

A devastating exposure of Iraq war

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Occupation: Dreamland, directed by Ian Olds and Garrett Scott

This unusual film succeeds in revealing the essentially reactionary and doomed character of the US occupation of Iraq simply by allowing eight soldiers to speak, as the camera records the daily mixture of danger, boredom and inevitable demoralization that accompanies their tour of duty.

Directors Ian Olds and Garrett Scott were embedded with a squad of the US Army's 82nd Airborne Division in Fallujah in the winter of 2004, just a few months before this city became known throughout the world as a focal point of the mounting resistance to the US occupation.

The embedding technique was utilized by the Pentagon, in light of the experiences in Vietnam, to curb the independence of journalists and ensure favorable newspaper and television coverage of the invasion and its aftermath. Film is another medium, however. Partly because the scenes recorded by Olds and Scott were released more than a year later, rather than within hours or days as in the case of print and television, the result of embedding was not what the authorities expected.

One of the filmmakers, Ian Olds, told the audience at a recent New York City screening of the movie that, while no one has contacted them, they heard that the Pentagon wasn't happy with the result. One official was reported to have said, "We would have made a different film." At the same time, Olds added, the authorities apparently concluded that any open complaints would only succeed in calling more attention to the film.

The filmmakers let the facts speak for themselves. There is, of course, a place for documentaries that provide more historical background and analysis. *Occupation: Dreamland*, however, is all the more powerful because it lets the camera and the soldiers tell

the story, and the camera does not lie. The views of the soldiers have the ring of sincerity and truth. Precisely because the GIs express different views about the war and very different levels of social consciousness, the real nature of the occupation is as clear as can be.

On patrol during the day, occasionally attempting a bit of small talk with the local population although they do not speak the language, the soldiers are generally greeted with either sullen silence or vocal complaints. At one point an uproar ensues when an Iraqi woman is detained. Another scene shows several soldiers surrounded by a restless crowd, as an Iraqi man angrily denounces the appalling conditions, the lack of electricity, security or jobs, and the inability and refusal of the occupation authorities to make good on any of the promises of improved living conditions. The speaker suggests the impossibility of any plan to win the "hearts and minds" of the local population. "America can go to the moon, it can make nuclear rockets," he declares, "but it can't make people"—in other words, it cannot produce a docile and cooperative population.

The filmmakers were also able to accompany the US forces on several nighttime raids, apparently at homes where tips had indicated weapons and ammunition were stored. The raids are also virtually guaranteed to fail in their aim, neither drying up the source of weapons nor, above all, tamping down the anger and opposition to the occupation forces. On the contrary, as the camera shows, women and children cower as the soldiers brutalize their husbands, fathers and sons. One soldier relates his frustration, explaining that they can't do anything about the living conditions, and when they tell the Iraqis that they have arrested some "bad guys," the response is, "Yes, that's my brother..."

Those arrested are immediately hooded when they are taken away. Although these scenes predate by some months the notorious images from Abu Ghraib, they do

suggest what might have come next, in Abu Ghraib and other prisons.

In fact, the 82nd Airborne has been in the news this past week—just as this film was being released—in connection with charges by a captain and two sergeants that abuses were carried out by this division near Fallujah during this very period. For obvious reasons, nothing of this sort was or could have been filmed by a crew working with official Army permission inside this unit. Nevertheless, the cross-section of soldiers filmed and interviewed in *Occupation: Dreamland* includes one or two who, judging from their comments, were capable of such actions, as well as soldiers who would have protested against them. There is little doubt that abuse and torture was carried out in other units. *Occupation: Dreamland* underscores the fact that the primary responsibility for all the crimes carried out in Iraq is a political one and rests with the government in Washington.

The interviews with the soldiers, simple and straightforward, are easily the most powerful part of the movie. Only one maintains consistent support for the invasion and occupation. Among the rest, about half are increasingly vocal in their disgust with Bush and the lies used to justify the war. The others, while not voicing any opposition or expressing any concern for the plight of the Iraqis, are increasingly demoralized.

When one discussion begins, Staff Sergeant Chris Corcione says somewhat halfheartedly that there should be no “bashing” of the president on camera. The film then cuts to a continuation of the conversation in one soldier’s living quarters. The GI, Thomas Turner, angrily denounces Bush and points out the role of Iraq’s oil resources and the profiteering of Halliburton and other military contractors, amid the hypocritical claims to be bringing democracy to the Middle East.

Luis Pacheco, a medic from Chicago, is perhaps the most outspoken, virtually declaring his solidarity with the suffering Iraqi people. While affirming his patriotism, Pacheco adds, “I can’t blame these people. I wouldn’t want some other county to come in and drive through our streets.” Later he comments, in a reference to the resistance, “If this was Chicago, I’d be running up there with a couple of guns...”

Another GI, Joseph Wood, explains how he was convinced to join up, how he opposed the plans for the Iraq war from the very beginning, and his plans to

study fashion if he is able to get out. Wood, now a student at New York’s Parsons School of Design, attended some of the New York City screenings with the filmmakers last weekend.

Another soldier, unable to make any sense of what he has been told, tries to hold on to his belief that the occupation can accomplish something, but then adds gloomily, “It’s going to take years and years and years...” Another GI, also more demoralized than politically aware, declares, “They [the Iraqis] don’t give a shit about us, and I don’t give a shit about them.”

When one considers that the scenes in this documentary were filmed more than 18 months ago, the current state of morale of the occupation forces in Iraq, more than 1,500 deaths and many thousands of injuries later, is not hard to imagine.

A particularly important scene in the film is a mandatory meeting of the soldiers with officers who seek to pressure them to reenlist. The officers, seemingly oblivious to the presence of cameras, contemptuously tell the men that they are losers, that they have no idea what they want to do in life, that there is nothing that society has to offer people like them and they’d better stick with the army.

This film, modest in scope and aims, is nevertheless a powerful exposure of the war and the impact of this criminal adventure upon hundreds of thousands of workers and youth used as cannon fodder to defend the interests of the tiny ruling elite. If millions could see this film, it would undoubtedly have an impact similar to that produced by the campaign of Cindy Sheehan, helping to crystallize the growing opposition to the Iraq war and growing demands for the immediate withdrawal of US forces from that country.



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