

Netflix drama strikes a nerve ...

A spook comes out of the woodwork to attack Brad Pitt's *War Machine*

By David Walsh
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Does art have social consequences? Does it matter which attitude filmmakers or novelists, for example, adopt toward the big events of the day?

Here's a case that may help settle the argument or at least provides strong circumstantial evidence.

Three weeks ago we reviewed *War Machine*, the Netflix satire about Gen. Stanley McChrystal and the bloody, neo-colonial American war effort in Afghanistan.

We noted its unusually biting character. This is not a film that makes obeisance to the greatness of the US military. It presents the war in Afghanistan as "a debacle, presided over by lunatics and egomaniacs," the WSWWS review noted.

Written and directed by Australian David Michôd, and based on the 2012 non-fiction book, *The Operators: The Wild and Terrifying Inside Story of America's War in Afghanistan*, by the late American journalist Michael Hastings, *War Machine* sarcastically hails the US in its opening moments, "Ah, America. You beacon of composure and proportionate response. You bringer of calm and goodness to the world."

The WSWWS noted that for once a film reflected some of the widespread hostility toward a quarter century of brutal war and toward the politicians and generals who have conducted it.

It was only fitting that a spokesperson for those war criminals would respond.

Whitney Kassel, late of the Defense Department, Special Operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan, a former member of McChrystal's "team," and an associate in private business of a long-time leading figure in the CIA, has written a denunciation of *War Machine* in *Foreign Policy* magazine, "Screw Brad Pitt and the 'War Machine' he rode in on."

The unusually frank language of the headline presumably provides some sense of Kassel's disapproval. Indeed, she acknowledges that her initial "eye-rolling quickly gave way to expletives."

The character of Kassel's objectivity in regard to Gen. McChrystal makes itself evident early on when she notes that Hastings (whose *Rolling Stone* article, later expanded into the book on which *War Machine* is based, essentially ended the general's career) "took down a man I worked with during the time in question and deeply respected—one near-universally viewed as an American hero of integrity and intelligence."

McChrystal was a ruthless practitioner of counterinsurgency warfare, responsible for the killing of thousands of Iraqis. His entourage in Afghanistan, according to Hastings, was "a handpicked collection of killers, spies, geniuses, patriots, political operators and outright maniacs." A staffer neatly describes in Hastings's book the now infamous Gen. Michael Flynn, one of McChrystal's toadies, as a "rat on acid."

Kassel presents the 16-year US-led intervention in Afghanistan as "a

war effort that, while certainly replete with absurdities and mistakes, was and continues to be fought by men and women who are dedicated to improving the security of the United States and its allies by helping to build an Afghanistan that will not provide safe haven for al Qaeda or, more recently, the Islamic State."

This is a pack of lies. The US is not in Afghanistan to protect American lives, but to advance its interests in a geopolitically strategic area. The war has led to nothing but death, destruction and misery on a vast scale.

Kassel is particularly concerned that *War Machine* casts doubt on the legitimacy of the entire "war on terror," the code phrase with which American imperialism has justified its drive for global hegemony since 2001.

She goes on: "Likewise—and this is the part that matters today—the portrayal of the U.S. and NATO's very presence in the country since 2001 as rooted in fantasy and an inflated sense of American prowess is disingenuous and dangerous in its mischaracterization of a war that remains, particularly in the face of escalating violence and instability, an important part of reducing global terrorism."

Kassel seems unaware that this last sentence contains an obvious contradiction. The longest war in US history has ostensibly been carried out in the name of "reducing global terrorism," yet there is "escalating violence and instability."

War Machine is not a primer in anti-imperialist politics, but it does make clear that the war in Afghanistan is a doomed project. The film's narrator asks in the opening moments, "What do you do when the war you're fighting just can't possibly be won in any meaningful sense?"

The narrator further explains that the US military's "counterinsurgency" strategy runs up against basic political realities: "When ... you've just gone and invaded a place that you probably shouldn't have, you end up fighting against just regular people in regular-people clothes. These guys are what are called insurgents. Basically, they're just guys who picked up weapons 'cause ... so would you, if someone invaded your country. Funnily enough ... insurgencies are next to impossible to defeat."

But Kassel inhabits a different political and moral universe. Her writing has the ghastly quality of the "democratic" military bureaucrat or intelligence agent, the muffled, perpetually disingenuous tone of the individual who plots bombings and murders and mass repression, but refers to such activities as "strategic options" and "the tools available for trying to turn around what was considered an urgent national security priority," and half-believes her own obscurantism.

She presents a glowing picture of the same crowd among whom Hastings placed "killers ... and outright maniacs." Kassel writes: "I found McChrystal and his team to be respectful, thoughtful ... McChrystal spent endless hours with the members of the assessment team [which included

Kassel—very few of whom had direct military experience—exploring strategic options available to the United States and NATO.”

Toward the end of her tirade, Kassel once again expresses anxiety about the impact of *War Machine* and points to “a particular hazard,” that the film will reinforce “a view of the war in Afghanistan as this generation’s Vietnam, led by men ... who care only about protecting their own egos and reputations, with no sense of the sacrifices inherent in war and no strategic vision or logic behind their decisions.”

She expresses nervousness about the “reworking” of the US approach to Afghanistan that Trump administration officials may be considering and asserts that “it is critical that they, and the American public to whom they report, understand how we got here, and the reasons why some elements of a counterinsurgency strategy may remain valid moving forward.”

Kassel, according to the Huffington Post, for whom she writes occasionally, “spent four years at the Office of the Secretary of Defense where she focused on Special Operations, Counterterrorism, and Pakistan policy. During this time she spent a year in Pakistan working for the Office of the Defense Representative and Special Operations Command Forward. She also served as the representative of the Secretary of Defense to General Stanley McChrystal’s Strategic Assessment Team in Afghanistan in 2009.”

This is someone up to her neck in imperialist violence and intrigue. At one point, Kassel served “as Assistant for Counterterrorism Policy in the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations, Low Intensity Conflict, and Interdependent Capabilities (ASD SO/LIC&IC) within the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy (OSD-Policy).”

Kassel, a Democratic Party supporter apparently, often tweets about women’s rights and racism—and Russian aggression! Of course, how could it be otherwise?

A special mention must be made of her association with the Arkin Group, the private intelligence firm, where she “served as a senior director focused on strategic analysis and risk management.”

A founding partner of the Arkin Group is Jack Devine, according to the company’s website, “a 32-year veteran of the Central Intelligence Agency (‘CIA’). Mr. Devine served as both Acting Director and Associate Director of CIA’s operations outside the United States from 1993-1995, where he had supervisory authority over thousands of CIA employees involved in sensitive missions throughout the world. In addition, he served as Chief of the Latin American Division from 1992-1993 and was the principal manager of the CIA’s sensitive projects in Latin America.”

In fact, Devine’s first foreign assignment was in Chile, where he arrived in August 1970. Even before being physically assigned there, he writes, “I had worked the night shift for the Chile Task Force in Langley, synthesizing cables from Santiago into a morning intelligence report for the bosses.” Devine was present in Santiago in September 1973 when the Nixon administration and the CIA organized a coup, along with the Chilean military, that brought the brutal Pinochet dictatorship to power, which tortured and murdered tens of thousands of political opponents, trade unionists and young people.

The Arkin website also notes, “From 1985-1987, Mr. Devine headed the CIA’s Afghan Task Force, which successfully countered Soviet aggression in the region. In 1987, he was awarded the CIA’s Meritorious Officer Award for this accomplishment.”

In other words, Devine is one of the figures criminally responsible for arming and fomenting Islamic fundamentalism in Afghanistan as part of the effort to undermine the Soviet Union. In his own words, in his autobiography, *Good Hunting: An American Spymaster’s Story*, Devine moved “guns and ammunition across the border into Afghanistan,” aiding “the Afghan mujahideen and their determined opposition to the Soviet Union’s occupation of their country in the 1980s. I ran the last, and

the largest, cover operation of the Cold War.” The career of Osama bin Laden, Al Qaeda, the 9/11 terrorist attacks and ISIS itself all emerge, directly or indirectly, from this operation.

Devine and Kassel have co-authored numerous articles, including “Afghanistan: Withdrawal Lessons,” in the *World Policy Journal*, 2013. This cynical morsel of *realpolitik* offered advice to the Obama administration on the best policy to pursue “in protecting U.S. interests” in the region. “Robust covert action” remained high on the list. Should the Pakistani government, for example, turn down US aid, “we should respond with appropriate covert action. This would include paramilitary activities as well as psychological operations, propaganda, and political and economic influence.”

Devine also acknowledges Kassel’s assistance in the preparation of his autobiography.

Devine and Kassel continued to do at Arkin what they did at the CIA and the Defense Department, respectively, defend the interests of American corporate and financial interests.

The Arkin website, in its “Case Studies” section, offers the example of the work it did for an investor, “concerned about instability and uncertain about prospects for South African agriculture.” The firm “initiated a political risk analysis and market intelligence project, and also completed an investigation of political, legal, and regulatory events that could impact foreign investors, agriculture operations, and the industry of interest.” Arkin “uncovered no evidence indicating that South Africa’s leaders would reverse foreign investment-friendly policies.”

In Vietnam, Arkin assessed “the future of pro-privatization initiatives” and also laid out “incentives and road blocks associated with privatization and elucidated the process by which entities become eligible for consideration.”

This background has provided Ms. Kassel with the moral and intellectual high ground from which to criticize the anti-war satire, *War Machine*, which lifts the lid on the lethal madness of the US military and dares to call into question American foreign policy.

It is entirely to the film’s credit that it has provoked an angry response from this trusted agent of American imperialism.

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