

# SICARIO, MACHIAVELLIANISM OF NEOCONSERVATIVE AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

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## TECHNICAL PRESENTATION

*Sicario* is a 2015 American movie, directed by Denis Villeneuve and written by Taylor Sheridan. The protagonist is Kate Macer, an idealistic FBI agent from the Critical Incident Response Group. During an assault on a house suspected to hide hostages for Mexican cartels, an explosion causes the death of two of her officers. Kate's superiors suggest her to take part in a special task force of the Department of Justice (DoJ), led by Matt Graver, charged to neutralize the Sonora cartel. While taking the plane to the task force base, Kate Macer meets Alejandro, Graver's partner, a mysterious contractor. After landing on the El Paso Base, they head to Juarez with a team that includes US Marshalls, Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) Agents and units of Delta Force Army, in order to capture the brother of one lieutenant of the cartel. During the final assault in the smuggling tunnels at the border, Kate Macer frontally opposes to Graver about the legality of the operation. Graver explains she is just a pretext for the setup of the operation. Since the CIA is not allowed to operate on the American soil, her FBI agent status was used as a legal cover. While the task force is taking

care of getting rid of the cartel members, Alejandro captures a policeman, a mule for the cartel, and forces him to drive to Alarcon's house. He also neutralizes Macer, who tried to follow him in the tunnels. Graver then tells Kate the real goal of the operation is to favor the Colombian cartel Medellin to stabilize drug trafficking and eliminate the escalation of violence at the border. Alejandro takes care of eliminating Alarcon and his family. His murder is a revenge for the murder of his own family, killed because he was a prosecutor fighting Mexican drug cartels in Colombia. The film ends with Alejandro threatening Kate Macer, forcing her to sign a document that certifies the legality of the operation. As he goes away, Kate aims her revolver on him but finally refuses to shoot.

Considered as a critical success at its release<sup>1</sup>, the movie was especially praised for Villeneuve's direction, the script and the performances from Emily Blunt (Kate Macer) and Benicio del Toro (Alejandro). Despite a local controversy in Mexico for the depiction of the border between Mexico and the United States and the city of Juarez<sup>2</sup>, *Sicario* allowed Director Denis Villeneuve to affirm himself in Hollywood after the thriller *Prisoner* (2013) and before the breakthrough of *Arrival* (2016).

The subject and the way to show the dark side of federal agencies found *Sicario* to be compared with *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), directed by Kathryn Bigelow, which focused on the tracking and the execution of Osama Bin Laden. It is interesting to show in this paper the similarities between the war on terror and the fight against drug traffics, especially since the 9/11 attack and the accession of the neoconservative doctrine in the Bush administration (2001-2009). The use of similar methods, which includes relying heavily on military forces and establishing exceptional measures, has left us to wonder if the "war on drugs" was more a question of foreign policy than public health. Thereby, the links between drug traffic and security threat could compromise the noble ideals of national health and focuses more on the theory of foreign policy developed since Machiavelli, focusing more on the success of operations rather than on the means put in place to achieve them. We will thus focus on how *Sicario* manages to express Machiavelli's principles in the fight against drug trafficking at the US-Mexican border, and how the tensions of the American society are represented through the main characters, i.e. Kate Macer, Matt Graver and Alejandro.

## SICARIO, MACHIAVELLIANISM AND NEOCONSERVATISM

The popular culture rooted the political thought of Machiavelli as a way to preserve power in unscrupulous or remorseful ways. We cannot enumerate the amount of characters depicted as “Machiavellian” in movies, books or real life that were also established as “villains”. But when we look a little bit closer, the political thought of Machiavelli is more the result of the need for political leaders to ensure first and foremost the security of their city, and the values they defend<sup>3</sup>. These principles are the foundation of the realist theory of International Relations. The world is considered as an anarchic place without legitimate supranational authority. Thus, the conflict between States is the only way for a political leader to establish its domination and the protection of the so-called national interests. In our analytical framework, the work of Machiavelli does not underestimate the need to apply reason in the conduct of foreign policy<sup>4</sup>. In his book *The Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livy* (1517), Machiavelli defends a more republican vision of the power, based on the political morality of the Roman republic. He develops the necessity of *virtù* for the leaders. To assume the security of their territory, their military and political decisions must involve foresight, courage and firmness<sup>5</sup>. Machiavelli insists on freedom as a principle preserving the Roman Republic. He also warns against the possible decadence of a republican regime that would abandon itself by delegating the defense of the homeland to mercenaries, and no longer to the people. By doing so, dominant would show their obstinacy to retain their prerogatives and their privileges:

*“And without doubt, if the object of the Nobles and of the Ignoble [populace] is considered, it will be seen that the former have a great desire to dominate, and the latter a desire not to be dominated and consequently a greater desire to live free, being less hopeful of usurping it [liberty] than*

*are the Nobles: so that the People placed in charge to guard the liberty of anyone, reasonably will take better care of it; for not being able to take it away themselves, they do not permit others to take it away.”*<sup>6</sup>

The political framework of *Sicario* illustrates the tensions between the necessity to accomplish the objective of getting rid of the drug cartels at the Mexican border, in order to assure the security of the United States, and the decisions taken in order to achieve this goal. This leads to tensions between Kate Macer, a young and idealist FBI recruit, and Matt Graver, the leader of the task force against the main perpetrators of these cartels. Screenwriter Taylor Sheridan, from the El Paso region, has been deeply affected by the escalation of violence in the border area as well as the involvement of US agents in this fight. It was especially a female agent of the FBI he knew for several months that inspired him to create the character of Kate Macer. This real-life based character was a non-negotiable condition for the director Denis Villeneuve, despite the strong opposition from the production of the film<sup>7</sup>. According to Taylor Sheridan, *Sicario* depicts the most violent period of fights against drug cartels in the late 2000s in the city of Juarez. The methods of US agencies, i.e. DEA, CIA or FBI, were greatly strengthened by the Bush administration, according to the neo-conservative principles, following the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. One of the examples in *Sicario* is the scene where Alejandro tortures Guillermo Diaz<sup>8</sup> with the “water boarding” method. This method has been practiced by the CIA in many secret prisons around the world<sup>9</sup>.

Sharing the same representation of the world and, more generally, of international relations (namely an anarchic environment where each State poses a threat to the other), the third-generation neoconservatives were greatly influenced by Machiavelli’s supporters in foreign policy. The election of George W. Bush as President in 2000 allowed them to be part of the decision-making process in the American foreign policy. The

Vice-President Richard Cheney, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz (who had Allan Bloom, a student of Leo Strauss, as a college teacher), and finally John Bolton, the Deputy Secretary of State for International Security, were the main architects of neoconservative foreign policy<sup>10</sup>. During the first Bush administration, they were the main preachers of preventive war, in order to prevent the potential rise of enemies that would affect US strategic influence<sup>11</sup>. John Bolton, considered as a “War Hawk”, was especially involved in the Iraq intervention of 2003, and a strong advocate for military threats against the Iranian and North Korean regimes. The proponents of the neoconservative theory also have in common to express military conflicts with a simple rhetoric (“you’re either with us, or against us” from president Bush during the launch of his program against terrorism), and to insist on the “internal” threat of the enemy in order to enforce the principles of foreign policy on American soil itself<sup>12</sup>.

This principle is important in the decision-making process and the responsibilities taken by the main characters in *Sicario*. Machiavelli’s rhetoric, as much as the neoconservative one, does not focus on ethical issues but only on the success of actions. This is especially the case of Alejandro’s character in his ultimate goal. It was because of his involvement as a committed prosecutor against the drug cartels that he saw his family being murdered. He then became a hitman<sup>13</sup> for the CIA, charged to hunt the leaders of Mexican cartels. His morality is one of the questions that has elicited the most questions from screenwriter Taylor Sheridan: “Does this make him a bad man? I do not know [...] He’s a volunteer, for his own reasons”<sup>14</sup>. His mission may be associated with Machiavelli’s idea: “the greatness of a crime can cover his infamy.” In *The Discourse on Livy*<sup>15</sup>, Machiavelli tells the story of Pope Julius II who decided to destroy all the tyrants who occupied the lands of the Church, by getting there almost alone. In itself, he committed the most important crime of the Ten Commandments (“you shall not kill”), but he did it in order to lib-

erate the peoples who were exploited on religious grounds. This idea of actions taken as criminal but guided by a larger consideration is the basis of American neoconservative thinking. George Bush focused his political program on the importance of Christian religious values in America, being himself a “born again”, who rediscovered the faith after several years of alcoholism<sup>16</sup>. The American foreign policy of the Bush administration was deeply marked by the attacks of September 11, 2001 on the World Trade Center (New York) and the Pentagon (Virginia). Therefore, their main objective would be to focus on the hunt and capture of the leader of the terrorist group responsible for this attack, Osama bin Laden. However, the difficulty of this mission was that the American troops would not be facing a clearly identified state-like enemy, but rather a nebula scattered even in the American population. This “Good vs. Evil” approach requires contradictory action from protagonists’ claims to be in the right side.

The need to reach one’s ends by going beyond the principles for which the republic fights for shows the limits of Machiavelli’s republican *virtù*. The latter explains that good men, after certain events, can easily be corrupted<sup>17</sup>. By now working for the Colombian cartels and the CIA, Alejandro joins forces with those he had sworn to fight as a prosecutor in order to carry out his vendetta against Alarcon. As Graver explains to Kate after the final assault: “Alejandro works for anyone who will point him toward the people who made him.”

<sup>1</sup> The character of Graver illustrates the method of Vice President Dick Cheney in terms of foreign policy during the administration of George W. Bush. As the Republican president had little expertise in foreign policy, Richard Cheney had considerable room for maneuver to implement his strategy. This meant concealing a lot of information from the president to avoid exposing him and making him “responsible” for US diplomatic and military operations<sup>19</sup>. By refusing to reveal to Kate Macer the true reasons for the dismantling of Mexican cartels throughout the film, Graver conceals information from US federal

intelligence agencies and thus avoids them assuming diplomatic and political responsibilities. One of the keys to the Cheney doctrine was to quietly release US forces from administrative standards to ensure their effectiveness<sup>20</sup>.

The strategy of freeing American agents from any political restraint allows them to perform their actions according to their convictions, and thus satisfy their own state of mind. Machiavelli explains that soldiers fighting for their own glory are the ones who are most efficient<sup>21</sup>. In *Sicario*, one could argue that Kate Macer’s situation illustrates this way of motivating soldiers to become more involved in defending American republican values. Her idealistic character forces her to accept the suggestion of her hierarchy to be able to track down the people responsible for the failure of her last operation in Arizona, instead of focusing on the cartel’s little hands. However, as we can see throughout the film, it’s her superiors who take advantage of the situation, using her as a cover for their true mission, making her believe in the merits of the task force. It is interesting to note that Macer’s colleague, Reggie Wayne, is refused by Graver on the pretext of his academic cursus<sup>22</sup>. The choice of a female principal character, *sine qua none* condition from screenwriter Taylor Sheridan and director Denis Villeneuve, stands out from the traditional representation of the American hero, i.e. a heterosexual white man with a classic nuclear family (wife and children)<sup>23</sup>. Here, the main character is a woman, divorced, without children or family ties. Her personal situation is a determining factor of her selection by Matt Graver<sup>24</sup>. Macer’s personal situation, the absence of personal constraints, allows her to devote herself solely to her mission, Machiavelli’s representation of a soldier’s glory. On the opposite, there is great mistrust of exiled people, whether in Machiavelli’s work, in *Sicario* or among the neo-conservatives. Machiavelli considers citizens must distrust them because they can represent a threat to the republic<sup>25</sup>. Their personal goals are usually different from the goals for

which they are selected, and usually involve a willingness to return home or leave as soon as possible. In *Sicario*, this suspicion is illustrated right at the first meeting between Kate Macer and Alejandro on the plane<sup>26</sup> that brings them to their base in El Paso. The disturbing soundtrack and the presentation of Alejandro from the beginning as a mysterious and dark character, hidden behind sunglasses and avoiding answering Macer’s questions, accentuate the “geopolitical atmosphere” developed by Klaus Dodds<sup>27</sup>. Macer’s doubts develop throughout the film as she gets no clues about Alejandro’s intentions. She questions Graver at the end of the first meeting between the different agents and during the final assault, she decides to follow him when he takes a different path from the intervention team, in order to get revenge from the man responsible by killing him and his whole family<sup>28</sup>. After neutralizing him by shooting him in his bullet-proof vest, Alejandro finds Kate at her home and threatens her with her revolver, so she would sign a paper to make the entire operation legal. All the tension accumulated throughout the film between the two protagonists is reflected in this final scene, where Kate then has the opportunity to kill Alejandro in cold blood but does not find the strength to drop her republican values.

This representation of mistrust of exiles can be put in relation with the “Curveball” scandal during the US intervention in Iraq in 2003<sup>29</sup>. From his real name Rafid Ahmed Alwan al-Janabi, “Curveball” served as a crucial source to justify the intervention of the Bush administration in Iraq on the grounds of the presence of weapons of mass destruction. With a chemical engineering background, “Curveball” claimed to have worked in a secret laboratory for biological weapons in the 1990s before going into exile in Germany and seeking political asylum there. Despite the doubts of the German intelligence services regarding inconsistencies in his statements to the CIA, the Bush administration intervened in Iraq in 2003. In 2005, the revelations about “Curveball” and American stubbornness – despite the reports of the in-



spectors of the United Nations – began to be published. This case is still considered one of the most serious intoxications in espionage.

## CONCLUSION

It is clear that *Sicario* is not only a movie about the violence of fights against the drug cartels at the Mexican border, but also a representation of the principles that guided the Bush administration in its foreign policy, and the way it affected the Homeland Security of the US. For Machiavelli, foreign policy does not differ from domestic politics, but there are just different aspects of the *virtù* to convey both. As an agent of the FBI, and thus of US domestic security, Kate Macer embodies the defense of the American republic and the values of liberty on which it is based. Graver and Alejandro, recruited by the CIA and therefore responsible for external actions, embody the military *virtù* to maintain American foreign interests in the fight against drug cartels. In doing so, we can argue that *Sicario* is a close representation of a functioning republic regime according to Machiavelli: the establishment of civil discord between the elites, and the plebs, a perpetual political conflict inherent to the republic<sup>30</sup>. The link between the fight against drug trafficking and the fight against terror seems to be accentuated in *Sicario's* sequel, *Soldado*. This movie focuses on the characters of Graver and Alejandro, in their mission to hunt down a cartel-spawn that teams up with terrorist groups.

## ENDOTES

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