

# 'Starship Troopers' Was A Warning To America

The '90s cult classic is a savage satire of fascism that's required viewing now

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**This is your last free story this month.**



Photo: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment

The [sci-fi war movie \*Starship Troopers\*](#) bombed when it opened in 1997. Both audiences and critics hated it. They saw a shallow, gratuitously violent CGI cartoon about giant alien bugs dismembering sexy space marines.

But I saw a different movie than everyone else. Yes, it's a gruesome special-effects-stuffed spectacle where, for instance, a human's brains are sucked out by a giant intelligent worm. *Starship Troopers* is also more complex than most thought at the time.

I sat in a movie theater during the waning days of a century that saw the birth of a new empire — an empire of the people, by the people, for the people — and beheld a big-budget blockbuster preach the truth. The future belongs to America, which isn't great news for the future.

America, you see, is a boot. It has always been a boot. The nation was founded in mercy but it governs in violence. The state smashes. It obliterates enemies, foreign or domestic, real or invented, us or them. This is called the American way, but it's also called fascism.

It is what it is and *Starship Troopers* knew, back then, what it is.

The #1 movie of 1997 was James Cameron's epic Academy Award-winning historical romance *Titanic*, about young love on a doomed boat. That movie made hundreds of millions of dollars. The reviews glowed. *Titanic* told an anxious society hurtling towards a new millennium that technology can fail but the human heart will go on. It's a sad movie. *Starship Troopers*, however, has a happy ending. An ecstatic one.

In the late 90s, the majority of Americans had briefly lost touch with their bloodlust. Spoiler alert: That didn't last long. Even America's most popular movie franchise has 'war' in the title. It might as well be called *Triumph of the Force*.

I think, in retrospect, moviegoers didn't like having their noses rubbed in the truth by a movie. They preferred the one where Leo DiCaprio freezes to death.

*Starship Troopers* was a gory warning that the legendary TV and movie series *Star Trek* is laughable bullshit. There is no utopia where humanity evolves into a gentle species dedicated to peaceful space exploration. Captain Kirk is a fascist. He loves firing phasers and photon torpedoes, both dependable solutions to most intergalactic problems. And like *Star Trek*, the society of *Starship Troopers* has eradicated racism and sexism. Everyone is equal and equally intoxicated by violence.

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I was sixteen years old when America invaded Iraq in 1990. The goal was the heroic liberation of Kuwait, a

Middle Eastern country no one had heard about before it was invaded by Iraq's strongman president and former CIA contractor Saddam Hussein. This would end up being a geopolitical miscalculation on his part.

The war was short but a blockbuster. I remember watching in wonder as high-tech tomahawk missiles struck buildings with uncanny accuracy from hundreds of miles away. The first Gulf War was post-Cold War America putting the world on notice: Don't fuck with us.

There were nights I worried there would be a draft like there was during the last war in Vietnam. I had family who fought in that nightmare. They never talked about it but I could see the jungle in their eyes. I knew, in my bones, I wouldn't survive a war. Hell, I don't think I would have made it through boot camp. When I turned seventeen my dad gently suggested I join the Marines and retire in my 40s. My 40s?! That's almost dead. I then asked my dad if the Marines had a drama department and that ended that discussion.

My fears I'd end up getting shot at in the desert were short-lived, thankfully. The war lasted a little more than a month.

I also remember thinking the stealth bombers looked pretty cool. I was proud that we had nearly-invisible warplanes that looked like spaceships that could visit kill anyone, anywhere. What a strange thing to feel proud of. I

didn't hate the Iraqis but everyone else did, suddenly. But I didn't mourn their dead when I watched grainy footage of enemy tanks blowing up. It was a video game to me. These were human beings cooking to death in iron coffins but I was mesmerized. Look what America can do. What we can do.

The Iraqis didn't even do anything to me. Eventually, when terrorists from that vast region did wound America, we enthusiastically overdid it.

I was so swept up by the first Gulf War, I even tuned-in to the massive victory ticker-tape parade in Manhattan for our boys on TV like it was Thanksgiving. I was smitten by the jingoistic spectacle. That is the closest I ever came to feeling the sentimental tug of fascism — I am the tribe, the tribe is me, and if the tribe is strong, I am strong.

Seven years later, I'm watching a colorful movie about young people smiling before dying but I'm laughing. And they die spectacularly and frequently like it's a slapstick comedy wet with blood.

*Starship Troopers* is satire as sharp as the razor-like mandibles of the extraterrestrial insects who our heroes are horny to exterminate. War isn't hell, it's totally awesome! It mocks right-wing nationalism. The main characters are all sexy and corny and passionately devoted to a government that sees them as expendable. That's the movie's most reliable punchline: Patriotism is

for suckers.

The *Starship Troopers* movie is a savage vision of an America that's spread like a virus around the world. Semper Pax Americana. A global war-loving military-led government with one rule: if you don't fight, you don't get rights. Only citizens vote, and the only way to become a citizen is to kick ass. In *Starship Troopers*, the young cheerfully sacrifice them for the state and the survivors grow old horribly scarred or limbless.

Even in 1997, you could see where America was going, if you squinted. We were a country in love with power and money, and that love would deform our priorities and values and identity over the next few decades. The first Gulf War was so successful it spawned a sequel. A vast invasion and occupation of the Middle East that has lasted almost twenty years.

The movie is occasionally funny, especially during fake government broadcasts filled with over-the-top propaganda — state news broadcasts and advertisements that feature happy soldiers happy to be soldiers.

We worship military service when it's politically convenient. For the most part, veterans are ignored. But show me where a country spends its taxes and I'll tell you what's in that country's heart. America's heart pumps bullets. We love war, even if we forget those who fight it.

As a director, Paul Verhoeven's best films both flatter and skewer America. *Robocop* is arguably his best movie, even though the title is pure B-movie schlock. This action-movie about a half robot, half — well, you get it — is a savage send-up of unregulated corporate greed, the privatization of law enforcement, and this country's passionate love of guns.

*Robocop* isn't just a movie about a police officer who is half-robot. It's also part *Frankenstein*, and part social critique of the Reagan era. But then there's a movie like Verhoeven's *Showgirls*, the notorious 1996 erotic melodrama about a young woman with dreams of making it big as an exotic dancer in Las Vegas. That movie is still mocked to this day. It's dismissed as soft-core pornography. But *Showgirls* is an accurate reflection of America: greedy, gaudy, desperate to please. That's why no one takes it seriously. To take it seriously is to accept America is ugly.

Verhoeven gets this country in a way no other director does. He spent his boyhood in the Nazi-occupied Netherlands and saw fascism up close. He grew up around war and, clearly, had some things to say about it.

That's why *Starship Troopers* is more of a traditional war movie than sci-fi, even though there are spaceships and laser cannons. We follow a handful of fresh-faced men and women bursting with enthusiasm as they complete training, ship out to combat, and are transformed by

battle. The tropes are all there, but the twist is we're rooting for the men and woman of the intergalactic infantry to rain down hell on the bad guys. When they die, horribly, it's glorious. It's what they signed up for.

*Starship Troopers* is an example of a movie that's better than the book, which was written by renowned sci-fi author Robert Heinlein. The book is a political essay masquerading as a young adult space adventure. It argues that violence is "the supreme authority from which all other authorities are derived." That's a tattoo for a fascist if ever there was one.

The invading aliens in *Starship Troopers* are nicknamed Bugs and for all we know, they could be defending themselves from the humans. But the humans don't seem to care why the Bugs are on the warpath. They are singularly obsessed with one thing: killing Bugs.

Fascists exist to stomp. They put their boots on one at a time. To a fascist, anyone who challenges their authority is a bug. Protestors, liberals, people with the courage to stand up and say "no." Bugs. If you can avoid becoming one, do so. But not everyone gets that choice. Some of us are born bugs.

For most Americans, "fascism" has been a word that belonged to the distant past, but it's found a new relevance. There is a new and frightening division in America right now.

On one side, a diverse and unruly majority who hold onto the promises of democracy and believe in the sanctity of the institutions that govern republics and on the other, an uncompromising white power minority who applaud violence and cruelty and support a president whose only strategy is to reward the faithful and punish everyone else.

Fascism is fear, exploding like fireworks in the sky and the crowd goes "awww." It's flush cheeks and fury. Big feelings. Fascism is a good time but only if you're a fascist.

It was always going to happen here. And it is happening now. Maybe *Starship Troopers* truly is prophecy — maybe two hundred years from now the world will be clenched like a fist, and our generation will be honored by fascists as their forebearers.

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