

C H A P T E R 2

Hard Bodies: The Reagan Heroes

The Reagan era was an era of bodies. From the anxieties about Reagan's age and the appearance of cancerous spots on his nose; to the profitable craze in aerobics and exercise; to the molding of a former Mr. Universe into the biggest box-office draw of the decade; to the conservative agenda to outlaw abortion; to the identification of "values" through an emphasis on drug use, sexuality, and child-bearing; to the thematized aggression against persons with AIDS—these articulations of bodies constituted the imaginary of the Reagan agenda and the site of its materialization. And whereas heated debates over "ideas" and "values" took place throughout this period, they generally took as their justification and target of success the bodies and each "value" declared as its own. But as Amnesty International and other civil and human rights organizations can attest, Reagan's policies were geared not so much to the individual human body as it might be the material location of suffering, pain, or deprivation, as they were to the control of the *idea* of the body, as the Reagan ideology vied for and captured the power to define how bodies were to be perceived, touched, fed, regulated, and counted.

In the dialectic of reasoning that constituted the Reagan movement, bodies were deployed in two fundamental categories: the errant body containing sexually transmitted disease, immorality, illegal chemicals, "laziness," and endangered fetuses, which we can call the "soft body"; and the normative body that enveloped strength, labor, determination, loyalty, and courage—the "hard body"—the body

that was to come to stand as the emblem of the Reagan philosophies, politics, and economics. In this system of thought marked by race and gender, the soft body invariably belonged to a female and/or a person of color, whereas the hard body was, like Reagan's own, male and white. In Reagan's self-promoted image—chopping wood at his ranch, riding horses, standing tall at the presidential podium—his was one of these hard bodies, a body not subject to disease, fatigue, or aging. "Ronald Reagan lifted the double-edged ax above his head and slammed it into the tree branch lying on the ground. He swung again, his right hand sliding the length of the long wooden handle, and kept swinging for two full minutes. His face glistened with sweat. . . . In his faded denim shirt, leather gloves, scuffed boots and cowboy hat, he looked fit and even young."¹ This hard body became for Reaganism what Jurgen Link has called a "collective symbol," what he defines as "collective pictures that are culturally 'anchored' in the most literal sense and that act as carriers of symbolic meaning."² The depiction of the indefatigable, muscular, and invincible masculine body became the linchpin of the Reagan imaginary; this hardened male form became the emblem not only for the Reagan presidency but for its ideologies and economics as well.

To understand the broad functions of these bodies as collective symbols, it is important to see them not simply as images for Reagan's own self-projections or idealizations of an outdated Hollywood heroism but to recognize their successful linkage in Reaganism to the national body as well. As such, these hard bodies came to stand not only for a type of national character—heroic, aggressive, and determined—but for the nation itself. In contrast to what Reagan's public relations workers characterized as the weakened—some even said "feminine"³—years of the Carter administration, in which the United States government was brought to a standstill by a Third World nation, the Reagan America was to be a strong one, capable of confronting enemies rather than submitting to them, of battling "evil empires" rather than allowing them to flourish, of using its hardened body—its renewed technological network—to impose its will on others rather than allow itself to be dictated to. As Roger Rosenblatt's assessment of Reagan's popularity suggests, part of the reason why so many Americans were disillusioned with Carter was that he made them feel "small" as a nation and, we can only conclude, as individual bodies as well:

"There was Carter himself . . . who was perhaps most bitterly resented for shrinking those hopes down to the size of a presidency

characterized by small people, small talk and small matters. He made Americans feel two things they are not used to feeling, and will not abide. He made them feel puny and he made them feel insecure.⁴

In this sense, those hard bodies heralded by Ronald Reagan were not just self-images; they were national identities.

Joehen and Linda Schulte-Sasse, like Link, describe how such identifications work by referring to collective images:

The experience of an imaginary unity such as the nation cannot take place without the construction of signs or images of that unity; the self seeks to overcome its separation and the extreme differentiation of modern societies by mirroring itself in signs that facilitate the illusion that the very difference that establishes the sign as sign is overcome in the experience of the sign. It takes pleasure in experiencing itself not so much as unity, but as unified in the image of unity.⁵

The Schulte-Sasses are speaking in this passage primarily of objects for national identification, such as flags or caricatures of enemies, but it is clear that the image of a body could serve equally well as a sign of unity, to the degree that the image of that body is widely accepted as the projection of the national body itself. In this sense, there is a dual identification taking place: first, with the individual body, as citizens might choose to see themselves *as* that body, desiring its strengths, expressions, and stances; and second, with that body as a national emblem, as a collective symbol for a nation that individual citizens receive pleasure from feeling themselves a part of. The Schulte-Sasses insist that this second form of identification must be understood as a form of pleasure, what they call "national pleasure,"⁶ deriving from the sense of "substitute mastery" the image provides: "The average subject's illusion of being a historical agent . . . demands the aesthetic representation of substitutes with which we can identify and depends on images that contain nothing messy or confusing. . . . Such substitute mastery reconciles us with the nonreadability of everyday events."⁷ In these terms, the hardened bodies that emblemized Reaganism assisted citizens/viewers in perceiving not simply those bodies but themselves as masterful, as in control of their environments (immediate or geopolitical), as dominating those around them (whether they be the soft bodies of other citizens or of enemies), and

as able to resolve crises successfully (whether domestic or international in scope). Such bodies assist in the confirmation of this mastery by themselves refusing to be "messy" or "confusing," by having hard edges, determinate lines of action, and clear boundaries for their own decision-making. "The purpose of the masculine ego," Antony Easthope explains, "is to *master* every threat. . . . The castle of the ego is defined by its perimeter and the line drawn between what is inside and what outside. To maintain its identity it must not only repel external attack but also suppress treason within."⁸ It is in keeping with this focus on hard edges that Reagan established so many policies concerning the integrity of international boundaries.

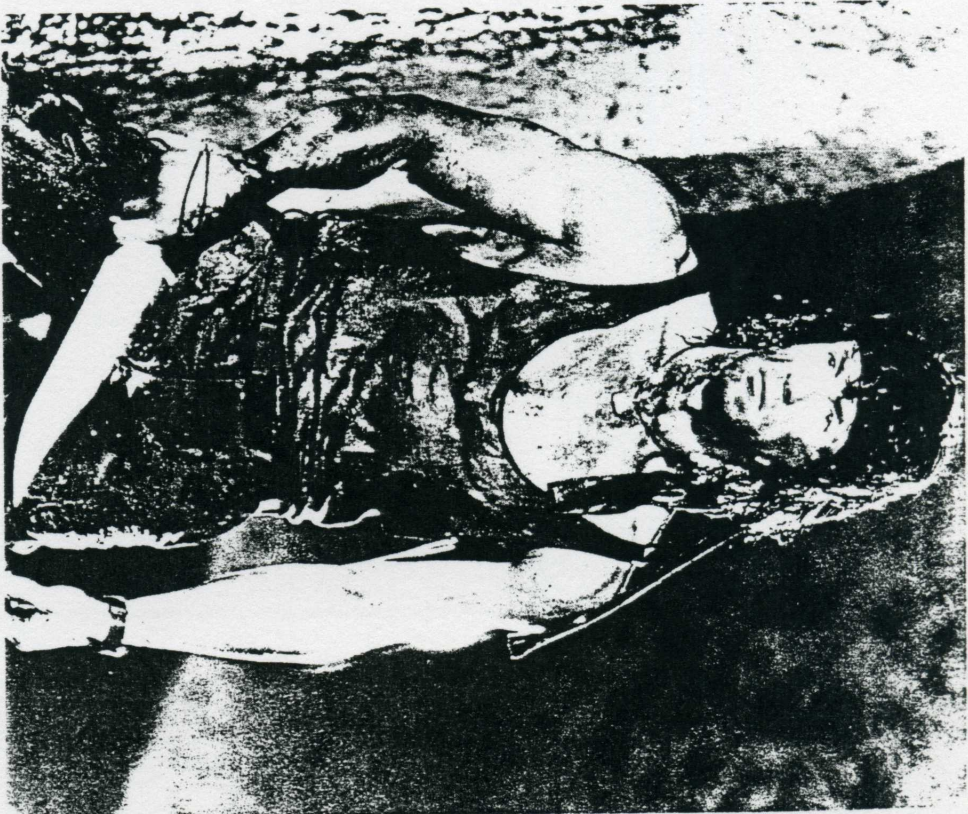
One of the functions of the hard edges of such individual bodies is, of course, not simply to invoke similarly defined national boundaries but in fact to reinstate them. According to Reaganites, the Carter presidency not only squandered the national strength and will but failed to maintain the distinctive boundaries of the national identity as well. In a simple but symbolically powerful act of boundary definition, Ronald Reagan, on taking office, restored many of the trappings of the office of the president that Carter (or his predecessor, Gerald Ford) had discarded, including the playing of "Hail to the Chief" (Carter had chosen Sir Arthur Bliss's "Jubilation"), wearing a suit coat while in the Oval Office (Carter had worn a sweater), and reviewing troops at arrival ceremonies.⁹ Just as Reagan reestablished the boundaries of the presidency, hard bodies reestablished the boundaries not only of the individual masculine figure but of the nation as a whole.

To understand the diverse functioning of these hard bodies in the Reagan era, it is imperative to keep in mind the collective pleasure that can be derived from imaging and narrating them.¹⁰ One of the key mechanisms for that collective imaging and narration during the 1980s and one of the most visible locations for the "collective symbol" of hard bodies was the Hollywood film, in the viewing of which the pleasure of feeling a part of a national unity could be achieved, not through a speech, a flag, or even a war, but through the narration and movement of hard bodies themselves—their confrontations, actions, decisions, and victories. Film theorists have established that the pleasures of cinema are deeply rooted in psychological, emotional, and personal pleasures, that audience members are able to establish diverse forms of identification with characters and scenarios on the screen.¹¹ What Joehen and Linda Schulte-Sasse's comments suggest is that this relationship with the characters and events on the screen can function to promote mass unity as well. In such terms, the cinematic

narrative offers two ways to a feeling of "mastery": at the level of plot, in which the hard-body hero masters his surroundings, most often by defeating enemies through violent physical action; and at the level of *national plot*, in which the same hero defeats national enemies, again through violent physical action. Viewers can experience personal power by identifying with an individual hero's victory over fictional antagonists and national power through the "pleasurable collective experience" of identifying with one of the key images that came to embody the political, economic, and social philosophy of the 1980s—the hard body. The substitute mastery offered by Reaganism is never simply personal or national but a combination of both. It is for this reason that the hard body was able to function more effectively even than the American flag or individual wars to support Reaganism—because it served both forms of identification simultaneously.

One of the most popular icons of the Reagan era was the film character of Rambo, played by Sylvester Stallone, a man whom audiences watched develop his hard body throughout the *Rocky* films. While those on the left caricatured Reagan's militarism by referring to him in political cartoons as "Ronbo," Reagan himself quipped at a press conference after the release of the hostages in Lebanon, "Boy, I saw *Rambo* last night. Now I know what to do the next time this happens."¹² The films themselves were among the most popular of the decade, suggesting that they had, for whatever reasons, successfully tapped into a strain of American thinking. In three films that span the years of the Reagan presidency, John Rambo, a Vietnam veteran, takes on and defeats a series of enemies—a small-town sheriff and the National Guard in *First Blood* (1982), Vietnamese and Russian soldiers in *Rambo: First Blood, Part 2* (1985), and Soviet military commandos in *Rambo: First Blood, Part 3* (1988, Peter MacDonald). Because the films focus on Rambo's physical prowess, and because Stallone himself did extensive body-building for the part, the films can be used to illustrate how the hard-body imagery evolved during the eight years that Ronald Reagan was in office. Taken in order, the *Rambo* films narrate the production of the hard body during the Reagan years.

A CBS News–New York Times Poll taken shortly after the 1980 election showed that although 11 percent of the people voted for Ronald Reagan because he was conservative, 38 percent voted for him because he was *not* Jimmy Carter. John Orman explains in his study of the Reagan and Carter presidencies that "Reagan, by most accounts, won the [1980] election essentially because he was not Jimmy Carter,"



The 1980s' "hard body" hero, John Rambo. (*Rambo III*, Tri-Star Pictures)

By 1984, however, "Reagan won precisely because he was Ronald Reagan."¹³ In the intervening years, Reagan's personal and national body image was enhanced by two significant events—the assassination attempt on his life in 1981, and the invasion of Grenada in October of 1983. In both cases, Reagan was able to show that incidents that could have defeated a lesser man—or, more to the point, a lesser body—were unable to overcome him. Indeed, in all of American history, five presidents have been shot at and hit by assassins' bullets, and of those

five—Lincoln, Garfield, McKinley, Kennedy, and Reagan—only Reagan survived. And he not only survived, he stayed in character throughout. As Haynes Johnson concluded, Reagan's optimistic and upbeat actions after the shooting "conveyed a sense to the public that Reagan possessed larger-than-life qualities."¹⁴ And as Lou Cannon put it, "The president rattled off one-liners in the face of death and emerged from the ordeal as a hero."¹⁵ Perhaps more important, the assassination was taken not only as a personal triumph for Reagan but as a national one as well: "His survival from a bullet wound lodged an inch from his heart was taken as an augury of a national turn for the better; it signaled the breaking of the skein of bad luck that had plagued the nation and its leaders for nearly twenty years."¹⁶ And when the deaths of more than two hundred U.S. Marines in Beirut threatened to bring back the national trauma and sense of helplessness that had surrounded the Iranian hostage crisis during the Carter years, Reagan distracted the public away from Beirut by invading the small island nation of Grenada only two days later, ostensibly to protect U.S. bodies—students at the medical school in St. George's.

In 1982, however, the year in which *First Blood* appeared, the image of the personal and national hard body was not yet culturally solidified. The nation was still reeling under the traumas of the Vietnam War and the Iranian hostage takeover. Stepping out of both scenarios was John Rambo, veteran of the Vietnam War and an escaped POW who had been tortured in captivity. But although the Reagan hard body was not yet fully configured, there is no doubt from this movie that the focus on the body had already begun.

As the film begins, John Rambo is shown from a long shot, walking down a tree-lined road. Only after viewers have assessed his full body does the camera turn, as it does with dramatic effect in the trademark opening of each film, to a close-up of Rambo's calm, emotionless, almost peaceful face. Rambo has arrived at the home of the last surviving member of his Special Forces unit from the war, Delmar Berry, only to be told by Berry's mother that he had died the previous summer from cancer, a cancer brought on, she believes, by Agent Orange contamination. When Rambo shows the photograph of Berry, Orange contamination. When Rambo shows the photograph of Berry, remarking on how he was so much bigger than all of the other men in his unit, the mother graphically describes how the cancer had so deteriorated his body that she was able to carry him in her own arms. The film opens then with an invocation of an absent strong body—the big man who had been taken down to a less than feminine size by a disease brought on by the war itself—and Rambo's isolation as now

the only surviving body from that war. The question the film has posed is one that the Reagan presidency soon would answer: Would that body go the way of its companions and deteriorate as well, or would it find a way to survive the onslaughts of captivity, contamination, and public betrayal?

In the opening scenes of the film, it seems that the answer to this question will be in the negative, as Rambo is arrested and beaten by a small-town sheriff's department, essentially because they did not like the way he looked, in other words, not for any particular behavior, belief, or expressed attitude but because his body did not conform to the town's expectations of what a citizen's body should look like. As the sheriff (Brian Dennehy) advises him when he first escorts Rambo out of town, "Get a haircut and take a bath. You won't get hassled so much." The sheriff's animosity is focused solely on how Rambo's body looks and smells. And when he arrests Rambo for vagrancy, he immediately instructs his deputies to "clean him up" so that he'll be able to face the judge the next morning.

It is the act of "cleaning him up" that propels the plot forward into the explosive and violent spectacle for which the Rambo films have become famous. For it is only when the deputies physically strip, hose down, and then attempt to shave Rambo that he exhibits his first overtly physical and aggressive acts of the film, as he uses his expert combat techniques to maim the deputies who have trapped him. To insure that viewers condemn the deputies, the director, Ted Kotcheff, mixes flashbacks to Rambo's torture by the Vietnamese with his treatment by the deputies. When one of the deputies waxes a straight razor in Rambo's face in an attempt to shave him, Rambo balks. Deputy Galt then places his nightstick around Rambo's neck in a choke hold. Rambo flashes to a scene in the POW camp where a Vietnamese soldier is slicing at his chest with a long-bladed knife, yielding the multiple scars that viewers saw on Rambo's torso earlier in the scene. His body is presented not as unclean or unshaven but as victimized, as wrongly, harshly mistreated by enemies foreign and domestic who would like to redefine and reshape that body and its presentations.

The opening scenes of *First Blood* then show that, within the United States in 1982, there were reasons for concern about the future status of the masculine body. The town's guardian, Sheriff Teasle, has, for example, a body that contrasts markedly with Rambo's. Brian Dennehy was an excellent choice to play the part of Teasle, making Rambo's judge and opponent the possessor of a corpulent male body,

which in its weakness and lack of stamina and self-assured fullness represents all that Rambo sets out to defeat. If, this film argues, the masculine body is to be reclaimed, it will have to be done, not simply by reclaiming some value or usefulness for that body (for example, its serviceability in time of war), but by rejecting the corpulent body altogether, showing *its* uselessness and destructiveness even in time of peace. Another highly popular 1982 film, *An Officer and a Gentleman* (Taylor Hackford), works out the same tension between the weakened and the strong masculine body, again explicitly in terms of a national military and identity. The very plot of the film—how a no-good, flip, useless, and soft male body is changed into a triumphant, resilient, and determined heterosexual hard body—narrates the transformations promised by the Reagan presidency. The softened, pampered, and ill-trained male body will become, for the Reagan imaginary, the body of the Carter presidency, the body that was unable to defend its country/its town/its values against outsiders. This is the body, the Reagan logic will declare, that cost American citizens a unified national strength, in the same way that Teasle's unwillingness to accept Rambo's presence in his town eventually cost the town many of the bodies of its male citizens and a large portion of the town's property.

First Blood clarifies the consequences of the "weakened" years of the Carter presidency, when strength and preparedness were, according to the Reagan historians, abandoned in favor of negotiation and capitulation. The "waffling" and "wavering" that Nixon believed characterized the Carter years¹⁷ typified the inability of the national body to defend its principles and national values. Consequently, *First Blood* shows audiences that inadequate, unprepared, and weakened masculine bodies simply cannot compete with the forces of a strengthened and prepared body.

After Rambo escapes from the prison and flees to the mountains, his survival skills already activated, the sheriff and his deputies pursue him, joking about the "hunt" they are on and having no clear idea of who Rambo is. Skillfully and methodically, Rambo maims each of the deputies, each time with a different type of assault. Later, Colonel Trautman (Richard Crenna), the man who trained Rambo, comments that he must be slipping up, since he had been trained to kill, not injure. But the film requires that Rambo not kill these deputies;¹⁸ first, because it would be difficult to maintain his characterization as a victim if he became a successful killer; and second, because helpless, screaming men far more effectively portray the consequences of a

weakened masculinity than silent corpses do. Each deputy in turn appeals for help to Sheriff Teasle, who cannot help him, and the soundtrack begins to echo with the pitiful and plaintive voices of disabled men, all at the mercy of their own weakness.

But *First Blood* is not satisfied to show the weakened individual masculine body of the small towns of America. It must show the weakened national body as well. When Teasle calls in the National Guard to help him capture Rambo, the focus shifts away from what might be simply a poorly trained sheriff's department to the national military itself. Led by Lieutenant Clinton Morgan (Patrick Stack), the National Guard unit walks right by Rambo, who has concealed himself in the river. Later, when Rambo holes up in an abandoned mine, Morgan orders each of his men in turn to go in after him. Each refuses. When Rambo fires at them, they throw themselves down in fear. As a last resort, and against Teasle's orders not to kill Rambo, Morgan orders one of his troops to fire a rocket launcher into the mine shaft. When the mine explodes, Morgan is certain that Rambo is dead. Later, when Teasle orders him to clean up the mess made by the explosion, Morgan whines, "Aw, Will! I have to be back at the drugstore tomorrow!"

Here is the film's harshest criticism of the country's military preparedness: a veteran who has been out of combat for at least five years easily defeats the backbone of U.S. national security. Admittedly, as Trautman reminds Teasle, "Rambo was the best." But these soldiers and deputies are clearly the worst. As Trautman figures it, the odds of two hundred such men against one Rambo are "about right." When the body that had been trained for warfare in the sixties (Rambo joined the Army in 1964) confronts the body trained for warfare in the late seventies, the outcome is clear: the soft body, even when massed in numbers and equipped with up-to-date technology, will lose. And it is this soft masculine body, *First Blood* declares, that represents the national body as a whole.

The film thus presents a short history of this national deterioration. Rambo's body was not foreign born or trained, but one that the country's military was more than capable of producing through the early seventies. The absence of more bodies like his is attributed in the film to two sources: the Vietnam War, which brought on the deaths of all of the other members of Baker team; and the United States itself, which has failed to produce more bodies like these to replace the lost ones. In the intervening years, the country has produced men who view battles as weekend jaunts or hunting speecs, rather than, as

Rambo does, struggles for individual and national survival. Indeed, the country is so unaccustomed to seeing bodies like Rambo's that Rambo's soft-bodied adversaries repeatedly fail throughout the film to recognize it. When Teasle first sees Rambo on the road, he takes him for a hippie, even though Rambo is wearing an Army jacket decorated with an American flag. When the deputies see the scars on his body, they cannot imagine what caused them. And when Rambo disarms all of the deputies and escapes from the prison, they cannot explain his skill. Later, when they're tracking him in the woods, the deputies send attack dogs after a piece of plastic draped over some branches or shoot one another by mistake. They simply cannot recognize his body when they see it because, the film implies, they are not used to seeing men like him anymore.

The film's dynamics work on this assumption, that the audience, like these deputies, is not used to seeing bodies like Rambo's anymore and that the more they see them, the more they will desire them, not only at an individual but at a national level. The true success of *First Blood*, both symbolically and as a marketing tool, is to have created the desire in citizens/audiences to see more bodies like Rambo's, an achievement to which the blockbuster films of the 1980s can attest.

In *First Blood* Rambo's body was continually contrasted to the soft bodies of the deputies and National Guard soldiers to show audiences its sufficiency; the later films have found such comparisons unnecessary. If, as Orman put it, in 1980 Reagan was elected "because he was not Jimmy Carter" and in 1984 "because he was Ronald Reagan," by 1985, the release date of *Rambo: First Blood, Part 2*, Rambo was now popular because he was Rambo. There are no recognition problems in this film. When Rambo enters a room, heads turn. Nor is there any ambivalence about the status of his body. In the first film it was unclear whether his body was clean or dirty, lawful or unlawful, strong or weak; by 1985 Rambo's body-strength is indisputable. In the opening shots the camera pans across the bodies of men hammering rocks in a prison yard and stops at Rambo's bulging physique. No longer the contemplative figure walking through the woods at the opening of *First Blood*, Rambo's is now an even more active, muscular, and hardened body. The camera is not ambivalent about and needs no narrative justification to display his physical prowess.

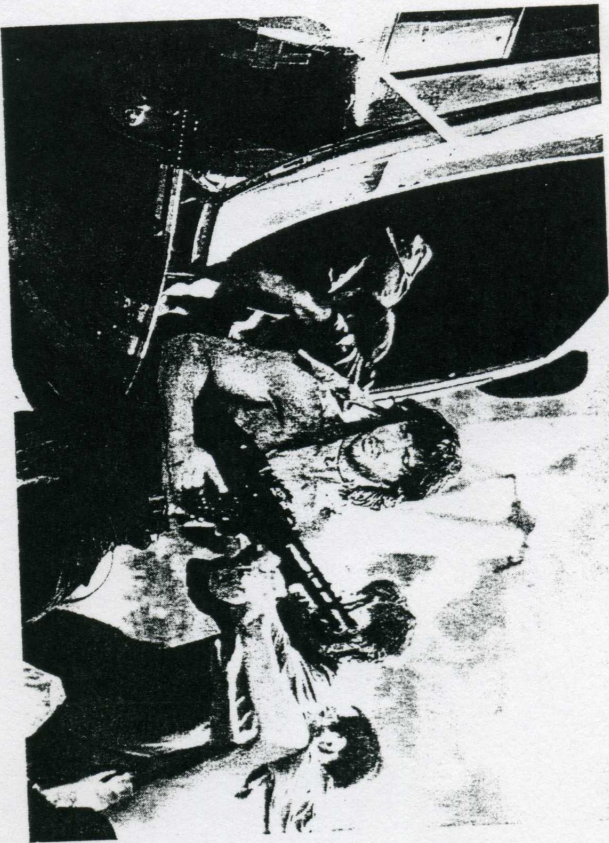
One of the reasons for the success of Rambo's body and the case of its recognition in 1985 lies in Ronald Reagan's own achievement of

the hard-body imaginary that would typify his presidency. Through his first term as president, Reagan was able to establish himself in the mold of what Orman has called the "macho presidential style," which he defines by the following seven qualities:

1. Competitive in politics and life
2. Sports-minded and athletic
3. Decisive, never wavering or uncertain
4. Unemotional, never revealing true emotions or feelings
5. Strong and aggressive, not weak or passive
6. Powerful
7. A "real man," never "feminine."

As Orman goes on to say, "The macho presidential style places the ability to portray strength, aggressiveness, and power at the top of its demands." And though Orman will claim that to some degree "each president more or less embodied the seven components of the macho presidential style," he also concludes that "Ronald Reagan is the quintessential macho president."¹⁹

Reagan established these qualities as significant in his presentation of the presidency and his embodiment of the national character. Just as the Rambo films provided narrative models of these characteristics in action, the invasion of Grenada and the bombing of Libya provided concrete, historical instances of the same thing. In particular, the plots of the three films enabled the Reagan hard body to lay to rest the anxieties displayed in the opening scenes of *First Blood* about the future of the masculine body. *First Blood*, for example, establishes Rambo's determined competitiveness. When Trautman tries to encourage Rambo to give himself up so that no one else will get hurt, Rambo reminds him that "they drew first blood" and so the fight must go on. Rambo's strength, speed, and endurance underscore his physical agility, and, when combined with his physique, mark his athleticism. His decisiveness is shown at each stage of his narrative, whether in jumping hundreds of feet into a pine tree to escape a pursuing helicopter in *First Blood* or rescuing an American POW in *Rambo*. And though Rambo broke down at the end of *First Blood* and cried on Trautman's shoulder for his lost friends and uncertain status at home, by *Rambo*, he is emotionless. Even when Cáo Bao (Julia Nickson) asks him to take her to America with him and then kisses him, he shows no response. The most emotion he shows is in his anger toward Marshall Murdock (Charles Napier) when he learns that Murdock aborted the



Rambo rescuing POWs. (Rambo: First Blood, Part 2, Tri-Star Pictures)

mission that was to pick up Rambo and a rescued POW, leaving them to the Vietnamese and Soviet torturers. Even here, Rambo shows only a curled upper lip, as he tells Murdock, "I'm coming to get you." And because Rambo is consistently depicted as strong, aggressive, and powerful, these films conclude, he can be nothing other than a "real man." The promised presidential pardon offered to Rambo at the beginning of *Rambo* if he completes his mission successfully solidifies early in the movie the connection between Rambo and Reagan. It is as if Ronald Reagan has personally promised to free the hard-bodied man from his confinement in return for bringing back more men like him, the survivors from before the decade when masculine bodies were methodically weakened by a "soft" presidential style.

The shift toward the hard body as a national emblem takes place in this second film as well. Whereas in *First Blood* Rambo's own body was assaulted by the sheriff and his deputies, which implies that Rambo alone is the victim of Teasle's form of American domestic torture, in *Rambo* the initial focus has shifted away from Rambo's individual body to that of the anonymous and collective body of the men Rambo is sent to rescue. In a similar fashion, Reagan, by this point in his presidency, had managed to redefine the focus on

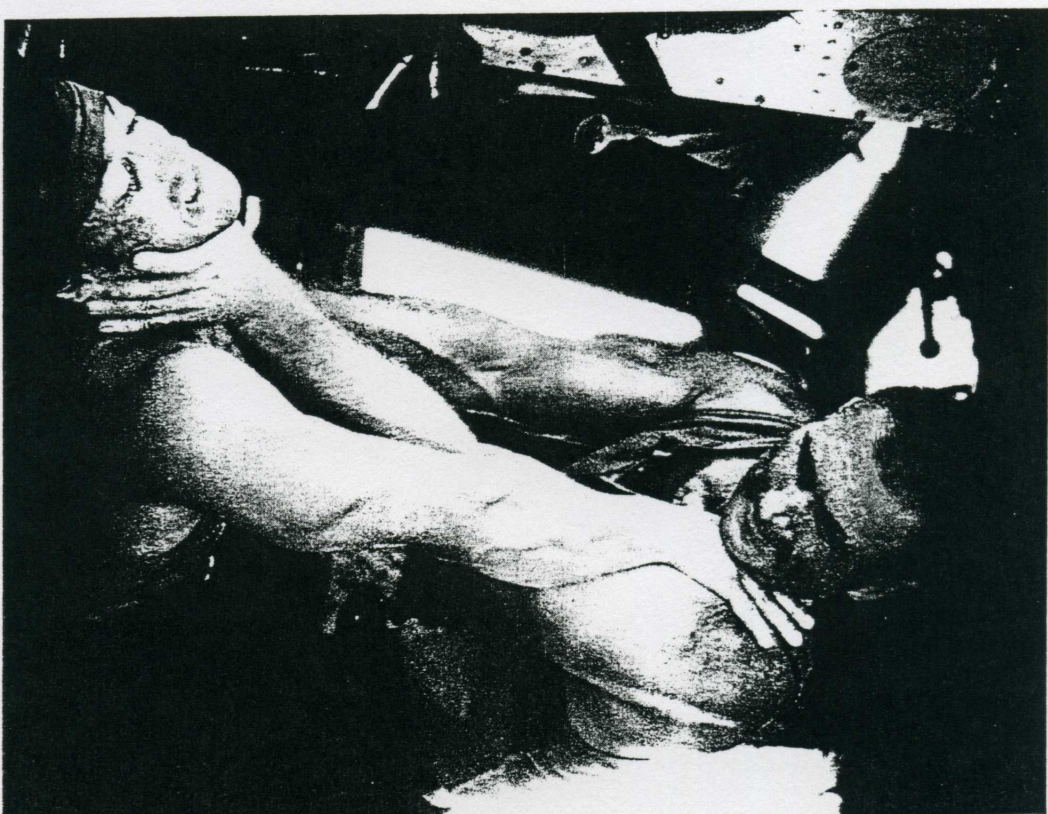
hostages/captives that had so mesmerized the Carter presidency away from the individual captives to the general status of American bodies. Jimmy Carter knew the names of each Iranian hostage, became friends with their families, and prayed for their rescue individually. As he recorded in his memoirs, "The hostages sometimes seemed like part of my own family."²⁰ Reagan, however, chose to characterize American hostages as collective and representative groups. From the early days of his first term, when he proclaimed a National POW-NIA Day, to the 1983 Grenada invasion staged to "rescue" American medical students, whom Reagan argued could then be taken as hostages, to the crisis over the TWA hostages in 1985, Ronald Reagan treated hostage situations as if America itself was held captive rather than individual diplomats, students, or soldiers. As he told the returning TWA passengers during a White House reception for them, "None of you were held prisoner because of any personal wrong you had done anyone; you were held simply because you are Americans. In the minds of your captors, you represented us."²¹

In the filmic logic of *Rambo*, the forgotten POWs were not individual soldiers who might have committed atrocities or participated in the devastation of an entire nation. Audiences never hear any of their individual stories or learn any of their names. They are referred to in the film as simply "American POWs," Americans who have been left behind to suffer and starve because Congress is unwilling to appropriate money for their rescue (and there is no doubt in this film that it is Congress and not the president who is to blame for this failure). In this sense, these hostages come to represent a crisis in the national body, an effort to suppress a part of the national body that had been, presumably, "forgotten" but has in fact, as this film makes clear, actually been actively suppressed by a weakened government. As Colonel Podovsky (Steven Berkoff), a Soviet adviser, observes as he is torturing Rambo, "It seems you were abandoned on direct command." As *Rambo* goes on to say, it is exactly the deliberate suppression of this part of the national body that has led to the production of the kinds of masculine bodies shown as now in charge of U.S. affairs. Marshall Murdock, the key figure here, is weak-bodied and weak-willed, and he surrenders both body and will to Rambo on his return from the mission. He wears a long-sleeved shirt and tie, which contrasts with Rambo's military gear and then exposed muscular torso. Murdock sweats uncomfortably throughout the film, drinking imported Cokes and positioning himself in front of fans as protection against the climate of Vietnam. In this crucible

that crystallized the hardened body of a John Rambo, Marshall Murdock's body is shown to be out of place, ineffective, and weak, in other words, soft.

Ronald Reagan's shift from individual to national bodies had, obviously, a number of consequences. He excluded many from the national body by characterizing them as part of the "soft body" that posed an internal threat to the well-being of the United States. From welfare recipients to homosexuals, from Cuban refugees to university professors, Reagan succeeded in establishing a domestic equivalent to the "foreign terrorist." But, as Richard Nixon argues in *The Real War*, the linchpin for the entire Reagan philosophy was the Soviet Union. If Reagan had not been able to "demonize," to use Michael Rogin's term,²² the Soviet Union, he would have found it impossible to make his parallel accusations of internal weakness. Only a "hard" external opponent justified the call to strengthen U.S. bodies to meet that threat.

Rambo shows American audiences that threat in the bodies of Soviet "advisers" to the Vietnamese prison camp. For the Reagan logic to work, those Soviet bodies are presented as much harder than those of the sheriff or his deputies in *First Blood*. As both Reagan and *Rambo* declare, during all those years when American bodies were getting fat and comfortable, Soviet bodies were hardening themselves for the coming battle. Sergeant Yushin (Vojo Gotic), assistant to the colonel interrogating Rambo, is the only man in any of these films whose muscles are actually larger than Rambo's. His firm-jawed indifference to inflicting pain is only the most obvious indication of his preparedness. As the film goes on, it becomes clear that the only body who could stand up to Yushin's is Rambo's, a body that the U.S. government had rejected and sentenced to hard labor. And whereas the Soviet Union has rewarded Yushin for his hard body, the U.S. government has punished Rambo. Where then, this film invites audiences to worry, would they find the bodies needed to defend the United States against Soviet attack? Like *First Blood*, *Rambo* is geared toward manufacturing a national desire to produce more hard bodies like Rambo's and reject the soft bodies that have come to inhabit the government. At one point *Rambo* seems to contradict Reagan's enthusiasm for technology, especially military technology. Although Reagan's increased funding of the military was geared largely toward improved weaponry and sophisticated technologies, Rambo not only does not need such weapons, he is hindered by them: he has to cut himself free of all of Murdock's sophisticated equipment in order to parachute into Vietnam. Though Trautman has referred to him as "a pure fighter



Sergeant Yushin, the only man with muscles bigger than Rambo's. (*Rambo: First Blood*, Part 2, Tri-Star Pictures)

ing machine," Rambo prefers to think of his brains and not his body as his most important asset (he may be the only one in Hollywood who believes this). As he tells Murdock, who has just proudly displayed the banks of computers at Rambo's disposal, "I've always believed the mind was the best weapon."

It is not my goal here to show that the *Rambo* films adhere entirely to the Reagan ideology,²³ but I think it important to work through this apparent contradiction between technology and the individual (one that plagued the entire decade, as can be seen in such films as *Alien* and *Terminator*), largely because it was a contradiction inherent in the Reagan philosophy itself, which continued, despite its insistence on technological innovation, to rely on individuality and not technology as the true basis for American superiority over Soviet thinking. Lon Cannon summarized Reagan's feelings on the matter in these words: "Reagan was always easily convinced that American ingenuity could overcome technological obstacles of great magnitude."²⁴ With SDI, conceived in the year of *First Blood*'s release, Reagan tried, unsuccessfully, to combine these two visions of American progress, since it would be the individual ingenuity of American scientists and the individual support of a visionary American president that would launch the technology that would, in Reagan's mind, ensure world peace. But the uneasiness of the marriage between technology and individualism is reflected in the rocky rhetoric of Reagan's 1988 Moscow summit speech:

Like a chrysalis, we are emerging from the economy of the Industrial Revolution, an economy confined and limited by the earth's physical resources, into [one] in which there are no bounds on human imagination and the freedom to create is the most precious natural resource.

Think of the little computer chip. Its value isn't in the sand from which it is made, but in the microscopic architecture designed into it by ingenious human minds. In the new economy, human invention increasingly makes physical resources obsolete. We are breaking through the material conditions of existence to a world where man creates his own destiny.²⁵

As these remarks make clear, one of the key features of the Reagan hard body was mental as well as physical superiority over its enemies. In the contrast between Yushin and Rambo, for instance, Yushin, though strong, does not seem to be very bright. He never speaks, and acts only when commanded by Podovsky. He seems to be *only* a "fighting machine." Rambo, on the other hand, decides when to work with Murdock and when to disobey his orders (in bringing the POWs back, for example). He uses his body not only to defeat the Soviet soldiers but to outsmart them as well. Given that so much of Reagan's character-

ization of the Soviet Union as an "evil empire" is grounded on communism's ostensible disregard for human individuality, it is imperative that Rambo be more than a fighting machine. In order to be the embodiment of Reagan democratic ideals, he must be both muscular *and* independent of mind. As Reagan went on to conclude at the Moscow summit, "Progress is not foreordained. The key is freedom of thought, freedom of information, freedom of communication." For Ronald Reagan, the best "weapon" to use against the Soviet Union is not then a tank or a nuclear bomb but the "free" American mind inside a hard body. This would be, as Rambo tells Colonel Zaysen in *Rambo III*, the Soviets' "worst nightmare."

Rambo: Do you really think you're going to make a difference?

Trautman: If I didn't, I wouldn't be going.

Rambo: It didn't before.

Trautman: That was another time.

These early lines in *Rambo III*, as Trautman tries to explain to Rambo why he is going in to deliver weapons to Afghani fighters rebelling against Soviet occupation, declare the changes that have taken place in Hollywood's representation of the hard body between 1982 and 1988. In *First Blood* Rambo won his battle only at the expense of a prison sentence; in *Rambo* he was told that winning this time was up to him; but in *Rambo III* his only friend tells him that times have changed, that battles such as those they fought in Vietnam are now winnable, not just by individuals like Rambo, but by the country as a whole. And though Rambo is again fighting the evil Soviet empire, he does it this time not on behalf of a handful of POWs but for an entire nation.

Whereas the first Rambo films ground their plots in the loss in Vietnam, a war that spanned the administrations of five presidents and has influenced the policies of an additional four, *Rambo III* takes as its narrative target a specific "loss" of the Carter administration, the Soviet takeover in Afghanistan in 1979, an act that Richard Nixon, setting the tone for the Reagan administration, described in these terms:

What made the fall of Afghanistan so significant a loss to the West was not just the fate of its 18 million people. . . . Not even its strategic location would make its loss so significant, if that loss had occurred in isolation. But it did not occur in isolation. It was part of a

pattern . . . of ceaseless building by the Soviets toward a position of overwhelming military force, while using subversion and proxy troops, and now even its own, to take over one country after another, until they are in a position to conquer or Finlandize the world.²⁶

Afghanistan, in Nixon's and then Reagan's logic, was more than simply another country that the Soviet Union had come to control. For these men, Afghanistan was one more stepping stone to eventual Soviet domination of the world. In such terms, Rambo's defeat of the Soviet garrison in Afghanistan is not simply a victory for himself, Trautman, or even the Afghani mujahideen, but for the entire free world. This is what the Reagan hard body has, by 1988, been advertised to achieve.

Here, as in *Rambo*, the national body is in peril of capture and death at the hands of the Soviet Union, as Trautman, on his mission to deliver weapons to the mujahideen, is captured by soldiers commanded by Colonel Zaysen (Marc de Jonge). And though Rambo enters Afghanistan only to rescue Trautman, his eventual support of the Afghanis escalates the battle from one for the national body to one for the Western body, or, more precisely, is staged as a battle in which the U.S. national body is now valued as *the* Western body itself. The numerous shots of Soviet aircraft firing on defenseless women and children, the tales of Soviets hiding bombs in childrens' toys, the scenes of Afghanis being tortured in the Soviet prison—all arouse not only images of the "evil empire," but imply that the Soviets would only commit such atrocities in any country that stood in the way of its intended goals of domination. Because these practices are, according to the film, typical of Soviets and not specific to their fight in Afghanistan, the people of Afghanistan come to stand in here for any people in the world who are struggling to maintain their freedom against the Soviet Union. It is here that Trautman's body is not simply the body of a captured American officer, but the imprisonment of the warrior for freedom, the one who is willing to confront the Soviets before it is too late. The battle that had been domestic in *First Blood* and against Vietnam's Communist government in *Rambo* is now a battle for democracy around the world. And the only body who can wage this battle for the beleaguered West, according to *Rambo III* and those who endorse its policies, is the hardened American body.

As a mark of how thoroughly this is a "different time," the problem of recognition that plagued Rambo in *First Blood* has not only disappeared, as it did in *Rambo*, but become commonplace enough to



Rambo leading Afghani rebels to rescue an entire nation. (Rambo III, Tri-Star Pictures)

become a joke within the narrative. The deputies of Hope could never be sure who Rambo was and whether they were seeing him or not; the government officials of *Rambo* knew Rambo on sight because of his reputation; but *Rambo III* moves into the world outside U.S. territories and bases to test Rambo's identity. And as the chanting Bangkok crowds attest at the opening of the film, even the people of Thailand know who Rambo is. As he battles another man in a brutal stick fight in order to gain money for the Buddhist monks who have allowed him to live with them, the crowds of gamblers surrounding the two fighters cheer "Ram-bol! Ram-bol!" It is in many ways more important that they know him, not for his credentials as a soldier—as Ericson says in *Rambo*, "You made a helluva rep for yourself in Nam"—but for the status of his body. They know Rambo as a tough and winning stick fighter in the gambling dens of Bangkok. To them, his popularity is not based on past accomplishments and medals won decades before but on his current abilities. This is, of course, the claim that Ronald Reagan would make about the U.S. hard body, that its reputation for toughness, strength, and superiority should not be



Bangkok betting on Rambo's hard body. (Rambo III, Tri-Star Pictures)

determined by acts undertaken decades before but by the acts of that body in the present—Grenada, Nicaragua, El Salvador, the Soviet Union. And when those acts are widely known, as they are here, they are approved by the masses of people who see them and the bodies that achieve them. Their approval and confidence is so great, in fact, that they are willing to bet on those bodies to win.

When Rambo meets Hamid (Doudi Shouka), the Afghani guide who is to take him to the village near the prison where Trautman is being held, Hamid does not recognize him at all. He even says to Rambo, to the great delight of Rambo fans, "You look like you have not been in war." But by the end of the film, after Hamid has seen Rambo fight Soviet commandos and risk his life to save Afghani women and children, he asks Rambo to stay and continue to fight with the mujahideen. But this is, after all, how Reagan has set up the U.S. national hard body, that it would not be known by its appearance or words but by its deeds, its willingness to risk itself for the welfare of the women and children and to fight Soviet commandos anywhere in the world. The hard body must act, not profess, its strengths and to do so

must continue to have stages upon which to perform its spectacular feats of muscular politics.

But although Hamid must be shown Rambo's abilities in order to believe them, film audiences demand no such tests of credibility. As director Peter MacDonald knew, audiences had, by 1988, become familiar not only with Rambo but with the hard-bodied president he emblemizes. So the source of skepticism in Afghanistan is a source of humor at home, as audiences gain an insider status, defining "us" against "them," on the basis of being able to recognize Rambo. After Hamid asks Rambo if he is a soldier or a mercenary and receives a negative answer to both inquiries, he is perplexed about Rambo's identity. "Are you a tourist?" he asks, incredulously. Rambo's simple reply—"I'm no tourist"—allows U.S. audiences to have a joke on the simple-minded Afghanis who have not yet been introduced to this U.S. product.

But the joke extends to the Soviets as well, marking their naïveté in not believing in this new U.S. body, assuming that all Americans are like those they met in the 1970s. An Afghani informer who overheard Hamid's conversation with Rambo tells Colonel Zaysen that Rambo has arrived and that he is a "tourist." After Rambo makes his first failed attempt to rescue Trautman, exploding half the compound and killing many soldiers, Zaysen screams to Trautman, "Who is this tourist?!" Zaysen is placed in the position of Sheriff Tease, who was equally perplexed about how Rambo could possibly do the things he did. But as an important indication of the increasingly positive attitudes toward the military and foreign interventions in the intervening years, the ignorant are now no longer U.S. citizens, or even the citizens of our allies (it was, after all, the security of Thailand that was the real concern after Vietnam), but the Soviets and those who have come under their influence. It is the Soviets, thanks to Rambo and Reagan, who will be most surprised when they have to confront the new American body, a body that is no longer that of a vulnerable tourist (think of Klinghoffer and the *Achille Lauro* incident or the TWA hijacking, all of which involved U.S. tourists), but instead that of a primed soldier.

This warrior identity is one of the key subthemes of *Rambo III* and a new twist to Rambo's character. Whereas in *First Blood* and *Rambo*, Rambo seemed the reluctant warrior, only fighting where others had drawn "first blood," and though he professes to not want to fight in *Rambo III*, Trautman, Rambo's trainer and mentor, confronts him about this ambivalence. When Trautman first asks Rambo to accompany him to Afghanistan, Rambo refuses, saying that it's

not his fight and that his battles are over. Trautman replies: "You may try, but you cannot get away from what you really are . . . a full-blooded combat soldier." When Rambo objects, "Not any more. I don't want it," Trautman concludes, "That's too bad. 'Cause you're stuck with it." He then goes on to tell Rambo a parable about a sculptor who produced a great work of art out of a rough rock. When praised, the sculptor declared that his was not the achievement of having produced this sculpture where there had been only rock, but simply of having revealed what had always been hidden within the rock, the figure that was now called art. Similarly, Trautman explains to Rambo, "We didn't make you this fighting machine. We just chipped away the rough edges. You're going to be tearing away at yourself until you come to terms with what you are. Until you come full circle." True to the Reagan narrative about the country, Trautman's parable suggests that bodies (and nations) like Rambo's are not manufactured out of nothing, but are simply fulfilling their inner destinies. Any ambivalence or confusion the "owner" of this body may feel can be attributed not to questions about that identity but to repression and denial, deliberate efforts to forget who and what those bodies are and the purposes they serve. Within this narrative, Rambo's stay at the Buddhist monastery or Carter's celebration of peace and negotiation are the products of active repessions of the true identity of Rambo and the nation he came to stand for. While in a different context, the nonviolence of Buddhism or of Carter's human-rights agenda could be viewed as alternatives to the aggressiveness of Reaganism, the plots of *Rambo III* and "Reagan 2" depict them not as alternatives but as weaknesses and denials. And while those denials are being made, the Reagan story tells, both Trautman and Afghanistan were taken prisoner by a country whose narrative has never wavered from its goal of world domination. For Reaganism, the warrior hard body *is* the American identity, and the scenario of the Reagan presidency is one in which Ronald Reagan must simply play the part of the modest sculptor who has been able to see behind the "rough edges" to the true inner nature of the American people and thereby produce a work of art to be appreciated by all the world.

Through the *only* focused shot of a woman in the entire film, audiences are invited to imagine how that appreciation will look. As Rambo first enters the Afghani village, the camera cuts from shots of men to boys and back again. But as Hamid's voiceover explains, "They never see man look like you," the camera cuts to a close-up of

a woman's eyes, seen above the veil that covers the remainder of her face, as she watches Rambo walk through the village. Though it is difficult to draw exact conclusions from one shot, these eyes clearly do not show distaste, fear, or repulsion, but instead interest, possibly admiration, at the least fascination. As Hamid narrates, the world is not used to seeing men like Rambo—hard bodies like those of Reagan Americans—but when they do see them, they are intrigued and fascinated, ready to learn what those bodies can do, not reject them out of hand. Through this woman's gaze, the camera discovers a boy following Rambo and Hamid, full of curiosity about Rambo's weapons and body. Though Hamid sends the boy away, he appears again in the film, following Rambo into the Soviet prison, where he is wounded in the leg. When Rambo sends him away to recover, he gives him the necklace he took from Co Bao's body after she had been shot in *Rambo*, indicating the place the boy has in Rambo's affections. This boy, and the woman who prefigured him, stand in the film and in the Reagan imaginary for the relationship non-Western, nonwhite peoples and women will have to this new American body, one not of equality but of child-like appreciation. Harking back to earlier representations of nonwhite peoples Americans are sent to rescue (think of John Wayne's smiling pat on the head to Hanchung, the Vietnamese orphan in *The Green Berets* (1968, John Wayne and Ray Kellogg), as he tells him, "You're what this is all about"), *Rambo III* reaffirms that the hard body Reaganism celebrates can be only white and male, while the grateful peoples of the world follow curiously behind, infatuated by the image of the men who "look like you."

In what became one of the most memorable and quoted scenes of the film, Trautman confirms for viewers the status of this hard body as superior to all others. When Colonel Zaysen asserts that he will hunt Rambo down, Trautman calmly replies, "You don't have to hunt him. He'll find you." Astounded, Zaysen exclaims, "Are you insane? One man against trained commandos? Who do you think this man is? God?!" To the cheers of U.S. audiences, Trautman coolly answers, "No. God would have mercy. He won't." In the hierarchy of the Reagan imaginary, the hard-bodied U.S. male is tougher even than God, for God might exhibit some of the weaknesses characteristic of the Carter presidency, particularly those of forgiveness and love (two days after his inauguration, Carter declared amnesty for Vietnam War draft evaders; during his campaign, he was criticized for speaking too often of love and compassion⁷). Thus Rambo is declared superior to non-Western and nonwhite peoples, white Soviets, and, finally, God

in his commitment to carrying out his missions and punishing his enemies. This is the image that Reagan wanted to put forward about the military and government—that it would show no mercy toward its Soviet enemies and would fight them relentlessly and indefatigably until the battle was won. There would be no hesitant incursions or half-prepared rescue missions—only victory.

Rambo III is so secure in its portrayal of the U.S. hard body that it can even close the film with a joke about the possibility of Rambo becoming “soft.” Where joking about such things would have been too risky in 1982 or 1985, by 1988, Trautman can confide to Rambo, after defeating an entire Soviet garrison, “We’re getting soft.” When Rambo replies, “Just a little,” this hypermodesty evinces, not the worries of the audience that such might actually be the case, but their snickers, as the audience is invited to join in the private joke that only two such hard-bodied men can afford to make, thereby sharing those bodies as national identities and national securities. As Rambo and Trautman drive off to the desert, the audience can rest assured that no one is worried about the status of Rambo’s and Trautman’s bodies except the Soviets.

But for all of the frolicking insider humor and camaraderie that the *Rambo* films invite U.S. audiences to share, like the Reagan social philosophy, there is a line drawn to separate the true hard bodies, who will rescue not only the country but the world, from the bodies of the remaining U.S. citizens. Although the demonization of the Soviet Union and the infantilization of the Third World serve to create a sense of national identity as a form of “national pleasure” and suggest that this nation is superior to all others, there is a division created within that national identity that insures that although Rambo’s body may serve as an emblem for audience identification with national strength, the members of the audience understand as well that they cannot all *be* Rambo. Because Reaganism as both a political and an economic philosophy was grounded on hierarchies and divisions between those who would benefit from government policies and those who would not, there had to be some way to distinguish *between* groups of Americans, especially among those people who might imagine that they had most to gain from Reagan’s assertive masculinities—men. In order for Reaganism to succeed, it had to have some way to lure men into a sense of shared mission with the Reagan state *at the same time* that it had to insist that there was some way to differentiate

from and explain the discrepancies between those were able to benefit from the profits of that state and those who, for reasons the Reagan logic made clear, *chase* not to. As one mechanism for drawing that line, the *Rambo* films offer the hard body itself.

In each of the *Rambo* films, there is a moment when his body is wounded. In *First Blood*, when Rambo first confronts Teasle’s deputies in the wooded mountains to which he has escaped, one rabid deputy intent on killing Rambo begins firing at him from a helicopter as he is perched precariously on the wall of a sheer cliff. As they both hover above the rocky ravine below, Rambo realizes that Galt will kill him if he remains where he is, so he leaps out from the wall to the pine trees below. As he crashes through the pine branches, one catches his right arm and rips it open. After causing Galt to fall from the helicopter to his death below, Rambo takes a needle and thread from his knife handle and proceeds to stitch together the bleeding skin of his wound. In *Rambo*, he is tortured by Sergeant Yushin. Tied to an electrified bed spring, Rambo’s body is continually jolted with higher and higher levels of electricity, enough to make the lights in the camp dim and flicker. Finally, after Podovsky has been forced to admit that Rambo is “the strongest so far,” Yushin takes Rambo’s knife from a brazier where it has been heating. Placing it against Rambo’s face, he slowly cuts a line down Rambo’s cheek with the glowing knife. Rambo only grimaces. But the best scene is reserved for *Rambo III*, where a piece of flying shrapnel from an explosion during the prison escape is lodged in Rambo’s right side. After rescuing Hamid and the boy and sending them away to safety, Rambo works on his wound by firelight. Using his thumb, Rambo forces the piece of wood out through his body. Then, after pouring gunpowder from a bullet into the back of the wound, Rambo lights it with a stick from his fire. The gunpowder explodes out both sides of his body, cauterizing the wound.²⁸

In each of the many times that I watched these films in public, these scenes never failed to arouse discomfort, especially among the male members of the audience. From subtle fidgeting to outright disgust, viewers who had been in synch with Rambo’s triumphs a minute before seemed suddenly distanced from him. Those who could fantasize easily about replicating Rambo’s assaults on tanks, rescues of prisoners, or uses of weapons seemed now to have difficulty imagining suturing or cauterizing gaping wounds in their own bodies. In each film, the wounds of Rambo’s body worked against audience identification with

him. Although the overall plot continued to invite identifications with his mission, methods, and muscles, these single moments suggested that such identifications could not be complete.

Such scenes are full of ambivalence and potential contradictions for the ideologies of the films. On the one hand, the ability to endure severe pain underscores how truly hard these bodies are. But on the other hand, the wounds indicate that the hard body *can* be wounded, that it isn't invulnerable or invincible, that it is not a machine but human flesh. On the one hand, these scenes suggest that viewers would all want to have bodies like these, bodies that can overcome pain in order to achieve a goal, bodies that recover from damages to go on and fulfill their mission. On the other hand, they can indicate that viewers would not want a body like this if having such a body means having to undergo such hardships, pain, and isolation. Why risk these contradictions? What can be gained from them?

On the most straightforward filmic level, such moments rationalize sustained attention to the exposed male body, scenes that, as Steve Neale pointed out some time ago, are sources of anxiety in a Hollywood film tradition in which the female body is usually the exclusive object of erotic desire.²⁹ Although all three films are devoted almost exclusively to the portrayal of Rambo's body, these scenes are among the few in which that body is still, in which Rambo is not pursuing enemies, firing weapons, or blending in with trees and mud. Consequently, audiences can examine Rambo here at some leisure and explain any anxieties aroused by that examination as anxieties of plot and not pleasure. But the eroticization of the male body can be achieved in other kinds of portrayals than suturing and cauterizing bleeding body parts. Why the wound?

There are several ways in which these scenes reinforce rather than contradict Reaganism. By arguing, for example, that the national body *can* be wounded—a case that one would think Reagan's image of national strength could not tolerate—Reaganism can insist on providing adequate protection for that body. If the national body were in fact invincible, there would be no need for arms buildups, weapons development, or billion-dollar military budgets. But by voicing concerns about vulnerabilities, Reaganism can argue that more needs to be done to insure that those vulnerabilities not be exposed. This cautionary logic can work on two levels—the individual and the national. Taking, as it so often did, the Iranian hostage situation as an indication of a vulnerability, the Reagan administration could argue that individual American lives are at risk and made vulnerable

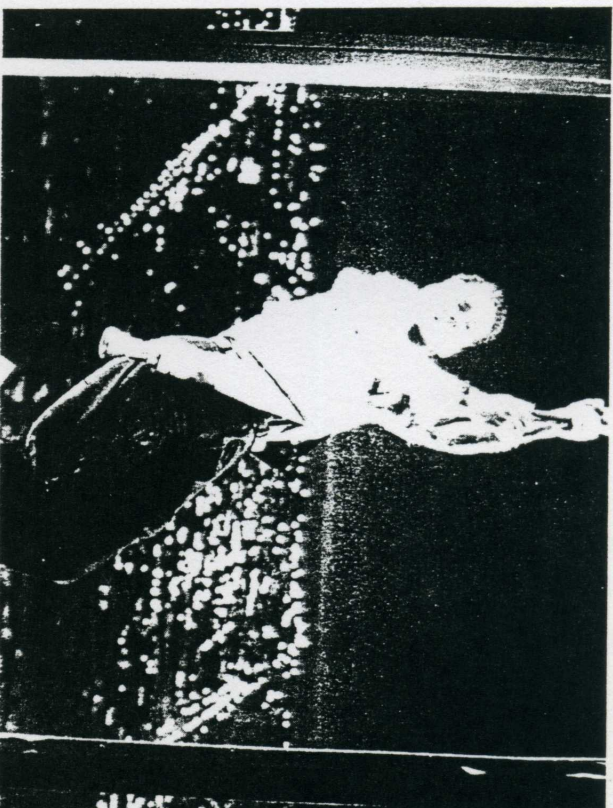
because of inadequate protection against terrorists. Reagan was to say exactly this about Grenada that "American lives are at stake."³⁰ Reagan's response to this projected fear was to train Special Forces units as hostage rescue teams, to target Mu'ammad Qaddafi and the PLO as leaders of international terrorist organizations, to subsequently bomb Libya and to have the PLO shoot at U.S. soldiers and to invade Grenada to insure that more U.S. hostages would not be taken. Reagan's "Star Wars" proposal promised to protect the national body from any vulnerabilities it might have in relation to a Soviet nuclear attack, since the country no longer possessed the numerical superiority in nuclear weapons that it had in earlier decades. The need for such a space-based weapons system is contingent on the insistence that the national body *can* be wounded. So although the Reagan military and foreign policy philosophies worked to construct a successful image of the national hard body, they could do so only within the context of acknowledging that that body was vulnerable.

Reagan's own vulnerability becomes an important correlative here, as his hard body was the object of an assassin's bullet. On the one hand, John Hinkley's shot proved the president vulnerable; on the other hand, Reagan's recovery proved him strong and resilient. This is a second reason for the portrayal of vulnerability—that the national body can be shown capable of recovering from a past wound. This is one of the necessary premises of Reagan's attacks on the Carter administration. If the "wounds" suffered by the national body during the Carter years—Iran, hostages, inflation, Afghanistan, Nicaragua, and so on—were irreparable, Reagan would lose the force of one of his most frequent claims, that his leadership would make a difference to the nation ("Are you better off now than you were four years ago?"). Like Rambo, the nation can repair itself. Without the need of outside assistance—from NATO, Japan, China, or other allies—the United States will be able to suture and cauterize its own gaping wounds. Relying only on its own ability to repair itself, the nation can return, like Rambo, to the fight against the Soviet Union.

But by far the most important function of these scenes is to simultaneously offer and deny the promise of Reagan prosperity to the viewers of Rambo's films. Rambo's painful self-surgery insists that the national body can both heal itself and remain strong and combat-ready despite its wounds, offering a reassuring form of "national pleasure" as audience members can identify with the hard national body that survives and defeats its enemies. But these scenes also declare that, at

the level of the individual body, there are differences between Rambo and most of the viewers of his films, ensuring that the feelings of sameness and unification that inspire such national pleasures do not "trickle down" to the level of the individual, where sameness and unification would be antithetical to the very mechanisms of prosperity Reaganism holds out. Most viewers, especially male viewers, are invited to recognize through these scenes that their bodies and Rambo's are not the same. Specifically, although viewers' bodies could be as vulnerable as his, suffering wounds and pain, their bodies, many men sense, could not survive those wounds as Rambo has done, because they could not perform the self-repair that enables Rambo to go on. This can only be perceived as a failing, a weakness brought out by the comparison to Rambo's hard body, which places such viewers in a position of inferiority to Rambo and the bodies like his that emblemize the Reagan social and economic system. As a result of such individualized de-identification, viewers are asked to explain discrepancies between themselves and Rambo as personal failings rather than systemic flaws. In keeping with the logic of the Reagan hierarchy, any differences between relative successes within the Reagan system must be attributed, not to preexisting racism, disproportionate allocations of social resources, or economic and class inequalities, but to personal inadequacies considered as internal *bodily* failures. In such a system, some men have earned their survival and others have not. And whereas weak men may not be actual enemies, they are nonetheless not entitled to the profits due to those whose strength insures the survival of the nation as a whole.

Rambo does not stand alone as the hard body of the Reagan era. Other Hollywood blockbusters present similar heroes, performing similar bodily feats, overcoming similar wounds, and fighting similar enemies. In the 1984 film *The Terminator*, Kyle Reese (Michael Biehn) and Sarah Conner (Linda Hamilton) overcome wounds, the police, and isolation to defeat a mechanical warrior that threatens to destroy the future of the human race. In the 1987 film *Lethal Weapon*, Martin Riggs (Mel Gibson) uses special-forces training to withstand torture and beatings in order to vanquish an evil ring of drug smugglers. In the 1987 film *Robocop*, Alex Murphy (Peter Weller) survives body transformation and mind erasure to outsmart and physically vanquish drug smugglers and corporate profiteers. And in the 1988 film *Die Hard*, John McClane (Bruce Willis) survives explosions, falls, and injuries to subvert a plot by foreign robber-terrorists. In each of these



John McClane's wounded body. (*Die Hard*, Twentieth Century Fox)

films, the hero is defined and determined by a focus on the body. In each case, the heroic body turns out to be, like Rambo's, superior to those of his enemies, his companions, *and* the audience. In each case, what determines a hero is the possession of a hard body. Though other characters may be quick-witted, charming, experienced, or clever, without the hard body to go with it, they cannot be heroes.

In these films, the hero is pitted against an enemy whose identity and nature makes the hero into an emblem of the national body. What is important to recognize is how, in the process of producing this national body, the nation is reconstructed. These films exhibit some of the ways Reaganism used hard bodies to redraw national boundaries. But what distinguishes these films from the *Rambo* sequence and marks their contribution to the Reagan imaginary is that, where the Rambo films worked out the Reagan foreign policy through battles with the Soviet Union, these films work out the Reagan domestic policy through home-front battles with internal enemies of Reaganism: terrorism, lawlessness, disloyalty, and the deterioration of the family. These later films in effect return to the domestic setting of *First Blood* to trace the alternate trajectory of