

JOHN RAMBO: INNER RAGE, PRIVATE WARS

John Rambo does not fight for his country. He gave that up years ago. In *First Blood* (1982) he fights for himself—to assert his innocence and to punish his persecutors. In *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985) he fights to save himself (getting out of prison) and his comrades-in-arms (the forgotten POWs of Viet Nam). In *Rambo III* (1988) he fights to save his only friend, Colonel Trautman, and to even the score in Afghanistan.

By the time of *Rambo* (2008) our hero is burdened by regret—he laments his many kills—and a justifiable apathy.

But for the first time he sets out on a mission that has nothing to do with him. And even though he thinks trying to save the foolhardy missionaries is suicidal, it could be the only road to inner peace. He's given up on causes, but if he can use his great talent for righteous ends then maybe he can live with himself. If killing is what he was born to do that doesn't mean he was born to commit evil. Rambo sets out to kill in hopes of making amends for his killing. His carnage-wrought redemption has begun.

First Blood begins with a smiling Rambo (do we ever see *that* again?), eagerly anticipating a reunion with an old Army buddy. The air is fresh and clean, the sun is shining, and all seems right with the world. But from here on, it's all clouds and darkness. His friend is dead, struck down in his prime by cancer caused by exposure to Agent Orange. For Rambo, losing the last man from his unit, the last man who could understand, triggers something cold and primal. After years of feeling unwelcome in his own country, he finds one example too many of the United States not caring for its own—the soldiers were not protected from this scourge in Viet Nam, and they were not given adequate medical care when they returned. Both the citizenry and officialdom are now spitting on soldiers.

Harassed by a sheriff eager to throw his weight around, Rambo goes back into town because he's tired of being dismissed as a non-entity. By confronting Sheriff Teasle, perhaps he's really admitting it's time to confront something broken, deep inside.

But Sheriff Teasle is in no way a stock villain. His function in the story goes far beyond inspiring Rambo to face his demons. Indeed, we learn a lot about the sheriff, and his hypocrisy, but his bravery, stubbornness, and casual cruelty raise difficult questions that help us take stock of our hero.

In his contentious little tête-à-tête over drinks, Teasle admits to the colonel that he wishes he'd been the one to kill Rambo. The colonel dryly observes that such a desire "doesn't sit well with that badge." He goes on to chastise the officer, remarking that Teasle can go home to the missus, because he is just a "civilian," not one of those tasked with the unthinkable, as were the Colonel and Rambo: "We had orders...when in doubt, kill."

But, Teasle, despite his base temptations, is right to recognize his duty. It's not his job to weigh probabilities, to decide if the risk is too great. Trautman simply dismisses his convictions

as misplaced pride. He may enforce the law, but it will cost him his life. When the gun shop is blown up, the expression on his face is priceless. Teasel's beyond being mad...he's scared, and he suspects he's going to die. Moreover, he knew this was a possibility already, long before the military got involved. Tellingly, when the late Deputy Galt's unconscionable behavior is brought to light, Sheriff Teasle observes that if Galt was out of line then *he*, as sheriff, was supposed to handle it. The law polices the law because order must be maintained; the institution cannot risk disparagement. The public must be held in check not just by the strong arm of the law, but also by its very aura of respectability. So, according to Teasle, Rambo can never be justified in his actions, because he is *outside* the law. He is a law unto himself. And that is beyond the pale. The institution is more important than any man.

But Teasle doesn't seem to understand that he treated Rambo differently than the familiar denizens of his "quiet little town." That's what Rambo chafed at. It wasn't about protecting the institution as much as elevating some people and suppressing others—the undesirables. Indeed, Rambo's not even permitted to eat in one of their restaurants. After all, he smells. So he can stuff his ugly face someplace else.

But Rambo is hungry.

Teasle may be right in his conviction that he has to do something, that he can't cower before the enemy.

But he created the enemy. Pitting himself against Rambo, the sheriff never understands his quarry. They have a lot in common, but all he can see are differences. His real complaint is mainly implied—*he* suffered, too (note the Purple Heart displayed behind his desk), in the Korean War probably. But he had to adjust to the real world. He didn't go on a rampage and make excuses for his anger. People forgot about *his* war, too. And he definitely doesn't want some snotty colonel thumbing his nose at him just because he's not a pure killing machine—it isn't something to be proud of. And that's why Rambo is so very upset that he would declare war on a tiny corner of his own country. He's been dismissed as inconsequential. But the institutions he's fighting are instituted for the people. They are not self-perpetuating and above reproach. If government, the military, and the law are failing the people, if such institutions merely serve the powerful, or those who curry favor, if there is no recourse but the primal scream of defiance, then calculated destruction is warranted. And just as Sheriff Teasle drew "first blood," so did America when it told its veterans to go to hell.

Years pass, and John Rambo is given an offer he can't refuse—perform reconnaissance on a suspected P.O.W. camp in Viet Nam. If her survives, he'll win his freedom; and it's for a good cause. Rambo makes a pointed comment regarding prison life: "In here at least I know where I stand." Is he referring to the difficulty of returning to civilian life? More likely, he smells a rat, and suspects his government will stab him in the back again.

"Sir, do we get to win this time?"

"This time it's up to you," Colonel Trautman replies. Left unspoken is the understanding that Rambo, established as a law unto himself, can choose whether he will accept the orders he is given.

During his journey, we learn more about our hero and realize how humble he is. Why was he chosen for this mission? He's expendable. What's that? It's when you're invited to a

party, and nobody cares if you don't show. And in spite of his extraordinary strength, he observes, like a sage, "I've always believed that the mind was the best weapon." Well, what brings you luck? "I guess this," Rambo says, as he brandishes his hunting knife.

Rambo never even thinks of taking pictures, but he doesn't blow up the camp to start with; he makes an attempt to accept the strictures placed upon him. His idea is to bring back one of the POWs as proof of what's occurred. But once he is dismissed as inconsequential (just as in *First Blood*) and left to die, he steps out of the trap he's walked into and goes after the big cheese who lured him in like a mouse—the duplicitous Marshall Murdock. He's part of a Washington cabal confining Viet Nam to the realm of mere political miscalculation, the blame for which resides safely elsewhere. He can't see that the war—for Rambo, and especially the POWs—is still happening.

Trautman gives Murdock an overdue tongue-lashing: In '72 we were supposed to pay the Cong \$4.5 billion in war reparations, but we reneged. The POWs remained! The money wasn't paid because it was thought that the men were not valuable enough to justify putting South Viet Nam at risk, as they continued the fight until '75.

And if the POWs are admitted to be there, will there be war again? Is it really worth it?

For Trautman, it's worth the risk. He's seen the devastation of men expected to give their all, when their country gives nothing in return. He's seen the devastation sustained by John Rambo. (And in *II* the devastation of being abandoned is compounded by having his new love, Co, taken from him.)

In spite of his overwhelming anger, Rambo finds a way to keep from murdering his tormentor, leaving Murdock with this salient piece of advice regarding the POWs:

"Find 'em...or I'll find you."

John Rambo's quest to redeem the time begins in earnest in *III*. Rambo lives a quiet life punctuated by raucous Bangkok stick fights that help fund the work of Buddhist monks he's settled amidst. He thinks he's home, but the colonel tells him he's fooling himself, that he need not be ashamed of being a "full-blooded combat soldier"—it's what God made him, not the Army.

So if he's not home, where is home? He feels alienated from America. Is he supposed to surround himself with killers? Since that's what Rambo is, that's who he has to be with? He barely likes himself—he doesn't want to be stuck with other malcontents fighting off PTSD with labored jokes. Where are the normal people? Is he doomed to be alone, always?

He has the skill to kill, but not the will. And his carnage complex overwhelms.

We recall that Rambo was merciful to his stick-fighting opponent, letting him lose with dignity rather than pummeling him after he hit the floor, as was expected. Perhaps this is the dilemma—Rambo is skilled in battle, doesn't run from a fight, but takes no pleasure in the destruction of his adversaries. And that's what he tries to compartmentalize them as—adversaries, not enemies. And this, ironically, is not so much to their benefit as to Rambo's. Consider: if he's in a war, and he's going to kill anyway, if he is killing *adversaries* then he's not murdering. If he's killing *enemies* then he is probably murdering. The slide into sin is even more pronounced given that Rambo usually outclasses his opponents by a factor of 3 to 1. Since it's so easy for him to kill, he has to be all the more careful that he use his power responsibly.

But there's no mercy for the Russian commander. He is an enemy, indeed. Thus, Colonel Trautman rejoins his arrogant captor, who ignorantly believes he can crush our hero: "God would have mercy [on you]. He won't."

The actor, Marc de Jong, playing Colonel Zaysen in *Rambo III*, is at a terrible disadvantage. His character is a straight-up rehash of Lieutenant Colonel Podovsky from *II*, played by the dynamic Steven Berkoff, of *Octopussy* and *Beverly Hills Cop* fame. If only they knew there would be a *III*, it would have been delightful to have him survive, to be dispatched by Rambo one picture later. Berkoff's character made an admirable attempt to have Rambo turn to evil by simply sharing the truth—Rambo was abandoned by his own government. By his silence, Podovsky argues, Rambo is "protecting" them.

It's true that they do not deserve protection. But Rambo could never stomach the idea of helping Viet Nam or the Soviet Union. As a law unto himself, he will reward righteousness, and punish wrongdoing, wherever it is. And so he resolves to fight the human scourge of three countries, on no orders but his own.

Rambo has no similar battle of wits with Zaysen. He is simply a foil for Rambo's righteous demolitions. Rambo observes that Afghanistan is not his war. At least in *II* he was going back to finish something he started. But after going in, and seeing the Soviet Union's brutality first-hand, when the Mujahideen leader advises him to leave, saying, "This is not your war," Rambo replies, "It is now." Rambo hoped his fighting days were over; he has to stop sometime. The colonel reminds him that the real fight is inside, and, ironically, unless he embraces his gift for violence, he will never have peace. There is no alternative, lest our hero leave justice to wither on the vine. As a law unto himself he doesn't have the comfort of relying on superior officers telling him to stand-down. If he doesn't fight, he only has himself to blame. He can shun the killing to avoid guilt, but then he will feel guilty for his failure to act. This is Rambo's one true fear: He is damned if he does, damned if he doesn't; and there's nothing he can do to make things better, to make life livable.

Yet, despite his torment, Rambo really cares, and he cares enough to kill the very best.

Apart from the scene in the temple where the colonel tries to convince Rambo to join him on the mission, there's not much philosophizing in this film. It has some spectacular action set-pieces (the mine-crawl, the explosive wound cauterization, the battle in the cave, the tank-versus-helicopter finale), but it's obvious the real fight is, for now, definitely without, and not within.

After the victory, the Afghans, who had been telling him to go, now want him to stay. Particularly poignant are the entreaties of the young freedom fighter whose family was killed, and whose bravery inspired Rambo's relinquishment of his one precious personal possession, the jade ornament given to him by Co.

"Can you not stay?"

"...I've got to go."

Rambo doesn't know where home is. But at least he's realizing where it's not. Even amongst his brothers-in-arms, he is still alone.

Apparently little has changed for Rambo in *Rambo*. (This has got to be the most schizophrenically named series of films in cinematic history. The last movie is named like it's

the first, and the third movie sounds like the second sequel to the fourth movie. And the fourth movie has the same title as the second movie, apart from the post-colon proviso [*Rambo* and *Rambo: First Blood Part II*]). He still lives in Thailand and still looks out for the Buddhist monks. And then along comes some idealistic missionaries fresh from the rarified air of Colorado. He is contemptuous of their platitudes and ignorant piety—to them, man is not fallen, but just needs a steadying hand after losing his footing. Rambo sees something in Sarah that shatters his bitter complacency. Shunning pay, he decides to take them up-river, elevating her to team leader, ignoring the feckless men of her company, including her jealous husband, Michael. After Rambo saves their lives from bloodthirsty Burmese pirates, Michael sanctimoniously lectures Rambo on how it's never right to take a life, tacitly admitting that Rambo's reproof that his wife would have been raped 50 times is a-o.k. with him. Sarah is able to convince Rambo and Michael to see this through, later giving Rambo her cross pendant as a parting gesture, and a gesture of faith.

This concept, a (very loud) meditation on the proper role of violence, is at the heart of the film. Michael embraces violence during the film's climactic battle, smashing a soldier's head with a rock. He is shocked, but unrepentant. He did what had to be done. And Rambo, reflecting on Colonel Trautman's admonition that he would have to "come full circle" and embrace who he is, also makes a change. Rambo, thinking about Sarah's fearless faith, is chastened. Indeed, the missionaries do genuine good in the village, tending the sick, and teaching with tenderness. Despite having legitimate grievances, Rambo has been living selfishly. If the most adamant pacifist can accept the necessity of violence in a—yes—*fallen* world, then there is a place for Rambo. He wasn't made this way by the U.S. Government. No, it's who he is. And so he resolves to "Live for Nothing...or Die for Something," easily one of the most inspiring lines of dialogue in film history.

The rest of *Rambo* is murky actionneering, the enemy repellent, but ill-defined. In addition to the shocking takedown of the pirates, stand-out sequences include the forest-leveling detonation of the WWII ordinance, and Rambo's angry larynx-ripping dispatch of Sarah's would-be rapist. This is the most violent of the four films, which is saying something. But if the audience is to decide if, or when, violence is justified, it needs to be brutal and explicit. If it is understandable at its most extreme, then perhaps we can accept it even if we never embrace it.

There is a place for killing, and *Rambo* makes the case that it's only permissible when the alternative is far worse.

But this is arguably the first time he is fighting solely for others. There's little risk that our hero will fall into the trap of taking revenge. Yes, he undertakes a rescue of Sarah like he set out to rescue Colonel Trautman in *III*. But he helped Sarah into Burma. He did not help the colonel get into Afghanistan. He undertakes this mission before he has to. He decided to go up-river before there was trouble. In *First Blood* the mission was preserving his dignity. In *II* the mission was freedom—for the POWs, sure, but, initially, just for himself. Now he's fighting for someone to whom he owes nothing. She wanted to fight evil with simple charity. Rambo knew, against such an implacable, conscience-seared enemy, that only unflinching violence would suffice ("You're not gonna change anything").

Negotiating with evil gives evil the edge. Remember what he said in *II*: "To survive a war, you've gotta become war."

But she, in her own way, is just as brave as Rambo. To her credit, she never questions his methods, just challenges him with hard questions motivated by compassion and respect rather than ivory-tower condescension.

She gives him the strength to break free.

No longer will he kill to live to kill. He'll just live—not *for* himself, but *with* himself.

History may not be kind to the United States once the passions of the '60s are finally a distant memory. The Viet Nam debacle—in both its foreign and domestic manifestations—haunts us still. Could we have won? Should we have even tried? Questions like these will never be answered until the anger subsides and we take a long, hard look at our fractious history as a people. We have to figure out what America means to us, and what America means to the world.

All John Rambo wanted was for his country to reciprocate the love demonstrated by her self-sacrificing soldiers. That didn't happen. But Rambo found a way to forgive, inspired by a foretaste of God's mercy seen in the indomitable spirit of missionaries willing to lay down their lives in a quest to show their fellow men that we are *not* an irredeemable race. Were they prudent? No. Evil is real, and its power is only vanquished by the Living God. But we should never refuse a noble fight simply because we're scared of losing. That was a temptation Rambo battled many times over. But he, himself, is indomitable...and maybe he didn't need to be redeemed after all. Maybe God knew his heart was in the right place, from the very beginning.

And so he comes full circle. When John Rambo reaches that mailbox, he's finally returned from Viet Nam.