

Body of War: a wounded veteran and, disgracefully, a defense of the Democrats

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Written and directed by Phil Donahue and Ellen Spiro

Body of War, a documentary by Phil Donahue and Ellen Spiro, attempts to build a case against the Iraq war by focusing in detail on the life of one young soldier who comes home paralyzed from the chest down.

Tomas Young is a bright, likeable man who was wounded in the spine in Sadr City in April of 2004; he is not only confined to a wheelchair but suffers severe attendant disabilities, including an inability to cough, trouble regulating his body temperature, dizzy spells, urinary tract infections and sexual dysfunction. The film brings us his daily trials in intimate detail, and he shows patience and wry humor as he struggles to adapt to his new life. He then puts those same qualities to use when he has a political awakening and begins speaking out against the Iraq war. We follow him as he travels, together with his mother and new wife, to various anti-war rallies, and joins the groundswell of veterans opposed to the war.

Many of these scenes are poignant and touching. At the rallies Young encounters other disabled vets, as well as mothers holding photos of their sons who died in Iraq, and meanwhile the stresses on his own family are given a tender treatment. Cinema does us all a service when it portrays the personal costs of war, especially in a climate where the vast numbers of U.S. wounded from Iraq (currently at least 23,000) are willfully brushed under the rug by the media. Young himself is well-spoken and obviously courageous, and his opposition to the war has a heartfelt sincerity.

Unfortunately, this is only half the movie. Intercut with Young's story is a potted retelling of the Senate vote for the Iraq War Resolution in October of 2002. This section is a shameless glorification of the

Democratic Party, or a section of it, that succeeds in torpedoing much of the anti-war potential the work might have had.

The titular *Body of War* refers not only to Young's physical form, but to the U.S. Congress, which—as an opening title card prominently reminds us—holds the Constitutional power to declare war. The filmmakers wish to show how, in the Iraq War Resolution, it surrendered that power to President Bush. The highly-superficial segments consist mostly of sound-bite clips edited together in artificial sequences to produce dramatic effects.

We get President Bush's groundless assertions about the danger of Saddam Hussein; we see Republican Senators parroting those assertions word-for-word. We hear, every few minutes throughout the film, a stentorian voice reading off the roll call of the final vote. We do glimpse, pointedly, a few high-profile Democratic Senators, like Hilary Clinton and John Kerry, adding their voices in favor of the resolution.

But, spotlight front and center, we find Democratic Senator Robert Byrd, mounting his campaign of opposition in a series of impassioned speeches that won him a certain renown on the left. Byrd is given a glorified role in the movie: at the end, he meets Young and boasts about what he calls "the Immortal 23," those predominantly Democratic Senators who voted No. A painful second roll-call then occurs in which Byrd enlists Young to read aloud the names of those Senators from the list.

It is worth noting that, for all of his eloquence, what Byrd is really defending is not peace, but the prerogative of the legislature to have the final say on matters of war. Is this actually an anti-war message? The film opens and closes with images of the Capitol building, and one feels that in the filmmakers' eyes the

Iraq war is not a barbaric crime or a neo-colonial adventure so much as a failure of parliamentary procedure.

Worse, the film has chosen to portray the Democratic Party, or at least its stalwart core, as the only line of defense that stood between the American people and the tragedy in Iraq. Nothing could be further from the truth, or more calculated to undermine the possibility of a real anti-war movement in the population. In fact, the Democratic Party has been behind the war from the beginning and remains behind it now, as they have demonstrated again and again by continuing to pass every funding request for the conflict, even after becoming the majority party in 2006. The film offers no explanation for this continuing support, or, in the case of the Iraq War Resolution, why the majority of Senate Democrats were motivated to vote for it.

For that matter, no explanation is given for why the Republicans themselves wanted the war! Unmentioned are oil, geostrategic calculations, Great Power rivalries, worldwide economic conditions, or anything else. The implication, by cinematic default, is that the United States invaded Iraq because President Bush was personally bloodthirsty, and the Republicans hypnotized the majority of Democrats into going along by their repeated equation of Saddam Hussein with Hitler. (Six or seven of these sound bites get strung together in the film.)

This is hardly a serious analysis.

Donahue is a well-known liberal and longtime Democratic Party supporter. In early 2003, MSNBC canceled his show *Donahue* in a transparent move relating to his public anti-war stance. A memo surfaced claiming that Donahue was a “difficult public face for NBC in a time of war,” and, speaking on the *Hannity and Colmes* show, Donahue explained the cancellation by saying, “From the top down, they were just terrified. We had to have two conservatives on for every liberal.”

Donahue is no doubt genuine in his opposition to the war and the Bush administration, but his opposition remains within the confines of the two-party system. Hence the tortuous character of the film’s logic. We are expected to remember the ‘heroic’ opposition of a minority of the Democratic senators, when the main body of Democrats has gone on sustaining the bloody conflict and promises to continue doing so. Donahue is attempting to bolster the image of the Democratic Party

at a time when it has been discredited in the eyes of millions. Not an honorable mission.

We are left with the horrors of war as an argument. And, without taking anything away from the suffering and grief of military families, that is not enough. Wars do not happen because people are ignorant of their consequences. Exposing the fact that people suffer will not by itself stop this war or prevent the next one. Complex historical and political questions are involved. In fact, such exposure did not even deter Tomas’ brother, a soldier too. Within the movie we see him depart for Iraq, immune to the very argument with which the filmmakers hope to move a nation.

Since making the film, Tomas Young has continued his activism, often advocating better health care for veterans and federal funding for the kind of stem-cell research that can help his condition. In a recent note for the Bill Moyers blog he writes, “Being an antiwar activist in this day and age is frustrating. You fight and fight and nothing gets done.” His frustration may have been presaged by the final scene of the movie, in which Young and Robert Byrd move slowly together down a marble hall in the Capitol building. Young is in his wheelchair and the aged Byrd is limping with a cane. “I see we’ve both got mobility issues,” Young quips.

Unintentionally, the filmmakers have left us with a perfect summation of liberal protest politics.



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