

“American Sniper”: Humanizing and Glorifying a Mass Murderer for the Empire

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I saw Clint Eastwood’s movie American Sniper the other night. It is the story of U.S. Navy SEAL sniper Chris Kyle, based on his autobiography. Kyle fought in Iraq between 2004 and 2009 when the U.S. was occupying the country. (In February 2013, Kyle was killed at a gun range by another former soldier, reportedly suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).)

American Sniper has been nominated for six Oscars, including best film and best leading actor; it has broken box-office records for war movies, and it’s generating heated debate.

Many who are praising the film say the movie is about him, not about the politics of the Iraq war. “It’s a movie about a man, a character study,” said lead actor Bradley Cooper. “The hope is that you can somehow have your eyes opened to the struggle of a soldier, as opposed to the specificity of the war.” Others argue *American Sniper* is “both a tribute to the warrior and a lament for war,” as the Associated Press reviewer wrote.

BS . Regardless of the intentions of those making these claims, BS.

This is a profoundly reactionary movie. *American Sniper* humanizes and glorifies Chris Kyle, an unrepentant Christian fundamentalist mass murderer who killed 160 Iraqis (supposedly the most “kills” by any U.S. soldier in history). Meanwhile, the movie demonizes and dehumanizes every single Iraqi (with the possible exception of one family), portraying them as evil terrorists and “savages” who deserve to die.

By telling this story through Kyle’s eyes and purported experience (and prettifying that story), *American Sniper* weaves a fable about the U.S. invasion of Iraq and its role in the world: America is a force for good. Whatever its mistakes, the U.S. sends its military to places like Iraq to try to protect the innocent and destroy evil. It promotes the outlook that only America and American lives count and anything goes to “defend” them. This is the big lie on the big screen.

The U.S. Military: A “Bloody-Jawed Wolf”—Not the “Sheep Dog” of the World

Chris Kyle is shown growing up in Texas, a good-old boy from a traditional white, patriarchal, and patriotic Christian family, who hunts. According to the film, the arc of Kyle’s life is defined early on by his father. There are three kinds of people, he tells his sons: most are sheep who are afraid and go along; then there are wolves who prey on the sheep; and then there are the sheep dogs who protect the sheep from the wolves. And his kids better damn sure be the sheep dogs, or they’d get the strap.

Kyle starts out as a wannabe cowboy, but he's adrift. Then—according to the film—he's jolted into supposed clarity by the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania by al-Qaeda, Islamic jihadists, which killed hundreds of people. He enlists in the Navy SEALs. His resolve is hardened when he and his wife watch the Twin Towers come crashing down on 9/11. He's going to be the "sheep dog" protecting America and its sheep from the terrorist Islamic wolves.

His unit is deployed and American Sniper cuts directly and wordlessly from 9/11 to Fallujah, Iraq, around 2004. The clear impression is that the two were directly linked. Kyle says the people the U.S. is fighting in Iraq are the ones who attacked the U.S. on 9/11. And the Iraqis are pretty much all portrayed as terrorists out to kill Americans.

The theme that Kyle and the U.S. military are "sheep dogs" in the world runs throughout the whole movie. But sorry—the U.S. and its military aren't sheep and they aren't sheep dogs. They are, as Malcolm X put it, like "bloody-jawed wolves," with the blood of the people of the world dripping from their fangs.

What the Hell Was the U.S. Doing in Iraq? What the Hell Was—and Is—It Doing in the Middle East?

American Sniper is an exercise in training people to see the world through the eyes of the empire. First, the story that it chooses to tell is one of a particularly fanatical and murderous soldier. Why not one of the antiwar Iraq vets who threw their medals away and condemned the war crimes they carried out? Second, telling the story of the "warriors"—the soldiers—is not the most valid and truthful way to understand what a war is about. You can't truthfully tell the story of one individual detached from (or by falsifying) the context they're in; and the story of one individual can't serve as an overall summary of historical events.

In American Sniper, Kyle jumps from his wedding to the battlefield in Iraq. The film's explanation is that this is in response to the September 11, 2001 attacks. But what the hell was the U.S. doing in Fallujah? What the hell has it been doing in Iraq? And what the hell was—and is—it doing in the Middle East, long before 9/11? Pretending the story starts in 1998 or on 9/11, and that the thing you really need to know is the "heroism" of Kyle and his comrades, is telling a story alright—a reactionary fable.

Before the 2003 U.S. invasion, Iraq was ruled by a tyrant, Saddam Hussein. But Iraq was not involved in 9/11. There was no Islamic jihadist presence in Iraq to speak of. And Iraq did not have weapons of mass destruction (nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons), as the Bush-Cheney regime claimed it did. These were all deliberate lies to justify invading and conquering Iraq.

Why, then, did the U.S. attack Iraq? Because the U.S. imperialists wanted to strengthen their stranglehold on Iraq and the whole Middle East. The U.S. has controlled this region since the 1950s—through invasions, coups, assassinations, bombings, despotic torturers like the regime in Egypt, and turning Israel into a regional attack dog. The U.S. imperialists have used Middle Eastern oil to dominate the world economy and other powers dependent on it, and have made untold billions in profit off it as well. Controlling the Middle East means controlling vital trade routes and a strategic military crossroads between Africa, Europe, and Asia. It is a key pillar of their whole global empire of exploitation. Millions and millions of lives have been crushed to enforce this order—including at least 500,000 Iraqi children, who died as a result of the U.S.-UN sanctions imposed on Iraq in the 1990s. (And the U.S. has

been intervening in Iraq since the 1920s.)

But the U.S. grip on the region was fraying and Saddam Hussein had gotten in their way, so he had to go. The U.S. planned to take over Iraq and turn it into an outpost for advancing their grand plan for an all-powerful global empire.

The U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq wasn't some noble effort to get justice for 9/11. It was an unjust, immoral, and illegal war of naked imperialist aggression. It resulted in the murder of over 120,000 Iraqis and the deaths of over 600,000 more. It has devastated Iraq and driven more than five million people from their homes. It has put vicious oppressors in power and fueled reactionary Islamic fundamentalism. The U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq was a towering war crime. One person's "narrative" about his own experience doesn't trump this history and reality. And how could anyone make an honest or truthful movie about the U.S. war in Iraq without in some way at least touching on, recognizing, or acknowledging this broader picture? (See "[The U.S. Legacy 10 Years After Invading Iraq: Death, Disease, Devastation, Displacement](#)")

U.S. War Crimes in Fallujah

While one person's story cannot define the goals and nature of a war, Kyle's story does tell you a lot about the immoral and predatory nature of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. In an early scene set in the city of Fallujah, Kyle is setting up on a rooftop in a battle zone. The streets are full of rubble, many buildings are destroyed, and most everyone left seems to be a jihadist combatant. The message many people will take away—especially since the U.S. ruling class and its media have carefully censored and suppressed real pictures and real coverage of what the U.S. has done in Iraq—is that this is just how Iraqis live, that Iraq is just a disgusting, fucking mess. In fact, this is what Kyle and other U.S. soldiers say repeatedly. Kyle: Iraqis are "savages." His brother, also deployed to Iraq, as he's leaving: fuck this place.

But *American Sniper* doesn't show why Fallujah was devastated. Beginning in April 2004, the U.S. laid siege to the city, forcing most of the population to evacuate, then shelled and bombed it—including with white phosphorous and cluster bombs. White phosphorous can melt skin and flesh right down to the bone. U.S. soldiers called it "shake and bake." Its use is generally considered a war crime because it's an indiscriminate killer. "I need another heart and eyes to bear it, because my own are not enough to bear what I saw. Nothing justifies what was done to this city. I didn't see a house or mosque that wasn't destroyed," a member of Iraq's Red

Crescent Society told journalist Dahr Jamail in 2004 after visiting Fallujah. (*Democracy Now!*, November 8, 2005)

Kyle zeros in on a mother and her young son in his sniper scope. They're coming into the street in front of a U.S. convoy. He thinks he sees a grenade, but he hesitates to make sure and then get the OK. As portrayed in *American Sniper*, he clearly doesn't want to shoot women and children. But then he has to execute one, then the other—because it turns out they really did have an explosive and were intent on killing American soldiers. Later, in one scene U.S. officers question Kyle about complaints from Iraqis about their relatives being killed. But Kyle dismisses it; he shoots people when they have weapons. The implication is that these complaints are just lies by a bunch of lying Iraqis, and that the bureaucrats who

believe them are putting the troops in harm's way.

In reality, according to eyewitnesses, American snipers in Fallujah shot anything that moved. They shot ambulance drivers and medical workers. They shot people trying to claim the bodies of relatives lying in the streets.

“They try to kill anybody who works in humanitarian aid. They attack any humanitarian aid worker, doctor, or ambulance to kill him,” a Fallujah resident told Inter Press Service. A doctor told Jamail, “I remember once we sent an ambulance to evacuate a family that was bombed by an aircraft. The ambulance was sniped—one of the family died, and three were injured by the firing.”

There is an extensive record of U.S. military savagery in Iraq, far beyond the scope of this article. In a 2007 trial of U.S. snipers operating in Iskandariya, south of Baghdad, it was revealed that the U.S. had a strategy of “baiting” Iraqis by placing out detonation cords, plastic explosives, and ammunition so snipers could then kill them, and that sometimes the snipers planted such evidence on the bodies of those they shot down—like U.S. cops sometimes plant guns on their victims. The video *Collateral Murder* (<http://www.collateralmurder.com/>), based on video leaked by Chelsea Manning (who is now serving a long prison term for that heroic act) shows a U.S. helicopter murdering civilians and journalists. Two courageous soldiers who were part of that unit, unlike Kyle, later apologized to the Iraqi people for their actions. ([Read](#) an interview with one of them, Ethan McCord)

When an occupying power carries out collective punishment and murders civilians, these are war crimes and crimes against humanity. Google “war crimes Fallujah” and you’ll find entry after entry, including YouTube videos of U.S. forces in action.

These aren’t the actions of a “sheep dog,” but to paraphrase Malcolm X, of a “bloody-jawed wolf,” with blood dripping from its fangs as it yammers on about “freedom,” “democracy,” and “good and evil.”

American Sniper hides and rewrites the true history of the U.S. in Iraq with a fog of imperialist propaganda, myth-making, and lies.

Chris Kyle and the U.S. Military: Embodiments of the Putrid Values and Immorality of the System They Served

What kind of a military would use such weapons, and carry out such atrocities? What kind of military would joke about using weapons like white phosphorous—calling firing these horrific weapons “shake and bake”? An oppressive, imperialist occupation force which considers the local population as its enemy and aims to terrorize and suppress them.

The way the U.S. fought the war in Iraq, and the way it indoctrinated its troops, reflects the totally unjust nature of the war.

In *American Sniper*, Chris Kyle embodied this “America is good, everyone else is evil, only American lives count” outlook. He’s totally unapologetic about killing scores of Iraqis. *American Sniper* deceitfully portrays all his victims as having had it coming. After he is “forced” to shoot down the mother and her son who are fighting the U.S. occupation, he

sums up that he's never seen such evil as he's seeing in Iraq. There is only one Iraqi in the whole film who's shown having a shred of humanity. The rest are terrorists or collaborators with the terrorists.

Kyle's autobiography is even more revealing (director Clint Eastwood's film prettifies him). Kyle wrote that everyone he killed deserved it, that he hated Iraqi "savages", that he didn't give a damn about Iraqis, and that he loved what he did—killing "bad guys." He had a cross tattooed on his arm because he wanted people to know he was a Christian. He bragged about going to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina and killing 30 "looters"—in other words, desperate people in New Orleans, Black people in particular, trying to survive. (Apparently this and other claims he makes in the book are lies.) Why would anyone not only choose to make a movie about someone who spouted this racist shit, but sanitize him on screen as well?

When NBC correspondent Ayman Mohyeldin dared criticize American Sniper, he received hundreds of vicious and racist death threats. Others who've spoken out against the film have received similar threats. This reaction points to the outlook, values, and social base being whipped up by the film.

Supporting the Troops IS Supporting the War

American Sniper concentrates a key way the U.S. rulers have undercut the widespread unease and opposition to the ever-shifting mosaic of wars the U.S. is fighting in the Middle East, first Afghanistan and Iraq, then drones in Pakistan and Yemen, now back into Iraq and Syria, with upheaval and instability continuing to grow by leaps and bounds with no end in sight. They are working at this by focusing attention on the suffering, sacrifices, and "valor" of the troops carrying out their wars. Kyle is portrayed as complex and a humanitarian in many ways. He is willing to sacrifice himself for his buddies, to protect others. He even goes on patrols against the wishes of some in the chain of command; he doesn't just hide in buildings and on rooftops. He's shown having qualms about executing women and children.

The wrenching emotional, and humanizing, scenes are those between Kyle and his wife and Kyle and his buddies—never of any Iraqis—they're just ciphers (dehumanized objects). In the warped and twisted logic and immorality of this movie, the tragedy isn't that literally millions of Iraqis have either been killed or have had—and are continuing to have—their lives destroyed! It is that those who carry out this slaughter have their lives shattered. The tragedy is supposedly the suffering of the military occupying Iraq.

The message: Whatever one thinks of the war, the U.S. troops are good guys and everyone should support them. But this is just putting a human face on mass murder for empire. War criminals may love their families (or their pets). So what?

Let me pose it this way: A rapist may also love and "protect" his family—does that justify rape?

What does "supporting the troops" mean? It means supporting what they do. Why should anyone with a conscience support people who carry out war crimes in service of the obscene goal of violently maintaining a system of global exploitation, including the very system that shoots Black and Latino youths down in the streets and degrades and abuses women in a thousand ways?

Whatever their background or personal lives, these are not “our” troops—they’re cogs in a global military machine, the troops of the U.S. imperialist system. Whatever the soldiers thought they were doing—and no doubt the military hierarchy forcefully breaks down and brainwashes the troops and no doubt many are crippled mentally and/or physically by the war’s toll—the fact is they were carrying out an unjust and bloody war of conquest, suppressing any opposition, installing a new reactionary regime, and trying to turn Iraq into a neo-colony.

Those who, for whatever reason, have become part of that military machine should learn about its actual history and purpose, and repudiate and oppose it. Some heroic veterans of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars have done this. They’ve spoken out against and exposed the crimes committed by the U.S. military, and repudiated the war, including by some throwing their medals away. Why aren’t major movies being made about them? There are fleeting glimpses of antiwar sentiments in American Sniper, but the focus is on Eastwood’s portrayal of Chris Kyle—and he’s the polar opposite of the vets who’ve spoken out against the war and who’ve had real feelings for the people of Iraq.

Eastwood’s movie comes at a time of the explosive rise of reactionary Islamic fundamentalism and great peril and difficulty for the U.S. imperialists, in the Middle East in particular. Whatever his intent or understanding (in one interview he claimed showing the suffering of American soldiers is antiwar), American Sniper is a movie that whips up ideological and political support for America’s ongoing crimes against the peoples of that region.

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