

Star Wars, *Star Wars*, and American Political Culture¹

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The small group of US Army officers who planned military strategy for the recent war in the Persian Gulf called themselves the “Jedi Knights,” referring to the heroes of George Lucas’ Star Wars films.² Nearly a decade after the release of the last film, the name testifies to the cultural resonance of the trilogy. Indeed, *Star Wars* (1977), *The Empire Strikes Back* (1981), and *The Return of the Jedi* (1983) were all among the most popular and profitable films in the history of cinema. It is not surprising then, that military and political figures have tried to use imagery from the films to build support for their policies. President Ronald Reagan’s announcement of a new Strategic Defense Initiative, on March 23, 1983, is a case in point. Critics dubbed the Reagan program “Star Wars” in derision, contending that the president’s vision of antimissile weapons in space was not simply fanciful, but also impossible, expensive, and dangerous.³

Reagan readily accepted the critics’ language, welcoming an association with the romanticism and the lure of technological advancement found in the films. The president’s commitment to his Star Wars undermined at least one nuclear arms control agreement (the perhaps utopian Reykjavik proposals in 1986) and produced several less balanced budgets. At this writing, the Star Wars movie trilogy is available on videocassette for home use throughout the United States. Although not available for use in the home or elsewhere, the Department of Defense’s Star Wars consumes some \$2-4 billion annually, an increasing share of a declining budget, propped up by early, and probably overly optimistic, reports of the Patriot missile’s effectiveness in the Gulf war.

“Star Wars” has stuck to an odd conglomeration of Pentagon programs with astonishing ease—indeed it is more frequently used than the official SDI acronym—but more than anything else this reflects a misreading and misinterpretation of the Lucas movies, which are seen to glorify and romanticize technology and, indeed, warfare. In this essay, I will argue that the Star Wars films suggest another reading that is far more skeptical of SDI’s promises. In this essay I will examine the

Star Wars trilogy in order to extract this critique. I begin with a brief review of each film and the political environment surrounding it, which helps to explain the incredible popularity of the series. I conclude with a discussion of several recurring themes in the trilogy and in contemporary American political culture.

Star Wars

Released in 1977, *Star Wars* accompanied the first signs of a major military buildup as the United States government attempted to overcome the *malaise* of the Vietnam syndrome, that is, a general reluctance among the public to use military means to achieve political objectives abroad. Jimmy Carter presided over substantial increases in military spending and capabilities, even as he articulated a desire to rid the earth of nuclear weapons. He continued negotiations on a SALT II agreement with the Soviet Union, while providing for the development of new nuclear MX, cruise, Pershing II and Trident D-5 missiles. Carter defined the Persian Gulf as a “vital interest,” and began organization of a “Rapid Development Force” which could defend it. Interestingly, however, filmmaker George Lucas began work on this film during the height of the Watergate scandal, imagining his work partly as a polemic against the corrupt Nixon administration. Indeed, Nixon was his initial inspiration for the insecure and repressive Emperor.⁴

In *Star Wars*, we are drawn into a war between a loose rebel alliance, scattered across the galaxy, and the evil empire, whose imperial stormtroopers, faceless and dressed in either completely black or white armor, embody a totalitarian nightmare.⁵ Deliberately, the Empire’s minions are without character or distinction, with the sole exception of Lord Darth Vader, commander of the Imperial forces and servant to the Emperor—who will not appear until the final film. Darth defines himself with austere excess, apparently muscular underneath his black armor and helmet, towering above all other characters, and blessed with the mechanically augmented baritone of James Earl Jones.

Darth and his troops chase and ultimately capture rebel leader, Princess Leia, who has secret information about the Empire’s Death Star, a superweapon which can destroy entire planets with a single blast. In pursuit, they destroy her home planet and numerous non-combatants along the way. Leia has sent a call for help with two robots, or “droids,” R2-D2 and C3-PO, who are instructed to find the mysterious Jedi master, Obi-wan Kanobie. En route, pirates capture the droids and sell them to the trilogy’s hero, young Luke Skywalker. As a hero, Luke is drawn no more subtly than villain Darth Vader. He is passionate, youthful, impatient and resolutely democratic. “Call me Luke,” he tells C3, the protocol droid, who prefers to address his new owner as “Sir.” Leia’s

message and the droids lead Luke to “Old Ben” Kanobie, a local hermit, who introduces Luke to the story and to the Force.

Ben enlists Luke’s aid in finding and rescuing the princess. He also hires a pilot and a ship to evacuate them from the planet. Joining the rebels then, albeit only by hire, are Han Solo, a typical western hero, and his partner and intimate, Chewbacca, the large and hairy ape-like Wookiee. (Their relationship is deeply grounded in a long-tradition of American literature, in which the hero is paired with a non-white [non-human] male to allow the development of an intimate alliance without homoerotic overtones.⁶) Solo is desperate for cash to pay off bad debts accumulated through smuggling, and to avoid bounty hunters pursuing the price on his head.

The Death Star captures Solo’s ship, the *Millenium Falcon*, but the heroes view their predicament as an opportunity. Han, Luke, and “Chewey” set out to rescue Leia, a post-feminist princess who wields her own blaster and makes decisions, as Ben stealthily wanders the ship’s corridors in his Jedi robes, looking for Darth. The rescue is successful, but only because Ben sacrifices his life (sort of) in a light sabre duel with Darth that allows the others the time to escape. They rejoin the rebel alliance and mount an attack on the Empire, aided by secret plans R2 copied from the Death Star’s computer, which identify the Death Star’s one vulnerability.

The rebel “snub fighters” are small enough to penetrate the Death Star’s defenses, so the Empire sends out its own fighters. As the rebels make successive passes at their target, Ben’s voice advises Luke to “trust [his] feelings.” Luke rejects his computer targeting scope to feel the target instead. In the nick of time and against all odds, he destroys the Death Star. “Remember,” says Ben, “the Force will be with you always.” The movie ends with a formal ceremony in which Leia hugs and honors Han and Luke, and the final credits roll.

The movie was immensely popular, generating a line of spinoff toys, slogans and bumperstickers, and infiltrating popular jargon. (I started thinking about this essay when I heard a man in the supermarket admonish his three year old son that “Jedi don’t cry.”) The technical wizardry of Lucas’ team explains some of this popularity, but clearly the movie touched a deep nerve as well. It gave expression to popular myths in American culture. The heroic rebels succeeded by virtue not of technological advantages, but through greater commitment, diversity and justness of cause. Luke appeared to be both a common man and a master of science—much as Jimmy Carter (the peanut farmer and “nuculah” engineer) did in his presidential campaign. The heroes sought independence, not dominance, and personal affiliation was always a stronger motivation for action than obedience or ideology. Technology

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was less trustworthy than some mystical sense of self, and small was most assuredly beautiful.

The Empire Strikes Back

Released in 1980, during the electoral campaign between incumbent Jimmy Carter and challenger Ronald Reagan, the *Empire* promised a striking change in tone from the optimism of the new hope in *Star Wars*. The darkest and most confusing film of the trilogy, *Empire* and events separate and wound the heroes, and the film ends with a bare promise of retribution in a sequel as the heroes stare out into space. The Empire is still seeking to quash the rebellion, and to reconstruct the Death Star. Han's creditors pursue and capture him, while Luke seeks training as a Jedi Knight under the tutelage of Yoda, an elderly muppet living on a swamp planet.

Luke's training comprises the center of the film. Yoda instructs Luke in the use of the Force, aided periodically by Ben's apparition, while tormenting him with near zen challenges. In explanation and instruction Yoda is suitably cryptic, "You must unlearn what you have learned. . . my ally is the force. Life creates it. . . Its energy surrounds us and binds us. . . You must feel the force around you. . . everywhere. . . the rock, the tree. . ." Yoda then raises Luke's sunken ship through will. Luke is astounded. "I don't believe it," he says. Yoda responds sadly, "that is why you fail." The ship sinks below the swamp again. Faith is critical to make any of this work.

Against Yoda's counsel, Luke leaves training early to rescue Han and Leia, who he (correctly) senses are in trouble. Seeking help, they have travelled to Cloud City (the only place black people appear in the trilogy) to find Han's old friend, Lando Calrissian. Lando attacks, then embraces the heroes, before betraying them to the Empire; then, betrayed by Darth Vader, he helps Leia escape, incites a rebellion, and joins the rebel alliance. Darth freezes Han in carbonite, then gives the frozen Solo to bounty hunters. Luke arrives as the other heroes escape in the *Falcon*, and confronts Darth.

"You are not a Jedi yet," Darth reminds him, as they draw sabres and fight. Darth cuts off Luke's right hand, and invites him to join the Empire. He also tells him that he is Luke's father. Luke screams, cries and denies, but Darth has the Force with him, "Search your feelings," he says, "You know it to be true. We can rule the galaxy as father and son. . . come with me, it is the only way." But Luke finds another way, dropping off the side of the building. Hanging by a small piece of pipe, he calls to Leia telepathically, and the *Falcon* returns to rescue him. The film ends in disarray. Lando is off in the *Falcon* to rescue Han from his creditor, Jabba the Hut, while Leia visits Luke in the hospital,

where he has been fitted with a new black mechanical hand, reminiscent of all of Darth.

Indeed, the disarray of *Empire* well reflected the political upheaval of 1980. The Carter presidency had reached a similar level of confusion, as the administration had jettisoned the more conciliatory aspects of its foreign policy, including restrained military spending, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, participation in the Moscow Olympics, and arms control. Although Carter's new hawkishness may have helped him win the Democratic nomination for the presidency, it left him effectively defenseless against Ronald Reagan, the Republican nominee who promised a tougher foreign posture—and perhaps more importantly, a return to a mythic past of conventional values and Pax Americana. Carter offered only a softer version of his opponent's message, leaving voters with little apparent choice. Given this context, Carter's last minute attempt to raise the issues of nuclear proliferation and nuclear war, voiced through his daughter's concerns in a televised debate, seemed disingenuous.⁷

Reagan took office in 1981, seeking to make good on his campaign promises in military and foreign policy, increasing Carter's already increased military budgets, continuing all of the weapons systems Carter had started and resurrecting a few Carter had cancelled, such as the B-1 bomber and two nuclear powered aircraft carriers. In 1982 and 1983 the situation appeared especially desperate, generating the strongest antinuclear movement the United States had yet seen. The last Star Wars film would emerge amidst a climate of conflict and confusion.

The Return of the Jedi

The final installment of Star Wars, released early in 1983, shortly after Ronald Reagan announced his strategic defense initiative, *Return* is fittingly the most pantheist and primitivist in the series. In the face of insurmountable technological odds, the rebels, armed with the Force and primitive (even by 20th century standards) weapons, defeat the Empire, destroy the Emperor and redeem Darth Vader. Of course, it looks bleak at the outset. The Empire has virtually destroyed the rebel alliance and finished construction of the Death Star. Meanwhile, the rebels are dispirited and isolated. (It is *Star Wars* all over again.)

The rebels mount several attempts to rescue Han Solo who, still frozen in carbonite, is mounted on the wall of Jabba's den of hedonism, which is populated by all manners of slimy sycophantic types. As the rescues fail, Jabba gains custody of the droids, Chewbacca, Leia (who, posing as a bounty hunter succeeds in thawing Han late one night) and eventually Luke. Jabba plans to use Leia (as a private dancer on a leash) and the droids (R2 has been reduced to selling drinks) and throw the others down a bottomless pit. Captive and apparently helpless, Luke,

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now a Jedi, demands that Jabba free them all or be destroyed. Jabba laughs, sealing his doom and that of his entire entourage. Effecting their escape by killing Jabba and his party, Luke and R2 return to Degna to complete the Jedi training with Yoda, while the others return to the *Millenium Falcon*.

Luke arrives to find Yoda on his deathbed. Yoda confirms that Darth is indeed Luke's father, formerly Anakin Skywalker, and notes that he must confront Darth in order to become a Jedi. "You will be the last of the Jedi," Yoda gasps, then dies and disappears. Ben's emanation comforts Luke, tells him that Leia is indeed his sister, with comparable Jedi potential, and encourages him to go on. Luke then returns to the rebel alliance, where the rebel command staff plans the final assault on the Death Star. Han, Luke (now both generals) and Princess Leia are to lead a ground attack to disable the power source for the Death Star's protective shield, and then General Lando Calrissian will lead the space attack.

On the ground, the rebels engage in a series of guerrilla battles with storm troopers, and are then captured by the Ewoks, tiny teddy bear-like creatures who plan to eat them, with the exceptions of Leia, who is a friend, and C3-P0, whom they worship as a god. The rebels escape the meal and forge an alliance with the Ewoks. Together, they defeat the imperial troops and disable the force shield. Luke then leaves to confront Darth directly; he plans to "turn" him to the good side of the force. Darth and the Emperor, aware of Luke's intent, plan to take advantage of his naivete and compassion.

Luke surrenders to Darth, who turns him over to the Emperor. The Emperor welcomes Luke, releases his handcuffs and sends the guards away, leaving the two alone with Darth. The Emperor orchestrates a duel between Darth Vader and Luke, who is reluctant to fight. He defends himself only, but far more effectively than in the previous film. Despite the Emperor's urging, however, Luke refuses to kill his father, throwing down his sabre and declaring "I am a Jedi like my father before me." His empire threatened, the Emperor himself now attacks Luke with electric rays and lightning bolts as Darth watches and Luke calls for help. At the last possible moment, Darth turns on the Emperor, and throws him down the reactor core of their ship, then breathes heavily and falls to the floor. Luke reaches Darth and holds him in his arms. The moral battle concluded, it remains only to sweep up the pieces.

The rebel fighters, under Lando's direction, blow up the Death Star. Recognizing his imminent death, Darth asks Luke to help him remove his helmet and mask, then tells him to leave him to die. Luke refuses, "I have to save you," he says. "You already have, Luke," Darth replies, then dies conveniently, as Luke exits. The Death Star explodes in a nova visible to the Ewoks on the planet below. The rebels rejoice, Han and

Leia acknowledge their love, and absolutely everyone left alive is ecstatic. The Ewoks burn their dead heroes (and Anakin Skywalker) in a night ritual, dancing and beating drums, as the Jedi (Ben, Yoda and Anakin) look on approvingly.

Star Wars in Politics

Oddly, the political use of the Star Wars films is predicated on a reversal of terms. Ronald Reagan promised that his strategic defense initiative would one day end the threat of nuclear destruction by creating an impenetrable “peace shield” to protect the United States from any Soviet nuclear attack. Space-based defenses would destroy enemy nuclear missiles in space, providing a more stable security than the deterrence of mutually assured destruction (MAD). “Star Wars,” at least in Reagan’s vision, would end deterrence by retaliation and replace it with deterrence by defense. Rhetorically, it was an attractive notion, finding a technological *deus ex machina* to end the terror of the arms race. “Wouldn’t it be better to save lives than to avenge them?” Reagan asked.⁸ Such an apocalyptic premise is clearly the province not of the often Luddite rebels, but of the evil Empire.

SDI was immediately confronted with opposition from a wide range of sources. Strategic theorists questioned the viability of a defense-based deterrence regime. Pentagon planners resented the commitment of large resources to a research effort with little immediate prospect of a military payoff. Peace activists wondered if the Star Wars technologies might be used offensively, worried that it would complicate or frustrate arms control, and rejected the notion of technological solutions to political problems.

The Star Wars plan had bypassed the institutional scientific establishment, including not only Lawrence Livermore and Los Alamos research laboratories, but even the President’s science advisor.⁹ Many within the scientific establishment, including the laboratory directors, contended that the program had been oversold, and that the peace shield was a technological impossibility.¹⁰ Thus, much of the debate turned on the issue of whether or not Reagan’s utopian vision was possible, rather than whether or not it was desirable, essentially conceding a kind of moral high ground to the administration. Framed in this way, SDI believers had a relatively safe rhetorical response: never doubt the imagination, initiative, and capabilities of American scientists; isn’t it better to see what solutions they can devise?

The Romance of Technology

At first glance, the Star Wars trilogy seems to support this approach. The movies are in themselves a technological tour de force, with spectacular special effects and innovative cinematic techniques. At the

same time, however, the films explicitly and implicitly criticize faith in technology at every possible turn. Several themes emerge very clearly. First, small is beautiful, clearly reminiscent of the culture of the 1970s, when the trilogy was conceived. Second, initiative, creativity and risk-taking can always overcome superior technology. Third, technology is not to be trusted, for it corrupts human capacity and judgment.

Superweapons and impenetrable shields are the property not of the rebel alliance, but the evil Empire, which clearly possesses superior technological prowess. It is unable, however, to overcome the ingenuity (and moral superiority) of the rebels. The Empire's equipment never fails; its weapons never misfire, the scanners never report false information and the faceless stormtroopers (also part of the machinery of oppression) never disobey. Yet the Empire's forces are always frustrated by the smaller forces, less sophisticated weapons, and tactical innovation of the rebels. In contrast, the heroes are forced to make do with inferior equipment which frequently fails, patched together with ingenuity and tactics generally borne of desperation, that make the best of bad circumstances. It is a human or moral failure which makes the Empire vulnerable, the same element that allows the rebels to succeed.

This point is underscored by Lucas' decision to use the droids as the narrative center of the films. In the first few minutes of *Star Wars*, C3-P0 calls R2-D2 a "malfunctioning little twerp." We then follow the droids across the galaxy and see them subject to the waves and whims of destiny, the Force and human agency. C3, sporting the only middle-Atlantic accent in the alliance, provides a running commentary of the audacity of the rebels by continually calculating (and reporting) the astronomical odds against success of every rebel operation. Yet Han Solo, Luke Skywalker and Princess Leia always go with their instincts rather than the odds (and they always win). The heroes also demonstrate an uncanny loyalty to their droids. In *Star Wars*, Luke is offered a fresh R2 unit to guide his fighter, but chooses to keep the battered R2-D2 because of their experiences together. In *Empire*, when C3 is blasted into hundreds of pieces, the Wookiee Chewbacca carries the pieces on his back while working to reassemble his friend.

It is not surprising that the Empire, with its focus on efficiency and efficacy, does not name its droids, but an even starker contrast is provided by the Empire's treatment of its people, who function as replaceable cogs in the Imperial machine. Darth Vader repeatedly demonstrates his willingness to execute commanders who allow the rebels any advantage, strangling them long-distance with the Force and giving battlefield promotions to terrified underlings. Darth greets the admission of error and acceptance of responsibility, tried by one admiral, with thanks—and death. In *Return*, we see that even Darth is deemed

expendable by the Emperor, who invites Luke to kill and replace his father.

Throughout the battle scenes, the large Imperial weapons, walkers, battleships and Death Stars are frustrated by smaller and more versatile rebel equipment. Rebel fighters use harpoons and tow ropes to trip walkers in a desert battle and snub fighters to infiltrate the defenses of the Death Star. They are all small enough to avoid the major defenses and attacks of the Empire's weapons. Most impressive is Solo's smuggling ship, the *Millennium Falcon*, which is constantly beset by all kinds of technological failures. Chronically unable to achieve "hyper-drive" (light speed), Solo avoids destruction or capture by leading Imperial fighters through an asteroid field; he eludes the Death Star by landing on top of it, then drifting off with the garbage. The *Falcon's* odd construction allows the heroes a secret hiding place when searched by Imperial troops. Yet, despite its essential funkiness, the *Falcon* is the command ship of the final rebel attack on the Death Star.

As spectacular as the multi-ship space battles are, however, the most dramatic and critical scenes are duels between Jedi knights using light sabres. Clearly phallic, the will-powered laser, described by Obi-wan as "an elegant weapon of a nobler day," is disdained by all but the Jedi. Solo, who says that he would always prefer a good blaster, uses the sabre to slay and open a beast to keep Luke warm in the desert in *Empire*. It is the only non-Jedi use of the weapon in the films, possible because of Solo's strong feelings for Luke and the extreme circumstances. To become a Jedi, Luke must build his own sabre, developing his own distinctive green tinge. He uses it in hand-to-hand combat against both primitive beasts and imperial stormtroopers. It is with the light sabre that Darth Vader slays Obi-wan in the first film. Ben's blue light blade, shorter than Darth's red beam, flickers as Darth taunts him. "Your power is weak, old man," he says. Light sabre duels between Darth and Luke serve as the moral and dramatic cores of both *Empire* and *Return*.

The ultimate irony of technological advantage is demonstrated most dramatically in the final earth battle, in which the Ewoks defeat Imperial forces using sticks, rocks, spears, catapults, winged assault, ropes and hand-to-hand combat. With bravery and superior tactics, the tiny Ewoks are able to seize walkers, defeat stormtroopers and ultimately help disable the force shield to make the rebel victory possible. Importantly, after the battle the Ewoks are able to put down their weapons and hold an ecstatic dancing celebration around a fire. It's impossible to imagine the stormtroopers doffing their helmets and dancing similarly if they had won.

Ewok weaponry is versatile and subservient to Ewok designs. In contrast, Empire technology overwhelms both victims and perpetrators. Obi-wan tells Luke that the young man is mistaken about the good

that might be in his father, for Darth is now “more machine than man.” Luke’s own mechanical right hand strains at the temptation of the dark side when the Emperor challenges him. Finally, as he dies, Darth asks Luke to help him remove his trademark helmet and faceplate, even though he knows it means his death, so that he can look at his son with his own eyes. The heavy breathing, pronounced footsteps and booming baritone now all disappear, as we see a middle-aged man relax and die, apparently redeemed—for he will appear in Jedi heaven in the last shot.

Darth or Dad?: Images of Fatherhood

Luke’s development throughout the trilogy takes him through a series of surrogate fathers, as he struggles to grow up in a chaotic and hostile world. He is repeatedly orphaned and adopted, as he tries to discover his destiny, and with it his identity.¹¹ In *Star Wars*, Luke feels trapped on his aunt and uncle’s moisture farm. He is desperate to escape his pedestrian farm life and attend the space academy to become a pilot. His adoptive parents fear there may be too much of his father in him, that he is too reckless and wild, but the past is never discussed.

As resentful as he is about staying on the farm, he is unwilling to disobey his aunt and uncle, although he will complain. He is drawn into the adventure when he buys the droids from pirates for farmwork. Like all American farmboys, Luke is an inveterate tinkerer, working to keep the machinery intact. Trying to fix R2, he runs across Leia’s message for help, and it is by following the droid that he ultimately meets “Old Ben” Kanobie, as clear a surrogate father figure as the American cinema has ever produced. Ben tells Luke about his real father, Anakin Skywalker, who had been Ben’s friend and ally, and presents Luke with his father’s light sabre, inviting him into Jedi training. Offering Anakin’s legacy, the allure and mysticism of Jedi secrets, the promise of adventure and the appeals of the beautiful Princess Leia, Ben knows he has won Luke’s commitment to the cause, even as he tells Luke that he must make his own choices.

The choice is preempted, however, when Luke learns that Imperial troops have killed his aunt and uncle. The option of choosing familial duty and staying on the farm has been foreclosed. Orphaned for the second time, Luke is now Ben’s charge. The older man will initiate him into the ways of the Force, and protect him until Luke has reached maturity; he calls Luke, “Son.” Jedi knighthood, and the strong relationship to the Force it entails, apparently includes a genetic component, for Ben repeatedly tells Luke that the Force is strong within him as it was for his father. We later learn Luke’s sister Leia also has comparable Jedi potential (though in the “G” rated films, she never touches a light sabre). He urges the young man to find his strength within, to trust himself and to feel the Force in making decisions about

tactics or ethics. Ben's tutelage is short-lived, however. Seeking to save rebel prospects for victory, represented in the persons of Luke, Leia and Han Solo, Ben allows himself to be slain by Darth Vader in a duel, knowing the ensuing confusion will give the others time to escape. "If you strike me down," Ben warns Darth, "I will become more powerful than you can imagine." Darth's light sabre passes through Ben's robe, but the old man disappears as his robe falls to the ground. (No Jedi corpses litter Star Wars' landscapes.) As Luke and his friends take off, Ben becomes a ghostly presence, his voice advising Luke to run.

This is, of course, hardly the stuff of engaged fatherhood. Luke seeks another surrogate in Han Solo, who calls him "Kid," but the model is flawed. Solo energetically expresses his disdain for the Force and for political causes generally, and vociferously maintains an explicit commitment to look out for himself rather than Luke or the rebel alliance. Further, both he and Luke are initially rivals for Princess Leia's affections. At best, he is an older brother, taunting, teasing and protecting. Luke has been orphaned, but oddly not abandoned, as Ben continues to serve as a conscience and an advisor—at least on general matters. In the succeeding space battle, when Luke is among numerous small snub fighter pilots attacking the giant Death Star, Ben's disembodied voice whispers instructions, telling Luke to feel the Force and trust his feelings. (Solo, who has promised to leave the battle to settle his debts, has a fit of conscience and returns to protect Luke.) And it is when Luke takes his mentor's advice, rejecting the targeting scope and computer on board to make a bombing pass on instinct, that he succeeds in destroying the Death Star and ending the dramatic conflict of the film.

The Empire Strikes Back is a film about Luke's continued search for his father. Instructed by the late Obi-wan to continue his Jedi training, Luke sets out for a distant swamp planet to find the Jedi master, Yoda. Wizen and small, Yoda is an unlikely trainer of warriors, and Luke doubts his identity from the start. The master's manner confuses him further, as Yoda whines and wheedles for food, hitting R2 with his cane. The bases of the master's instruction are much the same as Obi-wan's—feel the Force, trust your feelings, look within and believe. As Luke progresses in his training, he shows increasing deference to his master, who informs him that he must enter a swamp cave to complete his training, bringing in no weapons, for the cave contains only what one brings inside. There are no reflections of eternal truth in this parable; rather, Luke confronts his own fears in a vision of Darth Vader. The two duel with light sabres, and Luke decapitates the evil vision, only to find his own visage in Darth's helmet. Terrified, he runs out to find Yoda.

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He finds the courage to confront the actual Darth Vader only when he feels his friends in jeopardy. The aspiring Jedi, armed with his father's sabre, seeks out and finds Darth Vader, whom he knows is at the center of the Empire's evil. Obi-wan had told him that Darth, another Jedi, had killed Luke's father, Anakin Skywalker. As they duel, Darth explains that the story is slightly different, that he is Anakin, Luke's father. Luke refuses to believe, but Darth—in true Jedi fashion—tells him to look inside himself for the truth. Luke is enraged, and attacks Darth with an abandon which proves to be his undoing, for Darth is stronger and more controlled. Luke lunges at Darth with his sabre in both hands, while Darth easily parries Luke's thrust with one hand. He strikes at Luke, severing the young Jedi's right hand, and with it his sabre and connection to the Force. It is an horrific masturbation fantasy. Darth has robbed Luke of his Jedihood, reminding him of his youth and effective impotence. Outside Cloud City, Luke clings with his remaining hand to the edge of a bridge, as Darth approaches slowly, inviting his son to join him in ruling the Empire. The dark side beckons, and Luke, disarmed, demoralized and maimed, seems to have little choice: surrender (morally as well as tactically) or die. He releases his hold on the building, choosing not to choose.

Although he is rescued by Leia and Lando in the *Falcon*, Luke is not the same. He has fallen from innocence, and now distrusts not only his father, but also his surrogates, who kept from him knowing of Darth's paternity. Symbolically, his right hand has been replaced by a black mechanical one similar to Darth Vader's. He is, he knows now, his father's son, supremely conscious of his own vulnerability, both in battle against Darth and from within. The movie ends darkly.

In *Return*, Luke identifies himself as a Jedi; he has made his own sabre and wears the monk's robes of a Jedi master. Armed with knowledge of the Force, he is able to duplicate some of Ben's tricks, winning entrance to Jabba's lair by controlling the minds of his guards, and demonstrating the skill with a light sabre that only a Jedi knows. After effecting the rescue of Han and his friends, however, Luke returns to Yoda's planet in hopes of completing his training. The master is on his deathbed, however, and tells Luke that the younger man now knows everything. Lamenting Luke's rush through his training, Yoda's last words are naturally about the Force. "Remember," he says, "a Jedi's strength flows from the Force. . . once you start down the dark path, forever will it dominate your destiny. . . Don't underestimate the Emperor's power or your father's fate you will follow." The prediction of following in father's footsteps is surely first the fantasy then the nightmare of most young boys.

Orphaned yet again, Luke is confused and desperate until Ben's emanation reappears, comforting him and telling him that Yoda will always be with him. He apologizes for concealing Darth's true identity, and tells him of his twin sister, whom Luke instantly realizes is Princess Leia. The master's advice suddenly reverses, "Bury your feelings deep down, Luke. They do you credit, but they could be made to serve the Emperor." Luke's confusion is understandable. His masters have consistently told him that his feelings were the source of his power and his relation to the Force. Ben has now acknowledged that they are also a weakness, a route to the dark side and must be controlled. He has also said that he must confront and destroy his own father in order not only to reach maturity, but to save the Empire.

Affecting a reversal, Luke decides to confront Darth by not fighting, turning himself in to Imperial troops, "knowing" that Darth will not betray him to the Emperor. He challenges Darth's paternity, empathy and ethics rather than his martial skills. Luke surrenders his light sabre to Darth, addressing him as "Father," but Darth renounces the name, and without apparent hesitation hands the sabre (and Luke) over to the Emperor. Almost sighing in recognition of the complexities of life in the real world, Darth explains, "It's too late for me, son. The Emperor will show you the true nature of the Force. He is your master now." Luke is shocked and disappointed that Darth expresses powerlessness in the face of the larger world, that his commitments to the Empire supercede any feelings he might have for his son. "My father is truly dead," he says.

The Emperor claims his role as Luke's new master, determined to teach him all about the dark side, alternately offering Luke a position alongside his father and the opportunity to replace him. He appeals to Luke's rage, showing him the battle between the rebels and the Empire, and taunting Luke to intervene and do something about it. Luke gazes longingly at his sabre, as the Emperor narrates, "You want this, don't you. The hate is swelling within you now. Take your Jedi weapon. Use it. I am unarmed. . . Give in to your anger. . . It is your destiny. You, like your father, are mine."

With obvious sexual overtones, this is a story about adulthood. The phallic sabre and the feelings and power associated with it make Luke different, but they do not free him from a social role, at least as the Emperor tells it. He must accept his father's failings and recognize his limits. Destiny means accommodation, and acceptance of an appropriate role within a rigidly structured hierarchy. "Your overconfidence is your weakness," Luke tells the Emperor. "Your faith in your friends is yours," the Emperor responds. Destiny is a solitary affair.

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As they watch the battle going badly for the rebels, the Emperor continues taunting Luke, calling for him to go for his weapon, to acknowledge his feelings and temptations, to recognize, in effect, his mortality. Led by his own mechanical hand, Luke reaches for his sabre, but Darth is quickly there to parry his son's strike against the Emperor. The two are quickly enmeshed in a sabre battle. Almost in parody of Yoda and Ben, the Emperor provides commentary and instruction to Luke: "Use your aggressive feelings. Let the hate flow through you." Luke puts his weapon down, refusing to fight his father, confining himself to parrying his father's blows. Now Darth is tired; he swings his sabre with both hands, while Luke provides the commentary. "Your feelings betray you father. I feel the good in you, the conflict." The Emperor laughs, and Darth pursues Luke, calling upon him to give in to the dark side. Suddenly, from Luke's mind, Darth realizes he also has a daughter. Suddenly Luke is much less important, there is another Skywalker who may be turned.

Luke loses all control thinking about his sister confronted by Darth, and moves to attack Darth. He cuts off Darth's right hand, evening the score from the previous picture. The Emperor laughs. "Your hate has made you powerful," he announces. "Now fulfill your destiny and take your father's place at my side." Luke nervously feels his own mechanical hand twitching (runaway technology), then throws down his weapon. "Never!" Luke responds, "You've failed. . . I'm a Jedi like my father before me."

The Emperor now attacks Luke with lightning bolts, and Luke is dependent upon Darth Vader for rescue. Darth kills the Emperor and saves his son, but at the cost of his own life. Darth's sacrifice makes the rebel victory possible, and also vindicates Luke's faith in his father. A moment of conversion has redeemed an entire life. This kind of moral equation, however, is difficult to balance. We can't imagine Luke visiting his father in retirement, discussing space-based crabgrass. Nor can Luke make him answer for his life in service to the Emperor. Luke's father must die, but he does so after abandoning the mask and the identity of Darth Vader. He looks upon his son through Anakin's eyes, then dies conveniently, allowing Luke the dilemma and the freedom of discovering his adult identity alone.

Growing Up: Personal and Political Maturity

Although the droids are the narrative center of the story, and the romance of Han and Leia a major plot device, the moral center of the films is Luke's search originally for roots, and ultimately for identity. We see Luke struggle from adolescent longing to arrive at Jedi knighthood. Importantly, however, arriving means recognizing the limits of his achievements. There is a profound uneasiness in Luke's maturity.

His role models, Ben and Yoda particularly, have been killed; his father resurrected only to die almost immediately afterward.

The real story is that Luke recognizes that his achievements have come through recognizing other ways of doing battle. In stark contrast with the technological escalations that drive the arms race, Luke's battles are fought with progressively less sophisticated weapons. His triumph in *Star Wars*, destroying the Death Star with a bomb dropped from his snub fighter, occurs only when he rejects computer targeting and following Ben's disembodied advice, trusts his feelings and feels his target. In *Empire*, he confronts Darth with a light sabre in hand-to-hand combat—and he is defeated. Although he is able to demonstrate considerably more sabre skill in *Return*, the climatic battle in the final film is fought and won with moral suasion. The Emperor is defeated by rallying the conscience of his servants, not by beating him or those servants down. (It is a prescient predictor of the fall of state communist governments throughout the Eastern bloc.) Luke essentially rejects even the sabre in the final reel, triumphing by not fighting.

We might read in Luke's process of maturation an allegory of the United States growing up as a nation. Like Luke, the United States's early development was defined by playing enemies and allies off each other, even as George Washington sounded the warning about entangling alliances. The post-World War II period was defined by the creation of progressively stricter alliances, and the development of increasingly sophisticated weaponry. Its purported cold war victory, like Luke's triumph over the Emperor, took place not because the East bloc was overwhelmed by force, but because the citizens of East bloc nations were moved to undermine their own governments, and importantly, it was the international softening which made their efforts possible.

Political leaders in the United States have been reluctant to recognize this; such a realization would call for dramatic policy changes. Instead, the government has sought to legitimate building an Empire (or "new world order") with the trappings of innocence and rebellion. Politically we demand both dominance and the sympathy reserved for underdogs, ostensibly to be earned with moral superiority. Reagan promised to "give" the completed star wars system once complete—albeit twenty to thirty years later—to the Soviet Union, cloaking the strategic defense system in the language of apocalyptic promise. American troops in the Persian Gulf, are said to have triumphed by virtue of superior cause and skill, ignoring the massive firepower advantage. They were led not by a lord, but the very human "Storming Norman." In contrast, the Iraqi dead, both civilian and military, remain nameless and faceless, as do future enemies. We need to confront the ambiguity and conflict here, and the films suggest a way to do so.

We recognize Luke's maturity when he realizes that the faster scooter or even the more deft swordsmanship, are not marks of maturity, but rather maturity is marked by the ability to lay the weapons down. This is, of course, no easy feat. Luke learns from his Jedi masters and from the Empire that technological advancement, no matter how sophisticated, comes always with a cost; that it distorts judgment while making its own demands. He sees no military or technical advantage, no matter how lopsided it appears, can ensure victory, and that there are in fact more powerful weapons. Contrary to the Emperor's expectations, Luke's compassion proves not to be his vulnerability, but the strength which makes it possible to topple the Empire. We learn that even the Emperor's cruelest servant, Darth, was redeemable via love and faith, not power. Considering the prospects for strategic defense, we might also do well to consider Luke's lessons.

Notes

¹I want to thank Bill Hoynes and Mary Ann Tétreault for helpful comments on some of the ideas in this piece.

²Fred Kaplan, "The Force Was With Them," *Boston Globe* 17 Mar. 1991: A26.

³For an optimistic view of SDI, see General Daniel O. Graham, *High Frontier: A New National Strategy* (Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation, 1982). For a variety of critical perspectives, see George Ball, "The War for Star Wars," *The New York Review of Books*, 11 Apr. 1985; Zbigniew Brzezinski, ed., *Promise or Peril: The Strategic Defense Initiative* (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1986); Sidney Drell, Philip Farley, and David Holloway, *The Reagan Strategic Defense Initiative: A Technical, Political, and Arms Control Assessment* (Cambridge: Ballinger, 1985); Nancy L. Kassebaum, "Arms Control After the Summit," *Arms Control Today* November/December 1985; John Tirman, ed., *Empty Promise: The Growing Case Against Star Wars* (Boston: Beacon, 1986).

⁴For details on George Lucas' career and the Star Wars trilogy, see Dale Pollock, *Skywalking: The Life and Films of George Lucas* (New York: Harmony, 1983).

⁵Viewers found both communist and fascist overtones in the stormtroopers. See Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1988) 228-236.

⁶See Leslie Fielder, "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in Huck Honey," *Partisan Review* June 1948, reprinted *A Fielder Reader* (New York: Stein and Day, 1977).

⁷On the political context of the late 1970s and early 1980s, see David S. Meyer, *A Winter of Discontent: The Nuclear Freeze and American Politics* (New York: Praeger, 1990).

⁸The text of the speech, delivered on television on March 23, 1983, can be found in *Public Papers of the President: Ronald Reagan, 1983* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1983) 439-443.

⁹For treatments of the bureaucratic politics of SDI, see Fred Kaplan, "'Star Wars': The Ultimate Military Industrial Compact," *The Boston Globe* 14 Sep. 1987; Janne Nolan, *Guardians of the Arsenal* (New York: Basic, 1989); Daniel Wirls, "The Origins

and Institutionalization of the Strategic Defense Initiative,” paper delivered at the American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, Atlanta, Georgia, 1989.

¹⁰E.g., Herbert York, *Making Weapons, Talking Peace: A Physicist's Odyssey from Hiroshima to Geneva* (New York: Basic, 1987).

¹¹Also see Robert G. Collins, “*Star Wars*: The Pastiche of Myth and the Yearning for a Past Future,” *Journal of Popular Culture* Summer 1977.

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