as lost to a struggle beyond themselves. From the limited perspective of the film, war seems futile. But when we take a broader view, in which the Japanese and Americans are now strong allies who have been at peace for decades, we must ask whether this would have been possible were it not for America's overwhelming victory.

Courage and sacrifice are noble traits only if the ends they serve are noble. Otherwise we're just glorifying man's capacity to do good, in his own strength, for his own ends. That's humanism, the most pernicious, bankrupt ideology of all.

And while the film sees America as the aggressor, it cannot be forgotten that Japan had been on the war path since 1931! The Rape of Nanking, Pearl Harbor, and the Bataan Death March had all come before. The Japanese elicit sympathy in this film because many of the characters don't want to fight, while the others are fighting to maintain honor, not to accomplish Japan's strategic goals. So the battle is viewed in a vacuum, with the Japanese defending their homeland against an invader who won't even fight fair.

The film tries to maintain equity by allowing the Japanese soldiers to develop respect for the Americans. For like the Japanese they are brave, dutiful, and far from home. But there is no equity. The Japanese were wrong and America was right. And while it's true that the soldiers on both sides may have just wanted to stay alive and get home, the military leadership of Japan had goals of subjugation while the military leaders of America had goals of liberation.

Movies that question the point of war invariably weaken a nation from accepting the necessity of it when the time comes. Such movies are valuable in demonstrating the stranglehold that sin has on the world, but, ironically, they are of little help for those of us trying to live in peace.