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Racial Ideology in Government Films: The Past and Present of the US Information Service's *Men of the Forest* (1952)

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Abstract: Movies beyond the scope of Hollywood and entertainment have shaped notions of race in American culture since the early decades of cinema. A range of nontheatrical sponsors and creators in the US made films to serve practical functions in society—to inform, to organize, to persuade, to promote, etc. The US federal government was a major sponsor of many of these films, which provided American and foreign audiences depictions of race that differed considerably from popular commercial images. For example, *Men of the Forest*, a film made in 1952 by the United States Information Service focuses on the Hunters, a Black family who owns land and a forestry business in rural Georgia. A documentary of sorts, the film highlights Black life, work, and land ownership in the South in ways not seen in popular feature films of the day. Yet, in the film and others like it, histories of institutional racism are woven into cinematic form and content in ways that are distinct from the entertainment industry. The creators of *Men of the Forest* omit details of segregation in the South to emphasize the Hunter family as examples of American democracy, a choice suited to the film's Cold War purpose: to counter the anti-American message of Soviet propaganda for foreign audiences. On one hand, by producing and distributing the film, the federal government acknowledged Black farmers and landowners in the Jim Crow South. On the other hand, it avoided the structural inequality surrounding the Hunters to frame their reality as an example of American democratic progress for international circulation. Today, government films like *Men of the Forest* prompt contemporary reflection on the institutional histories they represent and their evolution into the present. The film and many others are available online due to the digitization of collections from the National Archives, Library of Congress, and elsewhere. With this increase in access, contemporary scholars have the ability to investigate how the federal government and its various internal entities mediated racial ideologies with moving image technologies. As an example of such research, this essay examines *Men of the Forest* by focusing on the past and present contradictions that arise from its depiction of a Black family with land and an agricultural business in rural Georgia. Two recent events shed light on the histories reflected in the film and their contemporary significance. In 2018, *Descendants of Men of the Forest, The Legacy Continues*—a documentary created by family members of the film's original participants—contextualized the original production as evidence of the Hunter family's legacy in the community of Guyton, Georgia. Underlying this local effort, *Men of the Forest* serves as an important historical event and record of the family and the community. On a broader scale, in March 2021, Congress passed a large relief package for disadvantaged minority farmers, intended to help alleviate decades of systemic racism in government agricultural programs. Lawsuits from white farmers and conservative organizations followed quickly, challenging the provision of government aid based on race. In this federal context, *Men of the Forest* exposes an institutional image of individual success that downplays the structural racism facing people of color, especially those with agricultural livelihoods. Even as politics and legislation evolve, this vision of democracy once exported by the federal government has widespread currency and accumulating effects. The connections between *Men of the Forest* and these recent events reveal the racial politics at play in government films and the ways in which they take shape in the real world beyond the screen.

Keywords: race; film; US government; southern history



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1. Introduction

Throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty first, films made for purposes beyond entertainment have reflected and shaped notions of race in the US as they have sought to inform, organize, persuade, promote, etc. The US government was a major sponsor of such films made for nontheatrical contexts for much of the twentieth century. While entertainment cinema in the US tracks racial fantasies and fictions in popular American culture, government films track practical images of race used within political and ideological cultures across the country and beyond national boundaries. These productions reveal competing and evolving notions of race that the federal government employed using film technology. As government films are increasingly digitized and made available online, they provide an opportunity to better understand how nonfiction cinema has been used by institutions not only to represent but to also shape ideologies of race in the US. Moreover, analyzing and interpreting government films from a contemporary vantage point reveals how the realities and ideas they reference—never fully contained or controlled within their frames—have lived on and reshaped their meaning.

Men of the Forest, a federal production from 1952 that focuses on a Black family who owns land and a forestry business in rural Georgia, provides a rich example of a government representation of race that necessitates working across time to interpret.¹ Produced by the United States Information Service (USIS) as propaganda for foreign audiences during the Cold War, the film's institutional depiction of race is unique today and perhaps more progressive than one might expect. *Men of the Forest* features locally shot footage of the Hunter family as they cut and sell timber and save money for a new saw for their family forestry business in coastal Georgia. The film highlights Black farming and land ownership in the South in ways not seen in narrative feature films of the day. Yet, histories of institutional racism are woven into its cinematic form and content in ways that are distinct from the entertainment industry. *Men of the Forest* celebrates the Hunters' agricultural labor, adaptation to new technology, and work ethic without acknowledging segregation in the South, a choice suited to the film's Cold War purpose: to counter the anti-American message and accusations of US racism in Soviet propaganda. On one hand, the film shows a federal government that acknowledged Black farmers and landowners in the Jim Crow South. On the other hand, it avoided the structural inequality surrounding the Hunters to frame a positive national image for international political gain. Today, the contradiction underlying the federal government's representation of race in *Men of the Forest* takes on new meaning as recent events and images contextualize its legacy on national and local scales.

Interaction with *Men of the Forest* today happens primarily in a digital environment removed from the film's initial production and purpose. Motion picture preservationists at the US National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) digitized and posted the film to *YouTube* in 2017, noting it as one of their favorite and most unusual finds of the year for its representation of Black protagonists (Amidon and Holmstrom 2017). NARA's digitization and posting of the film online allowed it to circulate digitally as a public artifact open to new viewing contexts that have illuminated its significance beyond its initial function as Cold War propaganda. The contradictory treatment of race in *Men of the Forest*, at once affirmation and simplification of the Hunter family for political objectives, is thus open to comparison and interpretation across time as it now exists in online spaces. This contemporary situation is now the norm for many government films (and nontheatrical films more broadly) as preservationists and collectors have digitized and made archives available online. Examining films like *Men of the Forest* in their contemporary state reveals the evolution of their meaning and illuminates the ideological power and malleability of governmental visions of race in American media and culture.

An historical lens oriented toward contemporary interaction with *Men of the Forest* reveals how the federal government envisioned race in the US within the film and what it means today. The first section of this essay situates *Men of the Forest* within a broader history of government film images of race and a more precise account of race in federal

propaganda produced by the USIS during the early Cold War. Close analysis of the film in its immediate context shows how the federal government utilized nonfiction images of the Hunter family and their Georgia homestead to visualize American racial equality for ideological consumption by foreign audiences. The second section engages *Men of the Forest* as a contemporary archival text shaped by the passing of time and the evolution of the realities referenced on screen. Since NARA digitized the film in 2017, new interpretations of its images reflect temporal and social changes on national and local scales. The film belongs to contemporary contexts that reorient its purpose and value, and the meaning of its depiction of the Hunter family. These recent interpretations, when viewed in relation to the film's historical context, reveal the limited and contradictory frame that the federal government used to represent a Black landowning family in the Jim Crow South.

On a national scale, the film's propagandistic vision has proven misleading as recent federal legislation reveals that rural landownership and agricultural livelihoods for Black Americans still bear the historical effects of institutional racism. In March 2021, Congress acknowledged the inequalities that once faced the Hunter family as they passed a large aid program for farmers of color, intended to help alleviate decades of systemic racism in government agricultural programs. Yet, lawsuits from white farmers and conservative organizations followed quickly, challenging the provision of government aid based on race, presumably on the assumption that institutional racism is a matter of perception. *Men of the Forest* reveals that the federal government set a precedent for such dismissals of institutional racism. The USIS visualized this ideology on an international scale as the film celebrated a Black family unhindered by racism while racial equality had not been actualized in the US. As recent legislation reveals, this ideology of dismissal persists and affects contemporary politics of race and efforts to reckon with the nation's institutional history of racism.

The long-term effects of the institutional racism erased from *Men of the Forest* were exposed on a local scale in February 2020, as Ahmaud Arbery was murdered by white men in a Georgia neighborhood not far from the Hunters' hometown of Guyton. While segregation and institutional discrimination remained out of view in the film, American racism and its evolution appeared shockingly nearly 70 years later in cell phone footage of Arbery's murder. A former white cop and his son acting as vigilantes physically enforced the color line once institutionalized and ideologically condoned by local and national governments. They chased and gunned down the unarmed Arbery on the presumption that he had trespassed and stolen from a neighborhood property. An accomplice's video recording of the horrific killing captured the continued racial policing of land and property in rural Georgia and prompted further state and federal investigation when leaked over two months later. This personal footage filmed in proximity to the actual location of the Hunter family's land reveals how individual notions of land and property in coastal Georgia continue to carry institutional histories of violently enforced racial boundaries even though they were removed from view in *Men of the Forest*.

Bridging the local and national scales at which *Men of the Forest* takes on new meaning, NARA's preservation and digitization of the film led to rediscovery of the film by the Hunter family in Georgia in 2017. The film, long inaccessible to the American public due to legal restrictions on the domestic release of United States Information Agency (USIA) materials,² was seen for the first time by the Hunters' descendants and one of the family members featured in production, James Hunter. After the rediscovery, Remington Kent, the grandson of James Hunter, produced a new documentary about the original film and the family's legacy in the local community that screened at an area theater. *Descendants of Men of the Forest, the Legacy Continues* (2018) reclaims the film by returning its images of the Hunters and their home, land, and agricultural livelihood to their local context. Interviews with family and friends provide details omitted by the federal government about the work and personal lives of the Hunters, as well as the Reeses—a neighboring family shown in the film. The familial and local investment in the film as a record of the Hunter and Reese families and means of illuminating their past for the present reveals the temporality of the

US government's control over *Men of the Forest* and the contemporary potential to access and resist its institutional legacy.

Created as propaganda, *Men of the Forest* provided an image of the nation that emphasized racial equality to promote the American government. The film celebrated the Hunter family for their hard work, landownership, and use of modern technology yet omitted from view their lack of civil rights and its effect on their lives in the Jim Crow South. Examining the film today, its framing and omission speaks to an expedient recasting of American racial identity at the federal level during the Cold War, a move to combat communism in a war of national public image that took priority over reckoning with state-sanctioned racism. The film erased the racist values and structures within American democracy that continue to affect people of color and to shape notions of individualism, property, and prosperity. This distorted vision of American democracy maintains ideological influence and accumulating effects that should not be distanced from the film as it circulates online. The past of *Men of the Forest* remains present and actively evolves in meaning and significance today. Recent national-scale events and conversations about enduring racial injustice expose the USIS's erasure of institutional racism from images of Black landowners in rural Georgia in 1952. At the same time, the Hunter descendants' recent rediscovery of *Men of the Forest* reorients its frame to reclaim familial and communal imagery no longer restricted to government use. Both scales and contexts to which *Men of the Forest* now belongs bring into view what was omitted or distorted by the USIS, which provides an opportunity to reckon with powerful institutional ideologies of race that developed during and after the Cold War.

2. Government Film and Race

Representations of race in films produced outside the realm of theatrical entertainment in the US are understudied but gaining attention at the intersection of American film history and cultural studies. In recent decades, archivists and scholars have drawn attention to a diverse range of films made for nontheatrical purposes and contexts and their vulnerable status in libraries and collections transitioning to digital infrastructures. Questions of race in these films—made by a variety of sponsors and/or creators—coincide with efforts to define and categorize them. For example, Allyson Nadia Field and Marsha Gordon address the representation of race in American nontheatrical films, a broad and diverse category they define by its marginalization in comparison to commercial cinema (Field and Gordon 2019). They argue that the range of films examined in their collection “marks a radical and exciting disruption of the Hollywood model of production and distribution. If the big screens marginalized people of color, small screens often helped to balance the scales” (*Ibid.*). For Field and Gordon, nontheatrical films and the light they shed on the relationship between race and cinema have been undervalued in the “dominant theatrical universe” (*Ibid.*).

US government films adhere broadly but imperfectly to Field and Gordon's broad categorization of American nontheatrical films as marginal and disruptive in comparison to Hollywood. State film production, while attuned to small screens, was extensive in scale for much of the twentieth century and followed trends that were distinct from yet informed by Hollywood. As 16 mm equipment became more accessible and widespread beginning in the 1930s through midcentury, government productions flourished and spanned numerous agencies and entities, including the US Department of Agriculture and military. Made for institutional settings and objectives, these films often employed documentary, educational, and promotional form and content intended to engage specific audiences for practical aims beyond entertainment. While these modes of filmmaking allowed for a wider range of people, places, and events than those popularized by Hollywood studios, they also followed conventions for nonfiction fare at the time to establish an institutional framework or perspective for the images on screen: a voice-of-God narrator as the primary sound track; an objective, 3rd person camera; continuity editing; and narrative-influenced plot development.³ Ultimately, commercial cinema's interest and investment in the American and international public provided the federal government a model for film operations.

The shared interests between the two became explicit during and after World War II as Hollywood personnel and organizations were highly involved in government productions (See [Lovejoy 2018](#); [Cull 2008](#), pp. 58–59, 110–11). In 1954, for example, the US military commissioned the Motion Picture Association of America to conduct a study of its film and photography branches with increased productivity and future collaborations in mind ([Wasson and Grieveson 2018](#)). The report reveals, according to Haidee Wasson and Lee Grieveson, that the military used cinema to address internal needs but also distributed films externally, to commercial and noncommercial outlets, for “often overlapping goals to entertain, educate, and promulgate the virtues of the military and its activities” (*Ibid.*, pp. 2–3). Thus, they argue:

Public relations and propaganda were intertwined. By midcentury, then, Americans could frequently and regularly see such moving images and hear their sounds on televisions in their living rooms and on film screens in movie theaters, classrooms, libraries, veterans’ organizations, factory floors, boardrooms, and countless other private and public forums. Military films were a common element of American media ecosystems. Such films also became integral to international campaigns to ensure the ‘American way,’ efforts that grew especially after World War II (*Ibid.*).

Even as government film operations within and beyond the military were tailored to specific institutional environments and their immediate needs, they also reflected an expansive investment in cinema as a tool for the US government to create a national image that appealed to masses of people ideologically.

Representations of race in US government films are thus less disruptive than useful, crafted to meet specific institutional needs and to contribute to national image-building. Analyzing race in this subset of nontheatrical films requires considering “cinema less as an art or as commercial entertainment and more as a deployment of particular technologies, forms, practices, and spaces that have coalesced as ‘cinema’ to forward particular social, economic, and political objectives” (*Ibid.*), or as Wasson termed it in prior work: “useful cinema” ([Wasson and Acland 2011](#)). Broadly, nontheatrical films may offer alternative, smaller-scale images of race compared to Hollywood, but US government films reveal that such productions were often employed to shape and reinforce dominant institutional ideologies. For example, beginning in the 1930s, Pare Lorentz’ now canonical US government productions *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936), *The River* (1938), and *Power and the Land* (1940) showed rural scenes across the US to draw attention to pressing rural issues, like electrification and topsoil erosion. Yet, these films emphasized rural, white farmers as symbolic figures linked to early American pioneers, which reinvigorated notions of white individualism rooted in land by erasing the history of enslaved and exploited labor, violence, and land theft from view. In the 1940s and 1950s, representations of nonwhite communities and people increased as government filmmaking expanded, and institutions adapted to wartime and postwar realities. *The Negro Soldier* (1944), directed by Frank Capra, sought to recruit African American soldiers by focusing on Black Americans and their history in the US. Capra broke with Hollywood convention to appeal to Black audiences and to portray Black people in more depth and with more respect, but ultimately the film imagined racial unity to serve American morale and the war effort in a nation where Black citizens still lacked voting rights and face legalized discrimination. In contrast, *My Japan* (1943) used explicit anti-Japanese racism to promote the sale of war bonds. To encourage national support for the war, the film employed an othering strategy to denigrate Japanese people and culture as foreign and enemy to American society. During the early Cold War, the federal government produced *Men of the Forest* and put images of a landowning Black family in rural Georgia to similar practical and ideological use.

The USIS and Men of the Forest

The United States Information Service (USIS)—the sponsoring agency featured in *Men of the Forest*’s opening credits refers to the foreign offices of a national “information” program that began under the Office of War Information (OWI). The OWI—a government

agency established during World War II to create and distribute media about the war to domestic and foreign audiences—closed in 1945, but the USIS maintained disparate operations under the Department of State. The service was reinvigorated during the Cold War as the 1948 Smith-Mundt Act established a postwar information program organized within the State Department. The act was a response to growing negative characterizations of the US in Soviet propaganda, with initial operations aimed at emphasizing “the virtues of American democracy” for Soviet and Eastern European audiences (Rawnsley 1999). Soon the program garnered increased funding from Congress, due in large part to President Truman’s efforts to bolster American propaganda with his Campaign of Truth and the outbreak of the Korean War (Cull 2008, p. 46). As the perceived need for a more aggressive strategy against the Soviet Union took hold in national leadership, the program’s propaganda became a professional enterprise that integrated collaborations with private companies and production and distribution of a wide range of media abroad. According to Gary D. Rawnsley, “the whole of the United States was mobilized: propaganda was no longer the preserve of government; now, spreading the truth and waging the Cold War became a national duty.”⁴ From 1948 to 1952, State Department funding for the information program grew from \$20 million to \$115 million, and 93 countries were being targeted (Osgood 2006).

Men of the Forest reflected a postwar “information” or propaganda program with expanding resources and support in a war of public relations (*Ibid.*, p. 72). Film, which had been used extensively by the OWI in World War II, was a key component of the aggressive strategy to combat Soviet propaganda. The postwar information program established in 1948 included a division of International Motion Pictures that “commissioned and purchased documentaries for overseas use.” (Cull 2008, pp. 27–28) Funding increases strengthened these film operations, from domestic documentary productions to Hollywood exports to partnerships with foreign production companies. By 1950, an estimated 125 million worldwide had seen a State Department film (*Ibid.*, p. 46), and by the end of 1951, output of documentary films had increased 300 percent (*Ibid.*, p. 67). Made in 1952, *Men of the Forest* was produced as leaders in the postwar information program were trying to iron out a national image that effectively countered Soviet criticisms (*Ibid.*, pp. 72–73). The Letters from America Campaign, a successful initiative from the same period, reveals how the information program sought to dispel perceived misconceptions of the US as “an uncultured land of materialism, racial injustice, and economic exploitation” (*Ibid.*, p. 57). A partnership with a government organization that “promote(d) the political education of recent immigrants to the United States,” the campaign encouraged immigrants in non-English language communities to write letters to families and friends in their former countries (*Ibid.*, p. 57). Letter writer were provided instructions and “politically helpful” suggestions on how to describe their lives in the US (Rawnsley 1999, pp. 38–39; Cull 2008, pp. 57–58). By 1952, around 35 million people in the first and second-generation immigrant communities had written one billion of these letters (Cull 2008, p. 57). Cost-effective, the campaign “harnessed the strength of ordinary people who, it was hoped, would be more trusted overseas than any official propaganda organization.” (Rawnsley 1999, p. 39). Exploiting institutional power and infrastructure, the postwar information program positioned immigrants to participate in the production of American “information” by utilizing their experiences to represent the US as a nation where people meet opportunity not injustice.

This strategy for propaganda illuminates *Men of the Forest*’s focus on the Hunter family. Like the Letters from America Campaign, the film was intended for and exhibited to foreign audiences by the USIS. It was never released domestically, as the 1948 Smith-Mundt Act restricted the domestic release of the information program’s materials (Cull 2008, p. 40). The film has similarities at the level of content as well; it shifts away from a default focus on white Americans to center the daily lives of a successful Black family in rural Georgia in a positive light. The over 1-hour film was shot on 35 mm on location in Guyton, Georgia and depicts the Hunters as they interact at home, work, and in their community. The

film consists primarily of documentary footage organized by a Voice-of-God narrator who contextualizes the images as a story of a family working together to save and purchase a mechanical saw for their timber business. The Hunters appear realistic in the local footage, but also identifiable as representations of American rurality and individualism updated to reflect racial, economic, and technological advancement. While an unconventional representation of race in the midcentury US, *Men of the Forest* utilized the Hunter family's experiences to create an ideological vision of the US that could garner foreign support and counter Soviet power.

Examining the film in its context today reveals how the USIS depicted race to promote American ideology during the Cold War. In the opening moments, viewers meet the Hunter family on their farm in Georgia as they begin their morning routine. The narrator explains that the family has owned the farm "for over 80 years", and the land was originally cleared for planting cotton and tobacco. Lewis Hunter, now head of the household, is a "woodsman" by trade. While Georgia is mentioned as the location, no further detail is included—government documentaries of the era rarely characterized people in individual specificity and depth, but rather depicted them as representative types and collective identities (See [Nichols 2017b](#)). The narrator's introduction of the Hunter family as Black landowners and farmers in a non-specific location reworks the established convention of idealizing white rural people as representative of the nation. The goal is, seemingly, to appeal to foreign audiences potentially critical of the US and receptive to perceptions of the nation as racially and economically exploitative. Thus, details of Georgia's status as a southern state where Black residents faced segregation laws is omitted, as is the lack of federal legislation ensuring basic rights for Black Americans. The film's opening decontextualizes the family and their farmland and home, associating them with hard work and land ownership to signify American democracy as racially just.

The film's voiceover narrator also establishes a point of view toward the family that is familiar and supportive yet anonymous. His perspective implies a government who knows and invests in its citizens personally. Throughout the film, the unidentified narrator speaks in all-knowing proximity to the family as he names, contextualizes, and interprets documentary images of them for audiences. For example, he aligns much of description and plot development with the thoughts of the youngest Hunter son, James, who joins his father and brother in the forest for the first time as the film begins. The narrator describes the moment: "And so, on this day that James would always remember, he and his father and brother set out for the forest. His chest swelled with pride, for today he felt like a partner in the firm of Hunter and Sons". Here he voices James' inner thoughts and feelings and speaks with intimate and interior knowledge of the Hunter family; scenes similarly bring viewers into the Hunters' home and work life. The images of the film are thus tightly controlled by a narrating point of view that suggests a harmonious relationship between the US government and the family. This institutional point of view toward the Hunters' everyday lives characterizes the US government as egalitarian and invested in their livelihood in rural Georgia.

The narrative that drives *Men of the Forest* works similarly to emphasize the Hunters' local community as representative of a democracy familiar with and supportive of their livelihood. The plot begins as the men of the family leave the farm for the day to harvest timber alongside their white and black neighbors—throughout the film, black and white residents are shown living and working alongside one another without restrictions or strife. They eye a crew with a new mechanical saw that allows them to increase a day's yields, so the family decides to work together to save money for their own saw. As the Hunters strive for this goal, tempted to spend their hard-earned money but committed to the potential of a new saw, the community proves more than a backdrop. In the narrative climax of the film, a forest fire breaks out in the area where the Hunters are logging. James, one of the Hunter sons, runs to a neighboring timber crew for help. Characterized as local residents and friends of the Hunters, black and white foresters respond quickly, and together with the Hunters put out the forest fire. The dramatic sequence amplifies an obstacle in the

Hunters' path as they suffer a loss of profit. Yet, they manage to mitigate and survive the disaster with the support of people who know and respect them. The narrative focuses on the Hunters' community as an environment where working citizens support one another despite race or means, a localized image again decontextualized to suggest that American democracy fosters such community among its citizens.

The film ends as on a celebratory note as the Hunter family buys a mechanical saw and reaps rewards from saving money wisely. The narrator emphasizes how the experience has, most of all, strengthened their familial bond and respect for one another, his words suggesting that investing in these ideals benefits people beyond the Hunters. Even with purchasing power, the family remains focused on working together to "better themselves". In the final scene, father and sons use their earnings to buy and surprise Mrs. Hunter with a sewing machine, something she wanted but withheld from buying while they saved. Presumably, the sewing machine will bring greater productivity to the home, Mrs. Hunters' domain, as the saw provides greater timber output for the family business. As the family cherishes the new saw and sewing machine, the narrator describes what they mean to the family:

For them, the saw is a symbol of something warm and friendly. It had joined them together as a family so that they might better themselves. They are better not only because of the extra food and luxuries they are able to buy. They are better because in working for a common good, they have strengthened the family bond. For out of their achievement, was born a new love, a deep affection, and a greater respect for one another.

Again, speaking for the family, the narrator appeals to broader values as he implies that the bond between the family has grown stronger because they pursued the opportunity to "better themselves" fostered by a government with mutual respect and familiarity with its citizens. Alongside images of the family smiling together outside their home, these final lines are reminiscent of a happy ending in a Classical Hollywood film, but they avoid decorative excess and glamour to emphasize the everyday lives of working Americans. Classical Hollywood happy endings bring narrative closure by reinforcing or restoring core American ideals in fictional, spectacular form. The closing documentary moments with the Hunters in *Men of the Forest* imagine a slice of life in an equitable nation, an image that the US government hoped would sustain power in a war with the Soviet Union.

In its postwar context, *Men of the Forest* provides insight into how the US government approached and employed cinematic representation of race. As the Cold War escalated in the early 1950s, the film centered a Black family in the rural South for a specific purpose that shaped its content and form: to spread "information" about racial equality and economic and technological progress in the US. The federal government represented the Hunters for national image-building in a global political sphere. Documentary footage of the family and an uplifting narrative about their hard work, adaptation to modern tools, and upward mobility in rural Georgia provided a malleable propaganda image of the American government and its citizens that the USIS utilized abroad to ideologically counter communism. While *Men of the Forest* is a unique depiction of Black Americans and important visual record of the Hunter family today, the film's Cold War context reveals how the federal government's interest in the Black land and business owners served political aims that erased the institutional infrastructure of racial segregation and discrimination that threatened their livelihoods and excluded them from American democracy in 1952.

3. The Legacy of *Men of the Forest*

3.1. A National Record

Men of the Forest was inaccessible to Americans until the United States Information Agency materials were released to the public by law in 1990. Digitized in 2017 and posted by the US National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) to their *YouTube* channel, the film now circulates in a digital media environment that opens it to new connections and conversations that reveal its evolving significance as a cinematic representation of race in the US. The contemporary importance of *Men of the Forest* was apparent to NARA archivists

as they digitized the film. In 2017, they came across the film in NARA's Motion Picture Preservation Lab while processing a backlog of films from the United States Information Agency. Writing in *The Unwritten Record*—a blog dedicated to NARA's special media holdings, archivists Audrey Amidon and Heidi Holmstrum note how the film is exceptional compared to other government film fare because it “features a black family as the core protagonists”.⁵ Listing it among their favorite film finds of 2017, Amidon goes on to say “It would be hard to overstate how rare this is in government films. In fact, we haven’t seen anything like it before” (*Ibid.*). Upon finding the film, the archivists recognized the film as distinct in their expansive interactions with government media and important to share with others on their institutional blog space. NARA's digitization of the film reflects a reoriented institutional perspective toward the film due to the passing of time and dissolution of US information programs. No longer immediately useful for its intended Cold War purpose, NARA highlights the film as a unique archival record in the public domain.

Since NARA digitized the film and posted it to *YouTube*, it has appeared in several spaces online as an archival artifact shared with the public. For example, in 2021, C-SPAN featured the film on an episode of the *Reel America* series and uploaded a version to their website. *Internet Archive* preserves a recording of the broadcast available for free streaming. The film has also been added to *Wikipedia*, *IMDB*, and *Mubi* pages that list basic production information. The attention given to the film by NARA archivists and their perception of its unique representation of Black protagonists prompted the digitized film to circulate as an archival document available for public viewing from national outlets. The meanings of the film evolve in these contemporary contexts as its propaganda function fades into the background and a new institutional perspective emphasizes preservation and reflection on the film as a public record. NARA's digitization recontextualized the federal production to emphasize its representation of Black people, families, and communities as significant today on a national scale. As preservationists encountered *Men of the Forest* from a contemporary vantage point, they valued the film as a text exceeding its initial purpose and the former federal restrictions on its form, content, and accessibility.

3.2. A National Mischaracterization

Open to public viewing and conversation, the vision of democracy in *Men of the Forest* takes on new meaning as recent events expose its dismissal of institutional racism. In 1952, the federal government retrofitted local footage of Black landowners and families in rural, segregated Georgia for an idealized image of American democracy that could be exported internationally during the Cold War. Even though the immediate governmental power and intent behind the propaganda production have faded, the mischaracterization of racism in the US promoted in *Men of the Forest* has evolved and festered at national and local levels in ways that expose other meanings at play in the film's depiction of the Hunters.

The current judicial debate over an aid program for minority farmers included in the Biden administration's American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 reveals the ongoing effects of government distortion of institutional racism in the same arena *Men of the Forest* depicts—rural agriculture. The contested legal status of Section 1005, a \$4 billion debt relief package for “socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers”, reveals the persistence of ideological dismissals of racism in spheres of rurality and agriculture deeply rooted in traditional notions of American individualism and property ownership.⁶ In an attempt to redress systemic racial exclusion in the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the history of Black land theft across the country, Section 1005 provides “farm loan assistance”, including direct payments of up to 120 percent of outstanding debt, while the less debated Section 1006 provides USDA loan, grant, and educational support for “socially disadvantaged farmers, ranchers, forest land owners and operators, and groups” (*Ibid.*). In response, white farmers have taken legal action against the USDA for what they argue is an unconstitutional provision of debt relief based on race.⁷ Section 1005 and 1006 define “socially disadvantaged” in accordance with previous USDA legislation, “A farmer or rancher who is a member of one or more of the following groups whose members have been subjected

to racial or ethnic prejudice because of their identity as members of a group without regard to their individual qualities: African Americans, American Indians, Alaskan Natives, Hispanics, Asians, and Pacific Islanders".⁸ The loan program has been halted by a judge and its future will be determined by a class action lawsuit that will shape the future of similar legislation aimed at addressing decades of national scale discrimination. At stake is federal acknowledgement of historical, systemic racism and institutional action that addresses its accumulating effects on the lives of Americans today.

In conversation with the Section 1005 controversy, *Men of the Forest* provides a cinematic representation of American rurality that illuminates the ideology of democratic equality at the heart of the debate. The current case against Section 1005 appeals to racial equality to dismiss the history and effects of institutional racism in federal agriculture programs. In the class action lawsuit, the plaintiffs argue that the federal debt relief program violates white farmers' rights to equal protection under the constitution as they are excluded from federal aid based on race (Levenson 2021). Equality is protected, according to this argument, by avoiding historical exclusions based on race and their continued effects because doing so surfaces injustices that further undercut equality. *Men of the Forest* frames the Hunters as illustrations of an earlier version of this same contradictory logic and approach to institutional racism. This Cold War ideology of race utilized to combat communism and further American global power is still politically viable today. It shapes the federal government's legal ability to address a long history of racist policies that continues to limit the rights of Black Americans.

While Section 1005 draws attention to the federal erasure of institutional racism at play in *Men of the Forest* and its legacy, the horrific shooting of Ahmaud Arbery brings to light the systemic racism still effecting coastal Georgia 70 years after production of the film. In Brunswick, Georgia—just under 100 miles from Guyton, where the Hunters' resided in 1952, the 25-year-old Arbery was murdered on 23 February 2020. His killing speaks to the local context in which the Hunters lived in 1952 as it exposes the continued ideological and individual effects of the institutional devaluing of Black people in the formerly segregated state. Arbery was murdered because former cop Gregory McMichael and his son Travis perceived his presence running in their Satilla Shores neighborhood as a threat to property and people that prompted them to arm themselves and chase the unarmed young man in a truck before shooting him multiple times at close range with a shotgun. Invested in white supremacist notions of American individualism, property ownership, and economic mobility, the McMichaels acted as vigilante enforcers of the color line once legally mandated and still ideologically powerful in coastal Georgia. The men were not initially arrested by local police because of Gregory McMichael's career as a police officer and former post with the District Attorney. The case stalled until footage of the murder was leaked to the press, reportedly from the killers aiming to clear the air about what happened.⁹ The killers would likely have gotten off without severe penalty if video of the murder had not surfaced. The governmental avoidance of acknowledging and prosecuting racist violence at a local level today sheds light on the institutionalization of racism in the area where the Hunters lived and owned property—realities never mentioned in *Men of the Forest* but exposed decades later in the footage of Arbery's horrific murder.

While the McMichaels thought that video captured at the scene by a man who assisted them would clear up rumors and speculation about their actions in the local area, a national audience responded with outrage. Reviewed heavily throughout the trial, cell phone footage at the scene showed unprompted, deadly violence arising from racist hatred toward a young man simply trying to flee the situation. Yet the McMichaels' lawyers framed their racism as a matter of skewed perception that motivated armed protection of their families and property. They argued as much in trying to garner lenient sentences for Arbery's killers after they were convicted in their state trial. They claimed that, even if flawed, the McMichaels thought they were protecting their families and themselves.¹⁰ Doing so, the attorneys argued, reveals that the men are not depraved criminals but capable of rehabilitation. Pleas for leniency based on claims that the McMichaels' racism

was simply a flawed perception were unsuccessful as they contrasted starkly with their behavior in cell phone footage. While decontextualized images of the Hunters were used by the federal government at national and international scales to promote democracy and minimize systemic racism in *Men of the Forest*, amateur images of the violent racial exclusion integral to this ideology as it was enacted locally by real people in real time could not be so easily contained and distorted. Ahmaud Arbery's death illuminates the local context omitted from *Men of the Forest* and the national lie promoted in the film, which rings hollow 70 years later as the nation's history of racism continues to that shape individual ideologies and interactions.

3.3. A Local Legacy

NARA's public digitization of *Men of the Forest* ultimately provided an opportunity for the film to return to Guyton, Georgia. The Hunters, as well as the Reese family—scenes in the film include the Reeses and their neighboring home, rediscovered the film after a family member came across NARA's YouTube video and recognized a pecan tree still on their property (Kent 2022). Once rediscovered, the film provided a way for the families to acknowledge and engage with their ancestors and the local community in the present. While the Hunters and Reeses had long known of the film and the extensive footage captured during the production, they did not, according to James Hunter—the youngest son featured in *Men of the Forest* and one of two cast members still living—know its title or purpose (*Ibid.*). The digitized film allowed them to identify the film's cast and scenes in personal detail, filling in images with intimate knowledge and vivid memories. In 2018, Remington Kent—the grandson of James Hunter, created a documentary that utilized the government film to anchor personal interviews with Hunter and Reese family members about the lives and legacies of those depicted in the film. *Descendants of Men of the Forest, the Legacy Continues* showed on 3 July 2018 at the Mars Theater in Springfield, Georgia near the Hunters hometown of Guyton. Area newspaper the *Effingham Herald* reported on the documentary's premiere by highlighting its relationship to the 1952 film as a local production. Rick Lott reports that “the sequel of sorts” will revisit and “pay homage to a movie shot in Effingham County in 1952” that “featured members of the Hunter and Reese families of the Guyton area” and “focused on the work ethics and value system that existed with Kent's great-grandfathers, Lewis Hunter and Terling Reese” (Lott 2018). Lott's local contextualization of *Men of the Forest* and Kent's *Descendants of Men of the Forest* speaks to the importance of the original film as a conduit for the Hunter and Reese families and the surrounding community to envision and interact with the realities and experiences of those depicted on screen.

Family accounts of the people, places, and events portrayed in *Men of the Forest* shed light on the Hunters and Reeses' realities as Black land and business-owners in Guyton and the local and regional context in which they lived. According to family members, the Hunters have owned the land shown in the film, at present, for at least 150 years (Kent 2022). Close friends and neighbors, the Reeses had also purchased the 1-acre property and home shown in the film (*Ibid.*). The knowledge and immediacy of these details for the Hunter and Reese descendants reveals the vital role family histories play in illuminating what was simplified by the USIS in *Men of the Forest*, the significance of Black families owning land and working for themselves in the segregated South. For example, family accounts reveal that the Hunters farmed their land and logged timber in the surrounding area for the pulpwood industry, which they supplied to Union Camp (Lott 2018). Union Camp refers to a mill operated by the Union Bag and Paper Company in nearby Savannah (the company was later named Union Camp after a merger with Camp Manufacturing in 1956) (Campbell 2019). Union Bag and Paper had moved south in the 1920s, likely to avoid unionization. It proved an influential company for the forestry product industry in Georgia as the South's agricultural economy modernized; Union Camp's Savannah mill was its largest and facilities in the surrounding area supported its operations (*Ibid.*). The company sold for \$7.9 billion in 1999 but not without controversy along the way (*Ibid.*). A Ralph

Nader team investigated and reported in 1971 that the company had exploited the local environment's water and land (See [Fallows 1971](#)). Details provided by the families enable a fuller picture of the socioeconomic context in which the Hunters lived and worked, a local area with an evolving agricultural and industrial infrastructure that speaks to larger changes taking place in the Jim Crow South. Family accounts of their land and livelihood provide a history of Black landownership and business amid these changes. *Men of the Forest* de-emphasized these details of regional and local context, a choice reflected in the exclusion of location and participant names from the opening credits. This omission is a reminder that the federal government produced and maintained ownership of the footage of the Hunter and Reese families and restricted its value and accessibility to its Cold War objective. The federal government engaged and represented the Hunter and Reese families locally, but they scaled the film's use for an international stage. Today, both families have reclaimed the film's images that they did not have access to for decades.

Family and local engagement with *Men of the Forest* gives voice and value to details de-emphasized by the USIS and federal government. The Hunters' and Reeses' rediscovery of *Men of the Forest* and the attention they have given to characterizing those depicted in the film and reflecting on their legacies, works to restore local ownership of its imagery. In *Descendants of Men of the Forest*, Kent begins a collection of extensive interviews with surviving participant in the production, James Hunter. While Mr. Hunter describes some of his experiences being part of the film, including that the crew shot on location for 9 weeks and captured extensive footage left out of the film, his direct experience with the family members depicted on screen is the ultimate emphasis. He concludes with a confirmation that the Hunter family working together was not "phony" but life "as it was lived." Soon interviews with family members about their impressions of the film's images of their ancestors take screen, implying that what later generations experienced as they watched the film and took away for themselves is an equally important account of *Men of the Forest*. In *Descendants of Men of the Forest*, the intent of the original film to counter Soviet characterizations of the US is less relevant than the film's ability to provide a cinematic record of the former Hunter and Reese ancestors, a way to enliven the history and legacy of what they achieved in Guyton, Georgia during the 1950s. As descendants engage with the production from their own perspectives, the images of the Hunters and Reeses are given life and meaning by their families.

4. Conclusions

A film made to use during the Cold War, *Men of the Forest* and its representation of race is difficult to know what to do with today. The institutional context in which its depiction of the Hunter family was useful remains inaccessible, no longer because of legal restrictions but the passage of time. Now digital and online, we encounter it in a new context, as a contemporary experience of the past in the present, in proximity to recent events and images that invite associations, reflections, and interpretations that illuminate its depiction of race within and beyond its original frame. While *Men of the Forest* is a rare government production about a Black land and business-owning family in segregated Georgia that can be traced back to a Cold War context that has evolved and sheds new light on the film's depiction of race today, the film's difficulty is not unique. Made to use, government films envisioned ideas and images of race throughout much of the twentieth century, not only to convey but to also actualize institutional ideologies. Their legacies as representations of race thus extend beyond their original context in ways that scholars are only beginning to understand. *Men of the Forest*, past and present, shows us how vital this work is.

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Notes

- ¹ *Men of the Forest* is accessible online via the US National Archives YouTube channel, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1NDW72RDMTk> (accessed on 1 February 2022).
- ² The USIS, housed under the Department of State from 1945–1952, moved to the United States Information Agency, a separate agency established by Congress in 1953 and closed in 1999.
- ³ For more on conventions of documentary during this era, see (Nichols 2017a).
- ⁴ Rawnsley, 37.
- ⁵ Amidon and Holmstrom, <https://unwritten-record.blogs.archives.gov/2017/12/13/favorite-film-finds-of-2017/> (accessed on 1 February 2022).
- ⁶ “H.R. 1319—American Rescue Plan Act”, 117th Congress, Public Law 117-2 (11 March 2021), Section 1005 and Section 1006, page 135, stat. 13 and 14, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/1319/text> (accessed on 1 February 2022).
- ⁷ Miller et al. v. Vilsack, 4:21-cv-00595-O (N.D. Tex 2021). See (Held 2021).
- ⁸ “2501 Fact Sheet—Farming Opportunities Training and Outreach Grant Program”, USDA, Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement, 2020, https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2501_FactSheet.pdf (accessed on 1 February 2022).
- ⁹ “Exclusive: Man charged in Ahmaud Arbery murder leaked original video of the shooting” WSB-TV, 15 May 2020, <https://www.wsbtv.com/news/local/exclusive-man-charged-ahmaud-arbery-murder-leaked-original-video-shooting/KCWVSD4IP5FPRO24I47ZBMPPNE/> (accessed on 1 February 2022).
- ¹⁰ “Watch: 3 men convicted of the murder of Ahmaud Arbery sentenced to life in prison for the killing” PBS News Hour, 7 January 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/watch-live-three-men-convicted-of-the-murder-of-ahmaud-arbery-will-be-sentenced-for-the-killing> (accessed on 1 February 2022).

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