

American Sniper: A wolf in sheep dog's clothing

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Directed by Clint Eastwood; screenplay by Jason Hall

Veteran director Clint Eastwood's newest film, *American Sniper*, brings the autobiography of Chris Kyle to the big screen. Kyle was reputedly the deadliest marksman in the history of the US military with approximately 255 kills, 160 of which were officially confirmed by the Pentagon. The film, an inept and cartoonish effort, follows Kyle as he serves multiple tours in Iraq following the 9/11 attacks in a story of xenophobic revenge and violence.

The crude tone and themes are introduced very early in a scene from Kyle's childhood. In a schoolyard his younger brother is being beaten by a bully much larger than him while other children circle the two. Kyle decides to defend his brother by attacking the other boy.

At the dinner table that evening, Kyle's father explains to the boys there are three types of people in the world—sheep, wolves and sheep dogs. He explains that predatory wolves are responsible for all the “evil” in the world and it is the job of sheep dogs, who are “blessed with aggression,” to protect the sheep who cannot take care of themselves.

This apparently serves as Kyle's motivation throughout *American Sniper*. The notion that the US is under attack from “evildoers” is the rationale for ultra-right and pro-military fanatics. It is also the world turned upside down. Imperialism has dominated and plundered the Middle East for more than a century. Over the past number of decades, the US has been the primary source of aggression. It is the wolf in sheep dog's clothing (and badly disguised at that). *American Sniper* is rooted in a fantasy, in profound untruth, and can never recover from that.

Later, now grown up, Kyle (Bradley Cooper) is a

rodeo cowboy, but gets sucked into geopolitics after watching the 1998 bombing attacks on US embassies. He stares with daggers in his eyes at the television set as though in a trance and mutters under his breath, “Look at that...look at what they've done to us.”

He enlists in the Navy, confirming his recruiter's assessment that he wants to join up and fight because he is “pissed off.” He begins rigorous training as a Navy SEAL and a sharpshooter. Toward the end of his training, Kyle meets and eventually falls in love with Taya (Sienna Miller), who initially has misgivings about dating an arrogant SEAL, but quickly succumbs to Kyle's homespun Texan charm.

The two later witness the September 11 attacks on television, and Kyle is again overcome by anger. During the pair's wedding a year and a half later, Kyle and his Navy SEAL buddies joyously receive word they will be sent to Iraq.

All told, Kyle serves four tours in Iraq over the course of several years and returns home each time to find he cannot settle into civilian life, even after the birth of a son and a daughter. Kyle becomes obsessed with returning to Iraq to protect his fellow soldiers, and he refuses to talk to anyone about the memories that obviously haunt him.

Kyle's skills as a marksman quickly earn him the nickname of “the Legend” and makes the Marines he protects feel invincible. Kyle's task is generally to watch over groups of US soldiers while they move door to door in devastated cities like Fallujah where most people have been evacuated and all who remain are painted as sinister agents there to attack Americans.

Virtually every Arab in *American Sniper*, whether man, woman or child, is plotting to kill as many American soldiers as possible, whether they are charging with grenades in hand, burying land mines or

hiding around corners with rocket launchers. To Kyle and his fellow soldiers, Iraq is full of “savages” who need to be wiped out. This term is used repeatedly.

The handful of Arabs who do not pose an imminent threat to the soldiers are still painted in extremely negative colors. One family Kyle and his outfit come across is headed by a father who wants \$100,000 to help them find an Al Qaeda operative, and another family that invites the soldiers into their home for a meal has a secret cache of weapons hidden under a child’s bed. In the most disturbing scene the Al Qaeda operative in question uses a drill to torture and murder a young boy in front of his father who has agreed to aid the US troops. The Middle East is full of monstrous people who indeed seem “evil.”

Meanwhile Kyle is increasingly alienated from his wife, who tells him again and again that he needs to “come home,” both physically and mentally. A chance meeting with a soldier at an auto repair shop whom he saved from death on one of his tours drives home the idea. The US soldiers do not seem to be able to “finish it” in Iraq no matter how many of them sacrifice their lives.

Eastwood’s film relies on its audience knowing nothing about history, including the history of US support and financing for Islamic fundamentalism, and holding the most primitive, simplistic views. The viewer never learns why people are resisting the US in Iraq. In one scene, Kyle tells another soldier that “this [Iraq] is more than just this dirt.” The evil in Iraq could spread to San Diego or New York if they fail to stem the tide.

As is his wont, Eastwood permits his protagonist to commit any murderous act, including the killing of women and children, as long as he pulls a long face afterward and appears regretful. Cooper performs poorly and unconvincingly, but the material is poor and unconvincing. No one else fares any better. Clichés and stereotypes are the order of the day.

In *American Sniper*, there is hardly a hint of opposition to the Iraq war, one of the most unpopular in US history. The one fellow soldier who tells Kyle somewhat dubiously that he hopes they are accomplishing something in Iraq is shortly thereafter killed. Kyle later explains it wasn’t the bullets that did him in; it was the fact that he had questioned the troops’ goals and purpose.

Eastwood, who agreed to direct the film after Steven Spielberg bowed out of the project, claimed in an interview that, even though he is supposedly “antiwar,” *American Sniper* is not intended to support one or another political ideology.

“I was a child growing up during World War II,” he explained. “That was supposed to be the one to end all wars. And four years later, I was standing at the draft board being drafted during the Korean conflict, and then after that there was Vietnam, and it goes on and on forever... I just wonder...does this ever stop? And no, it doesn’t. So each time we get in these conflicts, it deserves a lot of thought before we go wading in or wading out. Going in or coming out. It needs a better thought process, I think.”

The director may be entirely sincere in the doubts he expresses about the efficacy of war, but his ideological cluelessness and the gravitational pull of reactionary social forces have produced a work that legitimizes and glorifies one of the great crimes of the past half-century, the illegal, neocolonial invasion and occupation of Iraq. Those who sent Kyle and others there deserve to face war crime charges.



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