

The patriot – a gripping story of war and family

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Released the weekend before July 4th in the year 2000, this Roland Emmerich historical action film doubled its \$110 million dollar budget. Mel Gibson stars as a peaceful farmer living in South Carolina in 1776, who is compelled to lead the Colonial Militia after a sadistic British officer needlessly murders his son. Suddenly changing from a relaxed and loving individual to a violent soldier hell-bent on revenge, Gibson provides a convincing, and emotionally strong performance that drives the almost three-hour movie. When he storms out of his burning house carrying a literal handful of weapons, it's obvious he means business... and has passed the point of no-return. As the determined father leads his rag-tag group of men into battle, he proves to be a resourceful and resilient strategist, often outsmarting the British, including one memorable moment when he participates in a prison exchange using dummies.

The talented ensemble supporting cast includes Heath Ledger, Jason Isaacs, Chris Cooper, René Auberjonois, Tom Wilkinson, Donal Logue, Adam Baldwin, and dozens of other faces that populate the battlefields. The men, and the few ladies present, do a fine job with the period-accurate dialogue, but only Isaacs really stands out from the crowd with his impossibly despicable portrayal of the fiendish redcoat. Overtly reluctant to war with England, our titular hero warns early that, "An elected legislature can trample a man's rights as easily as a king can." Besides giving us insight into the man's intellect and understanding of 18th century politics, the line is a poignant commentary on today's culture, some two hundred years later.

Many of the most gruesome deaths happen just out of view, but the R-rated picture still exhibits some decidedly graphic moments, particularly those

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involving Gibson's trusty hatchet. But as far as war-movies go, the on-screen brutality is rather tame. Emmerich certainly has a flare for the ostentatious and grand... delivering on this trademark by delivering sweeping anamorphic shots in beautiful slow-motion. Sometimes, this big-Hollywood style works, and is suitably appropriate for the epic action on screen... but other times it feels particularly cheesy and unnecessary. The soundtrack by the immensely prolific John Williams mayn't be his best work, but the pulsing mix of strings and woodwinds provide a lively and patriotic backdrop to the adventure. The leisurely paced narrative tends to repeat itself, but comes marching back with an exciting finale battle scene, that unfortunately is also a complete work of fiction. Although it functions as a poor, and generally inaccurate account of the actual Revolutionary War (HBO's impressive " John Adams" mini-series is far superior in that regard), the film does contain authentic and realistic costumes and locations.

Despite its many redeeming qualities, the film will always share unavoidable and unfavorable comparisons to Gibson's earlier war-epic, " Braveheart". Which is much stronger execution of a near-identical story involving lost-love, flag-carrying speeches, and rag-tag heroes taking on the mighty British empire. Perhaps that's why it won five Academy Awards, whereas its Colonial counterpart could only secure three technical nominations. Given their similarity, I'll always choose the Best Picture to re-watch on a lazy summer afternoon... but this picture still has a great deal of entertainment value.