



“American Sniper” or How a Film Revealed America’s Contradictions

SIMON DESPLANQUE
 Stagiaire, UCL

“Clint Eastwood’s American Sniper is a film that evokes complicated emotions. A month after seeing it, you might still be wrestling with whether it’s powerful, profound, or propaganda.”¹

Chris Nashawaty, Entertainment Weekly

THE ORIGINS OF A DEBATE

On 25th December 2014, Clint Eastwood released what would become the highest-grossing war movie of all time and the most successful film of his director’s career: *American Sniper*². Based on NAVY Seal Chris Kyle’s best-selling autobiography, the movie gives the spectator a first-person insight into the story of “the Legend”, the deadliest marksman of the US forces engaged in Iraq. Far from representing Kyle just as a cold-blooded professional, the film intends to show, among other things, how war can affect the everyday life of ordinary people.

Even if Bradley Cooper, who earned an Oscar nomination for his stunning performance in the title role, did not want the movie to be seen as a political lampoon, *American Sniper* soon sparked a fierce controversy in the United States which is clearly illustrated by the preliminary remark

(permet de nuancer le mot “propagande” de la citation). “Subject to widespread praise among conservatives for depicting an American soldier at his best, [it was condemned] by some liberals who question[ed] the admitted pleasure Kyle took in killing and dehumanizing Iraqis.”³

Kyle’s personality was indeed central to these critics. In his book, this rodeo cow-boy from Texas claimed having fun while doing his job, calling Iraqis “savages” and boasting about killing looters in New Orleans in the aftermath of Katrina. The only regret he ever expressed was that “he shot too few Iraqis”⁴ during his four tours. This issue became so heated that various US politicians, among which Sarah Palin, got quickly involved in the debate on the social networks.

A few months after this controversial release, it is time to try to understand the reasons of both the success of this movie and the debate it generated. Addressing this question will require us to take two distinct points of view into account:

- 1) The director’s ambitions and opinions while making his film;
- 2) The way critics and, more generally, the public understood his work and, thereby, forged an interpreta-

tion that may differ from the director’s.

It is only the combination of these two aspects⁵ that allows the researcher to grasp the whole symbolic scope of a movie and what it tells us about collective opinion. Even if the director wanted to give a specific tone to his work, the fact that it is interpreted in a different way by critics and general opinion is fully relevant to academics, including those studying International Relations (IR).

A DEEPLY-ROOTED VISION OF AMERICA AND OF ITS ROLE ABROAD

Far from being an ordinary war film, *American Sniper* is, first of all, a typical US movie, which does not only reflect the values and hopes of a certain part of America but also deep US policy trends.

Ethnocentrism, cultural isolation and paranoia

In the days that followed its release, *American Sniper* was compared by some critics with two previous Clint Eastwood’s war movies: *Flags of our Fathers* (2006) and its companion film *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006). Deeply anti-war, both

films described the battle for Iwo Jima from two different perspectives. While the former focused on the “hero mythology” in the United States, the latter offered a rather unique insight into a Japanese soldier daily life. These two portraits avoided any kind of Manicheism, which could partly explain their success. The second opus indeed gave a human face to an “enemy” – i.e. the Japanese – that, until then, had rarely been treated in a favorable way by Western cinema so far.

American Sniper contrasts with this two-part work. Because of the “first person approach” chosen by his director, the movie does not offer the same kind of nuances about war and its consequences. At first sight, the enemy is described in a simplistic and sometimes caricatured way, which reflects Chris Kyle’s vision of the conflict he was engaged in. This kind of narrative is often criticized among movie-lovers and critics, not only in Europe but also in America. From our point of view, this is, paradoxically, an explanation for Eastwood’s last film’s success, which also reveals deep trends of the “American national style”⁶, defined as “a collective perception of the world as a whole that could affect the formulation of foreign policy”⁷.

Among the elements of the US national style pointed by Louis Balthazar, several of them can be found in this highly debated movie. First of all, Kyle’s vision of the world tends to be somewhat ethnocentric. At no moment does he question the American cultural supremacy. The whole film is filled with various references to a certain kind of US culture, included to the highly emblematic Texan one. The soldiers fighting together with Kyle seem to consider Iraqis as “savages” and “barbarians”. This kind of monikers is not insignificant. It suggests that these people, referred to as “Hajis” – a derogatory term for Muslim – reject values seen as universal and inherently good. This dichotomy between civilization and its enemies, coupled with a paranoid tone, is typi-

cal of the US national style⁸.

However, these representations must be put in the specific context of the Iraq War. The hero is immersed in an asymmetrical conflict in which the enemy intentionally blurs the distinction fighters / non-fighters and does not hesitate to use most cruel guerrilla warfare techniques. The opening scene, showing a woman and her child acting like human bombs, shows that the threat can come from anywhere, hence a deep mistrust towards the local population among the US troops. Besides, Kyle’s main enemy, i.e. the Syrian marksman, is nor underestimated nor demonized. Furthermore, “The Legend” respects him as high-class adversary.

Jacksonian echoes

Eastwood’s movie does not only reflect a diffuse American mentality. It also adopts a clear political stance that can better be apprehended thanks to Walter Russel Mead’s definition of Jacksonism. Named after the seventh President of the United States, this is one of the four schools that defined the foreign policy “from the eighteenth century to the twenty-first”⁹. Very present in the Southern part of the country and in the Midwest, their national-populist discourse is fiercely denounced abroad but also by the so-called “East Coast elites”¹⁰. To this extent, it must not be forgotten that Jacksonism, far from being a foreign policy school amid others, is a deep social, cultural and religious movement in American society.

Jacksonians indeed believe that the most important goal of the United States in both foreign and domestic policy is the physical security and the economic well-being of America¹¹. Because they see the international system’s anarchy as potentially dangerous, they do consider the use of force as a real foreign policy option. During the conflicts, they pay a lot of attention to the code of honor and traditions such as the truce flag. Should the enemy not respect them, Jacksonians are ready to wage a “dirty

war” and, therefore, to abandon the basic elements of this code they are so attached to. They also plead for the United States to keep their whole freedom on the international stage and hence refuse to join international organizations or, more generally, to adhere to international law¹².

At the internal level, Jacksonians are deeply suspicious towards the central power and the political establishment. They consequently tend to prefer a “loose federal structure” and oppose taxes, even though they are “obstinately fond of federal programs seen as primarily helping the middle class”¹³. They are particularly attached to the freedom granted by the Second Amendment, which they see as the “citadel of [their] liberty”, the best way to preserve their constitutional liberty¹⁴.

All of these aspects perfectly fit not only with Kyle’s personality such as portrayed in the movie but also with Clint Eastwood’s own political views. Close to the Republican Party, he once described himself as “a social liberal and a fiscal conservative”¹⁵. The dispute Eastwood had with Michael Moore in 2005¹⁶ about his famous documentary *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) shows all the importance the 85-year-old director grants to the right to bear arms. This fascination for weapons is one of the numerous Jacksonian values Kyle shared with Eastwood¹⁷.

However, these values do not only have to do with violence and guns. They can also be found in the way family is depicted. From the very beginning, family indeed plays a central role in the hero’s destiny. The short insight into “the Legend’s” childhood shows how his father influenced his life choices and induced him to join the army. Embodiment of religious virtue, this father is also an example of moral righteousness. Teaching his children about the “crude reality of life”, he did not hesitate to use violence to prevent them from becoming “bad guys”. This image of family, typical of Jacksonian values such as

tradition and honor¹⁸, is omnipresent throughout the movie. The hero is not only a faithful husband; he is also a loving father. His spouse is both a patient and devoted housewife, who will help him to recover from his post-traumatic stress disorder, issue which is mainly tackled through family's lenses¹⁹.

In terms of foreign policy, *American Sniper's* director declared that he was not "fan of going to war in Iraq and Afghanistan"²⁰. However, because of the intelligence available at that time, he was not opposed to Operation Enduring Freedom. Reasoning as a typical Jacksonian, he judged that the risk for the United States was real and justified the intervention. He did not actually believe in the implementation of democracy in this country²¹. This kind of logic is at the heart of the movie. Kyle's motivation to join the army takes root in the attacks American embassies endured from terrorist cells in Africa. He does not enroll to defend a noble cause but by sheer patriotism.

AN UNUSUAL DEPICTION OF A STILL DEBATED WAR

To some extent, the three features previously described can partly explain the success of this blockbuster. The origins of the debate it generated are a little bit easier to unravel. To our view, they can be found in the way the Iraq War and its consequences have been handled by the vast majority of film directors so far. Four movies best exemplify this trend: Brian de Palma's *Redacted* (2007), Paul Haggis's *In the Valley of Elah* (2007), Kathryn Bigelow's *Hurt Locker* (2008) and Paul Greengrass's *Green Zone* (2010).

The first two movies adopt a clear anti-war stance. In *Redacted*, de Palma confronts the points of view of several US soldiers from the same platoon. He describes the daily life of these men and the circumstances that led them to rape a young Iraqi and kill her family. Based on true events (the Mahmudiyah killings of March

2006), this narrative echoes another de Palma's movie about a wartime rape: *Casualties of War* (1989)²². The choice of the title also reveals de Palma's basic intention: denouncing the complicity of the media in the conflict.

In the Valley of Elah also intends to criticize *Operation Enduring Freedom* by depicting how conflict can affect a man's beliefs and behavior. The movie follows a Vietnam War veteran whose son is missing since his return from Iraq. The father's investigation will lead him to discover the harsh reality of the conflict and the disastrous effects it had on his son, murdered by his comrades suffering from severe post-traumatic stress disorders.

As for *Hurt Locker*, the pacifist message is more subtle. The soldiers are not portrayed as "bad guys". On the contrary, they could nearly be seen, according to some critics, as "superheroes"²³, bravely risking their life in more and more dangerous demining operations. Their behavior towards the local population is not really put into question. What is criticized here is the system that produced such violence-addicted men, kind of modern-times cowboys who cannot imagine any other reality than war itself.

Last but not least: *Green Zone*. This 2010 film featuring Matt Damon directly tackles the political motivations of the conflict by following the adventures of a young idealist US soldier whose mission is to find and destroy the alleged Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD's). His investigation leads him to the conclusion that these WMD's never existed and that the reasons of the war are to be found elsewhere. The final scene of the film indeed suggests that oil was the real motivation behind *Enduring Freedom*.

Eastwood's blockbuster sharply contrasts with all these films. Unlike *Redacted* and *In the Valley of Elah*, *American Sniper* does not portray US soldiers as "bad guys". These men are just doing their job and struggling to

survive in a hostile environment. Besides, the political aspects of this war are not tackled at all. By focusing on sole Chris Kyle's point of view, the director adopts another focus. He does not criticize the Iraq war but war as such in a more indirect way than its predecessors. The only reason for which these men fight is very vague: avoiding a "new 9/11" on the US soil.

Given Clint Eastwood's political affiliations²⁴, we can suppose that some critics saw in this discrete but real critic a tacit approbation of the motivations of a conflict that still sharply divides the United States. This could partly explain why Bigelow's feature film, which deliberately avoided a Manichean stance and did not directly tackle political issues, was not subject to the same kind of critics.

A MORALIST STRAIGHTJACKET?

Thanks to tools originally designed for the International Relations field – and more specifically for the Foreign Policy Analysis – this paper managed to explain the controversy surrounding *American Sniper's* release. By adopting a typical Jacksonian perspective, Eastwood gained the support of a whole part of the US public opinion, mainly from the South and the Midwest where Jacksonian values of honor and tradition are still vivid.

Jacksonism can also explain the fierce debate the movie generated. The values this huge political, social, cultural and religious movement defends, both at the international and internal levels, are widely debated and contested, in the United States and abroad. Combined to Eastwood's political leanings, to Chris Kyle extravagant personality, to the controversy still surrounding *Operation Enduring Freedom* and to the way the Iraq War has been depicted by Hollywood so far, controversy was nearly meant to arise.

This debate leads us to an ultimate consideration about the political dimension of art in our Western societies. As soon as a book or – in this very

case – a film tackles a politically sensitive issue from an unconventional / non-mainstream way, critics grow and sometimes denounce a political lampoon or even propaganda. If art has an obvious political dimension, it would be both unfortunate and dangerous to reduce it to this simple aspect. Art is, after all, the representation of a particular point of view which presents interesting dramatic aspects. It is the accumulation of perspectives that makes art what it is, not the infinite declinations of the same stance, as deep as it can be.

(ENDNOTES)

1 NASHAWATY Chris, “American Sniper”, *Entertainment Weekly*, 25 December 2014, <http://www.ew.com/article/2014/12/25/american-sniper>, consulted on 15th May 2015.

2 “Top-US-Grossing War Feature Films With At Least 1,000 Votes”, *International Movie Data Base*, http://www.imdb.com/search/title?genres=war&num_votes=1000.&sort=boxoffice_gross_us&title_type=feature, consulted on 15th May 2015.

3 McCOY Terrence, “How Clint Eastwood’s ‘American Sniper’ stoked the American culture wars”, *Washington Post*, 20 January 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/01/20/how-clint-eastwoods-american-sniper-has-been-swept-up-in-the-american-culture-wars/>, consulted on 15th May 2015.

4 CRONE Jack, “‘I wish I’d killed more’: American Sniper Chris Kyle said his only regret was that US lives were lost because he shot too few Iraqis”, *Daily Mail*, 25 January 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2925187/I-wish-d-killed-American-Sniper-Chris-Kyle-said-regret-lives-lost-shot-Iraqis.html>, consulted on 16th May 2015.

5 This combination is our answer to a current question among movie-lovers: “Who does a film belong to ?” For an original approach to this debate, see LE FOSSOYEUR DE FILMS, “Blade Runner”, *Youtube*, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eXajPKu4F0M>, consulted on 16th May 2015.

6 DAVID Charles-Philippe, BALTHAZAR Louis, VAÏSSE Justin, *La politique étrangère des Etats-Unis. Fondements, acteurs, formulation*, Paris : Presses de Sciences Po, 2008, p. 75.

7 Idem, p. 55.

8 Idem, pp. 76-81.

9 RUSSEL MEAD Walter, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World*, London: Routledge, 2002, 400 p. The other trends are the Hamiltonian (realists), the Jeffersonians (“dovish” isolationists) and the Wilsonians (liberal idealists).

10 STRUYE de SWIELANDE Tanguy, *La politique étrangère de l’administration Bush. Analyse de la prise de décision*, Bruxelles : Peter Lang, 2007, p. 78.

11 RUSSEL MEAD Walter, “The Jacksonian Tradition and American Foreign Policy”, *The National Interest*, n°58, Winter 1999/2000, p. 7.

12 STRUYE de SWIELANDE Tanguy, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

13 RUSSEL MEAD Walter, “The Jacksonian Tradition and American Foreign Policy”, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

14 Ibidem.

15 MCCLAIN Kathleen, *A New Benchmark In Clint Eastwood Guide - 76 Success Secrets*, Aspley: Emereo Publishing, 2015, p. 58.

16 In his documentary, Moore interviewed the then President of the National Rifle Association, Charlton Heston, one of Eastwood’s close friends, in quite a harsh way.

17 In 2013, this Iraq veteran wrote a book called *American Guns: A History of the US in Ten Firearms*.

18 RUSSEL MEAD Walter, “The Jacksonian Tradition and American Foreign Policy”, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

19 During an interview given a few weeks after his movie’s release, Eastwood claimed: “The biggest anti-war statement any film can make is to show the fact of what [war] does to the family and the people who have to go back into civilian life like Chris Kyle did.” Voyez SIEKCKZKOWSKI Cavan, “Clint Eastwood Says ‘American Sniper’ Makes An Anti-War Statement”, *The Huffington Post*, 26 January 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/01/26/clint-eastwood-american-sniper-anti-war_n_6547068.html, consulted on 19th May 2015.

20 GALLOWAY Stephen, “Clint Eastwood Describes His Near-Death Experience, Says ‘American Sniper’ Is Anti-War (Exclusive)”, *The Hollywood Reporter*, 16th March 2015, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/clint-eastwood-describes-his-death-781618>, consulted on 18th May 2015.

21 Ibidem.

22 This film is inspired by the notorious “incident on Hill 192” (1966), during which a young Vietnamese woman was gang raped and killed by US soldiers.

23 REGNIER Isabelle, « «Démineurs» : sur le terrain de mort des démineurs,

surhommes et hypervulnérables », *Le Monde*, 22 September 2009, http://www.lemonde.fr/cinema/article/2009/09/22/demineurs-sur-le-terrain-de-mort-des-demineurs-surhommes-et-hypervulnérables_1243626_3476.html, consulted on 20th May 2015.

24 It seems important to note that Eastwood's movie only reflects one Republican point of view. This movie cannot be seen as reflecting the convictions of all the GOP's members.