

## Trigger-Happy Hollywood: Dirty Harry, Fascism, and (<https://thepolitic.org/>) the Liberal Backlash of the 1970s



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(<https://thepolitic.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Dirty-Harry-e1558572245456.jpg>)

“The film’s moral position is fascist. No doubt about it.” These words, written (<https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/dirty-harry-1971>) by Roger Ebert shortly after the 1971 release of *Dirty Harry*, were but one denunciation in a torrent of them. A widely-read freelance article (<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/04/clint-eastwood-dirty-harry-police-brutality-racism/>) by a Harvard student in the Sunday *New York Times* derided the film as “a simply told story of the Nietzschean superman

and his sado-machostic pleasures.” The most biting attack came from influential film essayist Paulina Kael, who dismissed (<http://scrapsfromtheloft.com/2017/12/28/dirty-harry-saint-cop-review-by-pauline-kael/>) the film as a “deeply immoral” piece of “fascist medievalism.” Her ultimate diagnosis was grim: “this action genre has always had a fascist potential, and it has finally surfaced.”

The film’s right-wing politics were hardly subtle: it starred Clint Eastwood in the role of Harry Callahan, a California cop that takes the law into his own hands after an emasculated liberal bureaucracy hampers his attempts to bring a sociopathic killer named Scorpio to justice. Whether such conservative themes earned the film the label of “fascism” was a different debate altogether. Clintwood and director Don Siegel, a self-identified liberal, took (<https://www.popoptiq.com/dead-right-dirty-harry-captured-70s-culture-wars/>) the criticism personally. Just two years after the first film, Clintwood and Siegel released a sequel, *Magnum Force*, which attempted to exonerate Harry from the charges of fascism lodged against him. Such an attempt, I contend, was unnecessary.

Despite the venomous charges of its critics, *Dirty Harry* is not and never was a fascist film. However, the sequel, in its conscious attempts to make that same argument, inadvertently embraces a fascistic outlook. The ways in which both films attempted to preempt liberal critiques reveal much about the cultural power of the left-wing movements of the 1970s, and the ways in which conservative filmmaking accommodated said power even as it rebelled against it.

Writing about late 60s-early 70s Hollywood films in their book *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film*, Michael Ryan and Douglas Kelner, summarize *Dirty Harry*’s right-leaning argument as such: “liberal criminal justice is unjust because it prevents good cops from doing their job, and it lets criminals go free to commit more crimes. Cops are portrayed as heroes whose zeal to protect the innocent and society is misinterpreted as brutality by liberals.” The San Francisco setting links the dangers that Callahan confronts, and resolves, to the urban unrest of the 60s and 70s. The message is plain: weak-willed liberals have allowed militant criminality to flourish, and an empowered police force is the solution. A key scene in the film has a smug district attorney general and law professor from (the notoriously liberal) Cal Berkeley inform Harry that Scorpio cannot be convicted because his Miranda rights were violated. Miranda, of course, serving as a symbol of liberals’ corruption of the Supreme Court and corrosion of criminal justice. It is Harry’s willingness to circumvent this system to execute justice as he sees fit, an act that suggests we “must rely on authoritarian and repressive police force...avoid coming undone as a result of its structural imbalances,” that originates the much-cited accusations of fascism.

And yet this is a terribly simplistic reading. While Harry does indeed put himself above the law, the film expresses deep ambivalence about his vigilantism. This can be seen in the subtle parallels that it draws between Harry and Scorpio. Such parallels are not immediately obvious: Scorpio's unmanly whining (as when Harry stabs his leg) and childish impulses (as when he sings "Row Row Your Boat" on the hijacked bus) clearly distinguishes him from the masculine and mature Harry. Yet Siegel complicates this easy binary. Harry and Scorpio may be visually and personally distinct, but they both indulge in a perverse sort of voyeurism: Scorpio through his rifle's scope, Harry through his binoculars. Harry's ogling of a half-naked woman through his binoculars while on a stakeout echoes Scorpio's gaze, through his scope, at the bikini-clad woman he kills earlier in the film. The context of their voyeurism differs considerably—Scorpio aims to kill, Harry to save—and yet both enjoy it.

Similarly, just as Scorpio psychologically torments Harry during their first direct encounter by revealing that the hostage he wants to save is already dead, Harry psychologically tortures a defeated black robber at the start of the film by threatening to shoot his face. Both derive naked pleasure from these activities, hinting at their sociopathic similarities. These shared traits are likely intentional. After all, Siegel once told (<https://www.popoptiq.com/dead-right-dirty-harry-captured-70s-culture-wars/>) reporters that "the cop is just as evil, in his way, as the sniper."

The most obvious example of the narrative's conflicted attitude towards its "hero" comes at the end of the second act, when Harry tracks Scorpio down in a football field after a protracted chase that leaves both battered. The foreboding cinematic language leaves little ambiguity as to how to interpret what comes next. As Harry approaches Scorpio, who lays begging and bleeding on the bright green grass, the handheld point-of-view camera shakes wildly, conveying Harry's unhinged state of mind. As Harry demands that Scorpio inform him of his hostage's whereabouts, the lighting in subsequent close-up shots douses his face in darkness while also drawing attention to his bulging eyes and bared teeth. Gone is the stoic, savvy Harry, replaced by a snarling beast we barely recognize. The music, far from triumphant, grows more distorted and disturbed as the scene trudges on. The clincher comes when Harry actually begins torturing Scorpio, deliberately stepping on his bleeding leg. Immediately the camera zooms away from Harry and Scorpio, sparing us the grisly violence, until it eventually gives us a long shot of the entire football field. Harry and Scorpio vanish from view, obscured by the ominous mist enveloping the stands, while the eerie music drowns out Scorpio's pained screams. That Harry's brutal torture of Scorpio occurs in a football stadium is no coincidence. It subverts this great symbol of American masculinity. Siegel transmutes the football stadium into the Roman colosseum, Harry the gladiator and Scorpio his humiliated victim. Harry's torture of Scorpio, far from glorifying violent machismo, condemns it as mere savagery.

While Scorpio insists on his right to a lawyer, Harry deliberately presses his foot against Scorpio's injured leg, inducing pained screams from his victim. Harry's disregard for the Miranda rights Scorpio so desperately recites marks the moment he finally puts himself above the law. This is the moment (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=buNwwAximcE>), in other words, when Harry's ostensibly fascistic impulses explicitly surface. That the moment is portrayed so gruesomely, and in such explicitly frightening terms, renders problematic any claims of the film uncritically embracing extrajudicial justice. Even the final scene, where Harry finally kills Scorpio in a cowboy-style shootout that recalls the moral anarchy of the Wild West, ends on a somber note. Harry throws his badge away, quitting the police force and in doing so accepting that the modern society of the 1970s has no place for him. Paired with the animalistic portrayal of Harry's interrogation of Scorpio, the concluding scene's message becomes ambiguous: should we mourn Harry for failing to integrate into modern America, or mourn modern America for abandoning Harry's ideology? Either way, the film's ambivalence about Harry's worldview remains. This ambivalence is consistent with Don Siegel's public pronouncements on the character: Harry, Siegel said (<https://www.popoptiq.com/dead-right-dirty-harry-captured-70s-culture-wars/>), is "a genuine hero whose attitudes I abhor."

*Dirty Harry's* critics, of course, were unwilling to grant the film a more nuanced reading. *Dirty Harry 2: Magnum Force* is about as subtle as a bulldozer in its attempt to reform Harry Callahan's image. Its villains, a group of traffic police officers that brazenly execute criminals left and right, embody every quality ascribed to Harry by his critics. Their Gestapo-like uniform, complete with thick leather boots and tight-fitting vests, is missing only a Nazi shoulder patch. Harry, the rebellious rascal, now preaches restraint. His new catchphrase doubles as the theme of the film and, not coincidentally, disavows the theme of the original film: "A man's got to know his limitations." The film's agenda surfaces most forcefully when Harry confronts the vigilante police officers in a parking garage. They explain that they are "simply ridding society of killers that would be caught and sentenced anyways if our courts worked properly," summarizing the theme of the first *Dirty Harry*. The meta-textual reference is not lost on the police officers. "There simply is no other way, Inspector," the traffic cops tell Harry. "You of all people should understand that." The police officers assume what Harry's critics did: that he is an unabashed fascist who believes he has the authority to act as judge, jury, and executioner. Harry is unmoved. "I afraid you've misjudged me," he tells the officers—and his critics.

And yet the film never clarifies how, exactly, Harry's critics have misjudged him. He proclaims that he "hates the goddamn system, but until someone comes along and fixes it, I'll stick with it," but then spends the film repeatedly disobeying his superior's orders and circumventing the system when it suits him, as when he provokes the criminals he's assigned to follow and when he insists on taking two inexperienced officers

with him to a confrontation that devolves into a violent shootout. Although Harry criticizes the boss of the villains—“when police start becoming their own executioners, where does it end?”—he himself guiltlessly kills four police officers in the film’s climax. The moral line that distinguishes Harry’s vigilantism from that of his enemies’ is unclear. The film succeeds in tarring the traffic cops as irredeemably evil by having them target innocents (such as Harry’s black friend Early Smith) when necessary. But this method of differentiating Harry from his foes rings hollow, because it sidesteps the actual moral question: is it ever acceptable to execute criminals via extrajudicial means?

*Magnum Force*, by failing to substantively differentiate between the traffic cops’ and Harry’s moral codes but insisting on the former’s evil and the latter’s goodness, ironically renders Harry a more fascistic figure than the original film ever did. Such an arbitrary distinction implies that only Harry has the authority to execute his own vision of justice simply by virtue of being Harry. From the beginning of the film, *Magnum Force* forbids any equivocation between Harry and his foes. The first traffic cop is introduced to us in a manner that indelibly marks him as a villain: ominous music that indicates a dangerous presence, ground-level camera shots that fixate on the officer’s Nazi-like leather boots, and a face that the camera never allows us to see. The traffic cop is thus dehumanized and Nazi-fied from the start, even though his first action—shooting up a couple of mobsters that have escaped punishment on the basis of a legal technicality—does not differ from what Harry does at the conclusion of the first film.

The traffic cops, clad as they are in jackets, hats, and sunglasses that obscure their identities, are ultimately defined more by their Nazi symbolism than either their identities or their actions. Harry, in his tweed suit, remains visually distinct from his foes throughout. Gone is the blurred line that the original film drew between Harry and Scorpio, the one that cast doubt on our hero’s morality, replaced instead by a blaring neon boundary. The film, however, never justifies the placement of that neon boundary.

The sinister arbitrariness of Harry’s designated “hero” status shows itself best in the climax of *Magnum Force*. After Harry blows up the evil police chief Briggs, who planned to frame him after escaping, he repeats his new catchphrase: “Man’s got to know his limitations.” And yet the catchphrase doesn’t map on to the narrative context. Harry, after all, has just once again acted as judge, jury, and executioner. He has once again overstepped his limits, not respected them. Harry, then, cannot be speaking about himself. But if we assume him to be addressing the man he has just killed, his words appear disturbing. He berates Briggs for attempting to take the law into his own hands, right after he has done so himself. The implication is that men have to know their limitations—except Harry, who can act as he pleases with impunity. Unlike the first film’s football-torture scene, nothing in the climax’s cinematic language, from music to lighting, suggests that the viewer should feel uneasy about Harry’s actions. He is the hero, plain and simple.

Thus, in its zeal to clear Harry's name, *Magnum Force* expunges the moral ambivalence that made the original *Dirty Harry* right-wing but not fascist. Harry's behavior between the two films does not change. What does change is the narrative's portrayal of it, and therein lies the difference. The original film treats Harry's transgressions against the law with an ambivalent mixture of deep suspicion and reluctant embrace. Meanwhile, *Magnum Force*'s full-throated glorification of Harry despite its failure to meaningfully distinguish his extrajudicial killings from that of his enemies renders both the film and its protagonist genuinely, or at least nearly, fascist. In its sloppy attempts to rebut its critics, the *Dirty Harry* franchise became what they claimed. Harry the antifascist is far more fascist than Harry the right-wing cop.

The narrative and logical pretzels into which the *Dirty Harry* films twisted themselves to evade left-wing criticism evidence the cultural influence the relatively nascent liberal movements of the 1960s had managed to achieve in a mere decade. Both *Dirty Harry* and *Dirty Harry 2* are conservative films, as any pro-cop, pro-gun, pro-law-and-order film in the 1970s must have been. Yet despite their clear politics, both films display a keen awareness of the social context from which they have emerged and for which they are being produced, and as such attempt to preempt left-wing criticism. As shown above, the original *Dirty Harry* moderated its portrayal of Harry's authoritarian tendencies, while the sequel tried to totally renounce them. That neither concession to the Left made a difference to the film's hostile reception matters less than the fact that such concessions were made at all in a franchise that starred a conservative celebrity (Clint Eastwood) championing plainly conservative themes. Siegel's discretion makes sense, operating as he was in an environment so politically polarized that even films like *The Godfather* and *Star Wars* were accused (<https://s-usih.org/2014/05/fascinating-fascism-the-other-f-word-in-seventies-cultural-criticism/>) of fascism. The looseness with which left-leaning film and cultural critics deployed this damning criticism in the 1970s betrays a climate of liberal paranoia concerning the rise of conservatism in the United States, a paranoia no doubt bolstered by the appearance of candidates like Barry Goldwater in 1964 and the right-wing Nixon's administration's Watergate scandal. Any director looking to create a film with explicitly conservative themes, as Siegel did with *Dirty Harry*, had to reckon with this reality and tailor his filmmaking accordingly.

Indeed, the *Dirty Harry* films do more to accommodate the Left than simply denounce fascism. Ryan and Kelner are right to note that "the evil figure in [Dirty Harry] is a fanatical and 'effeminate' killer...who is associated with peace symbols, long hair, and other countercultural paraphernalia." However, this observation fails to note the ways in which Scorpio is also designed to antagonize liberals—and thereby inculcate sympathy for Harry. While he is visually associated with the liberal movements of the 1960s, Scorpio espouses values antithetical to them. He is openly racist, even employing a racist slur at one point in the film, and targets not just whites but blacks and homosexuals. Scorpio is thus an "equal opportunity" villain: he collects and synthesizing in his person values anathema to both ends of the political spectrum.

Scorpio's overt racism, in turn, reflects well on Harry. If Harry's out to kill a racist, then surely his violent policing serves rather than hurts minorities. Harry himself is presented as an outward bigot, but the universality of his bigotry renders it non-discriminatory; he hates everyone equally. More importantly, his only real friends across both films are non-white: his first police partner is Mexican, his second is black, and his first on-screen romantic interest is Asian. Even Harry's perverted impulses are presented as egalitarian. He is as willing snoop on an undressed Mexican woman as he is on a white one. Thus we find that these conservative films nonetheless embraced multiculturalism, often consciously as a shield against potential criticism.

Right after Harry shoots a handful of black criminal early in the first film, for example, we see him being treated by a black doctor with whom he is a close friend. The absence of this "close friend" for the remainder of the film exposes his single, utilitarian purpose: to absolve Harry of charges of racism. He'll shoot black people, but he'll befriend them too.

Thus we see that *Dirty Harry's* right-wing politics are, to a degree, mere bravado. These ostensibly rebellious conservative films persistently soften their edges, almost pandering to their left-wing critics. Harry Callahan acts out right-wing fantasies of law-and-order, but on a leash that mitigates the sharpness of his bites. Harry's authoritarianism is restrained by not just a rotting liberal bureaucracy but a cautious director and screenwriter. Such caution evidences the extent to which liberal ideas on race and representation had penetrated the cultural mainstream. Siegel could predict exactly what aspects of the film would be lightning rods of liberal outrage—Harry's authoritarianism and racism—and consciously tried to preempt them.

The original *Dirty Harry*, with its racist villain, multicultural fixations, and pronounced ambivalence vis-à-vis Harry's aggressive policing, is as much an accommodation of left-wing backlash as its more heavy-handed sequel. In many ways, we can read *Dirty Harry* as not just a conservative backlash film, as Ryan and Kelner did, but as a *liberal* backlash film. The conservative values to which it pandered (traditional white masculinity, strong-armed policing, liberal impotency) are just as integral to the film's thematic construction as the liberal ones to which it deferred. This is to say nothing of the sequel, which only exists to assuage liberal concerns about fascist cops. It ultimately was the paranoid, reactionary politics of liberals and conservatives alike that concocted the volatile blend from which the *Dirty Harry* franchise emerged.

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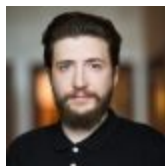
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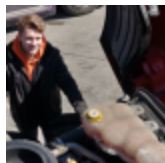
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