

10-18-2012

Government Good Guys

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/news_rls

Recommended Citation

"Government Good Guys" (2012). *News Releases*. 572.
https://ecommons.udayton.edu/news_rls/572

This News Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Marketing and Communications at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in News Releases by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mschlangen1@udayton.edu.

University of Dayton, Ohio (url: <http://www.udayton.edu/index.php>)



Government Good Guys

10.18.2012 | Research, Faculty, Culture and Society

President Ronald Reagan famously said the nine most terrifying words in the English language are, "I'm from the government, and I'm here to help."

But where would Gotham City be without the tireless service of Batman's government ally, Commissioner Gordon? And how great a debt of gratitude does the world owe a few government scientists and fighter pilots who halt an alien invasion of Earth in *Independence Day*?

Box office hits reveal the paradoxical love-hate relationship Americans have with their government, according to new research from University of Dayton political science professor Michelle Pautz.

Pautz studied the top-100 grossing films of all time (unadjusted for inflation) in both the U.S. and Australia for how the movies portrayed government and civil servants.

"Overall, these movies offer generally negative — or at best, mixed — depictions of government, but the individual government characters fare much better," Pautz said.

She said this reflects the experience of most Americans, who may be skeptical about government on the whole but generally have positive experiences with civil servants on a daily basis.

Pautz identified 424 government characters in 134 of the 200 films, which included blockbusters such as *Avatar*, *Titanic*, *The Dark Knight*, *Star Wars*, *Toy Story 3* and *Jaws*.

"Film is the most accessible form of art and has a powerful influence over the perceptions of audiences worldwide," Pautz said. "Most research on this topic looks at films most people have never seen. I'm interested in how government and government employees fare in history's most popular movies."

Some of the key findings include:

- Overall, government depictions were 30 percent positive, 48 percent negative and 22 percent mixed. In U.S. films, government received a 26/46 (positive/negative) rating, and in Australian films, the rating was 34/49.
- Of all 424 characters, 60 percent were depicted positively, with 68 percent described as having acted with integrity.
- These characters were most often (37 percent) described with positive adjectives such as compassionate, patient and competent, while less often (29 percent) described negatively, with adjectives such as rude, arrogant and deceptive.
- Surprisingly, Pautz said, only 12 percent of government characters were described with adjectives of the stereotypical bureaucrat: cynical, nerdy, boring, average, powerless, slow-witted, inept and lazy.

Breaking down the characters into groups, Pautz found:

- Military characters received mostly a mixed portrayal (42 percent) but were more often portrayed negatively (31 percent) than positively (27 percent).
- Law enforcement characters were portrayed quite differently by country. In the U.S., they were portrayed more often negatively (40 percent) than positively (27 percent), while in Australia they were portrayed more often positively (49 percent) than negatively (33 percent).
- Civil servant characters — such as teachers, corrections officers and postal employees — fared best. Overall, their depictions were 39 percent positive, 25 percent negative and 35 percent mixed.

"I was surprised by the generally negative and mixed portrayal of the military and even police, particularly since many of the films were released after 9/11," Pautz said. "Unfortunately, movies often play to stereotypes, especially with minor characters, and it's easy to make cops the bad guys."

A common theme in American films is the ineptitude and corruption of law enforcement officers, she said. Frequently in these films, the audience sees cops portrayed negatively, but a central police character rises above the negative images and proves

to be competent and effective, such as Axel Foley in *Beverly Hills Cop*.

The complexity of the military is likely responsible for the mixed depictions it receives in film, Pautz said. For example, the military is portrayed as taking advantage of a young Forrest Gump and manipulating him during his service in the Vietnam War; yet, through his military service, Forrest meets upstanding soldiers who are self-sacrificing and some who become his lifelong friends.

"We can start to identify a pattern where even when government or government employees are portrayed negatively, we see lone individuals going against the system to save the day," Pautz said.

Nick Bastow, a senior project manager at the Institute of Public Administration Australia (IPAA) assisted Pautz in coordinating Australian film data. Pautz presented her findings in September at the annual meeting of the IPAA in Melbourne. The study is a follow-up to research she published in 2010 on box office hits from 1992-2006. That research did not examine law enforcement and military characters.

Pautz said that while she is not optimistic government will see its image on the silver screen improve anytime soon, she does see an opening for the often-maligned government worker.

"Because of the powerful influence of film, there is an opportunity for civil servants to work with filmmakers to better represent the work of government and maybe even encourage some movie-goers to seek out the civil service professionally," she said. "After all, there are plenty of brave, heroic police and intelligence officers who destroy evil on behalf of the public in film, and they generally look good doing it."

For more information, contact Cameron Fullam, assistant director of media relations, at 937-229-3256 or fullam@udayton.edu.