

IN THE LINE OF FIRE

[1993]

by

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In the Line of Fire is an interesting film that deals with assassination, father-figures, and doppelgangers. It also continues Clint Eastwood's laudable and mature deconstruction of the hero image and gives the audience an opportunity to take stock of our own beliefs about heroism.

Assassination at the political and social level has received considerable attention both in films and literature. However, the symbolic meaning of this act is seldom mentioned. The difference between murder and assassination is that, in the latter, the victim is a summation of the whole country, the center of the culture, the father-figure of a national collective. From this we can see that assassination is a variation of the Oedipal conflict: the son kills the father in order to take over his position at the center of the public's (rather than the mother's) attention and adoration.

However, *In the Line of Fire* is a little more complex because our central figure, Frank Horrigan (Clint Eastwood), is trying to *protect* the President, not assassinate him. How does this fit in psychologically? It seems to me that the often-unmentioned side of the Oedipal conflict is the son's guilt at hating the father. After all, most fathers are fairly nice, loving people. For years, the father cares for, supports, and protects the son. Only after it is time for the son to strike out on an independent life must the break with the father come. Some, perhaps most, of these breaks are accomplished with minimal trauma. It is only the exaggerated ones that are of interest to dramatists and psychologists. Because the son basically loves his father, there is an internal element that wants to *protect* the father from harm, even if that harm is to come from the son himself, and yet there is another part of the son that demands independence at any price.

Am I saying that the assassin, Mitch Leary (John Malkovich in a role brilliantly more reptilian than anything in *Jurassic Park* [1993]) and Secret Service agent Frank Horrigan, are two aspects of the same person? At the psychological level, yes. And the film gives us ample evidence. They have the same backgrounds and values (but from opposite sides of the fence), and they instinctively know volumes about each other. One

could easily make a case that there is not only a bond of uncanny understanding between them, but also one of love and caring. Further, Frank cares little for the president as a person, and like the assassin, finds him shallow, callous, and cynical. Yet what Frank is protecting is not the person of the president, but the concept – the symbol, if you will. The fact that he indeed does take a bullet for a president he disrespects as a person is a strong argument that the act must be taken at a symbolic and psychological level rather than as a literal one. But if one pursues these ideas further, complications set in.

One knot is that Frank Horrigan is *older* than the president he is protecting. How does this fit into the psychological scheme I have proposed? Perhaps it may make more sense if we factor into the formula some of the concerns of our contemporary society. Our national image of the hero is still one generated primarily by magazine and TV advertising and by other movies (including Eastwood's own). Yet here we have an actor who, in real-life, is 63 years old and still playing action roles (impressively, I might add). Perhaps he, like his character and much of the now-beginning-to-gray Baby Boom generation are coming to terms with aging and are trying not to hold too desperately to the idea that “hero = youth.” Thus, Horrigan has a conflict between protecting a father image and yet hating the youthful, though attractive aspects of that same persona.

In this way, the film begs us question our concept of the hero. As in Clint Eastwood's previous film, *Unforgiven* [1992], he seems bent on demythologizing what he has spent his adult career building. In the case of *Unforgiven*, it is the image of the super-macho cowboy, the man with no name (ironically, the music of *In the Line of Fire* is composed by Ennio Morricone, the same man who did the music for many of Eastwood's spaghetti Westerns). Previously unfeeling, unrelenting, immoral, and taciturn, the hero of *Unforgiven* is now vulnerable. *In the Line of Fire* continues this effort by deconstructing the Dirty Harry image.

Throughout the film, the villain and the audience assume that Frank Horrigan is willing to die to save the President's life. His failure to act during the Kennedy assassination has generated such guilt and depression that we are all convinced he is more than willing, even eager in his atonement, to die. Yet when push comes to shove, when the bullets fly, he is sensibly wearing a bullet-proof vest and suffers only a few broken ribs. What we have misjudged is not Frank Horrigan, but ourselves and what we demand of our heroes. If nothing else, this film forces us to reexamine what we have formed in our psyches to define heroism and where those images have come from. Many of them have come from films made during a time when it was politically expedient to have a populace willing to die for the title of hero – the Second World War, the Cold War, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Evil Empire War – but all that is now over, and we must reassess our ideas of heroism. I think that *In the Line of Fire* is a helpful step in that direction.

In the Line of Fire. Directed by Wolfgang Peterson. Written by Jeff Maguire. Distributed by Columbia Pictures, 1993.