

The Force Be With Us?

By James Pinkerton

Font Size: ↑ ↓ ☒

Published 06/01/2005

So now we know: [The Force](#) is against George W. Bush. Or at least George Lucas, the creator of the Force, director of the new movie, "Revenge of the Sith," is against Bush -- [that's for darn sure](#).

Does it matter? Should the president be worried that Lucas has turned to the anti-Bush side? One marketing and communications expert says so, because the real brand at risk is not W., but Uncle Sam.

Lucas was not always like this. One reason for the enormous commercial success of the original "Star Wars" trilogy from the 70s and 80s was that the films served as a [cultural Rorschach Test](#) -- one could see, in them, whatever one wished to see. And so those movies were generally greeted as pure popcorn-ish escapism, a la [the Buck Rogers movie serials from the 30s](#).

But in fact, the "Star Wars" films were always political footballs, on several different levels. Most obviously, Darth Vader looked like a Nazi, and his soldiers were called "storm troopers" -- and so one could watch the movie, and have the fun of playing anti-fascist. Almost as obviously, liberal-leaning critics immediately slapped the name "Star Wars" onto Ronald Reagan's 1983 [Strategic Defense Initiative](#); the name stuck, in part because many pro-SDI folks thought that the "Star Wars" moniker was actually pretty cool.

In fact, "Star Wars" was so cool, across the ideological spectrum, that Newt Gingrich said of the first '77 flick that it was a prefiguration of Ronald Reagan's victory -- because Luke Skywalker was like America, fighting the evil empire, which was the Soviet Union.

No wonder the movies were so successful. By watching them, one could either refight World War Two or fight World War Three. Or just have a good time.

Through it all, Lucas kept quiet; evidently he figured that if everyone was Rorschach-ing the movie his or her way, then everyone would buy a ticket -- and, of course, all the spinoff toys. Indeed, Lucas seemed most interested in cultivating his image as master-mythmaker; in rare interviews on his Northern California ranch, he spoke only cryptically about the influence of, say, [Joseph Campbell](#) on his work. Every semi-explanatory word from Lucas, of course, inspired sages, seers and commentators to launch yet another

earnest debate as to whether the Force was more like Taoism or Christianity or the New Age. Indeed, the seeming lack of politics in the films became an issue; the hardcore political Left decided that "Star Wars" was bad because the films were diverting the masses away from necessary politicization and mobilization.

But now, with "Sith," Lucas has outed himself as a ferocious enemy of Bush. A few astute observers noticed [the W-whacking early on](#), but at the Cannes Film Festival -- in, of course, France -- Lucas went "full-auto" on the president, labeling him a warmongering, democracy-subverting usurper; "Lucas strikes back at Bush" was the headline [in the May 17 edition of *The Chicago Sun-Times*](#). For good measure, Lucas went on to offer words that were sure to endear him to mainstream -- which is to say, liberal -- movie critics: he announced, for the first time, that his original intent for "Star Wars," way back in the early 70s, was that the film should be an allegory about the evils of Richard Nixon.

Needless to say, Lucas' words -- in the film itself and in the film-spin -- warmed the hearts of those mainstream critics who had previously been dismissive of the series, especially the [fourth](#) and [fifth](#) installments. But for "Sith," the sixth and last -- so we are told -- film, the critics have only [love](#), more [love](#), and then [even more love](#).

A few pundits predicted that the movie's overt politicking would [diminish its appeal](#), as proved to be the case with [Ridley Scott's pro-Muslim "Kingdom of Heaven"](#). But with "Sith," they were wrong; the film [took in \\$158 million in its first four days](#). [And while "Sith" will prove to be nothing like the first "Star Wars" movies in terms of cultural impact, it still seems destined to be a huge hit in America, as well as the rest of the world, where, of course, Bush-bashing plays well.](#)

And so the right-leaning lobe of the blogosphere discovered the limits to its power. The pajama-istas might have been able to take down Dan Rather, but they were [thoroughly rolled by Lucas](#); calls for a [boycott](#) were not heard..

Moreover, some conservatives liked the film's political message; Paul Craig Roberts, former assistant secretary of the treasury under Ronald Reagan, wrote a column asking, ["Is Bush a Sith Lord?"](#) and then answered, in effect, "yes" -- W. is as insidious as Darth Sidious.

Needless to say, the activist Left has made the most of the movie; some have [compared Bush to Darth Vader](#), just as Lucas wants them to, while others are [Sithifying the entire Republican party](#).

Meanwhile, folks are flocking to the flick. How come? One answer, of course, is that it's better than the last two films; the odious Jar Jar Binks has been reduced to a small non-speaking role.

But the more disturbing possibility, for Bush fans in particular and for Americans of various ideological hues in general, is that the film reflects the shifting *Zeitgeist*, which holds that the US is becoming fearful, even imperial.

That's the reluctant view of [Marc Babej](#), president of a Manhattan-based marketing strategy consultancy, Reason Inc. Babej makes his living by surveying the cultural landscape and its competitive context, advising his clients how best to act and react. Back in the 70s, he observes, it was hard for many -- Lucas obviously excluded -- to think of America as a dreaded evil empire. During the post-Vietnam Jimmy Carter era, Uncle Sam seemed mostly pathetic, viz. the poster art for the 1979 film "[Americathon](#)," which speculated that the country would soon be so bereft and bankrupt that the government would have to stage a telethon just to pay its bills.

But now, the wheel has turned. The Soviet Union is no more, and the world is now unipolar, as Charles Krauthammer [proclaimed](#) 15 years ago.

Yet while neocons thrill at the prospect of running the world, there's a downside. Which is, if America has power over the planet, then it has responsibility for the planet. Thus our strength -- or, more accurately, the perception of our strength, since America does not, in fact, run the globe -- is being used against us.

A case in point is a recent report from the [International Committee of the Red Cross \(ICRC\)](#), which criticized the US in about the most vehement terms imaginable; according to [The Wall Street Journal](#), one ICRC staffer said that American guards at Guantanamo were "no better than and no different than the Nazi concentration camp guards." ([The ICRC denied the charge](#).)

A second case comes from Amnesty International (AI), which [accuses](#) the US of running "the gulag of our time." That, too, is an outrageous comparison. Just as Americans are obviously not Nazis, neither are they operating [a Soviet-style Gulag](#).

So there you have it: the US is like either Nazi Germany or Stalinist Russia.

Still, the perception of American unipolarity is now being used against us. [In the words of AI's Irene Khan](#), "The USA, as the unrivalled political, military and economic hyper-power, sets the tone for governmental behaviour worldwide. When the most powerful country in the world thumbs its nose at the rule of law and human rights, it grants a licence to others to commit abuse with impunity."

By this reckoning, numerous [allegations of Koran-flushing](#) take on vastly greater significance: it's one a small matter of blasphemy if someone somewhere desecrates the Muslim holy book, but it's a huge matter if the United States does it. As the Duke of Wellington observed almost two centuries ago, for a large power, there is no such thing as a small war. Evidently the same holds true for outrageous incidents: if an American is involved, or allegedly involved, there is no such thing as a small outrage.

So while *The Wall Street Journal* editorial page can [denounce](#) the AI report as "pro-al Qaeda propaganda," the damage is clearly being done.

Back to Babej. If he were to take on Uncle Sam as a client, Babej would make two points: First, the identification of America as an "evil empire" is symptomatic of a larger image problem. Second, since the reality of American empire is undeniable, what's needed is a plan: not for denying "empire," but for refuting the "evil" rap. That is to say, "Yes, America is an empire. A *good* empire."

Through much of history, Babej notes, "empire" had positive connotations. The Roman Empire was seen as a unifying and civilizing force; [its fall](#) is still fixed in our psyches as one of the great sad swan songs of all time. Thus it was easy, as late as the 19th century, for Thomas Jefferson to think of America as ["an empire for liberty"](#), a great realm of conscience and community.

But in the 19th and 20th centuries, the resonances of empire darkened. Colonialism and nationalism, followed by fascism and communism, shifted the emphasis of "empire" away from benevolent confederation, toward coercive subjugation-and worse. And of course, the original "Star Wars" fed into scheme: not only did Darth Vader wear that big Wehrmacht helmet, but others on the imperial side wore the grey and green of old Germany, even as they arrayed themselves in [Riefenstahlian](#) formations, all to the tune of ominously [Brucknerian](#) marches.

Still, Babej believes that if "empire" could be shifted one way, from positive to negative, it can now be shifted the other way, too -- back to positive. After all, he argues, other empires, of a kind, seem OK; he cites the European Union and NATO as more harmless exemplars of empire: "The faulty assumption about 'empire' is that it is necessarily based on conquest and territorial incorporation." What's needed instead, he continues, is "a conscious campaign by the US to emphasize the Jeffersonian vision of empire -- as an empire of liberty, in which freedom is the centerpiece."

Of course, the Bush administration would respond that it is now doing just that, with its international "public diplomacy" operation. To which Babej responds, "They aren't getting to the heart of the

matter yet." As he says, "The role of public diplomacy can hardly be overestimated for the US, because its imperial role is rooted in an ideology -- enlightenment values of freedom -- not the dominion of one ethnic group over others. For a state rooted in ideology, the finesse of public diplomacy is needed -- and that can be tricky."

Yes, it can be tricky. As Americans learned to their sorrow, the good name of their country can be battered when a Pakistani cricket player holds a press conference. That would be [Imran Khan](#), who admittedly is no ordinary batsman, but rather the national sports-hero of that cricket-crazed country. And so when he denounced the *Newsweek* [Koran-flushing](#) story on May 6, Muslims in Pakistan and elsewhere listened-and took bloody action. Where was the US on that story? Nowhere. It took days for Washington DC to react at all, and by then much damage had been done.

In the future, if such p.r. calamities are to be avoided, the US will need a vastly more comprehensive communications strategy. If information is part of warfare, then why isn't there a permanent "war room" inside the Pentagon (that was a joke) dedicated to distant early warning? Such an operation would be charged with "rapid response" to emerging crises. And so, for example, the next time Imran Khan holds an America-accusing press conference, someone fluent in the local language should be there, on scene, immediately to rebut the accusations. Is that a lot of work? Sure it is. But it was a lot of work to create all the other components of national strategy, and it was worth it to do so. Oh, and by the way, it would be helpful if the US would knock off the abuse/torture stuff, such as it seems to be happening.

There are some signs that the US is finally "getting" the dynamics of this info-war, which we have been losing. Last Wednesday, Secretary of Defense Don Rumsfeld [told the World Affairs Council in Philadelphia](#) that the US is engaged in "the first war in history that is being conducted in an era of multiple global satellite television networks, 24-hour news outlets with live coverage of terrorist attacks, disasters and combat operations." Our battlescape, Rumsfeld continued, is "a global Internet with universal access and no inhibitions, e-mail, cell phones, digital cameras wielded by anyone and everyone." And with that comes "a seemingly casual disregard for the protection of classified information, resulting in a near continuous hemorrhage of classified documents, to the detriment of the country."

That's for sure, Mr. Secretary. That's the techno-media environment of today, in which all verities and solidities seem to melt in the air. Now deal with it. As Babej observes,

Public diplomacy can do much to breathe life into the notion of a "good empire." But it's a high standard, and living up to it requires three things. First and foremost consistency

between ideology and action, studiously avoiding actions that contradict the US's claimed mission, such as supporting pet despots. Second, language: "with us or against us" would be fine if the "us" is defined as "democratic nations and people" and the "with or against" consistently pointed to the dichotomy democratic/free vs. undemocratic/dictatorship. Third, tonality: a "good empire" can throw its weight around, but has to do so in a very different way; it can't be overbearing toward true allies, and must reserve the language of overt intimidation only toward avowed opponents.

The accomplishment of these objectives will not be easy. In fact, it might not be possible to restore completely the luster of America's image. But surely it's a good idea to try making the changes Babej suggests. Because it's apparent that the fate that looms before us - the continuing "Vaderization" of the US -- is a dark fate, indeed.