

When is an ‘antiwar film’ not an antiwar film?

By Joanne Laurier
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Jarhead, directed by Sam Mendes, screenplay by William Broyles Jr., based on the book, *Jarhead: A Marine's Chronicle of the Gulf War and Other Battles* by Anthony Swofford

In light of the disastrous consequences of the American invasion and ongoing occupation of Iraq, a truthful film about the Persian Gulf War of 1990-1991 could have a real value. Presenting the first war in an honest way would help disabuse the population about the current one.

In launching the Persian Gulf War, the administration of George H.W. Bush carried out the largest military mobilization since World War II, labeling it the start of a New World Order. Involving all the great powers and numerous minor ones, the war marked the beginning of a drive to recolonize the oppressed countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America.

The US provoked the 1990-91 war to seize a strategic position in the oil-rich Persian Gulf. Its blitzkrieg against Iraqi forces was a crime of historic proportions. The ground war, an entirely one-sided affair, was the bloodiest four days witnessed since 1945 when the US incinerated hundreds of thousands of Japanese in the atomic bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima.

The world now knows that the earlier war was simply the first chapter in a far larger tragedy, which continues to play out in the streets and villages of Iraq. What then is one to make of a film about the 1990-91 conflict described by its creator as “non-judgmental”—neither for nor against the war?

British director Sam Mendes describes *Jarhead* as the third in his trilogy of American films. An ambitious undertaking, but the results have been weak. *American Beauty* was a pretentious and failed attempt to critique suburban America; *Road to Perdition*, an ersatz gangster movie; and now *Jarhead*, the director's essentially dishonest presentation of the seduction of destruction.

Deriving its title from a slang term for a US marine, *Jarhead* is based on the memoirs of Anthony Swofford, who at age 20 was a lance corporal in a US Marine Corps scout/sniper platoon during the Persian Gulf War.

Actor Jake Gyllenhaal plays Swofford, the son of a gung-ho Vietnam vet, who enlists in the Marines, undergoes a brutalizing basic training and is sent, along with his fellow “jarheads,” to Kuwait. Months of anxious waiting in the desert for combat prompt one of the soldiers to ask, “Are we ever going to get to kill anyone?”

The characters, for the most part, are unsympathetic. The more-sensitive Swofford (who reads Camus' *The Stranger* on the toilet) is effectively integrated into a band of psychopaths who perform hazing rituals, such as hot-poker branding; beat each other half to death; and get geeked up for battle with every manner of

twisted behavior. The group is disciplined by military lifer Staff Sgt. Sykes (Jamie Foxx), who refers to the Iraqi dictator as “Saddam Insane.”

The film's preoccupation with the platoon's “war-is-hell-but-what-a-hell” conduct is monotonous. The scenes of obscenity-laden banter are simply tedious, when they are not distasteful, particularly the gratuitous sequences involving Swofford's girl-friend back home. The shouting and carrying on cannot disguise the essential emptiness and superficiality of the filmmaker's approach. *Jarhead* lacks both drama and purpose.

This is a work that wants to have its cake and eat it too. A few references to oil and profits are intended to satisfy the war's critics, so too the few tears shed over dead Iraqis. The brutalizing impact of the marines' training comes in for a few easy shots. The “patriotic” spectator, on the other hand, may revel in the display of American firepower, machismo and its triumph in the desert war. Who knows, who cares? Mendes clearly does not terribly.

Swofford's book, a 2003 *New York Times* bestseller, was hailed by that newspaper's critic as a “searing contribution to the literature of combat...an irreverent but meditative voice that captures the juiced-up machismo of jarhead culture and the existential loneliness of combat.” One does not have to get far into the book to develop a disdain for its literary champions—not to mention those who would choose to render it cinematically, at least in an uncritical fashion.

One passage in the book conveys its general approach, as well as that of the film. Swofford relates an incident, also depicted in the film, in which reporters from the *New York Times* and the *Boston Globe* interview members of the squad in Kuwait. Prepped in advance by their officers, the soldiers repeat patriotic clichés: “This is about freedom, not about oil. This is about standing up to aggression, like the president says,” and “I think this mission is valid and we have all the right in the world to be here and the president has all the right to deploy us and we are well trained and prepared to fight any menace in the world.”

Swofford writes: “He [the reporter] wants to look at the psyche of the frontline infantryman, and I can only offer him processed responses.... I wish to speak to him honestly and say: I am a grunt, dressed up in fancy scout/sniper clothes; I am a grunt with limited vision. I don't care about a New World Order. I don't care about human rights violations in Kuwait City. Amnesty International, my ass. Rape them all, kill them all, sell their oil, pillage their gold, sell their children into prostitution. I don't care about the Flag and God and Country and Corps. I don't give a fuck about oil and revenue and million barrels per day and US jobs.”

Left as is, and that is the book's (and film's) modus operandi, this

“hard-hitting” talk is simply an apology for ignorance and backwardness. Swofford’s responsibility, and Mendes’s, is to make something of the experience, to bring out its truth, not simply to record its surface or the unthinking impressions of a 20-year-old youth with no conception of the war’s significance. What use is that?

Antiwar sentiments and imagery occasionally surface. For example, in a scene in which the marines come upon a convoy of Iraqi vehicles burned to a crisp by American bombs. Charred military and civilian corpses form a nightmarish tableau that has little effect on anyone except Swofford, who moves out of sight of his companions in order to vomit. The scene is repeated in the film.

Even here Mendes’s *Jarhead* is cautious and keeps its distance from the horror, refraining from creating sympathy for the victims of the US attack. What kind of an antiwar film is afraid to present the horrors of war, particularly those committed by its “own” side? The book, however, is less evasive in recounting Swofford’s essentially indifferent reaction to the incident: “The dead men have been incapable of killing for days or weeks or at least hours and so I would not have shot them.” But as soon as he sees live Iraqi soldiers in the process of surrendering, he says: “I wish to turn upon them my years of training and suffering, and I want to perform some of the despicable acts I’ve learned over the prior few years, such as trigger-killing them from one thousand yards distant, or gouging their hearts with a sharp bayonet.”

Certain films, such as the remarkable *Apocalypse Now*, have not shied away from portraying the horrors of imperialist-perpetrated wars and the resultant disorientation of their combatants, but from an ardently antiwar stance. The warped state of mind of the soldiers in *Jarhead* is even understandable. But in assuming a so-called “neutral” stance, the film ends up excusing the atrocious behavior.

It also argues that the consciousness of the soldiers is uniform. This springs from its abstract notion of the Universal Warrior—a killing machine uninterested in the nature of the war in which he fights and deserving of praise for his service.

The filmmaker confirms his adherence to this view in an online interview with *Cinema Confidential*: “[*Jarhead*] can be considered an antiwar film, but it depends on the eye of the beholder. I’d like to see it as a great hymn to the resilience and bravery of the marines, in the face of nothingness. That’s the irony of these things, because there is no perfect antiwar movie.”

One method might improve the odds: by actually intending to make one! Instead, Mendes settles for a mixture of cynicism and opportunism. At the war’s end, the marines throw their desert attire into a bonfire, shouting, “We never have to come back to the shithole again.” This is offset, however, by the preceding scene in which Troy (Sarsgaard) goes ballistic over an order to *refrain* from making a kill as a sniper. In fact, Swofford and Troy at first seem upset that the war is over and that they have been unable to commit some acts of carnage. All this goes uncriticized.

Mendes continues: “The very things that bleeding heart liberals, like you or I, consider to be antiwar, someone else would look at it as pro-war. Or the glorification of war. And that’s one of the points of Swofford’s book, the paradoxes.”

The “paradoxes” in the Swofford chronicles are not as paradoxical as the filmmaker claims. The book is peppered with brutal musings, such as “We gleefully run through the enemy positions, noting the hundreds of different ways a man might die when five-hundred-pound bombs are dropped on his weakly fortified position or when his tank or troop carrier is blown nearly inside out.”

Swofford ends his book quite unambiguously: “Sometimes you wish you’d killed an Iraqi soldier. Or many Iraqi soldiers, in a series of fierce firefights while on patrol, with dozens of well-placed shots from your M40A1, through countless calls for fire. During the darkest nights you’d even offer your life to go back in time, back to the Desert for the chance to kill. You consider yourself less of a marine and even less of a man for not having killed while in combat.”

The author is also not ambiguous in his pro-war belief. He is quoted in the movie’s production notes praising the marine grunt for ultimately “doing good work for the rest of us.”

Today, Swofford has parlayed his war experiences into a career as a writer and college educator. Another veteran of the Gulf war, obsessed with killing and mutilating the enemy and whose fascistic views were nurtured in the same environment, Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bomber, returned from the war a disillusioned walking time-bomb.

Swofford concludes, more or less, on this note: “[B]ut because I signed the contract and fulfilled my obligation to fight one of America’s wars, I am entitled to speak, to say, *I belonged to a fucked situation*. I am entitled to despair over the likelihood of further atrocities. Indolence and cowardice do not drive me—despair drives me.... In crowded rooms and walking the streets of our cities, I am alone and full of despair, and while sitting and writing, I am alone and full of despair—the same despair that impelled me to write this book, a quiet scream from within a buried coffin. Dead, dead, my scream.”

The book’s sentiments are no doubt genuine, as is the despair. And in that, it compares favorably with the film, which seems largely contrived and strained, thanks to Mendes. One doesn’t believe in much of anything in the film.

Swofford’s work, however, remains extremely limited, and open to truly deplorable interpretation, because he has failed to make any serious assessment, after more than a decade, of the Gulf war, its objective origins and consequences. Impressions, vividly presented or not, are inadequate, when dealing with enormous historical events. Only in the context of such an understanding could he grasp the extent to which he and his fellow marines were also victims. Both film and book fail to perceive that the deep demoralization of the US forces flows ultimately from their soul-destroying assignment to conquer the world on behalf of a bankrupt imperialism.

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