

The Promise of Liberal Empire and the Good Frontiersman in *Body of Lies*

Busy with drone strikes, shootouts and whirlwind romances with Iranian nurses, CIA officer Roger Ferris (played by Leonardo DiCaprio) has understandably little time to reflect on the nature of American intervention in the Middle East. But his superior Ed Hoffman (played by Russell Crowe) has no such complications. “Do we belong there or do we not?” he muses, cutting fruit in his cushy suburban home. “Doesn’t really matter how you’d answer that question,” he concludes, “because we are there, we’re tired, and we can’t see the end.”

In many ways, the characters in mildly-successful 2008 action-thriller *Body of Lies* are carbon-copies of Robert Kaplan’s journalistic subjects from his military-base travelogue *Imperial Grunts*. Ed Hoffman, with his constant references to the Crusades, is the elite in Washington who “debates imperialism in grand, historical terms,”¹ while Ferris the field agent is the titular ‘grunt’ who “interprets policy on his own, on the ground.” At the same time Ferris is also a classic Frederick Jackson Turner-style frontiersman—just as the wilderness “takes the [frontiersman] from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe,”² Ferris must contend with a geography where cellphones are of no use, where messages are passed by hand while Oojami’s *Dark Ages* fittingly plays in the background.

And yet *Body of Lies* does not entirely conform to the tropes of the frontier. In an attempt to make a hero of Ferris, director Ridley Scott fashions him as idealistic and culturally respectful, with a belief that Arabs and Americans are intrinsically the same. In other words, Ferris is no ordinary frontiersman: he is a markedly *liberal* one. This is, in many ways, the end goal for Robert

¹ Robert Kaplan, *Imperial Grunts* (New York: Random House, 2005), 5.

² Patrick Sharp, *Savage Perils* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), 60.

Kaplan-style intellectuals, who, in a world marked by an “increasingly decentralized nature of command,” envision frontiersmen as being guided by a “firm, moral belief system,” built on a bedrock of “secular patriotism.” To this worldview, frontiersmen (or empire) are not objectionable in and of themselves—they are perfectly justifiable if guided by a liberal spirit. But examining fictional CIA agent Roger Ferris reveals the defects in this vision: even this imaginary best-case liberal frontiersman is not enough, as he romps through the Middle East creating and ordering difference, while replicating damaging information paradigms. Liberalism, in film as in history, on the frontier as in the metropole, remains incapable of substantially challenging empire.

The film itself has a typically convoluted plot. A new terrorist by the name of Al-Saleem has appeared on the global scene, responsible for bombings in Sheffield, Amsterdam and Manchester. Agent Ferris flits across the Middle East from Iraq to Jordan to Syria, with place-names flashing along the screen as he goes on missions gathering intel. At first, Ferris meets Nizar, an Al-Saleem member who is willing to trade information for asylum in the US. Nizar dies as a consequence of Hoffman’s (Ferris’s boss) negligence, something that Hoffman is not concerned about: since Ferris had already “milked him” (gotten information out of him), Nizar was “dry.” Ferris is unhappy with this, but sullenly goes along. Ferris is able to locate an Al-Saleem safehouse in Jordan, which he needs help surveilling around the clock. To do this, he enlists the help of Hani Salaam, the suave head of Jordanian intelligence who lives by one rule—he must not be lied to. An impatient Hoffman decides to unsuccessfully storm the safehouse, angering Hani and losing the team’s only lead in the process. Injured in the fighting, Ferris is hospitalized, where he meets nurse Aisha, immediately developing feelings for her. The team need a new plan to flush out Al-Saleem. They decide to report a fake terror attack by a made-up terrorist organization, framing an innocent Jordanian architect in

the hope that Al-Saleem will reach out to him. This does not work—the architect is killed, Aisha is kidnapped and Ferris must chase after her. Ferris is then captured and tortured, but rescued by Hani Saleem’s men just as he is about to be executed. Tired of it all, Ferris turns down an office-job offer from Hoffman, and goes off looking for Aisha.

Ferris is made to closely resemble the classic image of the man on the frontier in three key ways: through the use of technological contrasts, depictions of individual violence and comparisons with the bureaucratic Ed Hoffman. Very early in the film Hoffman underscores the notion of a core technological disparity. “Our enemy,” he says, “has realized they’re fighting guys from the future.” As a consequence, they revert to older means of delivering packages, messages and surveillance. This shift necessitates that agents on the ground (like Ferris) adapt to a world without technology, aiming to tame the wilderness of the Middle East. The articulation of a future/past dichotomy is a favorite of empire: Metcalf notes that despite differences in the British opinion of India, “at no time did these internal tensions ever call into question the fundamental British vision of India as a land lost in the past.”³ Iraq/Kuwait/Syria are all essentialized as lands lost in a technological past, with broken-down cars and potholed roads a part of this depiction. A key characteristic of the frontier thus smoothly makes its way into *Body of Lies*. Additionally, Patrick Sharp identifies “violence and individual heroism”⁴ as key Roosevelt-like characteristics of the frontier man. With ample shootout scenes and emotionless, cold-blooded killings of informants and terrorists alike, Ferris exemplifies this mentality, displaying ‘martial values’ at the “meeting point between savagery and civilization.”⁵

³ Thomas Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*, (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1995), 27.

⁴ Patrick Sharp, *Savage Perils* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), 58.

⁵ *ibid*, 59.

To drive the point home even further, Ferris is contrasted both emotionally and geographically with his superior Ed Hoffman. No frontier can exist without the civilized, modern metropole, and this is the space that Hoffman conspicuously occupies. He is a portly man, and actor Russell Crowe reportedly gained sixty pounds to play the role. This put-on physical appearance is not unintentional. The metropole tames the modern man, rendering him 'soft' in contrast with his peers on the frontier. Hoffman is always on his phone and always eating, luxuries that can only be afforded to the metropolitan man. While he speaks to Ferris, he is going through the routine activities of everyday life—he talks while picking up his son from school and while cheering on his daughter at a soccer game. He is occupied with the drudgery of modern life, while Ferris leads an exciting life on the frontier. This cushy modern life that allows Hoffman to speak in grander, historical terms than Ferris—when asked by his wife to go to sleep in their suburban home, he remarks that he is busy “saving civilization, honey!” The obvious hypocrisy of a man pretending at saving civilization while sitting in his bathrobe is intended to further valorize Ferris as the 'grunt' on the frontier who is actually getting things done. Thus these three recurring strategies—technology, martial values and contrast with the metropole—converge to portray Ferris as the classic man on the (Middle Eastern) frontier, keeping the “Universal Caliphate” (in Hoffman’s words) at bay.

But Ferris is more than just the classic frontiersman: with his opposition to Hoffman, respect for Jordanian culture and qualms about 'sacrificing' Arab intermediaries, he is a markedly *liberal* frontiersman. At this stage it is important to clarify what is meant by the term 'liberal', since its application differs greatly over time (something illustrated by Thomas Metcalf). Here it is taken in the classical sense, denoting the belief that all peoples (regardless of culture or race) are innately the same, deserving of respect and reformable by institutions, education and commerce. In this sense,

Hoffman is markedly *illiberal*, particularly in his use of language. He repeatedly mispronounces Arab names, much to the chagrin of Ferris, who immediately corrects him. There are more cringeworthy instances: while questioning an informant, Hoffman asks tongue-in-cheek “So you don’t want to kill the Jews and the Crusaders, huh?” eliciting a grimace from Ferris. At surface level, Ferris thus does seem to value the differences between Arabs. This extends beyond his conversations with Hoffman and into his personal conversations, particularly with love interest Aisha. From the very beginning Ferris respects Jordanian cultural conventions—he seeks Aisha’s sister’s permission to see her, brings gifts to her home, and consciously restrains himself from physical affection in public. Hani Salaam confesses to liking Ferris because he speaks Arabic and understands Jordanian cultural peculiarities such as the *dar-al-harb*. Even the very fact that Ferris romances Aisha helps construct a more liberal persona about him—he does not have any qualms about romancing a subject of what Hoffman calls a “towelhead monarchy.” As with his frontier persona, *Body of Lies* goes over and above in an attempt to emphasize Ferris’s liberalness, particularly in his reactions to Hoffman’s treatment of native informants and intermediaries as pawns. When Ferris’ driver Bassam dies, Ferris attacks Hoffman’s nonchalance, immediately asking “what are you doing for Bassam’s family, Ed?” The viewer is shown that Ferris truly cares about his Arab allies, demanding compensation for them the same way an American would receive. Similar to the construction of Ferris as the frontier man, a series of clues littered throughout the film aim to build further by portraying Ferris as a sensitive, respectful and *liberal* frontiersman.

And yet Ferris the liberal frontiersman is still not immune to replicating the evils of empire: he is complicit in creating and ordering difference and perpetuating a damaging information apparatus, while leaving empire for the most part unchallenged. An encapsulating example of all of

these comes when the Americans are setting up the fake terrorist organization to draw Al-Saleem out. While looking for a 'strawman' to frame, Ferris literally flips through a computer database full of faces, names and details of Jordanian citizens in order to find the perfect match. While doing so, he rejects candidates casually, muttering "No . . no . . no" as he works his way through, finally landing on Omar Sidiki, an innocent architect as his choice. The resemblances of this database to the British survey *The People of India* is uncanny—Ferris, much like the colonial government in India, is applying his local knowledge to create and order difference by grouping citizens (probably unaware that they are being surveilled) on the basis of how much in common they have with terrorists. In doing so, an innocent man is caught in the crosshairs: a direct casualty of this ordering of difference. Additionally, Ferris also performs a familiar shift from 'embodied' knowledge to institutional knowledge in this process. Bayly, in his essay *Between Human Intelligence and Colonial Knowledge* describes this shift as a key characteristic of colonial intelligence systems in India.⁶ These same systems further the creation of difference and propose ways to order it, perpetuating a vicious cycle of objectification of the colonized. Further examples of the creation and ordering of difference (as well as uncountable Orientalisms) are littered throughout *Body of Lies*, but this example encapsulates the manner in which Ferris—for all his sensitivity and liberalism—is still complicit in and actively promotes damaging facets of American empire without ever challenging it directly.

Despite all this, the valorization of Ferris the liberal frontiersman suggests to the viewer that he is a 'good' frontiersman, much in line with Robert Kaplan's vision. Ferris is repeatedly contrasted

⁶ CA Bayly, *Empire and Information*, (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1996), 142.

with Hoffman to hammer this point home—while Hoffman is overtly racist at times, Ferris shines in contrast, leading the viewer to the conclusion that Ferris is the best it gets. There is no contemplation of a world without empire, just as with Kaplan's *Imperial Grunts*, where the presence of 'grunts' is treated simply as a necessary evil. Ferris is representative of Kaplan's ideal grunt, guided by a moral compass, externally respectful and capable of challenging his superior officer when needed in a world of decentralized power. But a closer examination of Ferris' doings as above reveals an inconvenient truth that jolts Kaplan's thesis: there are no good frontiersmen, and even this proposed best-case from *Body of Lies* is severely lacking. Liberalism, even if extended to the frontier, remains incapable of challenging empire. Historically, it rarely even gets that far. A true application of liberalism is restricted to the metropole, while the frontier/colony (as in the case of India) is cast as different and Orientalized as a pretext to perpetuate decidedly illiberal rule there.

If liberalism even on the frontier will not challenge empire, what can be done? Perhaps a clue comes from the heavy emphasis both *Body of Lies* and *Imperial Grunts* place on 'grunts'. With the unconventionally decentralized nature of warfare today, perhaps an action as simple as deserting, which has a long historical tradition (particularly in anarchist thought) could be very significant. Other solutions include shutting down military bases, combating military-industrial complex lobbying to Congress and challenging 'martial values' ingrained into our society. It is likely that any number of these (or all of these) could go a long way to the goal of a world without empire. But one thing is certain—there is no 'good' frontiersman or 'good' empire, and simply extending liberalism from the halls of the White House to the hearts of soldiers in the Middle East will not solve anything.

A closer look at the CIA officer Roger Ferris in *Body of Lies* thus serves as a launchpad for a much wider set of inquiries. Ferris is portrayed in the classic image of a manly man on the frontier, but with a twist—he is a markedly *liberal* man on the frontier, and is valorized in that image throughout the film. The viewer is meant to believe that Ferris is the best that it gets, and that the only possible improvement on a frontier man is a *liberal* one. Examining Ferris and his actions in the film demonstrate that even this purported improvement perpetuates the core evils of empire, leading to the conclusion that there is no ‘good’ frontiersman or ‘good’ empire. This argument has a lot in common with the movement for police abolition in the metropolitan US. Both arguments recognize that this is not simply a case of bad apples—police and American empire are structurally fraught, and liberal reform is unlikely to succeed. As the movement for police abolition picks up steam in the US, one can hope that a similar critical lens will be extended from the metropole to the frontier. The global policeman that is American empire needs challenging, and realizing that liberalism is historically and conceptually toothless to do so is a good place to start.