New World Disorder: *Black Hawk Down* and the Eclipse of U.S. Military Humanitarianism in Africa

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Abstract: This article argues that Ridley Scott's film *Black Hawk Down* (2001) may be seen with the benefit of historical hindsight as a portrait of the fear of imperial overreach and failure as written through the psyche of elite U.S. soldiers. In *Black Hawk Down*, Mogadishu and its denizens are made to stand in for the worst fears of the American military and the civilian policy-making establishment: the city, and, by extension, urban Africa, is represented as a feral zone in which the U.S. military's unmatched firepower and technology are overwhelmed in densely populated slums. The Mog, as the film's Special Forces troops call the city, is a ramshackle megacity whose residents are armed to the teeth with the military detritus of the Cold War. Mogadishu thus embodies the new Heart of Darkness, a stateless urban world of vicious Hobbesian war of all against all. This view of Africa as the vanguard of anarchy is shared by a significant segment of the elite in the global North, who see the criminalization of the state in Africa as a direct threat to U.S. interests. If, as these analysts hold, it is from such feral zones that future threats to American society are likely to originate, then potent new weapons systems must be developed to deal with this racialized new world disorder. This article unpacks the ahistorical character of such self-serving representations of urban Africa, underlining the extent to which policies pursued during the Cold War and neoliberal era by powers such as the U.S. have helped to create the conditions that *Black Hawk Down* represents in such spectacular excess.

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Résumé: Cet essai soutient que le film de Ridley Scott *Black Hawk Down* (2001) peut être considéré, grâce à un recul historique à propos, comme un portrait de la crainte de l'ambition et de la défaite impériale perçue au travers de la psychologie de l'élite militaire américaine. Dans le film *Black Hawk Down,* Mogadishu et ses habitants sont destinés à incarner les pires craintes de l'armée américaine et de l'establishment politique civil. Par extension, l'Afrique urbaine est représentée comme une zone sauvage dans laquelle la puissance militaire et technologique a priori inégalée des américains est submergée dans les bidonvilles surpeuplés. Dans le film, la ville ou le "Mog" comme l'appellent les troupes des forces spéciales, est une méga cité délabrée dont les résidents sont armés jusqu'aux dents avec les détritus militaires de la Guerre Froide. Mogadishu incarne ainsi le nouveau "Coeur des Ténèbres," un monde urbain apatride en guerre à la Thomas Hobbes, de "tous contre tous." Cette perception de l'Afrique comme avant-garde anarchique est partagée par une partie importante de l'élite des pays du Nord, qui considèrent la criminalisation de l'état en Afrique comme une menace directe contre les intérêts américains. Si, comme l'indiquent ces analystes, les futures menaces contre la société américaine sont censées provenir de ces zones sauvages, alors de nouveaux systèmes d'armement doivent être conçus pour faire face au désordre racialisé de ce nouveau monde. Cet essai dévoile le détail des aspects non historiques de ces représentations partiales de l'Afrique urbaine, soulignant de quelle manière les mesures prises pendant la Guerre Froide et la période néolibérale par une puissance telle que les Etats Unis ont participé à créer les conditions représentées avec un excès si spectaculaire dans le film *Black Hawk Down.*

Shortly after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, a special screening of the soon-to-be-released film *Black Hawk Down* was held for a group of military and civilian leaders that included prominent neoconservative hawks such as Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, Secretary of the Army Thomas E. White, and the Iran/Contra perpetrator Oliver North. Ridley Scott, the movie's director, informed his eminent audience that he had made the film to clear up the idea that the military had "messed up in Somalia" (Burlas 2002). For Scott, the U.S. intervention in Somalia in 1992 "was heroic in a very unstable part of the world." In addition to engaging with the past in order to "set the record straight," *Black Hawk Down* was also intended to provide a frame for the recently inaugurated war on terror. Indeed, Scott and his co-producers considered making the connection between the U.S. withdrawal from Somalia and the growth of al-Qaeda explicit, but dropped the idea because they felt that "the connections were apparent" (Elder 2002).

The presence of key neoconservatives such as Cheney, Rumsfeld, and Wolfowitz at the screening of *Black Hawk Down* suggests that policymakers were sensitive to the role that representations of U.S. military interventions along the lines of Scott's film might play in cementing support for the group's Project for a New American Century (PNAC). *Black Hawk Down,* with its depiction of the courage under fire of a small group of Special

Forces troops during the humanitarian intervention in Somalia, offered a particularly opportune narrative of post–9/11 American identity. This narrative promised to help bolster fundamental conceptions of a nation under siege. As George Monbiot (2002) wrote in *The Guardian*, "What we are witnessing in both *Black Hawk Down* and the current war against terrorism is the creation of a new myth of nationhood. America is casting itself simultaneously as the world's saviour and the world's victim; a sacrificial messiah, on a mission to deliver the world from evil."

Every contemporary war movie made in the U.S.—*Black Hawk Down* included—is shaped to a certain extent by the so-called Vietnam syndrome: the perception that even a superpower can be defeated by comparatively lightly armed insurgent forces if it lacks the cultural backbone needed to wage war. Of course, this representation of the U.S. defeat in Vietnam is itself a product of right-wing revisionism: the American public rebelled against the Vietnam war not because it lacked true grit but because it refused to continue sacrificing young men in a war that seemed not simply unwinnable but also, to increasing numbers of Americans, patently colonial (see Barkawi 2004). Although right-wing hegemony from Ronald Reagan onward has been secured by blaming cosseted "liberals" for their cowardice—for, that is, purportedly betraying the troops by refusing to commit the resources necessary to defeat the Viet Cong—both the Pentagon and the Right learned from the bitter experience in Vietnam. Exercising control of representations of foreign wars was henceforth to be an essential component of domestic hegemony. The military consequently began to work closely with filmmakers depicting U.S. wars, developing "entertainment liaison" agencies to shape depictions of conflicts, as well as mandating the "embedding" of journalists reporting on American wars. After all, cultural representations shape American popular perceptions of war, but actual military engagements can have a profound impact on broader cultural politics—as the multifarious domestic social transformations catalyzed by the U.S. engagement in Vietnam demonstrated all too clearly. For the neoconservatives, who proclaimed boldly that American power is good for the world, overcoming the Vietnam syndrome meant defeating lingering domestic resistance to foreign interventions.

Critics such as Susan Jeffords (1989) and Marilyn Young (2003) have argued that Vietnam revisionist films perform their ideological work by erasing the problematic political terrain of U.S. Cold War interventions. In films from *The Green Berets* (1968) to *We Were Soldiers* (2002), the Vietnam war is transformed into a series of isolated battles of which Americans can feel proud through a recycling of World War II themes, with the crucial focus being on the combat troops themselves, the beleaguered "band of brothers" with whom the audience is encouraged to identify (Young 2003:261). The tight focus on these noble warriors, almost always shown dying heroic deaths while clutching photos of loved ones, offers a strategic elision of political considerations of the war's motives, and pits the lone

soldier against not only hosts of enemies but also the "Establishment" in the form of supercilious superior officers and the out-of-touch policymaking elite in Washington. This potent revisionist myth finds its popular expression in the ubiquitous "Support the Troops" bumper sticker, the implication of course being that supporting the troops equals refusing to challenge the occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan.

True to this now dominant form of Hollywood military mythmaking, *Black Hawk Down* sticks in many ways to the "support the troops" script. As a result, critics have tended to decry the film's carefully circumscribed focus on citizen-soldiers under fire, a narrative thrust that leaves the viewer "in the position of vaguely distrusting government—a faceless, ambiguous 'Washington'—but embracing the military as embodied in the soldier-patriot—and may thus, ironically, defer to the decision-making of government institutions so as not to oppose the soldier culture that serves those institutions without question" (Klien 2005:444). For such critics, *Black Hawk Down* epitomizes the stance of "regeneration through violence" that has long characterized the national psyche.[1]

Such a critique of Scott's film made perfect sense in the period immediately after 9/11, when the nation grieved over the al-Qaeda attacks in New York and Washington and geared up for preemptive strikes in Afghanistan and Iraq. Today, after years of counterinsurgency combat in these nations, other facets of the text come to the fore.[2] Most significantly, *Black Hawk Down* may be seen with the benefit of hindsight as a grisly portrait of the stark fear of imperial overreach and failure as written through the psyche of elite U.S. soldiers. In *Black Hawk Down*, Mogadishu and its denizens are made to stand in for the worst fears of the American military and the civilian policymaking establishment: the city, and, by extension, urban Africa in general, represents a feral zone in which the U.S. military's unmatched firepower and technology are overwhelmed in densely populated slums. This view was articulated in particularly stark terms in Robert Kaplan's *The Coming Anarchy* (2001), which imagines civilizational breakdown spreading out from the urban core of Africa to infect much of the planet. It is a view that the U.S. military has embraced, as recent efforts to ramp up so-called Military Operations in Urban Terrain underline.[3] In keeping with such perspectives, in *Blackhawk Down*, The Mog, as the film's Special Forces troops call the city, is a ramshackle megacity whose residents are armed to the teeth with the military detritus of the Cold War. Mogadishu is thus made to embody the new Heart of Darkness, a stateless urban world of vicious Hobbesian war of all against all. This view of Africa as the vanguard of anarchy is shared by a significant segment of the elite in the global North, who see the criminalization of the state in Africa as a direct threat to U.S. interests. It is from such feral zones, these analysts hold, that future threats to American society are likely to originate.[4]

If, as Edward Said has argued, stereotypes are essential to the construction of the imperial self, then defeat at the hands of an enemy that has

been represented as the opposite of that self—as predominantly weak, irrational, and inferior—can be extremely unsettling—and not for the military alone.[5] *Black Hawk Down* may be read as an unsuccessful attempt to exorcise American fears of the new Heart of Darkness represented by the slums that harbor an increasingly large segment of the planet's population.[6] For if the film encourages American viewers to overcome the idea that the military "messed up" in Somalia, it nevertheless also includes a thinly veiled admission of stark terror over the racialized horde massing in contemporary megacities. Of course, such films never acknowledge the historical responsibility borne by the U.S. for urbanization in the global South, a trend driven, as Mike Davis (1997) has argued, to a significant extent by Cold War enmities and neoliberal trade policies. In addition, films such as *Black Hawk Down* ignore the complex forms of conviviality through which, as AbdouMaliq Simone (2004) has it, people become a kind of infrastructure that makes life bearable in such locations. Instead of such a complex perspective, *Black Hawk Down* offers a nearly unparalleled spectacle of urban violence. Unlike the initially rosy Neocon predictions for the liberation of Iraq that were contemporary with its release, that is, Scott's film articulates deep ambivalence concerning so-called humanitarian interventions, an ambivalence that hints at the onset of global paralysis on the part of the world's superpower. Such paralysis is not so surprising: while U.S. policymakers are ardent believers in fighting terrorism aggressively around the world, they are also proponents of neoliberal economic doctrines that create precisely the conditions of instability and state failure that are conducive to the growth of extreme anti-American doctrines.[7] Thus, if *Black Hawk Down* ostensibly argues that Americans must support their troops, the Africa represented in the film also conjures up potent fears of imperial overreach and eclipse that have become an increasing apparent feature of the American cultural landscape.

Combat in Hell: Black Hawk Down as Manual for Military Ops in Urban Terrain

Black Hawk Down begins with a series of brief vignettes intended to contextualize the combat scenes that constitute the bulk of the film's dramatic action. As the film opens, the Senegalese singer Baba Maal sings a hauntingly plangent song in his native Wolof while grainy images of Somali corpses awaiting burial in winding sheets unfold across the screen. These images resonate with—indeed, seem to consciously evoke—contemporary journalistic depictions of Africa, in which the continent tends to be homogenized and associated with decontextualized and apolitical images of starvation and suffering. Adding to this ersatz journalistic sheen, a voice-of-God narrator informs us that years of tribal warfare in Somalia have created famine "on a biblical scale" and that Mohamed Farah Aidid, a powerful "warlord," has taken to seizing international food shipments in order to

use hunger as a weapon against disloyal elements of the Somali populace. The world, we are told, responded to this tyrannical behavior by dispatching a force of twenty thousand U.S. marines, who ensured that food aid was delivered. When these marines withdrew, however, Aidid began attacking United Nations personnel tasked with distributing aid in the country. In August 1993, Task Force Ranger was deployed to Somalia to capture Aidid and restore order. After this quick historical summary, the film dramatizes Aidid's tyranny through a scene in which a group of Rangers witnesses members of his militia gunning down starving Somali civilians at a Red Cross food distribution site; the film's viewers observe and are encouraged to identify with the soldiers' frustration as they are informed by superiors that U.N. rules of engagement prevent them from intervening in the unfolding massacre. Through these opening vignettes, *Black Hawk Down* creates the impression that the U.S. military and the interests that animate it are not only identical with universal humanitarian inclinations, but also coincident with the good of the oppressed Somali people. In this manner, the World War II narrative of America as anti-authoritarian paladin and global liberator is folded neatly into the situation in Somalia.

It would be a severe understatement to say that this black hats–versus–white hats narrative simplifies the highly complex nature of Somali clan conflicts during the early 1990s. But in addition to providing a conveniently dramatic, Manichean representation of Somali politics, *Black Hawk Down*'s opening narrative erases the U.S.'s complicity in generating the very famine conditions that troops were purportedly dispatched to remedy. Throughout the end of the Cold War, the U.S. armed and supported the Somali dictator and former Soviet client Mohammed Siad Barré. While there were no doubt many motivations for doing so, the geographical proximity of the Horn of Africa to the Middle East's richest oil fields certainly figured prominently in American realpolitik. As it did with many of its puppet rulers during the Cold War, the U.S. turned a blind eye to Barré's oppressive domestic policies, flooding Somalia's economy with billions of dollars of military aid in exchange for strategic military bases. Such American support did not, however, come for free. After he was dropped by the Soviet Union in 1977, Barré was forced by the International Monetary Fund to adopt a package of so-called structural adjustment measures. These austerity programs, contrary to the rhetoric of development that accompanies them, tend to smash indigenous social structures and impose a capitalist model of agriculture on countries as part of a strategy of what David Harvey (2003) terms "accumulation by dispossession."

As they did in many other parts of the global South, such neoliberal measures blunted the egalitarian promise of the postcolonial development state and generated significant popular opposition—the roots of the civil war depicted in *Black Hawk Down*.[8] Exacerbating this crisis, during the first Gulf War migrant laborers from all over the Middle East were expelled from the oil-rich regimes of the region in what the Midnight Notes Collec-

tive (1993), in one of the first and most cogent analyses of resource war-
fare, describes as a reconfiguration of the international working class: "In
the environment of an 'international intifada' against IMF austerity plans,
any new attempt to vastly debase workers' lives amidst new accumulations
of wealth based on oil price increases was going to require a leap in the
level of militarization."[9] The famine conditions represented in the open-
ing sections of *Black Hawk Down* are thus to a significant extent *a result of*
government policies—both domestic and international—rather than a
product of anarchy unleashed by the absence of centralized government.
Indeed, not only was the famine nearly over when the U.S. intervened, but
it was far from ubiquitous, being concentrated in the areas subjected to IMF
structural adjustment programs, where local groups were rebelling against
Barré's repressive central government (see Cohen 1999).

The ease with which *Black Hawk Down* establishes its mendacious open-
ing narrative of African anarchy is a product of the extent to which such
representations are consonant with contemporary common sense concern-
ing the continent. For many mainstream foreign affairs analysts, Africa
embodies a new Heart of Darkness, a continent completely excluded from
global trade flows, where the nation-state has largely broken down and the
vast majority of the population, lacking formal employment, is engaged
in a variety of illegal and dangerous pursuits (see Liotta & Merkel 2004).
Of course, as analysts such as Chabal, Daloz, and Simone (1999) have
pointed out, African political systems often work along informal lines that
are orthogonal and opaque to Western governance. Such opacity is not,
however, necessarily equivalent to breakdown, yet Western commentators
often depict African governance in precisely such terms. Even a prominent
Africanist such as Jean-François Bayart reiterates this perspective in his dis-
cussion of the criminalization of the African state: inasmuch as the *pax
Britannica* or *paix coloniale* ever existed at all, it was no more than a brief
parenthesis in a history haunted by the specter of war" (Bayart, Ellis, &
Hibou 1999). For Bayart, the conflict in Somalia would presumably repre-
sent a reappearance of this original African mode of governance through
warfare. In such accounts, the admittedly grave problems of many parts
of the continent tend to be described as being entirely of African's own
making.[10] Yet, as James Ferguson (2006) points out, such representations
of Africa not only elide the impact of a quarter century of structural adjust-
ment on the continent, but also obfuscate the extent to which Africa is
linked to global economic flows through enclave economies predicated
largely on resource extraction. For analysts who parrot the common sense
view of autochthonous African anarchy, however, the postcolonial narrative
of development and eventual leveling of global economic inequalities has
been abandoned for a view that the increasingly poor nations of the global
South are not simply *behind* the former imperial powers but rather *beneath*
them in a poorly concealed revival of the Great Chain of Being that char-
acterized conceptions of civilizational difference during the era of high

imperialism. Perhaps the most well-known version of this narrative is that of Robert Kaplan (2001), whose Malthusian journalistic accounts of Africa redeploy the discourses of degeneration that characterized the Victorian era.[11]

The theme of degeneration appears most explicitly in *Black Hawk Down* in the scenes connected to the capture of an arms dealer named Atto. After Special Forces swoop down on the convoy in which he is traveling, Atto is placed under arrest in the U.S. military base outside Mogadishu. During his interrogation by the aptly named General Garrison, Atto is filmed in a manner that recalls Marlon Brando's star turn as Kurtz in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), his shaved head swathed in shadows and smoke from the Cuban cigar he ostentatiously smokes. Atto, whom Garrison accuses of arming Aidid, serves as a convenient stand-in for the warlord, whom U.S. forces have been unable to capture. As such, the arms dealer is painted, as one of Garrison's underlings puts it, as "urban, sophisticated, and cruel." His greed-motivated behavior is, for Garrison, one of the main forces behind the violence that is taking place in Somalia; he thus embodies the criminalization of the state discussed by analysts such as Bayart.

The isolation of violence in the person of Atto repeats a standard trope of U.S. policymaking. During the Cold War, movements of anticolonial nationalism were typically represented by U.S. elites as driven by outside forces. This view, a product of an American cultural arrogance that viewed all people as basically wanting to be like the U.S. and therefore welcoming American intervention and liberal capitalist modes of regulation, was strategically dysfunctional (see Barkawi 2004). If insurgency was a product of external intervention, counterinsurgency simply required military isolation of these foreign elements rather than an extensive crusade intended to win the people's "hearts and minds." Although the U.S. campaign in Vietnam, for example, included an ideological component, it was predominantly predicated on traditional warfare intended to shatter isolated communist elements. The result was strategic failure. Similarly, in Somalia the U.S. tried to end the civil war by capturing leaders such as Aidid; this tactic, as Atto suggests during his interrogation, reflects American policymakers' failure to understand the deep roots of the conflict. Popular anti-American sentiment is made abundantly evident, however, when entire quarters of the city rise up during the Special Forces' raid on Aidid's headquarters, an uprising that characters such as General Garrison are completely unable to anticipate or explain.

In addition to sniping at the U.S.'s historical reluctance to become involved in long-term imperial administration, Atto also needles Garrison by pointing to the broader significance of the conflict in Somalia, saying, "See all this, it's shaping tomorrow, a tomorrow without a lot of Arkansas' white boys' ideas in it." Garrison's jocular retort that he wouldn't know about that since he's from Texas is amusing, but hardly constitutes an adequate response to Atto's remark. For this stinging comment implies that

Somalia and places similar to it are zones in which U.S. imperial hegemony is beginning to break down. While they may be tightly interwoven with global markets in the form of weapons dealing and resource extraction, such states are bereft of the conditions of civil order and liberal democratic governance that commentators such as Francis Fukuyama (1992) heralded in the brief period of triumphalism that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. The degeneration of the imperial periphery represented by a figure such as Atto is, then, intimately tied to the eclipse of imperial hegemony.

Atto's interrogation session concludes with a clash over the issue of humanitarian intervention. Atto revives the rhetoric of anticolonial nationalism to charge that the U.S. has no business in Somalia. Given the history of U.S. support for tyranny in the country, such a perspective has substantial historical weight. However, Garrison meets Atto's charge of colonialism by claiming that the situation in Somalia is one of genocide and that the international community therefore has a responsibility to intervene. This argument, whose appeal is a product of the post–Cold War moment in which the film is set, revives the liberal imperialism of nineteenth-century figures such as John Stuart Mill (see Dahbour 2007). In the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse, liberal interventionists such as Michael Ignatieff recognized that "global governance" de facto implied rule by the sole remaining superpower: the United States. The hope, however, was that the hegemonic power could be persuaded to override a state's sovereign right of self-determination in order to institute a regime of liberal values such as respect for human rights, and that the military interventions necessary to establish such an ideal state would be temporary. As many commentators have pointed out and as the U.S.'s overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq made evident, however, allowing the hegemonic power to adjudicate and act on claims of human rights violations opens the door to warfare and annexation. As Tarak Barkawi (2004:138) has remarked, there is a strong military component to representational strategies such as Orientalism, since Western interests and humanitarianism are typically represented as coincident. Yet because war is itself the most fundamental violation of human rights, it is by no means clear that, even within the logic of liberal paternalism, intervention is justified.

Although *Black Hawk Down* devotes scant additional attention to the moral issue of human rights intervention, the contradictions I have just sketched out nevertheless make themselves felt in the film. To the extent that it has one, the moral consciousness of the film is lodged in a young soldier named Eversmann. In the establishing sections of the film, Eversmann is shown arguing that the U.S. has a burden to help those suffering human rights violations rather than simply walling itself off from the world. This scene once again recirculates World War II themes of just war. Eversmann's arguments are met with skepticism by his fellow troops, one of whom laconically comments that he doesn't know about human rights, but he does know he's been trained to fight.

Eversmann's rebuttal that he's been trained to "make a difference" is dismantled most effectively in later scenes in which he speaks with a battle-hardened Delta Force operative named Norm "Hoot" Gibson, who tells Eversmann that once bullets start whizzing past one's ears, idealistic intentions become meaningless. All that's left, Gibson says, is your drive to survive and to protect your "buddies." The high-minded U.S. intervention in Somalia thus boils down to nothing more than a skirmish between different male clan groups, with the U.S. Rangers and Delta Forces bonding through the ritual spilling of their own and others' blood. While the philosophical debate around intervention is not explicitly resolved in *Black Hawk Down*, the film's combat scenes graphically underline the fact that allowing hegemonic states to make decisions about human rights violations tends to lead to an escalation of warfare. In such conflicts, survival rather than altruism becomes the sole imperative.

It is to this survival imperative that the film devotes the lion's share of its narrative attention. Before discussing the film's depiction of the Battle of Mogadishu, however, I should note that the combat situations represented in *Black Hawk Down* are relatively atypical of U.S. foreign interventions. Despite the high profile of Special Forces within both the military and the American media at present, the U.S. typically exerts its power through standard proxy armies or, when its own forces are involved, through high-altitude bombing sorties, these days often conducted by remotely controlled drones (see Barkawi 2004). The saliency of Scott's film, however, lies in the fact that it depicts combat situations that the military believes are becoming increasingly common. A statement from U.S. Joint Forces Command helps clarify the logic behind this focus on urban warfare:

> The explosive growth of the world's major urban centers, changes in enemy strategies, and the global war on terror have made the urban battlespace potentially decisive and virtually unavoidable. Some of our most advanced military systems do not work as well in urban areas as they do in open terrain. Therefore, joint and coalition forces should expect that future opponents will choose to operate in urban environments to try to level the huge disparity between our military and technological capabilities and theirs.[12]

The Battle of Mogadishu has great strategic significance according to this military logic not simply because it reflects the shift of population from rural to urban centers throughout the global South, but also because urban insurgency is perceived as a pragmatic response to overwhelming U.S. firepower in virtually all other terrain.

This transformation of combat has come as quite a surprise to military theorists. In the late 1980s, Pentagon wonks began discussing a so-called Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) that would endow the U.S. with unparalleled "full spectrum dominance."[13] Using cutting edge networked infor-

mation technology, the U.S., it was argued, would vault beyond all potential military antagonists in the same manner that the Germans' use of coordinated air- and armored-assault had handed them primacy in the blitzkrieg against continental Europe at the onset of World War II. As James Der Derian (2001) has remarked, the ferocious destructive potential of U.S. military technology as it developed in the 1990s had the paradoxical effect of strengthening the belief in *virtuous warfare* by allowing civilian and military leaders to threaten and, if necessary, unleash violence from a distance and by remote control—with few to no American casualties. Indeed, to the extent that the big techno stick sanitized the gory side of warfare through its pixilated displays of precision destruction, it threatened to absolve those who wielded it from moral responsibility for their acts. The promise held out by techno-war for sanitized "surgical strikes" actively encouraged foreign conflicts, and helps explain the liberal vogue for humanitarian intervention today.

Yet while the U.S. military has registered the increasing prominence of urban combat zones, *Black Hawk Down* suggests that it is constitutively unable to acknowledge the underlying economic and political forces that are driving urbanization in the megacities of the global South. If cities are the Achilles heel of military power, U.S. warmakers are increasingly forced to disavow awareness of the role played by neoliberal policies in unleashing the very forces of unsustainable urbanization that they are called on to quell.[14]

Black Hawk Down plunges the viewer into the bloody midst of what Pentagon theorists now term Military Operations in Urban Terrain (MOUT). While Scott's skillful use of perspective encourages the viewer to identify with the outnumbered Rangers and Delta Forces, the racialized character of the conflict in which they are engaged is constantly apparent given their identity: with the exception of one African American private, all the U.S. forces depicted in the film are young white males. The racial character of the conflict is already apparent in the film's opening scenes, which show Mogadishu's Bakara Market populated by muscular gun-toting gang bangers straight out of HBO's *The Wire* rather than by starving Somalis. White American domestic racial fears of the inner city are evidently interpolated within this conflict in a distant land. Yet once battle is joined, the Somalis are reduced to hordes of un-people, the equivalent of cardboard target figures who can be killed cleanly and with virtually no visible suffering. The few Somali characters depicted in the best-selling Mark Bowden book from which the screenplay draws are excised, leaving the viewer with no points of identification among the Somali horde. This racial dynamic reaches its height in the scene in which two Delta Forces operatives volunteer to defend the otherwise unprotected crew of Mike Durant's downed Black Hawk helicopter. As George Monbiot (2002) remarks, the stand of these two U.S. soldiers against the masses of Somalis who eventually overwhelm them strongly recalls the British film *Zulu* (1964), which depicted

the iron-willed discipline of British colonial troops as they fought against and were ultimately massacred by masses of Zulu warriors in southern Africa. Like this earlier film, *Black Hawk Down* depicts its white protagonists as consummately heroic, skilled, and disciplined, while it depicts the African masses as overwhelmed by savage bloodlust. Once the crowd eventually guns down Durant's two protectors, for example, he is nearly torn apart by the crowd and we witness, through Durant's eyes, the corpses of the Deltas being carried aloft as trophies by the hooting crowds. This scene thus consummates what might be termed the imperial war nostalgia that animates the rest of the film's combat scenes.

While much of the film reduces the Somalis, whom Americans of all ranks insist on calling "skinnies," to the products of racial stereotyping and antipathy, *Black Hawk Down* also demonstrates the obverse side of such stereotyping animus in its detailed examination of the militia's sophisticated combat tactics.[15] For example, when Task Force Ranger lifts off in its Black Hawks for the run into Mogadishu—accompanied by a Jimi Hendrix track that indicates the extent to which the Vietnam-era counterculture has been co-opted by the Right—a Somali boy herding goats outside the base lifts up a bulky old cell phone to the skies. The camera cuts to the crowded slums of Mogadishu, where one of Aidid's lieutenants is handed a telephone over which he hears the roar of approaching American military muscle. This decidedly low-tech phone network, scavenged from the discarded hardware of the developed world, functions as a highly effective early warning system for the Somali resistance. When the Black Hawks thunder in over Mogadishu two minutes after lifting off, they are greeted by huge funnels of black smoke pluming into the air, a rallying call to all the city's residents to mass against the incoming American forces as well as a highly effective form of road block. As we see later in the film, the winding alleyways of Mogadishu where these burning tires are set up themselves become one of the Task Force's worst enemies, as instructions relayed from airborne observation platforms confuse the drivers of convoys lost in the labyrinthine streets of the city. Indeed, the city of Mogadishu itself becomes an enemy of the Americans, as Somali gunmen, armed to the teeth with AK-47s and other detritus of the Cold War, pop out of windows, dart out of alleys, and shoot out of crowds of women and children at the U.S. soldiers.

Furthermore, once the members of the Task Force rope down into the city, the Somali militia's ability to piece together old technology and to find the Americans' weak points is displayed with devastating clarity. The so-called technicals, old jeeps and pickup trucks with machine guns mounted at the back, wreak havoc on the pinned-down troops. Most devastating, however, are Soviet-made rocket-propelled grenades. The Somalis use these against individual soldiers, against the convoys that wind through Mogadishu's streets like sitting ducks, and against the Black Hawk helicopters that are supposed to offer cover for ground troops. Scott's film excises Bowden's account of the Somalis' steep learning curve as they figured out how to overcome the thick

body armor that was supposed to make the Black Hawks invulnerable to small arms. Instead, *Black Hawk Down* simply depicts the militia leaders' brilliant tactic of wiring the RPGs to explode just as they shoot past the Black Hawks' rear rotors. The helicopters are as a result transformed from impregnable airborne castles into multi-million-dollar military liabilities. There could hardly be a more apt symbol for the U.S. military's vulnerability in urban combat than the deathly gyre of the Black Hawks over Mogadishu.

If *Black Hawk Down* offers a chilling depiction of urban combat as the Achilles heel of U.S. power, the military has been quick to draw lessons from the conflict. Notwithstanding their acknowledgment that urban warfare is "combat in hell," military theorists have worked diligently to elaborate doctrines for such fighting through a series of conferences sponsored by the likes of the RAND Corporation think-tank, armed forces publications such as *Parameters*, and Joint Forces war games such as the San Francisco–based "Urban Warrior" exercise and its successor, "Urban Resolve."[16] Theorists specializing in military operations in urban terrain seek to overcome the advantage conferred to insurgents by the complex spaces of the city through a series of interlocking tactics. Most importantly, theorists argue, steps must be taken to prevent buildings, sewers, and other parts of the urban environment from offering refuge for enemy combatants. New technologies of surveillance and reconnaissance called for by MOUT advocates promise to turn cities inside out and, by revealing their entrails, deny insurgents the advantages offered by the architectural edifices of the city. In addition, tactics are to be developed that limit access of both combatants and noncombatants to particular urban areas using nonlethal obstacles such as vehicle barriers and quick-hardening foams. Extending such measures to a wider ambit, what the RAND book *Corralling the Trojan Horse* (Glenn, Steeb, & Matsumura 2001) calls nodal operations are designed to cut off and control particular zones or nodes of the city.[17] Should these localized strategies fail, Major General Robert Scales has suggested an "indirect" approach through which U.S. forces establish a siege line around a city, allowing them to strike at enemy forces within the urban perimeter at will—a strategy that for all intents and purposes turns cities into giant concentration camps.[18]

In addition, rather than completely abandoning RMA doctrine, some enterprising MOUT theorists have found a way to reintroduce computer-based technology to urban combat, notwithstanding its supposedly low-tech character. In a recent article that seems oblivious to the dystopian messages of films such as *Robocop* and *Terminator*, two MOUT analysts call for the creation of an "urban warfighter system" that is equal parts man and machine in order to allow the military to win the coming urban wars of the next quarter century. The core of this system would be a body suit with "integral C4ISR, engagement, and active survivability systems" that would allow soldiers to communicate and "see through" walls, leap over tall buildings in a single bound, survive enemy gunfire unscathed, and unleash lethal hails of lead at will.[19]

Just as was true of air war–based RMA doctrine, the animating force for this hyperbolic military fantasy is the desire to avoid eroding domestic consent through the high death toll of city-based combat. Once again, then, the military is turning to a series of technological fixes for the intractable social problems generated by the spiraling inequalities of the neoliberal world order. The logical culmination of this military research is to take humans out of the loop entirely through the creation of robotic killing systems that, as Stephen Graham (2005) observes, would "help save lives by taking humans [i.e., U.S. troops] out of harm's way." Such military fantasies, Graham says, "reduce the politics of empire to an age-old quest for using the technological advantage of the colonizing power to exterminate those who might politically oppose it. They fundamentally rest on the essentially racist idea that life in the global south is essentially worthless and expendable."

Conclusion

The fantasy of unlimited control over life and death, the logical outcome of *Black Hawk Down*'s imperial war nostalgia, is also an admission of weakness. While Scott's film participates in the now common post-Vietnam trope of military brotherhood, it also lavishes unnerving depictions of U.S. vulnerability on its viewers, revealing the folly of fantasies of technological omnipotence. The abjection of U.S. power is evident throughout the film's grisly combat scenes, but is perhaps summed up most powerfully in the encounter between downed Black Hawk pilot Mike Durant and one of Aidid's lieutenants. Laughing at Durant's refusal of a cigarette, the latter says,

> "Ah yes, you Americans all lead long, dull lives…. Do you really think that if you get General Aidid we will simply put down our weapons and adopt American democracy? That the killing will stop? We know this: without victory, there can be no peace. There will always be killing, you see? This is how things are in our world."

The words given to this Somali by the film's Hollywood screenwriters provide a concise summary of the fear generated in policymaking elites by megacities of the global South such as Mogadishu. According to the stereotypical views held by such elites, in the cities of the global South a Hobbesian war of all against all is the fundamental human condition. Sites such as Mogadishu cannot simply be ignored, the logic goes, since they are not only access points to valuable natural resources, but also breed potent threats to the increasingly unstable *pax Americana.* Most importantly, however, they dramatize the decadence of America and its tottering global hegemony by reminding us of our culture's aversion to death. *Black Hawk Down*'s Somali militia thus parrot the right-wing attack on U.S. liberal culture's lack of martial ardor, our decadent unwillingness to sacrifice our children in wars,

just or unjust (see Luttwak 2007). Urban insurgents are not only aware of these weaknesses, Scott's film suggests, but are also able to use asymmetrical warfare highly effectively to stir up American domestic resistance to foreign interventions. The only logical response is to embark on quixotic and costly quests for more effective ways of killing such insurgents.

If *Black Hawk Down* takes as its frame the U.S. humanitarian intervention in Somalia, the film's depiction of the Battle of Mogadishu also demonstrates America's willingness to deploy the sole proven techniques of counterinsurgency warfare: asymmetrical retribution and mass terror (see Luttwak 2007). While such behavior runs counter to prevalent Western concepts of human rights, the film's representation of an urban Africa riven by internecine warfare suggests that a potent new ideology has gripped the public imagination in developed nations. With the promises of development and equality between and within the nations of the world fast receding, deepening forms of inequality and the social conflict that accompanies them are explained in increasingly naked racist terms.[20] The denizens of urban slums embody a terrifying global Other, inhabitants of an anarchic and violent world that is treated as a product of its residents' inherently pathological behavior. As I have demonstrated, such representations elide the role played by the United States and other developed nations in catalyzing the crises in Somalia and many other African nations. Perhaps more worrying, *Black Hawk Down* also limns a future in which the lives of Africans and other poor peoples will be even more effortlessly expendable than they are at present. Such seems to be the logical terminus of liberal imperial interventionism.

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Notes

1. The classic treatment of this righteous victim stance is Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (1973). For a discussion of the deployment of this trope in the post-9/11 context, see Dawson and Schueller (2007).
2. While this reading of the text's fluid meaning may seem strange to those unfamiliar with cultural studies, the importance of context in establishing meaning and the agency of the reader in interpreting a text have been some of the field's cardinal insights.
3. For a fuller discussion of Military Operations in Urban Terrain, see Dawson (2007:169–80).
4. See, for example, Bayart, Ellis, and Hibou (1999); Chabal and Daloz (1999); and, most notoriously, Kaplan (2001).
5. For a discussion of the military component of Orientalism, see Barkawi (2004: 118).
6. For a discussion of the U.S. military's deep trepidations about slum warfare, see Davis (1997).
7. For a discussion of the collapse of neoliberal doctrines of global economic regulation into the neoconservative War on Terror, see Medovoi (2007).
8. For an overview of the global popular resistance generated by IMF structural adjustment policies, see Walton and Seddon (1994).
9. Midnight Notes Collective, founded in the late 1980s by autonomist Marxists such as George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici, has published important interventions in debates about academic capitalism, resource wars, and the international division of labor, among other issues.
10. In the introduction to his discussion of state failure in Africa, for example, Zartman (1995) offers scant analysis of the role of superpower manipulation during and after the Cold War.
11. For a discussion of African and discourses of degeneration, see Miller (1986).
12. http://www.jfcom.mil/about/experiments/uresolve.htm.
13. The doyen of U.S. military theorists, Andrew Marshall of the Pentagon's Office of Net Assessment, notes that the Soviets were the first to begin speculating about the impact of information technology on warfare, although it was his legendary memorandum of 1993, "Some Thoughts on Military Revolutions," that triggered the full-blown discourse on a revolution in military affairs within the U.S. See Der Derian (2001:28).
14. For an analysis of the role of IMF structural adjustment programs in fueling urbanization in the global South, see Davis (2007:61).
15. For a discussion of stereotypes and ambivalence, see Bhabha (1993).
16. For a discussion of "Urban Warrior," see Der Derian (2001:124–51).
17. A summary of MOUT doctrine may be found in Warren (2005:218). For a fuller discussion of MOUT, see Dawson (2007).
18. For a discussion of Sales's proposal, see Hahn and Jezior (1999:77).

19. C4ISR is military jargon for "command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance." See Hahn and Jezior (1999:79).
20. For an important overview of the postracist status quo, see Winant (2001).