



The Amistad Case in Fact and Film

by Eric Foner

Historian Eric Foner, DeWitt Clinton Professor of History at Columbia University, examines the issues surrounding the historical film *Amistad*. In this essay he explores the problems faced by the producers of *Amistad* and the shortcomings of both the film and its accompanying study guide in their attempt to portray history. More importantly, Foner raises questions not only about the accuracy of details and lack of historic context, but also about the messages behind Hollywood's portrayal of history as entertainment. (Posted March 1998)

Compared with most Hollywood megafilms, *Amistad* must be considered a step forward: it's about slavery, not exploding volcanoes or rampaging raptors. But given that Steven Spielberg is the director, Anthony Hopkins and Morgan Freeman the stars, and a reported \$75 million was spent on production, it can only be judged a disappointment. It does contain a few visually compelling moments, such as the scene on a slave ship that viscerally conveys the horrors of the Middle Passage. Overall, however, as a movie *Amistad* is simply a bore. As history, this account of a Cuban slave ship seized in 1839 by its African captives, and their legal travail that ended in the U. S. Supreme Court, also leaves much to be desired.

Amistad's problems go far deeper than such anachronisms as President Martin Van Buren campaigning for reelection on a whistle-stop train tour (in 1840, candidates did not campaign), or people constantly talking about the coming Civil War, which lay twenty years in the future. Despite the filmmakers' orgy of self-congratulation for rescuing black heroes from oblivion, the main characters of *Amistad* are white, not black.

The plot pivots on lawyer Roger Baldwin's dawning realization that the case he is defending involves human beings, not just property rights, and on the transformation of John Quincy Adams, who initially refuses to assist the captives but eventually persuades the Supreme Court to order their return to Africa. As in *Glory*, an earlier film about black Civil War soldiers, *Amistad*'s black characters are essentially foils for white self-discovery and moral growth.

This problem is compounded by having the Africans speak Mende, a West African language, with English subtitles. A courageous decision by Hollywood standards, this device backfired along the way when someone realized that Americans do not like subtitled movies, as foreign filmmakers have known for decades. In the end,

most of the Mende dialogue ended up on the cutting-room floor. Apart from the intrepid Cinque, the Africans' leader, we never learn how the captives responded to their ordeal. It would have been far better to have the Africans speak English (the film, after all, is historical fiction), rather than rendering them virtually mute.

Most seriously, *Amistad* presents a highly misleading account of the case's historical significance, in the process sugarcoating the relationship between the American judiciary and slavery. The film gives the distinct impression that the Supreme Court was convinced by Adams' plea to repudiate slavery in favor of the natural rights of man, thus taking a major step on the road to abolition.

In fact, the *Amistad* case revolved around the Atlantic slave trade — by 1840 outlawed by international treaty — and had nothing whatever to do with slavery as an domestic institution. Incongruous as it may seem, it was perfectly possible in the nineteenth century to condemn the importation of slaves from Africa while simultaneously defending slavery and the flourishing slave trade within the United States.

In October 1841, in an uncanny parallel to events on the *Amistad*, American slaves being transported from Virginia to Louisiana on the Creole seized control of the ship, killing some crew members and directing the mate to sail to the Bahamas. For fifteen years, American Secretaries of State unsuccessfully badgered British authorities to return the slaves as both murderers and “the recognized property” of American citizens. This was far more typical of the government's stance toward slavery than the *Amistad* affair.

Rather than being receptive to abolitionist sentiment, the courts were among the main defenders of slavery. A majority of the *Amistad* justices, after all, were still on the Supreme Court in 1857 when, in the Dred Scott decision, it prohibited Congress from barring slavery from the Western territories and proclaimed that blacks in the United States had “no rights which a white man is bound to respect.”

The film's historical problems are compounded by the study guide now being distributed to schools, which encourages educators to use *Amistad* to teach about slavery. The guide erases the distinction between fact and fiction, urging students, for example, to study black abolitionism through the film's invented character, Theodore Joadson, rather than real historical figures. And it fallaciously proclaims the case a “turning-point in the struggle to end slavery in the United States.”

Most galling, however, is the assumption that a subject does not exist until it is discovered by Hollywood. The guide ends with a quote from Debbie Allen, *Amistad*'s producer, castigating historians for suppressing the “real history” of African-Americans and slavery. Historians may be guilty of many sins, but ignoring slavery is not one of them. For the past forty years, no subject has received more scholarly attention. All American history textbooks today contain extensive treatments of slavery, almost always emphasizing the system's brutality and the heroism of those who survived — the very things *Amistad*'s promoters claim have been suppressed.

If the authors of the study guide really want to promote an understanding of slavery, they should direct students not to this highly flawed film, but to the local library. There they will discover several shelves of books on slavery and slave resistance, from academic tomes to works for children. Maybe, in this era of budget cuts, some of that \$75 million could have more profitably been spent on our public libraries.

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