

**THE BLOG**

300 Reasons to Hate America

By Marty Kaplan

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The Iranian government isn't happy about the depiction of their ancient Persian ancestors in the blood-drenched American film *300*. Neither is a group of Iranian filmmakers, who have protested to UNESCO. The knock is that the Persian ruler Xerxes is depicted as a decadent, freakish, 8-foot piercing queen, and that his swarthy soldiers resemble an army of al-Qaeda terrorists. "Hollywood Declares War on Iranians," said one newspaper headline in Tehran — cultural and psychological warfare. The film is available in Iran only on the black market, but its abundant grosses in the US, fueled by its computer-graphics gore, will likely make it an international hit.

Everyone knows that a nation's "soft power" — its cultural identity and exports — is no less relevant to its global standing than the hard power of its military arsenal. Public diplomacy consists of one country attempting to convince another country to advance its own interests through efforts like traveling music productions, visas for visiting scholars and future politicians, and foreign-language radio broadcasts of news and entertainment.

But the cultural exports of the United States are mainly not created under the banner of the State Department. Big movies are intended to make money, but not necessarily to make friends. Their impact on America's image in the world is basically a by-product, not an intention.

This does not make Washington happy. After 9/11, a delegation led by Karl Rove came to Hollywood to ask filmmakers to consider whether some of their movies — especially ones with bare lady-flesh, bad words, and violence — might be a reason (in the phrase of the day) "why they hate us." The White House folk also asked the studio types to consider ramping up their output of wholesome, idealistic product, so that other countries would admire America for what it really is, and not just see it as depicted in, say, the films of Quentin Tarantino.

But Hollywood, which is a business as exquisitely sensitive to the market as any, is not betting on inspiration to make a buck. The international marketplace loves the rough stuff. Within days after the US knocked down the Taliban government of Afghanistan, video rental stores appeared out of nowhere in Kabul, and the hottest items on their shelves were Schwarzenegger and Seagal. Those illicit satellite dishes in Iran aren't up there to catch Shia sermons from Pakistan, or even *Lady and the Tramp*; they're looking for Tony Soprano and *South Park*.

What's unusual about *300* is its convergence with the axis-of-evil message Washington favors. Ancient Persians is a proxy for contemporary Iran; the Spartans are stand-ins for America's Western Civ forebears. The Persian are

costumed as though they just stepped out of one of Osama bin Laden's terrorist training camps; the Greeks look like they spend all their free time at Bally Total Fitness.

It's not hard to imagine Karl Rove's reaction to *300*: "Make my day." But speaking of Clint Eastwood, the Administration had better hope that he's got no interest in the Battle of Thermopylae. If Eastwood could make us empathize with the Japanese at Iwo Jima, there's no telling what devastation he could wreak by humanizing the caricatures that Ann Coulter calls "rag-heads."

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