

The Ground Truth: the cruel fate of Iraq war veterans

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The Ground Truth: After the Killing Fields, directed by Patricia Foulkrod, limited theatrical release September 2006 and available on DVD

Primarily made up of interviews with returned Iraqi veterans, Patricia Foulkrod's documentary, *The Ground Truth: After the Killing Fields*, unflinchingly exposes one of the human costs of the US occupation of Iraq.

The experiences of these young soldiers, some physically disabled for life, and all suffering some degree of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of killing Iraqi and Afghan civilians, represent one of the most severe indictments of the American ruling elite.

The soldiers describe everything from the false advertising and outright lies used to persuade them to enlist ("If you join the National Guard, you won't see combat overseas"); to the dehumanizing process of boot camp, where they are taught to chant about killing "ragheads" and "hajis"; to the denial of benefits and necessary medical support upon their return.

The motivations of those interviewed in *The Ground Truth* for joining the US armed forces differ. Some were patriotic—Sean Huze, for example signed up on September 12, 2001, immediately after the attack on the World Trade Center; others were simply "gung-ho," as Rob Sarra described himself. Or, as in Demond Mullins's case, they needed money for education. After serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, these veterans find themselves betrayed, disillusioned and angry.

None of this is entirely new information—reports of the failure to provide troops with adequate body armor and the attempt to charge veterans for their meals while recovering in military hospitals have already given some hint of the callousness of the upper echelons of US military command. However, impersonal facts and statistics gain a human dimension in the film.

Several of the sequences stand out. At a military recruitment fair, toddlers are shown how cool it is to hold a missile launcher on their shoulders and push the little red button—"Boom!" Marine vet Jimmy Massey comments that the process is designed so that a recruiter is only successful if he or she is willing to manipulate and lie to get kids to enlist.

Footage shot at a Marine training camp just prior to the Iraq invasion confirms the abusive and degrading techniques used to make killing a conditioned reflex. US Army Lt. Colonel David

Grossman, author of "On Killing," explains how the word "kill" never appears in any of the training manuals, and yet it is the training's paramount purpose.

"If you look at warfare over time, the hardware used for killing hasn't changed all that much, but the software (the mind of the soldier) has changed tremendously," he says. By the time of Vietnam, the military had crafted techniques to condition soldiers to kill without hesitation, including civilians. To this end, realistic simulations like video games and psychological manipulation such as chants accompanying the physical training are employed as a form of brainwashing.

Navy vet Charlie Anderson can still sing one such from memory:

"Bomb the village, kill the people, throw some napalm in the square.

Do it on a Sunday morning, kill them on their way to prayer.

Ring the bell inside the schoolhouse, watch those kiddies gather round.

Lock and load with your 240, mow them little motherf---s down!"

Once in Iraq, the veterans describe being in a war zone without front or rear lines, where the "combatants" look just like the people, and they have no clear sense of mission beyond "We're here because of September 11, to take revenge on the terrorists." Herrold Noel says, "This war is a different war. You're fighting men, women, children, killing a woman who may be pregnant...that's what messes with you, you're not just killing another soldier."

Director Foulkrod was able to obtain video footage from the BBC and unembedded sources, unlike the material shown in the American media—corpses of civilians lying in the streets, soldiers raiding an Iraqi home at night, herding terrified women and children into one room and putting plastic hoods on the men, stepping on the heads of a row of male detainees to get them to lie face down on the ground. "Occupation is a situation of domination—behaving abusively, threatening. Killing is just the icing on the cake."

Several veterans describe a turning point when what they have been trained to do becomes intolerable. Their morale broken, they fight just so they can get home. One vet says, "Three-quarters of the troops in Iraq want to return home

within the year.”

Not surprisingly, coming home after such dehumanization and fitting back into civilian life is an adjustment that these veterans have found extremely difficult, one for which they have furthermore received very little support from the Veterans Administration. The tragic scale of disfigurement and amputations makes some wish they had died in Iraq. Perhaps more insidious are the less-visible injuries.

Again, the film puts a human face on the statistic that PTSD is the second most common injury in this conflict after bullet wounds, and that the official estimate admits that upward of 20 percent of veterans experience it. There are expected to be 20,000 new cases in 2006 alone, according to a report published by Knight Ridder this past June.

The Veterans Administration tries by various means to avoid taking responsibility for PTSD and having to treat it. One of the methods it resorts to is a cruel “Catch-22.” Veterans who indicate on a discharge survey that they are experiencing symptoms—suicidal thoughts, hypervigilance, rage, insomnia—are either kept in Iraq or on a US military base to be treated, and are not reunited with their families. As a result, most soldiers deny having symptoms, only to discover that when they later seek help, perhaps after a violent “incident,” they are told that since they answered “No” on the previous survey, they don’t have PTSD, but rather a “personality disorder” that is not treated by the Veterans Administration as a combat-related injury.

The film includes interviews with spouses and family members who find themselves caring for extreme physical and emotional trauma that places inordinate stress on families. The US military journal *Stars & Stripes* acknowledges that the divorce rate for Iraqi veterans has jumped from 9 to 15 percent, and alcohol abuse rises from 13 percent to 21 percent within a year of returning from combat, though others would put these figures higher. Furthermore, the military will not accurately report the rate of suicides, claiming instead that many of the veterans who take their own life, as did 22-year old Jeff Lucey, whose parents appear in the film, “would have done so anyway.”

The Ground Truth is a thoroughgoing indictment of the war in Iraq. And yet, after having attested in detail to the gross indifference and essential criminality of the US occupation of Iraq, the filmmaker backs away from drawing the appropriate political conclusions.

In an interview with the online journal *Dark Horizons*, director Patricia Foulkrod says her intention was to show the invisible (or it would be more accurate to say ignored) suffering of the young men and women who’d been deployed in Iraq. An admirable goal, Foulkrod’s compassion for these soldiers makes itself powerfully felt.

But as a self-defined child of the 1950s who remembers how Vietnam veterans were denied necessary support supposedly because antiwar protest turned the country against them, her

overriding concern is that her film be “pro-soldier,” more than antiwar. The soldiers’ scathing condemnations notwithstanding, she still wants them to be seen as heroes for having fought for their country—heroes, she will admit, like those she remembers epitomized in *The Best Years of Our Lives*, the 1946 film directed by William Wyler about the difficulties suffered by World War II veterans.

As a result, she acquiesces, unintentionally perhaps, to the camp that equates opposition to the war with “not supporting the troops.” Whether it was the result of her editing, or her choice of questions, not a single vet is heard to say that he or she thinks the war was launched on the basis of lies, that it should be stopped, or that anyone in the government should be held responsible. The words “Bush administration” are never uttered, nor the word “oil.”

If Foulkrod hoped to gain a broader distribution by placing her film politically “in the middle,” she gained little by it. Even as it stands, if *The Ground Truth* were to be as widely distributed as it should be, it would severely undermine already flagging military recruitment and heighten opposition to the reintroduction of the draft.

Since Foulkrod first encountered most of these veterans in Walter Reed military hospital in 2003, many have progressed through their recovery to become activists in various antiwar or veteran support groups. Even if they are not representative of the majority of Iraqi veterans, it is nonetheless significant. They have also established bonds with groups of Vietnam veterans, who provide the benefit of their own bitter experience.

At the end of the film, Camilio Mejia, one of the most outspoken antiwar activists to have emerged from the Iraq War, says, “We are not fighting in Iraq to bring democracy and freedom.” Additional footage shows him leading a group of veterans on a march through New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, where he comments, “One sees the same greed and indifference on the part of the government and corporations to the American people as one sees in Iraq.”

Together with an empathy for these veterans, this should be the main truth that one takes away from *The Ground Truth*.



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