

The Men Who Stare at Goats: US military goes for the paranormal

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Directed by Grant Heslov, screenplay by Peter Straughan, based on the book by Jon Ronson

A journalist comes across a top-secret wing of the US military dabbling in paranormalism in Grant Heslov's debut directing effort, *The Men Who Stare at Goats*. Heslov, who wrote the screenplay for *Good Night and Good Luck*, loosely based his comic work on the 2005 non-fiction account by British journalist Jon Ronson about a clandestine American army unit in the 1970s and 1980s that believed it could defy the laws of physics.

The film opens with a brief sequence set in 1983 at Fort Bragg in North Carolina. Wild-eyed Brig. General Dean Hopgood (Stephen Lang), the US Army's chief of intelligence, concentrates his thoughts, rises to his feet and attempts to walk through an office wall, with disappointing results.

Twenty years on, Ann Arbor, Michigan-based journalist Bob Wilton (Ewan McGregor) is desperate to be embedded with the US military in Iraq as the Bush administration invades that country. While waiting in Kuwait City, he meets an army operative posing as a trashcan salesman. Lyn Cassady (George Clooney) has been reactivated post-9/11 and is on his way to Iraq.

Cassady tells Wilton he was part of a covert military unit commanded by General Hopgood in the 1980s. The psychic spies (engaged in "black ops," because officially they didn't exist) were trained, among other things, to kill animals with their minds. An 'animal-heart-bursting' program was developed with 'de-bleated' goats, as opposed to the previously planned for dogs, on the grounds that it was nearly impossible for a human being to form an emotional attachment to a goat. (What was once Dog Lab thus became Goat Lab.)

Based on Wilton's idle scribbles in a notebook, Cassady, "the most gifted psychic" in the unit, takes him to be a fellow Jedi Warrior, a supersoldier in the New Earth Army. ("We must become the first superpower *with* super powers.") "Project Jedi" involved the supposed honing of various skills, ranging from the mundane—awareness of every detail in a room upon entering it—to remarkable levels of intuition and even invisibility.

As it turned out, the act of becoming invisible was adjusted slightly to mean "finding a way of not being seen...by understanding the linkage between observation and reality, you learn to dance with invisibility. If you're not observed, you are

invisible. You only exist if someone sees you," Cassady explains delicately. Other abilities included "remote viewing" (i.e., 'seeing' and describing people or things in another location, even at another time) and intimidating the enemy with "sparkly eye technique"! On the road, Cassady attempts to show Wilton his psychic skill at "cloud bursting" (dispersing clouds with his mind), until he drives his vehicle into a rock in the middle of the desert.

The New Earth Army, Cassady recounts (and we see this in a flashback), was initially the 1970s' brainchild of Colonel Bill Django (Jeff Bridges), a traumatized Vietnam vet who became caught up in the hippie counterculture. From his experiences in the war, he concluded that 98 percent of soldiers who killed in combat became insane. ("The other two percent were crazy when they got there.")

How could the gentleness of his men, their natural inclination not to shoot at other human beings, be turned into a strength?, asked Django. In response, he developed the "New Earth Army Manual." Yoga 'cat' stretches, amphetamines, and self-expression through dance were all called upon in the attempt to master the rearrangement of atoms by the mind. But when it proves possible, or so the story goes, to kill animals with a stare, the dark side emerges.

Years later, another Django disciple and Cassady's nemesis, Larry Hooper (Kevin Spacey), is now rebuilding the New Earth Army "without the hippie crap." He runs a privatized military unit in the Iraq desert where orange jump-suited Iraqi prisoners are being tortured.

The Men Who Stare at Goats possesses more heart than logic in dramatizing what the filmmakers clearly perceive to be a period of lunacy in the history of the American military. Sobering, however, is the film's inference that the unit's psychic testing in the 1980s was in part responsible for the development of the "enhanced interrogation techniques" used in the current 'war on terror.' Despite the film's artistic license about events and its confused structure, it promotes a humane and antiwar sentiment. Images of sinister American corporate scavengers (bringing Blackwater, Halliburton et al to mind) ripping through Iraq's countryside in their Humvees and the torture of prisoners at the hands of the military-trained Hooper reinforce the movie's overall disgust with America's neocolonial ventures.

Clooney, in particular, is entertaining. Especially endearing is the great earnestness with which he describes one or another preposterous operation or promises to extract himself from each

crisis situation solely through the exercise of his mental powers...a remarkable feat that never quite works out.

Where the filmmakers stumble is in their ability to integrate a complicated bit of history and to present it in a tone, comic or otherwise, entirely appropriate to the material. What did the film's creators have in mind? They might have been thinking that the inclination of the Bush administration and its allies, in the words of a White House aide in 2004, to believe that "when we act, we create our own reality," helps explain the current mess in Iraq.

Perhaps, as well, they wanted to examine how it is that the military finds itself in the present Middle East quagmire if key personnel—represented by the Bridges and Clooney characters, with access to the military's summit—were genuinely opposed to war and violence? *The Men Who Stare at Goats* tends to take the words of such individuals at face value and also pulls back, perhaps not surprisingly, at indicting the American military as an institution.

Ronson's book points to the crisis into which the Vietnam defeat threw the military. It seems reasonable to assume that some of the subsequent interest in 'the powers of the mind' was the result of a loss of confidence in the capacity of mere weaponry and numbers to vanquish a foe united around a political cause, like the Vietnamese. So, certain elements, under the influence in part of the counterculture, New Age quackery, drugs, *Star Wars*, and so forth, came up with this notion of a war fought in part with mental powers.

Whatever the intention of the Bridges character or his real-life counterpart, however, the reality was that the psy-op activity did not come to *substitute* for massive violence, but merely to *complement* it. The outcome of such psychic 'research' has been the refinement of torture procedures, along with continuous propaganda efforts to destabilize any regime strenuously opposed by Washington. *The Men Who Stare at Goats* alludes to this state of affairs by implication in its final sequences.

Amusing and perhaps outraged as it is, but lacking a fundamental sense of the depth of the situation, Heslov's movie remains on the verge of being substantial, as though suspended in midair. It can't quite make up its mind how seriously it should take itself.

The Men Who Stare at Goats is, in fact, several films at once: the story of the unit's exploits in the 1980s, the misadventures of Cassidy and Wilton traveling around in contemporary Iraq, and a relatively short sequence on the Iraq war and its horrific byproducts. Clooney's adept clowning ties the various pieces together, but the binding is fragile and often threatens to snap. The film does, however, know where it stands in relation to the menacing forces represented by the Spacey character.

The Army's First Earth Battalion was a bizarre entity whose activities, according to the cover of Ronson's book, "are alive today within the US Department of Homeland Security and in Iraq." The author points out that Major General Albert Stubblebine III—the commanding general of the US Army Intelligence and Security Command from 1981 until he retired in 1984—envisioned an army that would use extrasensory techniques in international

conflicts.

Apparently, Stubblebine "was determined to turn his 16,000 troops into a new army, an army of soldiers who could bend metal with their minds and pass through objects and consequently never have to go through the chaotic trauma of a war like Vietnam again... And so it was that Jim Channon's [founder of the First Earth Battalion] madcap vision, triggered by his postcombat depression, found its way into the highest levels of the United States military."

In the film's production notes, Ronson is quoted as saying that the program started very simply: "They experimented with things that sound absurd, like 'race-specific stink-bombs' and subliminal sounds and 'attack bees'... The first leader of the remote viewing unit—a CIA man called Sidney Gottlieb—also ran a very dark endeavor called MK-Ultra. They would secretly spike the drinks of unsuspecting military people with LSD. Some of the awful things that Kevin Spacey's character does in the movie were inspired by stories about Gottlieb."

Paranoid thrillers like *The Manchurian Candidate* about brainwashed assassins were of interest to the CIA, according to Ronson in his book.

The production notes explain that the official files on the First Earth Battalion remain sealed. "But veterans of the program continue to wield influence in and out of the military, including Jim Channon, who is now known as 'a global elder' and the 'world's first corporate shaman'; John Alexander, a leading expert on nonlethal weapons; Joseph McMoneagle, one of the original recruits who psychically identified a previously unknown Soviet submarine; Ingo Swann, originator of the term 'remote viewing' and developer of the first training protocols; Lyn Buchanan and Mel Riley, who currently offer psy-ops services through a private company in Washington, D.C., and Ed Dames, sometimes called 'the real Obi Wan Kenobi,' a renowned remote viewing expert and trainer."

It was perhaps not so difficult for the makers of *The Men Who Stare at Goats* to underestimate the malevolence and madness of the American military in pursuit of its global aims.

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