

“The Future is Coming, and You’re Not in It”: *Top Gun: Maverick* as a Reflection of Anxiety and a Reaffirmation of Dominance in An Age of American Hegemonic Decline

In the 36 years which have passed between the making of the original 1986 *Top Gun* film (Tony Scott, US, 1986) and this year’s long-awaited sequel, *Top Gun: Maverick* (Joseph Kosinski, US, 2022), our eponymous protagonist Pete, callsign “Maverick,” Mitchell (Tom Cruise) has changed little. Despite an illustrious career, Maverick has only advanced to the rank of captain since graduating second in his class from the Navy’s Fighter Weapons School—alternatively known in both the film and real life as “TOPGUN”—at the end of the first film.¹ His rebellious streak, evidently, has not waned, frequently landing him in hot water with his superiors and complicating his career. At the opening of *Top Gun: Maverick*, these tendencies result in his reassignment from his role as a test pilot on the secretive “Dark Star” experimental aircraft program after he disobeys the orders of Admiral Cain (Ed Harris). Maverick is thus forced to return to TOPGUN, this time as an instructor under the command of the cynical Admiral Beau ‘Cyclone’ Simpson (Jon Hamm) to train a cohort of highly-talented young pilots for a challenging but crucial mission, including Lieutenant Bradley “Rooster” Bradshaw (Miles Teller), the son of his former co-pilot Goose (Anthony Edwards), whose tragic death in a training accident plays a crucial role in the first film and has haunted Maverick since.

However, while Maverick may have remained largely the same as ever over the past 36 years, the geopolitical climate of our world certainly has not. The Cold War between the United States and Soviet Union which predicated the basis of the original film came to its official,

¹ Leo Robson, "Top Gun: Maverick and the Politics of the Action Hero," *The New Statesman*, May 25, 2022, [Page #], accessed December 8, 2022, <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/film/2022/05/top-gun-maverick-review-movie-soundtrack-box-office>.

peaceful conclusion five years after the film premiered, ushering in a new era of “liberal international order” dominated by the singularly powerful US as global hegemon.² Globalization caused profound societal and economic shifts, and information technologies revolutionized warfare.³ The original film was released during a period of relative Cold War hegemonic success and stability for the US under President Reagan, but also a period of rehabilitation for a US military attempting to finally “emerge from the shadow of Vietnam.”⁴ By contrast, the *Top Gun* of today is the product of a period of American decline, rather than dominance. While the US remained the dominant hegemonic power of the world system throughout much of the post-Cold War era, and certainly remains the dominant state for the time being, the future of this primacy is at best, uncertain, and at worst, threatened, as the hegemony of the US is increasingly challenged by rising powers like China or undermined by its own domestic and foreign politics.⁵ While “predictions of American decline and a shift in international order are far from new—and they have been consistently wrong,” a number of International Relations scholars and geopolitical experts agree that “this time really is different.”⁶ Since the turn of the 21st century, Daniel Deudney argues: “Washington’s political capacity to conduct a coherent foreign policy had been declining, calling into question the ability of the United States to play its traditional role as hegemonic leader and problem-solver.”⁷ US power is beginning to wane, and as it does, anxieties around this decline have undoubtedly begun to proliferate within both its political leaders and

² Daniel Deudney, "Hegemonic Disarray—American Internationalisms and World Disorder," in *The Rise and Decline of the Post-Cold War International Order*, ed. Hanns W. Maull (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 200, accessed December 8, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198828945.003.0011>.

³ Doug Stokes, "Trump, American Hegemony and the Future of the Liberal International Order," *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (2018): 133, accessed December 8, 2022. ; Der Derian xxx

⁴ Robson, "Top Gun."

⁵ Alexander Cooley and Daniel H. Nexon, "How Hegemony Ends: The Unravelling of American Power," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2020, N/A, accessed December 8, 2022.

⁶ Cooley and Nexon, "How Hegemony," N/A.

⁷ Deudney, "Hegemonic Disarray—American," 201.

broader population, already demonstrated by the popularity and success of isolationist, “America-First” political rhetoric.⁸

Consciously or unconsciously, the plot and formal elements of *Top Gun: Maverick* can be interpreted as a reflection of US anxieties about its decline. The film, whether intentionally or otherwise, can indeed be read as the reassertion of American dominance through a “virtuous” mission carried out against a vague and unspecified but technologically formidable enemy, emblematic of the state’s generalized anxiety surrounding America’s gradual decline as a hegemonic world power. Furthermore, the concept of technology itself can also be interpreted as representative of US fears of its waning powers, ultimately bested by the protagonist, Maverick, as another reassertion of America’s continued primacy. Ultimately, the film can be interpreted as a demonstration of the “spectacle of war”—a morally and technologically advanced “virtuous war”—in an effort to reassert American primacy and soothe the nation’s concerns over its lessening power and relevance on the world stage.

While the plot of *Top Gun: Maverick* is completely centered around the preparation for and execution of a single, “essential” mission, the specifics of that mission—most crucially the enemy power the US engages in combat with as a result—are quite vague. As *New Yorker* film critic Anthony Lane writes in his review of the film: “the premise of ‘Top Gun: Maverick’ is that America decides, on its own initiative, and possibly just for fun, to liquidate a uranium-enriching facility of a hostile power. What the effect of this attack might be on the combustible politics of the region in question matters not a jot.”⁹ While Lane’s description is intended to be humorous, it is also fairly accurate. The extent of the threat posed by the enrichment plant that Maverick and

⁸ Cooley and Nexon, "How Hegemony," N/A.; Stokes, "Trump, American," 133. ; Deudney, "Hegemonic Disarray—American," 201.

⁹ Anthony Lane, "'Top Gun: Maverick' Far Outflies Its Predecessor," *The New Yorker*, last modified May 30, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/05/30/top-gun-maverick-far-outflies-its-predecessor>.

his team are tasked with destroying is never specified, beyond the fact that it has been “built in violation of a NATO treaty” by a “rogue state,” and that “the uranium produced there represents a direct threat to our allies in the region.”¹⁰ As Donato Loia argues: “*Top Gun: Maverick* tries to re-cement the myth of a country—the United States—with a universal mission,” it appeals to the US’s role as hegemon during a period of “virtuous” conflicts designed to uphold the liberal order, most primarily the pre-“war on terror” US-led interventions.¹¹ Throughout the 20th century, US foreign policy was categorically defined by “a “clear and present danger” from powerful foreign great powers.”¹² Following the conclusion of the bipolar Cold War conflict, increasingly sophisticated military technologies and its undisputed role as leader of the new “liberal international order” prompted the US, the dominant hegemon of the system, to utilize what James Der Derian has theorized as a strategy of “virtuous war,” defined by “the technical capability and ethical imperative to threaten and, if necessary, actualize violence from a distance—with *no or minimal casualties*,” to solve frequently moral conflicts.¹³

As such, in order to hark back to this American primacy of the liberal international order which dominated the immediate post-Cold War era and thus silence narratives of US decline, *Top Gun: Maverick* must create a credible threat to the international order for the US to virtuously neutralize, thereby reasserting its hegemony.¹⁴ However, when this imperative is combined with the film’s desire to maintain some degree of political neutrality to appeal to a wider international audience beyond the US, the end result is that the film refuses to actually name its enemy beyond classing it as a “rogue state.” The identity of this “rogue state” in

¹¹ Loia, "The Empire," 715.

¹² Deudney, "Hegemonic Disarray—American," 201.

¹³ Stokes, "Trump, American," 147.; Der Derian xxxi-211

¹⁴ Loia, "The Empire," 719.

question is never revealed by the film, and in fact is purposefully hidden through various filmic elements such as dialog and mis-en-scene.

Der Derian writes that, “faces without states, states without faces” represent the “virtual states of concern” in the post-Cold War world, signifying the virtual and amorphous nature of threats which virtual war aims to conquer.¹⁵ The film takes this principle literally: in *Top Gun: Maverick*, the enemy is truly nameless and faceless. Throughout the entirety of the pivotal mission sequence, the faces of the enemy pilots are completely obscured by shiny black helmets, tinted black visors, and black oxygen masks. Their hands remain perpetually gloved in black leather, their planes completely unmarked except for generic, grey camouflage. In comparison, the faces of the US pilots, even when wearing their masks and visors, remain partially visible and easily identifiable. While this indeed serves the basic purpose of aiding the audience in distinguishing between the main characters throughout a flurry of quick action shots, in contrast to the complete erasure of any kind of identifying feature of the enemy forces, it also drives home the narrative that we are not to identify the enemy at all. Through the mis-en-scene choices made in representing the enemy to the purposefully vague descriptions and terminology deployed in the script, the film makes it blatantly clear we are not supposed to know or guess who the mission is targeting, beyond the vaguely snow-covered terrain of enemy territory.

While it is true that the enemy’s true identity is never specified in the original *Top Gun*, either, the 1986 film features elements of mis-en-scene which heavily indicate the enemy are intended to represent the USSR—or at least some form of communist power. The enemy aircraft are almost incessantly referred to as “MiGs,” the name of a Soviet-manufactured plane used

¹⁵ James Der Derian, *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-industrial-media-entertainment Network*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 102.

almost exclusively within the Eastern Bloc, and the aircraft feature red stars painted on the oxygen masks and dashboards. Overall, the enemy fighters are highly implied to be Soviets, or at least communist allies of some variety.¹⁶ In contrast, Maverick's present-day foes are virtually unidentifiable, almost barely recognizable as human.

The idea of inventing a fictional nation so as not to offend any factual ones has a long precedent within Hollywood, but *Top Gun: Maverick* surpasses this notion in its complete rejection of any association of the enemy with a particular state.¹⁷ While this is certainly in part due to the film's desire to appeal to global audiences rather than simply US ones, it also speaks to the broader theme of the reassertion of American power which undercuts the film, and mirrors Der Derian's claim that in the "virtuous war" which characterizes the post-Cold War period, states are frequently forced to invent their own "credible foes."¹⁸ Based off the information the film provides, the US could be asserting itself against truly any vaguely hostile state. In the broader context of the film's reassertion of American hegemonic power, this is precisely the point: the main message is that the identity of the enemies does not truly matter. As Loia writes: "It is a futile exercise to try to identify *who* the enemy is since, in the logic of the American Empire, that is, of an Empire that still wants to present itself at the top of a world order, the enemy is always the enemy to come."¹⁹ The fact that the US is pursuing a "virtuous" initiative, morally and technologically advanced, against any kind of "rogue" enemy power is enough to justify the mission and reassert America's power as the primary leader of the liberal international order.

¹⁷ Loia, "The Empire," 719.

¹⁸ Robson, "Top Gun"; Der Derian xxxi

¹⁹ Loia, "The Empire," 719.

The concept of military technology plays an interesting, albeit somewhat conflictual role within the film of *Top Gun: Maverick*, alternately contributing to and detracting from the film's reassertion of American dominance and hegemony. As we have seen, the power of technology aids the film's suggestion of America's continued hegemony through its integral role in the "virtuous mission" carried out by Maverick and the pilots against an unnamed rogue state. However, in the form of these enemies' highly advanced "Fifth-Generation Fighters" as well as the pro-drone inclination of some members of Navy bureaucracy themselves and the general narrative of technological replacement which dominates much of the film, technology also poses a distinct threat to the mission and Maverick himself, and can be interpreted as exemplifying just how deeply insecurities around US decline have already penetrated within American culture. As Loia writes, "the shadow of machines looms over Maverick and the younger generation of pilots," creating a sense of anxiety within the film as well as representing the anxieties of the US.²⁰ Indeed, the struggles between old and new technology, whether it be Maverick's outdated F-14 against the enemy's "Fifth-Gen. Fighters" or human pilots against the rise of unmanned aircraft, can be interpreted as representative of the struggle between the increasingly-outdated model of American hegemony and an increasingly multipolar world.²¹ However, Maverick ultimately triumphs over both these technological threats, solidifying the film's stance that even while threatened and declining, American hegemony is still prominent.

The role of the enemy's highly advanced "Fifth-Gen. Fighters," and Maverick's ultimate defeat of these highly advanced planes in an F-14 Tomcat—the now-outdated plane flown by the original cohort of "top guns" in the first film—represent technology's role as a stand-in for anxieties surrounding American decline, as well as the film's ultimate endorsement of American

²⁰ Loia, "The Empire," 719.

²¹ Cooley and Nexon, "How Hegemony," N/A.

hegemony through Maverick's success. The very idea that an enemy power could outstrip the US in terms of military technology, as the "rogue state" encountered in *Top Gun: Maverick* does with its highly secretive, advanced, and feared "Fifth-Generation Fighters," demonstrates the profound anxiety surrounding American decline which the film grapples with. To paint the US as a technologically inferior to a "rogue nation" when the country "spends more on its military than its next seven rivals combined," seems strange, unless considered as an expression of fear over US decline.²²

As Paul Virilio writes, through its extensive use of screens, navigation systems, and targeting systems, the modern fighter jet represents the "advanced stage" of "the disintegration of the warrior's personality," the pilot is "tied to his machine, imprisoned in the closed circuits of electronics, the war pilot is no more than a motor-handicapped person temporarily suffering from a kind of possession analogous to the hallucinatory states of primitive warfare."²³ Throughout the majority of the movie this description is applicable to Maverick and his students. The pilots rely on highly advanced navigation, communications, and targeting systems within their F-18s to train for their mission, and indeed, when Maverick and subsequently Rooster are shot down and stranded in enemy territory, they are helpless, conspicuous targets. Only once they are back in the air, safely ensconced in the comfort of the aircraft, do they regain their utility and advantage.

The enemy pilots are even more closely fused with their aircraft. The lack of identifying marks and complete concealment of any identifying human features hides any clues to their nationality, as already mentioned, but also any indication of whether they are actually human at all. Indeed, any trace of a face is completely obscured behind the reflective black shield and oxygen mask, The enemy pilots are calm, cool, collected, and completely silent, almost robotic

²² Cooley and Nexon, "How Hegemony," N/A.

²³ Virilio, *War and Cinema*, 85.

in their demeanor, a sinister comparison to the frantic energy and radio chatter of the US “top gun” pilots.

However, during the final dogfight which directly ensues between the enemy “Fifth-Gen. Fighters” and Maverick, with Rooster as his co-pilot, in a stolen F-14, the “museum piece” F-14—still a highly technologically advanced piece of weaponry—is missing a majority of these mediating or aiding technological elements mentioned by Virilio. The radio does not function for the majority of the sequence until the main fighting is over, the radar has been removed, and the plane runs out of guided missiles early on. An already inferior machine is handicapped even further by damage, and Maverick is essentially completely reliant on his guns and his intuition to win against the highly advanced “Fifth-Gen. Fighters.” Maverick does not prevail without help; he and his co-pilot Rooster are saved from obliteration at the last second by “Hangman” (Glenn Powell). But Maverick’s still-significant victory in the obsolete F-14 represents both a symbolic victory of man over machine, vindicating Maverick’s repeated mantra: “it’s not the plane, it’s the pilot,” as well as a victory of American primacy over fears of its decline, represented through threatening technology, made all the more impressive by the powerful capabilities of the threat faced.

Maverick’s struggle against advanced technologies as a symbolic representation of the US struggle against threats to its hegemony and anxieties around its decline is also demonstrated by the theme of technological replacement which permeates the film, most notably through the interactions between Maverick and his commanding officers, particularly Admiral Cain (Ed Harris), a staunch advocate for drone warfare. As James Der Derian writes, “when order and predictability decline, leaders reach for the technological fix.”²⁴ Cain, who embraces the

²⁴ Der Derian, *Virtuous War*, xxx.

advanced technologies of unmanned aircraft so wholeheartedly he is humorously nicknamed the “drone ranger” by his subordinates, distinctly represents this tendency. His prioritization of drone programs causes a significant point of contention between himself and Maverick early on in the film and exemplifies Maverick’s battle against technology throughout. Cain, like the powerful weaponry of the “rogue state,” can be viewed as a representation of the anxieties around American decline.

When reprimanding Maverick at the start of the film for his insubordinate acts intended to keep the “Dark Star” experimental plane program alive, Cain informs Maverick that “the future is coming, and you’re not in it,” and that “the end is inevitable, your kind is headed for extinction.” One cannot help but wonder if he is speaking to Maverick exclusively as an insubordinate inferior with a short future in the Navy, a human pilot soon to be replaced by a drone, or if we can in fact interpret a deeper meaning behind his words, as a waning symbol of American dominance. In such an interpretation as the latter, Caine and his push for modernization and unmanned technological advancement represent the fear of declining hegemony, a direct challenge to US power, and, when Maverick replies, “maybe so sir, but not today,” it can be taken as emblematic of the film’s approach to American decline: maybe soon, but not yet. Indeed, by successfully flying a mission which drones would be unable to accomplish, Maverick proves “the primacy of “the pilot”” and scores a decisive victory for humanity in the battle against machines.²⁵ In his symbolic battle with Cain, however, Maverick represents the reassertion of the film’s faith in American power in the face of threats to its dominance.

²⁵ Robson, “Top Gun.”

However, *Top Gun: Maverick's* greatest reaffirmation of the primacy of American hegemony is in its portrayal of war as spectacle. Ultimately, as James Der Derian writes: "It is, among other things, a failure of democratic politics to understand the mimetic appeal of primal, emotive sources of identity in times of great uncertainty."²⁶ *Top Gun: Maverick*, however, understands this appeal very well. The spectacle of war is one of the most powerful "primal and emotive sources of identity" for a nation, and during the present time of geopolitical uncertainty and American anxiety, *Top Gun: Maverick* represents a distinctly modern and "sanitized" version of this spectacle, updated for the age of morally and politically advanced "virtuous war" and designed to quell the fears of American (and global) audiences through the comforting escape of violence with little real consequence.²⁷ The film creates what Susan Buck-Morss, elaborating on Walter Benjamin's concept of the "aestheticization of politics," calls the "aestheticized spectacle of war," a representation of warfare which engages the audience's senses to create a spectacle.²⁸ The relationship between weaponry, cinema, and sensory perception is long, according to Paul Virilio, and the film capitalizes on the relationship between these concepts to create a spectacle of warfare which actively engages audiences.²⁹ As Virilio writes: "weapons are tools not just of destruction but also of perception— that is to say, stimulants that make themselves felt through chemical, neurological processes in the sense organs and the central nervous system, affecting human reactions and even the perceptual identification and differentiation of objects."³⁰ Even in their aestheticized representation on the screen, the weapons depicted in *Top Gun: Maverick*—the fighter jets—are capable of producing these sensory

²⁶ D Der Derian, *Virtuous War*, 169.

²⁷ *Ibid.*,

²⁸ Susan Buck-morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," *October* 62 (1992): 4, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778700>.

²⁹ Virilio, *War and Cinema*, 5.

³⁰ Virilio, *War and Cinema*, 6.

perceptions: their impressive speed, sounds, and the actors' real-life reactions to the powerful G-force of flying at supersonic speeds all engage the senses to create an impressive spectacle of "aestheticized warfare."³¹ Thus, through its engagement of the senses to create a spectacle of "aestheticized warfare," *Top Gun: Maverick* ultimately dissuades fears of American decline by convincingly portraying the nation's frightening yet impressive military capabilities, which have, since the United States' rise to hegemony in World War II, represented the foundation of its power.³²

While titular character Maverick exemplifies the film's stance on America's global position through his miraculous successful completion of the mission and safe return despite all odds, for the pilots of "TOPGUN" in their struggle against drone warfare, as well for representations of American supremacy, the film "may be less a matter of reversal or revival than of a last hurrah."³³ While *Top Gun: Maverick* may feature many elements which can be read as representations of current anxieties over America's gradual hegemonic decline, such as the threatening potential of the enemies "Fifth-Gen. Fighters" or the gradual ascension of unmanned technologies over human pilots, with the ultimate victory of Maverick and his team over the technologically formidable but unidentifiable "rogue state" and the sensory spectacle of war reasserting American dominance, the film ultimately challenges the very real decline of American hegemony in the 21st century and reasserts America's position as the preeminent global actor.

³¹ "Top Gun: Maverick (2022) –Real Flying. Real G Forces. Pure Adrenaline.," video, 02:51, YouTube, posted by Paramount Pictures, December 18, 2019, accessed December 8, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nz9lnIDdkMo>.

³² Deudney, "Hegemonic Disarray–American," 207.

³³ Robson, "Top Gun."

Filmography:

Top Gun: Maverick. Streaming. Directed by Joseph Kosinski. 2022. Paramount Pictures.

Top Gun. Streaming. Directed by Tony Scott. 1986. Paramount Pictures.

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