

War Dogs: Cry havoc? Or what exactly?

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Directed by Todd Phillips; screenplay by Phillips, Stephen Chin and Jason Smilovic; based on a Rolling Stone article by Guy Lawson

The film *War Dogs* starts out somewhat promisingly. We are told in a narration that war is essentially big business. According to the film, it costs \$17,500 to equip one US soldier—and at least two million soldiers have been deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan so far. The air conditioning for the military bases used in these wars alone costs \$4.5 billion each year. We see footage of various Bush administration officials, and then we hear, “War is an economy. Anybody who tells you otherwise is either in on it or stupid.”

Unfortunately, *War Dogs*’ insights, as restricted as they are, more or less end there. Overall, director Todd Phillips (*The Hangover*, *Due Date*) has made a rather juvenile film about American arms dealers during the Iraq War. While certain critics have praised it as a “scathing indictment of Dick Cheney’s America” (*Salon*), it is no such thing. In fact, the film tends to revel in the backwardness and filth it ostensibly criticizes. It is as anti-war as Martin Scorsese’s *The Wolf of Wall Street* is anti-high finance.

Based on a true story, the film introduces David Packouz (Miles Teller) and Efraim Diveroli (Jonah Hill), two young men in their 20s from south Florida, who eventually make a fortune selling weapons to the US government and securing a \$300 million contract to equip the Afghan National Army with Chinese-made ammunition from Albania.

Before all that, however, David is a massage therapist who needs to make more money after finding out his girlfriend is pregnant. He is reunited with his old high school buddy and sometime gun dealer, Efraim, who now owns a shell company named AEY. Working out of a modest office, they search for government contracts online that would allow them to supply the Pentagon with weaponry.

The only problem, aside from any possible moral qualms of course, is that David’s girlfriend Iz (Ana de Armas) is firmly opposed to the war in Iraq. So David lies to her and says he is really just selling bed sheets to the government.

Jonah Hill has some decent lines in the film, but his performance here has been overrated. He seems to be making a living now playing swinish characters and not much else. Early on in the film, David tells Efraim that—like his girlfriend—he too is opposed to the US role in Iraq, to which Efraim replies crudely, “I f**king hate Bush, but it’s not about being pro-war, it’s about being pro-money.”

The pair take bong hits and snort lines of coke, and repeat “bro” and “dude” a good deal before getting down to business. If director Phillips wanted to say something about a certain self-indulgent and self-destructive segment of the generation that came of age during the Bush years, the opportunity was there, but, unhappily, *War Dogs* merely aspires to be slick and “entertaining” without causing its audience to think too deeply about anything.

It is significant that the film makes no mention whatsoever of the current occupant of the White House, Barack Obama. Apparently, all the blood and corruption stopped flowing after January 2009. Granted, *War Dogs* takes place during the height of the fighting in Iraq in 2006 and 2007, but it feels dated now. Hundreds of thousands or more have died since then throughout the region, and billions more in cash have been raked in by the masters of war.

No doubt some will argue that *War Dogs* is meant to be satirical, even subversive. Certain scenes ring true, such as, for example, when Efraim and David have to transport a truckload of guns from Jordan to Iraq, all the while looking and acting like stereotypical “ugly Americans.” Efraim arrogantly calls a young Jordanian boy “Aladdin” and describes Arabic as “gibberish.”

However, these scenes strike one as mean-spirited and cynical more than anything else.

Our two heroes barely manage to escape Fallujah with their lives, eventually rescued as they are by a US helicopter and a fleet of Humvees. The famed anti-war song “Fortunate Son” (1969) by Creedence Clearwater Revival plays in the background and we are presumably meant to root for the “good guys” as they drive off the insurgents, i.e., Iraqi forces fighting against foreign invasion.

The classic rock soundtrack becomes a bit obscene after a while, especially when we hear Pink Floyd’s “Wish You Were Here” (1975) as Efraim and David test AK-47 rounds. One can only wonder how much the producers paid off Roger Waters and John Fogerty for their work.

In the film’s middle section we meet the mysterious arms dealer Henry Girard (Bradley Cooper), who informs Efraim and David about the aforementioned Albanian weapons and wants to set up a deal. They meet at an arms expo in Las Vegas, which Efraim describes as “Comic-Con with guns.”

After agreeing to the terms of the contract, Henry tells the two he wants to take off soon since he can’t stand this “dump” any longer. Efraim says something to the effect, “I know what you mean, Vegas is a two-day town only.” To which Henry replies, “I was talking about America.” For anyone in the audience who hasn’t figured it out yet, Henry is one of the “bad guys.”

The greatest problem the filmmakers seem to have with David and Efraim’s conduct is not that the two are profiting off people’s death and misery, but that they’re defrauding the “American taxpayer” by selling cheap ammo at exorbitant prices and violating the Chinese arms embargo. Also, David has to keep lying to maintain his stunning girlfriend and beautiful Miami condo. The immorality of some people!

Where all these bombs and bullets might end up does not seem to overly concern the filmmakers. One senses they wanted, above all, to make a raunchy “comedy” geared toward adolescent males. On the surface, there is something paradoxical about the fact that *War Dogs* can be so profane in its treatment of everyday life and yet apparently so naïve and Pollyannaish about the US government’s dark side. Four-letter words, violence, drugs and sex are fine with Hollywood—telling the

truth about the “war on terror” is another matter.

The real-life Efraim Diveroli ended up serving four years in federal prison, while David Packouz was sentenced to seven months’ house arrest. How was it possible that such opportunists and nonentities were in a position to defraud the US government of millions and arm the puppet Afghan army?

Above all else, the episode speaks to the criminality of not just the Bush administration, but the American ruling elite as a whole. As the *Rolling Stone* article “Arms and the Dudes,” which formed the basis of the film, pointed out, “The Pentagon needed access to this new aftermarket in order to arm the militias it was creating in Iraq and Afghanistan. The trouble was, it couldn’t go into such a murky underworld on its own. It needed proxies to do its dirty work—companies like AEY.”

It seems easy enough to conclude that an obscure company like AEY simply did not or could not pay off enough government officials to be let off the hook. Compared to the serious “players,” like Lockheed Martin, Halliburton, Northrop Grumman and BAE systems, they were mere small fry.



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