

# Aiming to be the Top Gun: Military Recruitment, Propaganda, and Shaping the Image of War through Popular Media

Rebecca Martin

*University of Lethbridge Faculty of Art and Science*

## Introduction

When someone is watching their favourite movie or playing their favourite video game, they may not expect that the United States military is actively trying to recruit them. That person may also not expect that many depictions of the military, war, or conflict are curated in a way to make them feel more favourable towards the institution and, to put it plainly, make the military look cool. The United States military is a very large institution both domestically and internationally, with about 750 bases in about 80 countries (Bandow, 2022). Due to the sheer size of the military and the types of activities it conducts, it is imperative that the people of the country are on board and perceive it as something that is important. The institutions of the military have an active mission to make the Armed Forces and war look appealing and framed in a good light. This is something that can be actively observed in advertisement campaigns and recruitment, but also in everyday media like movies and video games.

The people's perception of war in the media is something that contributes to both the morale of a country and the image of the military and the people serving in it. If the military looks like an evil and bad institution, people will likely feel negatively towards it, and have no incentive or pull towards the organization. If this goes far enough, people could have reason to act against these institutions through either civil or political actions. Whereas, if the military markets itself as a patriotic organization doing good things around the world, people will more likely view it as being important and would want to join and contribute to its efforts. When it comes to recruitment, people are more likely to join the military if they are familiar with the organization and see it as having a significant role in society. Especially if they see their values, personality, and goals reflected in its missions (Schreurs & Syed, 2011). This is where the image of war and the institutions that support it come into play and is what will be discussed throughout this paper. This paper will look at how pieces of media like movies and video games play into people's ideas and perception of the military and how that plays into recruitment. This paper

will argue that media about war, whether it be sponsored by the military or a piece of “civilian” media, plays a role in making war look appealing and functioning ultimately as a recruitment tool.

## Understanding Recruitment

To begin this paper, it is important to understand what recruitment is and what it means. For the sake of this paper, recruitment will be defined by Alan M. Saks (2017) as:

“Actions and activities taken by an organization in order to identify and attract individuals to the organization who have the capabilities to help the organization realize its strategic objectives. In particular, such activities should generate a pool of desirable candidates; enhance their interest in and attraction to the organization as an employer; and increase the probability that they will accept a job offer. (p. 48)”

This definition sees recruitment as being a targeted initiative with the purpose of attracting candidates to a job with success in mind. This definition is also inclusive of an organization’s objectives and how that can play into getting eligible and qualified individuals. This is something the military actively takes part in through a variety of methods and is constantly evolving the way it presents itself. In Sejin Park, Zienab Shoieb, and Ronald E. Taylor’s article “Message Strategies in Military Recruitment Advertising” (2016), they show that this idea can come directly in the form of advertisement, one of the main functions of recruitment, as the military can actively improve its image while also recruiting people. They go on to explain that this is somewhat of a two-for-one deal and allows the military to target specific demographics that may typically be under-represented while also making itself look like a viable and good decision.

Typically, when people think of military recruitment two different kinds come to mind (Park et al., 2016). The first type of recruitment is often informational advertisement. This is along the lines of “joining the Army to learn life skills,” “guaranteed pay and benefits every month,” and other appeals to money, education, travel, and skill development. The other type of recruitment mentioned is “transformational” and appeals to the ego and sensory situations. This can come in the form of pictures of people parachuting out of planes with captions like “challenge yourself” or “last step towards becoming a man.” Since these apply to a person’s ego, they can make situations feel like a challenge that one has to do to prove their worth. Many of these advertisements appeal to conventional ideas of masculinity and the “tough” or “manly man” image is often associated with the military, particularly branches like the Marines and Army. This is not to say that women are not targeted in military recruitment campaigns but rather men are the targeted audience when it comes to the campaigns discussed in this paper. This can be seen in the types of media that are

considered recruitment materials as they tend to be things conventionally marketed towards men: video games and action movies. This discussion around targeted audiences is not particularly relevant to the discussion in this paper, but it is important to keep in mind when analysing these works as men tend to be the heroes and the main focal point in these works (see Appendix A).

Although informational advertisement plays a role in changing the image of war and people's perception of the military, this paper is more concerned with the indirect ways the military recruits and plays with people's perceptions of war. As previously mentioned, this usually comes in the form of movies and video games. *Act of Valor* (2012) is a Pentagon made feature-length film made and designed for recruitment (Powell, 2014). Although *Act of Valor* did get a theatrical release and did make money (*Act of Valor* 2012), civilian made movies have a larger impact on popular culture and are more accessible to the average person. For the sake of simplicity, this paper will focus on civilian made movies that received some or no help from the military. Civilian made movies tend to have big and widely recognizable actors in them; people like Tom Cruise, Bradley Cooper, and Ben Affleck have all starred in war movies and received praise for their roles. This broadens the audience for people who want to see the movie and gets people who may not normally watch war or military movies to the theater.

In Jacques Ellul paper "Categories of Propaganda" (1965) he defines sociological propaganda as being an "influence [that] aims much more at an entire style of life or even one particular course of behaviour. (p. 5-6)" This influence of behaviour is something that the military utilizes in the media to improve the image of war and its surrounding institutions. A movie may not have an explicit pro-war stance, it may not even be a movie about war, but the military is able to utilize these pieces of media to further its agendas and create "unconscious" habits or reactions to war. This is also something that can develop into patriotism as movies about war tend to be reflective of the United States' ideals and culture. When enough people see movie after movie perpetuating American patriotism, they become more and more patriotic. Ellul describes this connection as having an ideology develop after time into someone's whole personality: he is American, they are pro-military (Ellul, 1965). It has been pointed out by some scholars that non-economic motives like patriotism are enough incentive for people to join the military (Padilla & Laner, 2001).

### Patriotism and Authenticity

This idea of patriotism is also reflected in movies through the characters in them. Many characters in film are named after or based on real life soldiers and a film is more likely to get military support by doing so (Robb, 2004). Support is granted when a film's producers portray people and activities in an "authentic" manner. This means that war and conflict

are depicted in a way that aligns with how battles are actually fought and how personnel would act under a variety of circumstances. This is something that is not always followed, as will be discussed later in this paper. This portrayal of “authenticity” only goes so far and is at the discretion of the military, with these institutions placing more importance on portraying a good or “cool” image over authenticity. This can be seen in films like *Black Hawk Down* (2001) and the renaming of characters as their real life names were seen as being uncool (Robb. 2004). Other changes can be seen in films like *Top Gun*. The U.S. Navy requested Kelly McGillis’ character be changed from an enlisted member of the military to an outside contractor. This decision was to make the movie more “accurate” but to also avoid fraternization between enlisted members, something that is not allowed.

When it comes to the perception of war, things in scripts are often changed to avoid outcry or controversy from the military community and veterans. Projects are also often denied support for depicting things deemed “unflattering (Powell, 2014).” Films supported by the military tend to have toned down violence and gore, in some cases minimal use of expletives and are usually somewhat sanitized. It is the job of the military to decide what is okay to use and what changes must be made in a script to receive support (Robb. 2004). In Robb’s article, movie producer Jerry Bruckheimer claims that many of the films he produced could not have been made without help and support of the military. This is not to say that good war movies can not be made without military help. For an example, the award-winning film *The Hurt Locker* (2008) was made without military assistance due to its “unflattering picture of the military (Powell, 2014).” Despite this however, it is ultimately difficult to get these types of films made without the resources provided by the military. It would be hard, for example, to make a movie like *Top Gun* without the fighter jets and pilots to fly them.

This balance between accuracy and “things that make the military look good” is often towed and most of the time swings in favour of good publicity and maintaining a good public image. This extends beyond what could be considered typical military movies and into general action or science fiction movies. *The Transformers* (2007) franchise has many ties and has received help from the military (Löffmann 2013). Löffmann also describes the United States as acting as the hero of the movie and the defender of “freedom.” The military also plays a role in the story of the films with the use of technology and “citizen-soldiers.” The idea of freedom is further explored in these movies where modern ideas of warfare, ideology, and military powers are discussed.

It is not a controversial idea to say that movies like *The Hurt Locker* portray a more accurate depiction of war and the military over movies like *the Transformers* franchise. *The Transformers* franchise is an action-packed movie that perpetuates an idea of American exceptionalism, heroism, and the unwavering powers of the United States and its military.

*The Hurt Locker* on the other hand, is raw and unflattering. The characters in the movie struggle, die, and ultimately make mistakes. Despite these differences, both movies still have the same themes of loyalty, dedication to one's country, and an overall sense of *Americanness* (Löffmann 2013).

American filmmaker Oliver Stone said, "most films about the military are recruitment posters (Powell, 2014)" and while these films may not be explicitly recruitment films or advertisements, they act as a vessel for people to experience war and understand what it is like. This can be seen with the movie *Top Gun* and the military capitalizing off it by placing recruiters outside of theaters, leading to a noticeable increase in enlistments (Powell, 2014; MSMBC, 2022). Civilian made movies are an excellent way of introducing these ideals and lifestyles. Maj. Gen. Edward Thomas of the United States Air Force said that "movies like *Top Gun* could create a perspective of what [the military] does every day (MSMBC, 2022)" and that these types of movies get people excited about the military and particularly about Navy Aviation. In a NATO document for "A Proposed Model of Military Recruitment" (Schreurs & Syed, 2007) the organization said that "some anecdotal and preliminary research evidence [shows] that movies that portray the military in a favourable way (e.g., *Top Gun*) can have a serious impact on military recruitment." The document goes on to say that films and video games have the ability to "influence youth attitudes toward the organization" and that most individuals do not enlist as "blank slates" having gained knowledge of the military through external popular sources. When movies such as these are made, they are inherently educating people, to some degree, about war and conflict in addition to military structures and lifestyles.

### What About Video Games?

Much like films and movies, the video game market is also home to military sponsored and inspired games. One of the most famous examples is *America's Army (2002-2008)*. This franchise originated as a research tool to investigate new technologies in developing real weapons. The game also functioned as a recruitment and public relations tool used by the U.S Army. (Derby, 2014) The game worked not to misrepresent war but as a piece of media that immersed people into the culture and universe of war and the military. The game gave prospects information about the military structure, operations, specialties, and other helpful knowledge. (United States Army and MOVES Institute, 2004) This is often considered as being "lifestyle marketing" with the goal of getting people to enlist in a new type of lifestyle. Another government funded game was *Full Spectrum Warrior (2002)*. It was designed as a training and commercial video game that depicted "realistic contemporary warfare. (Allison, 2015)" Other games like *Call of Duty (2003-)* and *Halo (2001-)* are good examples of contemporary non-funded military games with quite a large impact on gaming culture. Much like movies, these games deal with both

real life and science fiction topics. Although neither of these franchises are directly affiliated with the military, it is fair to say that the military does benefit from these games and the themes presented in them.

### Underneath the Sunglasses and Music

All of these movies and video games depict war in a way that seems enticing and interesting. Although there seems to be a lack of information and research into the direct correlation between media and military recruitment, many scholars agree on the propagandistic appeal to movies and video games and their role. (Löfflmann 2013; Padilla & Laner, 2001) Video games and movies make war accessible to the average individual and open people's eyes to what goes on through carefully curated and sanitized depictions. If fighting in the military was depicted with the same violence and persecution seen in real life, not only would the movies likely be unwatchable, but very few people would want to join and subject themselves to experiencing these tragedies. This is not done with the intent to deceive, any Google search about war can bring up its mass devastation, but rather make the cool aspects of the military look even cooler. As a side effect, things like PTSD, mortality, and mental or physical health risks often get ignored, left out, or minimized in film (Powell, 2014) and video games (Derby, 2014).

*American Sniper (2014)* is a movie that comes to mind that deals with the negative impacts of war and life in the military. This movie is the opposite of a lot of other movies discussed in this paper, as its depiction of war is complicated. Although not either anti or pro-war, the movie does not leave much to the imagination when it comes to the real-life implications. It is also a movie not made in-part by the United States Military, rather all tactical and military support and advice was done through third parties (*American Sniper 2016*). This was done likely to avoid having to make changes to the script and the story the filmmakers wanted to tell. These types of movies are also less likely to attract people to the military as they are quite bleak and make war and the military seem unwelcoming. Despite this, however, the movie *American Sniper* is not without glorification of its heroes and their accomplishments. Like the other media discussed in this paper, *American Sniper* should be looked at critically and with the understanding that it is ultimately propping up an agenda and is trying to sell viewers on something. Despite this however, *American Sniper* attempts to show the reality of conflict behind the aviator sunglasses and 1980's rock music montages, discussing the effect war has on the individuals fighting the conflicts and not the organizations in charge of them.

## Conclusion

Military recruitment looks to find good talent. This often means making the job seem better than it is, glorifying certain aspects and negating others. Whether it is through designated advertisement, recruitment campaigns, or civilian made media, image and perception are important aspects in making war and the military look viable and a place someone would want to work. This is why most movies and video games associated with the military tend to glorify war and life in the military. Although these types of media may not be designed with the intent to recruit, many still have a place in the enlistment process and play a role in why people want to join. Media like this is not a new thing and will probably continue in the future as long as movies and video games keep being made. Selling something like war to the average person is hard but movies and video games make it easier.

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