Pop culture for hire: Mercenaries in the Expendables serie

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Time in Hollywood is a flat circle. What was popular yesterday will be popular tomorrow, or so studio executives hope, and so movies get remade, franchises get rebooted, and ideas—and actors—get repackaged and trotted back out in order to sell a few more tickets. Sylvester Stallone's *The Expendables* (2010) predated the latest nostalgia craze by a few years, but the basic idea was the same; in fact, the film was conceived, and marketed, as a throwback to the action films of the 1980s and early '90s, surrounding Stallone (still a household name, if not the superstar he was 25 years ago) with a veritable Who's Who of aging action stars of varying degrees of fame (Dolph Lundgren, Mickey Rourke, Jet Li, Bruce Willis, and Arnold Schwarzenegger in a cameo, his first film role following his stint as Governor of California),[1] and wearing its R rating as a badge of honor at a time when most blockbusters make sure to secure a PG-13 rating to attract the widest audience they can.[2] Everything, from the film's far from streamlined plot to the nonsense-poem quality of large parts of the dialogue to the casual racism on display, screamed 1980s.

For all that, though, there are many things that make *The Expendables* easily distinguishable from the action movies of yesteryear that seemingly inspired it. Take, for instance, the way the action itself is filmed: if the blood and general level of brutality could be straight out of the Schwarzenegger-starring *Commando* (1985), the shaky-cam chaos is all 2010, an attempt to replicate the now-ubiquitous style that became popular in the mid-'00s. But what sets *The Expendables* apart from most action movies is the way it handles its cast. Traditionally, American action films tend to revolve around one central figure, sometimes accompanied by a sidekick who may or may not serve as comic relief, or backed by a cast of supporting characters who tend to be little more than archetypes; think John McTiernan's *Die Hard* (1988) for an example of the former and James Cameron's *Aliens* (1986) for the latter. By contrast, *The Expendables* is perhaps as close to a true ensemble piece as an action film can get; Stallone and Jason Statham[3] are very much co-leads, while Dolph Lundgren and Mickey Rourke both get significant screen time and memorable scenes, and even the supporting players (like Randy Couture and Terry Crews) get more lines and screen time than they would in most other action films.[4] In that regard, *The Expendables* actually looks much more like a war film (say, Oliver Stone's *Platoon* or Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*) than it does a pure action film, with one crucial difference: the titular Expendables aren't U.S. military personnel, but mercenaries.

In that sense, *The Expendables* is very much a product of its time, the same way *First Blood*, which helped make Sylvester Stallone a superstar to begin with and spawned the Rambo franchise, was. Released in 1982, *First Blood* starred Stallone as

a PTSD-stricken Vietnam veteran persecuted by the police department of a small town in the Pacific Northwest, and while it wasn't an overtly political film, the subtext was clear: this was a Vietnam movie. (The sequels promptly proceeded to drop all subtext in favor of over-the-top action.) Similarly, while *The Expendables* isn't openly about the War on Terror,[5] it is instantly recognizable as a post-9/11 movie, if only because it focuses on a group of mercenaries paid by the CIA to do their bidding. Mercenaries aren't exactly at the top of the food chain when it comes to popular culture. (The most famous of pop culture mercenary is arguably *Star Wars'* Boba Fett, and he needs "space" added as a qualifier before his job title.) That may simply be because it isn't entirely clear to the public what it is that mercenaries actually do, especially in a modern setting. If that is the case, the appearance of a successful blockbuster franchise starring a group of mercenaries in the decade following 9/11 shouldn't come as a big surprise, as the Afghan and Iraq Wars put mercenaries in the spotlight like never before. Indeed those two wars corresponded with the rise of private security companies (which had been used before in the Balkans), so-called private armies used extensively in both Afghanistan and Iraq during the occupation of those countries by American troops. The most (in)famous of those companies is undoubtedly Blackwater, now known as Academi, which often found itself in the news, particularly after the killing by four of its employees of 17 Iraqi civilians in Baghdad in 2007, which eventually led to a conviction in 2014. In effect, Blackwater soon became the poster child for private security companies, with all the controversy that entails.

Not that the Expendables can truly be described as Blackwater's counterpart. Although they are, like many actual mercenaries, former military,[6] they can't rightfully be called a private army: the first film features no more than seven Expendables, including one (Mickey Rourke) who doesn't seem to do anything but sit in the bar/tattoo parlor that serves as the team's headquarters. They are more like a team of independent and super-efficient Navy SEALs, contracted by the CIA for secret operations and other shady dealings. Interestingly, if the first film shares many blockbusters' distrust for the CIA (the Agency seems intent on double-crossing the Expendables by sending them on what amounts to a suicide mission, and the main villain is revealed to be a rogue CIA agent),[7] the Expendables themselves are portrayed as unambiguously good guys throughout. Their actions may help topple the government of fictional Vilena, a small South American country, but the movie never portrays this overthrow as the illegal act of war that it would be; instead, since Vilena's government is authoritarian and corrupt, the Expendables are seen as liberators, and it is heavily implied that their intervention will make things better in the long run.[8] Even their motivations are noble: when they go back to Vilena, knowing full well they are walking into a trap, it isn't for the money they were promised, but to save a young woman Stallone encountered earlier, and to retaliate for the attacks against them. If, as I mentioned earlier, *The Expendables* feels like a war movie in some regards, it displays none of the moral ambiguity that is essential to so many of those movies.[9]

A closer look, however, reveals that the qualities for which the Expendables are celebrated are the same that are usually attributed, in popular culture, to your garden-variety soldiers. Those men aren't fighting for their country (Jason Statham, like Liam Neeson, is probably incapable of producing a convincing American accent anyway), but they're fighting for each other. They routinely call one another "brother," and a significant part of the film is dedicated to them just lobbing jokes at one another, to the playful ribbing that is movie shorthand for "those guys really like each other." "I need more money," Jet Li complains at one point, as if to remind the

audience that the Expendables are indeed a mercenary outfit, but in truth money seems to be far below loyalty in terms of motivation for those characters; even when Dolph Lundgren's Gunner betrays the group, it is only after he has been kicked out because of his substance abuse and needlessly violent behavior. By the end of the movie, having atoned for his betrayal by receiving a chest wound and by giving Stallone the layout of the bad guy's fortress, he is reinstated. His stint as a villain becomes the subject of jokes in the group.[10] By the time the third act rolls around, the stakes are very much personal. In fact, that's the case in every film in the franchise. In a recurring motif Stallone tries to leave his team behind in safety, only for them to join him anyway, insisting that they can only prevail together. To paraphrase another modern action franchise (the *Fast & Furious* series), this is about family.

It is also about being heroes, which becomes even more apparent if one looks at the franchise as a whole. In the first movie, the Expendables save a small South American country from a puppet dictator and a rogue CIA agent; this coup might be seen as ambiguous but is celebrated here. The second film drops all ambiguity by having the team save the world from a group of terrorists (again with the War on Terror imagery), and again in the third, pitting them against Mel Gibson as a former "good" mercenary turned bad (the writers of the *Expendables* series having never encountered a meta-reference they didn't like, no matter how obvious).[11] Here the mercenaries become superheroes, capable of incredible feats, the Avengers with submachine guns. We've left plausible, if far-fetched, political violence behind to enter the realm of movie fantasy.

Action heroes, of course, are often idealized versions of whatever their real-life counterparts would be. John McClane (Bruce Willis in the *Die Hard* films) and Martin Riggs (Mel Gibson in the *Lethal Weapon* series) are cowboy cops, but they're brutally effective, and their sometimes erratic behavior (Riggs's in particular) never seems to endanger civilians. Ditto with Stallone's John Spartan in *Demolition Man*, or his Lieutenant Cobretti in *Cobra*. The examples are endless. *The Expendables* is therefore not unique in positing its characters as superhuman fighters; what sets it apart instead is the way it has them belong to a paramilitary unit, a sort of All-Star team (both within the movie and without) of ideal soldiers, turning controversial Blackwater-like private armies into an unambiguous force for good, albeit through the use of brutal violence.

There is another, more practical reason why the heroes of *The Expendables* are mercenaries rather than straight soldiers, one that has nothing to do with the post-9/11 zeitgeist and the increasingly large part played by private security companies in modern American warfare. It is simply a question of verisimilitude: while it is hard to imagine any army on earth would let a 60-something Sylvester Stallone join a firefight, make him the leader of a band of mercenaries, and we're much more likely to buy it. Call it the magic of Hollywood.

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[1] *The Expendables* was the first film in which Dolph Lundgren appeared since 1995's *Johnny Mnemonic* to get a theatrical release, testifying, if not to the quality of his output, at least to its perceived commercial viability.

[2] Somewhat ironically, *The Expendables 3*, released in 2014, would receive a PG-13 rating.

[3] Jason Statham himself is very much a throwback to the action stars of the 1980s, a world-class athlete who insists on performing his own stunts and cranks out an action movie or three every year.

[4] The other major exception in the past decade or so would be the *Fast & Furious* franchise, which, starting with the fifth entry, turned into a heist/action hybrid with an ever-growing cast that at this point includes not only original co-stars Vin Diesel and the late Paul Walker, but also Michelle Rodriguez, Ludacris, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, and *Expendables* alum Jason Statham.

[5] Not that the War on Terror hasn't inspired many films in the past decade or so, from Kathryn Bigelow's based-on-true-events *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), chronicling the hunt for Osama Bin Laden, to Duncan Jones's *Source Code* (2011), a science fiction parable about covert governmental operations and the use of torture in the fight against terrorism.

[6] There are references to the team's various members' past scattered throughout the series, and like most modern franchises, *The Expendables* has a fan-made wiki [http://expendables.wikia.com/wiki/Main_Page] which includes many backstory details gleamed from press releases and other promotional material (although the line between what is considered canon and what is little more than fanfiction is sometimes a little blurry).

[7] Subsequent movies in the franchise swiftly dropped that aspect, with the team's CIA contact (Bruce Willis reprising his role in *The Expendables 2*, before being replaced by Harrison Ford in the series' third installment) often joining the fight alongside the Expendables during the film's climax.

[8] It is hard not to think of all the coups and "revolutions" undertaken by CIA-sponsored groups in Latin America during the Cold War, from the Bay of Pigs Invasion to the September 11 1973 coup in Chile. Nor is it such a stretch to see the way the Expendables are treated by the population they just "liberated" as a form of wish fulfillment.

[9] The plot of *The Expendables* might also bring to mind that of *The Magnificent Seven*, another film about American mercenaries going to a foreign country to defend its people against corrupt oppressors. The key difference, though, is that while the Seven are hired by Mexican villagers to protect them from bandits, the Expendables are contracted by the CIA to meddle in the affairs of a sovereign country and depose its leader. Good intentions notwithstanding, this is still a movie about the illegal invasion of a foreign nation.

[10] The first film often seems as if it about to delve into more serious questions, like Gunner's substance abuse and psychopathic behavior, or Toll Road's (Mickey Rourke) PTSD, only to acknowledge them without digging any deeper. The sequels, on the other hand, stay well clear of any such issues.

[11] The franchise is chock-full of jokes that make little sense or seem like non-sequiturs if taken at face value, and are actually about not the characters but the actors portraying them. Randy Couture's past as a wrestler is repeatedly mentioned, Wesley Snipes jokes about having been locked up for tax evasion in the third movie, and Dolph Lundgren's character is described as a chemical engineer and a Fulbright scholar (which Dolph Lundgren really is). By far the most bizarre of those jokes happens in the first film, when Stallone says that Schwarzenegger's Trench Mauser "wants to be President;" it makes no sense in context and doesn't need to, because it isn't so much about Trench Mauser, fictional mercenary, as it is about Arnold Schwarzenegger, movie superstar and former Governor of California.