

THE RAMBO PHENOMENON

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Rambo is a sad phenomenon. Of course it is virulently anti-communist, as is to be expected. But so are the James Bond movies, only they have a certain grace. I remember once I was in Moscow at the end of the 1960s, and the first thing my guide asked me was whether by chance I had brought any James Bond books! He told me that he certainly did not like them for their political content, but they were so interesting, so entertaining, so exciting! James Bond comes out ten feet tall, swishing slalom down the slopes of Zermatt or something similar, making love to three women on the way down, and tops it all with a bottle of champagne and the most exquisite French food. In fact, the Bond books and movies are among the best tourist guides in the world.

As mentioned, there is a certain grace to them although the latter day versions have gone somewhat out of hand. Not so with the Rambo movie, I very much doubt that my guide would ask for that one. No grace, no elegance. They are the kinds of movies that might make one wish that the United States had never been discovered. For what is the content? Instead of portraying the terrible plight of a nation, the Vietnamese, who in the course of one generation have fought four imperialists and invaders, the Japanese, the French, the Americans and the Chinese; instead of focussing on this, reflecting at least in one sentence the horrendous acts of the United States in that war (being directly or indirectly responsible for the killing of somewhere between one and two million people and in addition for the destruction of the natural environment and partly responsible for heavy militarization of the society), the focus is on the United States in Vietnam, on that figure of infinite self-pity, the missing

in action (MIA). The theme is certainly single mindedly pursued by Rambo, there is practically speaking no occasion for love, no occasion for gourmet food because Rambo has an important message.

I think the basic message is this: even a U.S. criminal is above the creeps who are currently running Vietnam, as seen by the U.S. Of course, he is not a real criminal but he is taken out of a prison camp to set things straight, to administer justice, liberate those who deserve to be liberated, punish amply those who deserve to be punished. The Big God, the whole United States military machine had already had their say over a period of ten years from the mid-sixties to the mid-seventies; Rambo is a mini-God in action. Law and order, cops and robbers, the eternal themes in U.S. foreign policy--this time with the robber as a cop.

In his crusade for freedom and American values the American way Rambo presents a rerun of the war, tens years after, the way it should have been. The enemies are no longer Vietnamese people, small peasants, militia, guerrilla but the enemies the United States seems to want to have: brutal, stupid-looking Soviets and some sort of generalized Asian Prussians, curiously enough in what looks suspiciously like Japanese uniforms from the Second World War, and with Japanese rather than Vietnamese faces. A reactivation of the "hate Japan" syndrome, bringing in the war that was won, the good war still seen as unambiguous? In that case Rambo is on safe ground: there are latent anti-Japanese feelings to be counted on, and the U.S. public in general is perhaps not very good at making fine discrimina-

tions among "Asiatics". There is also a deeper similarity that the film makers may not have been aware of: one of the most popular books after the war in Japan was The Harp of Burma, dealing with a very similar theme: to locate and assemble bones of killed Japanese soldiers to see to it that they get an adequate burial; no words wasted on those killed by the same Japanese soldiers. The only thing missing in this movie would be some German Nazis. But then, maybe it is not so obvious on what side they are any longer, particularly after the Reagan speech in Bitburg, Federal Republic of Germany, with even the SS-soldiers very conspicuously buried at that beautiful place, remembered as people who fought for what they believed in. Since they believed in just about the same as President Reagan believes in, fanatic anti-communism, right wing extremism, it might not have been so difficult to pronounce those words, but very difficult to see German Nazis as unambiguous enemies.

However, there are two movies in one for those who can suffer this propaganda rubbish of a movie to the very end. There is one movie against Vietnam, and another movie against, essentially, the U.S. government. The theme of the second movie is that the U.S. government is what messes it all up, the effort to liberate those missing in action in particular, and by implication the whole Vietnam War in general--the war that in other parts of the world is usually known as the Second Indo-China war, a follow-up on the French war, and comprising much more than Vietnam only, proliferating into all of former French Indo-China. Rambo is against any "bureaucrat covering his ass", he is fighting for the badly treated veterans

in a war like any other war. He ends with the pathetic proclamation, this man of action rather than words: "why can't they love us, like we love it". Love unreciprocated is what the veterans have been given, according to the Rambo movie.

I have no difficulty sharing the Rambo concern and critique of the U.S. government, but perhaps in a different perspective. I shall never forget my brief visit to Saigon January 1968, in an effort to understand better what was going on in that war. Somehow I came across a press conference given by the Deputy U.S. Ambassador at the time, Robert Komer. He was showing all those charts we remember so well with three curves on them: one curve rising for "pacified villages", a second curve falling down, even quickly, for Vietcong villages and then a third curve in-between, relatively stable. The message given was very simple: Vietnam is turning "our way". And this was made even more clear when Robert Komer after having shown these charts explained at the end: "in short, I do not see any unfavorable sign!"

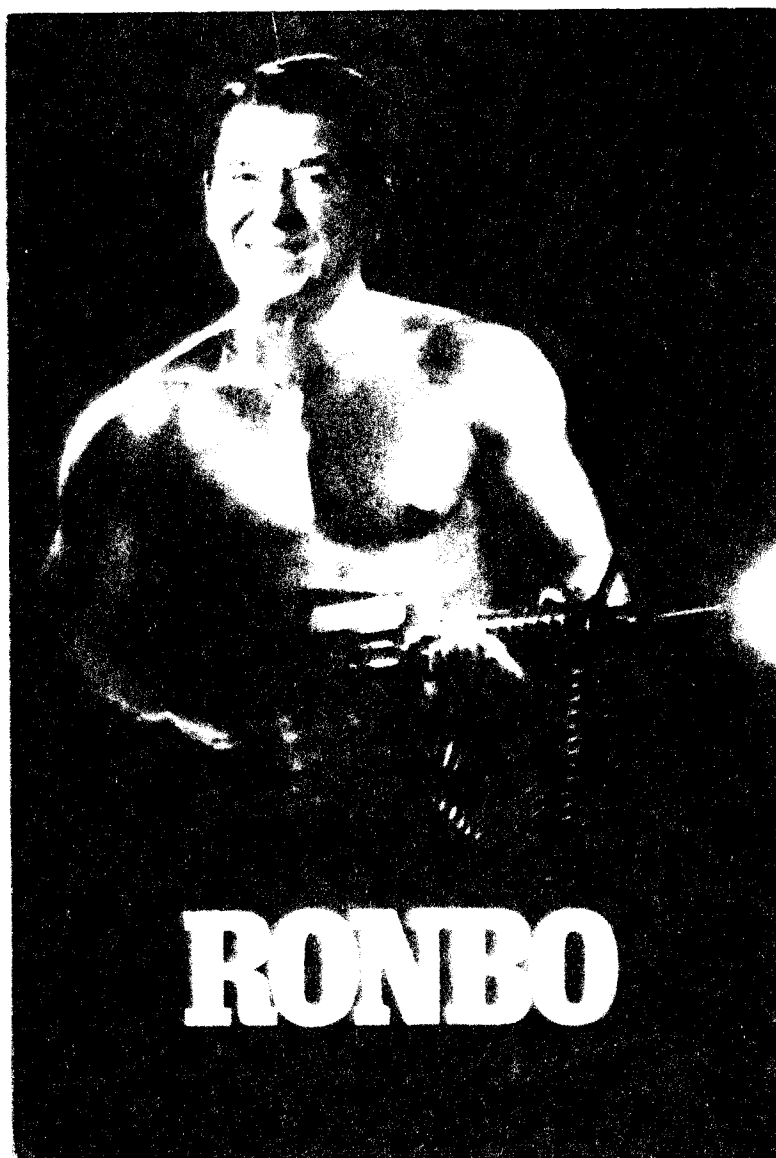
"Not one Bob?" a young CBS journalist in the audience inquired. "Not one", came the answer.

But Rambo is not directed against this type of stupidity, a rather general U.S. inability to understand what is happening in the world, not for lack of hard study and intensive effort, but because of wrong and narrow visions. Rambo's idea is that government bureaucrats

are not only stupid and half-hearted, they also actively sabotage those who could set matters straight if given the chance. And they are the U.S. people in general and the U.S. veterans in particular, meaning that the movie ends up with the archetypical conservative message of the double enemy, leftist radicals and the government (and maybe a third enemy, non-whites: the movie has clearly racist overtones). No wonder the movie is so popular in the current political atmosphere in the country.

The movie invites a reflection on the use of freedom of expression. Of course the movie should not be censored, it should only be regretted. But what is even more regrettable is that no adequate truthful movie has come out of that agonizing, horrendous experience. Where is the movie portraying what was done to the other side, to the Vietnamese with their almost endless suffering? If it is impossible today to make such a movie in the "Free World", how free then is that world?

MAKE MY DAY!



President Reagan as Rambo is here seen shooting to his left, where the enemy is, while looking at the audience/TV cameras.