

Richard Linklater's *Last Flag Flying*: The great pressure on artists to pull their punches

By David Walsh
14 November 2017

Directed by Richard Linklater; written by Linklater and Darryl Ponicsan

Richard Linklater's new film, *Last Flag Flying*, concerns two Vietnam War veterans who help a third bury his son, killed in Iraq. The movie is set in December 2003. It touches on America's endless wars and their countless victims, but shies away from some of the more difficult and painful realities.

Sal Nealon (Bryan Cranston), a Marine veteran, runs a not very flourishing bar in Norfolk, Virginia. One day, Larry "Doc" Shepherd (Steve Carell), whom Nealon—as a Marine—once helped to transport to the brig, shows up after more than 30 years. They, in turn, pay a visit to a black Baptist church, where Richard Mueller (Laurence Fishburne), who was Nealon's partner in delivering Shepherd to the military jail, is now a preacher.

Shepherd has come to ask the other two for a big favor: to join him as he accompanies the coffin of his son, Larry Shepherd Jr., on its route to Arlington National Cemetery, the military cemetery near Washington, D.C. They agree (Mueller with hesitations) and first make their way to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware, where the body arrives. The young man, a Marine colonel (Yul Vazquez) assures them, died a hero's death in a firefight in Baghdad.

One of Larry Junior's friends and fellow Marines, Washington (J. Quinton Johnson), who was present at his death, sets the three men straight about the manner of his killing. Thereupon, Doc decides that because the government has lied to him, he no longer wants his son buried in Arlington, but rather at home where he lives in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. After a brief, mistaken detention by Homeland Security when they rent a van for somewhat unclear purposes and a rental company agent becomes nervous, the three men end up traveling with the coffin by train, with Washington along as the Marines' representative. Various adventures ensue in the course of the journey.

The film is based on a novel by American author Darryl Ponicsan (born 1938). He also wrote *The Last Detail* (1970), which was made into the 1973 film of the same title with Jack Nicholson and directed by Hal Ashby. In fact, Ponicsan's novel, *Last Flag Flying*, published in 2005, is a direct sequel of *The Last Detail*. The same three central characters in the latter novel/film—Billy "Badass" Buddusky (Nicholson in the film), Richard "Mule" Mulhall (Otis Young) and Larry Meadows (Randy Quaid)—appear 30 years later in the second book.

The film version of *Last Flag Flying* is less of a sequel. The characters' names have been changed, along with the branch of

the US Armed Forces to which they belonged (Navy to Marines). Additional plot elements have been added, including the trio's responsibility for the suffering in Vietnam of a fellow Marine, denied morphine in his death agony because Nealon, Mueller and Shepherd had taken all the drug themselves.

In any event, the attempt to link the Vietnam and Iraq wars is entirely legitimate. Various references are made to the American government's lies and propaganda that underpinned both interventions: from the "domino theory" and stopping the "commies" in Vietnam so "we don't have to stop them on the beaches" of America to "weapons of mass destruction."

Nealon is given several speeches in which he pours out his disdain for the military brass, warning the colonel at one point that if they had met at a previous time, "One of us would have been fraggged" and the "other would have gone to the brig."

When "Doc" intones sadly, "I don't like the government, I don't trust them," and asks why his son died, it carries a certain weight. And when the trio visits the aging mother (Cicely Tyson) of the Marine they wronged in Vietnam, without telling her all the details, and she too asks, "What was it all for?," that too is a moving, disturbing moment. Washington tells Nealon and company, speaking of Iraq, "They hate us over there," and the latter comments, "Sound familiar?" That is also pointed.

But the film (like Ponicsan's novel) sharply pulls its punches. Given the scale of the crimes involved, millions dead in Vietnam, millions more in the Middle East, the threat of even more horrifying wars... *Last Flag Flying* hardly begins to come to terms with things. It's not much more than a mild rebuke.

Too many elements undermine what could have been a much stronger, fiercer work.

What, for example, was the government's "lie" about Larry Shepherd Jr.'s death? Instead of having been killed in a "heroic" firefight, he was shot to death on the streets of Baghdad by a lone Islamist gunman, in the midst of an operation to deliver school supplies. American benevolence at work! Murdered by a treacherous religious fanatic who shot him from behind while he was buying "Cokes" from a local store.

And there is the Marines' homicidal response. This is what Washington says in the novel, which is reproduced more or less in the film: "I yelled and we just lit up that fuckin' place. We killed the raghead, we killed Abdul, we killed all his family and all his customers."

This indiscriminate massacre of Iraqi men, women and children,

justified on the basis of the attack on an occupying soldier, is passed over all too quickly in the novel and also in Linklater's film. It is treated as quasi-normal and even perhaps understandable behavior.

The point is, once again, a work is being presented as "anti-war" because it details the terrible things done to US servicemen or women. Virtually nothing about the destruction of Iraqi society, the daily atrocities (except, as noted, in passing) and vast crimes committed by the American military, its intelligence apparatus and its mercenary contractors.

It's impossible to discuss the final, dispiriting impact of *Last Flag Flying* without referring to its conformist denouement, so readers are forewarned. After having sworn that he would not bury his son in his uniform, Doc relents in both the book and film, under pressure from the military and his friends. This is how it works out in the novel (echoed in the movie):

"Pride is the thing," says Billy. "It's no sin," he says to Mule.

"No, of course not," Mule agrees. "Not that kind."

"I could bury him in his uniform, even if."

"You know, it sounds like he'd like that," says Billy. "Hell, I'd like that. It means you did something. You served. Fuck what the politicians and their own sons did, you served. You stood up and stepped forward. Maybe you were wrongly used, but that's not your fault. You were there. You were willing and able. You didn't weasel out of it. You didn't think it was somebody else's duty. You took it on, man, and you looked good doing it too. Why the fuck wouldn't you, you had pride."

This argument, that military service, honor and pride can be separated in this way from the purposes and consequences of that service is political sophistry at its worst. Troops of every sort and description "serve," even bravely and heroically in certain cases, but what are they "serving"? The individual American soldier or Marine, often an economic conscript, is not responsible for the crimes of his or her government, but he or she is not "serving the country." Objectively, he or she is defending the interests of Wall Street, the banks, the oil companies, the defense contractors and the entire American plutocracy, the America of the ultra-rich, the America that despises and oppresses the working class and the poor at home as much as it does the masses of Iraqis and Afghans.

As we noted recently on the WSWS, "public sympathy for soldiers who have lost their lives" is being used "to disguise the criminal purposes for which they have been deployed."

Some artist or filmmaker is going to have to tell the truth: that the US military is the principal source of violence, terror and destruction on the planet, that its units often operating like death squads are inflicting suffering and death on peoples in countless countries, that no force has been responsible for such widescale horror since Hitler's armies in World War II. Telling the American people comforting lies about "pride" and "service" is absolutely no help.

One has to acknowledge, unhappily, that Ashby's *The Last Detail* had a stronger anti-military air and flavor to it. By implication and by the feelings it generated at least, the clash between the hardnosed, plebeian Buddusky (during Nicholson's most biting and radical period) and the Navy command was a social conflict, essentially a class conflict. Buddusky and Mulhall

were hirelings sent to do the filthy work that the powers that be subcontracted to them, and they hated it and to a certain extent hated themselves for doing it. That coldness and bitterness, that self-recrimination, despite the work's amusing moments, largely filled the screen. (*The Last Detail* was not, as one observer has noted, a film that would make you want to enlist.)

In the new film, unhappily, the near opposite is the case. The more insightful lines and sequences are the exception. There is far too much geniality, nostalgia, amiability (including in the sequence involving Homeland Security, which is treated in far too jocular a manner).

If the *Hollywood Reporter* can put its finger on some of the problems, then something must be seriously awry. Its review refers to the film's "mawkish consideration of sacrifice and regret" and the fact that the "consolatory closing scenes try to have it both ways by reinforcing the characters' belief in the value of service to their country, even if they question the lack of transparency in the government mandates behind it."

And further: "Linklater and Ponicsan deserve recognition for attempting to draw a throughline from Vietnam to Iraq, considering the honor of American military service while questioning its purpose and its losses. But *Last Flag Flying* is a disappointingly toothless statement, notable chiefly as a pallid reminder of a far more trenchant movie from more than 40 years ago."

Of course, the *Hollywood Reporter* cannot identify the source of the weakness, the immense contemporary presence, weight and pressure of the American military, which is increasingly running the government, the media and establishment policy as a whole. To oppose that consciously and resolutely, to suggest that the US military is not, in the end, an "honorable" and "patriotic" institution, but a sinister and murderous one, will bring down upon the filmmaker denunciations and threaten his or her career, perhaps his or her life. But this is what must be done, for the sake of the American population and the sake of humanity.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>