

Destined to Lead a Lot of Men in a Desperate Battle: Hollywood's Take on Contradictory Military Commanders in Patton (1970) and Alexander (2004)

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Introduction

Two legendary strategists. Military campaigns stretching from the border of Persia all the way to modern-day northern India and from Tunisia to the Ardennes. A strong sense of a divine-like destiny to command armies in the face of a numerically superior enemy. A complicated personality. These are some of the aspects that have come to define our conception of both four-star general^[1] George S. Patton, Jr. (1885-1945) and Alexander the Great (356-323 BCE), hereditary king of Macedon. The former played a crucial spearheading part in several World War II operations, while the latter conquered most of the known world in the 4th century BCE. Their feats of hard-nosed leadership are admired by countless military professionals and enthusiasts worldwide, so it was no surprise they both eventually ended up on the silver screen.

In the case of Alexander, the first version to come out of the gates was the now rather dated *Alexander the Great* (US 1956) starring Richard Burton. It took almost half a century for Hollywood to tackle the subject matter again, but once the time was right, several directors showed interest in helming a biopic on a truly epic^[2] scale. Initially, at least Martin Scorsese, Baz Luhrmann and Oliver Stone were developing competing projects, but in the end only Stone's vision, *Alexander* (US 2004), materialised itself.^[3] Following a barrage of crushing reviews from US film critics, it flopped at the box office and was nominated for six Razzie Awards (including Worst Picture) but managed to pay back the cost of production through its success at the international box office^[4] and DVD/Blu-ray revenues. Over the years it has even spawned two extended cuts with an altered scene dynamic and has generated some more positive reassessments.^[5]

Patton (US 1970) had an altogether different journey which culminated in seven Academy Award wins (including Best Picture, Actor in a Leading Role, Director and Original Screenplay) that cemented its position as one of the most respected soldier biopics ever

made. In terms of critic and general public reception, these two three-hour films could not be further apart, but, curiously enough, there are numerous interesting similarities and useful comparisons to be made.

The research questions of this article are as follows: How are General Patton and Alexander the Great represented^[6] as military commanders? Why are famous soldiers such an enduring topic of historical biopics – despite a plethora of contemporary, extremely brutal conflicts? Do the films in question manage to convey their grand strategic vision? To what degree is the forceful public persona counterbalanced with serious character flaws, weaknesses and mysticism? I will concentrate on four especially crucial facets of *Patton* and *Alexander* that affect our reading of the title characters' nature, namely the depictions of strategic and tactical^[7] abilities, speech giving, militaristic attitude, and religiosity. Speeches and different shades of militarism^[8] are fairly typical aspects of soldier biopics of any given decade, but meticulous attention paid to tactical details and religious beliefs is actually something quite rare. The scenes I have chosen for closer scrutiny help to define the screen Patton and Alexander primarily as commanders but also as thinking individuals.

Thus, *Patton* and *Alexander* belong to a long cinematic tradition, and yet partly have a heartbeat of their own, which makes them ideal biopics for a close reading. And not only that, impactful war dramas, too. They lift an exceptional individual to the forefront in ways that have ability to even defy staunch genre conventions. Instead of rushing from one massive battle scene to the next, both films show considerable care in crafting an in-depth titular character. The two screenplays utilise an approach Francis Ford Coppola found crucial while writing his draft script for *Patton*: bringing together a duality of contradictory qualities, finding a working balance between reverence and condemnation.^[9] This proves the point Dennis Bingham has made about biopics of men having undergone an evolution 'from celebratory to warts-and-all to investigatory to postmodern and parodic'^[10] – although there are hardly any traces of the last two in neither *Patton* nor *Alexander*.

The research literature includes books and articles about film and war history, film reviews, biographies, and tactical assessments. I have extended my scope somewhat beyond the bounds of film history, as the two films gravitate in a natural manner towards the aforementioned directions as well. Some basic knowledge of battlefield tactics helps to appreciate the effort put into those scenes and to realise their value as something more than just elaborate showcases of non-stop action and violence. Insights into the real historical person make it possible to proportion the filmmakers' vision to other possible popular and academic interpretations. As it is, 'the biopic and written biography stand side by side in the public sphere, like communicating vessels that subtly join specialist knowledge, popular history, and mass entertainment'^[11] – no matter how much friction that may cause.

It is notable that American research on Hollywood representations of war, such as *Hollywood and War: The Film Reader*, tend to habitually sidestep eras prior to the First and the Second World War, but this can be remedied by studying more general analyses of biopics and (Hollywood's) epic perception of history. As for biographies, a quintessential source of inspiration for filmmakers, it is only natural to start with those used by the screenwriters and directors of *Patton* and *Alexander* – all of which are generally respected as classics.^[12] I have used some recent ones as well to gain a fuller picture of the central

historical figures, but instead of simply trying to verify the films' historical accuracy scene by scene, my aim is to analyse why certain emphases and interpretations were made and ponder their significance and contribution to the cinematic story.

Both *Patton* and *Alexander* were produced and shot while there was a major contemporary conflict underway. The Vietnam War was getting ever more complicated in the late 1960s, while in 2003 the US-led coalition forces launched an invasion against Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. The parallels general public and critics drew could not have been more dissimilar, though. While *Patton* was – and still is – generally lauded for its evenhanded representation of a controversial general and war hero, *Alexander* generated, among all other things, unflattering comparisons to President George W. Bush. As Joanna Paul puts it, both were regarded as 'power-hungry Western ruler[s] interfering with the East to satisfy a demand for material and political rewards'.^[13] The cinema-going public seems to have been too preoccupied with an actual war, partly fought in the same areas *Alexander* and *Darius* once chose as their battlefields, to share director Stone's evident passion for *Alexander*. All of a sudden, the film, its makers and, of its stars, especially Colin Farrell and Angelina Jolie were up against not only audiences' preconceptions^[14] but demons born out of contemporary conflicts as well – in a fight that was, at least initially, unwinnable.

It is always a calculated risk to produce and direct a war biopic when at the same time the real thing continues to claim victims on a daily basis and much heated debates rage on between 'hawks' and 'doves' amid growing general frustration and peace protests. Remarkably, in *Patton's* case, however, the grim shadows of Vietnam did not much hamper the initial and enduring success.^[15] In fact, President Richard Nixon screened it in the White House theatre, while seeking reassurance for yet again escalating the war.^[16] Film critic Vincent Canby, for example, went in his considerable praise as far as to write: 'The most refreshing thing about "Patton" is that here – I think for the first time – the subject matter and the style of the epic war movie are perfectly matched. War was, for Patton, his destiny and sometimes great fun. Thus the big, magnificently staged battle scenes (photographed in marvelous, clear, deep focus), are not giving the lie to a film that, like "The Longest Day," would have us believe piously that war is hell.'^[17] Maybe the polar opposite ways *Patton* and *Alexander* were received indicate that the value of such films can be more objectively assessed only years later.

Epic commander biopics have been quite a staple sub-genre for film studios at least from the late 1950s onward, but at the same time the general public's wariness of unpopular, geographically distant wars has manifested itself many times over. The generally enduring, perhaps paradoxical appeal of such films has a few potential explanations. Many, like the Venezuelan *Libertador* (2013), are clearly made for partly nationalistic purposes, while some consciously opt for more ambiguous storytelling and refuse to give easy answers. A high-ranking officer with intellectual abilities and serious character flaws is very far removed from generic Hollywood action heroes. In both *Alexander's* and *Patton's* case, the viewer is, more often than not, asked to draw his/her own conclusions. Were they heroes? Blood-thirsty despots? Or martial visionaries either ahead of their time or stuck in the wrong century? The films in question provide much material to support any of these – and many other – viewpoints, and thus manage to avoid too evident black-and-white characterisations.

Besides, war provides an excellent framework for the previously mentioned aspect of depicting frictional relations between an (exceptional) individual and his community, the smothering or making use of extraordinary abilities, which brings dramatic, very human conflicts to the forefront. Biopics, then, have a manifold, hybrid identity that freely borrows from other popular genres when constructing a compelling narrative.^[18] This, at best, lends them enough universality to be able to speak to cinemagoers on a global scale.^[19]

And yet, it seems somewhat astonishing that biographical films about generals, admirals and field commanders have survived the simultaneous demand for reality-based films about ordinary soldiers, e.g. *To Hell and Back* (1955)^[20], *The Big Red One* (1980), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), *Glory* (1989), *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006), *American Sniper* (2014), and, more globally, the likes of *The Rising: Ballad of Mangal Pandey* (Ketan Mehta; India, 2005), *Ji jie hao/Assembly* (Xiaogang Feng; China-Hong Kong, 2007) and *Max Manus* (Joachim Rønning and Espen Sandberg; Norway-Denmark-Germany, 2008). I consider this to indicate the general public does not find commander characters as distant and unrelatable as one might think. In any case, the story of anyone from a newly-enlisted private to a four-star general can in the right hands be adapted into a gripping and thought-provoking feature film. Different perspectives need not be at odds with each other, but rather compliment the range of cinematic representations of soldiers.



Alexander the Great (a detail from 'The Battle of Issus' mosaic; Wikimedia Commons), George S. Patton, Jr. (Wikimedia Commons), Colin Farrell (screenshot from *Alexander*) and George C. Scott (screenshot from *Patton*).

Superb tacticians

Most historical feature films based on real events tend to focus on specific individuals – who are either famous, or whose lesser-known life story and experiences have captured the imagination of filmmakers by their power of representing some larger themes, with relevance to our own time as well. American film historian Robert A. Rosenstone points out that these individuals are put 'in the forefront of the historical process'^[21], and this is most certainly true regarding *Patton* and *Alexander*. Both of these real-life characters were already renowned in their lifetime, indomitably pushing themselves and their troops to achieve near-impossible feats. They gained reputation as risk-taking strategists and tacticians, and especially the stratagems used by Alexander the Great are still studied in military academies around the world. In cinematic terms it is equally fascinating that the

two never stopped reaching out towards what they believed was their ultimate destiny, and, on the way, practically became irreplaceable driving forces in vast processes: building the biggest empire the world had ever seen, and turning the tide of the Second World War.

Whenever the central figure of a biographical feature film is a world famous and respected commander, one of the first things laypersons, film critics and historians are likely to pay attention to is how convincingly the film is able to convey the wizardry of battlefield tactics. Such lengthy and complicated scenes are likely to be a serious box office gamble but nevertheless rewarding if the screenwriters, director and possible history and military consultants are up to the gigantic task. *Patton* and *Alexander* were not the only internationally released war dramas of their time to depict massive battles in meticulous detail. Sergey Bondarchuk's *Voyna i mir/War and Peace* (Soviet Union 1965-1967) and *Waterloo* (Soviet Union-Italy-US 1970) breathed life into the decisive battles of the Napoleonic Wars in a stunningly impressive way, while *The Longest Day* (US 1962), *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (US-Japan 1970) and *A Bridge Too Far* (US-UK 1977) showed both sides of the frontline as well. Of the 21st century films, *The Alamo* (US 2004) tried a more conventional US-centric hero narrative regarding the siege of the eponymous Texan mission station, and Ronald F. Maxwell's *Gods and Generals* (US 2003)^[22], primarily telling the story of Confederate Lieutenant-General Thomas 'Stonewall' Jackson, managed to include the battles of Manassas/Bull Run, Antietam, Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville in a single film. An equal level of ambition is abundantly evident in *Patton* and *Alexander*.

According to American military historian and former officer Bevin Alexander, it is a near-universal truth in military history that successful attacks against any enemy troops tend to have been directed against their flank or rear instead of opting for a frontal assault.^[23] Alexander the Great understood the potential power of following this ageless wisdom, and Oliver Stone grants us an opportunity to see a truly large-scale re-enactment of the tactics used in the decisive Battle of Gaugamela (1 October 331 BCE). The focus shifts between the Macedonian center and right and left flanks – the classic set-piece battle formation – and finally throws the viewer in the middle of a daring, planned cavalry charge (supported by infantry) of the right flank that cuts through a gap in Persian line, all the way to Darius' life-guard. This breaks the ranks of Persian main body, which starts retreating chaotically from the battlefield.^[24] General Patton utilises an equally cunning tactic in Tunisia when he ambushes a tank brigade advancing down in a valley and keeps up continuous shelling from the higher ground until the enemy has no alternative but to retreat.^[25] Similarly, his Third Army's rapid advance in harsh conditions during the Ardennes Counteroffensive (23 to 26 December 1944) takes German High Command by surprise and enables him to relieve American units besieged in Bastogne.



Alexander's cavalry (right) outwits its Persian counterpart (left) with a cunning surprise manoeuvre. Screenshot from Alexander.



Patton observing the Battle of El Guettar. Screenshot from Patton.

Some commanders develop an obsession of defeating the opposing commander in person^[26], and this is a fact that both films use to the fullest dramatic effect. Ancient chroniclers claimed Darius fled from the Battle of Gaugamela (or Arbela) pressed by Macedonian cavalry^[27] – led yet again by Alexander himself – but in Stone's vision things go even further. He has Alexander throw a javelin at Darius and miss ever so slightly – enabling the latter to escape in his chariot. At the very moment he seems hell-bent on chasing Darius he receives a message from Parmenion, whose left flank is crumbling. Alexander hesitates momentarily, but knowing his responsibility as Commander-in-Chief to the whole of troops, he decides to go and help Parmenion to repel the enemy hordes. Nevertheless he swears 'You can run to the ends of the world, you coward, but you can never run far enough!'^[28] This shows he is not yet willing to risk his army in pursuit of absolute glory and gives greater contrast to his later moments of 'madness'.^[29]

Not surprisingly, Patton displays alike symptoms of irrational obsession when it comes to Rommel, except that in their case there is a genuine and mutual respect that makes Patton fantasise on a chivalric tank duel between them two. Instead, he beats the German-Italian troops in El Guettar (23 March 1943) by reflecting Rommel's tactical moves^[30], but later discovers they were not led by the 'Desert Fox' himself. This nagging thought of defeating the battle plan but not its planner comes back to haunt him, but because of the unnatural death of his opponent, the decisive battle of strategic geniuses he longs for never realises itself. As a modern chief tactician and strategist, Patton had to delegate battlefield tasks to his subordinates – a fact that is concretely illustrated in the desert battle scene – and a week after the said defensive victory of El Guettar he gave vent to frustration in his diary: 'The life of a General is certainly full of thrills, but I am not worried, only cold all over. I wish I could do more personally. It is awful to confide everything to others, but there is no other way, and if you trust people, they seem to perform.'^[31] Still, some other remarks and correspondence attest to his fighting spirit and anxiety on sending fine soldiers to their deaths:

'After dinner I found that the 1st Armored Division had still failed to get the heights [...] so I called [Major-General] Ward on phone and told him to personally lead the attack on the hills and take them. Now my conscience hurts me for fear I have ordered him to his death, but I feel it was my duty. Vigorous leadership would have taken the hill the day before yesterday. I hope it comes alright.'^[32]

'I called Ward on the phone and told him to put on an attack [...] and, if necessary to take losses up to 25%. Our people, especially the 1st Armored Division, don't want to fight – it is disgusting. I feel quite brutal in issuing orders to take such losses, especially when I personally am safe, but it must be done. Wars can only be won by killing, and the sooner we start the better [...].'^[33]

'Poor Dick Jenson [Captain Richard N. Jenson, Patton's aide] went west this morning. [He died in a trench air raid from concussion, which is shown in the film.] I am terribly distressed. [...] I am really more broken up over Dick than I can express. I did not know how fond I was of him.'^[34]

It is easy to agree with British professor Geoff King that films based on real wartime events pursue a totally different agenda from that of action entertainment content with steady accumulation of body count and debris just for the sake of it. 'Authenticity' and 'respectability' are some of the top priorities that set them apart from clearly uncritical 'wartainment'.^[35] When it comes to intelligent representation of battlefield tactics, carnage and its mental effects, there are many ways of doing it effectively. The two films under scrutiny here give practically all the battle scene lines to the title characters and their immediate subordinates, which makes sense, given the commander's point of view. But while in *Alexander* the cameras are largely moving in the midst of the fighting, conveying panoramic views of the opposing armies, *Patton* chooses a different but equally sharp approach. To quote the New York Times film critic Vincent Canby, 'key incidents in Patton's campaigns [...] are reproduced as giant, largely impersonal panoramas. The destruction of life is viewed from observation posts and mulled over later in bivouacs that, more often than not, are splendid, confiscated palaces.'^[36]

Either way, the scenes concerning battlefield strategy essentially push the filmmakers to balance the huge-scale, easily monotonous action with memorable and deeply personal moments, and these are often used as reference points for later events. As such, they serve as valuable catalysts for character development and help binding the combat to the surrounding drama scenes.

Inspiring rhetoricians

The tactics Alexander and Patton used to achieve their celebrated victories would not have been possible without proper preparations, including ensuring rank-and-file commitment. Commanding an army on lengthy and difficult campaigns calls for considerable rhetorical skills, and *Patton* and *Alexander* recognise this, mostly in form of rousing speeches. The former starts with the famous one, generally simply known as 'The Speech', which the real Patton gave countless times prior to the Allied invasion of France.^[37] Given how iconic the scene has become, it may be surprising that it was the main cause of the strong disagreement between the studio executives and the 24-year-old Francis Ford Coppola that

initially saw his original screenplay draft not being used – and rewritten. It was five years later that Coppola was revisited, because George C. Scott was not pleased with the replacement script and stated he would not do the role without the Coppola one. This way the opening scene with an enormous American flag on the background found its way 'back' into the final screenplay and laid the groundwork for an ambitious and decidedly multi-faceted character study.^[38]

The film's version of the speech commences with ridiculing such a battle death that is 'heroic' but ultimately useless: 'Now, I want you to remember... that no bastard ever... won a war... by *dying* for his country. He won it... by making *the other* poor dumb bastard die for *his* country.' From this it becomes evident that Patton does not want his men to die in vain, but ultimate victory is the only option, as Patton makes abundantly clear by appealing to 'all-American' sensibilities: 'I wouldn't give a hoot in hell for a man who lost and laughed. That's why Americans have never lost and will never lose a war because the very thought of losing is hateful to Americans.'^[39] He is not by far the first or the last silver screen commander invoking nationalistic pride when addressing his troops. Alexander does exactly the same just before commencing the Battle of Gaugamela:

Some of you... perhaps myself... will not live to see the sun set over these mountains today. For I will be in the very thick of battle with you. But remember this: The greatest honor a man can ever achieve is to live with great courage and to die with his countrymen in battle for his home. I say to you what every warrior has known since the beginning of time. Conquer your fear... and I promise you, you will conquer death. And someday I vow to you your sons and your grandsons will look into your eyes. And when they ask why you fought so bravely at Gaugamela... you will answer with all the strength of your great, great hearts: 'I was here this day at Gaugamela for the freedom and glory of Greece!' Zeus be with us!^[40]



Alexander invoking pride in his men. Screenshot from Alexander.

Such spirited speeches, driven forward with huge self-confidence, are surely much easier for screenwriters, directors and actors to accomplish than the polar opposite ones – those made when the troops' morale is at the nadir and they begin to question the commander's justifications for continuing the campaign. *Alexander* succeeds in staging this kind of situation as well, when the Macedonian army reaches the Hyphasis River in the summer of 326 BCE. Alexander speaks passionately for the dreams he still hopes his men would share with him, but all that is mixed with an equal amount of despair and loathing:

You break my heart, you men. Afraid. Of course you have fears. We all have fears because no one has ever gone this far before. [...] But you know there's no part of me without a scar or a bone broken. By sword, knife, stone, catapult and club. I've shared every hardship with all of you. [...] Your simplicity long ended when you took Persian mistresses and children and you

thickened your holdings with plunder and jewels. Because you've fallen in love with all the things in life that destroy men. Do you not see? And you, as well as I, know that as the years decline and the memories stale... and all your great victories fade... it will always be remembered you left your king in Asia! For I will go on, with my Asians.^[41]

This last, unforgivable provocation gets furious responses from most of the soldiers^[42], and some veterans that remain anonymous even accuse him of wanting them dead 'so we can't speak of his crimes' and also having the blood of murdered king Philip on his hands. Alexander responds by smashing the mutiny and executing the ringleaders – doing, in old Ptolemy's words, 'nothing [...] that any general in wartime would not have done'. But Ptolemy concludes by emphasizing the obvious: 'But clearly, the army was divided. And Alexander was no longer loved by all.'^[43] Broadly speaking, Stone's interpretation of this incident goes hand in hand with Richard Miller's analysis of the same moment when 'Alexander was about to ask his exhausted Macedonians to cross just one river too many'. Miller wonders what made Alexander believe he could appeal to his men to go on when they lacked both physically and spiritually even the basic necessities for continuing the endless march into unknown territories. Miller comes up with the ancient notion of *pothos*, 'longing for things not yet within reach, for the unknown, far distant and unattained'. According to him Alexander was overcome with this overriding obsession and seems to have simply assumed his men's thoughts were in line with his.^[44] Indeed, director-screenwriter Stone himself states: 'I see Alexander more as an explorer, like many others of such a nature, not quite knowing what's going to come up on the horizon, yet boldly reaching for the new electrical charge of change.'^[45] All in all, Alexander would have done well to remember one inevitable truth about warfare so bluntly put forward by Patton in the film: 'Now... an army is a team. It lives, eats, sleeps, fights as a team.'^[46]

American film critic and author Derek Elley points out that in the epic tradition secondary characters react upon a single central character morally^[47], and in a biographical film that concerns itself with war and campaigns, the speeches carry enormous weight when it comes to representing troop dynamic and morale. As it is, silver screen commanders' authority either stands or falls by these pre- or post-battle moments. For all their less attractive personal attributes, the film Patton and Alexander clearly represent what an effective rhetorician can achieve – at least when not being back against the wall. Rhetorical means utilised by them are anything but unique in the history of cinema, but their convincing delivery and attention paid to many kinds of persuading details make all the difference.

'Inherent warrior' complex?

So far, I have analysed both the films mainly as stories about heroic individuals who, in the grim context of warfare, mostly 'do unusual things for the good of others'^[48]. Yet, it would be blinkered not to consider Patton's and Alexander's martial abilities both as a gift and a curse – the latter causing their 'dark side' to increasingly reveal itself. Depending on the situation, their men are at the receiving end of either praise and empathy or formidable authoritarianism and downright dangerous impulsiveness.

Perhaps the most striking feature of Alexander the Great as Commander-in-Chief was his incredible ability to remember his men by name. In the film he uses this gift to motivate them in the coming battle by highlighting some personal achievements and losses.^[49] Similarly, Patton says many times over how proud he is to command such a force, and while his brash antics cause uneasiness, perhaps among all ranks, the bond of mutual respect nevertheless remains. This filmic interpretation appears quite plausible for two reasons: While General Omar Bradley candidly acknowledges that Patton used bombast and outright threats to get results from his subordinates, as his aim was not to win affection^[50], Ladislav Farago emphasises how 'Patton always viewed his victories in the sacrifice of his soldiers' and could get enraged by orders that asked to take an objective 'regardless of losses'.^[51]



General Montgomery with Generals Patton (left) and Bradley (centre) at 21st Army Group HQ, 7 July 1944.

Source: Wikimedia Commons

There always is the question of taking advice from subordinates and orders from overall commanders. Alexander mostly insists on having the strategy his way – he's the King after all – while Patton obeys direct orders but uses his own initiative whenever the situation gets 'bogged down'. Both films include several strategy meetings between the central commanders – with or without maps. After a short introduction, dictated by old Ptolemy to his scribe in Alexandria, Stone's film moves almost immediately to Alexander's tent, where he explains his tactical choices for the Battle of Gaugamela. Some seasoned commanders clearly manifest their lack of faith in Alexander's plan, but his enthusiasm proves to be contagious. He affectionately praises the commanders present: 'my brave Parmenion', 'unbreakable Antigonus', 'bold Cassander', 'our revered Cleitus, Ptolemy and Hephaestion'.^[52] This indicates he does not wish to monopolise glory to himself, not yet at any rate. But it becomes unquestionably clear Alexander is the ultimate warrior, the linchpin holding the Macedonian war machine together. The outcome of the coming high-risk battle is unknown, but in Alexander's head it is already fought and won, whatever the arguments of the sceptic voices. Stone does not whitewash the criticism Alexander must have faced,

yet at this point stacks the scales quite heavily in his favour. These and other more intimate moments intend to make the viewer more inclined to feel empathy towards Alexander when his judgment and even sanity start to show obvious signs of crumbling.

Two millennia later, Patton finds himself making a similarly daring proposal that takes his American and British colleagues by complete surprise. Everyone in the map room understands the strategic importance of keeping Bastogne in Allied hands in order to break up the German offensive, but what Patton promises to achieve would practically be a miracle:

PATTON: *I can attack with three divisions in 48 hours.*

BRADLEY: *I'd give myself some leeway. Ike wants a realistic estimate, George.*

SMITH: *You're in the middle of a fight now. It's over a hundred miles to Bastogne.*

PATTON: *My staff's already working out the details.*

SMITH: *Frankly, I don't see how it's possible. Not in this kind of weather.*

ALEXANDER: *I should have thought you'd want to fall back and regroup.*

PATTON: *Not me. I don't like to pay for the same real estate twice. [...]*

TEDDER: *But what about your men? You can't cart them off 100 miles, expecting them to attack without rest.*

PATTON: *I trained these men. They'll do what I tell them to do.*

ALEXANDER [sarcastically]: *We hadn't realized you were so popular with your troops, General.*

PATTON: *I'm not. They'll do it because they're good soldiers. And because they realize, as I do, that we can still lose this war.*^[53]

Implied or overt disagreements over tactical details are a quintessential part of biopics about commanders, as they give a chance to show opposition to the central character's grand strategic vision and potentially prevent the film from veering into hagiography. *Patton* and *Alexander* make clear the legendary campaigns depicted are, more often than not, driven by the indomitable willpower of the two generals, and the role of other officers is mainly to adapt best they can.^[54] The dissenters are usually muted by yet another brilliant victory, and the most deeply problematic situations and moral dilemmas tend to arise outside the battlefields.



American and British generals discussing the strategy for relieving Bastogne. Screenshot from Patton.

As long as campaigning and battles keep following their precise strategies and end in decisive victories, Alexander and Patton tend to see themselves as irreplaceable^[55], having the best grasp of the current situation. But once they run into serious issues borne out of their own behavior, they go through personal crises that put the relationship with even their

most trusted comrades at risk. Few Hollywood war dramas would dare to have their protagonist kill one of his most able officers, in an oriental banquet of all places, but in *Alexander* this is exactly what happens. According to e.g. Arrian and Plutarch, the said incident involving cavalry officer Cleitus the Black^[56] occurred in real life as well, heavily drunken Alexander piercing him with a javelin.^[57] Cleitus loudly criticises Alexander's 'eastern ways' and finally calls him and his mother 'barbarians', which causes the fatality. Subsequently, the warrior king collapses on the ground in immediate horror and grief.^[58] Patton has a less severe but mortifying experience as he slaps, in front of many horrified witnesses, a broken-nerved corporal in a hospital tent in Sicily – and is subsequently ordered by Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe, Dwight D. Eisenhower, to make public apologies to the troops.^[59] This humbles him and helps to hold his tongue on future occasions.



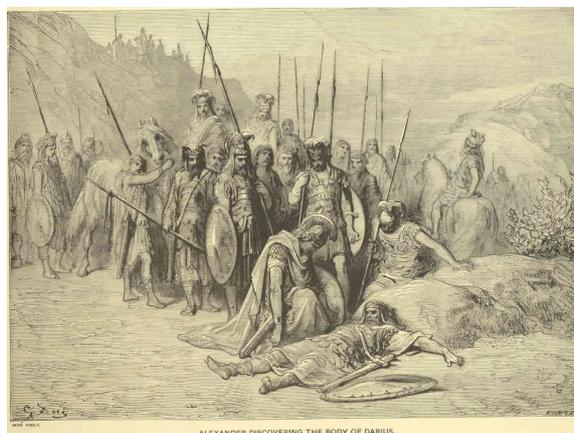
The infamous slapping incident. Screenshot from Patton.

Dark scenes of this kind serve well to illustrate some substantial weaknesses in 'Great Men' and that their strict demands may cause ramifications beyond their (well-meant?) intentions. Even a person 'born a warrior' must take into account human emotions and motivations to truly understand and value his men. Alexander and Patton seem to learn this lesson through their many tribulations, but not even a lifetime would be enough to change the core of their nature – warts-and-all. As Custen highlights, antagonism between the hero and the members of a given community forms a central conflict of the Hollywood biopic.^[60] Military biopics, then, operate within a much larger framework of conventions, and it is easy to see such similarities with for example composer and politician biopics. Often the protagonist is gifted or thinks in ways that are not much valued (or feared) by those in executive positions – and makes matters worse for himself by displaying character traits that even those on his side may find questionable.

It is notable that although both commanders clearly see and feel the appalling human cost of constant warfare^[61], they enjoy or even love being in the thick of it.^[62] Alexander personally leads his cavalry units into battles, and Patton does not mind going amidst explosions and hails of bullets either. The filmmakers' decision to include both of these extreme emotions is likely to leave the viewer with a more rounded and complex notion of the title characters. The legend does not overwhelm the real person, whose character flaws may prove to be his worst enemy. General Bradley describes Patton in his memoirs as someone who 'failed to grasp the psychology of the combat soldier', at least while campaigning in Sicily, and this made him seem remote.^[63] Bradley's comment would not possibly have been out of place regarding Alexander either, and the filmic representation does not hide this, as evinced by the powerful Hyphasis River speech/mutiny scene.

Militarism and idealism aside, vanity seems to be, or become, an essential part of both Patton's and Alexander's nature, and what could illustrate this more strikingly than the very first ultra-close shots of Patton's rings, horse whip, the many American and foreign military crosses and medals, gold braid, and the signature ivory-handled revolver. The Asiatic robes Alexander and his courtiers start wearing in Babylon and beyond carry a similar flavour of indulgence – hedonism even – which clashes sharply with the more austere sentiments of his trusted commanders. Perhaps these details could be interpreted as some kind of 'ornamentalism' that provides a necessary counterweight to the more brutal aspects of Patton's and Alexander's psyche. What is more, they are definitely not the only cinematic commanders with indulgencies: One need to look no further than British Major-General Charles George Gordon's B&S drink habit in *Khartoum* (1966), or crusader leader Reynald of Châtillon's costly fine silk robes in *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005).

The thin red line between 'Alexander the Conqueror' and 'Alexander the Man' is easily one of the crucial facets of Stone's film, especially when the two overlap. For example the lengthy scene depicting the Battle of Gaugamela is strategically believable, brutally realistic and chaotic, but perhaps the most thought-provoking little detail of it lies elsewhere. While it is difficult to say whether *Alexander's* representation of Darius III as an over-confident and martially rather incompetent commander-in-chief does justice to the real-life Persian king or not, a brief glimpse of him at the moment of defeat, juxtaposed with Alexander's genuinely compassionate reaction when later seeing his body lying on a remote riverbank, infuses the film with a sense of complex thinking about the enemy as well. Enemies they may be, but after suffering an unjust death even *their* King deserves to be covered with Alexander's red cloak and properly buried.^[64]



Alexander discovering the body of Darius. From the book *Great Men and Famous Women: A Series of Pen and Pencil Sketches of the Lives of More Than 200 of the Most Prominent Personages in History, Volume 1* (1894).

Source: Wikimedia Commons

Patton is equally unpredictable on this account. His famous speech(es)^[65], given prior to the Allied invasion of France, utilises powerful anti-Hun rhetoric, but a year earlier, amidst an air raid against a Tunisian town, he claims he would give medals to each of the attacking Luftwaffe pilots. Besides, he respects Afrika Korps commander Erwin Rommel and even has read his book on infantry tactics.^[66] Both Alexander and Patton have their racial and other prejudices, but that does not necessarily cloud their judgement, at least not in tactical terms. They give speeches to their troops that contain deliberately 'othering'^[67] passages^[67],

but when they come across acts of personal courage or betrayal, things get more nuanced. One of the most important points *Patton* and *Alexander* make is that the title characters are capable of deep thinking far beyond their military capacity – whenever they choose to.

Era-specific ideological and political differences aside, both commanders share a common distrust of the East. From boyhood on, Alexander is taught, especially by Aristotle, that the Persians are deceitful conquerors.^[68] Patton has his own deep-rooted reservations about Russians and the Red Army, which he would like to kick out of Europe at the earliest convenience. The film's representation of this attitude corresponds with his actual statement from 8 August 1945:

The difficulty in understanding the Russian is that we do not take cognizance of the fact that he is not a European, but an Asiatic, and therefore thinks deviously. We can no more understand a Russian than a Chinaman or a Japanese, and from what I have seen of them, I have no particular desire to understand them, except to ascertain how much lead or iron it takes to kill them. In addition to his other Asiatic characteristics, the Russian have no regard for human life and is an all out son of bitch, barbarian, and chronic drunk.^[69]

And yet, he consents to drink a toast of vodka with General Katkov – after they have called each other 'a son of a bitch'.^[70] While this hardly constitutes a willing accord with the Russians as a people, the scene is probably intended to function similarly to the one with Alexander and the dead Darius. As he stares in silence over the corpse of his nemesis, it feels as if Alexander suddenly realised something that truly challenges and even disturbs his preconceptions about the world. Whether *the Persians* are devious or not becomes irrelevant when pondering the eventuality that even a Great King can be murdered by his own men.

Mysticism and religiosity

Patton and *Alexander* explain the warlike spirit of the title character partly through their lifelong fascination and admiration of ancient heroes and past military geniuses. Walking with his father, Philip II, through a cave adorned with scenes from Homeric epics, the future king and world conqueror becomes fascinated by the idea of heroic destiny, especially that of Achilles.^[71] Plutarch mentions in his *Lives* that Alexander the Great kept an edited copy of Homer's *Iliad* (next to his dagger) under his pillow on campaigns^[72], and in fact the very scroll is fleetingly seen in the film^[73]. This admiration comes at a terrible personal price, as Stone imagines Alexander 'carrying in his genes the glory and torture of the heroes he cannot yet understand, to which end he becomes one of the greatest Greek tragic heroes of all.'^[74] In Patton's case his belief in the concept of rebirth^[75] has him reminisce aloud Napoleon's retreat from Moscow in the terribly cold winter conditions, much like those during the Ardennes Counteroffensive. Thus, Alexander seems to consider himself a reincarnation of mythical heroes, while Patton sees himself as a person who has already been reborn as a soldier many times over.

The prevalent mysticism is heightened by the deep religiosity of both commanders. Alexander's mother Olympias tells him when a little boy he's a son of Zeus, and this origin story is known to his subordinates as well. The narrator, old Ptolemy, states ambiguously: 'It was a myth, of course. At least it started as a myth.'^[76] The closeness to a god applies to

Patton as well: Although his witticisms can be very obscene he has time to read the Bible 'every goddamn day'^[77] and is seen praying in a church before resolving one of his most severe personal crises – the aftermath of the infamous slapping incident. Michael Keane paints a similar picture in his recent biography claiming that 'Patton's religious views, like the man himself, were unique and defy easy characterization'. When addressing his troops he used coarse language to drive his points home, but while praying in privacy – seeking guidance from God – that self-confidence was replaced by utmost humility.^[78]



Patton praying. Screenshot from Patton.

One of the most legendary examples of using religion as a 'weapon' is the famous 'weather prayer' issued in Patton's name when heavy snowfall was threatening the progress of his advance elements on their way to Bastogne.^[79] Patton, being 'tired of the Third Army having to fight Germans with supreme command, no gasoline, and now this ungodly weather', commissions the prayer from a slightly baffled Third Army chaplain:

PATTON: *Let's see if you can't get God working with us.*

CHAPLAIN: *Gonna take a thick rug for that kind of praying.*

PATTON: *I don't care if it takes a flying carpet.*

CHAPLAIN: *I don't know how this will be received, General. Praying for good weather so we can kill our fellow man.*

PATTON: *I assure you, because of my relations with the Almighty, if you write a good prayer, we'll have good weather. And I expect that prayer within an hour.*^[80]

Such small but quintessential episodes, revealing Patton's complicated inner machinations, are well in line with American film critic Roger Ebert's shrewd analysis of the enigmatic character: 'Scott's performance is not one-level but portrays a many-layered man who desires to appear one-level. Instead of adding tiresome behavioral touches, he allows us small glimpses of what may be going on inside.'^[81]

The faith in some preordained destiny shines through both silver screen representations. The triumphant way Alexander and Patton enter Babylon^[82] and Palermo^[83], respectively, carries an air of invincibility that turns these moments into spiritual experiences. Gods, including those of war, are clearly on their side – at least for the time being. Patton conveys this positive atmosphere in his diary entry for 26 July 1943, the day he visited the Archbishop of Palermo: 'I feel that he is on our side and this fact will have a good effect on the inhabitants.'^[84] It is noteworthy that while the film scene has Patton, an Episcopalian^[85], kiss the archbishop's ring as a symbolic gesture of respect to ecclesiastic authority, in reality his Roman Catholic deputy commander, Brigadier General Geoffrey Keyes, told him not to, because 'only the faithful [Catholics] did that'.^[86]



Patton and the Archbishop of Palermo. Screenshot from Patton.

Humility did not apply to Alexander the Great, when – just a few months before his death – he possibly went as far as to issue either a request asking or a proclamation demanding recognition of himself as a god.^[87] On the one hand, this interpretation corresponds well with Alexander’s alleged ‘Unity of Mankind’ vision, at least as envisioned by Stone and those historians – like W. W. Tarn and Robin Lane Fox – whose overall take on Alexander is more positive than negative. Stone sums up his view as follows: ‘I would call him not an imperialist, as present fashion would have it, but rather a “proto-man,” an enlightened monarch naturally in search of one land, one world – the unity, so to speak, of the womb. [...] In unconsciously pursuing this “one world” concept, under the guise of a personal quest, the Alexander of the drama we created would have to be a man who believed he was the right force to bring the world into a greater sense of unification and prosperity, that he was a step in the evolutionary process.’^[88]

On the other hand, Professor Thomas Harrison sees Unity of Mankind in particular as ‘cliché-ridden idealism’^[89], and, consequently, the said theme’s authenticity is quite hotly contested^[90]. Harrison also criticises the inclusion of ‘various sub-Freudian traumas’. This presents the tangible problem of how to respond to a film that pictures its title character as an idealist overcome by the massive scope of his dream but who undeniably, from time to time, sinks into a very bleak mental state that is potentially destructive both to him and to those near and far. Additionally, Harrison sees ‘excessive concern with historical plausibility’ as one of the reasons that made Alexander unsuccessful. He claims this ‘obscures the storyline with detail that distracts those who can read the references, and must seem obscure and wordy to those who cannot’.^[91] While arguments of this kind have quite often been made in connection with Stone’s films, it should be remembered that each of his three-hour historical magnum opuses – the others being *JFK* (1991) and *Nixon* (1995) – contains a massive amount of more widely accepted facts, speculative details and pure fiction (and is thus very much open to various criticisms from professional historians), but only *Alexander* was severely defeated at the box office and largely panned by film critics and general public alike.



Alexander entering Babylon in a triumph. Screenshot from Alexander.

Reasons behind Patton's mysterious, all-consuming ambition are not directly addressed in the film, but modern research suggests some very plausible ones. Attaining a high officer rank had become a family tradition, and George S. Patton, Jr. felt obliged to fulfill his ultimate 'destiny' of rising to the rank of general. This does not account for his drastic mood swings, but Carlo D'Este, one of the most prominent Patton biographers, has a convincing explanation for these and many other aspects of his behavior: undiagnosed dyslexia. Dyslexics tend to feel inferior, which might over the years transform into feeling special and making others notice that as well. According to D'Este, this need to prove one's intelligence and ability is 'the key, not only to understanding the source of Patton's drive to succeed, but of the authoritarian, macho, warrior personality he deliberately created for himself'.^[92] Actor George C. Scott may have pondered these facts while doing research for his role, as impulsiveness, compulsiveness and a tendency to boast are important features of his portrayal.

Chronologically the final aspect that unites both real-life Alexander and Patton and their filmic representations is the fact that they both died prematurely, outside battlefields. The former succumbed to a mysterious fever in Babylon, while the latter perished in Heidelberg from the damage to his cervical spinal cord caused by his car colliding with an army truck. *Patton* does not show his actual death as it concludes the story a few months earlier, but in *Alexander* the deathbed scene^[93] soars into mythical heights and at the same time clearly states both his generals' grief and their growing lust for power. In a preceding banquet scene Stone actually implies, rather vaguely, that Alexander might have been poisoned, but as the exact cause of death is lost to differing ancient accounts, this is naturally speculation made possible by dramatic license – and realised in a way that does not exclude the more likely possibility of a sudden illness.^[94] In any case, as the generals literally start fighting over his dead body, the vast empire Alexander created is just waiting to be irrevocably disintegrated^[95] ...

Conclusion

Patton and *Alexander* belong to a long continuum of biographical films concerning extraordinary individuals in command of sizeable armies. Practically every decade of film history has seen stories of victorious or ultimately defeated yet brave commanders, but several important factors make the films in question stand out. Both take historical authenticity very seriously, and when it comes to the accuracy of event history, alterations and speculative moments are deliberate and mostly necessary in order to craft a cinematically feasible plot. George S. Patton, Jr. and Alexander the Great led such eventful lives that trying to cram too many incidents and plot points into a single feature film would

make it quite impossible to come out with a profound representation of *the man*, not just the legend. Both films choose wisely to concentrate on a couple of essential campaigns and key battles while devoting an equal amount of the screen time to character development and more private drama moments.

The thematic richness and complexity of *Patton* and *Alexander* is quite uncommon among the big-studio-backed Hollywood epics, and the directors and screenwriters have taken considerable risks in portraying the title characters not only as heroic and inspirational but at times in a very harsh and unflattering light. While the two films can be said to partly strengthen the larger-than-life legend, they still contain enough moments of criticism to warrant a credible, multilayered characterisation instead of simplistic hero worship. The representations of Patton and Alexander do not hide away their seemingly inherent militarism, and although it is fairly easy to see the filmmakers' respect towards their protagonists, there are no clear signs of condoning acts of despotism, e. g. Patton slapping and madly yelling at an upset corporal and calling him 'a yellow bastard', and Alexander violently persuading his men to march on at the Hyphasis River. The two are walking contradictions as likely to attain greatness and wide admiration for their martial prowess as to gravely insult and destroy the very men they so deeply respect.

And yet, both Alexander the Great and George S. Patton Jr. emerge as undeniably extraordinary individuals, no matter how much weight one puts to their very significant character flaws. They could be simultaneously described as heroes and anti-heroes – the exact type of character that usually keeps modern audiences and critics (why not researchers as well) fascinated. As long as the general public, film critics and scholars are willing to invest their time in thinking about the personal, moral and practical complexities of warfare, big studios and more independent actors will keep backing biopic films that are either populist or 'respectable', and, occasionally, both. Wars show no sign of vanishing from the face of the earth, and because today relatively few western citizens will face its horrors firsthand, (semi-)fictionalised feature films and documentaries remain the most potent visual tool for trying to understand something that in its extreme brutality is far removed from ordinary life.

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