

“American Sniper”: Killing Ragheads for Jesus

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“American Sniper” lionizes the most despicable aspects of U.S. society—the gun culture, the blind adoration of the military, the belief that we have an innate right as a “Christian” nation to exterminate the “lesser breeds” of the earth, a grotesque hypermasculinity that banishes compassion and pity, a denial of inconvenient facts and historical truth, and a belittling of critical thinking and artistic expression. Many Americans, especially white Americans trapped in a stagnant economy and a dysfunctional political system, yearn for the supposed moral renewal and rigid, militarized control the movie venerates. These passions, if realized, will extinguish what is left of our now-anemic open society.

The movie opens with a father and his young son hunting a deer. The boy shoots the animal, drops his rifle and runs to see his kill.

“Get back here,” his father yells. “You don’t ever leave your rifle in the dirt.”

“Yes, sir,” the boy answers.

“That was a helluva shot, son,” the father says. “You got a gift. You gonna make a fine hunter some day.”

The camera cuts to a church interior where a congregation of white Christians—blacks appear in this film as often as in a Woody Allen movie—are listening to a sermon about God’s plan for American Christians. The film’s title character, based on Chris Kyle, who would become the most lethal sniper in U.S. military history, will, it appears from the sermon, be called upon by God to use his “gift” to kill evildoers. The scene shifts to the Kyle family dining room table as the father intones in a Texas twang: “There are three types of people in this world: sheep, wolves and sheepdogs. Some people prefer to believe evil doesn’t exist in the world. And if it ever darkened their doorstep they wouldn’t know how to protect themselves. Those are the sheep. And then you got predators.”

The camera cuts to a schoolyard bully beating a smaller boy.

“They use violence to prey on people,” the father goes on. “They’re the wolves. Then there are those blessed with the gift of aggression and an overpowering need to protect the flock. They are a rare breed who live to confront the wolf. They are the sheepdog. We’re not raising any sheep in this family.”

The father lashes his belt against the dining room table.

“I will whup your ass if you turn into a wolf,” he says to his two sons. “We protect our own. If someone tries to fight you, tries to bully your little brother, you have my permission to finish it.”

There is no shortage of simpletons whose minds are warped by this belief system. We elected one of them, George W. Bush, as president. They populate the armed forces and the Christian right. They watch Fox News and believe it. They have little understanding or curiosity about the world outside their insular communities. They are proud of their ignorance and anti-intellectualism. They prefer drinking beer and watching football to reading a book. And when they get into power—they already control the Congress, the corporate world, most of the media and the war machine—their binary vision of good and evil and their myopic self-adulation cause severe trouble for their country. “American Sniper,” like the big-budget feature films pumped out in Germany during the Nazi era to exalt deformed values of militarism, racial self-glorification and state violence, is a piece of propaganda, a tawdry commercial for the crimes of empire. That it made a [record-breaking](#) \$105.3 million over the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday long weekend is a symptom of the United States’ dark malaise.

“The movie never asks the seminal question as to why the people of Iraq are fighting back against us in the very first place,” said Mikey Weinstein, whom I reached by phone in New Mexico. Weinstein, who worked in the Reagan White House and is a former Air Force officer, is the head of the [Military Religious Freedom Foundation](#), which challenges the growing Christian fundamentalism within the U.S. military. “It made me physically ill with its twisted, totally one-sided distortions of wartime combat ethics and justice woven into the fabric of Chris Kyle’s personal and primal justification mantra of ‘God-Country-Family.’ It is nothing less than an odious homage, indeed a literal horrific hagiography to wholesale slaughter.”

Weinstein noted that the embrace of extreme right-wing Christian chauvinism, or Dominionism, which calls for the creation of a theocratic “Christian” America, is especially acute among elite units such as the [SEALs](#) and the Army Special Forces.

The evildoers don’t take long to make an appearance in the film. This happens when television—the only way the movie’s characters get news—announces the [1998 truck bombings](#) of the American embassies in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi in which hundreds of people were killed. Chris, now grown, and his brother, aspiring rodeo riders, watch the news reports with outrage. Ted Koppel talks on the screen about a “war” against the United States.

“Look what they did to us,” Chris whispers.

He heads down to the recruiter to sign up to be a Navy SEAL. We get the usual boot camp scenes of green recruits subjected to punishing ordeals to make them become real men. In a bar scene, an aspiring SEAL has painted a target on his back and comrades throw darts into his skin. What little individuality these recruits have—and they don’t appear to have much—is sucked out of them until they are part of the military mass. They are unquestioningly obedient to authority, which means, of course, they are sheep.

We get a love story too. Chris meets Taya in a bar. They do shots. The movie slips, as it often does, into clichéd dialogue.

She tells him Navy SEALs are “arrogant, self-centered pricks who think you can lie and cheat and do whatever the fuck you want. I’d never date a SEAL.”

“Why would you say I’m self-centered?” Kyle asks. “I’d lay down my life for my country.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s the greatest country on earth and I’d do everything I can to protect it,” he says.

She drinks too much. She vomits. He is gallant. He helps her home. They fall in love. Taya is later shown watching television. She yells to Chris in the next room.

“Oh, my God, Chris,” she says.

“What’s wrong?” he asks.

“No!” she yells.

Then we hear the television announcer: “You see the first plane coming in at what looks like the east side. ...”

Chris and Taya watch in horror. Ominous music fills the movie’s soundtrack. The evildoers have asked for it. Kyle will go to Iraq to extract vengeance. He will go to fight in a country that had nothing to do with 9/11, a country that columnist Thomas Friedman once said we attacked “because we could.” The historical record and the reality of the Middle East don’t matter. Muslims are Muslims. And Muslims are evildoers or, as Kyle calls them, “savages.” Evildoers have to be eradicated.

Chris and Taya marry. He wears his gold Navy SEAL trident on the white shirt under his tuxedo at the wedding. His SEAL comrades are at the ceremony.

“Just got the call, boys—it’s on,” an officer says at the wedding reception.

The Navy SEALs cheer. They drink. And then we switch to Fallujah. It is Tour One. Kyle, now a sniper, is told Fallujah is “the new Wild West.” This may be the only accurate analogy in the film, given the genocide we carried out against Native Americans. He hears about an enemy sniper who can do “head shots from 500 yards out. They call him Mustafa. He was in the Olympics.”

Kyle’s first kill is a boy who is handed an anti-tank grenade by a young woman in a black chador. The woman, who expresses no emotion over the boy’s death, picks up the grenade after the boy is shot and moves toward U.S. Marines on patrol. Kyle kills her too. And here we have the template for the film and Kyle’s best-selling autobiography, “American Sniper.” Mothers and sisters in Iraq don’t love their sons or their brothers. Iraqi women breed to make little suicide bombers. Children are miniature Osama bin Ladens. Not one of the Muslim evildoers can be trusted—man, woman or child. They are beasts. They are shown in the film identifying U.S. positions to insurgents on their cellphones, hiding weapons under trapdoors in their floors, planting improvised explosive devices in roads or strapping explosives onto themselves in order to be suicide bombers. They are devoid of human qualities. “There was a kid who barely had any hair on his balls,” Kyle says nonchalantly after shooting the child and the woman. He is resting on his cot with a big Texas flag behind him on the wall. “Mother gives him a grenade, sends him out there to kill Marines.”

Enter The Butcher—a fictional Iraqi character created for the film. Here we get the most evil of the evildoers. He is dressed in a long black leather jacket and dispatches his victims with

an electric drill. He mutilates children—we see a child's arm he amputated. A local sheik offers to betray The Butcher for \$100,000. The Butcher kills the sheik. He murders the sheik's small son in front of his mother with his electric drill. The Butcher shouts: "You talk to them, you die with them."

Kyle moves on to Tour Two after time at home with Taya, whose chief role in the film is to complain through tears and expletives about her husband being away. Kyle says before he leaves: "They're savages. Babe, they're fuckin' savages."

He and his fellow platoon members spray-paint the white skull of the Punisher from Marvel Comics on their vehicles, body armor, weapons and helmets. The motto they paint in a circle around the skull reads: "Despite what your momma told you ... violence does solve problems."

"And we spray-painted it on every building and walls we could," Kyle wrote in his memoir, "American Sniper." "We wanted people to know, *we're here and we want to fuck with you. ... You see us? We're the people kicking your ass. Fear us because we will kill you, motherfucker.*"

The book is even more disturbing than the film. In the film Kyle is a reluctant warrior, one forced to do his duty. In the book he relishes killing and war. He is consumed by hatred of all Iraqis. He is intoxicated by violence. He is credited with 160 confirmed kills, but he notes that to be confirmed a kill had to be witnessed, "so if I shot someone in the stomach and he managed to crawl around where we couldn't see him before he bled out he didn't count."

Kyle insisted that every person he shot deserved to die. His inability to be self-reflective allowed him to deny the fact that during the U.S. occupation many, many innocent Iraqis were killed, including some shot by snipers. Snipers are used primarily to sow terror and fear among enemy combatants. And in his denial of reality, something former slaveholders and former Nazis perfected to an art after overseeing their own atrocities, Kyle was able to cling to childish myth rather than examine the darkness of his own soul and his contribution to the war crimes we carried out in Iraq. He justified his killing with a cloying sentimentality about his family, his Christian faith, his fellow SEALs and his nation. But sentimentality is not love. It is not empathy. It is, at its core, about self-pity and self-adulation. That the film, like the book, swings between cruelty and sentimentality is not accidental.

"Sentimentality, the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion, is the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel," [James Baldwin](#) reminded us. "The wet eyes of the sentimentalist betray his aversion to experience, his fear of life, his arid heart; and it is always, therefore, the signal of secret and violent inhumanity, the mask of cruelty."

"Savage, despicable evil," Kyle wrote of those he was killing from rooftops and windows. "That's what we were fighting in Iraq. That's why a lot of people, myself included, called the enemy 'savages.' ... I only wish I had killed more." At another point he writes: "I loved killing bad guys. ... I loved what I did. I still do ... it was fun. I had the time of my life being a SEAL." He labels Iraqis "fanatics" and writes "they hated us because we weren't Muslims." He claims "the fanatics we fought valued nothing but their twisted interpretation of religion."

"I never once fought for the Iraqis," he wrote of our Iraqi allies. "I could give a flying fuck about them."

He killed an Iraqi teenager he claimed was an insurgent. He watched as the boy's mother found his body, tore her clothes and wept. He was unmoved.

He wrote: *"If you loved them [the sons], you should have kept them away from the war. You should have kept them from joining the insurgency. You let them try and kill us—what did you think would happen to them?"*

"People back home [in the U.S.], people who haven't been in war, at least not that war, sometimes don't seem to understand how the troops in Iraq acted," he went on. "They're surprised—shocked—to discover we often joked about death, about things we saw." He was investigated by the Army for killing an unarmed civilian. According to his memoir, Kyle, who viewed all Iraqis as the enemy, told an Army colonel: "I don't shoot people with Korans. I'd like to, but I don't." The investigation went nowhere.

Kyle was given the nickname "Legend." He got a tattoo of a Crusader cross on his arm. "I wanted everyone to know I was a Christian. I had it put in red, for blood. I hated the damn savages I'd been fighting," he wrote. "I always will." Following a day of sniping, after killing perhaps as many as six people, he would go back to his barracks to spend his time smoking Cuban Romeo y Julieta No. 3 cigars and "playing video games, watching porn and working out." On leave, something omitted in the movie, he was frequently arrested for drunken bar fights. He dismissed politicians, hated the press and disdained superior officers, exalting only the comradeship of warriors. His memoir glorifies white, "Christian" supremacy and war. It is an angry tirade directed against anyone who questions the military's elite, professional killers.

"For some reason, a lot of people back home—not all people—didn't accept that we were at war," he wrote. "They didn't accept that war means death, violent death, most times. A lot of people, not just politicians, wanted to impose ridiculous fantasies on us, hold us to some standard of behavior that no human being could maintain."

The enemy sniper Mustafa, portrayed in the film as if he was a serial killer, fatally wounds Kyle's comrade Ryan "Biggles" Job. In the movie Kyle returns to Iraq—his fourth tour—to extract revenge for Biggles' death. This final tour, at least in the film, centered on the killing of The Butcher and the enemy sniper, also a fictional character. As it focuses on the dramatic duel between hero Kyle and villain Mustafa the movie becomes ridiculously cartoonish.

Kyle gets Mustafa in his sights and pulls the trigger. The bullet is shown leaving the rifle in slow motion. "Do it for Biggles," someone says. The enemy sniper's head turns into a puff of blood.

"Biggles would be proud of you," a soldier says. "You did it, man."

His final tour over, Kyle leaves the Navy. As a civilian he struggles with the demons of war and becomes, at least in the film, a model father and husband and works with veterans who were maimed in Iraq and Afghanistan. He trades his combat boots for cowboy boots.

The real-life Kyle, as the film was in production, was shot dead at a shooting range near Dallas on Feb. 2, 2013, along with a friend, Chad Littlefield. A former Marine, Eddie Ray Routh, who had been suffering from PTSD and severe psychological episodes, allegedly killed the two men and then stole Kyle's pickup truck. Routh will [go on trial next month](#). The

film ends with scenes of Kyle's funeral procession—thousands lined the roads waving flags—and the memorial service at the Dallas Cowboys' home stadium. It shows fellow SEALs pounding their tridents into the top of his coffin, a custom for fallen comrades. Kyle was shot in the back and the back of his head. Like so many people he dispatched, he never saw his killer when the fatal shots were fired.

The culture of war banishes the capacity for pity. It glorifies self-sacrifice and death. It sees pain, ritual humiliation and violence as part of an initiation into manhood. Brutal hazing, as Kyle noted in his book, was an integral part of becoming a Navy SEAL. New SEALs would be held down and choked by senior members of the platoon until they passed out. The culture of war idealizes only the warrior. It belittles those who do not exhibit the warrior's "manly" virtues. It places a premium on obedience and loyalty. It punishes those who engage in independent thought and demands total conformity. It elevates cruelty and killing to a virtue.

This culture, once it infects wider society, destroys all that makes the heights of human civilization and democracy possible. The capacity for empathy, the cultivation of wisdom and understanding, the tolerance and respect for difference and even love are ruthlessly crushed. The innate barbarity that war and violence breed is justified by a saccharine sentimentality about the nation, the flag and a perverted Christianity that blesses its armed crusaders. This sentimentality, as Baldwin wrote, masks a terrifying numbness. It fosters an unchecked narcissism. Facts and historical truths, when they do not fit into the mythic vision of the nation and the tribe, are discarded. Dissent becomes treason. All opponents are godless and subhuman. "American Sniper" caters to a deep sickness rippling through our society. It holds up the dangerous belief that we can recover our equilibrium and our lost glory by embracing an American fascism.

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