

# RETURNING HOME. IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN VETERANS IN DOCUMENTARIES AND FICTION FILMS

Carlos Javier Díaz Ferrer  
Universidad de La Laguna

## ABSTRACT

The returning home of the soldiers from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have intensified the conflict created between American veterans and their government. The U.S. administration is supposed to provide ex-soldiers with their subsequent benefits and pension. However, that does not seem to be the case. Many American veterans are being ignored by their government which, in many cases, refuses to pay them and their families a full pension for the rest of their lives for what they suffer: post traumatic stress disorder. Documentaries and fiction films, such as the ones commented in this article, explore into the consequences of that disorder on the American soldiers and their closest relatives, serving as a «bridge» between the Establishment and the people.

KEY WORDS: PTSD, veterans, documentaries, fiction films, coming home, Iraq, Afghanistan, Establishment.

## RESUMEN

«Volviendo a casa. Veteranos de Iraq y Afganistán en documentales y películas de ficción». El regreso a casa de los soldados de las guerras de Iraq y Afganistán ha intensificado el conflicto ya creado entre los veteranos norteamericanos y su gobierno. Se supone que la administración norteamericana debe proveer a sus ex-soldados de sus correspondientes beneficios y pensiones; sin embargo, ese no parece ser el caso. Muchos veteranos norteamericanos están siendo ignorados por su gobierno el cual, en muchos casos, se niega a concederles una pensión completa a ellos y sus familias, para el resto de sus vidas, debido al desorden del estrés postraumático que sufren. Películas y documentales como los comentados en este artículo investigan las consecuencias derivadas de dicha patología, lo cual sirve como una especie de «puente» entre el poder establecido y el pueblo en general.

PALABRAS CLAVES: Desorden del estrés postraumático, filmes, documentales, regreso a casa, veteranos, Irak, Afganistán, poder establecido.



One of the key elements for analysis in many fiction films and documentaries about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is the return of soldiers to their previous civilian lives after a war experience, in this case in the Middle East.

Certainly, it was right after the Vietnam War when the figure of the psycho ex-soldier as an anti-hero emerged and expressed the populist rebellion against the war and its consequences. Those veterans had to face plenty of difficulties when dealing with their former personal relationships, co-workers and bosses, going through all kind of different emotions, from depression to anger and frustration.

We must bear in mind that, since World War I, what is known as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a common pathology suffered by many soldiers returning from a war zone. Public interest in PTSD can be seen in the popularity of films and literature depicting this particular disorder, and how individuals try to deal with such traumatic events in their lives.

Obvious examples can be found in a large number of films made about veterans of The Vietnam War. *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979) *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, 1978) and *Born on the Fourth of July* (Oliver Stone, 1989) present Vietnam veterans who try to cope with the trauma of war, showing many of the common symptoms of PTSD, such as emotional numbing, denial, macabre interests in recreating traumatizing events and substance abuse. Many other films also show them, although in a less obvious way, for example, *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976).<sup>1</sup>

In *Home of the Brave* (Irwin Winkler, 2006) some of those reactions are personified in the figures of the four returning soldiers: Jamal (Curtis Jackson), Vanessa (Jessica Biel), Tommy (Brian Presley) and Will (Samuel L. Jackson).

In the case of the Afro-American soldier, Jamal, he feels angry after the traumatic situation he had to go through during his last day in Iraq. He returns home after killing a civilian during a combat action, at the same time that he is left by his girlfriend as soon as he is back home. Jamal suffers from episodes of violence, as we can see in the therapy group scene, in which he almost beats the doctor who was monitoring the session (min. 52). Moreover, he has to face the bureaucracy of the Veterans Administration, since he finds so many difficulties when it comes to receiving his pension. Iraq veterans in *The Ground Truth* (Patricia Foulkrod, 2006) claim to have the same problem, the long period of time they have to wait until being treated for their PTSD, which usually takes more than 100 days. In this particular film, we also see how several members of the U.S. military deployed in Iraq have to face a harsh reality when they arrive home from the war.

Also related to this particular point, we have a scene in *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Michael Moore, 2004) in which the director shows us how U.S. Staff Sergeant

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<sup>1</sup> In Michael's Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*, Travis is the perfect example of the Vietnam veteran who finds so many difficulties to adapt himself to a normal life. At the end of the film, we can see how Travis finds a way, a very violent one, to face his frustration and anger towards society, at the same time that he redeems himself by rescuing a little girl from a world of misery and exploitation.



Brett J. Petriken is killed in action during his time of duty in Iraq and, some time later, his family receives a check from the U.S. Armed Forces, but only for the days Petriken had worked until the day he died in combat (min. 99). This situation can be another example of the way the U.S. government treats its veterans after serving their country, a situation that had an inflection point during the Vietnam War, since it was the first and only armed conflict which the United States Army lost in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

We can also see how Jamal's anger is expressed in his final decision to kidnap his ex-girlfriend, and force her to talk to him again. Unfortunately, a few minutes after Tommy arrived and persuaded him to continue with the therapy, Jamal was shot and killed by the police (min. 30). In my opinion, this tragic ending for this particular scene was used by the director in order to increase the elements of desperation and anguish that are present in any veteran who has been in combat during an armed conflict.

Vanessa also suffers from PTSD, although she expresses it in a different way, by isolating herself from her family and friends. Little by little, she even disconnects from her old boyfriend, and finally decides to move him away from her life. In addition, we see how she acts rudely in her first interaction with a fellow teacher at school, when he tries to help her for the first time (min. 38). The way I see this scene, this is an example of Vanessa's anger towards the world she has to live in after the horror suffered in the Iraq war. Obviously, she is not ready to cope with daily-life routine so she reacts against anybody who approaches her.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, in the school fight scene later on in the movie (min. 68), she also refuses to accept help from the same co-worker. Vanessa's anxiety, due to her experience in the war, makes her distrust men in general, as she remembers the way her fellow soldiers acted toward her, overprotecting her all the time. As a matter of fact, it is only by the end of the film that she decides to date her colleague (min. 70). In my opinion, the intention of the director with this particular scene was to give the audience a happy ending, in contrast with the majority of the Vietnam War films, in which we hardly saw a hopeful sign at the end.

There is also a moment in which Vanessa goes to the cinema with her son and meets Tommy there. Right in that scene, she looks up to the ceiling, as she was in constant alert. In fact, Tommy's next line makes a reference to snipers and how he already checked that out (min. 41). Vanessa smiled, since she perfectly understood that they both had the same feeling: the necessity of being constantly on guard, hyper alert and looking around for possible danger, all of them being characteristics of PTSD.

This abovementioned theme of isolation is something that many U.S. female soldiers in Iraq had been suffering during the war, a growing risk of being

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<sup>2</sup> In *The Deer Hunter*, we can see how Michael (Robert de Niro) refuses to spend the night with Linda (Meryl Streep), as he feels he does not belong to that place any more. He feels distant and far way from that town and their people (min. 124).





raped and assaulted by their own male colleagues.<sup>3</sup> Even though Vanessa does not say anything about this subject during the film, it is possible that she had seen or experienced some sort of sexual harassment, attempt at raping or raping itself. In her book, *The Lonely Soldier: The Private War of Women Serving in Iraq* (Helen Benedict, 2010), the author claims that the book's title comes from the isolation female U.S. soldiers experience when combining the trauma of their combat duties with sexual harassment by fellow soldiers. This situation is caused by the feelings of insecurity and fear towards their female comrades by many U.S. soldiers.

There is another scene in *Home of the Brave* in which Vanessa shows her discontent about the way everybody treats her after her return from Iraq. During her visit to Dr. Marsh, she tells him how frustrated she feels because everybody is always trying to medicate her (m. 124), a way of thinking caused by the overprotection she went through during the war by her fellow male soldiers and officers, from my point of view.

Tommy seems to control his anger and frustration, but he also has his difficult moments; especially in the scenes of his conversations with his dad. Tommy uses several drugs in order to fight depression, and also insomnia, a condition that makes him go on a ride in his car every night.

The case of Dr. Marsh is more complex, since he suffers from sleeping problems and feelings of shame (for not having been able to save all the soldiers who got injured during combat) openly expressed in the therapy scene. In that particular moment, he shares his frustration with the psychiatrist, at the same time that he admits his emotional numbness while doing his job as a doctor already back in Spokane. On top of that, he also has a violent episode with his son, in the scene in which he attacks his own son Billy (Sam Jones III) for wearing a piercing on his lips, during the Thanksgiving lunch (min. 23).

Another remarkable scene of the movie is the one in which Dr. Mash tells his wife that she would not like to hear the harsh truth about the war, the plain reality of what happened there, since it would be too hard, and the details of the experience would be too difficult to deal with (min. 39). We can also see his wife's frustration when it comes to living with her husband's psychological trauma. Even though she really wants to help him overcome his horrible past experience, she only gets a negative response from her spouse, due to the difficult situation he is going through.

This is somehow related to Aidan Delgado's words in *The Ground Truth*, when he says that American people in general do not really want to listen to the veterans' problems and what they have to say about the war; they do not really honor their soldiers as they deserve. On the contrary, they only show their false

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<sup>3</sup> See: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1170559/How-female-U-S-soldiers-Iraq-growing-risk-raped-assaulted--male-colleagues.html>

patriotism through their participation in parades or by waving American flags when the soldiers come back.<sup>4</sup>

I must say I particularly agree with Delgado's view on this point. The way I see it, this sort of obtuse patriotic feeling has been present after any war in which the United States has been involved since their Independence, with the only exception, perhaps, of the Vietnam War.

One of the most unknown aspects of the war to the public is the excitement that soldiers go through during firefights. It is a subject that veterans only discuss with each other, and perhaps with their priests and therapists, but it is something which people want to know about when soldiers return home. In the book *War* (Sebastian Junger, 2011), the author explains how none of the things which make life enjoyable back home are present in Restrepo, so the soldiers' self-worth is inevitably found in firefights. He continues saying that the men talk about combat all the time, analyze it and even dream about it.

As a matter of fact, it is so exciting that some of the men believe that they will never be satisfied with their «normal lives» again, after the amount of firefights they have been into. As O'Byrne, a U.S. soldier simply states: «I like the firefights.»<sup>5</sup>

Another important issue to point out is what is commonly known as stop-loss. Stop-loss is the involuntary extension of a soldier's active duty service in order to send him/her back to Iraq or Afghanistan. The stop-loss policy was applied by the United States Congress right after the Vietnam War and gives the President the right to suspend any provision of law relating to promotion, retirement or separation applicable to any member of the armed forces, as long as he considers it necessary for the national security of the United States.<sup>6</sup> This highly controversial policy has been legally challenged several times but U.S. federal courts have consistently denied the possibility to change it.

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<sup>4</sup> With relation to this point, we have the case of Emily Riggs, the wife of a U.S. soldier who got out of the Army in February, 2003, and wrote the following words in an email to Mr. Moore, which he later published in his book: *Will They Ever Trust Us Again?* (Michael Moore, 2004): «I would like to express to people that it is not enough just to say that you support the troops. You should lobby your congressmen and women to support a pay raise for the troops and support initiatives to build newer, better quality housing for military families. And most of all, if you really support the troops, you should insist that they be brought home NOW and that this meaningless war come to an end as soon as possible before more of the people they «support» are killed or wounded.» (*Will They Ever Trust Us Again?*, pp. 171-72).

<sup>5</sup> See *War* (p. 156). Even the author himself says about his time in Restrepo: «These hillsides of loose shale and holly trees are where the men feel not most alive-that you can get skydiving-but the most utilized. The most necessary. The most clear and certain and purposeful. If young men could get that feeling at home, no one would ever want to war again, but they can't.» (p. 234).

<sup>6</sup> Every person who enlists in the U.S. Armed Forces signs a basic contract with an eight year service obligation. The enlistment contract for a soldier who goes on active duty normally stipulates a first period of service from 2 to 4 years. The controversy appears with the expression «involuntary extension» of a service member's basic active duty obligation. This controversial law has created much anger and frustration among the U.S. soldiers deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan and made them quit the Army and become deserters.





In the film *Stop-Loss* (Kimberly Peirce, 2008), we can see how the U.S. soldier Brandon King (Ryan Phillippe) tries to explain his superior LTC Boot Miller (Timothy Olyphant) how unfair it is the situation for him at that moment. He has been stop-loosed; however, he considers that the policy is not applicable in his case, since it was created to be used in a time of war, and President Bush had already declared the armed conflict officially finished (mins. 35-36).

Another relevant topic to be commented about the coming home of the soldiers is the frivolousness and dullness most veterans have to go through in their civilian world. Junger claims that most veterans do not find any amusement in everyday activities and miss enormously the combat actions they left behind in Afghanistan.<sup>7</sup>

With relation to the returning home of the soldiers, we can say that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have intensified the conflict created between American veterans and their government. The U.S. administration is supposed to protect and take care of every soldier who has been in the wars of Iraq and Afghanistan, especially with relation to their subsequent benefits and pension. That does not seem to be the case. Many American veterans are treated as if they had some sort of mental disorder, so the government will not be forced to pay them and their families a full pension for the rest of their lives for what they really suffer: PTSD.

As it is commented in some of the works cited in this article, PTSD has always been an issue to be exploited by Hollywood. Therefore, a wider audience, and specially the common citizen, can get in touch with such a sticky aspect of the post-war. Documentaries and fiction films such as the ones commented in this essay, explore into the consequences of that disorder on the American soldiers and their closest relatives, serving as a «bridge» between the Establishment and the people.

Even though the poor treatment of veterans by the U.S. Government has always been a matter of great controversy, the abovementioned fiction films and documentaries show these tragic consequences in a very personal and straightforward way.

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<sup>7</sup> As Junger says in his book: «These men come home and quickly find themselves getting berated by a rear-base major who's never seen combat or arguing with their girlfriend about some domestic issue they don't even understand. When men say they miss combat, it's not that they actually miss getting shot at-you'd have to be deranged- it's that they miss being in world where everything is important and nothing is taken for granted. They miss being in a world where human relations are entirely governed by whether you can trust the other person with your life.» (War, p. 234).

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