Our favorite war

By Timothy Larsen in the November 28, 2006 issue

I occasionally hear parents complain that their elementary school children have ended up studying dinosaurs for several years in a row. A few grades go by and suddenly it seems like the only specialized knowledge their child has picked up is how to tell a Pachycephalosaurus from a Pentaceratops. As for teachers, they know that kids love studying dinosaurs. Why risk a unit on the great rivers of the world when there is a crowd-pleaser like T-Rex?

When it comes to learning history, World War II is the equivalent of Jurassic Park. British academics routinely complain that students come to university having studied the Allied victory over the Axis powers several times over—and little else. Likewise, in the U.S., the chairs of history departments have been known to observe that the only surefire way to boost student enrollment is to offer a course on World War II.

Flags of Our Fathers, directed by Clint Eastwood, offers another return to World War II—the iconic flag-raising by marines on Iwo Jima. Eastwood wants to say that historical truth is not simple. Heroes are something that we construct for our own purposes. The men who raised Old Glory on Iwo Jima are sent back to the States in order to be the poster boys of a campaign to raise war bonds. They have to endure endless kitschy endeavors—from eating dessert sculptures of themselves to participating in a pregame reenactment of their photogenic moment on a papier-mâché hill erected in the middle of Chicago's Soldier Field.

Flags of Our Fathers begins with a voiceover that criticizes crude ways of thinking about war: "We like things nice and simple, good and evil." In short, the filmmakers

are trying not to present a Manichaean vision of reality.

They do not fully succeed. The Japanese are portrayed uniformly as vicious and unscrupulous. They are exclusively and relentlessly those people who torture and kill the soldiers who fall into their hands; they take no prisoners. The Americans, on the other hand—aside from one soldier's vague reference to having seen and done things that he is not proud of—are free of any such culpability. Not just the cause of the war but even its execution is apparently above reproach. The moral ambiguity of these characters extends no further than their having reluctantly appropriated the sobriquet *hero* as a dubious means to a good end. (Eastwood has made a companion film from the Japanese perspective. *Letters from Iwo Jima* will open in Japan on December 9 and in the U.S. on February 9.)

To be fair, the film's limitation is somewhat inherent in the material. Studying World War II is one of the worst ways to learn about the nature of human conflicts. How many wars have had such a lack of moral equivalency, with Winston Churchill pitted against Adolf Hitler? How many wars has the U.S. joined following such a large-scale, completely unprovoked attack by another sovereign nation as the Japanese strike on Pearl Harbor?

If studying history is an opportunity to foster an awareness of the complexity of the causes of violent struggles and to gain an appreciation of how difficult it often is to adjudicate between the competing moral claims and grievances of opposing sides, then almost any other war would be a better subject for our meditations—World War I or the U.S.-Mexican War, for examples.

Flags of Our Fathers is completely devoid of the faith of our fathers. The only place for religion is in an occasional choice of expletive. Even a wartime wedding between a military hero and his hometown sweetheart is shown taking place at a city hall.

In a way, however, the absence of faith in *Flags of Our Fathers* is excusable precisely because World War II is probably the only war in which religion can be taken for granted by Americans. If one believes in just war theory at all, then the war to defeat the Axis powers is a textbook case. We need not even bother to brush the dust off the texts of Augustine. Alas, theological clarity does not usually come so easily. Therefore, if we are going to exercise our theological muscles sufficiently to be equipped to face the dilemmas of our world, then we will need to think about the contours of other conflicts.

Arguably Vietnam should also be set aside as insufficiently complex—its lessons are perhaps too obvious in the other direction. The Revolutionary War, as straightforward as it is in national memory, would be a far better case study. Was the cause really sufficient to justify killing? Even if the answer ends up being reassuringly patriotic, at least we would have had to do a genuine theological refresher course on the criteria for a just war in order to reach that conclusion.

What we need is not a complex film about a simple war but a simple film about a complex war. Simple, that is, in the sense of being able to awaken the interest of people who would rather be thinking about D-Day or dinosaurs.