

Stop-Loss: A serious and moving effort, but what about that three-letter word?

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Directed by Kimberly Peirce, screenplay by Peirce and Mark Richard

American director Kimberly Peirce's new film *Stop-Loss* deals with the terrible toll taken by the Iraq war on its returning veterans and one soldier's unwillingness to be redeployed. It is a generally worthy effort, whose real strengths deserve recognition. Its limitations too, however, which express ongoing problems, merit thinking about.

The US military's Stop-Loss policy is a loophole in a soldier's contract that allows for a term of military service to be involuntarily extended. Being "Stop-Lossed," or recycled back to a war zone, is commonly referred to as a "back-door draft." Congress first gave Stop-Loss authority to the Department of Defense after conscription ended in the wake of the Vietnam war.

Peirce became aware of the practice from her brother who, at 18, enlisted in the armed forces after the September 11 terrorist attacks and was sent to Iraq.

Lyrics in the rap song "Matter of Time" by 4th25, used in the film's opening and closing credits, "*If only I hadn't a been to some of the places I had been. If only I wouldn't a seen what I saw. Maybe I could feel again,*" add weight to the film's argument that thousands of youth are losing their lives and humanity in the criminal enterprise.

The talented Peirce has not made a movie since her 1999 debut feature film, the acclaimed *Boys Don't Cry*, the true story of a Nebraska transgender teenager, Brandon Teena, who was raped and murdered in 1993.

In an interview with the *New York Times*, Peirce offers something of an explanation for the hiatus: "There was a sense of deep, deep longing before *Stop-Loss*. *Boys* set the bar very high artistically for me. I wanted to be that much in love with my next character. I wanted to feel it was taking over my whole life. I was lonely when I wasn't able to work on a movie at that level again." With *Stop-Loss*, Peirce has found a creditable subject.

The first quarter-hour of *Stop-Loss* is set in the hell produced by American neo-colonial intervention in Iraq. Shaky digital footage shows all-too young soldiers clowning around in crude, macho fashion. (Most of the film is shot in 35mm by renowned British cinematographer Chris Menges.) Among them are Sgt. Brandon King (Ryan Phillippe) and his two buddies from Brazos, Texas, Steve (Channing Tatum) and Tommy (Joseph Gordon-Levitt). Continually under siege, the soldiers are fearful and contemptuous of the Iraqi population whom they consider to be an all-purpose enemy—faceless "Hadjis." In these opening moments, Peirce establishes the foul character of the US presence in the Middle Eastern nation and its disorienting, brutalizing effect on the troops.

Brandon orders his squad, manning a checkpoint, to pursue

insurgent snipers who lead them into an ambush in the alley of a Tikrit slum. The shaken unit responds by using massive firepower against everyone within range, including women and children. While two Americans die and one, Rico (Victor Rasuk), is seriously wounded, many more Iraqis lay lifeless. The sight of whole families massacred in their homes registers deeply with Brandon, who has had his fill of combat. ("Everything has turned out so different than what we thought.")

With their tours of duty ended, Brandon, Steve and Tommy return to Brazos. The town celebrates with a sigh of relief. There is little obvious pro-war sentiment in the gathering, but the state's US senator has his own agenda. He asks Brandon, a decorated war hero, to speak to the crowd. The latter complies by quietly speaking about his pleasure at being home, saying nothing about the war itself—at which point Steve grabs the microphone and ignorantly shouts, "We were killing Iraqis so they wouldn't be killing us in Texas."

The evening's festivities turn sour as alcohol combines with posttraumatic stress disorder, and both Steve and Tommy turn violent. During the night, Steve, suffering from flashbacks, digs a ranger grave in his fiancé Michele's (Abbie Cornish) front yard—after he blackens her eye. Meanwhile, Tommy, a newlywed, is so deranged his wife throws him out before the couple has the opportunity to open their wedding gifts. A more stable—and more consciously anti-war—Brandon seems less damaged, although he too exhibits signs of war trauma.

He is not prepared, however, for the shock of being Stop-Lossed. When his superior informs him of the awful news that he is being sent back to Iraq, Brandon boils over. "F--- the president; he's not over there fighting this war," he tells Lt. Col. Miller (Timothy Olyphant). He goes on: "I ran more than 150 combat missions, no complaints. I honored my contract and I expect the army to do the same." Placed under arrest for refusing to obey an officer, Brandon escapes custody.

Now officially AWOL, he makes a fateful decision. Accompanied by Michele, by this time alienated from Steve who has reenlisted ("If you don't fall in, it all comes apart"), Brandon decides to travel to Washington, D.C., to plead the injustice of his case with the senator who was present at his homecoming. The futility of the gesture is soon made clear. (The movie's soundtrack comments with the song from Snow Patrol, "Open Your Eyes": *Get up, get out, get away from these liars/ 'Cause they don't get your soul or your fire.*)

En route, Brandon and Michele visit the family of a casualty from the Tikrit mission. One family member, the dead man's brother, is bitter and hostile: "My brother's life was wasted over there." The pair also stops at a veteran's hospital, where Rico, wounded in the same incident, is recuperating from the loss of limbs (an arm and a leg) and vision.

Meanwhile, back in Brazos, Tommy's condition is getting worse. His anger and violence, rendered psychopathic by the war, are becoming uncontainable. Rather than therapy, the military throws him the Big Chicken Dinner—army slang for Bad Conduct Discharge, provoking dire consequences. Brandon and Steve have a confrontation. Brandon: "I'm done with killing.... The box inside my head is full of all the people I've killed." He ultimately realizes that "this war is never going to be behind me." The film's conclusion is appropriate and tragic, but not in some contrived, spectacular fashion.

In the movie's production notes, Peirce notes that an estimated 81,000 soldiers had been Stop-Lossed before Bush's "surge." She speaks to the striking fact that the young men she portrays in her film are not society's most disadvantaged. Psychological motives are her concern: "In the film, these young men feel a sense of duty and obligation, so they sign up to serve their country. But their black and white sense of patriotism and duty is turned upside down when they are faced with impossible circumstances. They end up committing a series of acts that force them, in the deepest sense, to question who they are, what they are and what they believe in. In the process, two lifelong friends [Brandon and Steve] who are so alike are torn apart by the wartime experiences they have to face."

Clearly *Stop-Loss*'s performers were heavily invested in the project, creating a genuine collective intensity. In an e-mail to the *New York Times*, Ryan Philippe (Brandon) wrote about filming sequences in Morocco (where the Iraq scenes were shot) during Ramadan: "We were storming real homes and neighborhoods, and at times I felt like a monster."

Speaking to *darkhorizons.com*, Peirce describes how soldiers develop a "kill-or-be-killed mentality," a reality she addresses in her film: "Their forward operating bases are right near the cities that they're surveilling. So mortars are being fired at them constantly.... The soldiers also said to me that both the checkpoints and having to do house-to-house searches and having to fight in the bedrooms and the hallways and the kitchens of people's homes is incredibly scary. And it increases the risk that you're going to kill an innocent person, or that your own soldiers are going to get killed or wounded....

"So I came to understand the intimate details of how this fighting is incredibly difficult on soldiers. I came to understand that there was a very high suicide rate. That there was a high rate of brain injury. And that our armor was—you know, better than it had been. And that meant that people who might have died in other wars were living with new kinds of injuries."

Peirce has been chastised for, as one critic put, piling "every calamity afflicting Iraq War veterans onto her narrative—Alcoholism, domestic abuse, PTSD [posttraumatic stress disorder] night terrors, suicidal behavior, prosthetic limbs—what starts as drama becomes unrelieved litany."

If Peirce is guilty of attempting to jam too much into her film, it is perhaps because the life-and-death issues she raises are barely mentioned by a subservient and complicit media and the nominal "opposition" party in Washington.

Stop-Loss then has many admirable qualities. Its opposition to the war and the political establishment is obvious and sincere, its sympathy for both the Iraqi and American victims of this imperialist war genuine and compelling.

Yet the film is not entirely satisfying, either artistically or as a social document. Peirce's desire to tell the Iraq veterans' whole story may account for some of the slightly forced character of certain moments. She took on a great deal. And between assiduous research, which the

director undoubtedly did, and a successful artistic rendition of events lie many pitfalls. Brandon and his friends, at times, feel a bit like composites, drawn from conscientious investigation and interviews.

Beyond that, however, there is another problem. Peirce sets out to create a work that would not merely preach to the fiercely anti-war choir. She legitimately wanted to make a point of contact with a wider audience. This is also commendable.

Nonetheless, there is a fine line between addressing a broad audience in a non-rhetorical and non-propagandistic manner, on the one hand, and adapting to real or perceived patriotic backwardness. At times, and in particular in its unwillingness to touch upon the real motives for the Iraq war, *Stop-Loss* crosses that line.

One small word would have helped immeasurably: oil.

Brandon is a bright and articulate young man. He is prepared to curse the president, go AWOL, appeal to a US senator and consider a lifetime of exile because of his horror at the war. He tells Michele, in a brief scene that rings true, that on his arrival in Iraq he'd quickly realized that the official explanations for the conflict were false. And yet we're to believe that such an individual has never formed political opinions of any kind about the actual cause of the war.

A UPI/Zogby poll carried out a year ago found (in the face of a total blackout of this question by the media and both major parties) that a full one third of the US population considered Iraq's oil supply a "major" factor motivating the invasion, another 40 percent considered it a factor of some kind.

Peirce's character, however, never utters a single political word, of even the most confused kind. This is not, in any meaningful sense, "realistic." Either the filmmaker is bending so far backward in her evenhandedness as to weaken her drama, or she is nervous at the thought of raising the hackles of certain political elements in the country.

A more general problem may be that filmmakers and other artists don't yet see a mass base for protest and opposition, and this discourages them from stronger and more forthright statements.

In any event, Peirce has brought a forceful story to the screen.



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