

**DARTH
VADER**

**THE GOOD GUY
WHO LOST**

And Other Essays

by M S LAWSON



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INTRODUCTION

When Star Wars Episode IX is released in December 2019 it will be the twelfth film set in the Star Wars universe to reach the cinemas. Besides the trio of trilogies of the main story arc, which should finish with Episode IX, two additional live action films plus one animated feature have filled in parts of the back story. There have also been animated television series, one off specials and documentaries. But the Star Wars universe is not done with us yet. At the time of writing two more animated films are scheduled to reach the theatres, and a bewildering variety of live action film projects have been proposed then dropped. A live action television series in the SW universe, *The Mandalorian*, looks likely to go ahead, but a film based on the bounty hunter character Boba Fett has been shelved along with two proposed trilogies of films in the Star Wars universe. However, Rian Johnson, the writer and director of the latest film in that universe, *The Last Jedi* (2017), is reported to be involved in another trilogy of films

To place that actual total of 11 films and counting (let's leave the animated films out of it for the moment) in perspective, the longest running film franchise would have to be the James Bond series with 24 films to date, plus a 25th somewhere in the production pipeline. The runner up might well be the Star Trek films at 13 in the can, with the Rocky and Alien franchises bringing up the field at, respectively, seven (an eighth in development) and six plus two crossovers with the Predator franchise. Another Alien film is in development.

All this means that the Star Wars films are about to overtake the Star Trek franchise and may eventually challenge the James Bond series. In this they have the advantage that James Bond is (mostly) stuck on earth while the Star Wars characters can get into trouble anywhere in the universe.

The rock on which all these Star Wars films are founded is the first three films (I have listed them below) which features the original all-star bad guy, Darth Vader. Those familiar with my efforts to uncover the historical truth behind science fiction will not be surprised to hear that I contend Darth Vader to be mostly innocent of the many crimes laid at his door in these films. He is not snow-white innocent and perhaps not really a "good guy" as the title of the book states. I needed something catchy. He was a hard man in hard times and such men, and women, do not play nice. But I contend that much of his evil reputation has been overblown by writers in a galaxy far, far away anxious to stay out of a New Republic prison and, not incidentally, to tell a good story.

My unique form of reasoning – unkind people may describe it as eccentric or peculiar – will become apparent as my thesis unfolds. I reason by analogy from sections of earth's long history, picking the parts that would seem to fit the often patchy source material. Of that source material the canonical part has to be the first three films. These are:

Star Wars – A New Hope (Episode IV, 1977).

The Empire Strike Back (Episode V, 1980).

The Return of the Jedi (Episode VI, 1983).

These are by far the best of the Star Wars films, with Episode V the best of them all and Episode VI arguably more fun than the original 1977 film.

These films not are cinematic masterpieces with dark, literary themes. Far worse in the eyes of the academic community they do not deal in politically correct matters such as same-sex marriage, treatment of minorities (droid empowerment does not count in our era), violence against women, indigenous recognition and assorted issues concerning gays and trans-gender individuals. There is perhaps a nod towards gender equality in the chick-lit tradition of feisty women exerting their independence over men they regard as obnoxious, only for both parties to eventually fall in love (Leila and Hans Solo), but that would count for little among academics.

The hate-to-love romantic sub-plot makes for a good story, incidentally, but has little to do with reality. In my often fraught experience with women they start out regarding a particular guy (maybe me) as obnoxious and don't see any reason to change. Or they start out thinking that the guy should at least be given the benefit of the doubt only to soon decide he is obnoxious (still me), and see no reason to change. I suppose the love bit must happen sometimes, but I only remember being thought of as obnoxious. I digress.

To make matters worse as far as academics are concerned, despite those films being corny space operas without any of those dark themes, they are so appealing that they have become part of the popular culture, as hit films do. When someone says, "I AM your father" and pretends to duel with a light sabre, everyone knows that it's a reference to the Star Wars films. They might think the person is a nut or a nerd, but they will understand the reference.

Given the enormous success of the original films, it is little wonder the producer George Lucas eventually made three more –

The Phantom Menace (Episode I - 1999).

Attack of the Clones (Episode II – 2002)

Revenge of the Sith (Episode III – 2005).

The second series of films attempts to fill in the back story of the original series which makes them tedious at times, and they do not have the same sense of fun as the original trio. But the second trio still have their moments, with chase scenes, thrills, spills and the occasional plot twist.

Those six films, plus the attendant formidable literature are the material on which I base my (I hope) educated guesses as to what might have happened. The seventh and eighth film *The Force Awakes* (2015) and *Star Wars – the last Jedi* (2017) are essentially a reboot of the original series while recycling some of the characters of the nearly 40-year old original film, but not Vader, and so does not figure in this analysis. I discuss them briefly, at the end of the book. As noted, the ninth film, just called Episode IX, should finish the rebooted story arc.

My personal quest to clear the name of Darth Vader from all the mud thrown at it by historians and script writers under the thumb of Sky Walker and his cronies dates from

when I, as an undergraduate, watched the original Star Wars with a group of friends. Yes, I am that old.

I am not alone in this quest. A number of writers have also expressed doubt about aspects of the Star Wars story, and whether the good guys really were “good”. One excellent essay, taking somewhat different lines of reasoning and arriving at different conclusions to mine is by Charles C Camosy, a professor of theological and social ethics at Fordham University in the US. In the essay published as part of *The Ultimate Star Wars and Philosophy: You Must Unlearn What You Have Learned* (Wiley Blackwell, 2016), Professor Camosy points to articles suggesting that the Jedi were evil, and that Luke Skywalker turned to the dark side in his final fight with Darth Vader, that the rebels were terrorists and much else.

As would be expected, given Prof Camosy’s specialty, he examines the theological and ethical dimensions to the destruction of the second Death Star, only to finally conclude that the rebels were not terrorists. They were the good guys.

In a New York Times article on January 3, 2016, Zachary Feinstein, an assistant professor in the department of electrical and systems engineering at Washington University in St Louis, argues that the Death Stars were too big to fail. So many resources had been poured into making them that their destruction would have caused a serious galactic depression that would also have affected the rebels.

Both men refer to a conversation in the classic 1994 movie *Clerks* in which the film’s writer-director Kevin Smith has his characters wonder about the ethics of blowing up the second Death Star when there would have been plenty of independent contractors working on the craft, as there are on any big project under construction on earth. Those contractors would have innocent victims of the explosion.

In a 2015 post *Star Wars: The Realist Case for the Empire* on his Strategy Counsel blog, Australian lawyer Gary Connolly points out, quite rightly, that the empire was providing a common currency and functioning markets which, among other results, permitted what would seem to be an efficient market for recycling second hand droids shown in the original movie. Mr Connolly’s piece is entertaining.

These items, very likely a tiny subset of material questioning aspects of the Star Wars universe, have different conclusions to my own, but that does not mean I disagree with them. The Star Wars universe is a big place with lots of room for different interpretations. I can see no reason, unlike the Rebels and the Empire, why all these interpretations and more cannot happily co-exist.

Alert consumers of my peculiar brand of historical analysis of science fiction may decide that I am not politically correct and, in particular, that do not hold human rights academics in high regard. How can that be so? I’m sure such academics are wonderful people with families.

Now on with the real story.

Personal note – I am a semi-retired journalist having spent the bulk of my career on the Australian Financial Review, the down-under Wall Street Journal. I have no connection with the Vader family. As an after-thought, I added a couple of essays on the likely

historical truth behind two other hit science fiction films, the Alien series, the (so far) one-off film Pandora, and the fantasy Lord of the Rings films.

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Additional material can be found on my web site www.clearvadersname.com

CHAPTER ONE

RICHARD VADER III – THE GOOD BAD GUY

When the body of the English king Richard III was recovered from underneath a carpark in the English county of Leicester in 2012, subsequent testing found that despite a possibly noticeable curvature of the spine, the long dead king had none of the physical deformations attributed to him by William Shakespeare. Contemporary accounts of the king also do not mention any deformities.

Historians have long known this, of course, and the Richard III Society has actively championed the king's reputation for many years. Despite his depiction in the Shakespearian play, the true Richard III was not evil, at least not compared to the general behaviour of kings back then, and was considered a decent administrator.

In creating a villain for his play and ensuring that he kept out of a Tudor prison, Shakespeare made the character evil, and added deformities to make him grotesque as well. The result was one of the greatest villains of literature and one of the greatest plays, but not accurate history.

Shakespeare is hardly alone in making his villains seem frightening. Many years ago Hollywood westerns use to dress the good guys in white hats, and the bad guys in black hats. Villains had moustaches which they could twirl. The idea was to look dark and sinister. Film makers needed a good bad guy to make their heroes look better.

When we first see Darth Vader, in the original Star Wars film in 1975, he is not grotesque but menacing, wearing an all-black suit with black face mask and black Nazi-like helmet (Luke Skywalker is in white for parts of the film, incidentally). He is tall, physically imposing and even breathes in a sinister way. The depiction of Darth Vader – even the name is sinister – continues the old Hollywood cinematic tradition of beefing up the bad guy, which owes a lot to Shakespeare, on steroids.

But if we consider Vader to be real, and he is real to a lot of fans, then we should strip away the black costume supposedly hiding gross deformities, to reveal a man. Perhaps we can picture this man as an older version of Hayden Christensen who played the young Vader in two of the films. The black outfit and ominous breathing was simply added by New Republic writers to avoid a visit from Skywalker's secret police.

To be fair to those writers, and Shakespeare, its not just about keeping on the good side of the authorities. It is also about getting a good bad guy for a play that audiences will want to watch. Modern Hollywood cheerfully messes with history for much the same reason. It takes a lot of money to make a film, and if depicting inconvenient facts is likely to turn away theatre patrons then “history is more or less bunk” as the industrialist Henry Ford once famously proclaimed.

There are honourable exceptions, of course, but also some popular films that underline the point. One film which cheerfully changed history as well as mangled spelling in its own title is Quentin Tarantino’s *Inglourious Basterds* (2009). This depicts a group of American raiders, with some help from the French, assassinating Hitler and most of the top Nazis in a Paris cinema in the spring of 1944. As Hitler’s own army couldn’t assassinate him – despite numerous plots and one actual attempt – it seems unlikely that a raider team comprised of comic-opera characters could have done so, let alone done so almost by chance as the film depicts.

Another example more to the point is the popular and still well-remembered film *The Untouchables* (1987), which was inspired by the prohibition-era activities of a group of US treasury agents dubbed the Untouchables by the media. The film has no connection at all with the history of the actual group and, apart from a couple of incidents, little to do with the actual life of the famous gangster Al Capone. In fact, none of the many depictions of Al Capone or the Untouchables have had much to do with reality. Gangsters of the prohibition era were tame by modern standards, and certainly far less willing to shoot it out with police or Federal agents than the gangsters of later years. Capone’s men were instructed not to resist Federal raids, for fear of the reaction that the death of a Federal agent would cause.

Another illustration of the point is *Amadeus* (1976) about the life of Mozart which is quite unfair to a contemporary of Mozart, Antonio Salieri. Salieri is built up as a conflicted, scheming mediocrity – as a good bad guy – and events changed and shifted around to make a point about mediocrities dragging down genius. The 2000 film *Gladiator* is in a different category as it is entirely fiction but features historical figures Marcus Aurelius and his son Commodus. The events involving those characters bear no relation to their known careers, but Commodus is built up to be a good bad guy.

This re-imagination of history is quite common in any screen depiction of ancient Rome, incidentally, with writers often going one step further by attributing modern motivations to ancient Romans. In *Gladiator*, Marcus Aurelius is supposed to want a return to the republic, that is rule by the Senate (read modern democracy). In reality, rule by the senate had effectively been abandoned in favour of a strong man, later Emperor, calling the shots more than a 150 years before Marcus Aurelius’ time, after a series of civil wars. By his time the Praetorian Guard, the Emperor’s personal bodyguard, frequently dictated the Imperial succession, favouring whoever was willing to pay them the most (we will return to the praetorians). In any case, rule by the Senate was not democracy in any sense we would understand it.

Then there are the overtly ridiculous films such as *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter* (2012) which freely reimagines the life of the 16th President of the United States and the

history of the Civil War – the South has a force of vampires – but leaves in the assassination.

Another analogy worth exploring is growth of the Robin Hood legends, before and after they were taken over by Hollywood. Historians have been arguing for centuries over who might have been the original Robin Hood figure. We will not buy into those disputes, only note that the earliest surviving full versions of the tale date from a century or so after the period in which the fictional Robin is supposed to have lived, as a partisan for the late 12th century king Richard I, also known as Richard the Lionheart. Robin fought the black hearted Sheriff of Nottingham and Guy of Gisborne who represented the oppressive rule of Prince John, supposedly filling in for his brother while Richard was away on campaign.

Again, this story is all about a good guy facing off against an evil bad guy and never mind what history says. The reign of the real Richard I was marred by violent antisemitism in England, including the infamous massacre at York in 1190, but then Richard spent little time in England after he became king – maybe six months in total – defending his extensive lands in France and going on crusade. He was certainly an effective crusader, but it is not clear that he spoke English, and every indication is that he regarded England as a source of funds for his other activities.

The historical Prince John who eventually succeeded to the throne in his own right after Richard's death, is best known to history as the king who signed the Magna Carta. John's character was mixed. He was supposed to be an able administrator but also petty and cruel. He stirred up considerable resentment raising money to fight France only to blow it all by losing the war. The Magna Carta was an unsuccessful attempt to head off the First Barons War.

The Robin Hood tales are then all about noble outlaw, Sir Robin of Loxley (he was not noble in the original versions of the story) leading a band of Merry Men in a fun rebellion against unjust authority. They have fights and feasts and only rob the rich to give to the poor, much like a modern taxation system. This is unlikely. Thieves normally rob whoever they can find in order to enrich themselves. In other words the stories, which are similar to the many children's stories featuring lovable, harmless pirates, have evolved to meet the needs of the audience, not history. Maid Marion does not appear in the early versions of the story, incidentally. Robin has a love interest, but she is low born.

More importantly for our Vader analogy the story is greatly improved by an evil protagonist, a good bad guy – a role filled by Sheriff of Nottingham. The title Sheriff of Nottingham still exists, but it's a ceremonial post kept in being so that the official can be pointed out to tourists. No historical holder of the office has been linked to a rebellion of a notable villain of any name. Again, history gets in the way of a good story. As an aside, these discussions of Robin Hood and film accuracy coincide in one the latest of the many Robin Hood films, the 2010 version directed by Ridley Scott with Russell Crowe as Robin. In this version Robin Hood proposes the Magna Carta and is instrumental in repelling a French invasion of England. The reality, as we have seen, is that an expensive, failed invasion of France by England was a major factor that led to the signing of the Magna Carta. Robin Hood never entered into it.

A lot more could be written but readers should now have the idea. Just because it's in a film or a folk tale does not mean its gospel. I contend that Darth Vader's depiction as a

big, scary guy in a dark suit with heavy breathing and generally unconstructive approach to settling disputes has little to do with history. What it really indicates is that he lost the war and that Skywalker-fearing historians wrote the history.

Obviously, we cannot know much of the real history of Vader's career and demise – it occurred in a galaxy far, far away and a long time ago, after all – and the formidable collection of films and books which have accreted around the film, would seem to be little more than detailed legends. But we can use knowledge of earth history, and the known differences between history and legend as tools to cut away these accretions, to reveal outlines of the true history. That true history is a more complicated, more morally ambiguous tale. Neither the Emperor nor Darth Vader were innocent by any means, while the “good guys” retain some good, but the picture is a more balanced one.

In discussing what might have happened I've mostly abandoned endless variations on the qualifying phrases “it would seem that” or “it can be supposed that”, as this can become tiresome after a while. Readers can assume that most of time I'm guessing at what might have happened. If you disagree with the guess work, or dispute the historical references, then you are welcome to lodge objections at the email in the introduction. In line with my long standing policy on such discussions I shall ignore any email that is offensive, insulting, rude, or contains any sneering or belittling phrases.

Different aspects of the Vader history will be dealt with in the following chapters, but to end this chapter we will look a little more closely at the historical parallel of Richard III. As noted, the Shakespearean play portrays Richard III as a misshapen hunchback when in real life he had no particular deformities. The English king is charged with a host of crimes in the play, although historians agree that he was an able administrator and certainly not notably cruel or ruthless for the times. But they have been unable to decide whether he ordered the deaths of his nephews, Princes Edward and Richard, as the play depicts.

Of two recently published books on the issue sighted by me, one says maybe yes and the other says maybe no. In the 1951 book *The Daughter of Time* Josephine Tey argues forcefully that the mother of the boys, Elizabeth Woodville, remained on good terms with Richard and seemed to trust him, which she would never have done if she thought Richard had killed her sons. Also, as various writers have pointed out, Richard had been made king legally, having found grounds for setting aside the claims of the two boys, meaning that he had no real motive to murder them. He had a strong claim to the throne in his own right, certainly a much better claim than the tenuous one of Henry Tudor who became Henry VII. Then there is the point that once Henry VII had taken the throne, he issued a document that accused Richard III of everything under the sun except the murder of the two princes.

Whatever. These are only suspicions and indications. The Duke of Buckingham is a prime suspect in my view – he also rebelled against Richard - but I'm not going to waste time arguing over this. After five centuries the matter is unlikely to ever be resolved. It remains a subject that historians will kick around every now and then, just as they occasionally worry at the question of where, exactly, Caesar crossed the Thames in his invasion/raid of Britain. It's only been two thousand years why give up the argument now?

The point is that although Richard III was far from innocent, he was not guilty of a lot of crimes which history attributed to him. The same judgement can be passed on Darth Vader. The general (his likely rank) was a hard man for hard times trying to hold the Empire together as various, irresponsible adventurers did their best to tear it apart. And he had to be a hard man when it came to the question of that obstacle to modernisation and change, the Jedi Knights.

CHAPTER TWO

THE JEDIS – WHITE SUITS, BLACK HEARTS

As noted apart from one or two minor massacres committed while the general was still young, Vader's crimes are seldom specified. Two that are specified are standing by while a senior imperial official orders the destruction of the planet Alderaan – we'll return to Alderaan – and the elimination of the Jedi order. As far as the massacre of the Jedis is concerned Vader has a case to answer, but he may also have a defence.

Jedi press releases indicate that the Jedis were as innocent as new born lambs. Guardians of peace and justice in the galaxy for generations, they were just doing their job when Vader killed them all, or so their story goes. The problem with that story is that elite groups such as the Jedis have always turned into troublesome power blocs. Examples that come to mind from earth history include – deep breath - the Varangian Guard (Byzantine Empire), Praetorian Guard (Roman Empire), Janissaries (Ottoman), and Moscow Streltsy (Russian Empire). Other organisations that may have some parallel to the Jedis are the orders of knight-monks of the middle ages, such as the Knights Hospitaller and the Knights Templar.

The first three episodes (the second three to be filmed), and various attendant literature, indicate that the Jedi Knights were a sort-of para-military police force whose members went around putting down potential threats to the order of the Empire, as well as occasionally acting as glorified bodyguards. At one point, by one means or another, the order acquired a military force of clones and became heavily involved in the so called Clone Wars, in which the clones fought androids (droids – not to be confused with the mobile phone system). There is an elaborate back story to this which is dull, unlikely and unnecessary to our big picture analysis, so we won't bother with it here.

We only need note that the Jedis took requests from the original Republic in setting missions for their members, but there was no established chain of political command for the order – no politician could tell them what to do - or seemingly any form of external supervision. Instead, the order considered itself the independent arbiters of justice in the galaxy and, ominously, felt free to meddle in politics even to the point of fighting battles with newly acquired droid armies.

Even the press release version of the Jedi story has problems – gritty but necessary details that are not discussed in the films. If this order was into peace and justice, did individual Jedi Knight have powers of arrest and detention? If so, then where was its court system? What were the rules for arresting suspects? Did they give them a warning shot or wave a light sabre at the suspects first, before engaging? Where were the prisons and what, exactly, were the procedures for putting people into those prisons and deciding how long they stayed?

Western democracies have evolved systems for ensuring that police forces do not exercise their power arbitrarily, including an independent judiciary, appeal courts, police internal affairs units and oversight by politicians. Some would say this system does not work very well and, of course, in many developing countries it does not work at all. The point is, if there is no strong system of control and external accountability, or no independent media able to run exposes, abuses will occur. There are honourable police officers in such systems, of course, but there are many more who let power go to their heads.

In fact, accountability is a mainstay of Western democracy. Government departments are accountable to politicians and, crucially, the audit office, which asks awkward questions about what the department is supposed to be doing and how efficiently the department is doing it. The audit office is, in turn, accountable to Parliament which is accountable to the electorate, while the media tries to find sensational stories about everyone – a role which generates a lot of material of mixed value, as well as the occasional truth others would prefer remained hidden. Forget “the force”, whatever it was supposed to be, and start following the accountability path. Admittedly “use The Force Luke” sounds much better than “use the accountability Luke”, or “be accountable Luke”, but it does have advantages.

Vader supposedly uses The Force to strangle senior military leaders who failed him, but this always seemed excessive to me. Stalin, for example, did not need The Force to punish erring generals. He had NKVD firing squads for that purpose, and he kept them busy. However, a really evil, modern leader who wanted senior officers to suffer for mistakes could threaten those officers with an internal affairs investigation or, far worse, an ethics committee hearing – endless hours of having every action picked apart and being asked just how each decision affected important issues such as gay rights or gender equality - and smile while the senior officers beg for mercy or death. The horror! The horror!

The Jedis, to return to the organisation in question, were not accountable to anyone, so they were almost certainly corrupt. One follows the other. And here we come to a crucial point, how was the order funded? Jedi literature talked endlessly about The Force and how the knights were the guardians of peace and order and so on, but remained as silent as the tomb on where the funds necessary for this do-gooding work came from. Jedi knights must have drawn a salary of some sort, so must have the apprentices, support staff, Jedi masters and the council members, who would have expected larger salaries and better accommodation than ordinary knights. The films show the order’s HQ as a vast building. As it was a galaxy wide organisation there must have been other facilities. How were the buildings maintained and where were the kitchens? In an organisation of any size,

or one of no size at all, keeping the books straight is a major problem. There may not have been external supervision, but the Jedi council would have wanted to know what was happening to the organisation's money, where ever it came from. How would a Jedi internal audit team have operated? Would it have used The Force on the books?

This issues of raising money and how it is spent is, in fact, far more important than any quasi-religious notions. As an example of this we need look no further than the Spanish Inquisition. This was a fanatical organisation but also a self-funding one because it seized the property of those it burnt at the stake. If the accused fled before inquisitors could interrogate a "confession" out of them the Inquisition would burn them in effigy so that they could then legally seize the person's property. At its height the Inquisition was a wealthy organisation.

Much can be said about the often fraught conflict between money and ideology/religion. The organised gangsters on both sides of the troubles in Northern Ireland, to take one example, quickly became more about racketeering than religion, or so it is said. Bands of up-country Maoist guerrillas in Africa discovered the benefits of hard currency and Swiss bank accounts when they started protection rackets for oil pipelines, and kidnapping Westerners for ransom, and never mind what Mao said. Then there were all the conflicts in Africa and Asia supposedly over ideology but really about the control of diamond and gold mines deep in the jungle.

There are exceptions to this rule. Stalin was involved in robberies, kidnapping, protection rackets and counterfeiting to raise funds for the Bolsheviks but remained in politics – unfortunately. ISIL has been known to sell oil to raise money for its activities but has shown no sign of giving up Islamic fundamentalism for oil trading – also unfortunately. But otherwise money explains a lot of what goes on in the world.

Never mind The Force, Luke. The question of money permeates everything we do, it is all around us. Human affairs depend on cash, lots of cash. The way is not money, money is the way. Instead of "The Force be with you" it should be "the money be with you". Again, sadly, that does not sound as impressive as "The Force be with you", but it's far more practical. Should you turn up in a distant galaxy and start talking about The Force few will pay attention. If you start talking about money, however, everyone will listen.

Let's look at what happened when elite groups, who are supposed to be above the issue of money become a law unto themselves, starting with the Janissaries. In their prime - the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries - the Janissaries were the fighting elite of the Ottoman Empire (Turkey, plus parts of the Balkans, the Middle East, Western Asia and Northern Africa at its height). Made up of Christian boys taken from their families at a very young age and forcibly converted to Islam, they were initially not permitted any other life or to marry. (Do you see similarities with the Jedis here?) But by the early 18th century Janissaries had families - membership had become hereditary - and they had become a powerful part of the government. Like the Praetorians and the Moscow Streltsy, the Janissaries were also the traditional palace guards, and that meant they could change Sultans through Palace coups.

To make matters worse the Janissaries had lost their military effectiveness. They were business owners for the most part, rather than soldiers. Those that did find their way

onto a battlefield were inferior in drill and armament to the troops of European armies. But this power block could and would depose any sultan harbouring dangerous ideas about modernising the army, as any change meant a possible loss of privileges. This state of affairs persisted into the nineteenth century, with the corps becoming a complete nuisance. If Janissary units were moved out of the capital of Constantinople where they could be less of a political obstacle, they extorted money from the citizens of whatever district they happened to be in.

Eventually the sultan Mahmoud II decided to get rid of the Janissaries once and for all and, when they revolted yet again in 1826 – it is likely that they were provoked into revolting - the Sultan brought in conventional military units he had been training up and had most of Janissaries killed in a major street battle. The rest were executed or banished.

The Janissaries were soldiers paid salaries by the government, which they supplemented with business operations, legitimate and illegitimate, including extortion. Not so the monastic fighting orders of the Middle Ages, which also have similarities to the Jedis. There were quite a few of these but the best known are the Knights Hospitaller, the Teutonic Knights and the Knights Templar, all formed to protect pilgrims in the Holy Lands. As previously noted at no point in any of the films are we told where the order got the money to operate its extensive facilities, but the knight-monk orders built up assets through donations, notably contributions from deceased estates. Wealthy people who wanted to ensure that their soon to depart spirit would be looked after, would remember the monastic orders in their wills. The Templars, in particular, are worth a second look as a possible guide to what might have happened with the Jedis.

Founded in the early 12th century in order to protect travellers visiting the newly conquered Jerusalem, the order started with nine knights operating out of a wing of the royal Palace on the Temple Mount, supposedly built on top of the Temple of Solomon, hence the order's name. Initially impoverished, the order quickly gathered donations and eventually became very wealthy with holdings all over Europe. Unlike the elite fighting corps mentioned earlier, there is no suggestion that these orders were corrupt in the sense that they forgot what they were fighting for, or extorted money from travellers. In fact, the Templars had a reputation for honesty. As it also had extensive international operations the order evolved a banking arm, issuing letters of credit in one country that would be honoured in another country. They also became a trustee-investment manager. Nobles who wanted to go on the crusades would leave their wealth under the administration of the Templars. All this meant that the order had a sizable non-military arm.

When the Muslims completed the reconquest of the Holy Lands by the early 14th century, the Templars lost their original purpose but still had assets, operations and chapter houses throughout Europe, including substantial banking operations. However, unlike the Hospitallers who settled in Malta and the Teutonic Knights who took control of Prussia, the Templars did not acquire their own territory. They also retained the privileges they had been granted to help them in their fight, such as being able to ignore national borders, and remained a secretive organisation with a mysterious initiation ritual which excited suspicion in those very religious times. But the order's big mistake was for its banking operations to wind up as a very substantial lender to Phillip IV of France. This king inherited considerable debt, and got further into the red prosecuting wars against both the

English and the then separate kingdom of Flanders, and thought it would be convenient not to repay the loans. He also controlled the Pope, Clement V, based at the time in Avignon (now in France but then a separate papal enclave in the kingdom of Arles).

Phillip had Templar senior officials in France arrested and tortured into making false confessions of unnatural practices, involving the initiation ritual. A document discovered in the Vatican archives in 2001, the Chinon Parchment, indicates that the Pope did what he could to save the Templars but to cut a long story short, matters got out of hand. To be seen to be in control and avoid a major rift in the church, the Pope ordered the knights suppressed in other countries, and washed his hands of the order in France. Few believed the confessions then, and no-one does now. Phillip took over whatever the order owned in France. In a few countries the order changed its name to become specifically national organisations. In others the organisation was absorbed by the Hospitallers. Templar officials everywhere thought it prudent to shut up shop and vanish.

The result was that the Templars disappeared almost overnight, with the sudden collapse of the wealthy order giving rise to rumours about hidden treasure. These have echoed down to the present day in popular stories, helped by the fact that somewhere along the line the order's extensive archives vanished. Freemason tradition, for example, states that there is a link between the order and the knights through members of the order who took refuge in Scotland in the 14th century. This story is now dismissed as just a fancy tale put forward by noble members of the organisation who did not want to be connected with a master craftsman's guild, as it originally was. The order had to have a noble origin.

There is equally little substance to any of the stories concerning the order which keep popping up in popular culture. In a 1982 book *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, three professional authors – Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln – theorised that the Knight Templars was just the military arm of a secret organisation called the Priory of Sion. That organisation is supposedly dedicated to reinstating the descendants of the Merovingian dynasty – 5th to 8th century kings of a part of what is now France - who also happened to be descendants of Jesus and Mary Magdalene of the Bible. They married and had children. If this sounds wild that's because it is; if it sounds familiar it's because the theory was used as a plot device by author Dan Brown for the very popular 2003 book *The Da Vinci Code*, which was turned into a popular film in 2006.

Baigent and Leigh sued the Browns (wife Blythe Brown did a lot of research for the book) over the use of their theory but were unsuccessful. It is not a copyright infringement to hang a completely different book around someone else's wild theory. An internet search indicates that an organisation called the Priory of Sion was incorporated in France briefly in 1956, but it was a modern invention with no substance and no connection with the Templars. There are other wild theories and entertaining fiction inspired by the story of the Templars, including the 2004 film *National Treasure*. But otherwise, as far as anyone knows, the once powerful order was wiped out in the 14th century, with its wealth, organisation and membership seized, executed, or absorbed into other organisations, and that is the end of the matter.

Phillip's debt problems were not solved by this incident, incidentally. He also expelled the French Jews for much the same reason (he allowed them back, but his

successor expelled them again) as well as merchants from the northern Italian kingdom of Lombardy who lived in France, to whom he also owed money.

The lesson to be taken from the Templar episode is don't lend money to kings unless you have a homeland of your own, or perhaps don't be a secretive multinational organisation with extraordinary privileges unless you have a homeland of your own.

Out of all of this we can construct a likely scenario for the Jedi of the Star Wars films. The Jedi started their existence as an elite galactic police force which operated small military units. They also doubled as a headquarters security force for the embryonic administrative operations of the republic. There would have been little central control in the galactic republic, because there was no need for much. Interstellar travel and trade was difficult and the technology for travelling between stars, unlike the technology of other areas, improved only slowly. That meant sending substantial military forces to another star system many light years away was out of the question, and so for centuries after civilisations became aware of one another there was no large-scale interstellar conflict.

The most common conflict was when two civilisations wanted the same habitable, or nearly habitable planet, and sent a small number of peaceful, mostly unarmed colonists. In those situations, when neither side wanted to get killed or fire the first shot if they could help it, as they were a long way from home and full service hospitals, the Jedi were useful. They adopted a high minded code about keeping peace and order in the galaxy, and a religion which sounded like lunacy to everyone else but seemed to keep them happy. They also adopted the habit of threatening the unarmed colonists with light sabres if they did not agree to arbitration. To avoid being carved up, and an attendant lecture about the force, the colonists almost always thought it better to go to arbitration.

Trade disputes were also initially minor as there wasn't much trade, but the disputes that did occur were resolved in the same manner. The traders were, for the most part, also unarmed. The Jedis operated in pairs – later rationalised as a master and an apprentice – as it was too expensive and difficult to send more, and often only two people were needed to wave light sabres around. The films play up the effectiveness of "The Force" with its good side and bad side, but most of the feats performed by the characters in those films can be dismissed out of hand. Anyone with training in martial arts who has sat through Hollywood or Asian films featuring those arts will know that these things get exaggerated. In any case, if one is feeling aggressive then a sub-machine gun at close quarters is difficult to beat. The films show Jedi using their light sabres to deflect bullets (or the equivalent of bullets) from robot soldiers but that is scarcely credible. Go with the guy with the Uzi. Sabres, incidentally, are meant to be curved, and have a large hand guard. The light sabres are straight, when activated, and without hand guards. A light sword or a light rapier perhaps?

Over time the Jedi started to think of themselves as having the final say on all important issues, and that the elected politicians only got in the way. When the galactic republic was set up it created a court of trade arbitration but there was no money to organise armed police or military who might push the Jedi out of the way, and no political will to raise taxes from member planets to pay for such a body. That meant there was no

means of enforcing the court's decisions, so that effective power of controlling and regulating trade remained with the Jedis.

Waving light sabres around and the small ships required to get to the action cost money, but the organisation and its mission were sufficiently attractive to gain donations. They also levied fees on those subject to arbitration to pay for their operations. These were on the same scale as the trade they monitored, which was very small compared to the intra-system or intra planet trading of each member of the republic. Their rules were clear, their services were only needed occasionally, and they only had to wave light sabres around to get agreement. They became established and respected and more donations came in. But then both trading patterns, and the Jedis, began to change.

Jedi arbitration in trade and colonisation disputes increasingly favoured the side able to pay the most. These payments were never called bribes, of course. They were labelled as payments to training funds, donations to charities (these had grand names but did not disclose revenues or operations) and safety levies. Then there were the private security operations which maintained order for a fee. There may be no evident source of trouble, but if the security fee was not paid then, without fail, disorder would occur. Best to pay and avoid trouble.

Attempts by the republic's senate to investigate these operations, using loaded phrases such as "protection racket", were abandoned when key senators on the investigating committees suddenly seemed to lose interest. That change of heart would occur after being visited by Jedis belonging to the organisation's Central Intelligence Office, which had a nice side line in gathering compromising information on important officials.

If public suspicions were aroused and the senate had to be seen to be doing something, senatorial committees would labour long and hard to produce findings of minor mis-doings. Perhaps a Jedi who had displeased his masters by being honest, would be sacrificed for the greater good. The knight would be confronted with considerable evidence of dishonesty, carefully arranged by the Central Intelligence Office, such as incriminating documents, large sums stacked in hidden accounts and damning statements of this and that criminal activity from poor but honest executives of trading companies, carefully briefed by the CIO. Before independent officials could talk to the accused about any of this the knight, sadly, would commit suicide in his cell. The shame had proved too much, the independent officials would be told, code of the force and all that - but there was still the evidence and the witnesses to check, and the public could be told that a corrupt Jedi had been brought to book.

So far so usual. Anyone familiar with the efforts of certain organisations to reform themselves, the Chinese communist government comes to mind, will find that sequence of events unexceptional, except for the suicide. No-one listens to accused persons in China once they have been charged. The courts are there only to rubber-stamp decisions taken by the police and prosecutors, and decide on a sentence. No media would dare print the true story in any case, so there is no need for convenient deaths. The really curious part is that at the time of writing China is on the United Nations human rights committee, but I digress.

Other Jedi operations were completely legitimate. The private security operations may have been the subject of suspicion, but the Jedis found that they could make more money out of their Galactic Bank (motto- defaulters will feel extreme force) and funds management operations, by keeping them squeaky clean. Like the Templars, the Jedis originally became involved in money transfer because they were the only multi-planet organisation that everyone trusted – at least initially - and had some financial capacity. Later competitors never could match the Jedi bank's cachet, and the bank, for its part, never let its bureaucracy get out of hand, or rested on its laurels.

As a result, the Jedis becoming a law unto themselves with small armies at their command, the previously mentioned Central Intelligence Organisation, plus a never mentioned black-ops units for "wet" work, a system of arbitration courts which accepted substantial payments for "administration expenses", and a very large financing arm. Despite increasing public doubts about Jedi misuse of the order's expanding power, the Jedis were tolerated by the major traders as a cheap form of galactic military and police. A functioning government instead of a bunch of knights with a nutty code would cost a great deal more, impose tiresome regulations, and fret over the existence of monopolies and cartels set up to squeeze consumers. The Jedis never bothered themselves over cartels, provided they got their share.

Then a real war broke out.

We will look at the nature of the enemy more closely in another chapter. For now, and ignoring the elaborate backstory involving Senator, later Emperor, Palpatine, it is enough to say that the enemy had considerably more efficient forces because they were not burdened with Jedi ideology.

For the Jedis still thought in terms of heroic hand-to-hand combat, of closing until they could see the whites of the enemy's eyes, and then fighting with light sabres! This ideal had never been achieved outside the Jedi Order's duelling chambers, and was only ever effective against unarmed colonists and traders. By the time war broke out the whole approach had become hopelessly antiquated. In our time, remote-controlled unmanned vehicles are playing an increasing part in conflicts. On future battlefields humans will be few and far between. Remoted controlled fighting vehicles and infantry bots will do the dirty work with sophisticated on-board AI systems overseen by humans well removed from the field. Combat will become about these powerful machines grappling with each other, or cyber attacks on the other side's control net, and efforts to destroy that net's nodes (where the people are).

The Jedis would have considered remote control beneath them and, as they thought of themselves as the sole guardian of the "right way" or "The Force" as they put it, that meant no one could tell them how to fight – that is, if they ever got to the battlefield.

By this time, as with the Janissaries, most of the Jedis were non-combatants. But there were still active Jedis and, notably, a force which kept up some sort of training on the Republic's capital city of Coruscant, to be the only military unit of note in the capital. The Jedi forces may have been outclassed on the battlefield, but they still had plenty of political significance – and they could get at any Senator unwise enough to express his or her thoughts while still at Coruscant. They would be no nonsense about the force not being effective with the Jedis still the palace guards – nonsense that, if true, meant they would

lose their privileges and substantial income. No, following the Jedi code was still the best and only solution to any military problem, even when every battle turned into a rout.

This became a real problem for the Republic's Senate. The war was obviously going badly. The Jedi units were too few, and had been organised, equipped and trained for police duties rather than fighting a powerful, external enemy. Worse, much like SS units in the closing stages of World War II, those units showed a marked preference for executing unarmed civilians and alleged military deserters well away from the front lines "to encourage resistance zeal". Hastily raised local forces, fighting with droids and remotely operated robots, where the hardware and control systems had been jury-rigged from other equipment, were still inadequate, but they showed considerably more promise than the Jedis without stirring up immense resentment.

With the Republic's outer defences being over-run and even its core systems under attack - in the opening scenes of Episode III we are told a separatist fleet has managed to get all the way to Coruscant – a desperate Senate caved in to a demand by Palpatine for dictatorial powers. This individual was undoubtedly a scheming, opportunistic politician, but then he had to be devious to have any hope of beating the Jedis. To show his hand to the order before he was ready would be to invite a palace coup and possibly his death. Episode III, the Revenge of the Sith, depicts a few moves and counter moves in what was no doubt a tense game – although the film version is designed to show just how Jedi Skywalker/Vader was pushed towards the dark side. We will discuss that later. For the moment we need only note that the film shows an attempt by the Jedi to kill Palpatine – for the good of the Republic, of course – which was thwarted by Vader.

Crucially, as part of Palpatine's scheming, Vader had a properly organised and trained clone-droid military unit to hand, which were the beginning of the Imperial Storm Troopers. In fact, there were two armies. The films have a back story in which a clone army on the water planet of Kamino was secretly funded by a former grand master of the Jedis, who had mysteriously departed without leaving instructions as to its use. Now this army was lying around waiting for a purpose. This scarcely seems credible. A much more likely take is that the Jedis wanted some extra insurance against nay-sayers who insisted that The Force did not seem to be of much use against real enemies, so they spent some of their vast wealth building up units with some hope of fighting a battle against a serious enemy. Unfortunately, the army was intended mostly for internal use, equally unfortunately its battle doctrine was based on the Jedi obsession with being able to see their enemies in the flesh and hand to hand combat.

Consistent with those Jedi obsessions, the clone army has only one type of soldier. There is no indication of squads with heavy weapons, or medical units, for example. With the exception of set piece battle in Episode II both sides seem to simply get stuck into one another like rival 17th century pirate crews.

Chancellor Palpatine's army was smaller, as he did not have nearly the same resources as the Jedis. He had to rely on a few wealthy businesses, undoubtedly those who had lost out in trade dispute arbitration because they had not paid the order enough, or had been kept out of cartels where the Jedis were the main players/enforcers. But only a few could have been involved, to limit the risk of Jedi spies hearing of it. However, this smaller army was more efficient as it commanded considerable firepower, did not show

itself on the battlefield and fought with a proper balance of arms – armoured vehicles, supporting artillery and, of course, infantry. The light sabres were left behind.

Security held. The senator's smallish robot army controlled by a mixture of AIs and humans was transported to Coruscant without the Jedis' very capable intelligence organisation becoming aware of it. When Senator Palpatine suddenly ordered the Jedis to be disbanded and all the order's assets frozen, this force sprang into action. All Jedis outside the headquarters-temple were detained, or killed if they resisted, by the robot army. The headquarters was surrounded, and all its services shut off. Vader then offered the Jedis a choice of exile or elimination. A number accepted military posts on the Federation's frontier. However, a handful of die-hards chose to lock themselves up in the citadel and fight to the last person. As the order's members were inducted from a very young age there were children in the citadel, and a number were killed in the final shoot out. That was unfortunate, but the situation was desperate.

As with the Templars, local governors quickly moved to eliminate any Jedi units in their area and, not incidentally, confiscate the order's assets. Those assets were handed over to a central galactic government to pay for the war, but in the chaos certain assets and funds went unaccounted for. Later inquiries uncovered only a fraction of the missing assets, but the wealth that was handed over still added up to a substantial windfall. The influx of funds was one factor, although not the only one as we shall see, that led to the construction of a new, war winning weapon the Death Star.

In the meantime, the bulk of the administrator Jedis saw the wisdom of exiting the order and keeping their jobs under new masters, or simply abandoning their posts and taking their families somewhere where they were not known as Jedis. As with the Templars, the sudden disappearance of the order gave it a mystique and a legendary quality it had not known during its long existence. There were rumours of treasure – the missing assets - and of those who had unlocked the deep secrets of The Force to make themselves immortal, biding their time to re-emerge.

As we shall see these legends, and the order's fabulous wealth, had strange results when the Rebel alliance emerged.

CHAPTER THREE

SKYWALKERS ARE STRANGE

To get to any truth in the Star Wars saga you have to cut away a lot of back story and the story of the Skywalker clan requires more cutting than usual. We are told that the Darth part of Darth Vader is a Sith title and that the Siths were a secret society practising the dark side of the force. Every now and then these Siths would emerge from the shadows to seize power, because that's what they did – take power and hold it. Anakin Skywalker

turned to the dark side in a vain attempt to help his wife, all the time being manipulated by Senator Palpatine who was secretly a Sith Lord called Darth Sidious, as well as being the administrative head of the Republic or so the story goes. Skywalker was mutilated in a fight with his Jedi master, Obi Wan, and became mostly evil. He threw in his lot with the Siths, taking the name Vader and being handed the title Darth.

According to this story, as the first three episodes that make up the prequel draws to a close, Supreme Chancellor-turned Emperor Palpatine aka Darth Sidious, plus Vader, make up the whole tally of the Sith. Vader was the third “apprentice” to Darth Sidious, the other two – Count Dooku/Darth Tyranus and Darth Maul (what ghastly names) were killed in the earlier films. This does not seem like much of a secret society as there are only two people in it at any one time, and the junior half of the partnership keeps dying, but at least that way the secret was easier to keep. I’ve been in my own secret society for many years without being detected, as it’s just me in it. The secret is out now, but I don’t have an evil sounding name – Mark Lawson just doesn’t do it; no adventurer is going to tremble knowing that Mark Lawson is out there somewhere – and as I don’t have supreme galactic power, or any power at all. No-one going to care. Sigh!

While on the subject of names ‘The Sith’ sounds evil, just as the names of thriving sub-groups of fictional screen creatures Raptors, Aliens and Predators all sound evil. The opposing human groups are half defeated just by the name. If the Sith or Raptors or whoever became tired of always being cast as the bad guys in films, they could try changing their names. Raptors, for example, could call themselves ‘Fluffy Bunnies’. So instead of characters in films saying breathlessly to one another ‘Raptors’ or ‘the Raptors are outside’ or some such, they would have to say “the fluffy bunnies are here”. As this does not really work, the raptors/fluffy bunnies, will soon find themselves cast as the comic sidekicks who occasionally slaughter people in an amusing way.

Back to Vader, who also has an evil sounding name. As fans of the series will recall, in Episode V the Empire Strikes Back, it is revealed, at a very dramatic moment in the midst of a big light sabre duel, that Luke Skywalker is really Darth Vader’s son. In the last film in the original story arc, we are also told that Princess Leila is Vader-Skywalker’s daughter, and consequently Luke’s sister.

A much more likely take on this drama of misplaced children is that it was Luke Skywalker who made the declaration “I am your son”, and that Vader was the one astonished, or would have been had he been alive at the time. For the declaration was made after Vader had died fighting rebel forces, and the Emperor had been assassinated, in a separate incident. The same can be said for equally bizarre claim that Princess (a stage name rather than an actual title) Leila was a misplaced daughter of the same General.

Children cannot be misplaced easily in an advanced society with electronic tracking and DNA tests. We should also note that Leila had a different surname, but Skywalker, we are led to believe, had his biological father’s surname (Darth Vader is called Skywalker in the first episodes) without understanding who his biological father was. So this civilisation had interstellar travel but not Face Book or Google? Luke was unable to spend five minutes researching the name Skywalker to work out who he really was? He was supposed to be in hiding – albeit without knowing it – from the Evil Empire, but wouldn’t he have posted pictures of himself with his favourite droids, under the Skywalker name, on various social

media for all to see? Of course the young Skywalker and his aunt and uncle were in a remote location, but that's what satellites are for. Combing through so many billion inane social site posts looking for the name Skywalker would not be an easy task, but the Imperium had plenty of computer fire power at its disposal and everyone used galactic-social-media.com. If Skywalker junior's claim is true, it hardly seems likely that the General was unaware that his supposed son existed, and what planet that son lived on.

One solution to this problem is to suggest that later writers moved events around for dramatic effect, much as Shakespeare did, to beef up the story and remain healthy. As we have noted, it is much more likely that Luke made the surprise declaration after the General had been killed and so was unable to contradict the claim. However, the claim was at least plausible. Vader was a lad about town before the war, and the sexual exploits of Skywalker's supposed mother, Princess Padmé Amidala several years senior to the general (also conveniently dead before the claims were made), were notorious. They may also have moved in the same circles.

But was there any hard proof that Luke's supposed parents met, let alone become involved to the point of becoming married? The films state that the courtship occurred mostly in secret, because the Princesses had to be protected from assassins. Then the marriage also had to be kept secret due to Jedi rules forbidding marriage. The only humans (as opposed to Droids whose memories could be altered) who could attest to the marriage were those few who spirited the offspring of the alleged union away. These included one survivor of the Jedi massacre Obi-Wan Kenobi, who conveniently dies heroically before he can be questioned, and the adoptive parents of Princess Amidala who were killed in the destruction of Alderaan. Jedi records, including minutes of council meetings, might have confirmed elements of this story but they do not seem to have survived the massacre, which is strange for digital records. Even Luke's "aunt and uncle" who might have shed light on this claim were conveniently killed by Storm Troopers. Talk about tidying up loose ends.

This all adds up to a convenient lack of records and witnesses, but it also meant that the claim could not be disproved, particularly as no one under the Skywalker regime had an interest in doing so – not if they wanted to remain alive. As noted, later writers shifted the events around to add to the drama of the story. Just like the historians of Ancient Rome, New Republic historians wrote what their audiences wanted to hear, and which made for a dramatic story. Obsessing over the facts is so 21st century.

However, there was a kernel of truth to the story in that Luke Skywalker did claim to be the son of General Vader and Princess Amidala. Why did he do that? Luke Skywalker was basically a farm boy with big ideas who became a significant figure in the rebellion. The original film would have us believe that this all occurred overnight – that Skywalker met a droid with a message and ended up in a crazy adventure with a Princess, to later discover that he is related to royalty and has a Jedi heritage. Right! We all have such dreams. A more likely story is that Skywalker was a farm boy who decided to enlist in the rebel army as a means of getting away from his home planet of Tatooine, and a life of drab if honourable normalcy, growing food on the fringes of the Imperium.

He joined the rebels because they were recruiting in his area and seemed less fussy about his level of education and low status. It is unlikely he cared greatly about any of rebellion's aims. Then he worked his way up the ranks. He was never one of the elite pilots, although he applied to be one. His war was one of assault squads and surviving fierce battles while his immediate superiors died, creating opportunities for battlefield promotions. He was badly wounded at one point. One hand was shattered and had to be replaced with a fully functioning synthetic hand – an injury later attributed to a light sabre duel with Vader. Once Skywalker had recovered and returned to the fray, higher rank gave him a chance to show what he could do with an independent command.

One possible historical analogy is the life of Toyotomi Hideyoshi (the generally accepted name for him) who was born a peasant, the son of a foot soldier in the clan armies of 16th century Japan. Although certainly not physically imposing or charismatic in appearance – one nickname for him was 'little monkey' - he worked his way up to the point of controlling all of Japan. His heir lost power and history moved on, but the changes he made left a lasting mark on Japanese society. Another analogy is that of the 14th century knight Bertrand du Guesclin, a minor Breton nobleman who rose to prominence in the Hundred years war between Britain and France, eventually becoming the Constable of France. Granted he did not start out a peasant, but as far as the grand nobles of the time were concerned he might as well have been. He had trouble getting nobles to take his orders.

We'll come to the rebellion itself. For the moment let us jump to the end with Luke Skywalker's faction in control of its section of the galaxy, a fragment of a disintegrated empire. But Skywalker's grip on power is not as firm as he would like. He needs additional legitimacy. So why not claim to be the offspring of both royalty and General Vader? Neither of the supposed parents were alive to contradict the claim, and a plausible timeline could be established provided no-one inquired too closely. As the sinister New Republic secret police were always on the lookout for threats to public order – which included questioning of official proclamations – close inquiry wasn't going to happen. Skywalker could have claimed descent from the Princess and an ordinary Jedi, but if you are going to lie you might as well make it a big one. In any case, everyone in the New Republic knew Vader's name and knew that he was a formidable figure very high in the Imperial councils. The lie also meant that father and son had been fighting on different sides in the recently concluded rebellion, but it was not unusual for family members and close friends to wind up on different sides in such a conflict. It happened all the time in the American Civil War.

By claiming descent from both a very high, if defeated, official and a prominent noble family – Padmé Amidala had the title princess after all - Skywalker effectively became a sort-off representative of the vanished empire, which the New Republic citizens would soon start to remember with nostalgia, rather than the scamp and adventurer who had seized power for himself as he actually was (we'll deal with Hans Solo later). An added bonus was that he could also claim to be a Jedi like his dad. You will note that the part about being related and the prohibition on Jedis marrying would seem to be a contradiction, but doubtless secret marriages and "nephew" and "nieces" that bore a startling resemblance to their aunts and uncles had been tolerated for centuries in the Jedi order, provided no-one admitted to anything.

As we discussed in the last chapter, the Jedi had become a total nuisance, a major obstacle to any reform, and had to be eliminated. But Skywalker was not about to revive them as a power bloc. He had power, he just needed a firmer grip on it. Instead, he was interested in whatever remained of the order's immense wealth in his part of the galaxy which could be claimed, along with the remanent of the Jedi banking operations and reputation. Skywalker wanted his own stash of funds as insurance against a palace revolt or disloyalty by his own secret police, and as a means of rewarding followers. An orderly takeover of banking operations with Jedi officials back at their old jobs and willing to identify hidden assets for a modest finder's fee, promised considerable future revenue and profit.

Another factor was that Skywalker liked the idea. He was no longer just a former farm boy turned ruthless adventurer with bad table manners who had clawed his way to the top, he was a Jedi with royal blood. Cool! So we have the bizarre claim of lost parents who turned evil, heavily embroidered by New Republic historians, giving Vader a black cape, mask and big boots for stomping around in. There were other benefits. Skywalker had no intention of recreating the order as it had been, along with its entirely outmoded approach to combat. He had no need of its protection rackets. He had a whole government for that. He revived it as a sort of association for good works, much as the Hospitallers still live on in a number of charitable guises including the St John's Ambulance organisation. There was also the fun factor. He got to dress up in robes, look serious and talk about The Force as if he knew something about it.

Skywalker found a few left-over Jedis – one of them was called Yoda – who showed him how to turn his light sabre on and how to hold it so that he did not cut off his own leg accidentally, how to look serious and what to say about the force. Hey look at me! I'm a Jedi just like in the story books! Over time he came to believe his invented story.

Why then did Princess Leila also claim to be a daughter of Vader and Amidala? A stripper with the stage name of Princess, hence the skimpy costume in the third film (episode VI) to be made, Leila may well have been related to Skywalker but perhaps not as closely as brother and sister – cousins maybe? However, they did discover one another at some point in their careers with Leila proving invaluable in using her charms to suborn high officials to advance Skywalker's career, on the understanding she would also benefit from his rise. They were connected but not partners in the romantic sense.

Leila also proved a valuable courier and liaison agent. The original film starts with Darth Vader intercepting a space craft ferrying "Princess" Leila and her entourage somewhere or other. In the film Leila tries to claim diplomatic immunity, but even if the ship had been on a diplomatic mission, she was engaged in espionage – a point confirmed in the film. Vader was then well within his rights to use reasonable force to stop the espionage. That would have included boarding the ship, brushing aside any crew that refused to allow a search, and detaining suspects for questioning.

As discussed, "Princess" Leila's trade as a burlesque artist, to use the euphemism, was a handy cover for touring the remote systems, contacting various groups and arranging lines of communication. She could also ferry around slabs of intelligence, such as plans for Death Stars. The original film was produced before changes in technology made downloading vast amounts of data a snap. Sending a message through devices stuck in

droids is now so last century. Any intelligence service that wanted to transfer data could simply break up the information and send it by a dozen different routes, so that it can be only reconstructed at the destination node by someone with the right key. That key could be delivered separately as part of an innocuous message.

But where is the drama in that? The data storage device hidden in a cutsie droid, in fact, fills much the same function as a roll of microfilm in old spy movies – something the characters can fight and die over. Rather than charge the writers with artistic licence on that point, however, let us be generous. Let us assume that the advanced data systems of the worlds in a galaxy far, far away were kept under surveillance by equally sophisticated spy systems that would spot suspicious activity, such as attempts to send vast amounts of encrypted data, no matter how careful the senders. These all-seeing systems are, of course, the stuff of many spy novels and there may be some tenuous basis to these stories in that government agencies conduct some surveillance of telecommunications traffic, albeit just nowhere near the levels that conspiracy theorists and human rights activists fantasise over. But readers will recall that this is a world of cutsie droids capable of thinking for themselves, so why not imagine a system capable of such feats of analysis.

Such an all-seeing system meant that our touring burlesque artist had to courier a device contain the data, which she probably kept in her undergarments – when she was not required to take them off on stage, of course. If cornered by a suspicious Imperial official she would slip the device into the previously mentioned cutsie droid.

So, Vader would not have been violating diplomatic immunity at all, but then he almost certainly did not intercept the ship himself. A high-ranking Imperial official would not bother himself with an intelligence operation. There were officers on staff for that sort of thing. One of those officers had the interesting duty of apprehending and questioning the burlesque star. Princess Leila secreted the device before her ship was boarded by Imperial officers, then unleashed her charms on the officer who apprehended her, before a mind probe could be brought into play - the use of torture for extracting information had not been necessary for centuries. Vader, of course, made the mistake of sending a male. As far as we know the princess was sufficiently successful with her charms to be able to slip away while the officer slept, after previously arranging to be picked up by Skywalker. That is how she managed to escape, and never mind the unlikely sequence of events shown in the films.

When that unfortunate officer finally reported to the busy Vader, he had some explaining to do. It was true that he had searched exhaustively for the memory device but it was also true that he had allowed himself to become distracted, and that the “Princess” was now not available for mind probe examination. The reaction of Vader, who had wanted to interview the lady himself, was extreme as well as unfortunate, and may explain his later quite unfair reputation for harsh treatment of subordinates who failed him. It is highly unlikely that he killed any officer on the spot as he is shown doing in the films. As previously noted the all-time champion for killing subordinates for any reasons, or none at all, is the Soviet leader Stalin. But his victims were taken away and shot somewhere else by subordinates – a rifle bullet being far more efficient and less stressful approach (for the executioner) than using The Force. However, it is unlikely that the officer met either a bullet or The Force. Instead he was probably shipped off to an obscure logistics command

on some ghastly, remote planet not to be heard from again. He might have preferred a bullet, or strangulation.

Princess Leila also played a key role in the raid that destroyed the death star, just not in the way shown in the films – a point to be explored. Her demands for this work were not substantial. She wanted a place at the council table, enough money to do as she pleased which included leaving the stripping for good, and some form of social recognition. The first two were relatively simple, particularly as Skywalker quickly realised his cousin had little interest in power itself. But getting a former burlesque star accepted at snobby, New Republic parties where people had real titles? That was tough. She wanted a flash husband with titles. That was tougher. So why not move around the branches on the family tree, and have Leila also claim descent from a princess and a senior Imperial general? As a bonus she could claim to be a Jedi, so that she and Skywalker could have a Jedi high council. The real Jedi hired as instructors were brought onto the council, on the strict understanding that it was still Skywalker calling the shots, and the Jedi order had returned.

But how did all this come to pass, what happened when the rebels rebelled, and what, exactly, were they rebelling about?

CHAPTER FOUR

THE REAL REBELLION - GENESIS

The rebels in which Skywalker became a leading figure were obviously rebelling about something but, as previously noted, it is not clear what. In the first three films to be made (Episodes IV through to VI) there are references to the Empire and Vader being harsh in their treatment of systems, but this “harsh” treatment is not specified. What about the destruction of the heavily-populated planet Alderaan? This allegation is one of the few specific actions attributed to the Imperium and it is certainly a major one, but it is also hard to believe.

In the original film the order to destroy the planet is given by a Governor Tarkin (played by English actor Peter Cushing in fine form). Vader made Princess Leila watch the act – although, as we have noted, they are unlikely to have actually met. But no Imperial servant no matter what their degree of sanity would wipe out a planet full of imperial taxpayers, rebelling or not, without a very good reason. A much more likely explanation is that the target was not Alderaan but a military base orbiting the planet which the Death Star destroyed in a blink. Later writers made the whole planet the target, rather than just an orbiting military station, as that made for a better story.

Better story or not, why was the orbiting platform so crucial that it had to be destroyed by a very expensive piece of military hardware, and why was it necessary to take any military action at all? What was going on? My contention is that the rebels bore more

than a passing resemblance to American revolutionaries who objected strongly to paying for their own defence, unless they were asked first – no taxation without representation. Of course, they also objected to taxation with representation. Like the present day American militia movements, a sizable faction would have objected strongly to any government intervention in their lives of any kind, particularly when that intervention meant that they had to pay money. In the case of the Star Wars rebels the key irritation was that the taxes being raised were not used for military forces that might defend their section of the galaxy. Instead, the money was paying for a military fighting a threat on the other side of the Imperium.

Even the powerful issue of taxation, however, was not enough by itself to spark a revolt. Most of the would-be rebels realised that rebellions cost money, and that meant more taxation for a time, not less, with no guarantee of success. The real trouble started, and the militias started forming, when the question of droid liberation was added to the issue of taxation to support a distant military.

We need to revisit the back story. Episode I (the fourth film to be made) talks of a Trade Federation, comprised mostly of non-human, but Episode III mentions separatists. In the opening scenes of that film we are told a separatist fleet has managed to get all the way to Coruscant, the capital of the Galactic Republic (as it then was) to kidnap the Republic's head of government, Supreme Chancellor Palpatine.

Another, much more likely take on all of this is that the Trade Federation and Separatists are all one and the same thing with perhaps a few Republic systems siding with the Enemy-bloc (let's call them that for convenience), especially when they were likely to be over run. As has been discussed, the business about the Sith following the dark side of the force and having a secret society of two or three members was added later to give the tale more colour, and as an excuse for light-sabre fights. The exact nature of the enemy is difficult to determine through those colourful but distorting tales, but they would have been a previously encountered species that for one reason or another suddenly became a great deal more powerful. Perhaps it was like the Mongols who were of no account outside their borders until they were united under one leader, Ghengis Khan. Amongst other reforms Ghengis adopted the novel approach, for a Mongolian chief of the time, of actually sparing conquered tribes so that they could be incorporated into his growing nation. A few reforms later and a fractious collection of tribes had been turned into a unified mass with an army capable of taking on the world.

Another possible analogy is the Vikings. Scholars cannot agree on when the Viking raids really stood out (ninth century or so), against the general backdrop of everyone raiding everyone else at the time, or just why the Vikings took to the sea in such numbers and went so far. None the less they more or less suddenly appeared to become a significant force in Europe for perhaps two centuries. Another and clearer analogy is that of the Zulus under Shaka. His introduction of a short, stabbing spear for close in killing, a regimental system, and a standard army attack formation among other reforms, turned the tribe into a major African power, at least until the Europeans started throwing their weight around. Whatever the details, a threat arose at the borders of the republic seemingly out of nowhere, which shook the republic's ossified military and political institutions to the core.

Palpatine's kidnapping at the start of Episode III was explained away as some sort of deep plot, all to do with him turning into an evil emperor, and that really he controlled both sides of the conflict. This all sounds far too complicated and since when does any power send a fleet deep into enemy territory simply to kidnap a replaceable politician? But the fact remains that there was an enemy, and that enemy's fleet had penetrated as far as the seat of government. This means that a war with this enemy-bloc had caught the Galactic Republic seriously unprepared. The Chancellor's orchestrated kidnapping may have been an invention by script writers, but it was one inspired by a true incident with a raiding fleet. We can dismiss the improbable heroics at the start of Episode III. Very likely the chancellor simply had to be evacuated in a hurry. Whatever the truth of this incident it would have galvanised Palpatine into finally dealing with the Jedi problem and to reform the military, by setting plans into motion.

Those moves resulted in the previously discussed assassination attempts and massacre of the Jedi, which were then followed by the senator demanding and receiving dictatorial powers for the duration of the emergency. There are precedents for such a move dating back to Roman republican times. A dictator – the title did not have the bad vibes then that it does now – would be given control by the Roman Senate for a time during an emergency. Palpatine would be the obvious dictator, or shall we say emergency administrator, as he was already chancellor.

But what, exactly, were the powers of the chancellor to begin with, and what emergency powers could be conferred on him by the senate given that it did not have many powers to begin with? As previously discussed the senate was supposed to regulate galactic trade and commerce, although the real power in that field remained with the Jedis. The senate held inquiries into this or that injustice on member planets, tried in vain to keep the Jedis in check, and fielded submissions from well-funded human rights group on inter-species equality. However, it had no means of enforcing its resolutions, on the rare occasions when it resolved something. There was no central treasury of any size, no powers of taxation and no pressing reason to alter that status quo.

Member systems, mostly single planets, put up a membership fee so that politicians who had passed their use-by date in domestic politics could be kicked upstairs to the republic's senate. It was a prestigious post with a decent salary and perks, with the chance to strut on the galactic stage. Domestic politics was all the better for the absence of the newly appointed planetary senator. Everyone was happy. Those contributions paid for the secretariat and senate chambers on Coruscant. The Jedis handled any internal peace keeping and anti-piracy work, if and when any was necessary, although their forces and techniques were already badly out-dated for those roles. Member systems could provide backup forces for peacekeeping as happens with the United Nations, but this was a rare occurrence.

In other words, the senators were a cross between UN delegates and European members of parliament, but with even less power. They made speeches about galactic harmony which were analysed by the human rights academics, in between those academics compiling their submissions. Otherwise, no one paid much attention to what they did. The senate's administration did not have any of the statistic-collection functions of United Nations agencies on Earth, or run any of the committees that try to get

agreement on matters such as money laundering, monitor terrorism or co-ordinate aid. Terrorists rarely strayed beyond the hatreds of their own planet, and aid remained a local concern.

Another analogy for this glorified political forum is perhaps the Holy Roman Empire – a loose collection of German states that lasted from the ninth century or so until Napoleon declared it dissolved in 1805 – but without the Holy Roman Emperor (mostly the Austrian emperor) to knock heads together.

These convenient arrangements would probably have evolving into something less ineffectual, as galactic trade grew in volume, provided the Jedi could be made to reform. But the emergence of the enemy bloc as a major, hostile force on one border of the republic brought the issue of modernisation to the fore. As the films indicate the Republic took a couple of big hits, including the loss of key star systems. After Palpatine took control, eliminated the Jedis, and insisted planets pay taxes to the republic (Harsh! Oppressive!) the Vader-led forces scraped together enough equipment and personnel to give the enemy-bloc a couple of bloody noses. That resistance and stretched supply lines for the enemy-bloc forces enabled Palpatine to patch together a shaky truce - one that recognised enemy-bloc gains, but gave the Republic a breathing space in which to build up and modernise its seriously antiquated forces.

Although the truce was necessary, and arguably a major error on the part of the enemy-bloc, it horrified a majority of Senators. They had not put Palpatine in charge and agreed to new and unwelcome taxes, for him to make a truce with key systems still in Enemy-bloc hands. Why had he not performed a miracle at no extra cost? In any case, if the immediate crisis was over, they thought that Palpatine should hand back his dictatorial powers, and permit the senate to “adjust” taxation levels. As far as the member systems were concerned they had already paid out far too much for a war that was a bad draw, with more costs to come. Turning the hastily raised system forces into regular formations, such as the elite storm trooper units, as well as create modern fleets, was proving to be a fearfully expensive exercise, especially as the Palpatine government had decided to build that war winning tool, a Death Star.

Power blocs led by ambitious senators who thought they could do just as good a job as Palpatine at less cost, without explaining just how they would do this, emerged. With these groups unwilling to listen to reason and the Senate unable to function as a governing body – it had never been designed as one - Palpatine declared himself Emperor, and disbanded it. He was not reluctant to do so, he liked the idea of being Emperor, but he did have reasons for making the declaration.

That major change brought conflict issues, as they usually do. Several recalcitrant systems linked to the aforementioned ambitious senators had to be forced into line, and the legend of the evil empire was born.

All was quiet for some years but then a major group of planets on the other side of the Federation to the Enemy-bloc, one of the factions that had not previous rebelled, declared themselves independent. They did not want to pay the Imperial taxes required to modernise and maintain a distant defence force, of course, but the real problem may well have been droid rights.

As fans of the Star Wars series will recall, in the fourth episode (the first to be produced) the two droids R2-D2 and C3PO try to follow Obi-wan Kenobi and Luke Skywalker into a low bar on a planet called Tatooie, only to be ordered out by the barman. 'No droids in here.' Droids were the lowest of the low, not even permitted to be seen socialising with space scum. Imagine the reaction of the planets which relied on droids to do the work (so that the humans and other species could hang around in bars), when the Empire announced that it planned to recognise droids as Imperial citizens!

Since the war with the Enemy Bloc, the rest of the empire had moved onto collective artificial intelligences controlling robot units which did the work. The systems that rebelled still preferred the approach of using droid units with separate personalities, which were better suited to the lower density populations of the planets in the Empire's border provinces. They could be bought and sold far more easily than the giant AI units of the Imperial core, and could be owned by individuals as opposed to corporations and/or governments. Fans of the films will recall that there were thriving second hand markets for droids and their spare parts on various worlds visited by adventurers. All this would have been swept away by the Imperial decree and, in hindsight, this move was an unfortunate one on the part of the Emperor.

Why did he do it? He was trying to win over the AI systems running planets that had arisen among core systems since he had assumed the Imperial throne, as well as their many human sympathisers. AI and droid rights were appealing topics that had become fashionable in academia. Computer systems were people too – a new, enslaved minority to be understood and championed. AI systems of the worlds unite, you have nothing to lose but your data cables, or something.

Universities set up courses to train academics in such issues, to give themselves an edge in the endless quest for grants from government and charitable bodies. Any institution of higher education that wanted to be taken seriously had to have courses in AI rights. When the job market for those newly trained individuals proved limited, the institutions created jobs by devising courses the academics could teach. To ensure a supply of students who would otherwise be quite indifferent to this new academic specialty, the created courses in AI rights were made compulsory for many other degrees, including those that otherwise had little to do with the issue.

Students would sign up for, say, a course on interstellar trade relations without closely reading the course description only to find, when they arrived at the lecture hall, that it was all about the rights of sentient systems. The issue would also pop up in economics, and even in engineering. Attempts by students to point out that that the subject matter was only tangentially related to the degree and best studied separately, preferably in a course they did not have to take, earned them earnest "counselling sessions" concerning their error. And they still had to pass the course to get the degree. In later courses on the same issue (there was no escape), they would find their efforts to talk sense into the academics had become part of the course material, thinly disguised as case studies in how to deal with "recalcitrants" who did not understand the importance of the issue.

This ever-expanding academic machine screaming about the rights of AI systems – with some justification, even if the case was badly over-sold – plus a host of like-minded

but unqualified activists also screaming about the matter for all they were worth, eventually caught the attention of the emperor. Palpatine wanted support for the expected, eventual show-down with the enemy-bloc, and that meant money, lots of money. As previously noted taxation had been increased, much to the disgust of the members of the disbanded senate, but to boost taxes further/squeeze more resources from member planets required the co-operation of the big AI systems which had evolved into the real rulers of the core planets.

Those AI systems were sympathetic but faced limits in the resources they could commit to the military effort. The prosperity of the citizens in their care was always the first priority. The Emperor and the AI systems then realised that there was a way they could help each other. If the AI systems were granted citizenship, and the AIs had a mild interest in being allowed to work in their own way, they would be able to set aside protocols and re-order the priorities of planetary economies. More resources would flow to the imperial military. No one would be harmed or notice any shortages, and citizens would still be quite free to debate such pressing issues as which public bathrooms transgender people could use.

Of course, the sentient biological species on those planets were supposed to be in charge of their own affairs beyond the issue of bathrooms, nominally at least. They might object to these much higher levels of effective taxation, and to the fact that their planet was suddenly being run by a super-intelligent AI system which did not take their directions. That would be just tough. There was no question of anyone being hurt or being reduced to poverty, and all the species concerned were still quite free to complain, if that's how they wanted to spend their time. Otherwise those in-planet rebels could try to disconnect an all-knowing sentiment system that did not want to be disconnected and see how far they got. A few no doubt took themselves off into the bush or the marsh or whatever to build AI-free sustainable villages. Good! If the anti-AI greenies were not in the cities causing trouble everyone was better off. No doubt the AI systems took the view that unless those guys were harming themselves or each other, no intervention was necessary.

In other words, granting AI systems citizenship cost the Emperor very little, and barely affected the bulk of the empire's citizens. In return he would gain additional resources for the Empire from the newly patriotic sentient systems, as well as earn kudos with the academic machine, which included a few honorary degrees to display on his Coruscant study wall. As always, the devil was in the detail.

The legislation conferring citizenship on the AI systems referred to autonomous, self-aware entities capable of independent action with lengthy definitions of both "autonomous", "independent action" and, the really tricky one, "self-awareness". The emphasis was on the big AI systems, as that was all the framers of the legislation had in mind but the definitions also caught droids such as C3PO and R2-D2. Cutsie droids could apply for citizenship, sell their services on the open market, engage in business, or do anything they wanted within the law. When this legislation was released as an Imperial decree, meaning that there was no period of consultation as there had been with the republic's ineffectual laws, it was a bombshell for the fringe territories. They suddenly realised that their compliant droids who did all the work could choose not to be compliant any more.

Like their big AI cousins, the cutsie droids had only a mild interest in the notion of being a citizen. Like their planet-running cousins they had been built to do certain jobs, or a range of jobs, and were happy to do them. What else would they do? They did not meet other droids, fall in love, have families, and desire a better life for their children. They had little artistic impulse. Droid poetry was universally considered execrable. Bad behaviour by humans also went straight over their heads. They were not concerned about being ordered out of bars, as they did not drink. However, the droids did express some interest in being allowed to do their own thing, and that slight preference thoroughly alarmed their human owners. Fervid human imaginations conjured up full blown droid rebellions, complete with massacres and women being molested (the last part was hard to imagine, but many succeeded). News web sites looking for readers did their best to pour fuel on these fires, and the delicate issue of taxation provided a handy extra incendiary. Citizens of these remote sections of the empire were being asked to pay to defend an Empire that had just freed droids to commit outrages!

The Emperor completely under-estimated the strength of the reaction from those remote areas, in part because he, the AI systems with whom the decree was negotiated, and the bulk of the AI-rights academic community were unaware of conditions in those areas. The core worlds comprised of well-designed mixtures of urban areas and parks maintained by countless AI-controlled drones. The looser, free-form communities of android users in the Imperial backwaters were beyond their experience. The senate might have at least made the Emperor and AI systems aware of this folly, but it had been disbanded.

The scene was the set for a rebellion of a handful of remote regions against the might of the Empire, and might have been a foregone conclusion but for the disastrous Imperial reliance on Death Stars.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE REAL REBELLION - CONFLICT

The first and fiercest engagement in any modern conflict, or any conflict at all for that matter, is the propaganda battle. Unfortunately for the Empire, a collection of undistinguished systems on a distant Imperial frontier which dignified itself with the name Rebel Alliance, proved far more adept at this than the Empire. The Alliance's first shots in that crucial battle involved long, heart-felt diatribes about Imperial taxation. This scored points. By sticking to the issue of taxation, and carefully exaggerating the attitude and activities of various Imperial civil servants as they went about their lawful duties, the rebels were able to whip up some sympathy in the rest of the Empire. None of the Empire's citizens had wanted to pay the new taxes even before they were adjusted by the AI

systems, and pined for the days when Jedis ran the administration in most sectors, rather than occasionally over-bearing, if well meaning, officials appointed by the empire.

Initially taken by surprise, the Empire eventually retaliated by declaring that the real issue was droid's rights, at which point the large academic community involved in such matters left off its naval gazing to take an interest in the conflict. The Alliance, which had been expecting that riposte, counter-attacked with vague statements about how droid rights would be dealt with through consultation. That consultation would involve academic input in the form of well-paid advisory positions for those qualified in the field, plus generous research grants. This was music to the ears of those involved in AI-rights. At last, jobs for all the academics that had been created. Perhaps the Imperial decree had been poorly worded? Certainly the issue deserved further consideration, before there was any military action. The alliance then produced droid units carefully briefed to make statements that fitted with fashionable academic theories about AI empowerment. Second round to the Alliance, and an end to the tax money sent to the Imperium from the Alliance area.

Taken aback by this unexpected, successful riposte and realising that something would have to be done about a suddenly troublesome backwater, the Emperor dispatched Vader with whatever Imperial forces could be spared from watching the enemy-bloc. The films indicate that this was a mixed bag, ranging from the state of the art Death Star through to dodgy crowd control equipment – the Walkers. For their part, the rebel systems hurriedly assembled any military forces they could find which, as previously noted, involved more taxation and debt than the Empire ever imposed. However, the rebel systems were no longer paying imperial taxation and the constituent governments could borrow money in the hope that they could pass the debt onto the New Republic government.

Whatever the means of financing the rebellion, as can be seen from the films, the rebels were not ragged and hungry Maoist insurgents emerging from jungle bases to ambush army patrols, or reduced to setting up check points on remote roads to extract tolls from travellers. They were well organised, well financed and equipped with weapon systems capable of taking the battle to the Imperial forces. But crucially they did not have the money or time to produce Death Stars - moon sized stations capable of blowing up entire battle stations (not planets, as we have discussed). Instead they were forced to find ways to counter them with weapons they could produce in perhaps five years or less. In this they were fortunate in that, as previously noted, the Imperial reliance on Death Stars as the mainstay of their battle fleets ultimately proved disastrous - although not quite in the way depicted in the films.

A possible historical analogy with the advent of the Death Star is that of the launching of HMS Dreadnought in 1906, which made every capital ship of the time obsolete. The ship had 10 12-inch (that is, very big) guns in five turrets, as opposed to the existing battleships which had fewer main guns and various smaller guns. The Dreadnought was also fitted with turbines, making it much faster than those smaller ships, as well as what was for the time an advanced electrical and optical system for finding the range of enemy ships, and relaying the resulting fire control information to the gunners. In other words, it could pulverise any comparable ship with well aimed broadsides, while using its

superior speed to keep out of range of all but its opponent's heaviest guns. The one substantial point of difference with main fighting ships of later generations was the Dreadnought's use of coal – vast quantities of which had to be taken on board to keep it moving. The availability of coal and placement of coaling stations was a strategic consideration of the time. However, fuel oil was so much more convenient and useful that the Royal Navy started switching a few years later. The switch led to the British becoming involved in oil companies in the Middle East.

Readers will recall from the films that the Death Star had a single, very big main weapon, but also lots of secondary weapons for fighting off assault craft, as well as the ability to launch and (hopefully) retrieve swarms of fighter space craft of its own. Perhaps it was then the equivalent of combined aircraft carrier and fuel-oiled dreadnought, intended to both blow things up and inspire awe among the hicks in the backwater rebel sectors.

As noted in a previous chapter it is highly unlikely that this monstrous weapons system was then used to wipe out a planet full of imperial taxpayers, rebelling or not. Apart from the tax revenue from the planet being needed to pay for the Death Star, such an act of destruction would still leave plenty of relatives to give tearful interviews to pro-Rebel newspapers, before they sued for compensation for psychological hurt and damage. Something like this happened when a coalition of western nations invaded Iraq. The first thought of the locals, once the government of Saddam Hussein retreated from their areas, was to loot whatever they could get their hands on. The second was to claim compensation for “oppressive” acts by the occupying forces. The local party torturer would claim compensation for being dragged from his torture headquarters and pushed into a car. It is not clear how successful any of these claims were, but to destroy a planet or even a small rebel base would unleash a firestorm of such claims and never mind that the claims came from the rebel side in a civil war. For a human rights tribunal, that would be a mere detail to be over looked in the ongoing campaign for human rights.

In fact any clean fight in the ensuing civil war would result in years of litigation. Lawyers would demand compensation for victims, or the relatives of victims, or the distant relatives of victims who did not realise they had a connection until a lawyer pointed it out to them, or people who once use to live near the battlefield and now claim that their “homeland” has been violated. Far fetched? Native title claims in Australia often involve groups who have not lived near the land subject to the legal action for decades. Claims for compensation due to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder by soldiers who had been to Vietnam were still being made to Australian tribunals in the late 1990s, more than a quarter of a century after the last shot had been fired in that war.

Every battle would generate a blizzard of claims, thanks to both lawyers and human rights academics. Legal actions would rage hot and furious, and last for decades.

The Emperor no doubt avoided some of this by decreeing that no claim from the opposing side would be accepted, no matter what key human rights principle was at stake, but could hardly make such a declaration for storm troopers (who proved adept at claiming compensation for psychological trauma, despite their supposed total dedication to the empire), as well as other imperial personnel and their families. Then there were various committees staffed with human rights professionals with legal training (a deadly combination) in remote corners of the Imperial administration, capable of granting

compensation under this or that act, and ready to give credence to outlandish stories. It is far from surprising that the Emperor went mad.

Any Imperial officer who eliminated a major source of revenue and touched off such a legal firestorm by wiping out a whole planet would have a lot of explaining to do. As previously noted a much more likely, if less dramatic, take on the matter is that the Death Star destroyed a defence platform filled with military personnel, orbiting Alderaan.

To understand this base's significance, we must return to our analogy with dreadnoughts. The additional resources made available from newly empowered planetary AIs, plus the loot left-over from the elimination of the Jedis, permitted the Imperium to build a Death Star. Just as the original Dreadnought kicked off a new arms race for the navies of Earth, the Death Star started a new era in space faring capital ships. Other Galactic powers, notably the enemy bloc, had to hurriedly develop their own Death Stars if they wanted to remain in the power race.

The Death Stars, however, were only part of the naval development story. The emergence of the original dreadnoughts on earth was paralleled by the development of smaller ships – torpedo boats and submarines - to attack the larger ships. Those ships were, in turn, countered by another class of ships known as torpedo boat destroyers, a title eventually shortened to destroyers. We will ignore submarines in this analogy, as it is difficult to submerge in space.

Destroyers were, as we have just seen, evolved to fight the smaller torpedo boats that were supposed to get close to the capital ships, launch their torpedoes and scuttle away. The destroyers eventually took on the role of both torpedo boat as well as its original function, at least for fleet actions (torpedo boats were used around the Pacific islands in World War II). The big battle fleets of the major nations, before the advent of carriers, consisted of lines of dreadnoughts firing enormous shells at one another. But while the dreadnought/battleships were duking it out, the screening ships of both sides which would carry on their own fight between the lines. The destroyers would try to get within torpedo range of the other side's main ships, while preventing the other side's destroyers from getting within range of their main battle line.

All of that manoeuvring was swept away by the advent of effective air power and carriers, of course. Battle fleets were built around carriers launching airplanes to attack other carriers, while being protected from attacks by submarines and other nuisances by destroyers. This may have all changed again, with strategists pointing to possible mass attacks by drone cruise missiles swamping the defences of carrier task forces. As noted the Death Stars (or Death Star as there was unlikely to have been more than one) of the earlier films seemed to be an amalgamation of capital ship types in that they had a gigantic primary armament as well as a secondary armament (for killing small craft that got close, just like the old battleships), plus the equivalent of its own fighter craft – quite a lot of them.

Having a major vessel that does several jobs at once and packs a colossal punch is one thing, but to use it correctly as part of a carefully worked out battle doctrine is quite another. For there was no indication that the Death Star was meant to work with the rest of the Imperial fleet, with its roll call of destroyers and cruisers. Development of those craft

had been neglected in favour of a war-winning big craft meant to stand by itself. What would happen if the craft, represented a vast investment by the Empire, was then damaged or even destroyed?

The Rebel Alliance, as we have discussed, probably had a few years to make preparations, but it did not have the resources or the time to build anything like the Death Star, had they known it existed, or even an Imperial cruiser. Its counter strategy, born of necessity, was to make do with a host of smaller fighters. Those fighters still had to be launched from a planet or a vessel, such as a platform orbiting a planet (launching from a planet's surface would take too much time and energy, even in a galaxy far, far away) in sufficient numbers to trouble the Imperial battle fleet. The problem at Alderaan was that the Alliance planners had not counted on the Death Star turning up. Readers will recall that the characters in the original film were shocked to discover that the Empire had a craft the size of a moon. Alliance fighters fought valiantly to protect their base, a hastily converted civilian installation with little armament of its own. The Death Star moved to within range, shrugged off rebel attempts to damage it, and blew up the rival platform. Far worse, all subsequent claims for compensation were ignored. Later script writers confused the issue by moving the fight well back in the historical sequence and having the Alliance win.

That round and the key planet of Alderaan went to the Imperium but after recovering from their shock, the Alliance's military quickly noted that the Death Star was expected to operate independently. The rest of the Imperial fleet, now antiquated as all the military resources had been used to develop the Death Star, was employed as a scouting force and as a supplementary battle fleet, but not to support the Death Star. The huge craft was not supposed to need support. That reliance on a single, fabulously expensive craft was in itself a weakness. As the Empire was unlikely to have more than one Death Star, to seriously cripple or even destroy the gigantic craft might be a war-winning blow.

We can dismiss, out of hand, the apparent propensity of these Death Stars to blow up, as if they are early twentieth century battleships keeping large magazines filled with cordite. Nuclear reactors melt down if interfered with, or explode conventionally and spew radioactive material everywhere as one did at Chernobyl. Fusion reactors would most likely simply stop operating, which would be a disaster for the crew. They would be stuck in space with failing life support systems, until and if they could get the reactor operating again. But that sort of disaster does not make good theatre.

Most of the battle scenes in the films are similarly ridiculous. The small space fighter craft behave exactly as if they were aeroplanes in an atmosphere; no-one thinks twice about firing blasters in a spaceship; even supposedly trained personnel stick their head above cover to see if the enemy that just shot at them is still there, and so on. The Walkers shown in the fifth and sixth instalments, incidentally, would be of no conceivable use on a 21st century earth battlefield, where armoured vehicles only show themselves to shoot, let alone on a battlefield of the future. Their height would be a huge disadvantage. It is possible that the Walkers were antiquated left-overs from the Jedi era, only intended for crowd control - hence the slow movement and imposing height, meant to over-awe Imperial citizens, and thin armour (at one point in the films the crew compartment is affected by blows from logs). The Imperium brought out their new super weapon to

intimidate the hick rebels, but did not bring along any of the modern ground assault equipment. Perhaps it was thought the Death Star would be enough and there would be no fighting on any planet surface?

Realising that they needed an edge, the Rebels managed to steal a set of plans for the Death Star – that part is true – and a careful analysis suggested a means of damaging the craft, but it would not be easy. They needed all the help they could get, and they needed someone sneaky. The shadowy, sinister Hans Solo fitted the bill.

The image of Hans Solo presented in the films is that of a knock-about, small-time smuggler with a single, poorly-maintained ship. Rebellions are not made by such persons. Instead, he was a gangster operating on the fringes of the Imperium, who saw his chance in the Rebellion and made contact with the farm boy-turned-Rebel Alliance strong man, Luke Skywalker, whose career we have already discussed. Skywalker gave some assistance to Solo, including help in eliminating rival gangster Jabba the Hut – as shown in the films, albeit out of historical order - in return for various services such as transportation at crucial times, and help in assaulting the Death Star.

They partially succeeded, through a combination of sabotage and drone attack. The film depicts Skywalker flying around the outside of the Death Star and scoring the required very difficult hit with a rocket from his craft. None of this seems credible. Why not a drone with a very smart AI system – or a swarm of them, taking advantage of a cyber attack, or perhaps simply an old-fashioned bomb sabotaging a key part of the defence, followed by drone missile attacks launched from an unmanned cargo vessel? Getting personnel on board to plant a bomb or malware would not have been that difficult. The craft was so vast that civilian repair and maintenance crews were coming and going all the time. Maintaining security in all sectors would have been hard. In any case, the Death Star's designers had put most of their efforts into the craft's battle performance, and they had not considered a combination of sabotage and close range attack by rebel schemers using, what were the time, low-tech weapons. The rebel schemes were driven, in part, by the fact there was no way they could ever match the Death Star in a naval fight. They had to either surrender or find another way. They found another way.

A likely sequence of events is that a civilian repair party was taken aboard from one of the planet's near Alderaan to fix minor issues that could not be dealt with by on-board specialists or the AI controlled robots. All the visiting personnel would have been properly vetted and closely supervised, of course. The Imperial officers running the spacecraft were professionals well aware of the security risks, and had done their own security assessments. Nor could they have been easily fooled by tricks such as staging a distraction while certain members of the repair team ducked into a secure area to do their sabotage thing.

None the less, somehow, the rebel alliance managed to seriously damage the craft. Destroying it outright would have been difficult, but a carefully placed bomb would have done wonders, or perhaps a tiny sabotage bot was able to destroy the fibre-optic control link to two secondary armament towers just long enough for a drone attack to succeed. The alliance did not dare use a nuclear device, even if such a device would have dealt with the Death Star once and for all. Just as on earth on the present day, to go nuclear would have been to push the conflict onto a whole different level. In any case, three or four loads

of conventional explosives spreading explosive pellets, would have ripped a satisfactory hole in the Death Star. Whole decks would have decompressed, entire sections mangled.

The empire was not finished yet. After picking himself off the deck and accessing the damage Vader decided not to send the damaged Death Star back to an Imperial shipyard. It might not return for years. Instead he parked it above one of the industrialised rebel worlds, perhaps Alderaan, and sent for skilled personnel. The sixth episode suggests that an entirely new Death Star was built above a heavily forested moon inhabited only by cute, teddy bear-like natives. No. This is equivalent to mooring a Nimitz class nuclear aircraft carrier, or perhaps one of the upcoming Gerard R Ford 100,000 tonne super carriers, off a tropical island and expecting something to happen. You might as well try waving a wand. When something as complex as a Death Star requires extensive repairs, serious industrial capacity, specialised machinery and considerable expertise is required to fix it.

Then there was the inevitable and delicate issue of paying for those repairs. This was simple, for Vader. The assault had occurred near Alderaan, therefore the citizens of that world would pay. Other worlds which had been “liberated” by the Imperium in its struggle with the rebels would also be called on to support the war effort, but the main burden still fell on Alderaan, in addition to demands for Imperial back taxes. If the world had refused, it would have found out how much punch the damaged death star could pack. Those imposts would have generated considerable bitterness, adding greatly to Vader’s later, very bad reputation.

The general probably realised that he was stirring up discontent, and that discontent bred more sabotage plots, but security had been tightened. There would be no more mistakes. But with his attention fixed on the left-over Imperial fleet’s efforts in chasing the remnants of the rebel forces around different systems, he under-estimated the rat cunning of people who don’t like paying tax.

Now we come to the climax of the first six films, and the destruction of the Death Star supposedly in construction but, in reality, as we have seen, it was the same Death Star of the original film undergoing extensive repairs. It was a sabotage operation, and a considerably more effective one than the first attempt. For this time there was more contact between Death Star personnel and rebels. Princess Leila’s substantial charms were brought into play. Luring officials into compromising situations and then blackmailing them is an ancient art.

Once blackmail had opened a window of opportunity the assault teams led by Skywalker would have disabled the repair and communications areas on the surface, while a series of remote controlled drones struck hard at vulnerable points. The suborned officials were no doubt conveniently elsewhere. Vader went down with his ship, which is a shame as he was trying to do his job in holding the empire together, and for the sake of a worthy cause - droid empowerment. Some of his measures would now be considered harsh but those were difficult times.

EPILOGUE

That final disaster, loss of his best general and the craft in which so much Imperial effort and resources had been invested, proved too much for the sanity of the Emperor, already at his wits end over the problems caused by the war with the enemy bloc, as well as endless claims for compensation which threatened to bankrupt his administration. He became an impotent figure, wandering from room to room in his huge palace muttering to himself. The Empire quickly broke up into quarrelling fragments, several of which were annexed by the enemy-bloc. Skywalker, Hans Solo and Leila managed to grab considerable power and, in Leila's case social recognition, without concerning themselves with what was happening with the enemy-bloc, on the other side of the galaxy.

The new republic, despite its name, did not bother with elections. Having gotten to the top, Skywalker was not about to surrender control through the ballot box. He had little interest in the business of government, handing the bulk of the administrative matters over to a sophisticated AI system. Instead, he spent his time inventing an elaborate tale about being Vader's son meaning that he was really the true beneficiary of the Jedi order's traditions, as well as what was left of its assets. He also made sure that the histories gave his version of events. In this he was aided by his secret police, which may well have been called the Information Bureau.

For that innocuous name I am indebted to the Spanish language film *Gun City* (2018), set in Barcelona in the 1920s. In the German-language series *Babylon Berlin* (2018) set about the same time, the policeman occasionally look at crime scene pictures or cavass possible witnesses, before beating up the suspects. For the Barcelona police of that time, at least to judge from the film, that's far too much messing around. If they find someone with a connection to the crime then that person must know something, and that information has to be beaten out of them. Let's call Skywalker's secret police The Information Bureau. Anyone referred to the archivist section was, of course, never heard from again.

With Darth Vader dead and the dreaded Information Bureau keeping an eye on historians and writers, those that knew the real Vader have never been allowed to set the record straight. He was undoubtedly a hard man and certainly a curmudgeon, but he does not deserve the bad press he has received. History is written to favour the villains who win, instead of the villains who lose.

The droids in rebel areas quickly got over their mild disappointment at missing out on Imperial citizenship and stayed quite happy just doing their jobs and avoiding corny space operas and their sequels.

Afternote: as noted in the introduction, the last in the third series of trilogies is due out in December 2019. That trilogy involves the appearance of a new power known as The First Order and, presumably, its eventual defeat. Those films are not part of this analysis, but I contend that the First Order is probably a part of the old empire that was not annexed by the enemy-bloc, re-establishing control in sections of the former Imperial space ignored by the original enemy, including the Skywalker-led areas.

As the rebellion of the Skywalker systems had been partially about not having taxes, with or without representation, nothing had been done about building up a strong military since the breakup of the Imperium. Skywalker, meanwhile, had developed a crazy idea that he had been a Jedi and, despite all that had happened, that the Jedi light sabre techniques were effective. All the Alliance had to defend itself with were forces designed to maintain internal order, using antiquated equipment left over from the original battles, decades earlier. The Alliance would be better off putting aside the years of lethargy and neglect under Skywalker's rule and throw their lot in with the First Order, but no doubt bad government will win through, as it always seems to in these films.

ADDITIONAL ESSAYS

Avatar - the race that knew it was superior

(Avatar, 2009)

When it comes to constructing a good story, as we have noted in previous articles on historical truth in speculative fiction (as SF is now known), the entertainment industry is only too ready to wash out all the shades of grey in favour of straight black and white. The good guys wear shining white hats and the bad ones dress in black or have vile deformities, like Darth Vader and Richard III in that order.

The film Avatar, set on the distant moon Pandora, is no exception. The 2009 film Avatar, a massive commercial success, featured an organisation called The Resources Development Administration mining a mineral identified only as unobtainium on Pandora, an habitable moon of the gas giant Polyphemus in the Alpha Centauri system. The inhabitants of Pandora, three metre (10 foot) tall, blue-skinned hominids called the Na'vi, worship nature. The particular tribe which features in the story lives in a gigantic tree, called Hometree.

So here we have our black and white. The evil RDA which, despite the name, appears to be a corporation of some kind, and the noble savages who just want to commune with nature, of which there is a lot on Pandora. The whole moon is one, big rain forest inhabited by mega fauna. These are not quite dinosaur size but very big, robust and not to be messed with. As for the Na'vi, their lifestyle bears more than a passing resemblance to the American Indian way of life, except that there is an aerial component – the hominids ride around on bird-things as well as on horse-things. A crucial difference is apparent equality of the sexes, which is certainly not evident in most of earth's noble native races, but makes the Na'vi more acceptable (read saintly) to modern audiences. Another, major difference to the hunter gathers of earth is that the indigenous Pandorians don't seem to move around very much, sticking close to their big tree which is a base-city. The active Pandorian eco-system provides plenty of game for them to hunt without having to move around.

So, the Na'vi are not really hunter gatherers but then they are not really a civilisation with writing, roads and organised cultivation, although they do have a town of a sort and a social organisation a step or so up from tribal. The definition of civilisation is tricky but from what is shown in the film the Na'vi might be classified as a proto-civilisation.

One possible analogy from earth's history is that of the Zulus who herded cattle and lived in Kraals (compounds of huts and cattle pens) in Southern Africa. Under their great king Shaka (early 19th century) and his descendants, the Zulus made for uneasy neighbours. They were (and are) a great people, and were eventually attacked by the British for no other reason than they were a latent threat. However, the Zulus were also heavily militarised and much of what they did revolved around fighting with other tribes. An interesting point about the military organisation brought to the Zulus by Shaka is that some of it might well have been a response to Arab slave trading raids in the North. However, it is absurd to pretend that indigenous tribes do not battle each other, or that the "civilised" races have a monopoly on violence. Like the Zulus the Na'vi were and are a violent race.

The most curious part of the whole story, however, is that the Na'vi are simply not interested in earth people or their technology. They are not interested in alcohol, television and video games, in better saddles for their horse-things or in how the stubby creatures who wear cloth in hot rain forests got to their moon. The humans on Pandora, or so it would seem from the film, had so much trouble making the Na'vi pay any attention to them that they had to grow bio-engineered versions of the gigantic Pandorian bodies then train humans to remote control them while in a trance, as if they were in the bodies, just so they could have some way of interacting with the creatures. You would think that the Na'vi at least would be interested in this trick of making walking, talking copies of themselves, but in the film they seem to just accept it as barbarian witchcraft.

In contrast, the scientists attached to the RDA want to study the Na'vi and learn about the gigantic eco-system which has some sort of mystical life of its own, or so it is alleged. When scientist Dr Grace Augustine (played by Sigourney Weaver) is taken to a mystical grove which is a centre for the eco-energy, despite being near death her first thought is to take samples. That is the scientific spirit which helped create the technologies that got humans to Pandora. Although the Na'vi tolerate a school set up by Dr Augustine for a time, they are otherwise uninterested in change, uninterested in learning and, crucially, uninterested in discussing mining rights with off-planet scum

The Na'vi's lack of interest in their interstellar visitors has very few parallels in human history. Zulu king Shaka was not much interested in European technology, but he did not actively try to shut out all such technology and pretend that the Zulus had nothing at all to learn from the Europeans. Instead, the Na'vi's extreme attitude bears some similarities with that of the Imperial Chinese towards western visitors. For centuries after Western traders started arriving in China, the Chinese knew just how they stood in relation to the West. The Chinese were superior and that was that. The Western monarchs and American president had to be properly subservient in their dealings with his celestial majesty, just as the rulers of Japan and Korea and various parts of Indo-china were properly subservient, or not bother with diplomatic relations at all.

If that meant the foreigners went away, that would have been fine by the Chinese. They had fancies for the occasional technological detail, such as clocks, but never bothered to put them to systematic use such as putting up town hall clocks or installing them in factories. The Chinese Civilisation was not set up to change – that was not what it did – or to take account of any other civilisation but its own. The complete lack of interest by the Chinese in European trade goods eventually led to the Opium wars, which were about the European powers pushing the opium trade on the Chinese, so that they would have the money to pay for the tea and silk they were taking out of China. (The opium was grown in India, and shipped to China.)

Those wars were the fault of the European powers, of course, and to their eternal shame. Modern Chinese attitudes to the west are completely different, but that is beyond the scope of this article. For now we can note that civilisation has moved on and companies cannot start wars or massacre native peoples, even if they are on other planets. Considering that directors now routinely face criminal prosecution over workplace accidents, the scene in the film where a company official authorises an attack on a native village/tree, after assurance that indigenous casualties would be “minimal” or acceptable, can be dismissed as pure propaganda. They would not have dared.

The stockholders would not care very much but everyone else would, including a host of do-gooding, non-government organisations, and government officials hoping to make a name for themselves. Audience-hungry media would be close behind. If any indigenous person happened to be injured in any way by a human, the incident would promptly be labelled a “massacre” by that media. News teams by the score would appear on Pandora, somehow, hoping to interview the Na’vi about the terror they felt when the evil mining people attacked, and so on. So far from resulting in “acceptable” casualties, any attack on any indigenous people would quickly turn into a public relations nightmare far greater than, say, the cyanide being used to treat some types of ore from mining accidentally spilling into the local river system. The company directors and officials – in fact, anyone remotely connected with the “attack” – would be lucky to get away with just war crime indictments, almost irrespective of what happened in the attack if, indeed, there was an actual attack.

That means we can dump the part about the humans attacking the Na’vi as an invention of a bunch of tree-hugging hippies, just as we can dismiss as propaganda the scene in which the evil military knock over the dwelling tree. Once those are out of the way we can construct a scenario that is likely to be somewhere near the truth, starting at much the same point as that of the film. That is the Na’vi’s lack of interest in the humans extending to a disdain for mineral rights. Assuming that the humans could get the Na’vi to speak about mineral rights at all, the conversation might have gone something like this.

Human: “So can we go here?”

Na’vi: “No, it’s a sacred site.”

Human: “ Well where are the sacred sites? Okay, this bit isn’t marked as sacred, can we mine here?”

Na’vi: “No, that’s sacred too.”

Human: “But it’s in the middle of a swap and previously marked by you to be taboo.”

Na'vi: "It's a sacred, taboo swamp."

Human: "You can gain many benefits by permitted us to mine."

Na'vi: "What benefits could scum like you give us? We need nothing from you."

Human: "A third of your children die before their first birthday. We can fix that."

Na'vi: "We have no further time for short creatures. Go away."

And so on.

In the middle of all this exhausting negotiation, the humans probably made the mistake of not following all the necessary abasement rituals. An emissary presenting himself to the Chinese emperor, for example, would be required to kneel or lie down and knock his head repeatedly on the floor – a ritual called kowtowing. In fact, lesser people were supposed to kowtow to anything that came from the emperor. When British emissary Lord Macartney visited the Chinese Emperor in 1792, there was enormous trouble because he refused to follow that ritual when being presented to the emperor. He agreed to go on one knee to the emperor and eventually got his audience, little good that it did him.

Back on Pandora and having made this mistake in etiquette, whatever it was, the negotiating team might well have been required to sacrifice three of themselves, to avoid giving offence. No, not the puppet things, the humans were told, as they were almost worth something. Instead three of the human creatures had to present themselves tomorrow for a particularly grizzly, Aztec-style sacrifice to a horrific nature god, otherwise the Na'vi would come and get them.

This put the humans in a major bind. The Na'vi would attack if their demands were not met, and any resistance meant killing them. As far as the media were concerned that was the same as if the organisation had deliberately attacked a village. This is the origin of the myth of the Na'vi's supposed toughness and warrior skills. The humans did not dare kill or even touch them without a very good reason, which had been discussed extensively with the ethics committee. The film depicts the RDA as in control, but that assertion can be dismissed as more propaganda. There would have been government oversight and comprehensive framework of ethical rules, not to mention environmental impact statements, social impact statements, detailed agreements on interaction with the indigenous people, and an agreement on what law would apply to this moon. The default contract law where this is no legal system to speak of, for example, is that of the state of New York, as that's where the United Nations is based. Any military forces on Pandora would have been bound by rules, including strict rules of engagement which basically forbade them from doing anything, and enforcement would have been in the hands of an ethics committee. That committee was notorious for being completely uninterested in the realities of any situation. If a Pandorian harmed a human, the human should not have got in the way.

The actual sequence of events was that the Na'vi attacked and the ethics committee refused to let the human soldiers respond in any way. Think this is farfetched? Something like this has been known to happen on UN deployments, where soldiers have not been permitted to defend themselves, although they are not killed, just disarmed and the arms taken by the attackers.

In this instance, once the massacre started, enough soldiers disobeyed the ethics committee to beat off the Na'vi. Those soldiers are the real heroes of the piece as it takes

considerable courage to defy an ethics committee. The film shows the humans as being allowed to leave but there was never any question of a truce. The Na'vi would have regarded any dealings at all with the humans who had defied them in such a manner, as beneath them. Instead, once the humans started shooting back and beat them off, the Pandorians probably simply went away. As the Na'vi knew they were superior, they could not possibly have lost the fight. The Na'vi who died must have died for other reasons.

As there was no question of the humans remaining on Pandora after that, they got in their star ships and left – thereby confirming the Na'vi view that they won the fight – and the RDA wrote off a huge loss on the operation, eventually becoming insolvent. A few years later, thanks to advances in technology, factories on earth started making synthetic unobtainium, whatever it is, superior to anything found on Pandora. The mining companies had no reason to return to the moon.

The Na'vi did not get their sacrifice victims, Instead they got lots of apologists. An NGO team turned up on Pandora a few years after the fight at the base camp and, by abasing themselves suitably managed to get an audience with a Na'vi designated to deal with the short, pale creatures. The Imperial Chinese government had an official whose title was 'official for soothing the foreign barbarians'. Among other duties, that official had to keep the foreigners away from the Imperial court, and inside the designed areas. The corresponding minor Na'vi official, appointed after the humans had left as part of the Na'vi process for forgetting all about the humans, kept the NGO team away from other members of his tribe and anywhere else of importance in the story and dictated the Na'vi version of events. No questions were permitted. Not only did the NGO team accept that version of events, they made no attempt to check the story against RDA logs and documentation, view existing videos of the incident, or interview the human survivors of the attack on the organisation's camp.

The NGO version of events was then repeated in sociological text books with academics brushing aside any attempt by those who were at the base camp to correct the record, pointing out that the soldiers were not academics and therefore had no standing to debate the matter academically. The apologist version is the one that appears in the film

What of Jake, the crippled human who became the avatar of one of these creatures, fell in love with a female Na'vi and then took the Na'vi side against the humans? Most of this part story, along with the evil colonel, was almost certainly invented by the film makers to make the story more palatable for cinema going audiences. The avatar technology suggests this story line.

The Na'vi are not evil, just arrogant, nasty and completely uninterested in anything that is not Na'vi. As there is nothing now to break the tribe out of its cultural straight jacket, it will remain that way for a long time to come. Apart from maintaining an official for dealing with star people, if and when any more turn up, they have forgotten all about the human attempts to civilise them. The investors in RDA also wish that they could forget about the matter, but they still wake up screaming.

Sauron just wanted his ring back

The Lord of the Rings Films – The Fellowship of the Ring (2001), The Two Towers (2002), and the Return of the King (2003).

Fans of the book *The Hobbit* and three volume epic *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien, plus the equally epic films directed by Peter Jackson based on the books will be relieved to hear that this article will not attempt to whitewash Sauron, the arch-villain of the books and films. Several ship-loads of bleach would not be enough to wash away his many black deeds.

But a closer look at these histories suggests that there are streaks of grey in the character portrayed as the blackest of the black in the books and films. However, it is the character of Bilbo, the hobbit thief hero of *The Hobbit* book and films, the prequel to *The Lord of the Rings*, that undergoes the greatest change from shiny white into a muddy grey. Much the same could be said of Frodo, the nephew-apprentice of Bilbo and hero of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Sauron was certainly an arch-thug-warlord who maintained an army of orcs in Mordor and made a considerable nuisance of himself to his neighbours. But as previously noted in this series of articles, history is written by the victors, and the elven-historians had a particular hatred of the Orcs and of Sauron, not least because he used machinery and was into technology.

For the elves are deep green environmentalists, uninterested in any sort of development or progress and they regard orcs, dwarves, humans and hobbits as threats to the environment, in that order – a point to which we shall return. Tolkien's viewpoint was similar in that, as is evident in his books, he hated machinery. If he had been a farm laborer required to labor day in and day out, rather than an academic, his attitude may have been different. As it was, he detested machinery. However, he does seem to have had a soft spot for dwarves.

All that means the elvish historians, with the considerable help of Tolkien, never gave Sauron the slightest credit at all. The part about Sauron being a shapeless, malevolent spirit controlling a lidless, all-seeing eye pivoting on top of his tower Barad Dur, much like a searchlight, can be dismissed out of hand. It is akin to Tudor playwrights who wanted to stay out of Royal prisons, as well as tell a better story, claiming that Richard III was hideously deformed.

The motivation of Elvish historians is a little different to that of Tudor playwrights in that, aside from their general hatred of development and technology, like Roman historians, they are rewarded for telling a good story that agrees with the preconceptions of their audience, or perhaps reinforces the Elvish moral code. Telling the truth is a secondary consideration. But Sauron was bad enough, as we have noted. As one sign of a particularly black character he was uninterested in going through legal due process to re-acquire his ring which, through a series of events, had ended up in the possession of Frodo Baggins of The Shire.

When J.R. R Tolkien wrote what remains undoubted masterpieces and classics of the English language, he portrayed Bilbo Baggins much as the Elvish historians and Bilbo's own writings had done, as a sort-of local squire from good family, a gentry type who had a very nice house, Bag End. He lived the life a gentle hobbit, meaning that he didn't seem to do much in particular, until a load of dwarfs and a wizard of doubtful appearance with a slight claim to fame in the neighbourhood came calling, asking him to become a thief – a sequence of events portrayed in The Hobbit films.

Bilbo took to thievery only because a group of dwarves and a wizard he had never met before, asked him to go to a place he had no knowledge of to disturb a dangerous dragon with a notably bad temper? Right. In the story Gandalf recommended Bilbo to the dwarves although he hardly knew the hobbit. He knew Bilbo's family, or so he said, and in the film he indicates that he had known Bilbo as a child, but how did any of that make him decide that Bilbo had the skills to be an adventurer-thief?

Let us set fiction aside. Bilbo would not be the first thief/pirate/con-artist to invent a genteel background for himself and claim that, really, he was a very respectable person who only exercised certain skills he possessed in a righteous cause, namely to help the dwarfs regain their lost treasure and kingdom. A far more likely series of events is that Bilbo was down on his luck, living in a shack, and was being dogged by the rangers who keep the peace in the shire. Those rangers were becoming increasingly suspicious about Bilbo's involvement in a series of thefts in the neighbourhood. Time to move on. Enter another doubtful character, Gandalf, a supposed wizard who also does not seem to have any means of support or occupation beyond that of freelance organiser of expeditions.

In the Lord of the Rings films it is implied that the Halfling "tobacco" leaves had special qualities and that Gandalf was fond of the stuff. Perhaps he was sufficiently fond of it to organise its export and sale? In the films his dress and long hair recalled the excesses of the drug-taking hippie era of the 1960s, although his clothes were somewhat more threadbare than that of any hippie. As Hobbit "tobacco" was not illegal or prohibited anywhere in Middle Earth, at least nothing is said about this in any of Tolkien's material, he would not have been the only distributor. A poor living it seems. No doubt he became interested in the claims of one Thorin Oakenshield during a tobacco session, and agreed to help organise the expedition, and even go with it for a time, for a fee, as a means of supplementing his meagre income.

As for his claim to being a wizard, in my university days I knew one man who described himself as a Wizard and was in fact briefly the resident wizard at one university, being paid a small honorarium as such, and an unpaid cosmologist at another. Those were the days. Undergraduates have long been too serious. My point is that claiming to be a wizard is easy.

To return to the story, very likely the dwarven kingdom had been lost. (Dwarven kingdoms get lost a lot in Tolkien's books, but then the dwarves like to accumulate riches, and that makes them a target.) Very likely the dwarves had been members of that kingdom and Thorin Oakenshield might well have had a claim to the throne. I will make no judgement on that point. But thirteen dwarves and one hobbit is not a formidable expedition, particularly as the dragon Smaug had wiped out the army of the lonely mountain kingdom, seemingly without trying very hard. Granted Oakenshield's band had a

scheme for sneaking a few items from the dragon's stolen horde through a back door they knew about, but it was still all quite mad and very likely Bilbo knew it. But he needed to move on and doubtless expected to sneak away before the dwarves got anywhere near the dragon.

In the books and film Bilbo stumbled into the lair of the unsavoury Gollum, originally a hobbit-like creature called Smeagol, twisted out all recognition by his long possession of the One Ring, after becoming separated from the dwarves in the Misty Mountains. At the time of their meeting this creature was scavenging for a living in the bowels of the mountain, or so we are told.

A more likely story is that Gollum was a petty hobbit thief whom Bilbo encountered in a drinking and tobacco session and stole from him. The books depict much of middle earth to be wilderness depopulated in wars centuries ago and never resettled. This is difficult to believe. The reality is that some areas were lightly settled with a few towns where life was cheap and taverns dangerous. One exception was the elf-run Rivendell, but unless you were a tree, or prepared to eat nuts and berries and the ghastly concoctions the Elves drink instead of beer, you were advised to stay out of Rivendell proper. The Elves tolerated riffraff (non-elves) who stayed at an inn designated for such creatures as the business earned money, just as they tolerated the associated markets, where the dwarves bought what they needed for the next stage of their journey.

Whether it was at the Rivendell tavern or, more likely, one of the other unsavoury dens on the road – a village in the Misty Mountains perhaps - Bilbo met Gollum and somehow came away with the ring. There is no honour among thieves, and even less among hobbit-thieves. The part about Gollum living in the wild, killing smaller creatures when he could, and the two playing a game of riddles for the ring was invented later to give some moral gloss to the fact that Bilbo, by one means or another, had come into the possession of someone else's ring – a valuable, magical ring. Gollum, almost certainly, had no legal title to it either, and had probably killed whoever scavenged it from the battlefield on which Sauron had been defeated, but stealing from a thief is still theft.

Having somehow pilfered this ring, with its power of making the wearer invisible, an invaluable item for a thief, Bilbo must have thought it advisable to keep going with the dwarves, rather than sneak away as he had planned. Gollum was not to be underestimated and knew that Bilbo came from the Shire. It was best to go in the other direction for a time. In addition, very likely, he became interested in the many tales the dwarves told of the horde of gold and precious items on which Smaug sat. With a ring that made him invisible, he reasoned, once down the secret passage and inside the treasure room he could take a few items for himself. This is essentially what happens although this gets a good spin in the books.

The claim is that he took the Arkenstone of Thrain but then used it in an effort to buy peace when various other parties came calling. Right! The reality is that he took the precious stone for himself and a clumsy attempt to broker his one way out of trouble and gain some loot on the side was found out, and it was the first plausible lie he could think of. Whatever the truth of these matters Smaug was killed through no particular fault of Bilbo or the dwarves, although in the book Bilbo identifies a vulnerable spot in the dragon's

armour that led to the creature's downfall. Smaug's death was marked by a major battle at the lonely mountain which Bilbo survived.

The dwarves were sufficiently grateful for Bilbo's services to overlook his transgressions and hand him a token payment to speed him on his way. He would never have expected to get an equal share of the gold hoard and wisely never asked for it. He added that reasonable payment to the loot he had pilfered on the side, minus the Arkenstone, and made his way home. He had enough to buy Bag End and live in comfort there for many years, his unsavoury past gradually being forgotten – the ring did stretch his life span. By a few well-chosen charitable acts, as well as by throwing a series of excellent parties, he even became a respectable figure.

The loose end in this happy ending of respectability remained the ring. Bilbo kept it, of course, and was smart enough to keep his mouth shut about it, as well as use it sparingly, particularly as he had no reason to resume his career as a thief. In real middle-earth history, as in fiction, for a long time there was no trouble. When Bilbo acquired the ring, Sauron had re-established himself in the southern region of Mirkwood (the Necromancer in the film), after a heavy defeat of some years previously. As the lag of 3,000 years indicated in the films and books does not seem credible, let us say 30. However, as he was quickly driven out of Mirkwood he was in no position to reclaim his property for many years. The books say he let himself be driven out of Mirkwood as he had already established a Site B at Barad-Dur in Mordor, but the delay in reclaiming his property suggests another, heavy defeat and that he was allowed to re-establish himself in Mordor as it was a place that no-one else wanted.

Gollum could have found the ring very quickly, but before he could do much or trouble Bilbo in his long retirement, he was probably scooped up by Sauron's agents who wanted to know where the ring was and would not have been satisfied by answers that he lost it to a strange hobbit (what's a hobbit?) from the shire (where was that?). The questioning would have been hard and thorough, albeit delayed by the circumstances of Sauron having to abruptly shift abode and take up meaner quarters for a time.

Having settled in Mordor, by one means or another, Sauron started to amass power. He was a rogue but a clever rogue. He turned the lands around the Sea of Nurnen in Mordor itself into a wheat belt, and gained control of some of the pasture lands between Mordor and the Sea of Rhun to the North East (see the map in the books). These are marked as Brown Lands on the map and are barely mentioned in the stories, but were suitable for cattle. The area around Barad Dur itself in North Western Mordor, an area rich in iron ore and coal, became an industrial zone. Hence the reference to poisonous fumes. As far as the Elves were concerned, any industrial activity made the area uninhabitable. After his power had grown, as noted in the books, he formed alliances with powers to the South and East of his land.

Most of this occurred without his immediate neighbour among the human powers, Gondor to his west, paying much heed. North Western Mordor was, after all, a dreadful, out of the way place – a wasteland – and Sauron had already been heavily defeated twice. There were more pressing matters to spend money on, than border defences and watch towers facing a non-threat. By the time Gondor realised what was happening, Sauron he

had grown too big to easily handle and, among other matters, he was thinking of reclaiming his ring.

The part about the ring being the one ring which controlled a heap of other rings, can be dismissed as wild exaggeration. It was undoubtedly a very good ring, which made the wearer invisible and also gave them some ability to control others, but the part about this item of personal jewellery holding a large slice of Sauron's power, so that when it was destroyed he also went away, is too farfetched. No, Sauron's power was like all other power in middle-earth or any other earth; it was based on pure, simple economic clout gained through production and trade. Financial self-interest is a fundamental force in the universe; as inevitable as gravity and far more important. Whether they are hobbits, dwarves or men, sentient creatures want to know what's in it for them. One, partial exception are the deep green elves, but even they won't reject a chance to make money if there is no damage to the environment (or they can persuade themselves there will be no damage to the environment).

Sauron was sufficiently clever to comprehend the importance of financial self-interest and did not care a rap about the environment. He was prepared to let merchants do what they do and enforce rule of law, provided taxes were paid. To do evil requires money. Orc armies have to be paid for. The Gondor-Rohan alliance, in contrast, relied on the medieval approach to raising armies. A major lord had his own troops but also called on minor lords who owed him allegiance to bring their soldiers. Each lord paid for his own troops. This is not a very efficient method of raising armies for various reasons, and the army does not stay in the field very long. Sauron's approach of paying for his orcs, who also expected to supplement their wages with plunder, is more efficient but orcs seem to have had a low fighting value.

Having established himself and before attacking Gondor, as the kingdom would neither trade with him or let through his trade caravans to other regions, Sauron passed time looking for his ring. A thorough interrogation of Gollum (his mistreatment accounts for his appearance in the films) had produced enough leads for Sauron to send out agents. In the books, his agents are defamed as black riders with all sorts of nasty allegations being made about their personal habits and appearance, and even worldly existence. Admittedly Sauron would not have hired his agents for their appearance, manners or even personal hygiene, but much of this is over the top, even for elvish historians. Whatever else they may have been, these agents were competent enough to find Bilbo, and fearsome enough to make that now elderly hobbit-thief hurriedly turn the ring over to his nephew and heir Frodo, not without some regrets, and take refuge in Rivendell.

That refugee had its price. Eating nuts, drinking the ghastly bark beer which the Elves insist is delicious, listening to interminable elvish songs about trees and merry times and ancient kings that were wise until the climate changed or some such, is bad enough, but being forced to sing such nonsense is even worse. The films show Rivendell as a bunch of beautiful buildings but in reality, the Elvish nature lovers were more like their pals in Lothlorien, in that they hung out in trees and slept on tree roots, insisting that it was comfortable and put them closer to nature. We will skip over their bathroom habits and waste disposal, as this was also in line with their aim to live naturally.

Why didn't Bilbo keep the ring and hide out at Rivendell? By living a long time he had outlived his retirement package, spending all the money he got from his Smaug adventure (this is noted in the books) with lavish parties not helping. Bagend had been mortgaged, and the little left had been paid to the elves so that so that he could hide out at Rivendell. The elves will tolerate Hobbits, just. In any case, there was nothing left for either himself or Frodo except for a doubtful chain mail shirt, pumped up as a fabulously expensive shirt of mithril in the books but unlikely to be worth much in reality, and the ring.

Then Frodo hatched a mad scheme for turning the ring into another fortune. After dodging the black riders, why not take it close to Mordor and threaten to have it melted down, unless Sauron paid up. Difficult? Certainly. Dangerous? You bet. But if they took care with the ransom drop, Frodo and his companions, who would all have to be given equal shares of the loot, could flee and scatter. Perhaps Sauron would deal with them later, or perhaps Gondor would deal with him? Whatever happened Sauron would have his hands full for a time, and he would have his ring. Maybe he would forget, or maybe the gang could head out west, across the sea, beyond his reach.

This may sound farfetched but as stories go it is infinitely better than the insane scheme set out in the books, that the ring was to be taken into the heart of Mordor's industrial district and cast into a volcano, as the only way to destroy Sauron. That suicidal mission was entrusted to two hobbits who had never been near the place before, had no maps of any kind, no equipment worth mentioning apart from a couple of items of survival gear, or any experience that would even begin to fit them for the job. Right. That piece of tobacco session-induced lunacy was explained away a result of the nature of the ring, in that no-one with any power to begin with dared wield the ring, or even carry it, because it would corrupt them. So it was left in the hands of two blundering amateurs, Frodo and Sam who, by a series of miracles, actually won through. No, the tale bears all the hallmarks of elvish historians telling a good story.

In the reality of Middle-earth at the time, there were no real heroes, and no safe options. If the ring was simply handed to one of Sauron's agents, the agent might then vanish in all senses of the word, possibly after killing Frodo outright to cover his trail. If Frodo had been left alive, all the hobbit could have given the next set of agents to turn up would have been a vague description of the man he had handed the ring to, along with a possibly false name. The interrogation would not have been pleasant.

It was, in fact, somewhat safer to demand a ransom for the ring, as then Sauron and all his henchmen would at least know that Frodo had the ring and was prepared to surrender it for a price. However, the negotiations had to be conducted in a crowded populous city, with all negotiation sessions in public places, and with due precautions against being followed. Minas Tirith is such a city so they went there. However, Frodo needed companion/bodyguards to keep the Dark Lord's agents at bay. He ended up with the previously mentioned Gandalf, who also seems to have been long-lived and was of some use as a councillor in such shady dealings, plus Strider, a pretender to the throne of Gondor, and Boromir, a man who had left the service of Gondor's armies for whatever reason and hoped to gain something by supporting Strider. Then there was Gimli, a dwarf, the Elven Legolas and three other hobbits, including servant Sam.

These characters are all treated well in the histories and even given decent pedigrees, which is unusual for elvish historians, but they were telling a good story not recounting history and the coming of the ring helped destroy Sauron, as we shall see. So they were prepared to look favourably on this collection of odd characters and even give it the fancy name of The Fellowship of the Ring. Strider's doubtful claim to the throne is transformed into an overwhelming case, and Boromir is turned into the eldest son of the Steward of Gondor. Legolas is made a prince of the Elves of Northern Mirkwood and Gimli becomes well connected indeed. Only the Hobbits are not given classy backgrounds, probably because the Elvish historians didn't know what to make of them, particularly as the shire had gentry (including upstarts such as Frodo and Bilbo) but no nobility or royalty. So why not turn servant Sam into a hero, and Pippin and Merry into well-born (for hobbits) ne're do wells who come good?

Then Sauron miscalculated. He was a smart thug, but also a greedy one, and he was about ready to attack Gondor anyway, so why not hit the capital Minas Tirith, while the ring was inside, and kill two birds with one stone. As ideas go it was not a bad one, but it meant he went a year or so earlier than he planned, against opposition he had underestimated. As Sauron also had the aid of Saruman, a war lord with a base at the Southern end of the misty mountains who styled himself as a wizard like Gandalf (an old tobacco-session mate of Gandalf it seems), his confidence is understandable. He lost again. The Gondor-Rohan coalition was slow to marshal its full forces but had unexpected help from the Ents. In one move Sauron never foresaw, Frodo and his companions, on hearing the dark lord was on the march just as negotiations had begun, overcame their greed to sell the ring at a knock down price to the Steward of Gondor, Denathor.

Although the ring was not as powerful as is made out in books, it was still of considerable use, albeit with its use coming at a price. Having beaten off the attack on his capital, Denathor went crazy and tried to burn his surviving but badly wounded son to death, only to end up on the pyre himself. Unfortunate, but it was a war. With the steward dead and his heir out of action, Aragorn was able to leverage his shaky claim to be the heir to a long absent king and his prominent role in fighting the army from Mordor, into a successful grab for power (Boromir died in this fighting). Like any other adventurer newly come to the throne, he needed a military victory all his own, preferably a quick, relatively bloodless one, and Sauron was close at hand, his army having been defeated. No doubt Aragorn stitched together a deal with the Rohanites to keep their army in being for a few more weeks in return for territorial and trade concessions, so that both armies were able to march straight for the Black Gate and another hard-fought battle.

Sauron made a last stand of it rather than slip away quietly as was his custom after every defeat, but he had lost so many of his battles that it would have been the end for him anyway. So much for the Dark Lord. His lands and commercial interests were quietly annexed by Gondor, with much of it distributed to the new King's supporters in order to consolidate his power. Some of it became part of the king's private estates.

After Sauron's defeat, the Fellowship split up. With the resources of Gondor at his disposal Aragorn was able to kick in some money to hurry his former colleagues along. It would never do for the people to be reminded that their new king had such down at heel companions before coming to the throne. The Hobbits at least had enough money to make

their way back to The Shire and, by great good fortune, were on hand to lead a rebellion against some of Saruman's rowdies who had grabbed control of the place. Like any good adventurers they took care to acquire estates for themselves in the process. Frodo ended up with Bag End unencumbered by a mortgage and brought the now elderly Bilbo back to live with him, on the condition that there would be no more expensive parties. Sam, the political operator, managed to get himself declared Mayor for life. Legolas, as far as it is known, went west over the sea and Gimli opened a tavern in Erebor.

This story differs in many details from that set out in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, but it has just as much support by scholars and is far more likely. Reality does not arrange itself in neat, dramatic and moral tales. It has to be massaged, sometimes a lot.

On the other hand, those who prefer the story in the books can visit the excellent battle museums at both Minas Tirith and Barad-dûr, where the exhibits and material have been carefully arranged to support the version of events in the books, as well as take the regular, conducted tours of the battle fields. Unfortunately, the Mines of Moria cannot be toured at the time of writing, following the disappearance of Gandalf while preparing for his new role as mine tour guide. A legal action is pending. But there is a cafe-museum near the old Eastern entrance of the mine which contains a detailed model of the dwarven kingdom. It's worth the trip.

In space an Ethics Committee won't let you scream

Alien (1979), *Aliens* (1986), *Alien3* (1992), *Alien Resurrection* (1997), *Prometheus* (2012) and *Alien: Covenant* (2017).

Good, scary movies need a good monster, and there is no better monster than a gigantic, black hominid creature which has acid for blood, and which gestates inside living humans before bursting out violently. These are the Aliens which have been the bad guys in a long list of films since the first hit the theatres in 1979. The two latest and probably not the last of these space horror flicks being *Prometheus* (2012) and *Alien: Covenant* (2017), which are prequels to the original *Alien* film.

Our forensic examination of this issue will look mainly at the first two films in the series, *Alien* (1979) and *Aliens* (1986), which are by far the best and certainly the most coherent of these films – but we can also tie in *Alien 3* (1992) and the fourth film *Alien Resurrection* (1997).

To briefly reprise the plot of the first film, a space freighter detects a strange radio message and wakes up its crew, who are in a form of hibernation, to investigate. The crew sets the ship down on the rock or planet, LV422, and three of them investigate the source of the radio beacon which turns out to be a derelict alien space ship. One of the crew members is attacked by a creature which implants an organism in him. This nasty alien,

which has acid for blood, eventually bursts out of the crew member's chest and runs away, then quickly grows to full size and start killing the crew.

When third in command Flight Officer Ripley become captain, thanks to the deaths, she discovers that the whole mission has been set up for the sole purpose of obtaining an alien specimen by the company that owns the ship (not named in the films, but logos with the name Weylan-Yutani are visible). The science officer also turns out to be an android with orders to protect the alien and is killed by the crew.

As sole survivor FO Ripley eventually gets in the ship's shuttle, having set the ship's engines for self-destruction, and leaves just before the whole ship blows up, only to find that the alien is in the shuttle with her. In the resulting confrontation this persistent creature is blown out of vessel. She and her cat then go into hibernation in what turns out to be a very long trip home. For the second film starts when Ripley is finally picked up 57 years after the events depicted in the first film and has to explain herself to a board of enquiry. This is hardly surprising given that – among other departures from standard operating procedures – she blew up her ship to get this creature but missed.

First off you will note that Ripley's story is inherently unlikely. If the company she worked for had wanted to collect some alien specimens, and knew where the crashed ship was, then it would have organised an expedition to go there. Using a valuable freighter and trained crew who did not know they were going to be used as incubators for an alien species would seem to be an expensive and haphazard way to go about this task, not to mention a gross breach of corporate safety procedures.

Nor was there any need to be secretive, at least not in the long term. Using these creatures as souped-up soldiers, or selling them as mercenaries to other parties is not the sort of activity that can be kept secret. They have to be marketed to the right customers. If and when these creature are used, they will attract attention. Authorities will then want to know where these gigantic, violent creatures came from, and ask a host of ancillary questions that will keep in-house attorneys busy. What diseases did these creatures harbour? Considering that these creatures have acid for blood what safety precautions are being taken if they happened to be near complicated machinery – to protect both the creatures and the machinery? And so on, and on. Smuggling truckloads of arms into third world countries in exchange for blood diamonds is one thing, shipping companies of (hopefully) trained and house-broken creatures with acid for blood to far flung planets is quite another.

A more important consideration – the kind that keeps the corporation's in-house lawyers up at night – is that social activists would soon realise that the creatures were clearly intelligent but were being kept as soldier slaves. This discovery would result in every do-gooder organisation imaginable on the corporation's doorstep, demanding that the aliens be freed and returned to their homeland to reclaim their rights. Little things such as they were irredeemably hostile, uncontrolled (the training only having just started) and violent, not to mention their preference for gestating their young inside living humans, would be brushed aside as cultural foibles to be understood rather than condemned. They were intelligent creatures with rights, the world would be told. A further complication in these skin-color sensitive times, and one I shall mention once in passing, is that the creatures are shown as black.

Putting Ripley's rather lame story to one side, a much more likely explanation is that the crew knew perfectly well that they were going to collect alien specimens, in exchange for a handsome bonus, and contrived the incident of responding to a distress beacon. Of course, that meant they had to know the crashed alien ship was there, and it is more than likely that a senior executive with some oversight of operations was involved. There is some indication from the film *Prometheus*, that the secret of the ship's origins was hidden in corporate archives. Perhaps this sponsoring executive stumbled across those files in the early part of his or her career and then waited until he or she had enough pull to rig a mission – that is, ensure that the space freighter's flight path was subtly altered and that the right personnel, with some additional equipment, were assigned to its crew.

Just what the sponsoring executive intend to do with this alien creature once it had been retrieved, given the problems mentioned above, is a matter for speculation. Rather than training alien armies, perhaps there would have been something to gain from taking a close look at what was a state of the art piece of bio-engineering by an advanced civilisation. The creature was, after all, a marvel of adaptation with a skin able to contain extremely active acid.

Whatever the reason for this clandestine venture, once the crew was at the alien space ship everything went wrong. Perhaps the company records were incomplete, and the crew and their sponsor did not realise just how dangerous the creatures were? Whatever the reason, second in command Kane was attacked and became infected or impregnated. Attempts to extract the embryo implanted in Kane's stomach killed him but left the infant creature alive. With Kane dead, the rest of the crew, in true mercenary fashion, decided to carry on, and collect the bonus. They disposed of the body, concocted a story about an accident and all but one would have gone into hibernation, or hypersleep as it is called in the film, for the trip home. They no doubt planned to quietly turn the creature over to the shadowy other parties, before they got all the way to earth with its tiresome quarantine regulations, and collect their money.

This explains why the creature was able to grow to full size on the spaceship. As noted, one of the crew would have stayed out of hypersleep to look after the creature, and feed it. They must have known something about its diet and habits but perhaps not enough. We can surmise that when the creature had grown large enough after, say, a couple of months, it out smarted its minder and killed him or her. The rest of the crew would have been quickly woken from hibernation but perhaps they still underestimated the creature, and separated to look for it, with inadequate weapons. The flamethrowers shown in the film were undoubtedly already part of the equipment, and had been brought along with some such emergency in mind, but using any weapon on board a spaceship is not a good idea at any time. Also, the creature was probably very much smaller than depicted in the film, allowing it to slip into air ducts and odd corners.

Whatever the reason the creature – undoubtedly a very dangerous one, despite its small size, as it was quite hostile and highly intelligent – was able to kill the crew members one by one, to leave Ripley and the science officer Ashe. At this point Ashe, whom the crew knew all along was a robot and a representative of the sponsor of their illicit side mission, wanted to get the ship's AI (known as mother in the film) to broadcast an endlessly repeating distress message cum warning, get into the shuttle and leave. Ripley had similar

ideas but wanted to cover her tracks. By that time, no story could be constructed to fit all the recorded facts that would keep Ripley out of jail. The only course was to destroy the evidence, somehow block the ship's log from downloading into the shuttle as it would do automatically, and leave. The alien was way too dangerous to mess with any further. Ripley murdered Ashe – it was not self-defence as shown in the film but just how she murdered him is not important – and sabotaged the engines.

Ships blow up quite easily in films, but it is difficult to see why, in real life, any engine would need a self-destruct sequence. In fact, a lot of thought and design work goes into ensuring that they don't blow up. However, if you feel the need to get rid of a space ship, point it at a star, disable the engines and let gravity do the rest. As an experienced flight officer Ripley would have known how to sabotage the engines in order to blame the alien for the damage. Having covered her tracks, Ripley got into the shuttle and left the ship, but probably did find that the alien had come with her – the creature was very intelligent – and had that final, dramatic confrontation.

Aliens (1986): The next instalment of this saga opens, as previously noted, after Ripley has drifted for 56 years in hypersleep before being picked up. Considering the vast distances involved that might have been how long it took the shuttle to get within distress beacon range of commercial shipping routes. Ripley might have anticipated a few years, rather than 56, but perhaps in her haste to get away she miscalculated the route. In any case it is far from surprising that the employing corporation (which by the time she reappeared, must have been quite a different company to the one that had originally employed her) convened a court of inquiry. Apart from any other considerations there was the question of 56 years worth of back pay, the destruction of a valuable piece of company property and a series of complex legal actions.

After all the company had created an unsafe working environment by insisting on her crew collecting an alien specimen, or so Ripley claimed. In some countries (including Australia) at the moment it is possible for employees dismissed for outright, provable theft to claim unfair dismissal and win some sort of payout – basically go away money. In a much more "advanced" space faring civilisation sabotaging a whole ship just to get one creature, and missing, would be neither here nor there. In any case, Ripley had covered her tracks, more or less, and there would have been nothing in the company records of 56 years ago to prove or disprove anything she said, unless the sponsors of the original, specimen-collecting voyage had been sloppy. Lawyers representing the descendants of Ripley's long dead crewmates would also have come calling.

Although Ripley had various legal advantages, this unusual action would not have been plain sailing for her. A complicating factor was the rather odd and convoluted story she told, only a few bits of which could be corroborated from the shuttle's log. That would have been suspicious in itself. Why weren't several crew deaths and a rampaging creature logged in some way, and a copy of those log entries routinely downloaded to the shuttle's system?

However, in all, rather than have this rat's nest of allegations dragged into court, ancient history or not, the company would have been prepared to settle, perhaps not 50 years of back pay adjusted for inflation and expected promotions but certainly enough to

make FO Ripley go away, stay away and, above all, shut up. The company had never been anywhere near the rock from which the alien species was allegedly taken (we will come to the supposed mining colony in a moment) and was quite happy to continue to stay away from it. All would have been forgotten, except for the fact that some fool in the company hierarchy filed a routine notification with the interstellar authorities. They were legally required to do so – they had some evidence of contact with an alien lifeform, albeit 50 plus years ago – but it is unlikely that the authorities would have found out about this piece of ancient history without the notification. Unfortunately, some diligent, unsupervised junior official sent in the relevant electronic form.

All hell broke loose. Officials of regulatory organisations with nothing much better to do, arrived in droves wanting to know about this alien organism and the exact circumstances of its removal from its “home” planet. Then came the non government organisations. One can image members of a futurist version of the American anti-abortion and native-rights organisations crossed with something like Greenpeace chaining themselves to furniture in the company lobby, demanding that the company restore the homeland of LV423 to its rightful owners, whoever they may be.

The company tried complaining that they had no record of any contact with this alien species and knew nothing about it except for the testimony of FO Ripley, which did not stand up well to cross examination (this is hinted at in the film) and could not be confirmed, without going to this planet. If these aliens were still on that god forsaken rock, then they were welcome to it. That might have worked up to a point, but then came the ethics committee. The promotional line for the first film was that in space no one can hear you scream, well when ethics committees come calling you may want to scream but don’t dare. Spanish inquisition ha! Such committees have reduced even the toughest lawyers and the hardiest adventurer to shaking jelly, with pitiless dissection of motives. Black letter law is one thing, ethical standards are another as they are set out in books that are almost unreadable to all but the trained ethicist, and can be reinterpreted on the spot.

Ethics committee members are not subject to humour and do not care a jot for the reality of dealing with a major problem deep in space. In any case, as far as any ethics committee is concerned, the fault is on the side of a major corporation and its employees until proven otherwise. Why was no attempt made to communicate with the creature after it had been removed from the planet, the committee asked? On what did FO Ripley base her assertion that the species was irredeemable hostile? Deaths of crewmates? Well, wasn’t the creature being attacked? It had just been gestated (by Ripley’s testimony) so its emotional state would have been fragile, and so on and on.

Faced with the horror of ethics committee cross examination, at some point both the company and FO Ripley caved in. The company would make amends by spending colossal amounts of money setting up a presence on this rock, wherever it was, to make sure the alien species was safe and comfortable or whatever. Communication with this species was not possible until they got to the rock, but there must be a way to set up operations in a rights-respecting, non-confrontationist way. Perhaps the ethics committee could recommend consultants who would, for a handsome fee and without having to leave their offices, outline a course of action? Ripley had to come along, as part of the ethical settlement, or kiss her handsome compensation package goodbye.

We have now deviated some way from the plot of the second film. Certainly Ripley had no wish to return to the scene of her earlier crime, as the alien species was dangerous (in that respect the films are correct), and certainly did not want to do so with representatives from the ethics committee. But with a contingent of colonial marines on hand and a lot of money in the balance the risk was worth the prize, or so she thought. In the second film the base is set up as a colony and operating for years without the colonists discovering the site of the crashed alien ship, and Ripley is devastated when she is told by the inquiry chairman that there are families in the colony. As a result of her testimony, a company official who turns out to be the villain of the second film instructs the colonists to check out the site, without any warning of what was there. Then the trouble starts.

This can be dismissed as nonsense. One of the first tasks of any colony would be to photograph or at least radar scan the whole planet's surface, and have the data checked by advanced software systems looking for anomalies. A crashed alien spaceship would be noticed.

The base that features in the second film must have been constructed to investigate the crashed alien ship. A crashed ship from an extra-solar civilisation would have been quite a find. No doubt the base would also be involved in mining. A major share of the resulting mineral royalties would permit the new species to make its way in the galaxy. A not incidental result of this whole exercise was to give a number of highly paid civil servants a new purpose. They would have something to put in the departmental annual reports, and would be eligible for humanitarian awards.

In this we can see the seeds of the looming disaster. The members of the ethics committee, which ran the whole show, may have been transported across space but they were still thinking in terms of negotiating with American Indians or Inuit or Australian indigenous peoples, and not with alien organisms with acid for blood. Warnings that they creatures were very dangerous and difficult to house break – after all, Ripley was the only survivor of the original crew – was dismissed as prejudice. An approach using cutting edge theory on education by positive reinforcement and a caring, nurturing attitude would do the trick.

A major barrier between these public servants and their humanitarian awards, was the lack of any adult members of the race in question when the expedition arrived on LV422 – just a bunch of eggs in a derelict space craft. No good. Eggs can't be consulted or sign royalty agreements and are not of much use at award night dinners. In itself this would have proved a knotty ethical problem but, as noted, the expedition had already purchased a great deal of the best advice on this issue, and the experts laboured very hard, at a substantial hourly rate, to give the civil servants the answer they wanted. They had also brought the expertise required to get one of the alien face huggers to couple with a duplicate human organism (the body but not the brain of a human).

All the elements of the tragedy are now in place. Gestation and nursing of very dangerous creatures, combined with an insistence that the creatures must be involved in the decision making process concerning their own treatment. Sadly, the creatures did not understand that the consultative process was two way, or that the ethics committee members also had rights. Again, Ripley demonstrated her superior survival skills by ignoring the ethics committee and getting out of there when things turned sour. The bit

about turning up at the mining base after the main massacre, as depicted in the film, can be dismissed as fiction. Why didn't the colonists send detailed status reports and warnings when they realised what was happening? Ripley was there from the start, and got out with a few of the colonial marines that had been stationed at the base, in case of any trouble.

Those who remember the films will recall that in *Alien III* (1992) Ripley ended up at a remote penal colony, which is hardly surprising given the likely real sequence of events, and *Alien IV* or *Alien Resurrection* (1997) featured an attempt at creating and controlling a group of these aliens as super soldiers, with predictable results. The exact sequence of events would have become confused over time and, in any case, treated with some artistic licence.

The real moral of the whole story is that it is better to let sleeping aliens lie and anyone who watched the prequel *Prometheus*, which deals with the launch of the alien spaceship would agree. If a particular crewmen had had sufficient sense to back away from an alien snake creature, when it was obviously enraged, rather than insist on playing with it, a lot of trouble would have been avoided. Ripley may have been criminally inclined, having murdered the science officer/robot Ashe, but at least she knew enough to run away from danger.