

United States History and Government  
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Movie Analysis: The Last Samurai. Warner Brothers. 2003.

The Last Samurai takes place in 1876. The movie is about Katsumoto Moritsusu, the last Samurai of Meiji Japan, and guilt-ridden Captain Algren of the U.S. Army. Captain Algren's identity as an American is haunted by the actions of the U.S. Army and their treatment of Indians. He has become an alcoholic and hopes that one last battle will be the end of his shame as a soldier who helped exterminate Indian culture in America's war against Indians. He agrees to be hired to train Japanese soldiers and engage Katsumoto who is resisting the globalization of Japan. However, during his encounter with Katsumoto, Captain Algren is captured. During his captivity he learns about the honor of the Samurai and becomes a warrior who fights with Katsumoto against the Japanese army. In the end, Captain Algren delivers the sword of the last Samurai to Emperor Meiji and defeats American diplomatic plans to become the sole provider of armaments to the modernizing nation of Japan.

This movie tells us about the clash of civilizations in 1876: the war of America against Indians and the drive to modernize Japan against the resistance of traditional culture. The movie also presents to viewers a glimpse of American diplomacy and by the use of flashback techniques, The Last Samurai shows viewers the horrible treatment of American Indians in America's march from east to west. The movie makes clear the predominance of "superior firepower" both in the conquest of the resistance of American Indians and in the conquest of modern over ancient Japanese culture.

**An important scene** of the movie tells us about entertainment and arms sales in 1876, as part of the industrialized economic transformation of America. The scene takes place during a celebration of America's centennial in San Francisco. Decorated war hero Captain Nathan Algren is both introduced and then fired by a Winchester Rifle salesman. The action then moves to a restaurant where Captain Algren is hired as a mercenary to fight in Japan:

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Winchester, America's leader in all forms of armament used by the United States Army, celebrates our nation's centennial by bringing you a true American hero.

As the words "true American hero" are hawked to the audience awaiting the appearance of the hero, Captain Algren takes a drink from a flask. Flanked by

drooping flags, the movie introduces the American war hero as one who is drowning out his past through alcohol. Captain Algren needs to be escorted to the stage by the arms salesman who assures Captain Algren that this will be his last performance. Captain Algren is seen leaving the backdoor of his staged performance and he is escorted by an old army buddy to a restaurant. The scene also gives the viewer a brief perspective of Americans in the eyes of the Japanese: "America is a nation of rude and cheap traders."

**Historical Commentary:** The Last Samurai is based on a screen play rather than a book or play. America is cast as the central actor in the modernization of Japan, when in fact Japan was pressured by both internal ambition and by European powers to modernize. Captain Aldren is a fictional substitute for two historical figures, one from France, another from America. The French army captain, Jules Brunet participated in the Japanese Boshin War of 1868-1869, and the American mercenary who inspired the creation of Aldren participated in the modernization of the Ever Victorious Army of China from 1860-1864. The character of Aldren is the result of creative screen writers. However, the memories haunting Captain Aldren are the nightmares of American expansion. The predominance of advanced military weapons in the 19<sup>th</sup> century still haunts America today as a major arms supplier to nations in civil war, such as Syria, Egypt, Iraq, and Afghanistan.