Green Zone: Some very belated questions timidly posed

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Directed by Paul Greengrass, screenplay by Brian Helgeland, based on the book by Rajiv Chandrasekaran

Green Zone, the new film directed by British-born Paul Greengrass, is said to be "inspired by" Rajiv Chandrasekaran's 2006 book *Imperial Life in the Emerald City*.

A National Book Award Finalist, *Imperial Life* documents the preparations for and invasion of Iraq in 2003, and its immediate aftermath. It discloses the players behind the scenes, as well as the roles and aims of those in front of the television cameras.

Imperial Life details the power struggles between the US State Department and the Pentagon, the personnel choices based on cronyism, the secrecy, bribes, and lucrative contracts, the lies told by American officials, and the effects of the war on the populace of Baghdad and Iraq as a whole. What does not play a major part in Chandrasekaran's work is the search for the notorious "weapons of mass destruction" (WMD). This, however, is the movie's chosen focus.

In his introduction to the movie tie-in edition of the book, director Greengrass (*Bloody Sunday, The Bourne Supremacy, United 93, The Bourne Ultimatum*) relates how he struggled in 2004 to come up with a viable film about the Iraq war, and how he nearly lost hope. He explains his thought process: "I felt that if we could create a noble character—a military everyman—who entered Iraq at the start of the war believing WMD were there, and then followed him on his just cause as he begins by degrees to realize that the pre-war intelligence claims are entirely unfounded, we would have the basis for a compelling journey. He would stand for all of us, and his hunt for the truth would be ours."

This was Greengrass's thinking in 2004, following the illegal invasion and while the US occupation was well under way. Massive global protests had taken place in 2003, perhaps the largest in history. It was no secret to millions and millions of people around the world that the claims about WMD had served as a pretext for a long-planned operation, the overthrow of the Saddam Hussein regime and seizure of Iraqi energy supplies.

No doubt there were those in the American military and government, many with a vested interest, who chose to believe in the Bush administration allegations. But how would such an "everyman" stand for "all of us"? If Greengrass, who has "left" pretensions, ignored all the evidence pointing to the falsity of the US claims, he should say so. His explanation suggests that he was pitching his film, from the outset, at an extremely low level.

Greengrass then relates how in 2006 he was given a copy of Chandrasekaran's book and, lo and behold, the place to go for the answers was revealed. "I knew as soon as I had finished *Imperial Life in the Emerald City* that it would unlock our stalled film." The book does, in fact, provide some basis for a realistic approach to the Iraq war, although Greengrass apparently did not glean overmuch. Nonetheless, what he did draw from Chandrasekaran's work left an impression of sorts.

Matt Damon, star of Greengrass's *Bourne* series of action films, plays Chief Warrant Officer Roy Miller, whose mission is to find the much-ballyhooed WMD. Damon, whose career has been built in part on his ability to remain affable even as he guns down bad guys, brings a sort of determined bafflement to this role. In its limited way, this is appropriate for the material.

We follow Miller and his unit on a very hazardous and ultimately futile mission to a site claimed by unnamed intelligence sources to contain a cache of WMD. It turns out to be another false lead based on intelligence from an individual code-named "Magellan," and Miller is justifiably irate at the danger into which he and his men were sent. He expresses his frustration at a press briefing, attracting the attention of both the CIA's Martin Brown (Brendan Gleeson) and the Pentagon's Clark Poundstone (Greg Kinnear).

These two men, and their respective departments, are at odds with each other, and it is not immediately clear whom

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Miller should trust, though this is cleared up quickly given Poundstone's smarmy insistence that the faulty intelligence comes from a reliable source. Miller is peeved at being told this, and turns to Brown when—while on yet another fruitless search—he comes into possession of material that he hopes could help reveal the truth about the elusive WMD.

It is telling, and almost darkly laughable, that the CIA is touted as the trustworthy entity in Greengrass's film! This is only one of many disoriented and disorienting elements in the film. The quirky camera angles and hand-held jerkiness (one of the director's trademarks) lend an unease that is only in part intentional.

Offered as an Iraqi "Everyman" is Freddy (Khalid Abdallah), a veteran of the Iran-Iraq war, who says, "I just want to help my country." He becomes Miller's translator after trying to do no more than pass information about an important meeting going on near a suspected WMD site. Freddy is the only truly sympathetic character, and Abdallah does a creditable job playing him, as he and Miller race from location to location trying to track down Magellan.

There are several chase scenes involving the different parties—good American soldiers chased by bad American soldiers, various Iraqis chased by various Americans, one Iraqi chased by other Iraqis, various Americans and another Iraqi. A couple of elements do stand out, including Greengrass's creditable effort to portray the random, sudden violence rained down upon the hapless inhabitants of Baghdad by the US military. Several apartments are entered during the chases, and a number of innocent bystanders are gunned down by both US and Iraqi forces.

There are also, between the chases, snippets of newscasts and events inserted into the story—Bush's infamous "Mission Accomplished" speech, the sudden and rash disbanding of the Iraqi army, etc. These serve as disjointed touchstones, and point up the level of deception, misinformation and incompetence in the initial months of the US occupation.

Greengrass attempts to contrast the Green Zone—by all accounts, an oasis at that time, with its perpetual pool parties and buffets—and the hellish reality of war torn Baghdad outside the well-protected area. Unfortunately, the depiction is not sustained or pointed enough, however many hooded Iraqis are seen herded here and there in detainment camps, and no matter how many pale, bikini-clad American women are languorously arrayed poolside within the zone's walls.

Several characters are thinly veiled portraits of actual players in the drive to war in Iraq. Lawrie Dayne (Amy Ryan) is a proxy for former *New York Times* reporter Judith Miller.

Art doesn't imitate life in this case, however, and Miller is half-rehabilitated by *Green Zone*, as the filmmakers paint her as wanting the truth, although not especially good at fact-checking. All too trusting, she accepted Magellan's information, and published (in the *Wall Street Journal*) the WMD lies in the run-up to the war.

The filthy pre-war role of the media is taken too lightly. As with many elements in the film, it is not thoroughly or seriously enough presented. Dayne grows tired of being kept from Magellan, and presses both Poundstone and Brown for more information on his identity. Poundstone knows, but won't tell, and Brown suspects, but is close-lipped. The reporter gives her card to Damon's Miller at one point, asking him to call her if he finds anything out.

Dayne is presented as a victim of the campaign of lies, when, in reality, the American media—and the *Times*' Miller, specifically—was deliberately complicit in transmitting the official line and beating the drum for war, war, war. This piece of historical reality is overlooked or glossed over in *Green Zone*, most obviously at its conclusion, which only reinforces illusions in the ability of the media to communicate the truth when confronted with it. One can only wonder how many "delete" buttons would be pressed in the real world.

The entire film has a disconnected, perfunctory feel to it, in good measure because Greengrass's work reveals nothing new, and fails to examine deeply what is already known. The film never breaks through the surface of the deceptions, and Damon's Miller never goes beyond putting a name to it. "You lied" is not enough. The theme comes down to "People Must Know," but Miller apparently intends to continue following orders and assisting in the occupation of Iraq.

Questions which should have been asked by American and British filmmakers years ago are making their way onscreen now. It is a shame, however, that a more thoughtful and probing effort has not been put forth by someone with Greengrass's resources. Although there is a fleeting satisfaction at hearing someone shout that, "Why we go to war always matters," this feeling is tempered by much of what else goes on.

There are a number of other half-cathartic lines, many delivered adequately, but knowing that this all comes too late, tepidly, and with no suggestion of a way forward renders this a job half-done at best.

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