

# Clint Eastwood's *Richard Jewell*: An important and largely unrecognized film

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*Directed by Clint Eastwood; written by Billy Ray*

Clint Eastwood's latest film, *Richard Jewell*, is a drama rooted in the victimization of security guard Richard Jewell (1962-2007) in regard to the Centennial Olympic Park bombing during the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta. The actual perpetrator of the crime proved to be far-right terrorist Eric Rudolph.

Scripted by Billy Ray, the movie is based on Marie Brenner's February 1997 *Vanity Fair* article "American Nightmare: The Ballad of Richard Jewell." Kent Alexander and Kevin Salwen's book *Suspect: An Olympic Bombing, the FBI, the Media, and Richard Jewell, the Man Caught in the Middle* was also used as source material.

*Richard Jewell* is forthright in its condemnation of the role of the FBI and the media, which combined to pursue and malign Jewell for weeks on end during the summer of 1996. The film shows these forces eviscerating a human being without the slightest concern for democratic principles or elementary truth.

Eastwood, now nearing 90, is a highly contradictory figure. He has directed nearly 40 films, of which some are very good and others very poor. The first category includes, prominently, *True Crime* (1999), *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006) and *Sully* (2016). Other efforts have been seriously misguided or disoriented, promoting a rancid misanthropy or vigilantism, including *Unforgiven* (1992), *Mystic River* (2003), *Million Dollar Baby* (2004) and *American Sniper* (2014).

Eastwood evinces a type of latter-day "rugged individualism" which drags him all over the political and ideological map.

The title character in his new film, Richard Jewell (Paul Walter Hauser), is an overweight man in his mid-thirties who lives with his mother Bobi (Kathy Bates) in Atlanta and wholeheartedly believes in the agencies of law enforcement. He imagines himself to be preparing for a "future in law enforcement—APD [Atlanta Police Department], FBI, maybe Secret Service."

Ten years before the bombing, Richard is working as a supply clerk for the Small Business Administration. There he meets lawyer Watson Bryant (Sam Rockwell), who although caustic and irascible, treats Richard with a degree of respect and even friendliness. Watson nicknames the socially awkward man "Radar," after the character in Robert Altman's *MASH* (who anticipates his commander's orders before he issues them), a far cry from what is typical for Richard—some variation on the derisive "Pillsbury Doughboy."

When Richard leaves to take a job as a campus rent-a-cop for a college, Watson warns him that "a little power can turn a person into a monster." In fact, Jewell thoughtlessly and high-handedly wields his authority against misbehaving students, leading to his dismissal.

On July 27, 1996, Atlanta is hosting the Summer Olympics at Centennial Park where Richard is now employed by AT&T as a security guard (to protect its five-story sound and light tower). He spots an unattended backpack beneath a bench during a concert. Richard persuades authorities to follow protocol and push the crowd back. Shortly after an expert identifies a bomb in the backpack, the device filled with nails explodes, killing two people (one directly, the other as a result of a heart attack) and injuring 110. Despite the casualties, Richard's vigilance has saved an untold number of lives.

Jewell becomes an overnight celebrity, appearing on nationwide television shows and sought after by book publishers. Mother Bobi could not be prouder. But the FBI and agent Tom Shaw (Jon Hamm) are busy creating a different scenario: "Richard Jewell, 33, a former law enforcement officer, fits the profile of the lone bomber. This profile generally includes a frustrated white man who is a former police officer, member of the military, or police wannabe who seeks to become a hero."

Aggressive journalist Kathy Scruggs (Olivia Wilde) of the *Atlanta-Journal Constitution* ( *AJC* ) approaches Shaw and offers sex in exchange for the name of the individual the FBI suspects. Scruggs convinces her editor at the *AJC* to publish a front-page story fingering Jewell ("FBI suspects 'hero' guard may have planted bomb"). The story instantly becomes national and international news. The witch-hunt begins, as a series of scurrilous headlines ("Saint or Savage?," "Bubba the Bomber," etc.) appear in the tabloid press.

When it finally dawns on Richard that he is being railroaded by the FBI, he engages the iconoclastic Watson as his legal counsel. The latter tries, at every juncture, to pound into Richard's head that the government agency and the media are his mortal enemies. For nearly three months, the FBI and the media do their best to grind Richard and Bobi's lives to pulp.

*Richard Jewell* has numerous positive features. Hauser is truly remarkable as the lumbering, overzealous, yet endearing Richard—a nuanced portrayal that avoids caricature. The superficially affable Hamm's FBI agent Shaw is appropriately cold and myopic, steadfastly denying the facts in front of his nose. To the bitter end, Shaw/Hamm still maintains Richard is "guilty as hell."

In one of the movie's most moving scenes, Watson introduces Bobi at a press conference as "the 113th victim of the Centennial bombing." He explains, "Her son's accusers are two of the most powerful forces in the world today. The United States government and the media. For the past four weeks, these horrific forces have combined to make her daily existence a living hell."

Bobi's public indictment of her family's tormentors is gut-wrenching: "I am so very drained. I hope and pray to God that nobody

ever has to go through this again. I do not think any of you can even begin to imagine what our lives are like. The media has portrayed my son as the person who has committed this crime. ...

“They watch and photograph everything we do. Like the media, the FBI follows his every move and watches my home constantly. And why? My son ... My son is innocent. Richard is not the Olympic Park bomber. Richard is not a murderer. He saved people’s lives. Please hear me, Mr. President, and help me. You have the power to end this nightmare.”

It is Watson/Rockwell, above all, who provides the movie’s anti-authoritarian edge. Rockwell is an outstanding performer whose witty jabs generally find appropriate targets. When he sees Richard’s extensive gun collection, Watson quips: “Were you expecting a zombie invasion or something?” More importantly, he constantly reminds Richard, who “respects authority” far too much, “Son, authority’s what’s outside that window looking to eat you alive.” The film draws heavily on these exceptional performances.

*Richard Jewell* concerns itself with a generally despised portion of the population—lower middle class or working class whites from the South. Figures such as Jewell are usually either the subject of ridicule or portrayed as mindless, racist brutes (the sort of role Hauser played in Spike Lee’s *BlackkKlansman*). Eastwood has not always shown humanity, or has too often been selective about whom he chooses to sympathize with, but here he summons up something important: sympathy for a despised and persecuted individual.

Moreover, the movie’s entirely legitimate premise is that one ought to be perpetually suspicious of governmental power and law enforcement, as there is every reason to assume they are up to no good.

This particular drama brings out the best in Eastwood, who has always represented something in American cinema, for better or worse. He grew up in Oakland during the Depression, the child of itinerant workers. The actor came to international prominence in a number of films directed by Sergio Leone, starting with *A Fistful of Dollars* in 1964. He was also associated with a number of films directed by Don Siegel (including *Coogan’s Bluff*, *Two Mules for Sister Sara*, *The Beguiled*, *Dirty Harry* and *Escape from Alcatraz*). He directed his first film, *Play Misty For Me*, in 1971.

*Richard Jewell* has not made certain people happy, although it received generally favorable, if not enthusiastic reviews. The film came out, after all, in the midst of the Democratic Party anti-Russia campaign, which celebrates the FBI and CIA as the great defenders of American democracy. Numerous critics were clearly made uncomfortable by Eastwood’s critique of these hallowed institutions.

Moreover, the portrayal of real-life Kathy Scruggs, the unscrupulous *Atlanta-Journal Constitution* reporter (extremely well played by Wilde), has also ruffled feathers. The filmmakers have been accused of “slut shaming” because of the scene in which Scruggs is willing to trade “sex for a scoop.” In fact, the similarities between the attempted media destruction of Richard Jewell and the #MeToo campaign, which also specializes in character assassination, unsubstantiated claims and anonymous leaks to the press to ruin lives and careers overnight, are obvious to those with eyes.

(Bizarrely, the *New Yorker*’s Richard Brody—in a comment that was positive by and large—suggested that Eastwood’s scathing criticism of Scruggs was perhaps unintentionally aimed at another “ultra-competent and accomplished woman,” Hillary Clinton. Brody indicated he had seen suggestions that *Richard Jewell* was “Trumpist propaganda.” It has reached the point on the intellectual “left” in

America that any defense of a white working class man is viewed with the utmost distrust and even hostility.)

The venal American media’s standard operating procedure is on display in *Richard Jewell*: Scruggs, the *AJC* and the rest, who can turn on a dime, cynically seek to manipulate public opinion. They demonized Richard Jewell as they demonize leaders of foreign countries the US government wants to bomb or invade. One day Jewell is on the *Today Show*, and the next, being vilified by Tom Brokaw (that “nonentity in the service of wealth and power,” as the WWSW described him in 2004).

Screenwriter Billy Ray has provided a fierce defense of the movie against the current posturing by the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* as the supposed defenders of Scruggs’s “good name.” In an interview with *Deadline*, Ray explained that the movie was about an individual “whose life was completely destroyed by myths created by the FBI and the media, specifically the *AJC* ... The *AJC* hung Richard Jewell, in public.”

After noting that the newspaper “editorialized wildly and printed assumptions as facts” and compared Jewell to “mass murderer Wayne Williams,” the screenwriter continued, “Now a movie comes along 23 years later, a perfect chance for the *AJC* to atone for what they did.” Instead, Ray points out, the *Journal-Constitution* is seeking to “deflect and distort. They focus solely on one single minute in a movie that’s 129 minutes long, opting to challenge one assertion in the movie rather than accepting their own role in destroying the life of a good man. ... And by the way, I will stand by every word and assertion in the script.”

For whatever reason, Eastwood’s film fails to indicate anything about the actual bomber, Eric Rudolph. Often presented as a mere backwoods Christian fanatic, Rudolph was a ferocious anti-communist ideologue, who described abortion as the product of a “rotten feast of materialism and self-indulgence” and who once explained that “I really prefer Nietzsche to the Bible.”

In his own statement about his motivations for the bombing at the Olympics, Rudolph wrote that in July 1996, “millions of people came to celebrate the ideals of global socialism” and that “the conception and the purpose of the so-called Olympic movement is to promote the values of global socialism as perfectly expressed in the song ‘Imagine’ by John Lennon.”

The Atlanta bombing occurred only 15 months after the Oklahoma City bombing carried out by right-wing extremist Timothy McVeigh. It is legitimate to ask whether the FBI’s persecution of Jewell was merely the result of incompetence and face-saving, or part of a larger effort to divert attention from the growth of domestic fascist elements, with extensive ties to the Republican Party, the military and “law enforcement.”

In any event, as far as it goes, Eastwood’s film is a serious, humane and sincere artistic and social accomplishment.



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