

In the Valley of Elah: reducing colonial war to personal trauma

Hiram Lee
5 October 2007

In the Valley of Elah, written and directed by Paul Haggis

The Iraq war is slowly making its way into the work of American filmmakers. How could it not? Paul Haggis, who has made a name for himself as a writer and sometime director of heavy-handed and confused message films (*Crash, Million Dollar Baby*)—a kind of modern-day Stanley Kramer, although not so consistently liberal—is the most recent fiction filmmaker to tackle the topic, which until recently has primarily been dealt with in documentary films.

His latest work, *In the Valley of Elah*, is inspired by the true story of Army Specialist Richard Davis, who was brutally murdered in 2003 in Columbus, Georgia, by some of his fellow soldiers after returning home from Iraq. Davis's story was the subject of an article written by Mark Boal for *Playboy* magazine in 2004 and this was the source material for Haggis's fictionalized account.

The movie begins when Hank Deerfield (Tommy Lee Jones), a truck driver and former military police officer, receives a phone call from military officials telling him his son Mike has disappeared and is now listed as having gone AWOL (Absent Without Leave) from his base in the US. Doubting that his son would ever truly go AWOL, Deerfield decides to mount an investigation of his own.

Driving to the small town which is home to his son's military base in pursuit of the truth, he comes up against a mostly inept local police force and a stonewalling military bureaucracy. The only person who will come to his aid is the well-meaning, but not terribly gifted detective Emily Sanders (Charlize Theron), who wants to do something meaningful with her life and career. Until now, she's been handed only the most innocuous tasks on the police force. Her

fellow detectives, all men, think she slept her way onto the squad.

From here the film plays out like an hour-long police drama on television (Haggis was a writer on *L.A. Law* earlier in his career). The body of Deerfield's missing son is discovered. The details are gruesome. Deerfield will effortlessly begin to expose all the mistakes of the local police in the ensuing investigation—he is something of a super-detective in the film—and with the help of Sanders he will uncover clues that point to the real murderer or murderers. With the help of video found on his son's cell phone, he will also uncover a disturbing secret his son and the other soldiers have been living with, regarding atrocities they committed while in Iraq.

That Haggis should make a film about soldiers returning home from war and a film which does not turn away from the brutal truth about civilian deaths in Iraq is commendable. He seems sincere in his opposition to the war and in his concern for returning veterans. But good intentions are not enough, and *In the Valley of Elah* suffers from some considerable flaws.

Much of the film is simply predictable. Can there be any doubt when we see Theron's character ridiculed and insulted by her chauvinistic male colleagues that they will get their comeuppance at her hand later in the film? And when a young woman goes to the police after her war veteran husband drowns their dog in the bathtub, believing she'll be next, only to be turned away by police, is there any doubt what her fate will be? Haggis's camera lingers on her just long enough so that we can be sure. Remember this face, he says. The director is like a bad fighter who telegraphs all his punches or a nervous poker player with too many tells.

At times Haggis's characters do not feel like flesh and blood creations, but rather mouthpieces or listening

devices for the writer's own ideas or clever lines. Theron's character has a young son whose only reason for appearing in the film seems to be to provide Jones' character the opportunity of telling him the biblical story of David and Goliath from which the film takes its title. It must be said, however, that *In the Valley of Elah* does not suffer as seriously from this artistic weakness as the director's earlier *Crash*.

The movie's handling of the murder and those suspected of committing it is also largely unsatisfying. Its chief argument seems to be that Mike Deerfield's killing resulted from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) afflicting him and his fellow soldiers. They were disturbed by what they experienced during the war and found returning home difficult and disorienting.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is a real and serious condition, one which tens of thousands of Iraq war veterans are dealing with every day. But to lay blame for the events which take place in Haggis's film solely on PTSD or emotions getting out of hand seems unconvincing.

The true story that inspired the film was far more complicated. According to Boal's original piece in *Playboy*, neither Richard Davis nor the soldiers he befriended were strangers to thuggish and backward behavior during or even before their time in Iraq. During his tour of duty in the war, Davis once reportedly stuck a knife into an Iraqi skull and propped it up at the entrance of a makeshift base at which he was stationed.

There were rumors circulating among soldiers who knew him at the time of his death that Davis was killed because he had information about the rape of an Iraqi girl committed by other US soldiers that he might make public.

Some of these stories about atrocities carried out by soldiers find their way into the film. In one scene a soldier places a sticker of a smiling devil on the head of a badly burned civilian corpse. In another scene Mike Deerfield presses his fingers into the open wounds of a prisoner sadistically and asks him if it hurts. There is a chilling moment when one of the soldiers recounts this story, laughing.

Haggis shows us some troubling things. He is able to shock us. But if he had probed deeper into the case he might have enlightened us as well. These men, after all,

took part in an illegal war of aggression in which torture and brutality were not mere isolated events committed by "a few bad apples," but the policy of those in Washington who planned and made that war. Moreover, such brutality is inherent to a colonial-style war. The occupying army, hated by the population, demoralized and brutalized by its circumstances, inevitably resorts to savagery.

Shock or dismay is not an adequate response. All in all, there is too much focus on the psychological aspects of the case in the film with not enough made of the social factors contributing to them.

The Canadian-born Haggis leaves us at the end of his film with perhaps the most heavy-handed image he's given us: Hank Deerfield, disgusted with the discoveries he has made while investigating his son's murder, chooses to fly an American flag upside down, an international symbol for distress. There's such a thing as putting too fine a point on something, and this is a perfect example. Haggis doesn't trust his audience members to be able to come to their own conclusions and so he leads them to the spot where he can hammer down on their heads his message.

That something is very wrong in America, that the country is "in distress" will come as no revelation to millions and millions of people. In moments like these Haggis is telling us something we already know, not contributing to our understanding of what it is and how it came to be.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact