

Staying the course in Iraq justified in television series

Debra Watson
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Over There, FX Cable Television Network, Wednesdays, 10 p.m.

Over There, the new television series on FX cable TV, debuted this summer and has been promoted as a unique television offering. It has been billed as the first time a TV series has attempted to deal with a war while that war was still being fought. The drama is a fictional account of one US Army squad's tour of duty in Iraq.

While the program is largely war propaganda dressed up as TV drama, its approach is not the gung-ho, bloodthirsty variety. This is a little more sophisticated. War is hell, we're made to understand, and American soldiers are shown in difficult, even terrifying circumstances. But, the argument goes, now that the US is engaged in Iraq, like it or not, we must "stay the course." The program corresponds more or less to the line of the Democratic Party.

Before the series had even aired, John Landgraf, president of entertainment at FX since January 2005, emphasized in interviews that *Over There* would not be about politics but would focus on the soldiers and their lives in Iraq and at home.

The notion that it is possible to represent a major conflict such as the invasion of Iraq artistically and in depth without paying any attention to its origins or character is nonsensical. It is artistically untenable along with everything else. This helps explain why the program is largely flat and boring. *Over There* is neither fish nor fowl, neither "action film" nor anti-war drama. Its essential dishonesty as a project must communicate itself to viewers.

And indeed it appears that has happened. The show plummeted from 4.1 million viewers for the July 27 premiere to 2.6 million the next week. Nielsen ratings show that nearly halfway through its 13-week run, the show has failed to regain any viewers.

The loss of viewers took place despite major contributions from industry representatives with highly favorable reputations in some circles. Steven Bochco is executive producer. Bochco gained fame from two popular TV Cop shows purportedly faithful to minute details about police work. His earlier TV dramas *Hill Street Blues* and *NYPD Blue* earned Bochco certain credibility for depicting gritty urban reality.

Chris Gerolmo wrote the first episodes of *Over There* and directed the pilot. Gerolmo wrote the film *Mississippi Burning*, a fictional account based on the murder of three civil rights workers in Mississippi in the 1960's. In that film history was turned on its head, with Gerolmo portraying the FBI as the savior of the civil rights movement. In reality the agency was spying on key leaders

of that movement, trying to disrupt its activities and busy assembling a dossier to discredit Martin Luther King.

In Gerolmo's *Over There* each character is largely a cardboard cutout conveniently identified by a nickname that defines his respective stereotype. Private Williams, or Smoke, is an angry black former gang member from the inner city who regularly smokes dope. The most profound insight ever attributed to this character is that he knows 'what's what' in a war zone because he comes from a comparable situation in urban America.

The dialogue regularly parrots the excuses for brutality in Iraq that regularly come out of American officials' mouths. This is made clear in a key scene from the first episode when the battle hardened character dubbed Sergeant Scream leads his troops in a firefight. They attack the enemy, holed up in a cluster of mud brick huts in the desert, while the sergeant yells "We didn't come for your oil, we came to kick your ass."

In a later episode, civilians killed by American soldiers are deliberately put in the crossfire by insurgents, used as human shields in a sinister plot to discredit the American invaders.

In another story, an Al-Jazeera press crew is portrayed as friendly to the insurgents, helping to set up a truce. Later we learn that the insurgents planned to violate the truce even as they were negotiating with US forces.

One episode finds footage from an embedded reporter dominating the 24-hour news cycle. The reporter's higher-ups at a British television broadcasting company have edited the film without his knowledge and the footage puts the US military in the worst light. While Al-Jazeera's proper name is used in the series the British company gets a fictional tag.

Major subplots involving two key characters illustrate the contrast between the show's portrayal of reality and reality itself. One episode follows Bo, a 20-year old recruit who put a partial college football scholarship on hold to join army and make the extra money he needed in part to support his wife and child. So far, so good. The character is in a situation that is typical of the injustices of real life in the US. He is an economic conscript in the modern "volunteer" Army.

But when he is injured and sent to a US military hospital in Germany for a leg amputation and subsequent recuperation, his first visit is from a family member he has not seen in years. His drunken father, who barely knows him, just wanted a free plane ride from the military.

Bo appears not to be bitter about his devastating loss, and

demands, unsuccessfully, to return to his unit to fight minus one leg. The character expressed no visible concern about the difficulties he faces in returning home.

There is no exploration of what the returning wounded face in America in the scenes located in the Army hospital. One need only consider the fate of thousands of Vietnam Vets sickened by Agent Orange and the victims of Gulf War Syndrome to get an inkling of the suffering and deprivation they are in for. The callous regard the government has for soldiers who sacrifice so much matches the ease with which the lies are piled up to justify the war in Iraq.

Smoke's relationship with his mother shows the screenwriter's penchant for demonizing a section of society in order to avoid probing politically charged social issues. For example, Smoke is portrayed as a dope-smoking misanthrope, always the first to demand they simply kill the enemy and ask questions later.

Smoke's mother is going about her life back at home, an overworked, obviously physically overtaxed woman working two jobs to support herself, Smoke's younger sister, and a baby. Again, so far, so good, and so typical of life in the US. But was it a society with a shattered safety net system, along with unprecedented social inequality and endemic racism that got her in this untenable situation, or was it something her 'good for nothing' son did in the past?

When Smoke agrees to make a video for British TV a segment is taped and sent to the news organization making him appear as a thug who just wants to kill for the sake of killing. Then he does kill two Iraqi civilians, a mother and her child. Arab news stations quickly pick up video of the killing and allege the incident is an act of wanton murder.

When Smoke's mother sees the footage of Smoke's interview on TV looping over and over through the news cycle, she has a stroke. Smoke does not even take advantage of a chance for a furlough to go home to see her.

The series was hyped with the message that it would show the conflict of the "boots on the ground" with the generals and Washington's conduct of the war. So it is Smoke who is dressed down by his superior for his conduct. But because the officer knows the insurgents deliberately put the civilians in harms' way, he lets him off the hook this time.

Such a scene, with the Army brass valiantly trying to control bloodthirsty soldiers, replaces the reality that was revealed in May 2004 when the footage of Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq surfaced. The atrocities committed by soldiers there were sanctioned and encouraged in advance by policies put in place at the highest levels in the Pentagon and Washington.

Apart from one or two news footage clips inserted in a series episode, there is little to identify the action in *Over There* as the Iraq war at all. The program's set in some North American Desert usually consists of an isolated village of mud brick surrounded by sand, a few palms, and some farm animals. It looks nothing like Baghdad or other urban areas of Iraq where US troops routinely carry out operations.

Halfway through the series we have met no identifiable Iraqis save a brief encounter with a couple and their children while the squad is kicking in doors in raids. The raids are loosely based on the assault on Fallujah late last year. Predictably the family we

meet bears some level of guilt. There is no attempt ever to portray anyone born in Iraq as a real human being except perhaps the member of the squad from Detroit who is of Arabic descent. He seems to be included in the series primarily to translate for the viewer at crucial points.

Through Dim, the bespectacled recruit who left Cornell University to join the army and fight in Iraq, we hear dialogue that provides the ultimate justification for any war. He sends video e-mail to his wife saying: "Someone said tragedy was the inevitable working out of fate. And the tragedy is we're savages here. We're thrilled to kill each other. We're monsters. And war is what unmasks us. But there is a kind of honor, a kind of grace. But if I am some kind of monster then it is my privilege to be one."

Such existential apologetics replaces an accurate presentation of any concrete political, social or historical facts about Iraq, the Middle East, or about any war in the era of US imperialism.

David Carr, in a review of the show for the *New York Times* at the end of August, addressed the lagging ratings. There is no doubt concern among studio moguls.

In the review Carr gives Bochco a platform to defend his creation. He also includes a quotation from an Army infantry veteran who served in 2003 in Iraq who concludes that the problem is news segments about Iraq shown on CNN and other television news programs are too short. Carr quotes him as concluding that "anything that brings attention to a war that is not getting much coverage is helpful."

The genesis of the series is also telling. Supposedly Landgraf, FX's new president, came to the cable network in January with a mission to put out a series on the war and recruited Bochco. Bochco in turn got Gerolmo to write the pilot and some scripts. 20th Century Fox Television ended up producing the series for FX. Like the Fox broadcast network and the Fox News network, FX is owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp.

The incestuous relationship of News Corp entities became necessary to get the show on the air when the original production company, Paramount Network Television, backed out of a deal to make the show. According to a November 2004 story in the *Hollywood Reporter*, Paramount rejected the series because studio executives were afraid they would lose revenue if the show was rejected in foreign markets.



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