



TEACHING AMERICAN HISTORY

SESSION 2: THE COMING REVOLUTION

Explore the Content: The American Revolution: Readings

Hollywood and the American Revolution

There are certain subjects that rarely succeed at the box office. Until the mid-1970s, and the smashing success of *Rocky*, sports movies almost always flopped with the general public. In recent years, western and swashbuckling adventure films have often been box office duds. But one genre has consistently failed. Hollywood has never made a film about the American Revolution that has lived up to expectations. Curiously, Hollywood has made more successful movies about the French and Indian Wars, including *The Last of the Mohicans*, than it has about the American Revolution.

Altogether, Hollywood has made fewer than a dozen movies that deal more than superficially with the Revolution. These include:

- *1776* (1972), a musical about the nation's declaration of independence from Britain;
- *Drums Along the Mohawk* (1939), which looks at a young couple in upstate New York who face Indian raids instigated by the British.
- *The Howards of Virginia* (1940) the story of a Virginia couple of differing social backgrounds and attitudes toward the Revolution;
- *The Patriot* (2000), which centers on a hero from the French and Indian War who reluctantly becomes involved in the Revolution;
- *Revolution* (1985), the tale of a trapper drafted to fight for the Continental army and a rebellious daughter from a Tory family; and
- *Sweet Liberty* (1969), a comedy about a movie company's attempt to adapt a college professor's historical novel.

The reasons for the failure of Revolutionary war movies seems obvious. Modern-day audiences find it difficult to identify with characters from the 18th century, who wear powdered wigs and knee breeches, use formal speech patterns, and write with quill pens. In addition, we live in a cynical age, and hate being reminded of more noble times. There is a tendency to regard Revolutionary war movies as excessively patriotic and overly romanticized.

The latest Revolutionary war epic, *The Patriot*, starring action hero Mel Gibson, illustrates the difficulties Hollywood faces in bringing the Revolution to life. One challenge Hollywood confronts is finding a story line that will engage a modern audience. The creators of *The Patriot* draw upon a number of Hollywood formulas that some would consider time-tested and others would call hackneyed.

One formula, which might be called "Little House on the Prairie in Flames," depicts a family caught up in wartime upheavals. Drawing on devices that date back to 19th century melodrama, *The Patriot* focuses on the trials and tribulations of a motherless family of seven. The youngest of the family's children, desperate for her father's love and traumatized by her mother's death, is mute for much of the movie. The fiancé of the eldest son is murdered by the villainous British. The love object of the film turns out to be widower's sister-in-law, allowing the family to be reunited in the end.

A second formula, which might be summed up by the phrase “*Braveheart* in a Three-Cornered Hat,” transports an action hero into the Revolutionary era. According to the conventions of the Hollywood action film, the action hero is a reluctant warrior who is eager to avoid involvement in a conflict. Not until he suffers a deep personal loss does he seek revenge. *The Patriot* depicts Benjamin Martin (the character played by Gibson) as a hero of the French and Indian War and a widower who feels profound guilt over the violence he committed in that conflict and devotes himself to raising his children. Only when a Colonel named Tavington kills one of his sons does Martin take up arms against the British. In Hollywood action films, the hero, who is motivated less by principle than by a desire for vengeance, triumphs over incredible odds. *The Patriot*’s plot is built around these clichés.

A third formula grows out of the conventions of the Hollywood war movie. Three wars have profoundly shaped Hollywood’s depiction of warfare. In World War II films, the enemies are portrayed as viciously sadistic brutes, utterly lacking in moral scruples. *The Patriot* nazifies its villains, who are preposterously evil. They burn plantation houses, impress slaves, murder civilians, including children, and burn down a colonial church. Nothing like that last event occurred during the Revolution—though a similar incident occurred during the second world war.

World War II combat films typically took a ragtag assortment of men of diverse ethnic backgrounds who are gradually molded into a dedicated fighting force. Similarly, in *The Patriot*, the Mel Gibson character recruits a ragtag militia including hard-drinking backwoods settlers, artisans, a minister, a French soldier, and even a slave.

The Civil War has also profoundly shaped the way Hollywood treats military conflict. *The Patriot* seeks to suggest that the Revolution was in some sense a war about liberating slaves and even purports to have its hero visit a maroon (fugitive slave) colony. Gibson’s character was modeled in part on Francis “The Swamp Fox” Marion, who was a slaveholder. But the film suggests that this character was antislavery, and that the African Americans who worked on his South Carolina plantation were free laborers. In fact, it was the British who promised slaves their freedom if they joined the Tory side.

A third war that has profoundly shaped Hollywood’s presentation of military conflict is the Vietnam War, and especially the massacre of civilians at My Lai. Recent war films—including *The Patriot*—usually feature a scene involving the indiscriminate killing of civilians.

Yet despite its parade of clichés, *The Patriot* does point to certain often-neglected aspects of the Revolution. It shows that the war was very much a civil war, pitting neighbor against neighbor. It also focuses attention on the war in the southern colonies, where the conflict was most violent. And finally, the film suggests how important guerrilla warfare and foreign assistance were to the American victory.