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The Illusion of Democracy: Contradictions Between Hollywood Narratives and U.S. Foreign Policy

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the ideological gap between Hollywood's depiction of the United States as a rational, democratic superpower and the reality of its interventionist foreign policy. Drawing from Joseph Nye's soft power theory and Antonio Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony, the study critically analyses how blockbuster films including the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Mission: Impossible series, Designated Survivor, and London Has Fallen construct and export an image of American moral authority, exceptionalism, and benevolent leadership. Through discourse analysis, the paper contrasts these idealized portrayals with the U.S.'s historical and ongoing record of foreign interventions, regime change, drone warfare, and military occupations, particularly in the post-9/11 era. The study also evaluates the global reception of these narratives, assessing whether international audiences internalize, challenge, or compartmentalize the cinematic image of American democracy. While Hollywood enjoys vast global popularity and dominates box offices across Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, this paper argues that the international consumption of such media simultaneously reinforces and problematizes the legitimacy of U.S. geopolitical actions.

Keywords: *Illusion, Democracy, Contradictions, Hollywood Narratives, U.S. Foreign Policy.*

Theoretical Framework

In understanding the gap between Hollywood's idealized America and the reality of U.S. foreign actions, two key theories are essential. Soft Power Theory (Nye, 2004) emphasizes a nation's ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion. Nye famously defined soft power as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment" (Allal, 2025). He further elaborates that soft power involves using culture and persuasion to induce "under-the-skin" changes in attitudes, contrasting sharply with hard, military force. In practice, Hollywood movies are a prime vehicle for American soft power: one analysis notes that "cinema is a great example of soft power", a way of "imposing values, culture, and ideology without using any military means" (Consonni et al., 2023). They further explain that soft power works through credibility and cultural appeal; as Nye cautioned, if a government's messages appear as blatant propaganda, "credibility is destroyed"

Complementing soft power is Cultural Hegemony (Gramsci). Hegemony theory holds that the ruling class maintains control by shaping the beliefs and culture of society so that its domination seems "natural." (Allal, 2025) explains cultural hegemony as media "imposing the culture of the dominant over that of the subjugated peoples". In other words, films and news can subtly reinforce the status quo by framing it as universally correct. This concept overlaps with Nye's soft power in that Hollywood content often merges persuasive culture with

ideological messaging. In Cold War-era films, for example, cinema “was a vehicle allowing spectators to see the ‘exceptional and adventurous’ features of American actions”, shaping public opinion in favour of U.S. policies. Today, scholars note that Hollywood continues to enact hegemony by privileging American viewpoints. For instance, (Consonni et al., 2023) observe that the U.S. film industry has “establish[ed] its own narrative and culturally colonizing external contexts”, creating a global presence that overshadowed local perspectives

These theories help explain why Hollywood often presents an idealized U.S. worldview. Soft power highlights how American films attract global audiences and disseminate U.S. values, while cultural hegemony explains how those narratives normalize U.S. dominance. In many cases, the overlap with propaganda is acknowledged: one study warns that the absence of horizontal influence means Hollywood’s export of U.S. values faces no “specular process,” allowing American ideology to flow unchecked overseas. Thus, Hollywood’s portrayal of the United States as a beacon of democracy and rational leadership should be understood not just as entertainment, but as a strategic extension of U.S. soft power – often designed to justify or obscure real-world policy actions.

The U.S Policy in Real

In reality, U.S. foreign policy has frequently diverged from its self-image as the leader of the free world. Historically, the United States has engaged in *hundreds* of foreign interventions. For example, one study notes nearly 400 military interventions from 1776 to 2019 (Kushi and Toft, 2022). The motives have varied – from countering European colonialism in the 19th century (e.g. the Monroe Doctrine) to containing communism in the Cold War – but common themes are the protection of U.S. economic interests, strategic positioning, and regime change. During the Cold War, doctrines under Presidents Truman through Reagan led to countless covert and overt interventions. The CIA orchestrated coups against democratically elected leaders (notably Iran in 1953 and Guatemala in 1954) to protect foreign business interests and curb leftist movements (Byrne, 2013). The United States also waged unpopular wars in Korea (1950–53) and Vietnam (1955–75) to oppose communist governments, often with dubious legal and moral justification.

After the Cold War, U.S. interventions continued unabated. The Bush administration’s “War on Terror” launched after 9/11 saw the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In both cases, initial justifications (harbouring terrorists, possessing WMDs) were later called into question. These conflicts have been marked by controversial tactics: extensive drone strikes in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia targeted suspected militants, often causing civilian casualties. The U.S. also intervened in Libya (2011) and Syria (2014 onward), supported coups (e.g. recent efforts in Venezuela), and provided logistical aid to allies fighting insurgencies (as in Yemen). In all these cases, self-described goals of promoting democracy or fighting terrorism frequently concealed other motives such as securing oil supplies or countering rival powers.

Critics argue such actions starkly contradict Hollywood’s narrative of the U.S. as a principled defender of freedom. For example, John Bolton, Trump’s National Security Advisor, casually admitted to CNN that “*I have helped plan coups d’etat...in other places*”, underscoring that the U.S. does what it “cannot do” under normal international law (Cook, 2022). According to him Such deeds have been called by scholars “the supreme international crime” – unprovoked

attacks on other nations' sovereignty. He also reports that the U.S. has engaged in regime-change operations in "more than 70 countries" since World War II, and waged wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Yemen and even Ukraine (indirectly) in recent years. Domestically, revelations like Abu Ghraib and the Pentagon Papers expose the gap between rhetoric and practice.

A useful way to summarize U.S. foreign policy reality is by listing its major interventions (pre- and post-9/11) and their outcomes:

- **Cold War Era (1947–1991):** U.S. fought proxy wars against communism (Korea, Vietnam); supported coups in Iran (1953), Guatemala (1954), Chile (1973), etc.; intervened in Latin American and Caribbean politics (Bay of Pigs, Nicaragua, Grenada, Panama); and engaged in "containment" doctrines (Truman, Eisenhower, Reagan) through aid and military interventions.
- **Middle East and South Asia:** Covertly attempted to overthrow leaders (Cuba's Castro, Egypt's Nasser); formally invaded Iraq in 1991 (Gulf War) and 2003; occupied Afghanistan (2001–2021) to remove the Taliban; intervened in Lebanon (1958, 1983) and repeatedly in Lebanon's civil strife; led NATO bombing of Yugoslavia (1999) and Libya (2011).
- **War on Terror (post-9/11):** Invaded Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) with pre-emptive rationale; waged long-term counterinsurgency in both regions; expanded drone strikes in multiple countries (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia) against al-Qaeda, Taliban, ISIS. Also backed anti-government forces in Syria, conducted special operations across Africa, and grew a global network of military bases.
- **Regime Change and Covert Operations:** Supported coups and election interventions in Latin America, Africa, and Asia throughout the 20th century (e.g. Congo 1960, Chile 1973) (Byrne, 2013); in recent decades plotted against governments in Venezuela and elsewhere.

In every era, interventions were often justified as "defending democracy" or fighting terrorism, yet these ideals frequently clashed with evidence on the ground. For instance, the 2003 Iraq War was sold to the public on false intelligence about WMDs. U.S. forces have sometimes partnered with brutal regimes (e.g. supporting Saudi actions in Yemen) even as Hollywood films depict only noble foes. As the Monthly Review points out, *"the Pentagon actively demands script oversight and dictates storylines"*, ensuring film narratives exclude real U.S. military misconduct (Cook, 2022). Thus, Hollywood's celebration of U.S. power belies a historical record of illegal interventions and gray-zone warfare. One critic flatly calls Hollywood *"a propaganda machine for the political and ruling elite"* that whitewashes history and promotes the American way of life (Guardian, 2013). The theoretical dissonance is stark: U.S. foreign policy often undermines democracy and sovereignty abroad, yet cinema portrays America as a benevolent, rational superpower, a contradiction that this paper explores in depth.

Through The Eyes of Cinema

The scene often opens with a familiar cinematic formula: a foreign conspirator—frequently Russian, Middle Eastern, or vaguely "non-Western"—sets their sights on global destruction. Just as chaos looms, the United States, guided by a morally upright and emotionally driven president, intervenes heroically to save the day. While cinematic exaggeration and

dramatization are expected elements of popular entertainment, these portrayals raise critical questions about the extent to which such narratives mirror—or intentionally distort—political reality.

Despite the stylized heroism on screen, these films often serve as ideological devices that reinforce skewed geopolitical perceptions. Hollywood tends to cast adversaries as stereotyped villains—Arabs, Russians, or rogue regimes—while presenting American interventions as rational, necessary, and inherently benevolent. A notable example is the *Mission: Impossible* franchise, where Ethan Hunt (played by Tom Cruise) leads a covert U.S. spy unit in preventing global catastrophes. Commentators have noted that these films depict the IMF agents as “unquestionably noble,” transforming real-life covert interventions into cinematic acts of heroism (Taylor, 2018). Similarly, the series *24* showcases Jack Bauer as the ever-loyal American operative, heroically stopping domestic terror threats, thus validating U.S. leadership without moral ambiguity.

The narrative continues in political thrillers like *Designated Survivor*, which portrays an unassuming law professor-turned-president as a competent and principled leader, embodying the ideal of democracy under pressure. These fictional scenarios suggest that any geopolitical crisis can be met with swift, ethical decision-making from U.S. leadership—an ideal that significantly contrasts with the historical record of American foreign policy, especially in the post-9/11 era.

Perhaps no franchise exemplifies Hollywood’s ideological slant more than *The Fallen* series. In *Olympus Has Fallen* (2013) and *London Has Fallen* (2016), American agents single-handedly defeat waves of terrorists. In the latter, U.S. Vice President Allan Trumbull (played by Morgan Freeman) declares, “in the absence of good options, drone strikes are vital defence mechanisms” (Khalil, 2016). The film presents this message as wisdom, not controversy, and characterizes Arab militants as generic enemies, justifying American counterterrorism as not only necessary but righteous. *Air Force One* (1997) follows a similar template, portraying the President (Harrison Ford) as a literal action hero rescuing hostages from a Kazakh dictator. Such narratives simplify complex international conflicts into tales of good versus evil, with the U.S. always cast as the unblemished protagonist.

Even family-friendly franchises like *Transformers* and *Jurassic Park* are not immune to these portrayals. Their collaborations with the U.S. military result in visual glorifications of American firepower and technology. These films normalize the presence of American might, turning military action into a background aesthetic of progress and heroism.

Crucially, these portrayals are not unintentional. American soft power has been institutionalized through cinema, public diplomacy, and cultural hegemony. (Artamonova, 2022) contends that blockbuster films—particularly franchises like *Marvel*, *Mission: Impossible*, *James Bond*, and *Transformers*—act as informal agents of U.S. foreign policy, embedding narratives of American exceptionalism, moral authority, and military dominance. These films distort historical facts, vilify non-Western cultures, and ultimately depict American unilateralism as a global necessity. Even when characters challenge authority within the plot, their dissent is neutralized, and the story arc inevitably justifies U.S. intervention as indispensable for world stability.

This global influence, however, is not always passively received. A study by (Zakzouk et al., 2023) on Arab youth revealed a complex reception of Hollywood films. While many young

Arabs are aware that these films perpetuate negative stereotypes—sometimes even causing feelings of alienation—they do not necessarily internalize these portrayals. In fact, most participants rejected feelings of shame about their identity, choosing instead to maintain pride in their cultural heritage despite Hollywood's influence. This suggests that while American soft power is far-reaching, it is not always hegemonically effective in reshaping cultural identities.

Still, the broader impact of these portrayals cannot be overlooked. As (Zoyza and Newman, 2002) argue, Hollywood frequently presents an idealized version of the United States—celebrating values like democracy, individualism, and heroism. These symbolic portrayals serve national identity-building purposes and project a utopian America to the world. However, this image often masks harsh social and political realities, particularly the contradictions inherent in U.S. foreign policy. Critics have pointed out that Hollywood functions as a medium for both conservative and liberal agendas, reducing political complexity to digestible binaries that suit American interests.

This process is not limited to fiction. Hollywood war films—particularly those aligned with U.S.-led regime change—often depict military interventions as just and humanitarian, when in fact they are strategic and, at times, legally and morally ambiguous. These portrayals are frequently shaped through direct collaboration with government institutions. The Pentagon and CIA have long offered support to film productions in exchange for influence over how the military and intelligence services are represented. The result is a form of cinematic sanitization—where war is cleansed of its horrors and moral compromises are erased. Roger Stahl's documentary *Theatres of War* exposes this dynamic in detail, highlighting how state collaboration has produced films that champion American veterans while erasing the suffering of local populations, particularly Iraqis and Afghans (Coles, 2022). The documentary argues that studio-military collusion leads to predictable narratives: American values triumph, terrorists are monstrous, and wars are noble. Films like *Iron Man* were even rewritten to serve as ideological messaging—originally a critique of arms dealing, the Pentagon-altered *Iron Man* now has Tony Stark preaching that “peace means having a bigger stick”. The piece notes that Stahl's evidence confirms critics' suspicions: Hollywood's “military-entertainment complex” stealthily conditions audiences to support U.S. wars. Coles observes that Stahl essentially maps the soft-power machinery at work—the film's exposure of these edits and denials bolsters the larger argument that Hollywood willingly participates in U.S. propaganda. In these films, torture becomes a normalized plot device, and drone strikes are framed as the inevitable costs of peace.

Historically, this practice has deep roots. (Örmeci, 2015) emphasizes that during the Cold War, Hollywood was systematically used as a vehicle for ideological warfare. Films such as *Rocky IV* and *The Hunt for Red October* were explicitly designed to counter Soviet narratives, presenting Russians as existential threats and Americans as moral crusaders. This pattern has continued into the 21st century, where institutions like the CIA are not just advisors but often co-creators in the storytelling process. By whitewashing controversial operations and reframing military aggression as heroic, Hollywood has become not just entertainment, but a strategic arm of American soft power.

In essence, Hollywood reiterates four major messages: that democracy in America functions smoothly, that presidents act altruistically, that the U.S. military is always on the side of

justice, and that American values are universally applicable. This glossy narrative stands in stark contrast to the real-world record—where support for authoritarian regimes, drone warfare, and the destabilization of entire regions undermine these same democratic ideals. The civilian casualties in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and beyond rarely make it into the cinematic frame. Instead, audiences are presented with heroism without consequence and justice without critique.

As (Cook, 2022) bluntly observes, many of these movies are “little more than advertisements for U.S. war industries.” The goal is not just to entertain but to ideologically condition, blurring the lines between culture and coercion. The disparity is clear: Hollywood’s heroes may save the world cleanly, but real-world American interventions remain morally fraught, complex, and often self-serving.

Perception Of International Audiences

Hollywood films have a wide variety of fan base in America and worldwide. With cinematic thrill, action and story telling these films have amassed such a following that these films cross billions of dollars in box office revenue. Box office figures illustrate this reach: roughly 58% of Hollywood’s ticket revenue now comes from international audiences (Zandstra, 2023). Major blockbusters, especially superhero films, often gross the majority of their profits overseas. For instance, *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) earned nearly 70% of its \$2.798 billion globally outside the U.S. This shows that foreign viewers eagerly consume American entertainment. Indeed, a Brand Finance survey notes the United States ranks first globally partly because it is “influential in arts and entertainment” (Brand Finance, 2024), a reputation driven largely by Hollywood. (Consonni et al., 2023) point out that Hollywood blockbusters “cater to universal tastes” and resonate globally, giving the U.S. a “well-established global reach” in cinema. Even casual foreign tourists often learn English by watching American films, and young people worldwide idolize Marvel and DC superheroes as symbols of heroism.

But the real question on how international audiences who consumes such films see the American government. Is there any change towards there perception towards the U.S.? International audiences perceive American democratic values conveyed in films like “Top Gun: Maverick” differently, often through a lens influenced by cultural and geopolitical contexts. The analysis by (Xu, 2023) indicates that while American audiences explicitly associate the film's themes with core democratic virtues such as heroism, individualism, and patriotism, international audiences tend to interpret these elements more via their political and cultural frameworks. For example, Chinese audiences often view the film as a vehicle of American ideological promotion and military propaganda, emphasizing themes like American hegemony and exceptionalism. They tend to be wary of the overt patriotism and heroism displayed, associating them with American political motives and global influence rather than universal democratic ideals. Chinese viewers also compare the film to Chinese military-themed films like “Wolf Warriors,” seeing both as representations of national strength and ideological narratives rather than as pure expressions of democratic values.

Moreover, the narratives themselves can provoke scepticism. Hollywood’s one-sided portrayals risk appearing jingoistic overseas. Depicting entire regions (like the Middle East) as monolithically terrorist, as Edward Said warned, “helped to bring about a generalization of Islamic terrorism” in the American imagination (Consonni et al., 2023). As Nye cautioned, when entertainment is too obviously an arm of policy, it “does not appear” as neutral

influence and loses effectiveness. Thus, international audiences may enjoy these movies as thrilling escapism, but this does not necessarily convert to support for U.S. interventions. The films project an image of a rational, moral America, yet surveys and indices suggest that many in the world view the U.S. leadership more critically – indicating that the “*illusion of democracy*” in Hollywood often fails to fully sway global opinion.

Foreign audiences, more aware of their real societies, often see these stereotypes as offensive and simplistic. For example, Middle Eastern viewers have criticized films like *London Has Fallen* for demonizing Arabs, and polls often show that soft power has limits – admiration for U.S. culture coexists with opposition to U.S. foreign actions.

In sum, while Hollywood remains a powerful tool of American attraction – reflected in global soft power rankings – its impact on audiences is complex. The U.S. is still celebrated for creativity and innovation, but many overseas publics remain sensitive to perceived propaganda.

Conclusion and Discussion

The illusion of democracy presented by Hollywood is not merely a cinematic exaggeration—it is a strategic and deliberate distortion that reflects broader patterns of ideological manipulation, cultural imperialism, and political deflection. This paper has sought to deconstruct the carefully curated image of the United States as a rational, benevolent superpower that is deeply committed to democratic principles. What emerges instead is a pattern of selective storytelling, where cinematic narratives sanitize the blood-soaked reality of U.S. foreign policy and convert morally ambiguous, often illegal interventions into morally heroic spectacles. This contradiction is neither accidental nor benign. Hollywood’s global reach, enabled by its monopolistic position in the international entertainment market, functions as a soft power tool that promotes the ideological legitimacy of U.S. actions abroad. By projecting images of rational presidents, principled soldiers, and noble causes, it offers a cinematic smokescreen for drone strikes, regime changes, and diplomatic coercion. The whitewashing of state violence is normalized through action thrillers, superhero sagas, and political dramas that never question who the real aggressors are—because in these stories, America is always the saviour. Critically, the failure of global audiences to reject these narratives should not be seen as endorsement, but rather as a testament to the seductive nature of cultural power. Entertainment, when fused with nationalism, can become a form of emotional conditioning—what Gramsci would describe as “consensual domination.” The audience doesn’t need to be forced to agree; it simply needs to be entertained enough to stop asking uncomfortable questions.

Moreover, the post-9/11 era has only deepened this paradox. As the U.S. expanded its war footprint under the guise of fighting terrorism, Hollywood accelerated its production of ideologically convenient narratives—justifying surveillance, celebrating torture, and portraying endless war as a noble sacrifice. These films rarely depict the long-term consequences of American interventions: the destabilized regions, the civilian death tolls, or the cycles of resentment and radicalization they fuel. In doing so, they do not merely misrepresent history—they actively contribute to a future in which these patterns are more likely to be repeated and accepted. It is no longer enough to dismiss this as harmless entertainment. The interlocking interests of the U.S. security state and Hollywood studios point to a much deeper alignment of cultural and political agendas. Recent scholarship has

revealed that Pentagon and CIA script approvals are commonplace, influencing everything from dialogue to character arcs (Alford, 2020). When state institutions shape the stories, a nation tells itself—and the world—cinema becomes not just propaganda but a mechanism of consent production.

At this point, the fundamental question becomes: Can there be a truly democratic culture when its most dominant cultural expressions are indistinguishable from state narratives? The answer, tentatively, is no. True democracy requires not just electoral participation but discursive plurality—the freedom to see, hear, and tell stories that challenge the prevailing order. Hollywood, in its current form, rarely offers this. Instead, it exports American myth as if it were universal truth, erasing nuance and complexity in favour of formulaic heroism and geopolitical binaries.

Moving forward, it is imperative for scholars, artists, and audiences to become more critical consumers of cultural products. The global south in particular must develop counter-narratives—cinemas that reflect their own histories, their own wounds, and their own resistances. Until then, the illusion of democracy will persist—not because it is real, but because it is well-produced.

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