

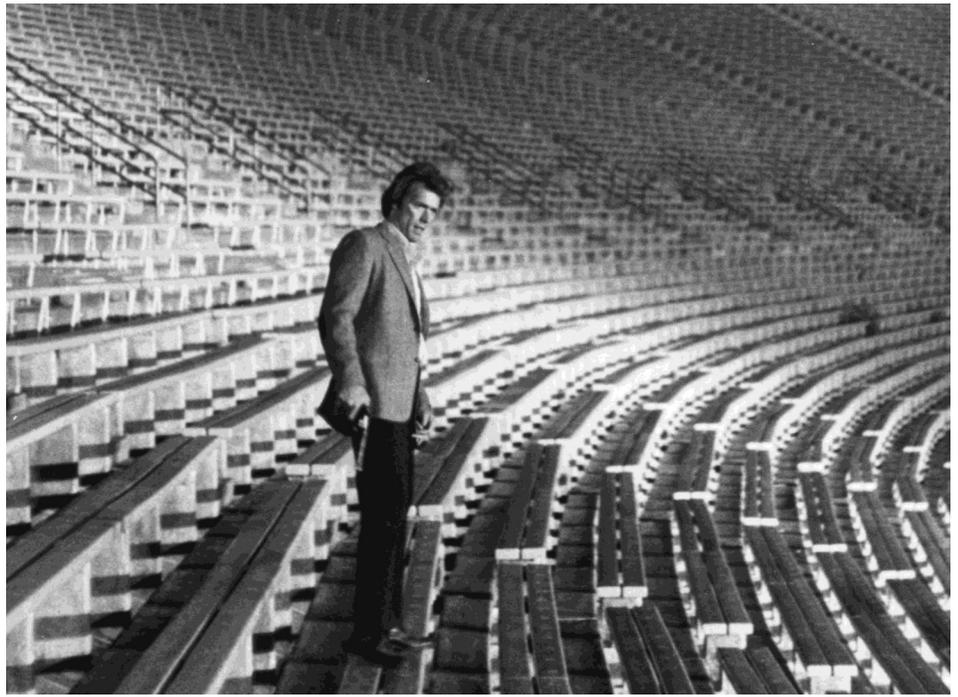
# Dirty Harry

By Matt Lohr

In the mid-1960s, two U.S. Supreme Court rulings, in the cases of *Escobedo vs. Illinois* (1964) and *Miranda vs. Arizona* (1966), would guarantee criminal suspects freedom from self-incrimination. If legal counsel was not present, an individual under suspicion could flat-out refuse to even speak to police. The “rights of the accused” were now the law of the land, but to old-school brothers of the badge, used to sweating, stressing, or flat-out beating confessions out of suspects, the rulings seemed like a direct assault on their ability to effectively conduct criminal investigations.

A conservative backlash, combined with then-rising violent crime rates, helped Ronald Reagan seize the governorship of California in '66, after campaigning on a vow to restore “law and order” to the state. Two years later, Richard Nixon took that hot-button promise national, and won the White House. In the cultural arena, movie and TV screens saw an influx of rough-edged cops who played by their own rules and put “punks” out of commission...*Miranda* and *Escobedo* be damned. And no dramatization of this shoot-first-and-don't-ask-questions ethos had greater impact or influence than “Dirty Harry.” Released in December of 1971, Don Siegel's thriller distilled the figure of the old-guard cop into something like a modern folk hero: A badge-wielding Paul Bunyan with a .44 Magnum instead of an axe.

“Dirty Harry” began life as an original screenplay called “Dead Right,” written by Harry Julian Fink and R.M. Fink; later drafts were penned by Dean Riesner and an uncredited John Milius. Warner Bros. originally purchased the script as a potential vehicle for Frank Sinatra, and the part was subsequently offered to a variety of leading men, including George C. Scott (who balked at the script's extreme-for-its-time violence) and Paul Newman (who found the character of Inspector Harry Callahan too right-wing for his sensibilities). Newman suggested the script might be a solid vehicle for Clint Eastwood, who, after years as a contract player and as Rowdy Yates on the long-running TV western “Rawhide,” had fi-



*Clint Eastwood as Inspector “Dirty Harry” Callahan hunts a killer at large in a San Francisco stadium. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.*

nally become a bankable movie star thanks to Sergio Leone's spaghetti-western “Dollars” trilogy. Eastwood agreed to do the film only on the condition that it be directed by Siegel, his frequent collaborator and filmmaking mentor.

Siegel began his career as an editor for Warners (he created the stage-setting montage that begins “Casablanca”), and was known as an efficient helmsman with a knack for elevating genre material while still delivering the button-pushing goods. “Dirty Harry,” which Siegel also produced, would be his fourth collaboration with Eastwood, and their first without overt ties to the Western genre. Harry Callahan strides the streets of a wild new frontier: San Francisco, then as now a bastion of liberal American sentiment. Instead of cattle rustlers or marauding Comanches, Harry's nemesis is Scorpio (Andy Robinson), a motiveless, conscience-free murderer whose crimes also include raping teenage girls and hijacking a school bus.

And no Western hero ever battled the obstructionist bureaucracy Harry finds himself up against. At every turn, his drive for justice is met by superior officers all too willing to negotiate with Scorpio, and lawyers who seem more concerned with the killer's rights than those of his victims. They're forever warning Harry against acts of potential harassment, coercion, or excessive force; a district attorney even invokes the names of *Miranda* and *Escobedo* as a cautionary note. Scorpio knows of these restrictions and

games them to his advantage, at one point paying a street thug to brutally beat him, then informing the press that Callahan was the perpetrator. But Harry knows he's got his man. Indeed, throughout the film, Harry is unwaveringly right about Scorpio's every move, which makes him (and the viewer) all the more frustrated at the rules and red tape blocking the detective's path. So, when Harry finally goes rogue, pursues Scorpio's hijacked school bus, and guns the murderer down, we sympathize with his actions...just as we do when, in the final shot of the film, he takes his now-meaningless badge and throws it over an embankment.

Of course, all the provocation in the world wouldn't matter if "Dirty Harry" didn't deliver as entertainment, and it's the picture's sheer ruthless effectiveness that makes its politics all the more compelling. Siegel directs with lean, economical craftsmanship, making sharp use of gritty character actors and real-life San Francisco locations (in particular Golden Gate Park's Kezar Stadium, where Harry's strong-arm pursuit of Scorpio finally skirts the line of straight-up torture). Lalo Schifrin's jazz-inflected score would set a sonic template for future cop films and TV shows, and while less gory than the genre's blood-drenched '80s heyday, the shootouts still pack a wallop, thanks to Carl Pingitore's pin-tight editing. The film is also unafraid to work the exploitation-leaning luridness of its material. Scorpio frequently attacks or kills children, and it's hard to imagine a contemporary picture featuring an image of a dead nude 14-year-old girl being pulled from a shallow grave.

While the role of Dirty Harry did not require him to flex acting muscles he hadn't already honed on previous pictures with Siegel, never before had the Clint Eastwood persona been so firmly fixed to the zeitgeist. Here was an aspirational figure for all walks of contemporary American life: Anti-authoritarian enough for the left, law-and-order righteous enough for the conservatives, always correct in his assumptions, unceasingly accurate in his aim. In his stylish yet functional working-stiff menswear, wielding his .44 Magnum, arguably the most iconic firearm in movie history, Eastwood cuts an indelible image, and the script provides him with a feast of hard-boiled dialogue, including the now-iconic "Do I feel lucky?" monologue (allegedly a Milius contribution), a scene so classic-hero cool that a seemingly endless number of parodies have failed to compromise its strength.

For his part, Eastwood has always maintained that he and Siegel only intended to make an entertaining detective thriller. And indeed, the ideologically incoherent nature of Scorpio's crimes seems to belie any agenda on the part of the filmmakers (despite the killer's peace-sign belt buckle and long hair, his targets include such ostensibly left-wing-friendly demographics as African-Americans and homosexuals). Still, upon its release, "Dirty Harry" became a lightning rod for controversy. "The New Yorker"'s Pauline Kael branded the picture "deeply immoral," a paean to "fascist medievalism." "Newsweek" dismissed it as "a right-wing fantasy," and protesters outside the following spring's Oscar ceremony carried signs reading "Dirty Harry Is a Rotten Pig." But the controversy only drew attention to the film, cementing its cultural cachet. Made for \$4 million, "Dirty Harry" would gross over \$28 million, spawning four sequels and an endless string of imitators. If you've ever enjoyed any film about a cop who throws aside the rulebook, butts heads with his bosses, and solves the big case while on suspension, you owe a tip of the cap to Harry Callahan.

And of course, Dirty Harry's style and philosophy continues to influence the rhetoric of conservative America. Reagan, a former actor who himself won the presidency in 1980, famously co-opted Harry's catchphrase "Go ahead, make my day" (from the Eastwood-directed 1983 sequel "Sudden Impact") to assert his willingness to veto proposed Congressional tax increases. And in 2016, in the face of ever-increasing left-leaning outrage against nationwide police brutality, Donald Trump, in his keynote convention address accepting the Republican nomination for the presidency, vowed to once again restore American "law and order." His most noteworthy celebrity supporter? Clint Eastwood.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

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