

Oliver North: A New Low for the Military-Industrial-Entertainment Network

Written by Robert E Kelly

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ROBERT E KELLY, JUL 5 2012

Even tea-partying righties should be pretty shocked at this shameless, exploitative, and wildly inaccurate manipulation of America's post-9/11 paranoia as a marketing gimmick. *24* is off the air, so here's the video game version, all designed to scare you senseless – for cash. When the Homeland Security Department terrified the country 10 years ago by telling us to buy duck tape and sheetwrap, at least they had public safety goals, however confusedly, in mind. But this pseudodocumentarian 'they're-everywhere!-no-one-is-safe!' viral video is just to hawk some video game.

The use of Oliver North is just awful. North was involved at the heart of the Iran-Contra affair during which he violated the appropriations clause and the Logan Act. Yet, now he is a credible figure for the largest entertainment franchise in the world [1]. Wow. "What does this say, then, about the market for a game like *Call of Duty*? Does Activision really believe its core market is so full of gun-crazy, right-wing types that it feels entirely comfortable employing Oliver North as someone to help sell the game?"[2]

Activision's *Modern Warfare* series has a well-known, morally dubious (yet also best-selling) record of brutality-celebrating, militaristic, war-glorifying gaming, but invoking Oliver North's pseudo-gravitas for right-wing street cred must be a new low. Is the first-person shooter genre now politicized too? Do Sarah Palin's 'Real Americans' blow away commies and terrorists with extreme prejudice, whilst wimpy liberals play girly games like *Final Fantasy*? The red state-blue state divide has now come to your Xbox too. How nice; how healthy for democracy. Is it necessary to remind all those Tea Parties who adore the Constitution that North blatantly and repeatedly violated the appropriations clause of said 'sacred,' 'holy' end-all-be-all document?

At a time when the President is asserting an unprecedented right to kill overseas Americans without Constitutional protections, we really don't need yet another wildly overhyped, quick-cut, paranoia-inducing threat assessment. Somewhere neocons are smiling, because I guess we all need our own drone now, right? But this stuff is pummeling our democracy and leading to all sorts behavior, like warrantless wiretaps or the Patriot Act, that we'd never tolerate otherwise and about which we will one day be ashamed.

The irony too is how baldly this 'documentary' contradicts the actual social science work on war – you know, from people who actually know what they're talking about. People like Pinker, Goldstein, the democratic peace, nuclear peace, Long Peace, or security community theorists. War seems to be becoming less frequent, less cost-beneficial, more hemmed-in with rules and norms, and less general (i.e., not involving all the system's big players anymore). If there's one thing just about everybody in IR today seems to agree on, it's that the US spends way, way more money on defense than it needs to. But I guess there's no money in a game entitled 'Threatlessness,' so let's amp up the fear-factor by rolling out the Gordon Liddy of the Reagan administration to freak out the consumer.

More generally, I find it pretty worrisome just how brutal post-9/11 American geopolitical entertainment has become. I don't mean violent; many movies and games are violent, even graphically so. Rather I am thinking of the unabashed relish for pro-American killing, the zealous bloodlust that's morally fig-leaved by American patriotism so as to be

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defensible to the viewer. The same people who cheered for Rick Perry's talibanic enthusiasm for the death penalty and waterboarding are thrilled to see the gleeful embrace of pro-American torture, mass-killings, and executions in even mainstream, hugely popular franchises like *Modern Warfare*, *24*, or *Transformers*.

24 constantly found a way to work in torture by the good guys, as if to say that real men, genuinely committed to America, don't have time for rules and due process. Lawyers are for sissies and liberals; patriots will gladly go over to Cheney's 'dark side,' beat the hell out of anyone and violate any law, to defend America. *Modern Warfare 2* became globally notorious by requiring the gamer to participate in a mass atrocity (machine-gunning hundreds of civilians), and in *Battle: Los Angeles*, the American hero performed a battlefield vivisection on a wounded opponent. In *Modern Warfare 3*, the protagonists shoot a defenseless, surrendered enemy in the face even after he has cooperated in giving information.

Homefront portrays the execution of parents in front of their screaming child, has the gamer hide under the bodies of a mass grave, and later encourages you not to waste ammunition on enemies on fire after an airstrike. *Transformers 3* includes four battlefield executions (because it's a movie for kids you know) and gives the antagonist the startling, downright revelatory post-9/11 line: 'We will kill them all in the name of freedom.' Wow – why not just give Michael Bay a job at some neocon think-tank? EA's *Battlefield 3*, in the same year as the US is debating striking Iran, spun up a story of Iranian-sponsored MWD use in Western cities, which then provokes a US invasion of Iran. Bill Kristol himself could have written that script, and I have no doubt after this paranoid video above that *Black Ops 2* will include some gratuitously vicious sequence packaged as 'defending' America.

The basic trick in all these the-defense-of-America-requires-cruelty narratives is to structure the story with such extreme bad guys and circumstances that the viewer can morally excuse the American hero for egregious violations of the law or rules of engagement that would otherwise get the cop/soldier/good guy rightfully thrown in jail as a dangerous sociopath. *24*'s constant portrayals of torture justified by the wildly unrealistic ticking time-bomb scenario is the most obvious example. So long as Jack Bauer can say he's trying to save a million people in LA, he's allowed to do anything – torture, maim, execute civilians, violate due process, steal passwords, etc.

This stuff is tea party nirvana where strong men stand-up for America while liberals at the ACLU worry about lawyers for terrorists. Conveniently the hero's brutality is shielded/morally excused by some lame narrative fig-leaf about WMDs or alien invasions. But the real point is to show vengeful, post-9/11 killing on behalf of America without feeling guilty about it. This is why it's terrifying.

So if you wonder why stories about American misbehaviour in Afghanistan, like trophy taking or killing squads, get so little attention, consider just how co-opted the post-9/11 geopolitical entertainment industry is, constantly presenting America's opponents as unworthy of any rights, justifiably tortured, and fit to be wiped out with extreme prejudice at all time. Conversely, if you wonder why *Apocalypse Now* or *Platoon* are vastly more gripping and engaging, while you can't even remember the story of last summer *Transformers*, it's because in the real world, the moral certainty imparted by the ticking bomb scenario almost never happens. Jack Bauer's 100% certainty in the bomb threat, which justifies his tearing out some Muslim's fingernails, is a narrative figment.

Lots of studies of war and intelligence gathering have told us just how much confusion and uncertainty there is ('the fog of war'). This is the whole reason we have the rules of engagement. This is why Jack Bauer would be in prison for life in the real world, no matter how much the right thinks he should be a role model for GWOCT. Real world bad guys – unlike in the black-and-white, 'moral clarity,' tea-party/neo-con dreamworld of Michael Bay, John Milius, Keifer Sutherland, Fox News, and even Peter Jackson – usually aren't all wholly unredeemable villains. Even after the 'good war,' de-nazification didn't lead to mass executions of the *Wehrmacht*. Someday we're going to look back on this post-9/11 bloody-minded entertainment with cringe-inducing shame, in the same way we think about *Rambo* or *Red Dawn* today.

I don't want to sound like some boring old dude who doesn't get this stuff. I like gaming. I waste lots of time on it. I enjoy action movies and FPS's like *Halo*; I've played *Modern Warfare* and *Homefront*. What unnerves isn't the thrill of the violence. That too is morally dubious, of course, but given that it underlies the viewing rush of every action

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movie ever made, hold that for a moment. What I find really noticeable and increasingly disturbing is the post-9/11 gleeful depiction of carnage. 9/11 'took the gloves off' and allowed so many directors – Bay, Milius, Sutherland, the EA and Activision designers – to unleash their reptilian id, all their inner xenophobia, cruelty, militarism, war-glorifying machismo, and sheer bloody-mindedness. And the Tea-Party loves them for it.

Every time I see one of these movies in Korea (*Battleship* and *Act of Valor* just arrived), or whenever my students tell me how great some new shooter game is, I always wonder what foreigners must think of us and this endless diet of jingoistic movie and gaming violence we produce. One movie after another game of over-the-top violence, huge CGI, American flags waving, uniforms and saluting, troopers barking canned, macho dialogue like 'Marines never give up,' killing, and then more killing, flirtation with torture. I understand why my students tell me America is an empire; we sure entertain ourselves as if we are, and foreigners can see this stuff. I know the Tea Party couldn't care less what foreigners think of us – that's their whole point, right? And I know the Pentagon approves Hollywood scripts before it lends its hardware, but I can't imagine that even the brass really wants only this kind of jingoistic pap. Who wouldn't exchange one *Apocalypse Now* for all these awful, cruel, rah-rah post-9/11 movies and games? But they gross huge amounts, of course; as will *Black Ops 2*, I have no doubt. And what self-respecting tea-partier wouldn't want to help Oliver North's rehabilitation to credibility?

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[1] <http://www.pcgamer.com/2011/11/11/call-of-duty-modern-warfare-3-becomes-biggest-entertainment-launch-ever/>

[2] <http://kotaku.com/5906871/oliver-north-sold-weapons-to-iran-now-hes-selling-call-of-duty>

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