

“Red Storm Rising”: Tom Clancy Novels and the Cult of National Security

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They're not just novels. They're read as the real thing.
—Former Vice President Dan Quayle on Tom Clancy's novels

Prominent midcentury American social critics Dwight MacDonald and Clement Greenberg, inspired in part by Frankfurt school intellectuals, decried the growing influence of the mass media and popular culture on postindustrial society. They asserted that *kitsch*, ersatz culture for the masses, as represented in radio, television, popular music, cartoons, advertising, paperback novels, and the movies, would overwhelm the avant-garde and undermine elite, or high, culture.¹ For many years, historians, who were among the last social scientists to take popular culture seriously, followed the lead of these intellectual critics in their disdain for the tastes of the masses. With the advent of the new social history, which focused on nonelites, and the recognition of the significance of the expansion of leisure time in postindustrial society, however, studies of popular culture have gained legitimacy. In recent years, for example, analyses of the popular culture of the Cold War have made significant contributions to our understanding of how Americans coped with atomic age anxieties and how they internalized the anti-Communist consensus.²

Serious analysis of popular culture may be particularly relevant to understanding the 1980s, an era in which a Hollywood actor became one of the most popular chief executives in the nation's history, partly on the basis of his skill at invoking themes drawn directly from popular culture. To cite a few examples, Ronald Reagan once threatened a veto by assuming the role of Clint

¹Richard Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s* (New York, 1985), 216–31.

²For an overview see Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore, 1991). Other prominent works include Paul S. Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (New York, 1985); Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York, 1988); and Lary May, ed., *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War* (Chicago, 1989).

Eastwood's Dirty Harry ("go ahead, make my day"). On another occasion he promised to take the country "back to the future" and, recalling his own most famous role as the dying Notre Dame football player, he urged George Bush to "win one for the Gipper" in the 1988 presidential campaign.³

Reagan's allusions to well-known movies suggest the extent to which popular culture leaves an imprint on mass consciousness. Because popular culture often conveys symbols and ideas that are familiar rather than original and is usually less developed aesthetically than elite representations, it has traditionally been condemned by intellectuals. But, as the "great communicator" himself clearly understood, lack of artistic merit does not render a book or film irrelevant to the public consciousness. Quite the contrary, as the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre once lamented with respect to literature, there are two kinds of books in the modern world: those that are unreadable, but are actually read by a great many people, and truly accomplished works, which are read by relatively few.⁴

Students of popular culture have noted that its most successful practitioners are those who express what the audience yearns to hear and see.⁵ The "traditional function of popular culture," they argue, is to "articulate an existing idea, attitude or concern and, in the process, to reinforce people's convictions." Or, put another way, "The most important single function of popular culture [is] the dissemination of common values, symbols and attitudes in such a manner as to create sociocultural consensus."⁶

Accordingly, research in mass culture should be useful to diplomatic historians, whose proper purview includes analysis of consensus making in foreign policy, especially in a democratic society. By exploring the relationship between popular culture and actual national security policy, foreign relations historians can better analyze the process through which society absorbs and perpetuates predominant themes of national security discourse. Use of popular culture allows the diplomatic historian to exploit a wider range of sources and include in the analysis the "bottom up" masses, whose exclusion has been the source of no little debate.⁷ Finally, such research lends itself to modernist methodologies, such as the "new cultural

³Most chroniclers of the Reagan years have made some effort to locate the president in the context of his Hollywood past. Some of the best efforts are Lou Cannon, *Reagan* (New York, 1982); Robert Dallek, *Ronald Reagan: The Politics of Symbolism* (Cambridge, MA, 1984); Garry Wills, *Reagan's America: Innocents at Home* (New York, 1987); Sidney Blumenthal, "Reaganism and the Neokitsch Aesthetic," in *The Reagan Legacy*, ed. Blumenthal and Thomas B. Edsall (New York, 1988), 251-94; and Bob Schieffer and Gary Paul Gates, *The Acting President* (New York, 1989).

⁴Sartre, quoted in Arnold Hauser, *The Sociology of Art* (Chicago, 1982), 618.

⁵Russell Nye, "The Popular Arts and the Popular Audience," in *Popular Culture: Mirror of American Life*, ed. David M. White and John Pendleton (Berkeley, 1977), 26.

⁶Garth S. Jowett, quoted in David Culbert, *News for Everyman: News and Foreign Affairs in Thirties America* (Westport, 1976), 10-11.

⁷Critics have charged diplomatic historians with failing to incorporate new methodologies and analytical frameworks derived from social history. See the discussion in Charles S. Maier, "Marking Time: The Historiography of International Relations," in *The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States*, ed. Michael Kammen (Ithaca, 1980), 355-87; and Charles R. Lilley and Michael Hunt, "On Social History, the State, and Foreign Relations," *Diplomatic History* 9 (Spring 1985): 101-13.

history,” further enhancing the ability of diplomatic historians to interface with their colleagues in other fields.⁸

In recent years, revealing studies have appeared on the popular culture of the Cold War, although most have focused on Hollywood representations.⁹ Relatively less attention has been paid to popular fiction. Studiously ignored by diplomatic historians has been the paperback spy thriller, even though it has been a highly popular genre and one with obvious Cold War resonances. Further research in this area might well illuminate popular perceptions of American foreign policy at a given point in time and might even represent the past more fully than traditional studies based solely on presidential decrees, State Department documents, and other official records.

The best-selling novels of Tom Clancy, the most popular writer of *any* type of fiction in the 1980s, with sales of more than thirty million books in the United States alone, show how fruitful research into this genre can be. Three of Clancy’s novels—*The Hunt for Red October*, *Red Storm Rising*, and *The Cardinal of the Kremlin*—can be interpreted as popular representations of Reagan-era Cold War values. They reflect both popular perceptions of Soviet behavior and the predominant national security values of the Reagan era. They also perpetuate myths about the American past and reinforce the symbols, images, and historical lessons that have dominated Cold War discourse.

Clancy’s novels are best understood in the context of the evolution of the thriller genre and the Cold War itself. Although espionage is sometimes described as the world’s second oldest profession, it was not until the twentieth century that the spy thriller emerged as a distinct genre. The celebrated Dreyfus case in *fin de siècle* France and the bitter international rivalries that characterized the twentieth century created the conditions in which the new genre flourished. As one scholar has observed, “Thriller literature is crisis literature and has arisen in the same century as crisis theology and an existential philosophy, as a response to the crisis of our civilization.”¹⁰

Erskine Childers’s *The Riddle of the Sands* (1903), Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* (1907), and, most outstandingly, John Buchan’s *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915) laid the foundation for the modern thriller.¹¹ Buchan pioneered the formula of the heroic epic in which the gentleman amateur (Sir Richard Hannay in the Buchan novels) survives harrowing chases and direct

⁸Lynn Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley, 1989); John E. Toews, “Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience,” *American Historical Review* 92 (October 1987): 879–907; Dominick LaCapra, *History and Criticism* (Ithaca, 1985); Frank Ninkovich, “Interests and Discourse in Diplomatic History,” *Diplomatic History* 13 (Spring 1989): 135–61.

⁹In addition to the works cited above see Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits, and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* (New York, 1987); Nora Sayre, *Running Time: Films of the Cold War* (New York, 1978); Peter Biskind, *Seeing Is Believing: How Hollywood Taught Us to Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties* (New York, 1983); John Hellmann, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York, 1986); Linda Dittmer and Gene Michaud, eds., *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film* (New Brunswick, 1990); and Michael Paul Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, the Movie and other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley, 1987).

¹⁰Ralph Harper, *The World of the Thriller* (Cleveland, 1969), 46.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 3–4; John G. Cawelti and Bruce A. Rosenberg, *The Spy Story* (Chicago, 1987), 3, 34–54. See also Clive Bloom, ed., *Spy Thrillers: From Buchan to le Carré* (New York, 1990).

encounters with evil and exotic villains in order to save Great Britain from intricate plots formulated by (usually German) spies. The highly moralistic heroic spy story formula dominated the genre until the 1950s, when the public, "tired of a devastating war and fearful of a nuclear future, clearly wanted escape, adventure, heroism, and romance, but remained suspicious of the pieties, the ascetic moralism, and the high-toned patriotism of the Buchan tradition."¹²

It was in this climate that the morally ambiguous novels of Eric Ambler, Graham Greene, and John le Carré emerged. These authors wrote not merely spy tales but literature, and, in marked contrast to Buchan's heroic epics, their stories explored the excesses of superpatriotism, conflicting loyalties, and the complexities of the "the human factor," as Greene entitled one of his novels. There was little trace of the moral certainty characteristic of the heroic epic formula in Greene's *Quiet American*, in which CIA agent Alden Pyle kills innocent civilians in a reckless attempt to spread American values in Vietnam. Even more unsettling was le Carré's *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*, published in 1962 and still considered the masterwork of spy fiction. In that novel Alec Leamas, the protagonist, finds himself trapped between the two in some respects indistinguishable Cold War antagonists. Betrayed by his own side and left alone out "in the cold," Leamas and his lover can only "come in" through their deaths at the Berlin Wall in the book's climactic scene. Le Carré's fiction reflected the daily uncertainties of real life spying, which the CIA's legendary counterintelligence specialist James Angleton, himself once accused of being a "mole" for the KGB, lamented had become a complex "wilderness of mirrors" in which it was difficult to separate the patriots from the traitors, good from evil.¹³

While the fiction of Ambler, Greene, and le Carré took the Cold War and its moral ambiguities seriously, Ian Fleming's James Bond could not resist the temptation of parody. Agent 007—the special designation gave him "a license to kill"—inhabited a world that shared characteristics with both Buchan's and le Carré's formulas. Like Buchan's Hannay, Bond lived in a manichean and melodramatic world in which the forces of evil—usually in the form of racially indeterminate characters such as Goldfinger and Dr. No—ultimately failed in their attempts to subvert world order. Unlike Hannay, but like the characters of Ambler, Greene, and le Carré, Bond operated in the context of a national security organization, which by this time had become a permanent fixture of Cold War fiction. After all, not even 007 could have been expected to tackle such postwar leviathans as SMERSH or SPECTRE without benefit of institutional support.¹⁴

Although he stopped well short of outright satire, Fleming did not ask the readers of his fourteen Bond novels to take them too seriously. In any case, readers (including John F. Kennedy) were more entranced by the exotic locations, fast cars, casino gambling, and furious sexual liaisons with the likes

¹²Cawelti and Rosenberg, *Spy Story*, 126.

¹³On Angleton see Tom Mangold, *Cold Warrior: James Jesus Angleton: The CIA's Master Spy Hunter* (New York, 1991).

¹⁴See Cawelti's brilliant analysis, "Bonded Excitement: Ian Fleming," in Cawelti and Rosenberg, *Spy Story*, 125–55.

of Honeychile Rider and Pussy Galore than in any serious reflections on the complexities of the Cold War. As John Cawelti has noted, “Fleming changed the spy story from a set of images heavily loaded with moral content into stories suffused with an amoral hedonism.”¹⁵ By the time Albert R. Broccoli began to produce the Bond films, especially those starring Roger Moore, the parody that had lain just beneath the surface of the Fleming novels had become the centerpiece of films that attracted a cult following. Fleming’s Bond was the most popular suspense hero since Sherlock Holmes and may yet enjoy an equally long literary and celluloid life.

Americans were heavy consumers of such spy stories, all of which were crafted by British authors, but the novels of Mickey Spillane were the first authentically American bestsellers to incorporate Cold War themes. While Spillane’s Mike Hammer properly belongs to the genre of the hard-boiled detective, he could hardly avoid contact with domestic Communists, the “reds” who had infiltrated America’s homes, schools, churches, cinemas, and, of course, the State Department in the early postwar years. From 1947 to 1952, Spillane’s novels sold millions of copies even as the United States committed itself to global containment and the extirpation of domestic communism. Spillane’s popular fiction reinforced the predominant national security values of the early Cold War much as Clancy’s would do in the renascent Cold War of the Reagan years.

There was nothing subtle or morally ambiguous about Mike Hammer or Tiger Mann, an espionage agent who appeared in some of Spillane’s later novels. They confronted evil villains, often either Communists, women, or both—and killed them. In Spillane’s first novel, *I, the Jury* (1947), Hammer names himself judge, jury, and executioner of the woman who had been his lover but also, he discovered, had killed his partner. The book, which sold over eight million copies, was followed by equally lurid and misogynist releases such as *Vengeance Is Mine!* (1950), *My Gun Is Quick* (1950), *The Big Kill* (1951), and *Kiss Me, Deadly* (1952). While real American soldiers were fighting communism in Korea, Spillane published *One Lonely Night* (1951), in which Hammer exalted in killing more people in one night “than I have fingers on my hands. I shot them in cold blood and enjoyed every minute of it. . . . They were Commies . . . red sons of bitches who should have died long ago.”¹⁶

The series of rapid fire confrontations with evil seems to have exhausted even Spillane, who became a Jehovah’s Witness and retired in 1952, only to reemerge in 1961, in the midst of the Kennedy Cold War crises, with a popular new series of novels. In *Bloody Sunrise* (1965), Tiger Mann, formerly of the wartime Office of Strategic Services but now an operative in a civilian anti-Communist agency, expresses the frustrations of unrepentant Cold Warriors embittered over the failure to defeat communism, even in “our own backyard.” “This country wasn’t founded on a goddam octopus government that lets mice like Castro and Kremlin bums pick us apart,” Tiger Mann declares. “When something gets screwed up and the striped-pants boys can’t

¹⁵Ibid., 127.

¹⁶Mickey Spillane, *One Lonely Night* (New York, 1951), 170–71.

handle it and the politicians are scared to death to touch it for fear of stepping on somebody's toes and maybe not getting reelected, then we do something about it."¹⁷

From the mid-sixties to the late seventies, with the morally ambiguous spy formula pioneered by Ambler, Greene and le Carré dominating the genre, it was evident that Spillane's manichean imagery had been displaced. The Vietnam War, Watergate, revelations of CIA misconduct, détente, and the arms race all served to reinforce the ambiguities of espionage and international relations. It had never been more difficult to discern the good guys from the bad. Some of the most successful thrillers of this period led the reader to identify with evil doers. In Frederick Forsyth's *The Day of the Jackal* (1971), readers find themselves admiring the professionalism of the assassin whose mission is the elimination of Charles de Gaulle. In Jack Higgins's *The Eagle Has Landed* (1976), the reader is drawn to the actions of Nazi airborne commandos who aim to kill Winston Churchill, rather than to a heroic protagonist on the "right" side in World War II. In Len Deighton's *Spy Story* (1975), the evil doers are prominent Englishmen. Thomas Grady's *Six Days of the Condor* (1974), later made into a popular movie starring Robert Redford, had the CIA cynically liquidating its own people because they had learned too much. The popular novels by Robert Ludlum did feature a traditional hero overcoming long odds in high-stakes confrontations with evil, but Ludlum employed a variety of villains, including even the FBI, and thus did little to eliminate moral ambiguity.¹⁸

By the late 1970s, however, the malaise of the Carter years and frustration over the sense of impotence fostered by the "Vietnam syndrome" created conditions conducive to both the revitalization of the Cold War and the reemergence of the heroic epic formula with Tom Clancy as its champion. Jimmy Carter had begun his presidency by calling on the country to rise above its "inordinate fear of communism," but by the end of his term he had lost public support for his handling of foreign affairs. The Iran hostage crisis, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the rejection of the SALT II treaty, and fears of Communist advances from Central America to the horn of Africa all combined to create a sense of crisis that Reagan exploited in his 1980 landslide election victory.¹⁹ The new president, drawing on the same Hollywood images of the cowboy that he had once romanticized on the "General Electric Theater" and "Death Valley Days," pledged that the nation would once again "stand tall" in world affairs. Vowing to contain communism across the globe, Reagan ordered a massive strategic buildup and employed military power in Lebanon, Grenada, and Libya. When the USSR shot down a South Korean civilian airliner (Flight 007, no less) that had penetrated deep into Soviet airspace on 1 September 1983, Reagan promptly declared, without evidence, that the Kremlin knew it was a commercial airliner but committed

¹⁷Mickey Spillane, *Bloody Sunrise* (New York, 1965), 42.

¹⁸Cawelti and Rosenberg, *Spy Story*, 187–217.

¹⁹Gaddis Smith, *Morality, Reason, and Power: American Diplomacy in the Carter Years* (New York, 1986).

the “crime against humanity” all the same.²⁰ Reagan responded to an outpouring of concern over the threat of nuclear war by abandoning a ten-year-old moratorium on defensive systems in order to promote the space-based Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), which he asserted would one day render nuclear weapons “impotent and obsolete.”²¹

Just as Mickey Spillane reinforced the Truman administration’s national security values, which found expression in NATO, Korea, and the global confrontation with communism propounded in NSC-68, Tom Clancy’s work was the fictional incarnation of the Reagan administration’s Cold War policy. Clancy’s novels challenged the morally ambiguous Ambler-Greene-le Carré paradigm by reviving the heroic epic formula first popularized by John Buchan. Clancy’s plots hinged on manichean struggles that invariably climaxed in the unambiguous triumph of good over evil. His protagonist, Jack Ryan, was in many respects a modern Sir Richard Hannay: clean-cut, patriotic, ingenious, and triumphant. Unlike Hannay, who was a product of pre-World War I innocence, however, Jack Ryan could not hope to win the epic struggles of the late twentieth century without the backing of a dedicated national security establishment and the ready availability of the most sophisticated military technology. And unlike James Bond, Ryan would never gamble and had little time for anything more than perfunctory sex, sometimes explicitly for procreation, and only with his wife. By “just saying ‘no’ ” to vice, Ryan embodied the Reagan administration’s “family values” as well as its national security policy.

Clancy’s novels hinge on what might be called the cult of national security, a set of assumptions and policy formulations to which the Reagan administration adhered. Reviving orthodox perceptions of the early Cold War, Reagan administration national security planners embraced worst-case scenarios of Soviet behavior based on the assumption of the existence of a totalitarian regime bent on global expansion and, ultimately, “world domination.” They perceived the USSR as beyond reform and utterly cynical with respect to the means it might employ to achieve its aggressive design. The cult of national security arrogated to Washington the primary responsibility to contain and deter the Soviet Union, thus invoking a language that reinforced the Cold War preoccupation with the adversary’s capabilities rather than its intentions. National security policy also sanctioned intervention on behalf of authoritarian regimes, using, once again, the words containment and deterrence—defensive terms that implied that Washington actually sought to promote self-determination. The cult of national security mandated strict control over foreign policy by the executive branch of government and sought

²⁰Ronald Reagan, “Korean Airline Massacre,” 5 September 1983, Department of State Current Policy No. 507. See also Alexander Dallin, *Black Box: KAL 007 and the Superpowers* (Berkeley, 1985); Seymour M. Hersh, *The Target Is Destroyed: What Really Happened to Flight 007 and What America Knew About It* (New York, 1986); and Marilyn Young and Michael K. Launer, *Flights of Fancy, Flights of Doom: KAL 007 and Soviet-American Rhetoric* (Lanham, MD, 1988).

²¹Raymond L. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (Washington, 1985), 1009–67. Arms race anxieties were reflected in the growing nuclear freeze movement and the popular response to both Jonathan Schell’s *The Fate of the Earth* (New York, 1982), and the ABC television movie “The Day After,” which depicted the impact of nuclear war on an American community.

to manage or subvert, sometimes through covert, illegal, or constitutionally questionable means, congressional and public opposition. Adherents of the cult of national security equated negotiation with Communist adversaries with Munich-style appeasement and sought to discredit domestic proponents of détente.

Clancy's texts, like the Reagan administration itself, not only reflected the cult of national security but apotheosized the American dream as well. Indeed, Clancy's own rise from Maryland insurance salesman to best-selling author and newsweekly cover star rivals any Horatio Alger tale. His six (through 1992) espionage and national security novels all topped the best-seller list for months and were translated into several languages, making him arguably the most widely read author in the Western world. Hollywood converted both *The Hunt for Red October* and *Patriot Games* into commercially successful films.

What accounts for the mass appeal of Clancy's novels? Even some of his most avid readers admit that the books do not thrive on literary merit. Clancy may be a more accomplished stylist than Spillane, but just barely. Critics have called attention to his "undistinguished prose"; "wooden dialogue"; "plastic characters . . . on a Victorian boy's book level"; and "rubber-band plot[s] that stretch credibility to the breaking point."²² Although Clancy sometimes succeeds in building suspense toward a page-turning climax—the elementary requirement of the genre—even in this respect he is no Frederick Forsyth. "If you don't share Clancy's reverence for the spectacle of a gigantic national-security apparatus mobilizing to repel foreign evildoers," noted critic Terrence Rafferty, "[Clancy's] stories are just a bore—you settle back in the bulletproof limo, close your eyes, and try to shut out the driver's jabbering."²³

Rather than thriving on their literary merit, it seems likely that Clancy's novels sell at least in part for the same reasons that Ronald Reagan was an immensely popular president. Much as Reagan did, Clancy rewards the public by invoking powerful themes that are embedded in the American cultural tradition. Perhaps the most potent theme invoked by both Reagan and Clancy is the enduring mythology of American exceptionalism—moral, political, and technological. In all three novels analyzed below, the American heroes— invariably patriotic white males employed by the nation's military or intelligence services—are virtuous products of a materially successful pluralist democracy. As yet another critic has noted, "What Clancy has to offer—and it makes his books emblematic of the Reagan administration's self-image—is an old-fashioned sense of certitude, righteousness and derring-do."²⁴ Clancy's patriotic heroes are highly skilled, disciplined, honest, thoroughly professional, and only lose their cool when incompetent politicians or bureaucrats get in their way. Their unambiguous triumphs over evil provide symbolic relief from the legacy of the Vietnam War, the country's most recent actual conflict, in which military victory proved illusive and distinctions

²²Robert Lekachman's review of *Red Storm Rising* in the *New York Times Book Review*, 27 July 1986, 7; David Lehman's review of *Patriot Games* in *Newsweek*, 17 August 1987, 68.

²³Terrence Rafferty, "To the Rescue," *New Yorker*, 15 June 1992, 86.

²⁴*Newsweek*, 17 August 1987, 110.

between good and evil proved illusory.²⁵ There are numerous parallels between Reagan and Clancy. Clancy buries the legacy of Vietnam, just as Reagan attempted to do. Like Reagan, Clancy evokes nostalgic memories of American innocence and military victory in World War II, the “good war” in which the United States (the critical role played by its allies, especially the Soviet Union, having been minimized in U.S. cultural discourse) defeated Hitler as well as the “Japs” and enjoyed unparalleled security through its monopoly on atomic weapons.²⁶ Clancy’s texts thus complement the “Dr. Feel-good” Reagan era in that they succeed in reinvesting American culture with nostalgic images of military victory over external demons, and they resist accommodation to a new status of “relative decline” in world affairs.²⁷

Clancy’s novels reinforce American exceptionalism by demonizing both foreign enemies and domestic political foes, much as the Reagan administration did also. As political scientist Michael Paul Rogin has argued, “political demonology” has been “a continuing feature of American politics.” “The inflation, stigmatization, and dehumanization of political foes” reflect “a countersubversive tradition that exists at the core of American politics, not at its periphery.” The monsters that have stalked American cultural history include “the Indian cannibal, the black rapist, the papal whore of Babylon, the monster-hydra United States Bank, the demon rum, the bomb-throwing anarchist, the many tentacled Communist conspiracy, [and] the agents of international terrorism.”²⁸ The Clancy novels employ Stalinist imagery, for the same reason Reagan did, to demonize the Soviet “evil empire” while promoting the mythology of American exceptionalism and the cult of national security. Clancy’s demonization of the USSR and manichean imagery reflect a pattern of countersubversive behavior that has been embedded in American culture since colonial literature reduced the frontier to a struggle between the Indian savage and the hunter hero.²⁹

The Clancy novels demonize not only the external enemy but the internal one as well. Because the stories reflect and promote one conception of national security, they vilify American liberals, academics, homosexuals, the news media, and other putative challengers of the Cold War ethos. Like past proponents of red scare hysteria over internal security, Clancy’s novels suggest that the United States could be undermined from within by spies and dupes of the international Communist conspiracy.

The triumph of American virtue only partially accounts for the appeal of Clancy’s novels; equally important is *how* the heroes of his fiction triumph. Clancy’s novels attach great importance to salvation through technology. Buchan’s hero used only his own ingenuity to overcome evil doers. Although

²⁵George C. Herring, “The ‘Vietnam Syndrome’ and American Foreign Policy,” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 57 (Autumn 1981): 595. See also Thomas G. Paterson, “Historical Memory and Illusive Victories: Vietnam and Central America,” *Diplomatic History* 12 (Winter 1988): 1–18.

²⁶Studs Terkel, *The Good War: An Oral History of World War II* (New York, 1989).

²⁷Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500–2000* (New York, 1988), 515–35.

²⁸Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, the Movie*, quotations on 274, xiii.

²⁹Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890* (New York, 1985), 81–106; Hellmann, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York, 1986), passim.

James Bond did employ deadly gadgets to get himself out of tight spots, he disdained being briefed about them (“*Try to pay attention, 007!*”) and never used them to achieve the ultimate conquest of his adversary.³⁰ Clancy, on the other hand, a self-confessed “technology freak” with a sure grasp of military hardware, has made his mark as “king of the technothriller.”³¹ Virtually without exception American weapons—from nuclear submarines to the Stealth fighter to SDI—work unerringly and are decisive in the final resolution of his plots. Consistent with Reagan’s promotion of such programs as the MX “Peacekeeper” missile and SDI, Clancy’s texts encourage the view that bolstering strategic arsenals, far from posing a threat to human existence, will enable the nation to deter and if necessary defeat aggressors as it fulfills its role as the exceptional guarantor of world order.

Clancy’s first and perhaps best-crafted novel, *The Hunt for Red October* (1984) contains all these elements—an emphasis on American exceptionalism, demonized enemies, and an array of high-tech weaponry. The enduring appeal of the book stems in part from its success as a classic thriller. It is, one reviewer noted, “the most satisfactory novel of a sea chase since C. S. Forester perfected the form.”³² The plot centers on the defection of a Soviet captain (Marko Ramius) to the United States in his nation’s most advanced nuclear submarine while the Soviet navy gives chase and American officials try to clear his path. Despite the privileges that accrue to the Soviet navy’s top submarine pilot, Ramius chooses to defect because he had begun to question Communist orthodoxies, and indeed had become “an individual in his thinking, and so unknowingly committed the gravest sin in the Communist pantheon [*sic*].”³³

Thus, the first forty pages of the novel establish the demonic nature of the USSR as the reader begins to identify with a Soviet protagonist who is exceptional because he acts as an individual in a regimented society founded on terror. (According to Clancy, the Soviet Union of the mid-1980s was still a state in which the KGB could “order the execution or imprisonment of a hundred men without blinking.”³⁴) In contrast to the redoubtable Ramius, most Soviet characters in *Red October* are dull-witted true believers in Marxism-Leninism. Clancy’s American characters refer to the average Russian as “Ivan,” evoking a more “terrible” image than does the noble-sounding Ramius, who is a Baltic European.

While the Soviet characters bumble their way toward strategic defeat, Jack Ryan and his colleagues skillfully guide *Red October* to U.S. shores, pulling off the whole enterprise so that neither the Soviets nor the American public are even aware of it. The novel highlights a U.S. intelligence operation

³⁰Credit for this allusion belongs to critic Louis Menand, who recalls the quotation from Agent Q as he attempts to brief Bond on new technology. See his “Very Popular Mechanics” (review of Clancy’s *The Sum of All Fears*), *New Yorker*, 16 September 1991, 91–95.

³¹Clancy interview by Marc Cooper in *Playboy*, April 1988, 161; Patrick Anderson, “King of the Techno-Thriller,” *New York Times Magazine*, 1 May 1988, 54; Thomas, “Art of the Techno-Thriller,” 60–65.

³²Review from the *Washington Post* is quoted in Thomas, “Art of the Techno-Thriller,” 61.

³³Tom Clancy, *The Hunt for Red October* (New York, 1984; first published by Naval Institute Press), 32.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 166.

that is both covert and successful, thus reassuring readers that their intelligence services may be accomplishing great things without their knowledge. U.S. intelligence services, the story suggests, should be amply funded and given license to conduct their business without the burden of external oversight. During the Iran-contra imbroglio, the Reagan administration showed that it shared the same view.³⁵

Through the character of Peter Henderson, Clancy underscores the dangers of democratic oversight while demonizing opponents of the national security cult. After progressing from Harvard, where he was an editor on the *Crimson* as well as an activist against the Vietnam War, Henderson became an aide to a U.S. senator and a KGB spy. The Henderson character alerts the reader to the dangers of congressional oversight by suggesting that congressmen may unwittingly pass information through disloyal aides into the hands of the tireless agents of international communism. Moreover, Henderson's character suggests that those who were involved in the antiwar movement and those with “liberal East Coast” and “liberal media” connections are potential traitors.³⁶

Despite the Henderson-Hiss-Lattimore attempts to stab America in the back, the mission succeeds, Ramius gains freedom, and Jack Ryan trumpets U.S. exceptionalism and material abundance. He informs a group of incredulous Russians that the United States is a land of unparalleled material wealth and equal opportunity. “Anything you want. . . Beef, pork, lamb, turkey, chicken. . . The United States feeds itself and has plenty left over. . . Everyone has a car. Most people own their own homes. . . The fact of the matter is that in our country if you have some brains . . . and you are willing to work . . . you will live a comfortable life even without any help.”³⁷ Moments later, Mannion, a black U.S. sailor, informs Ramius that all the Soviet propaganda he has heard about racism and the white bourgeois ruling class in America is just that—propaganda. Much like the Reagan administration itself, Clancy's characters dealt with poverty and racial inequality by acting as if they did not exist.³⁸

While demonization of the Soviet Union is an important element of *The Hunt for Red October*, it plays an even greater role in Clancy's second work, *Red Storm Rising* (1986). As the title image suggests, the novel emphasizes naked Soviet military aggression against the West. More than any other Clancy novel, *Red Storm Rising* promotes the worst-case scenarios of Soviet military behavior upon which the cult of national security depended. The book begins with dark-skinned, Koran-toting, Allah-quoting Soviet Muslim fanatics sabotaging a huge Siberian oil refining complex, thus depriving the USSR of 34 percent of its crude oil production and risking an internal rebellion on the part of “the faceless collection of men and women who toiled every day . . . in factories and on collective farms, their thoughts hidden behind unsmiling masks.” The Soviet defense minister declares at an emergency Politburo

³⁵See Theodore Draper, *A Very Thin Line: The Iran-Contra Affairs* (New York, 1991).

³⁶Clancy, *Hunt for Red October*, 330–31.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 410.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 415, 405.

meeting that “we must obtain more oil. It is as simple as that.” Because not enough can be purchased, he concludes that “we must take it.” The plot of *Red Storm Rising* thus reinforces the nightmarish image of an unstable totalitarian state that might at any moment resort to foreign “adventurism” to solve problems that flow from domestic instability. Like the Soviet bear, a large and powerful beast with a primitive mentality, Soviet leaders are violent and unpredictable. “In the Politburo, as in the jungle,” the narrator avers, “the only rule was survival.”³⁹

While the West is lulled to sleep by the détente line promoted by the new Communist party general secretary, the real decisions are being made in the Defense Ministry, which opts for total war to secure Soviet dominance of Europe and the Persian Gulf.⁴⁰ Thus, the Politburo votes overwhelmingly (in the midst of a failed campaign in neighboring Afghanistan) to risk nuclear war by seizing the Persian Gulf after first launching an all-out invasion of NATO-occupied Western Europe. The Hitlerian nightmare unfolds with a reprise of Munich, as the Kremlin leadership trumpets détente before the world community and even proposes a 50 percent reduction, with verification, of superpower nuclear arsenals.

After encouraging appeasement in the West, the Soviets initiate hostilities in the most cynical fashion—by killing innocent *Soviet* children in a Kremlin explosion and blaming it on West Germany, which they then invade.⁴¹ After neutralizing Europe, the Red Army extends its *blitzkrieg* by invading Iceland in order to seize control of the Atlantic. Soviet storm troopers smash the tiny, nonviolent country, which is defended only by a national police force.

During the Icelandic invasion, Soviet soldiers kill the mother, father, and dog of a young—and of course pregnant—Icelandic woman, who is herself subjected to a gang rape. The rape and the subsequent rescue scene revive a narrative formula first popularized by James Fenimore Cooper’s *Leatherstocking* tales and cemented in American cultural discourse ever since. The Cooperian mythology revolves around scenes of captivity, savagery, and violent regeneration through the heroism of the solitary hunter. In this case the solitary hunter is Mike Edwards, an air force lieutenant stationed at a NATO outpost on the western coast of Iceland. Like the self-made men who “tamed the frontier” before him, Edwards is not by nature a violent man, but even the mild-mannered air force meteorologist is compelled to adopt the savage frontier ethos. Sickened by the brutal rape and murders, Edwards and his fellow GIs cannot restrain themselves from summarily executing the Soviet prisoners who committed the atrocities. (The Icelandic woman falls in love with Edwards two days after being gang-raped.) The Russian soldiers thus merge with Spillane’s “red sons of bitches” and with the savage Indians, Filipino “goo-goos,” “Huns,” “Japs,” Nazis, and Vietnamese “gooks” as barbaric enemies who must be exterminated.⁴²

³⁹Tom Clancy, *Red Storm Rising* (New York, 1986), 1–24, quotations on 22, 24.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 25.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 96.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 315–26. On the Cooperian mythology and the frontier hero see Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment*, 81–106; and Hellmann, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam*, passim.

The Stealth fighter and bomber aircraft represent the theme of salvation through strategic technology in *Red Storm Rising*. “We nearly defeated you,” the defeated Soviet General Alekseyev explains. “If those damned invisible bombers of yours hadn’t hit our bridges on the first day, or if we had managed to smash three or four of your convoys, you would be offering me terms.”⁴³

After drawing sharper criticism from reviewers of his third novel, *Patriot Games*, a tale about IRA terrorist attempts to seize the British royal family, Clancy returned to the Soviet enemy in *The Cardinal of the Kremlin* (1988). Like *Red Storm Rising*, *Cardinal* opens with a reprise of an Allah-quoting, Koran-toting Afghani Muslim fanatic (with “dark pitiless eyes”) gunning down Soviet soldiers in the mountains of Azerbaijan, where the Kremlin’s operation Bright Star, an SDI-type system, is under construction.⁴⁴ As Americans and Soviets seek to learn about and sabotage each other’s SDI programs, a top CIA asset high in the Soviet defense ministry, Mikhail S. Filitov—the Cardinal of the Kremlin—is exposed and jailed and the top U.S. SDI scientist is kidnapped. The heroic Jack Ryan, aided by the *mujahideen* in Afghanistan (depicted as “freedom fighters” rather than Koran-toting fanatics), allows the United States to rescue its kidnapped scientist and free the Cardinal himself.

The Cardinal of the Kremlin promotes SDI as the means to salvation through technological advance. “Defense systems could not be stopped now,” Filitov observes. “One might as easily try to stop the tide.”⁴⁵ The Soviet character Yazov obligingly confirms the Reagan administration line when he acknowledges that his country is not only deeply involved in research on strategic defensive systems but is also “further along in testing.” Soviet negotiating offers, especially with respect to arms control, are dismissed as disingenuous ploys that mask malevolent intent. Only dupes in Congress and liberal peaceniks could think otherwise.⁴⁶

Like the rape and rescue scenes in *Red Storm Rising*, a demonization scene in *Cardinal* features Soviet savagery, this time directed at a beautiful Soviet woman who is an American spy. (Beautiful Soviet women are American spies; most Soviet women are depicted in Cold War popular culture as overweight matrons, like the uniformed comrade in the popular Wendy’s television commercial that appeared in the late 1980s.) Following her capture, the blonde woman makes a drug-induced confession as the Nazi-like doctor caresses her naked body. Mind-altering drugs make her forget everything. The Nazi-Soviet doctor later explains: “Surely you have read *1984*. It might have been a dream when Orwell wrote it, but with modern technology we can do it.” Invoking the most clichéd totalitarian imagery, the narrator describes the brainwashed woman’s once animated face as “blank. What had been lively was now as emotionless as any face on a Moscow street.” Big Brother no longer even needed to watch her. The imagery of totalitarian robotization is reinforced in other passages, where readers learn that Russians are “so grim all

⁴³Clancy, *Red Storm Rising*, 721.

⁴⁴Tom Clancy, *The Cardinal of the Kremlin* (New York, 1988), 1.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 134.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 134, 479, 20.

the time" (in part because their smiles "stop at their lips"); they don't "know how to have a good time"; and they themselves even admit that they "should have more Americans around."⁴⁷

This brief summary of the three Clancy novels shows the extent to which his popular fiction embodies the predominant national security values of the Reagan administration. Clancy's evocation of American exceptionalism, demonization of the Soviet Union, and his promotion of the national security *mentalité* indicate how deeply the United States invested in the language and symbols of the Cold War during the Reagan years. In the wake of defeat in Vietnam, the Watergate scandal, revelations of CIA misconduct, and the crises of the Carter years, Americans yearned to replace the morally ambiguous legacies of the Cold War with the unambiguous triumph of good over evil. Both Reagan's presidency and Clancy's novels were means to that end.

While the symbiosis between Clancy's texts and Reagan-era Cold War values seems clear, it is more difficult to assess the extent to which the books actually reinforced and promoted those values. It is not unreasonable to assume that the stress upon American exceptionalism, the demonization of the USSR, and the depiction of salvation through military technology reinforced the cult of national security in the minds of millions of Clancy readers. Clancy's novels, like those of Mickey Spillane, became best sellers in the same period that East-West tensions reached a new peak. It seems likely, therefore, that Clancy's fiction, like the Spillane novels of the early 1950s, helped bolster the Cold War ethos through the medium of popular culture.

The efforts of national security elites to promote Clancy's books, movies, and the author himself offer the best evidence that his popular fiction played a meaningful role in shaping opinion in the real world. The military establishment at first expressed some concern over Clancy's sure grasp of "secret" military technology, but it quickly concluded that such concerns were trivial when measured against the "great service" that Clancy's books performed by promoting the interests of the armed services and the military-industrial complex. Accordingly, the military establishment "adopted me," as Clancy himself once put it, by providing the popular author with privileged access to restricted facilities, job offers, and promotion of his books and films. "Everybody's willing to talk to Clancy," observed a Pentagon spokesman. "He's neat. He's one of the good guys." A Ford Foundation critic complained that leaks to Clancy were "the authorized winked-at way to leak information that will help the military procurement budget."⁴⁸ Republican national strategist Edward Rollins and representative Newt Gingrich of Georgia found Clancy such an effective spokesman for the cult of national security that they urged him to challenge Maryland representative Roy Dyson, a prominent Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee, in 1992. Clancy declined.⁴⁹

The military establishment also gave the producers of the film version of *The Hunt for Red October* advice and technical assistance, as it often did when

⁴⁷Ibid., 185–98, quotations on 199, 294, 260, 263.

⁴⁸Thomas, "Art of the Techno-Thriller," 60, 63, 64.

⁴⁹"The Hunt for Tom Clancy," *U.S. News and World Report*, 26 March 1990.

it approved of films. When producers of the film *Platoon*, which reflected critically on some U.S. military actions in Vietnam, requested similar assistance, however, the Pentagon refused. Additional efforts to exploit Clancy's fiction accompanied the opening of the film version of *The Hunt for Red October*. In theaters across the country the navy set up information tables, complete with model submarines, in the lobbies and hallways. Naval recruiters promoted the film as “the submariner's ‘Top Gun,’ ” a reference to the top grossing movie and video of the 1980s, which romanticized military service and prompted a 300-percent increase in naval aviation officer training enlistments.⁵⁰

The official embrace of *The Hunt for Red October* extended to the White House, where Clancy dined with the Reagans. Indeed, *The Hunt for Red October* became a publishing phenomenon only after Reagan called it “the perfect yarn” and recommended it to the nation. Senators, including Dan Quayle, who was then a senator from Indiana, praised Clancy, not as a novelist but as an authority on national security. During a debate on funding of anti-satellite weapons (ASAT) technology, Quayle held Clancy's *Red Storm Rising* aloft on the Senate floor and asked, “Have you read this book? ASAT technology is what wins the war!”⁵¹

The reception accorded Clancy's novels in these circles makes it clear that national security elites exploited his popular fiction to promote the cult of national security. Millions of readers have absorbed Clancy's exaltation of American exceptionalism, demonization of foreign and domestic political enemies, and promotion of military technology and new weapons systems. One cannot conclusively prove that Clancy's novels reinforced or changed the way those readers thought about the Cold War or U.S. foreign policy any more than one can “prove” that the Truman Doctrine or John F. Kennedy's inaugural address shaped public perceptions about the Cold War. What can be demonstrated, in this case, is that Clancy's novels promoted ideologically constructed perceptions of foreign policy discourse—perceptions that were absorbed by millions of Americans and were actively promoted by a national security establishment whose interests they served.

⁵⁰“One of Their Subs Is Missing,” *Time* 125 (4 May 1985): 82; Navy Secretary John Lehman quoted in Thomas, “Art of the Techno-Thriller,” 63. See also “The Pentagon's Unlikely Hero,” *U.S. News and World Report*, 15 September 1986, 66. In discussions with the author, Clancy vigorously rejected *Time*'s assertion that he has received classified information.

⁵¹Thomas, “Art of the Techno-Thriller,” 61, 64.