

THOMAS A. HORNE

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## Goliath In the Valley of Elah

*In the Valley of Elah* is often placed in a list of films about the Iraq War (along with *Redacted*, *Rendition*, and *Lions for Lambs*, all of which were released in 2007) that the American public mostly ignored. Whether this was the fault of the American public (who only want to be entertained, liberals lament) or of filmmakers (who should entertain rather than preach, conservatives believe) can be debated. From Hollywood's perspective, it is enough to note that a star-filled film only grossed 6.7 million dollars in the US. But a film by Paul Haggis, with a great performance by Tommy Lee Jones (who was nominated for an academy award), and the praise of most critics deserves a closer look and more respect. I want to consider *In the Valley of Elah* as an example of first rate political art and to pay some attention to the strategies it suggests political art might adopt, though at the end I suggest Haggis' film failed in one important respect.

### **Actual Events**

The film is based on the real life story of Richard Davis, which was first told by Mark Boal in a *Playboy* article entitled "Death and Dishonor."<sup>1</sup> Richard Davis was born in 1978, enlisted in the army when he was 19 years old, saw action early in the second Iraq war, returned to the States in June 2003, and on the night of July 14, 2003 was killed by fellow soldiers. To be more precise, after he had been stabbed 32 or 33 times, his body was soaked in lighter fluid and then set afire. By the time his body was found a few months later, animals had eaten much of him and scattered his bones. The local coroner asked the question that haunts Boal's article, "How

could they do this to a fellow soldier.”<sup>2</sup> Of course, PTSD from the war in Iraq is a part of this story as is the fact that the army had been forced to lower its recruiting standards. But as Boal raises the possibility that the soldiers who killed Richard may have stolen valuables from him or that some of them may have been trying to cover up a rape Richard saw them commit in Iraq, his story becomes more mundane. Greed, lust, and fear of punishment are common enough motives for a murder. Haggis, it seems to me, has changed the story’s title to a biblical reference (it was in the Valley of Elah that David killed Goliath) in an attempt to move from the mundane to the mythic, to find in the death of Richard Davis a greater significance.

Both *In the Valley of Elah* and *Redacted* (about a rape in Samara) are based on actual events and *Rendition* is based on the actual practice of sending prisoners taken in the war on terror to foreign countries where they could be tortured. Basing a political film on actual events may add legitimacy to the criticisms the film contains and gain some initial acceptance from the audience. Such films want to announce right at the start that they are not part of the long history of Hollywood war films that obscure the true nature of armed conflict.<sup>3</sup> But a narrative film, especially one with a title that draws our attention to an important cultural myth, is inevitably an artistic creation that will have to transcend the particular death of a particular person, even as it acknowledges it. There is a tension, then, between the desire to stay true to the facts for the sake of critical legitimacy and the need to embrace the mythic in order to find truth or meaning. How this tension is handled by Haggis is at the center of this discussion.

### **Cultural criticism**

In his article, Boal wrote that, “Richard inherited his looks from his mother, Remy, a Filipino American medic, but he took into his soul his father’s love of the military, a Davis trait for two centuries, he was told, ever since Jefferson Davis battled the Union.”<sup>4</sup> Haggis emphasizes this idea of fathers handing down to their sons attitudes toward masculinity and the military. It is our culture that this film identifies as politically significant, as the deep cause of this and other wars, rather than just the decisions or character of the politicians who invaded Iraq. The revelation that the daily briefing book presented to President Bush during the early days of the Iraq War was “adorned with biblical quotations” illustrates the point that Haggis is trying to make.<sup>5</sup>

At the start of the film, Hank Deerfield (the film’s name for Lanny Davis, Richard’s father) receives a call from the army informing him that his son, Mike (the name given to Richard Davis), has gone AWOL. A very pro military veteran of

the Vietnam War, Hank does not believe that his very pro military son would leave his post without permission. To seek the whereabouts of Mike, Hank travels to his base in New Mexico. This film begins as a detective story, focusing on a determined father searching for his son over the objections and barriers established by the official authorities, the military police and the police of the town. At this level, all of our sympathies are with the concerned father/detective.<sup>6</sup>

But the film's appraisal of Hank is more problematic and interesting the more we take seriously questions surrounding the place of war in our culture and the easy acquiescence of the American people in going to war in Iraq. It is in this larger context that the film considers the way fathers (like Hank) raise sons (like Mike). Twice in the film, the link between the generations is given visual and physical form. When Hank first arrives at the base where Mike was stationed, he searches Mike's living quarters and finds that Mike was still using the duffle bag that Hank saved from his time in Vietnam and had given to him. And, at the end of the film, after the soldier who had killed Mike committed suicide, Hank is given the watch that was found in his pants. It was Mike's watch, passed on to him by Hank, as it had been passed down to Hank from his father.

We get a better sense of what Mike would have inherited from his father by listening to the judgment of Mike's mother and Hank's wife, Joan (Susan Sarandon) and by watching the interaction between Hank and the young son of a detective on the local police force, Emily Sanders (Charlize Theron). Since neither Emily Sanders nor her son, David, was in the original story, we might pay special attention to them and to the roles they play in the film's narrative.

Distraught over the death of Mike, Joan accuses Hank of encouraging Mike to join the army over her objections. "Living in this house," she says to Hank, "he couldn't have felt like a man if he hadn't gone." Mike, we learn, was the second son to have died in the army, which prompts her to say to Hank, "you could have left me one." The film then cuts to Emily and David in bed, Emily's arms around David, protecting him. If Emily had talked to Joan Deerfield, she might have known that she needed to protect her David from Hank's notions about manliness and his tales of valor in war, like the story of David and Goliath. But Emily invites Hank to her apartment for dinner and approves of Hank's influence on David, thinking that David needs a male role model. David watches Hank intently, copying his movements, folding his hands and bowing his head in prayer just as Hank does before dinner. After dinner, Emily asks Hank to read David a story; instead Hank asks David if he knows the origin of his name. When David tells him he doesn't, Hank tells him the story of David and Goliath. Hank's account of the story

concludes by drawing these lessons. “The first thing David had to fight was his own fear.” And then, “That’s how you fight monsters. You lure them in close to you, you look them in the eye, then you smack them down.” David asks Hank if he has fought a lot of monsters and Hank replies that he has. As he leaves David’s room, Emily objects to Hank that the story he just told was not true. Hank says that it is true, “It is even in the Koran.”

For over 2500 years the story of David and Goliath has passed from generation to generation, from fathers to young men. As Haggis has said, “We told these kids these stories, like the story of David and Goliath. We tell them these stories and they grow up wanting to be that.”<sup>7</sup> But what does it mean to be like David? In the Valley of Elah, according to I Samuel 17, the God of the Hebrews delivered David from the champion of the Philistines, Goliath. David is a young, handsome shepherd, without armor, who confronts the older, much taller, well-armed, professional soldier, Goliath, with only a slingshot and five smooth stones. When Saul, the King of the Israelites, doubts David’s ability to fight Goliath, David recounts the time he slew a lion and a bear to protect his sheep and says confidently that “the uncircumcised Philistine shall be as one of them.” David, then, is young and beautiful while his enemy Goliath is monstrous and beast-like. These combatants are one another’s opposites, not only in their physical attributes, but more importantly in their moral status. David has “the living God of the Israelites” on his side, which guarantees his success. Goliath’s ungodliness and beastliness not only require him to lose the battle to David, they are justification for David cutting off his head and taking it to Jerusalem. Instead of David’s victory ending the battle between the Israelites and the Philistines, which was the proposal first made by Goliath, it resulted in the slaughter of the Philistine army. Artistic representations which focused on the savagery of Goliath’s beheading include Caravaggio’s is in his “David with the Head of Goliath” (1597-98) and Gustave Dore’s 19<sup>th</sup> century illustration, “David and Goliath,” for his illustrated Bible (1866).

Without an awareness of the violence of the story of David and Goliath, the beheading of Goliath and the slaughter of the Philistine army, and the justification of that violence because one side had God on its side while the other side was demonized as animal like, we might not pause to consider the importance of the title of this film and especially to stop and think about the scene where a young boy is told about David and Goliath for the first time. America, it turns out, has a long history of using this story, a history that dates to our earliest years. David and Goliath was a popular subject for sermons in 17<sup>th</sup> century America as ministers rallied their godly congregations to fight against the heathen Native Americans.

Expecting its young men to serve in the military, ministers invoked David as the model for the “Christian soldier” young Puritan men were expected to become.<sup>8</sup>

Even at its most innocuous, when its focus is on boys becoming men and the courage of the small against the large, this story seems inseparable from its self righteousness. In the basketball movie *Hoosiers* (1987), a rural, small town Indiana basketball team has improbably made its way to the state championship game against a large, urban high school. Before the big game, after the coach has given his instructions, the players are invited to talk. One says to his teammates “let’s win it for all of the small schools in the state.” Then two of the town’s ministers address the team. The first also dwells on the small size of the team’s school, but reminds the players that strength does not come from size but from “heaven.” The second minister simply reads verse 49 from I Samuel 17, which recounts David killing Goliath with just his slingshot. Underdogs can win if the gods, or the God, is on their side. Of course, this requires that the enemy, like Goliath, is not favored by the gods, that the enemy is a philistine, ungodly, different, an animal. The David and Goliath story, then, fills the underdog with energy and confidence, because he knows that God is on his side, and with contempt for his enemy, since God is not on their side.

The impact of the David and Goliath story in this film has its predictable effect. As Emily and Hank meet for the last time before Hank returns home, she mentions to him that ever since Hank told her son that story, he has been asking her to buy him a slingshot. After a pause, she adds that it could be worse, he could be asking for a BB gun. The audience doesn’t need to be told that David has started on a path - slingshot now, BB gun later - that will lead to a desire for increasingly more deadly weapons as he grows into a man.

The link between the story of David and Goliath and the death of Mike is reemphasized at the end of the film. After a shot of Emily, again curled in bed with her son, this time telling him the story of David and Goliath herself, the film cuts to Hank, back in Tennessee, putting a picture of his dead son Mike in full uniform on a living room table. So long as our most cherished cultural myths celebrate war and teach boys that military service and violence will make them men, the film suggests, young men like Mike will be killed. And too late will Emily Sanders learn the lesson of Joan Deerfield. Exploring the impact of cultural narratives on violence now has a long film history.<sup>9</sup> And not surprisingly, this history had a number of distinguished films added to it during the unpopular Iraq War. The best western of this period, *3:10 to Yuma* (2007), the best gangster film, *The Departed* (2006), as well

as the best war film, *In the Valley of Elah*, all take the destructive appeal of violence found in so much of our culture as their theme.

Using the story of David and Goliath, Haggis points out, has particular problems for America. One difficulty was inadvertently noted by Hank when he reminded Emily that this story is in the Koran. Everyone's problems are compounded if Jews, Christians, and Muslims have all been taught to see themselves as Davids and their enemies (that is, one another) as Goliaths, ungodly and beast like. But America faces a special problem. Is it really plausible for American soldiers to think of themselves as Davids. No doubt individual soldiers, vulnerable to the fire of a deadly enemy that seems everywhere in a counter- insurgency war, are quick to identify with David and find comfort in the moral righteousness that identification brings. But Haggis suspects that American soldiers and the American public must "very quickly realize that perhaps they are Goliath."<sup>10</sup> And so far as I know, there are no ideological or moral benefits to being Goliath.

*In the Valley of Elah* wants its audience to reconsider the idea that going to war can help turn boys into men, that learning to use violence is important to masculinity. It invites the audience to judge this coming-of-age narrative in light of the experiences of Mike Deerfield, a young man who learned these lessons from his father and who took them as guides to action. How else are myths sustained or modified or abandoned if not by the experiences of the people who act according to them? As William McNeill has written, "It is in directing and redirecting action that myth comes into play. Conversely, when actions undertaken in accordance with accepted ideas fail to achieve anything like the expected result, it is time to reconsider the guiding myth."<sup>11</sup> The young men who enlisted and fought with Mike in Iraq did not grow up into responsible adults. They learned to kill and some of them were killed. Here is the real advantage to Haggis of telling this story based on these actual events. It is the brutal death of Mike (Richard Davis) that gives the lie to any narrative that does not recognize the brutality of war.

### **Painful particulars**

The defenders of the war in Iraq had a vocabulary at their disposal that justified America's decision to invade that country. In brief, American armed forces, composed of "citizen soldiers" or "warriors," who are "heroes," invaded Iraq to bring about "regime change" or "democratization." This vocabulary can be found, among other places, on the videos and songs "Tribute to the American Warrior" by Kid Rock and "Citizen Soldier" by 3 Doors Down, both of which played at movie theaters as advertisements for the National Guard before main attractions during

the war. In another famous example, torture was renamed “harsh interrogation” by the Bush administration.

The use of euphemism to justify wars is not new. David Bromwich recently began an article on euphemism by citing Tacitus on Roman self-deception and then moved to the well-known essay by George Orwell, “The Politics of the English Language.”<sup>12</sup> To my mind one of the best discussions of euphemism is in Paul Fussell’s *The Great War and Modern Memory*, in which he analyzes how the “high diction” associated with the literature of the Arthur legends was used to describe the trench warfare of the first world war.<sup>13</sup>

Visual euphemism in the representation of war is also well known, even if it hasn’t received a treatment as definitive as Orwell’s. The photograph and monument depicting the invasion of Iwo Jima (reconsidered in Eastwood’s *The Flags of Our Fathers*, 2008) is a famous example. The controversy surrounding the Viet Nam Veterans War Memorial can be seen, I think, as stemming from the fact that it explicitly avoided euphemism. In the first Iraq War the grand visual illusion used to gather support from the American people was in the endless briefings showing laser-guided missiles hitting their targets, suggesting that war was now “surgical” and without consequence for innocent civilians. In the current Iraq war we have seen the pulling down of a statue of Saddam Hussein by Iraqi citizens, only later learning that the crowd was small and that they succeeded only because of the efforts of American troops, who were discreetly kept off camera.<sup>14</sup> The visual presentation of the heroic warrior, George Bush, stepping from the jet to the microphone on the aircraft carrier, dressed in full flight gear, also qualifies as does the decision to prohibit photographs of the flag covered coffins of dead soldiers as they are brought back from Iraq.

Whether literary or visual the purpose of euphemism is the same, to hide “the painful particulars of war” behind a façade of abstraction.<sup>15</sup> But this strategy provides the detractors of war with their strategy, to use language and pictures to depict “an image of things actually done or suffered.”<sup>16</sup> If euphemism’s goal is to dull the imagination and repress emotions so that reason sleeps, the anti-war artist has the power to make the consequences of war “present,” to use the language of Tim O’Brien, to engage the imagination, inflame emotions, and awaken reason.<sup>17</sup> To pick three classic examples, Goya’s prints in *The Disasters of War* (created in the 1810’s, published in 1863), Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937), and Remarque’s novel, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929, and the 1930 film) all deploy this strategy.

Seen this way, the story of David and Goliath as told to the young David Sanders by Hank Deerfield is part of the façade of war. Thinking back, Emily was right to

say to Hank that the story he had just told her son was not true. What about the reality of war is learned from Hank's story about smacking down monsters? More to the point would have been Nietzsche's aphorism, "Be careful when you fight with monsters, lest you become a monster," which would seem to better describe what happens to too many of the young men who go to Iraq, though certainly in spite of themselves.

Hank only comes to understand the consequences of the war, the painful particulars that euphemism tries to hide, because he can compare the young man he sent to the army with the young man who returned. The defining event in Mike's change in character was the killing of a young boy by the truck he was driving within a convoy, but contributing were the army's indifference to that death and his father's obvious reluctance to hear about it. Together, these events fit well into Jonathan Shay's analysis of PTSD in *Achilles in Vietnam*. The trauma begins with the betrayal of what's right, which conflicts with the soldier's unrealistic idealism about service to his country, and is exacerbated by the denial of the trauma by leaders. The result is the loss of moral character, that is, the ability to exercise restraint.<sup>18</sup> In Iraq Mike earned the nickname "Doc" because he would torture prisoners by pushing his hands deep in their wounds.

The reality of the military (according to Haggis) can be seen in the culture that it gives rise to in the environment of sex and violence that surrounds its bases. Mark Boal's story begins with a visit to the Platinum Club, Columbus, Georgia's "classiest" strip club. Haggis has Hank in and out of a number of strip clubs in his attempt to find out what happened to Mike. In one, Hank talks to a topless barmaid while a television behind him shows kickboxing. In another, Pussy's, Hank learns that Mike was ejected for shouting obscenities at the strippers. Across the street from the field where Mike was killed is a gun shop. Hank asks one of the soldiers in Mike's platoon if Mike was doing drugs. "No more than anyone," was the reply.

Once Mike returns to the States he seems to have lost all respect and restraint toward women. In a scene that was deleted from the version shown in theaters, but which is included on the DVD as a special feature, Hank talks to a young female soldier Mike dated before he and she left for the war. In her own tour of duty in Iraq she lost an arm and a leg. She tells Hank that she first met Mike in a bar when he "laid out" a guy who was "pawing" her. Mike took her home and didn't even try to kiss her, she tells Hank. When Mike returned from Iraq, he called her. She tells a deeply embarrassed Hank that when he first saw her he laughed, and then told her, "Not to worry, the parts he was interested in still worked."

The soldier who murdered Mike was similarly out of control. During the fight with Mike, he confessed, without emotion, "I looked down and saw that I was stabbing." One of the other soldiers came up with the idea of "chopping him up" and they would have buried the pieces, he said, but they were all hungry, so they went to the Chicken Shack for food. As harrowing as the account of the murder is, it is just as disturbing to listen to that account from an emotionally numb soldier, one who felt stronger about going to eat chicken than about stabbing a comrade.

By the end of the film the David and Goliath story, as an example of a narrative that suggests that war creates men, has been turned on its head. Instead of becoming a man through his military service, Mike killed a boy with his convoy and kept him from ever becoming a man. Instead of becoming a man, Mike became a torturer. Instead of becoming a man, he learned to abuse women and to abuse himself with alcohol and drugs. "You shouldn't send heroes to places like Iraq," Mike's roommate tells Hank, "everything is fucked up." This comment is particularly important considering that the creation of heroes is vital to the façade necessary to entice young men to serve, as can be seen in the eagerness of the army to find them or manufacture them. Consider, for example, the military reactions to the friendly fire death of Pat Tillman and the ambush of Jessica Lynch. Both *Flags or Our Fathers* (2006 and written by Paul Haggis) and *Hurt Locker* (2009 and written by Mark Boal) are exceptional films released during the Iraq War that reconsider the idea of heroism.

Two more (and currently popular) ways of seeing war also can serve as examples of euphemism, hiding more than enlightening, defending rather than criticizing. In the "Band of Brothers" view of war, combat seems uniquely capable of creating the close-knit family for which so many Americans clearly yearn. Soldiers become brothers, often under the leadership of a sergeant or lieutenant who has become a stern, but fair and caring father. As this representation of war narrows its focus to a small group of soldiers, the larger political justifications for the war, however inadequate, as well as the death and destruction visited upon friend and enemy are lost in the intensely satisfying creation of family values within the military unit. Mel Gibson's *We Were Soldiers* (2002) reconsiders the Viet Nam War from this perspective.<sup>19</sup> Obviously, Haggis's story about the murder of Mike by the rest of the members of his unit avoids this view of war (as does DiPalma's *Redacted*).

The visual power of cinema creates a unique problem for the realistic antiwar film, for the presentation of combat can be taken by the audience as a thrilling and alluring spectacle. Even films that contain antiwar sentiments can find their message is lost as audiences find the excitement and cinematic beauty of war

emotionally satisfying. Whatever Coppola's anti-war views were, his scene in *Apocalypse Now* when the helicopters playing Wagner swept across the sky dropping napalm and creating very cinematic fires in the background was so spectacular that it risked losing his critical message.<sup>20</sup> Haggis brilliantly avoids producing an alluring spectacle of combat through his use of the broken cell phone pictures to show Mike's experiences.

### **The audience recognizes itself**

The war in Iraq was not imposed on the American people, their representatives voted for it. Focusing on the stories of our culture, such as David and Goliath, that link manliness and war helps to explain why Americans were so ready to see enemies as monsters and to send their young men to kill them. But great political film making can do more than help its audience to understand the political landscape differently, it can get under its audiences' skin and force it to feel its own mistakes and change its self understanding. It can do this by presenting the audience with a character it first identifies with and then is horrified by. Haggis certainly knew that casting Tommie Lee Jones as Hank Deerfield, a concerned father investigating the fate of his son, would guarantee audience identification. This identification increases the impact that results as the audience realizes that Hank, a proud American everyman like themselves, bears some of the responsibility for Mike's death. Haggis has mentioned that he strove for the "tone and feel" of *The Searchers* (1956) and that he thought of Tommy Lee Jones as a "classic American hero" like John Wayne.<sup>21</sup> Just as John Ford used Wayne's star power in *The Searchers* to implicate the audience in racism, Haggis uses Jones to implicate the audience in this unjust war.

Our initial unmixed admiration for Hank Deerfield is shaken by the accusations of his wife, and later in the film by the influence that we can see he has on Emily's David. Even uglier is what we see in his pursuit of Pvt. Robert Ortiz. Both the military bureaucracy and then the soldiers who killed Mike suggest that Mike may have been involved with Mexican drug dealers and that the dealers may have killed him. Everyone's attention focuses on Pvt. Ortiz, a Mexican American in Mike's unit, who has also gone AWOL. When Hank catches up with Ortiz, he flies into a rage and beats him with a metal nightstick until he is pulled off by police. So out of control was Hank that he bloodied Emily's nose as she tried to stop him. And throughout his attack on Ortiz, he used ethnic slurs, calling him, for example, "a wet back prick." But Ortiz turns out to be innocent and as he is being taken out of the police station, he turns to Hank and asks, "What if the devil looked just like you?"

Slowly, Hank (and the audience through its identification with him) realizes that his instinctive patriotism was an inappropriate reaction to the war in Iraq and that the love of the military and its values which he passed on to Mike contributed to his death. As he comes to understand this, he is haunted by a telephone call from Mike when he was in Iraq. Throughout the film Hank tries to understand the broken video he finds on Mike's cell phone. Ortiz explains what happened on the video in a conversation with Hank after Hank has apologized for his actions. As Mike was driving a Humvee in a convoy and under orders to continue under any circumstances, he was forced to hit and kill an Iraqi boy. It was after that that Mike called home crying and asked his father to get him out of Iraq. Hank's response, masculine and patriotic to the core, was to worry that fellow soldiers might see Mike crying. "For Christ's sake, is anybody there with you," he asked Mike. Feeling the shame that Hank comes to feel at not taking Mike's pleas seriously, the audience must question its own response to leaving the troops in Iraq.

### **An invitation to reflect**

*In the Valley of Elah* brings to our attention the real costs of war, the costs the façade of euphemism is meant to hide. We often hear of the number of American soldiers who have been killed, 4370, and wounded, 31582, through the end of 2009<sup>23</sup>, though less often of the dollar cost of the war, between one and three trillion dollars.<sup>23</sup> Privatizing the war through contractors seems to have hidden the number of them who have been killed, but that is another 1292 killed and 9610 wounded through April 2008.<sup>24</sup> But rarely do we hear of the number of Iraqis killed, which is somewhere between 100,000 and 1,300,000<sup>25</sup> or the number that were forced to leave their home (approximately 2.6 million) or flee to another country (approximately 2 million).<sup>26</sup>

Of course, the specific concern of this film is the psychological damage done to returning veterans. When we first encounter Detective Emily Sanders she is interviewing a woman whose husband, a returning veteran from Iraq, has drowned their dog in the bathtub. She pleads for help for her husband, but is rebuffed. Later we accompany Emily as she responds to a police call from this woman's house and finds that her husband had drowned her just as he had drowned the dog. According to a Rand Corporation study, 17% of active duty soldiers and 25% of reservists showed signs of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder after returning from Iraq.<sup>27</sup> And in another study, the *New York Times* "found 121 cases in which veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan committed a killing in this country, or were charged with one, after their return from war...Three quarters of these veterans were still in the

military at the time of the killing. More than half of the killings involved guns, and the rest were stabbings, beatings, strangulations, and bathtub drowning...the overwhelming majority of these young men had no criminal history."<sup>28</sup> In 2008, 128 soldiers who had served in Iraq and Afghanistan committed suicide. In January 2009 the army lost more soldiers to suicide (24) than to Al Qaida.<sup>29</sup> The situations dramatized and the images presented *In the Valley of Elah* - the death of civilians, the torturing of prisoners, violence on the home front and the destruction of a young man's character - cannot be dismissed as aberrations.

Well-done political films, then, contain narratives and images that engage and educate the emotions of the audience. But this very visceral art form need not denigrate reason, for the images from film can be "an invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn."<sup>30</sup> Watching PTSD destroy lives in this film, how can we avoid asking how many soldiers develop this condition? How many commit acts of violence under its influence? How many kill themselves? Seeing images of cities destroyed we must ask about the consequences of the war for Iraqis. How many of them have been killed? Watching torture we wonder how widespread its use is. In short, though the impact of film acts first upon our emotions, it is those emotions that will motivate at least some in the audience to investigate the situations depicted. Though films that try to appeal primarily to reason and are merely didactic often fall flat, political films, like *In the Valley of Elah*, that are deeply emotional, can lead to viewers becoming informed as they try to make sense of the images and emotions the film produced.

### **Political action**

*In the Valley of Elah* is not a combat film, though some sense of what combat must be like in a counter-insurgency war is conveyed through the video on Mike's phone. It is better understood as a returning veteran film, a genre popular after WWII and the Vietnam War. The best example of this genre after WWII is *The Best Years of Lives* (1946), though it also includes *The Men* (1950), *Pride of the Marines* (1945) and others. These films honored the injured servicemen who returned from war and in so doing honored the war in which they fought. The successful readjustment of the returning vets vindicated the sacrifices they had made. By the end of each of these three films, the veterans have readjusted to civilian life because of the patience, understanding, and love of a wife or girl friend. It was the civilians who profited from the war and women who were unfaithful who were criticized.

After Vietnam, according to Gilbert Adair, the returning veteran became a recurring character in American films, giving filmmakers and audiences the

chance to continue to fight about the justice of American involvement.<sup>31</sup> In many of these films, perhaps *Taxi Driver* (1976) is the best example, the injustice and brutality of the Vietnam War was imprinted on the returning vets who had been psychologically damaged by their participation in the War. In the same way, Haggis's film uses the damage done to Mike and his fellow returning vets to indict the Iraq War.

Adair calls *Coming Home* (1978) "the returning vet movie" of its period, so it is worth considering for just a moment, especially its ending.<sup>32</sup> While the injured vet (played by Jon Voight) is again saved by the love of a good woman (played by Jane Fonda), more importantly, they find one another as they find themselves through their participation in the counter culture and active opposition to the war. In the film's most political moment, the injured vet chains himself to a fence to keep young men from being able to enter the marine enlistment center. And the film ends with Voight talking to a class of high school students and warning them not to be taken in by the handsome uniform of the recruiter or by the movies they might have seen about warfare. "It ain't like it is in the movies," he tells the students. But the most emotional moment in this scene is when he admits to the students that "he did stuff over there I find it hard to live with." Political action against the war was required, then, not just to keep more young men from going to Vietnam and returning, as Jon Voight's character did, without his legs. It was also required because America bore some responsibility for the suffering it had caused the Vietnamese. Though these models of resistance to the war were hardly calls to action, since this film appeared three years after the war was over, it is important that *Coming Home* ended with a validation of political activity.

*In the Valley of Elah* has been most heavily criticized for its ending. Hank returns to the school where he had at the start of the film helped a janitor raise the American flag, but this time to lower the flag and raise it again, upside down, in the international distress signal. Flags play a prominent visual role in this film, so it is understandable that Haggis would end the film with what he hoped would be a powerful visual symbol of America's sad state (like the rat in the last scene of Scorsese's *The Departed*). The upside down flag also provides a dramatic contrast to two John Ford films - the last scene in *Drums Along the Mohawk* (1939) and the church raising scene in *My Darling Clementine* (1946) - where the symbolism of the flag expressed America's promise. For many critics, however, Haggis' symbolism was just too obvious, too preachy.

But I want to make another criticism that relates more directly to the nature of political film. The problem with the ending, as I see it, was not that it preached, but

that it didn't preach anything political. That is, the end of the film only reinforces its pervasive sense of despair. The audience may leave the theater appalled at their country's actions in Iraq, but so overwhelming is the bleak landscape of violent and pornographic America that only resignation is possible. In ending this way, *In the Valley of Elah* is no different from the other anti-Iraq-war movies of 2007. *Redacted*, *Lions for Lambs*, and *Rendition* all end with individuals in private settings expressing personal grief. *Redacted* ends in a bar with an ex-soldier crying in the arms of his fiancé as he recounts to her and his friends the rape and murder perpetrated by his unit in Iraq. In the final scene of *Rendition* the husband who had been abducted and tortured embraces his wife and son on the lawn of their suburban home. The last shot in *Lions for Lambs* is of a weeping journalist, alone in the back seat of a taxi, looking out of the window as it drives past the graves of U.S. servicemen. Hank's lonely and symbolic act of flying the flag upside down, even if courageous and more public than crying in a taxi, shares with these other films "the failure to provide a redemptive and compensatory vision that would replace military representations as a source of self esteem."<sup>33</sup> Yet it is surely this redemptive vision that could be the most powerful strategy of all for a director hoping to use his art for political purposes. All of these films, at the moment it matters most, refuse to be actually political, that is, they do not model the kind of involvement with others that politics requires. Their protagonists don't march or demonstrate or disobey or campaign or even talk to anyone outside their family or friends about the war. They weep for their country alone or with their families, as if the war in Iraq were a tragedy, a natural disaster beyond human control.

Locating the cause of the war in a culture and its long-told stories, as Haggis did, especially runs the risk of absolving everyone of responsibility and teaching resignation. His film, even more than the others, needed to give the audience a model for political activity, images of people who are no longer under the sway of the myths that maintain violent manliness. He needed, that is, to move beyond realism, to embrace his art and to take part in the creation of another public myth, one that could serve as a counter to David and Goliath and other stories that teach young men to "smack down" their enemies. As political art, then, *In the Valley of Elah* fails in this respect: it wallows in personal grief, instead of modeling and validating the kinds of political actions that empower citizens to hold people in power responsible.

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#### Notes

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**THOMAS A. HORNE** is a Professor of Political Science at The University of Tulsa where he teaches political philosophy and film. He has published books and articles on 18<sup>th</sup> century political thought, but more recently has begun to write on the political narratives found in American films released in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.