

Teaching Caselette

THE ETHICS OF WAR FILMS: CLINT EASTWOOD'S *AMERICAN SNIPER*

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Directed by Clint Eastwood, the war film *American Sniper* was released in late 2014. Starring Bradley Cooper, the film chronicles the life of Navy SEAL Chris Kyle from the perspective of his 2012 autobiography. Kyle's legacy is defined by his 160 confirmed kills as a sniper, making him the deadliest in United States military history. The film was received as a great success with a worldwide gross of over \$500M and 6 Academy Award nominations. Despite this success, *Sniper* is a war film, and with the genre comes an expected level of controversy. Supporters of the film praise the movie's portrayal of Kyle's selfless heroism and firm patriotism. Alternatively, critics of *Sniper* are uneasy with the movie's perspective on the US invasion of Iraq, its portrayal of the Iraqi people, and its particular brand of aggressive patriotism. Some argue that the sheer controversy is what has driven *Sniper* to become the most successful film in the history of its genre.

This case study was completed under the direction of Dr. Amber Díaz Pearson, The Kenan Institute for Ethics.

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Introduction

Directed by Clint Eastwood, the war film *American Sniper* was released in late 2014. Starring Bradley Cooper, the film chronicles the life of Navy SEAL Chris Kyle from the perspective of his 2012 autobiography. Kyle's legacy is defined by his 160 confirmed kills as a sniper, making him the deadliest in United States military history. The film was received as a great success with a worldwide gross of over \$500M and 6 Academy Award nominations. Despite this success, *Sniper* is a war film and with the genre comes an expected level of controversy. In the case of *Sniper*, there is no shortage of dispute. *Sniper* is seen as a significant contribution to the war film genre, providing insight into one of the most notorious characters of the US war in Iraq. Supporters of the film praise the movie's portrayal of Kyle's selfless heroism and firm patriotism. Alternatively, critics of *Sniper* are uneasy with the movie's perspective on the US invasion of Iraq, its portrayal of the Iraqi people, and its particular brand of aggressive patriotism. Responses to the film made it to a wide range of newspapers, blogs, and social media pages, both defending and criticizing these various aspects of the film. Some argue that the sheer controversy is what has driven *Sniper* to become the most successful film in the history of its genre.

Major Issues

An article in *The Economist*, which noted the film attracted large numbers of conservative moviegoers, describes the film as portraying an "Iraq minus the bad bits."¹ By focusing on the 1998 US embassy bombings in Tanzania and Kenya as the inspiration for Kyle's decision to join the Navy, the film avoids dealing with the political justifications for the Iraq War. Consequently, the plot is primarily driven by a seemingly straightforward counterterrorism motivation – the military's desire to capture Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Emir of al-Qaeda in Iraq. Some critics have pointed out that Zarqawi did not attain that status until after the US invaded Iraq, and that his goals hinged on the expulsion of US troops from Iraq – a problematic oversight.²

Despite these points of criticism, supporters of the film have come out to say the film does not have an obligation to criticize the nuances of the Iraq War. This film is first and foremost a tribute to the life of a man who only regretted that he could not save more American lives. Pete Hegseth of Fox News argued in an op-ed that "the film is not a movie about the Iraq war."³ The movie was set to discuss Kyle's difficult life decisions that put his duty to his country in front of his family on more than one occasion. Hegseth goes on to argue that this film was meant to pay tribute to a man fighting in an arena where his critics can hurl insults from the safety of the sidelines.

The film has also been criticized for its portrayal of the Iraqi people. Frequently throughout the film, the major characters (predominantly US military servicemen) refer to the Iraqi locals as "savages," giving little to no acknowledgement that there are both good and evil people in this country. To help drive this point home, the film conjures up a violent Iraqi militant nicknamed "the Butcher" who is understood in the film to be Zarqawi's right hand man. This man is so indisputably evil, he is willing to use a drill to kill innocent children in order to deter other Iraqis from cooperating with US troops. In reality, the Butcher cannot be tied to a specific leader in al-Qaeda in Iraq. The Butcher's function as a character is not to accurately illustrate the war in Iraq; he is there to make it clear that Kyle's mission was good and his opponents were evil. This is a narrative choice often found in war movies that help make the conflict as black and white as possible. But this does not end with the Butcher: even in the portrayal of an

1 War on film: Bleeding red and blue. 2015. *The Economist*. January 31, 2015, <<http://www.economist.com/news/united-states/21641264-american-sniper-celebrates-regret-free-heroism-small-wonder-critics-hate-it-and-half>>.

2 Beauchamp, Zack. 2015. "American Sniper is a dishonest whitewash of the Iraq War." *Vox* January 21, 2015, <<http://www.vox.com/2015/1/21/7641189/american-sniper-history>>.

3 Hegseth, Pete. 2015. It's the patriotism, stupid. what liberal critics don't get about "American Sniper." *Fox News*, January 28, 2015, <<http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2015/01/28/it-patriotism-stupid-what-liberal-critics-dont-get-about-american-sniper/>>.

Iraqi family who offers Kyle's team shelter and food during a mission, they turn out to be harboring arms for Iraqi militants. As a result the main character is seen facing a civilization of indisputable evil. If women and children are willing to throw grenades at US troops, if families are stashing AK-47's underneath their floorboards, and if al-Qaeda leadership is willing to torture children with power drills, how could viewers possibly think good exists in this country? The film removes any moral ambiguity in a way that directly violates the reality of this conflict.

This criticism is often met with deflection as supporters of the film have argued that key scenes do evoke sympathy for the Iraqi people. In his opinion piece on the film, Jonathan Foreman (himself an embedded war correspondent with US forces in 2003 and 2005) argues that the enemy sniper Kyle battles is not portrayed as "especially evil or villainous: He's just an enemy soldier doing his job extremely well." Foreman continues by pointing out that the cruel intimidation and coercion methods used by al-Qaeda leaders in the film are not a far cry from what Iraqi civilians actually suffered. If this is the case, supporters argue, why should those portrayals be criticized as propaganda?⁴

Finally, certain reactions from sectors of the far right have drawn additional criticism. A substantial spike in hate speech and threats of violence against Muslim-Americans on social media was reported following the film's release, with some individuals directly referencing the film in their inflammatory posts.⁵ At the same time, those who have voiced distaste for the film's portrayal of its characters have faced a flood of people in social media and opinion columns, blogs, and commentaries criticizing those who dare look unfavorably upon an "American hero." These types of reactions make it necessary to ask the question: what role does the film bear in eliciting such behavior? When asked about the message of the film, Eastwood told *The Hollywood Reporter* that he was primarily concerned with his veteran audience, saying, "I think it's nice for veterans because it shows what they go through, you know, and that life. And the wives and families of veterans. It has a great indication of the stresses they are under. And I think that all ... adds up to kind of an anti-war [message]."⁶ Additionally, *Sniper* screenwriter Jason Hall had plenty to say when asked about the popular criticism surrounding the film. "People see the movie poster, and it's got a guy and the American flag, and they know Clint Eastwood—the *Dirty Harry* guy and the Republican convention guy—directed it. So they think it's some jingoistic thing. I would challenge that in a big way," said Hall. "The movie isn't about whether we should have been in Iraq or not. It's about how war is human."⁷

Given the arguments on either side what can we say about the rights and responsibilities of filmmakers? War films by their nature carry particularly loaded messages, making the genre specifically important in this debate.

4 Foreman, Jonathan. 2015. "What American Sniper gets right." *The Weekly Standard*. January 27, 2105, <http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/what-american-sniper-gets-right_826426.html>.

5 Woolf, Nicky. 2015. "American Sniper: Anti-Muslim threats skyrocket in wake of film's release." *The Guardian*, January 24, 2015, 2015, <<http://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/jan/24/american-sniper-anti-muslim-threats-skyrocket>>.

6 Galloway, Stephen. 2015. Clint Eastwood describes his near-death experience, says 'American Sniper' is anti-war (exclusive). *The Hollywood Reporter*. March 16, 2015, <<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/clint-eastwood-describes-his-death-781618>>.

7 Docketman, Eliana. 2015. Clint Eastwood says American Sniper is anti-war. *TIME Magazine*. March 17, 2015.