

Eastwood's Iwo Jima

Critical Engagements With Flags of Our Fathers and Letters from Iwo Jima

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Introduction: Know Your Enemy, Know Yourself

Rikke Schubart and Anne Gjelsvik

This is the draft version of the introduction in *Eastwood's Iwo Jima: Critical Engagements With Flags of Our Fathers and Letters from Iwo Jima*, Columbia University Press/Wallflower Press, Summer 2013.

So it is said that if you know your enemies and know yourself, you can win a hundred battles without a single loss. If you only know yourself, but not your opponent, you may win or may lose. If you know neither yourself nor your enemy, you will always endanger yourself.

Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, sixth century BC

Taken together, Eastwood's diptych *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006) and *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006) form a unique contribution to film history. It was the first time a director made two films at the same time about the same event, which here is the battle over Iwo Jima in 1945 during the Second World War. And it was also the first time an American director made an American film in Japanese, since *Letters from Iwo Jima* despite its English title is entirely in Japanese. Finally, and most importantly for our motivation to make this anthology, it was the first time a director touched us so deeply with his compassionate portrayal of soldiers, be they American or Japanese, that we simply were compelled to respond by bringing together this group of international scholars to write *Eastwood's Iwo Jima: Critical Engagements With Flags of Our Fathers and Letters from Iwo Jima*.

The first film, *Flags of Our Fathers*, traces the history of the men in the most famous photograph in history, Joe Rosenthal's "Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima," which in the West stands for victory, unity, and democracy.¹ The second film, *Letters from Iwo Jima*, traces the almost forgotten history of the ingenious defence of Iwo Jima by General Tadamichi Kuribayashi, who turned a battle expected to last five days into the bloodiest battle of the Second World War lasting thirty-six days. The first film gives us an American perspective, the second a Japanese perspective. Two questions have guided us: Why *two* films? And to what use can we put Eastwood's diptych in thinking about war today?

To comprehend the uniqueness of Eastwood's contribution we have to start at the beginning when a diptych was not yet in the making. We must go back to 2004, where Eastwood approached Steven Spielberg at the Oscar Ceremony. Eastwood had long wanted to film James Bradley's bestselling documentary book *Flags of Our Fathers* (2000), written with journalist Ron Powers, about the six American soldiers raising the flag on mount Suribachi, Iwo Jima. However, it turned out Spielberg owned the rights. Now, as Eastwood asked to buy them, Spielberg refused to sell, but suggested a collaboration with Spielberg as producer and Eastwood as director. Eastwood accepted. A script was written by William Broyles and Paul Haggis, the picture shot in 2005 on Iceland and on Iwo Jima, and the premiere set to 2006. As Eastwood researched the historical background for the battle he discovered a book with General Tadamichi Kuribayashi's letters, *Picture Letters From the Commander In Chief*, edited posthumously and published in Japanese in 2002. When the book was translated into English Eastwood found a new side to the battle: the perspective of the enemy. He considered including a Japanese perspective in *Flags of Our Fathers* but decided instead on a second film.

And this is where our story starts.

However, let us begin with the prehistory of the battle of Iwo Jima and the flag raising immortalized by Rosenthal's photograph taken on February 23, 1945, four days after the invasion of the small Japanese island in the Pacific. It was actually the second flag raising, the first having taken place earlier the same day. But the Secretary of the Navy wanted the flag as his souvenir, and to avoid the loss of the first flag, the Marines secured it and replaced it with a substitute flag. A worthless flag, they believed.

But if this flag was a substitute, Rosenthal's photo of the second flag raising was a once-in-a-lifetime image that immediately became an icon. The first editor to see the image reportedly said, "Here's one for all time!"ⁱⁱ And two days later, on February 25, the photograph was on the cover of American newspapers. It showed six soldiers working together, their faces invisible, to put a heavy pole (a water pipe) into the ground and raise the American flag over a landscape littered with debris of metal, wood, and rocks, with a heavy, dark sky behind them. There was something immortal about the image: it signaled victory, a struggle for democracy, the valor of the common soldier, and the desolation of war. It showed the American soldier as anonymous, yet heroic, the battle as won, yet a bleak landscape foreboding further losses. It spoke of the cruelty of war and the costs of freedom. Its sculptural and aesthetic qualities marked it as beautiful, its metaphorical richness made it mythic. A Congressman thought it represented "the dauntless permanency of the American spirit"ⁱⁱⁱ and it was hailed as "a masterpiece comparable to Leonardo's 'The Last Supper.'"^{iv} "The Photograph," writes James Bradley in his book, "stood for everything good that Americans wanted it to stand for; it had begun to act as a great

crystal prism, drawing the light of all America's values into its facets, and giving off a brilliant rainbow of feeling and thought.”^v

President Franklin D. Roosevelt handpicked the photo to serve as the symbol for the Seventh War Bond Drive and on March 30 ordered the six men in the photo back home. Of the six, three had been killed on Iwo Jima – Michael Strank, Harlon Block, and Frank Sousley. The three survivors, Ira Hayes, Rene Gagnon, and Navy Corpsman John Bradley, were sent on the Seventh War Bond Drive to raise the flag on papier-mâché mountains in stadiums in front of cheering crowds, selling bonds for 26 billion dollars, twice as much as hoped for.^{vi} On May 8, 1945, Joe Rosenthal received the Pulitzer Prize. The War Bond Drive began on May 9 in Washington and took the survivors through thirty-three cities in twenty-seven days. The photograph became a stamp July 11, 1945, the first American stamp to feature living people, and was turned into the world's tallest bronze statue at Arlington National Cemetery, Virginia, in 1954.

Much has been written about Rosenthal's photo and its symbolism. In his book, however, James Bradley unfolds the untold story of the six flag raisers and the Seventh War Bond Drive. The propaganda took its toll. Ira Hayes, a Pima Indian and an alcoholic, suffered from survivor's guilt and preferred to return to Iwo Jima rather than continue the show. He died in 1955, aged thirty-two. Rene Gagnon was disillusioned as media attention evaporated after the war and died a bitter man in 1979. John Bradley ran a funeral parlor and raised a family with eight children, and was silent about the war. It is this silence his son, James Bradley, explores in his book *Flags of Our Fathers*, which is an homage to the soldiers and the sacrifices they made to their nation. When James was a child, John Bradley never spoke about the flag raising or the war. After his death in 1994, his family discovered three cardboard

boxes in a closet containing letters, photographs, and a Navy Cross they didn't know he had. Why did John Bradley never speak of the war? Or of his role as a flag raiser and part of the world's most reproduced photograph? Perhaps, James Bradley and Clint Eastwood suggest in respectively book and film, because John Bradley never felt there was anything heroic about the flag or about the war.

Written before 9/11, Bradley's book has clear dichotomies of good and evil with the American soldiers as "boys of common virtue" fighting Japanese soldiers who are "wolves," "predators," and "skilled torturers."^{vii} Bradley presents the reader with the well-known image of a Greatest Generation, with soldiers' sacrifices, and with a heroism both common and extraordinary.

Eastwood has a very different focus. Wanting to deconstruct the "rainbow of feeling and thought" in Rosenthal's photograph, he looks for the tragedy of the battle of Iwo Jima which claimed 6,821 American lives and 19,217 casualties, the highest in the Second World War.^{viii} Twenty-four Medals of Honor were awarded for Iwo Jima, almost one third of all Medals of Honor awarded to marines during the war. Written and directed after 9/11, Eastwood's *Flags* is both a homage to the flag raisers and a critique of nationalism: the soldiers may be heroes but they are also victims of war and pawns in a governmental propaganda machinery using them as means to sell war bonds and win the war. Several of our contributions discuss the theme of heroism which remains, we think, unresolved and ambivalent in the film. When *Flags of Our Fathers* premiered on October 20, 2006, reviewers saw it as as "flawed yet admirable,"^{ix} aesthetically close to *Saving Private Ryan* but unlike *Ryan* eluding a clear stance on the necessity of war and the status of the "ultimate sacrifice."

It is when he is engulfed in this American perspective that Eastwood reads General Tadamichi Kuribayashi's letters. Embedded in an American tragedy he

discovers the Japanese perspective. Or, to use the vocabulary of French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, Eastwood hears the “call of the Other.”^x

Picture Letters From the Commander In Chief contained a selection of Kuribayashi’s letters to his family written from 1928 and until his death in 1945, including nine of his forty-one letters from Iwo Jima.^{xi} The General knew America well, having spent five years in the U.S. as a military attaché. “His letters to his wife and children reveal a man of profound sincerity and kindness,” says Clint Eastwood in his foreword to the English edition of *Picture Letters From the Commander In Chief*. “It was these letters that compelled me to think about the lives of all the Japanese soldiers who fought and died on that island.” Here, in the letters, Eastwood found “a unique man, a man of great imagination, creativity and resourcefulness.”^{xii} Many of the letters contained drawings by Kuribayashi, who in many ways was un-Japanese. He preferred to walk unarmed and led his soldiers in final battle (unusual for Japanese officers), he rejected the traditional Japanese war tactic of using pill boxes on the beaches and instead made his men dig out twenty-eight kilometers tunnel and 5000 caves in preparation for the invasion. He loved America and – like another officer on Iwo Jima, the equestrian Olympic Gold Medalist Colonel Baron Takeichi Nishi – had American friends and respected American values and their way of life. Nonetheless, he remained faithful to the Emperor’s orders to fight to the death and to the last man. Succumbing to the invasion forces of 110,000 American soldiers, 18,375 Japanese soldiers died. 216 survived. The last Japanese soldier surrendered on Iwo Jima in 1949.^{xiii}

Buried within the story of the flag raising Eastwood had found a universal story of war and loss. A very different story from the one he set out to tell. A script was quickly written by debutant Iris Yamashita and co-written by William Broyles,

roles engaged by Japanese actors, and the film kept in Japanese even if this would not sit well with American audiences. While doing post-production on *Flags*, a 75 million dollars blockbuster film, Eastwood shot *Letters from Iwo Jima*, a 15 million dollar film, in thirty-two days.

In constructivist war strategy, writes Mikkel Vedby Rasmussen in his contribution in this anthology, it is argued that to define an enemy also means to define yourself. That is, to construct the identity of an enemy means to construct your own identity. Because you can only fight an enemy you understand. And this means understanding yourself, too. After 9/11, the easy location of enemies and of Western values is no longer possible. One feature about war after 9/11 is the difficulty of West and East to find common ground, be it religiously, culturally, politically, or existentially. In her contribution Anne Gjelsvik draws from Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy of "the Call of the Other." His is an ethics where "the original meaning or impact of ethics (and accordingly the meaning of every human action), does not have its origin in myself, but in 'The Other.'"^{xiv} To put it simply, in Levinas' philosophy an ethics is not formed in our "I" but in our encounter with an "Other." We become moral human beings by hearing the call of the Other and responding to the call. In fact, to hear the call *is* to respond. To hear *is* to engage. And to engage is to become a moral human being.

We believe this is what happened when Eastwood read the Japanese letters. He heard the call of the Other. He understood that the enemy has a voice and a face. And he responded by turning a blockbuster war film into a daring diptych. *Flags of Our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima* are Eastwood's response to the call. He asks that we view war from both perspectives. Our own and that of the Other. A unique and

provocative stance which is why Rikke Schubart in her contribution claims Clint Eastwood as a “minor utopian.”

Eastwood did probably not have in mind the quote by Sun Tzu which opens this introduction. But we believe his diptych makes it possible to see war from two perspectives: our own and that of the enemy. Is it utopian to think we can see the enemy as an Other rather than as an enemy? That we can hear his call? Perhaps. But if such a state of mind exists, it is from here we want to imagine a future. *Eastwood's Iwo Jima* is our response to Eastwood's call.

* * *

The anthology has four parts: first part provides a historical context, the second and third are dedicated to readings of respectively *Flags of Our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima*, and last part is a political science perspective on war today.

Opening the anthology is Mette Mortensen's article “The Making and Remakings of an American Icon: “Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima” from Photojournalism to Global, Digital Media.” She traces the history of Joe Rosenthal's “Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima” from the first symbolic moment in the Second World War atop Mount Suribachi to the restaging and remaking of the “Iwo Jima” tableau during the War on Terror, both at Ground Zero and in Afghanistan. Asking what an icon is and what powers it holds, the article sheds light on questions of authenticity, symbol, and myth, not only in relation to Rosenthal's photo, but to photojournalism and documentation of war in general. It opens several recurrent themes in the anthology: the complexity of history, war, heroism, patriotism, memory, and the process of their representation.

While Rosenthal's photograph found its way into newspapers and souvenir shops as well as the seventh war bond drive and made the photographer a legend, a second documentation of the same flag raising led an anonymous afterlife and its photographer fell into oblivion. As told in James Bradley's book and as seen in Eastwood's film, there were *two* American photographers at work at the second flag raising. The forgotten cinematographer, Bill Genaust, who shot the scene on 16mm film, has his story told in Bjørn Sørenssen's article. Sørenssen places Genaust in the history of documentary film and discusses the role of the Marines' cameramen in the Pacific as well as the use of the documentary in telling war history – primarily as part of documentary series on television. Tracing the changes in how the Pacific War was told at different times, the article demonstrates how contemporary issues reflect on the historical discourses. Finally, Sørenssen addresses the function of the “historical facsimile” and shows how this feature plays a significant role in Eastwood's retelling of the war.

Closing the first part, Martin Edwin Andersen focuses on a lesser-known part of war history, namely the Native American and African American contribution in the American forces since the founding of the United States. Taking the experiences of flag raiser Ira Hayes as his point of departure, Andersen asks what military service meant for the two groups. The Second World War represented a major turning point for the status of both groups, however, while military service meant a potential integration into the larger American society and “a trial by fire to fight stereotypes” for the Indians, African Americans faced a more enduring racism. The integration of minorities in the armed forces proved a slow process, a knowledge that adds yet another perspective on the military's role in constructing nation and identity.

The American Flag has served as an important symbol in both American history and American cinema. Robert Eberwein opens the second part of the anthology by tracing the importance of and historical change in the representation of the flag in American war cinema. From the short film *The American Flag* in 1896 until *Flags of Our Fathers* in 2006, the flag changes from simple colorful glory to increasingly complex representations. Through readings of this motif in several movies, including *Sands of Iwo Jima*, *Patton*, and *Born on the Fourth of July*, Eberwein gives a historical view of the flag raising theme.

Glenn Man provides both a genre perspective and an auteur context by discussing Eastwood's diptych in light of post-classical narration and multi-protagonist plots. Eastwood's use of multiple narratives in both films is not only in dialogue with contemporary cinema and a step forward from his *Mystic River* (2003), but also represents a bold experiment in postmodern war cinema. Laying out the structures of the two films, Man provides both a map for reading the anthology's subsequent articles as well as a close analysis of the differences in the narrative structures in *Flags* and *Letters* and their impact on viewers' understanding.

An important theme in war movies is the question of heroism. What does it mean to be a war hero and what does a true hero look like? Looking closer at the portrayal of John "Doc" Bradley, Anne Gjelsvik argues that he represents a hero who deviates from a long tradition of glorification of strong masculinity. Gjelsvik compares Ryan Phillippe's Bradley to John Wayne's heroic Sergeant Stryker in *Sands of Iwo Jima* and in her discussion of Emmanuel Levinas' ethics argues that what we see here is the face of a new hero. A hero who is responsible in the true sense of the word, responding to the call from the Other in a caring and empathical way. A caring hero.

Robert Burgoyne explores the motif of *haunting* in the war film, a motif he sees as a neglected trait in a genre whose realism and verisimilitude are regarded primary characteristics. Speculating about the role of the uncanny in the war film, Burgoyne says that a “defining and distinguishing feature of the genre is the haunting of the present by the past, the past trying to possess the present.” Through his examination of voice, space, place, and the extensive uses of flashbacks, Burgoyne demonstrates how the living are haunted by the past and by the dead and offers a new perspective on *Flags of Our Fathers* as well as on the war film as a genre. This relation between the present, the past, and the process of memory is a recurring theme in *Eastwood’s Iwo Jima*.

Continuing the discussion of memory, Holger Pötzsch discusses how movies function as “memory making films” and how an individual film is transposed into cultural memory. Can fiction mould memories and can such memories provide access to the factual past? According to Pötzsch, *Flags of Our Fathers* shows a process of translation and negotiation where the remediation of the battle of Iwo Jima turns truth into myth and raises the central question of whether it is possible to represent the past as it was. Drawing on box-office figures and the critical reception, he demonstrates the movie’s impact on historical discourse and concludes that a polyphonous and multi-vocal fiction film may be the closest thing we find to activate the public into thinking critically about the past.

Opening the third part of the anthology, Rikke Schubart starts with a simple question: Why *two* films? And how do *Flags* and *Letters* differ in making audience see the enemy? Analyzing viewer emotions generated by the films, she argues that *Flags* calls for our empathy with characters and *Letters* for our sympathy. Reading General Kuribayashi as a tragic hero whom the audience sympathizes with, she says

viewers gain a new understanding of the enemy, sacrifice, and nationalism from *Letters from Iwo Jima*. She claims Eastwood as a “minor utopian,” a director with the courage to question “history” and “truth” by showing us plural perspectives and, in the end, creating a vision of a better world. A world with combatants but without enemies.

In the second part of his own diptych on Eastwood’s movies, Robert Burgoyne also approaches the question of humanizing the other and understanding the practice of honor suicide. He sees Eastwood’s use of the suicide theme as a frame in which history, ideology, and cultural differences are brought “into a close microscopic view.” He investigates the themes through a close film analytic examination of the role of the letters, the voices, and the framing of suicide within cinematic discourse. Reading the suicidal sacrifice as a speech act echoing the letters found in the ground at Iwo Jima, Burgoyne claims Eastwood’s achievement is to make the “otherness” of suicide less unfamiliar and to bring the past closer to the present.

Lars-Martin Sørensen places *Letters from Iwo Jima* in a Japanese context. How did the Japanese perspective influence Eastwood’s choices in the making of his second movie? And how was *Letters* received in Japan? Sørensen says the film’s Japanese background, the controversies about the past, as well as current nationalistic public debates, make grounds for caution. For instance, argues Sørensen, the gore and gruesome detail of war is downplayed to meet the preferences from audiences on both sides. However, catering to a Japanese audience does not mean adjusting in one direction since, as Sørensen’s article shows, there is no such thing as one Japanese perspective. He discusses four kinds of Japanese nationalism; peace nationalism, revisionist nationalism, “petit nationalism,” and “healthy” nationalism, and sees Eastwood’s movies in the light of these contemporary public discourses.

Whereas most articles in our anthology embrace Eastwood's films, Mikkel Bruun Zangenberg challenges the notion that the project succeeds in representing a universal humanism or that it succeeds as a critique of patriotism. Zangenberg claims Eastwood is caught in a dualist trap. This claim is supported by an analysis of what he calls uneven narrative strategies. These narratives – “the national narrative,” “the narrative of friendship,” “the humanism narrative,” and “the narrative of the enemy” – work in different directions and illustrate the challenge of representing warfare without reproducing the very dualities Eastwood try to deconstruct. Zangenberg, however, argues that nationalism reemerges and “that both films hints of a proud, nationalist narrative – there's something distinctly noble about the Japanese general Kuribayashi, who insists on dying for his country; and something touching about the American soldiers sacrificing life and limbs as opposed to the politicians back in Washington, shipping off their sons to Harvard and Princeton.”

Unifying narratives are typical of political leadership, says political scientist Vibeke Tjalve in the fourth and last part of the anthology which looks at politics and war today, and we are reminded of this by the well-known presidential phrase “with us or against us.” Warfare is also a question of communication and Tjalve investigates the history of political communication. She discusses *Flags of Our Fathers* as a critique of the American war machine where to sell a war means to tell lies and feed flags and idealization to the public. Tjalve challenges the conception that people want to be lied to. Discussing the dualism between the “Noble lie” needed to gain unity and confidence and the tragic language of truth allowing for dilemmas and doubt, her article places these Second World War films within contemporary politics, where they rightfully belong. So, do we need more lies in today's warfare?

Do we have a choice? Can individuals, soldiers, or directors change history or the course of war? Our very last article relates these questions to late-modern society and makes for a discussion of the relation between Eastwood's narrative of war, Japanese Banzai warriors, and al-Qaeda's contemporary suicide bombers. Political scientist Mikkel Vedby Rasmussen relates the issues of war, citizenship, and sacrifice to the core of modern identity. To ask "Who am I" is to acknowledge that "I have a choice." Drawing on Ulrich Beck's concept of "risk society," Vedby Rasmussen argues that our perception of future results informs the choices of the present. He concludes: "In a society where identity is something you choose, assuming the identity of war is also a choice."

So, what do we choose? Do we listen to politicians and terrorists? Or do we hear the call of the Other? Like we listened to and engaged with Eastwood's two war films, we hope this anthology will enable a reader to hear the call. And make her own choice when responding.

Notes

ⁱ According to Wikipedia and also according to Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, And Liberal Democracy*, Chapter 4, "Performing Civic Identity: Flag Raisings at Iwo Jima and Ground Zero" (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 94. See also Hariman and Lucaites for an excellent analysis of Joe Rosenthal's photograph.

ⁱⁱ Quoted from Hariman and Lucaites, *No Caption Needed*, 93.

ⁱⁱⁱ James Bradley with Ron Powers, *Flags of Our Fathers* (New York: Bantam, 2006, original 2000), quoting congressman Homer Angell, 238.

^{iv} Bradley and Powers, *Flags of Our Fathers*, quote from *Times-Union*, 221.

^v *Ibid.*, 282. To a European the photo also recalls another flag, the French Marianne holding the Tricolore in one hand, a bayoneted musket in her other hand, leading the people in the July Revolution

of 1830 in Eugène Delacroix's allegorical painting "Liberty Leading the People" (1830). Later, a photograph of firefighters raising the American flag on the ruins of World Trade Center echoed Rosenthal's photo. See Mette Mortensen, "The Making and Remakings of an American Icon," in this anthology.

^{vi} The government expected fourteen billion dollars from the seventh war bond drive. Sources vary about the outcome: James Bradley has 26.3 billion dollars as has also Wikipedia, while the bonus material on the *Flags* DVD says 24 billion. Bradley and Powers, *Flags of Our Fathers*, 294; Wikipedia accessed from

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raising_the_Flag_on_Iwo_Jima#The_7th_war_bond_drive_and_the_sixth_man_controversy on September 8, 2008.

^{vii} Bradley and Powers, *Flags of Our Fathers*, "Wolves" and "predators" 191, "skilled torturers" 138.

^{viii} The numbers vary in different sources. These, and the later Japanese casualties, are from Wikipedia, "The Battle of Iwo Jima," accessed on February 17, 2010.

^{ix} Sean Burns, "Heartbreaking *Letters*," review of *Letters from Iwo Jima*, *The Improper Bostonian*, 56, January 10-23, 2007.

^x Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanism of the Other* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003). See Anne Gjelsvik's contribution in this anthology for a discussion of Levinas' call and the soldier as caring hero in *Flags of Our Fathers*.

^{xi} Another book that inspired Eastwood was Kumiko Kakehashi's *Letters from Iwo Jima* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007), originally published as *Chipuzo Kanashiki* in 2005 by Shinchosha Co., Ltd. Tokyo.

^{xii} Eastwood quoted from the press material for the film *Letters From Iwo Jima*, "Letters From Iwo Jima: Production Information," 4.

^{xiii} Bradley, *Flags*, 247; Kakehashi, *Japanese Eyewitness Stories*, 41. Loyal to their promise to fight to the death the Japanese soldiers remained on Iwo Jima fighting in guerilla war.

^{xiv} Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*, 29-31.