Fair Game: Hollywood liberals treat the drive to war in Iraq

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6 December 2010

Directed by Doug Liman; screenplay by Jez and John-Henry Butterworth, based on the books by Joseph Wilson and Valerie Plame

The invasion and ongoing occupation of Iraq is one of the major imperialist crimes of the modern era. It deserves to be treated and re-treated by filmmakers, American filmmakers in particular. However, most of the films devoted to the Iraq war have delivered at best only glancing blows, dwelling on secondary issues and usually, in the end, swearing loyalty to the US military or other institutions of "American democracy."

Fair Game, directed by Doug Liman (*The Bourne Identity*, *The Bourne Ultimatum*, *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*)--and based on memoirs by Joseph Wilson (*The Politics of Truth*) and Valerie Plame (*Fair Game*)--is no exception.

The facts of the Wilson-Plame affair, bound up with the Bush administration's drive to war in the Middle East in 2002-03, are part of the public record:

A former US ambassador and Special Assistant to President Bill Clinton, Joseph Wilson was sent to Niger in 2002 at the behest of the CIA to investigate claims that Iraq had sought to purchase uranium in the African country for use in a secret nuclear weapons program. Despite the obviously fraudulent character of the allegation, the charge appeared in a CIA National Intelligence Estimate released just prior to the October 2002 congressional vote to authorize war against Iraq and was reiterated in President George W. Bush's January 2003 State of the Union address.

When Wilson refuted the phony Niger uranium-"weapons of mass destruction" (WMD) claim in a July 2003 *New York Times* op-ed column, Bush administration officials retaliated by leaking to the media the fact that his wife, Valerie Plame, was a covert CIA officer involved in counter-weapons proliferation efforts.

I. Lewis Libby, Vice President Dick Cheney's chief of staff, was eventually indicted for committing perjury and obstruction of justice in lying to a grand jury hearing evidence on the Wilson affair. Libby was charged with denying that he had 'outed' Plame, when he had, in fact, provided this information to several journalists, no doubt at Cheney's insistence.

Liman's movie centers on the pugnacious campaign conducted by Wilson (Sean Penn) to expose the Bush administration's use of false evidence and the toll this takes on his marriage. Fearing that harm will come to her children, her husband and herself, Plame (Naomi Watts), whose CIA training conditions her to keep her mouth shut, initially opposes Wilson's public conflict with the government.

It is a telling statement about the generation that now dominates in Hollywood that the writer and director pay virtually no critical attention to Plame's role as a CIA agent, one of the most murderous and widely hated organizations on the face of the earth. Her occupation is simply accepted as a matter of course.

Early scenes in *Fair Game* depict a couple juggling career pressures with home life. These are fairly pedestrian. Wilson is the emotionally-available bedrock, while Plame is shown in a CIA briefing room as a paragon of coolness. He is the often stay-at-home parent dealing with the children and their crises; his wife makes clandestine trips to Kuala Lumpur, Cairo and Amman investigating weapons proliferation as a NOC, or "non-official covert operative."

Heading up the CIA's Joint Task Force on Iraq, Plame is responsible for infiltrating Saddam Hussein's weapons program. She pushes an Iraqi doctor working in Cleveland into a dangerous venture to obtain information from the latter's brother who is a nuclear scientist in Iraq. ("We're going to war and your brother will be right in the middle of it.")

Unable to uncover evidence of Iraqi WMD, the CIA runs afoul of the White House and its war efforts. "Scooter" Libby (played with gusto by David Andrews) is dispatched to override the reports of the recalcitrant spy organization.

The movie navigates an uneventful course until Wilson's piece about the fraudulent Intel is published and the administration launches its vendetta against the Wilsons. As political tensions escalate, MSNBC's Chris Matthews reports the comment by White House political advisor Karl Rove that Valerie Plame is "fair game."

Joseph is more aware than Valerie, a hard-wired civil servant, that Cheney and his neo-conservatives have for some time been strenuously promoting and preparing for war with Iraq. When Libby is indicted, Wilson understands that the White House aide is a fall guy who will eventually be pardoned by the president. Meanwhile Plame reaches her breaking point and ends her silence. In typical Hollywood style, she reclaims her life and family.

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Some effort went into the making of *Fair Game*. productions notes describe the roadblocks faced by the scriptwriters: "[W]hen the Butterworths signed on to write the screenplay, they found themselves facing restrictions unlike any they had ever encountered before. Even Valerie's unpublished memoir was off limits to them until the CIA finished vetting it … So although the filmmakers had the rights to Plame's book and her cooperation as a consultant on the movie, she could not reveal any information the government still considered to be secret. The writers resorted to conducting research on their own to help fill in the blanks. 'We did an immense amount,' said Jez. "First about the U.S. government and the CIA, then about the Wilsons themselves.'"

Both Penn and Watts bring an alluring credibility to their characters. The scenes in Iraq are handled with care (Liman says, "We were the first American film company ever to shoot a non-documentary feature in Baghdad"). Brief footage of the "shock and awe" bombing initiating the war is a stomach-turning memory jolt.

Fair Game is a reminder that the Iraq invasion was based on lies. As such, the movie flies in the face of current attempts to rehabilitate George W. Bush in the rotten post-2008 election atmosphere. While Hollywood liberals may want to stir up the Wilson-Plame episode, Washington's Democrats and it establishment generally do not. Despite its timidity, Liman's film does not fit into the present debate.

One piece of evidence for this is a foul editorial in the December 4 *Washington Post* devoted to an attack on *Fair Game*. The editorial denounces the film's picture of "a White House conspiracy" to expose Plame and asserts that the movie takes its place in a Hollywood tradition of "making movies about historical events without regard for the truth." The *Post* responds angrily to the notion, well known to masses of people around the world, "that Mr. Bush deliberately twisted the truth about Iraq," and asserts that Wilson was "eagerly embraced by those who insist the former president lied the country into a war." The newspaper ends with an extraordinary expression of solidarity with Bush: "We'll join the former president in hoping that future historians get it right."

Aside from the *Post* attack, *Fair Game* has attracted little fuss. Presumably the ultra-right would rather not draw attention to Bush's criminality and, in any event, Liman's film does not venture beyond dramatizing the events, although he fleshes them out and gives them a human face. To his credit, the director recognized the innate drama in the incident and has a certain skill in mining it.

Fair Game, however, is at heart a conservative, pro-establishment film, which focuses on the Bush administration's breach of the reactionary law prohibiting the exposure of covert CIA operatives.

In reality, the campaign against Wilson and Plame expressed divisions within the US ruling elite--between the Pentagon and the Bush White House, on the one hand, and the State Department and CIA, on the other--over how best to pursue its geopolitical interests.

Such an understanding would be a closed book to Liman, whose father, Arthur Liman, a prominent New York attorney, was counsel for the US Senate and a major figure during the 1987 Iran-Contra hearings into misdeeds committed by the Reagan administration. The director treats the struggle in which *Fair Game* as one between the forces of good and evil, with the good having been vindicated by subsequent events.

Liman, like every film industry Democrat, has to avow publicly and insistently his loyalty to the institutions of the American state. He asserts in an interview that "this film is really a celebration about the people who go to work every day at the CIA, in the shadows, whose names we will never know. Their contributions to our safety we will never know." The director is speaking about an organization known worldwide as "Murder Incorporated."

This is a shameful comment on the US film world. Most of the liberal filmmakers presently at work are either frightened of the extreme right or demoralized about the prospect of social change, or both. They tend to couch their opposition to the status quo in patriotic and nationalist tones, asserting their solidarity, for example, with elements in the CIA and the military against the neo-conservative conspirators who are "betraying" America. No genuinely accurate or convincing accounting of American social life can be created on this basis.

A good deal has happened since the Wilson-Plame affair made the headlines, including the election of Barack Obama in 2008 and his administration's bloody escalation of the Afghanistan war. *Fair Game* conveys no awareness of or feeling for that. Its subtext is that with the end of the Bush presidency the worst was over. The film concludes with flabby moralizing about the perils of concentrating political power.

None of the dangers have gone away. Militarism and violations of democratic rights have been continued under Obama, and, in some cases, stepped up. *Fair Game*'s exposure of the origins of the Iraq war are useful, but the filmmakers have little or nothing to say about the larger social and historical issues that make the ongoing eruption of American imperialist violence inevitable.

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