

INTERNATIONAL BACCALAURATE
EXTENDED ESSAY

Title: American People's perspective about the Cold War in 1960-1980s represented with the Star Wars films

Research Question:How does the war between the Empire and the Rebel Alliance in Star Wars original trilogy(4th, 5th, 6th films) reflect the perspectives of American Society about the Cold War in 1960-1980s?

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INTRODUCTION

Between 1960s and 1980s, United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics(USSR) were in an ongoing war named “Cold War” (“Cold Conflict”). While the conflict was not an all out war between the two main parties, they battled over influence. Conflicts like Vietnam and Korea War were the result of the Cold War and the two sides’ influence over the region. Not only in war, they also competed with each other in technological advancement, for example in space campaigns, futuristic inventions, and as a fear for all the world, nuclear power.

The development of nuclear power led to the creation of the atomic bomb, which had the potential to destroy a city(“Cold Conflict”). The power of the atomic bomb was seen in Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the end of the 2nd World War, in Japan. While the US was the first to make an atomic bomb, USSR also created one in a short time. Because both countries had the power to destroy one another completely with the atomic bombs they had, they could not attack each other directly, thus they battled in different areas. People of the US lived in constant fear of destruction, and they were terrified of the possible results of the Cold War, it had the potential to destroy lives and becoming an all out war.

World War II was also effective for the American people, its effects on people lasted a long time even until the 1970s. It was a destructive war which saw oppressive dictatorships such as the Nazi Germany and Italy fight against the allies, including the United States of America. The Cold War was the result of World War II, which at the end saw the two world powers USSR and USA at the height of their power. World War II brought the fear of totalitarian regimes in the American people, and caused advancement of weapon technology, which also got people thinking about the Cold War more and more. (“How World War II Inspired Star Wars”)

The first Star Wars film, “*Episode IV: A New Hope*”, came out in 1977. Effected from the Cold War, space films were widely made and popular among the people of the United States.(“How Star Wars Revolutionized Entertainment”). It was an instant success, received various Oscar awards. "The tense relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union,

with the threat of nuclear annihilation lurking in the background”(“How International Politics Influenced ‘Star Wars’”) were the main factors in that time of the world which had a role in shaping the first ever Star Wars film. In the popular film, resemblances of the Cold War were seen through important figures in the film such as the Death Star and its ability to destroy a planet, the Rebel Alliance and the Empire and the War between them, and the symbol of hope that the War would end. The director of the films George Lucas intentionally made these references because he was also interested in history, and the current Cold War affected him in the making of Star Wars("The Real History that Inspired 'Star Wars'"). 3 years apart from each other, *Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back* and *Episode VI: Return of the Jedi* released in theaters, also showing resemblance of the Cold War and conflict within it. These episodes also showed signs from the World War II. The destructive conflict and the war were the main pillar of the Star Wars movies. Although the movies and the conflicts are associated with the Cold War, World War II was also effective in shaping Star Wars. Director George Lucas spent hours studying World War II footage and took inspiration from them, examples being resemblances in ships, weapons and regimes (“How World War II Inspired Star Wars”). Episode IV, V and VI are called the “Original Trilogy” of Star Wars, as they were the first three Star Wars movies released. The story ultimately finishes when the Rebel Alliance wins the last fight against the Empire, which is shown as a dictatorship throughout the trilogy. World War II was an important factor in shaping the Cold War; furthermore, it can also be considered as an important factor as to why the American Society was fearful of another war, they saw what lengths a war can reach in World War II. Thus, the World War II will be used to explain the American Society’s perspective about the Cold War.

By choosing this topic, I aim to explore the mirrors between the Original Trilogy of Star Wars and the state of the world and American people between 1960s and 1980s. As stated above, the Star Wars galaxy was a resemblance of the state of world in the Cold War, and Lucas wanted it to be. It also carries elements from the World War II, an event which had both psychological and physical effects on American people and also effected the view of American people about the Cold War, linking it to the research question: **“How does the war between the Empire and the Rebel Alliance in Star Wars original trilogy(4th, 5th, 6th films) reflect the perspectives of American Society about the Cold War in 1960-1980s?”**. To achieve this goal, real life examples of connections to Star Wars Original Trilogy will be given, which will be important events that shaped the 1970s-1980s American society e.g. the Vietnam War, The Manhattan

Project. This essay will focus on what was happening around the world, near the end of the Cold War. After the event is explained and its place in Star Wars is shown, their connection with the American society and the perspective of the American society about the event will be explained thoroughly. The essay will use secondary sources such as online articles and reports, research papers.

1. The Death Star and Weapons

The Death Star was first shown in the first Star Wars movie, *A New Hope*. It served as the ultimate battle station of the Empire, the antagonists of the original trilogy. In the movie, it is said that the construction of the Death Star took a long time, which required research and resources, and to top it all it was kept a secret from all the galaxy, except its makers and the Empire's leaders. Shaped as a moon, the Death Star was able to destroy a whole planet, which is called Alderaan, and killing billions in the planet, as seen in *A New Hope*, with its full power. The destruction of the planet Alderaan instilled fear in people of the galaxy's hearts, as the station's objective was just that. And seen in *Return of The Jedi*, a new Death Star but with the same technology, it could also destroy Rebel Alliance's starships("The Death Star"). The station's powers as described above shows the destructive power of the Death Star, which mirrors the atomic bombs created in the World War II, and were a threat in the Cold War reflecting the fear in American people's hearts.

The atomic bomb project, named Manhattan Project, mirrors the Death Star project from Star Wars. The Manhattan Project was a top-secret project, involving many scientists and hundreds of thousands workers at the same time. It took many years to fully gather the information and resources, and to get them together to build the ultimate weapon, which was a decisive factor at determining the end of World War II ("Manhattan Project"). Shortly after the first production and use in Japan, the USSR also got their hands on the bomb, making a competition for the USA. The atomic bomb itself was capable of destroying thousands of lives, as it did in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was a weapon, and a symbol of fear, especially in the Cold War era. In 1970, after the Cuban Missile Crisis and the bombings in Japan, the tension between the USA and the USSR often brought fear of another war, and this time a nuclear war.

American people feared if their fate would be the same as those who died in Japan. (“Cuban Missile Crisis”)

Technology was advancing as two major countries, USA and USSR were competing in all areas with each other. The American people, as the USA was a major participant of the Cold War and enemy of the USSR, feared the possibility of an all out war. The atomic bomb could destroy many cities in the USA. As the weapon technology was also progressing, atomic bombs were being produced more and more. The technological advancement in weapons also inspired Star Wars creator George Lucas in the creation of the Death Star (Reagin & Liedl, 2012). The first film was a big hit in America, as people could link the film with their daily lives. People could see how the Death Star was a destructive weapon, and they feared that it would kill or destroy the characters that they love in Star Wars, just as like what atom bombs could do in the real world. The Cold War saw its tension decrease in the 1970s. However, in the 1980s it briefly rose again, which brought the Death Star and Star Wars to people’s minds.

Another aspect of Star Wars that the American people could link to the real world was the blaster bolts, which fired lasers. President Ronald Reagan proposed the famous “Strategic Defense Initiative(SDI)” (“How International Politics Influenced ‘Star Wars’”) which planned laser weapons in defense against the USSR in the possibility of an all out war. American people immediately remembered how Star Wars already showed what would laser bolts look like, and it feared Americans that the Cold War would come to that state. The SDI was a direct reflection of the war system in Star Wars.

Although the Cold War was easing off in 1970s(“Cold War”), the effects were still persistent. The Cold War’s tension saw an increase in 1980s, and the all out war possibility was on the table again. The Death Star and the atomic bomb are linked with each other by their production phases, their uses, and their perspective by the American people. Both projects were planned to instill fear in the world/galaxy and were symbols of fear in wars, had destructive power which could kill and wipe out entire cities/planets, took a lot of research and time to construct. The blaster bolts also showed what the Cold War could have become in an all out war.

2. Guerilla Warfare and Vietnam

In the Star Wars, the Rebellion used guerilla warfare tactics against the Empire in battles, as seen in the *Episode VI: Return of the Jedi*, when the Empire and the Rebellion fight their last battle. The filmmaker and director George Lucas has also explained that the battle on Endor, the moon which the Rebellion and Empire fought its last battle, was inspired by the Vietnam War in various ways (“How International Politics Influenced ‘Star Wars’”). On the moon Endor, creature known as “Ewoks” lived and were native to the moon, just as how the Vietnamese were native to their land and a war was fought there. The American people viewed the Vietnam War as a destructive war which ended their loved one’s lives (“Vietnam War: An Overview”). Protests were happening all over the United States wanting the war to come to an end.

George Lucas was originally going to direct the film called “*Apocalypse Now*” (“How International Politics Influenced ‘Star Wars’”) which was about the Vietnam War, which had an effect in him being inspired by the Vietnam War and the Viet Cong. The Viet Cong, which was an armed movement aiming to defeat Southern Vietnam and liberate Vietnam under the communist Northern Vietnam rule. The Viet Cong armed organization used their homeland as a weapon, by building complex, well-camouflaged tunnels beneath the surface. The tunnels made easier to attack the enemy by guerilla strike method and the American Soldiers weren’t fit to follow them through the tunnels when they were escaping. (“Tunnel Rats of the Vietnam War”) To the American Soldiers, the tunnels were unknown and they had to fight an enemy which was unpredictable.

In Star Wars, *Episode VI: Return of the Jedi*, Ewoks are seen as the native creatures from Endor, allying with the Rebels to fight the Empire in the movie. They adapted to their terrain which was full of forests, grasslands and mountains. They mastered their fighting style which was a result of their adaptation to the forest moon. When the Empire came to the forest moon and battled with them and the Rebels, even their superior technology could not stand against them. By using guerilla tactics, even with spears and lances, their superior knowledge of the terrain they were able to camouflage themselves into the terrain and beat the Empire. (“How International Politics Influenced ‘Star Wars’”) The Ewoks did not have the equipment of

that of the Empire at all, and the Empire not knowledgeable about the terrain of the forest moon could not adapt and was ultimately defeated. This mirrors how the Americans failed to comprehend the Vietnamese war tactics, despite being better technologically equipped than them. The Vietnamese did not have that much advanced technology compared to the Americans. America brought all they had to the battlefield, and America, compared to Vietnam, had much more advanced technology. However, the guerilla tactics used by the Vietnamese proved superior to American's advanced technology. ("Vietnam War: An Overview")

Moreover, the American soldiers were being sent to a territory unknown, and to top that it was not their homeland. The soldiers were fighting a war which, to them, was not their war. This was an important aspect in shaping the protests for the war, because for the American people their family and friends were not dying for them, rather dying for the consequences of the Cold War, to aid the government's cause. ("Two Days in October") To the American people, the Vietnamese War was not being fought for them and their loved ones were dying not to aid the American society. There is also a parallel between how the Ewoks were the native of the planet but a greater war, the Empire versus the Rebellion, was also being fought in their territory. The war, like the Cold War in Vietnam, brought destruction in their homeland and in the case for Ewoks, damaged their ecosystem. For the Vietnamese, the bigger war, which is the Cold War, brought many deaths for their people. ("Vietnam War: An Overview")

The Vietnam War, through the perspective of American people, was a disaster for them. It was a never-ending war that cost many of the American people lose their loved ones and families and many soldiers were constantly being sent away to fight in the harsh conditions of Vietnam. ("Vietnam War: An Overview") Richard Nixon's term, the American President at the 1970s, saw the American people protests against the Vietnamese War. The War was already ongoing by his time and was at its peak then. Many American citizens were affected by the Vietnam War, the war was just not happening in the Vietnamese territory but protests were getting bigger and bigger in America, affecting American lives. The War ended in 1973, as a result of the wide protests all across the United States aiming to end the conflict and people wanting to be together with their loved ones again.

The filmmaker George Lucas, like the American people, was also witnessing the events and saw how they were. He was inspired by the ongoing war. Although the events of the Vietnamese War ended in 1973, George Lucas showed clear parallels between the film *Episode VI: Return of the Jedi* and the Vietnam War, and the president Richard Nixon. For George Lucas, Richard Nixon mirrored Emperor Palpatine. He said that the Emperor was a politician who took over the senate and "...he was really evil" ("The Real History that Inspired 'Star Wars'") and "...he pretended to be a nice guy". George Lucas saw the protests against Richard Nixon which inspired him in creating Emperor Palpatine. It was also the Vietnam War which made him make the character of Emperor Palpatine, through Richard Nixon.

The film *Episode VI: Return of the Jedi*'s Battle of Endor was a direct reflection of the Vietnamese War for George Lucas, and the American people also saw the link between them. The protests on behalf of the death of Vietnamese and American lives on the battlefield explains the American society's perspective about the War, which is to stop it and end the death. The Empire invaded Endor and battles against the Ewoks which used guerilla tactics that cost many casualties for the Empire, like the Vietnamese guerilla tactics which caused the same result for the American soldiers. The fight between the Rebels-Ewoks and the Empire mirror the protests in a way that they both want to end the war and live a peaceful life.

3. Symbol of "Hope"

The symbolism of the concept of "Hope" throughout all of the Original Trilogy is evident, with many of the objects or actions describing hope. "Hope" was an important element in Cold War, many people "hoped" for the war to end, to stop the death of the loved ones, or "hoped" for the authoritarian regimes to end.

A) Authoritism vs. Democracy and Victory Celebration

The Cold War saw many countries be collapsed and rebuilt, and countries with never-ending wars. For the American people, it was a desperate fight for democracy against authoritism and totalitarianism. In Star Wars, the fight between the Rebel Alliance and the Galactic Empire can also be seen as an authoritarian regime(the Empire), against democracy -fighters, which is the Rebel Alliance. The Rebel Alliance's motive was the "hope" that democracy would be reformed and they would win the fight against the authoritarians. Lucas himself told that he was inspired by "how democracies get turned to dictatorships" ("How International Politics Influenced 'Star Wars'"). He often said that international politics and American history affected the way he made the films. The Cold War was a battle between authoritarian regimes and democracies, and people feared to be ruled by oppressive and authoritarian regimes.

At the end of *Episode VI: Return of the Jedi*, the Rebels celebrate their hard-earned victory against the authoritarian Galactic Empire, as their ideas of democracy and freedom could finally be implemented. The Berlin Wall separated the parts of the Berlin city and when it fell, people celebrated the freedom they achieved. ("What was the Berlin Wall and How did it Fall?") The Fall of the Berlin Wall mirrors how the people both in the Star Wars galaxy and in Berlin celebrates the fall of the authoritarian regimes in Berlin. The decline of authoritarian regimes was what people of America hoped for, and they achieved that.

B) Luke Skywalker

Luke Skywalker was the symbol of hope through the Original Trilogy. From *Episode IV: A New Hope* to *Episode VI: Return of the Jedi*, Luke's journey as a farmboy to one of the galaxy's saviors and the man that redeemed Darth Vader, the symbol of destruction and fear in the galaxy, Luke's journey is based on hope. ("The Light and Dark Sides of Star Wars") Luke Skywalker is the Galaxy's hope of freedom. As a farmboy, he destroyed the Death Star in the film *Episode IV: A New Hope* and in *Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back*, he started to train as a Jedi. A Jedi, throughout the films, is presented as a symbol of hope and makers of peace("The Real History that Inspired 'Star Wars'").

As Luke Skywalker, in to *Episode VI: Return of the Jedi*, completes his training and becomes a Jedi. He then comes face to face with Darth Vader and Emperor Palpatine, and proceeds to redeem Darth Vader and defeat Emperor Palpatine. He always had hope in his father, which explains his symbolization as “A New Hope”. As a result, it can be said that Luke Skywalker represents the hope that the Cold War will end with the younger generation, as he grows up and becomes a Jedi, and the Rebels defeat the authoritarian regimes and end the Galaxy’s struggle. People hoped that the younger generation will live in a world without war, and Luke Skywalker represents that hope. The American society is an example of this hope. They were suffering the consequences of war, and they hoped a brighter future for the children.

C) The Rebellion

The Rebellion was the freedom fighters that the Empire fought against through the Original Trilogy. They symbolized hoped for the galaxy. From its logo to its purpose, Rebel Alliance was based on hope and their goal was a better galaxy, both free and in peace. They wanted to restore the Galactic Republic, which was a democratic regime that has lasted for thousands of years in the Star Wars galaxy’s history. (“The Rebel Alliance”) Although they were generally outmanned and outgunned, they held onto the hope that one day they would be able to restore peace in the galaxy and beat the Galactic Empire. Their logo was a representation of a Phoenix Bird, which always rose from its ashes, conveying their motive. (“Rebel Alliance Logo”) Princess Leia, one of the Alliance’s leaders and hero of the Rebellion, said the logo was a representation of hope. The Rebellion and their will were the symbol of American society’s feelings, and a message to them. During the Cold War, people hoped that the Cold War would end and they would live a peaceful life. The Rebel Alliance fights for freedom, and they win at the end. The people of America, especially in the peaks and the late stages of Cold War (1970s and 1980s) were tired of the war and they wanted it to end. The Rebel Alliance symbolising hope was a message to the people that hope should never be underestimated, even when they feel desperate and think that there is no way out.

CONCLUSION

The Star Wars original trilogy including the films *Episode IV: A New Hope*, *Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back* and *Episode VI: Return of the Jedi* was an important film series in the Cold War era for how it handles the political situations and technological improvements under the cover of space opera, the genre of the film. (“How International Politics Influenced ‘Star Wars’”) Because how it reflects Cold War in the film, it allows us to answer the research question: **“How does the war between the Empire and the Rebel Alliance in Star Wars original trilogy(4th, 5th, 6th films) reflect the perspectives of American Society about the Cold War in 1960-1980s?”**. The Cold War was a long and destructive war that caused people around the world to suffer and lead to destruction and creation of new countries. It was a global rivalry between authoritarian regimes and democratic regimes. Since the creator of the films George Lucas built Star Wars films during the Cold War era and based many aspects of his films on the events of Cold War, the original trilogy contains many examples of Cold War events. For example the technological improvements seen in Death Star and laser based weapon, similarities between guerilla warfare and the Vietnam War, and the symbols of hope in the films reflecting the hope that the War could end one day. The symbolisms given in the essay provide context about the American society’s actions and perspectives during the peak and late Cold War phases.

The original trilogy of the Star Wars saga is full of symbolisms of the Cold War. This study focused on the parallels between the events in the Original Trilogy and the interpretation of these events by the American society. It showed the dominant perspective of the American people about the Cold War. Overall, the Original Trilogy was a mirror for how it handled the American society’s values, fears and aspirations about the Cold War, beyond being an entertainment source; thus answering the research question through representations of key concepts like authoritarian power, rapid technological escalation, and the use of guerrilla resistance, and the hope of the war coming to an end; the films reflects key concerns of the period.

For the space opera genre, Star Wars was one of the first of his kind and was popular all across the world with its first film, *Episode IV: A New Hope*. George Lucas wanted the series to reflect events that have a strong impact on the American society's development during the late Cold war phases and he got it. The series can be interpreted in many ways, but the impact and the role it plays in delivering messages from the Cold War is crucial for understanding the films.

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