

# The controversy surrounding *American Sniper*

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The promotion and defense of Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper* is the latest means by which the political and media establishment in the US is pursuing its militaristic agenda. Such is the ferocity of this campaign that the relatively toothless critical comments of filmmaker Michael Moore and actor-director Seth Rogen have provoked controversy and brought down upon them a torrent of abuse. The two have been denounced as "traitors," and Moore has received death threats.

*American Sniper* is part of the effort to create a mythology around the illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq by the US military, an undertaking that has destroyed that Middle Eastern country's infrastructure, provoked a murderous sectarian civil war and led to the deaths of one million or more Iraqis. The motive is not simply to legitimize past crimes, but to intimidate and poison public opinion and undermine opposition to future and even greater crimes.

The hero of *American Sniper* is Chris Kyle (Bradley Cooper), a Navy SEAL who reportedly killed 160 or more Iraq insurgents. The film paints him as an upright, patriotic, God-fearing individual who was prompted to join the military, above all, by the September 11, 2001 suicide attacks.

The sequences set in Iraq present the American forces as engaged in a righteous campaign against an almost inconceivably savage and evil foe. *American Sniper*'s attitude toward Iraqis, and Arabs generally, is hostile and contemptuous. The US forces represent order, modernity, civilization and sanity; the Iraqis—superstition, backwardness, treachery and violence. The American soldiers are obliged, according to the logic of the film, to exterminate great numbers of Iraqis both in self-defense and as some sort of act of public hygiene.

The work never raises a single question about the legitimacy of the Iraq war, its origins, its historical context or its larger geopolitical implications. *American Sniper* is intended to block questioning and criticism.

A determined attempt is underway in the US to revive the jingoistic spirit of "My country, right or wrong," so

discredited in the eyes of millions through the experience of the Vietnam War.

The primitivism of the film's outlook is matched by the primitivism of the psychology and motivations depicted. The stolid Kyle is single-minded about protecting American lives; his rather whiny wife is single-minded about having him return home; the filthy Iraqis are single-minded about killing Americans, etc. Whitewashing a bloody, criminal operation in a comprehensive fashion is a time-consuming and, in its own way, demanding task; the filmmakers had little energy left over to create believable, complex human characters or dialogue.

It should be noted that Eastwood's film considerably downplays and dilutes Kyle's semi-fascistic views and behavior. Cooper is a far more subdued and sorrowful individual than Kyle as the latter describes himself in his autobiography.

The son of a Southwestern Bell and AT&T manager, who was also a deacon and owned a small business, Kyle (whose plan was to become a ranch manager) grew up in semi-rural, north-central Texas in an atmosphere steeped in militarism, anti-communism and "family and traditional values." It is hard to conceive of a more reactionary background.

As for Kyle's insights into the Iraq war, his ghost-written memoir states: "Savage, despicable evil. That's what we were fighting in Iraq. That's why a lot of people, myself included, called the enemy 'savages.'"

He adds: "My country sent me out there so that bullshit wouldn't make its way back to our shores. I never once fought for the Iraqis. I could give a flying fuck about them... I loved what I did. I still do... it was fun. I had the time of my life being a SEAL."

When he was investigated for allegedly killing an unarmed civilian, Kyle, an anti-Muslim bigot, told an army colonel: "I don't shoot people with Korans. I'd like to, but I don't."

Kyle also served briefly as a bodyguard for former Alaska Governor Sarah Palin. Extreme right-wing Christian fanaticism and related fascist notions are reportedly prevalent in elite US death squads such as the SEALs and

Army Special Forces.

The liberal critics, who have either shifted far to the right themselves or are thoroughly cowed, generally responded favorably to *American Sniper*. David Denby in the *New Yorker*, for example, argued that the film “is both a devastating war movie and a devastating antiwar movie, a subdued celebration of a warrior’s skill and a sorrowful lament over his alienation and misery.”

The *New York Times*’ A.O. Scott, while not quite placing the present work among Eastwood’s “great movies,” found that “its considerable power derives from the clarity and sincerity of its bedrock convictions. Less a war movie than a western... it is blunt and effective, though also troubling.”

Official Hollywood joined in the foul campaign to promote *American Sniper* January 15 by bestowing six Academy Award nominations on the film, including in the Best Picture, Best Actor and Best Adapted Screenplay categories.

The critics, the media and the entertainment establishment were clearly going to present no problem to the pro-war counter-offensive aimed at deadening public consciousness.

The “controversy” that emerged in late January was more of a provocation than anything else. The ultra-right, pleased as punch with the film and its commercial success, was simply waiting for someone well known to say the wrong thing.

When Michael Moore and Seth Rogen (fresh from participating in his own sinister provocation, the anti-North Korean film *The Interview* ) uttered a couple of “wrong things,” they were pounced on and undeservedly branded as opponents of the valiant American military.

On January 18, without mentioning the film, Moore tweeted, “We were taught that snipers were cowards... Snipers aren’t heroes. And invaders [are] worse.” He tweeted a second time to the effect that defending “your home... from invaders” who have come 7,000 miles was “brave.”

Rogen tweeted January 19 that *American Sniper* “kinda reminded me” of the Nazi propaganda film shown in Quentin Tarantino’s *Inglourious Basterds*.

The two came under ferocious attack. Rogen threw in the towel immediately, asserting he had been misunderstood: “I actually liked *American Sniper*. It just reminded me of the Tarantino scene... I wasn’t comparing the two.”

Moore, who hasn’t a political leg left to stand on (especially after vociferously defending Kathryn Bigelow’s pro-torture *Zero Dark Thirty* ), wrote a miserable, defensive comment on Facebook in which he disputed the right-wing’s claim that “Michael Moore hates the troops.” He asserted that he had opposed the “senseless” Iraq war, but insisted, “I’m the one who has supported these troops,” and referred to the “brave young men and women” of the

military.

This is truly fighting on your knees. It is one thing to explain that individual members of the armed forces are not responsible for the crimes of the US government and military, and that they are also victims of the imperialist war drive. It is quite another to praise the troops as heroes, as though the fact that they are involved in crimes is of no consequence, and accommodate oneself to the permanent militarism that has afflicted the US for the past 15 years, as Moore does.

The occupation of Iraq produced the decimation of Fallujah (where white phosphorus was used) and other cities where resistance was put up, the barbarity in Abu Ghraib, the massacre in Haditha, the gang-rape of a 14-year-old Iraqi girl and the murder of her family in Al-Mahmudiyah, the war crimes committed by the group of US military personnel in Baghdad known as the “Leavenworth 10,” the murders carried out by Marines in Hamdania, the Baghdad airstrike known as “Collateral Murder,” and countless other atrocities.

Violence and mayhem directed against the Iraqi population were committed by American forces in Iraq on a daily basis, only a tiny portion of which ever became public knowledge. That is the nature of colonial “counter-insurgency.” The US military-intelligence apparatus is the principal force for violence and terror on the planet, as masses of people around the globe understand all too well.

The *American Sniper* affair needs to be seen in the context of the unremitting drive to glorify the US military, intimidate and overcome opposition, and make those who are hostile to war and militarism feel isolated and alone. The desperate character of the pro-militarist effort speaks to the crisis of American capitalism, whose efforts in the Middle East and Central Asia have so far resulted largely in reversals and failure.

Whatever the intentions of the aging Eastwood, who continues to insist that his film is “antiwar,” *American Sniper* serves to fuel xenophobia and, in the wake of the *Charlie Hebdo* shootings, fan anti-Muslim hatred and violence. In its own way, this crude propaganda effort demonstrates that American imperialism has no intention of withdrawing from the Middle East, or any other part of the globe. The entire business comes as a serious warning.



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