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Latest 'Star Wars' Movie Is Quickly Politicized

By [DAVID M. HALBFINGER](#)

LOS ANGELES, May 18 - For sheer lack of subtlety, the light-saber-wielding forces of good and evil in [George Lucas's "Star Wars"](#) movies can't hold a candle to the blogging, advertising and boycotting forces of the right and left. (Or left and right.)

More a measure of the nation's apparently permanent political warfare than of a filmmaker's intent, the heroes and antiheroes of Mr. Lucas's final entry, "Episode III - Revenge of the Sith," were on their way to becoming the stock characters of partisan debate by mid-Wednesday, hours before the film's opening just after midnight:

The liberal advocacy group Moveon.org was preparing to spend \$150,000 to run advertisements on CNN over the next few days - and to spread leaflets among audiences in line at multiplexes - comparing Senator Bill Frist of Tennessee, the majority leader, to the movie's power-grabbing, evil Chancellor Palpatine, for Dr. Frist's role in the Senate's showdown over the confirmation of federal judges.

Conservative Web logs were lacerating Mr. Lucas over the film's perceived jabs at President Bush - as when Anakin Skywalker, on his way to becoming the evil Darth Vader, warns, "If you're not with me, you're my enemy," in an echo of Mr. Bush's post-9/11 ultimatum, "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists."

A little-trafficked conservative Web site about film, Pabaah.com - for "Patriotic Americans Boycotting Anti-American Hollywood" - added Mr. Lucas to its list of boycotted entertainers, along with more than 200 others, including [Jane Fonda](#), [Susan Sarandon](#), [Sean Penn](#) and the Dixie Chicks.

Even the Drudge Report Web site got into the act: beneath a picture of Darth Vader, it compared the White House press corps to the vengeful Sith, after reporters peppered a press secretary for pressing Newsweek magazine to "repair the damage" in the Muslim world caused by a retracted report about desecration of the Koran.

There is nothing all that new or imaginative, of course, about politicians borrowing from popular movies to score points; witness Ronald Reagan's co-opting of the "evil empire" metaphor for use against the Soviet bloc, or his critics lampooning his missile defense ideas as something straight out of "Star Wars." And Senator John McCain of Arizona, a Republican rebel of sorts, compared his 2000 primary campaign to Luke Skywalker's fighting his way out of the Death Star.

But it is highly unusual for a mainstream Hollywood movie to wind up in the swirl of politics even before it has opened - though that did occur with

20th Century Fox's "Day After Tomorrow," with its apocalyptic vision of global warming's consequences, which advocates including Moveon.org and Al Gore used to protest the Bush administration's environmental policy.

As a rule, Hollywood studios go to great lengths to ensure that their projects - both in the development stage and especially when they are positioned in the marketplace - are free of messages that could be offensive to any great swath of the moviegoing public. Like, say, people who vote for one political party or the other.

All of which calls into question Mr. Lucas's decision to have the premiere of the "Star Wars" finale at the Cannes Film Festival. France is sometimes called the biggest blue state of all, after all. And just what was Mr. Lucas - who could not be reached for comment Wednesday - thinking when he told a Cannes audience that he had not realized in plotting the film years ago that fact might so closely track his fiction?

Alluding to [Michael Moore's](#) remarks about "Fahrenheit 9/11" at Cannes a year earlier, Mr. Lucas joked, "Maybe the film will waken people to the situation."

Apparently in all seriousness, though, he went on to say that he had first devised the "Star Wars" story during the Vietnam War. "The parallels between what we did in Vietnam and what we're doing in Iraq now are unbelievable," he told an appreciative audience.

Peter Sealey, a former marketing chief at Columbia Pictures, said the partisan tug of war over the new "Star Wars" episode seemed absurd, likening the political interpretations of it to a Rorschach test. But he said Mr. Lucas was probably savvy in adding sizzle and relevance to a movie that otherwise might have earned publicity only by its effectiveness as entertainment.

"He could've come out and said, 'That's ridiculous - this is the white hats and black hats of the 1950's in space,' and quashed it," said Mr. Sealey, who teaches entertainment marketing at the University of California, Berkeley. "Did he do that? No, and it was probably smart. If he can get 'Star Wars' brought into the debate over unilateralism and the Iraq war, it just brings a current spin to it. And I don't think it's going to rule people

out."

Indeed, it is extremely unlikely that all the online screeds and boycotts put together will leave so much as a dent in the movie's box office results. Hollywood insiders have estimated that "Episode III" will have ticket sales of \$120 million or more in its first four days.

But Mr. Sealey said other filmmakers and marketers might do well to inspect their pictures for latent political messaging before the public does it for them.

He noted that a Universal Pictures marketing executive had given a lecture to his marketing class about "King Kong," which is coming out later this year. "Is there a political overtone to it?" Mr. Sealey said. "I suspect he's got to think that through today. The political sensitivities are so great that you have to take that calculus into consideration. Is somebody going to read into 'King Kong' that it's pro-Iraq, or it's going to get PETA upset?"