

that the new Algeria would be any better than a revolutionary totalitarian regime.

Freed of its colony, France quickly began to modernize its own economy (which grew at an amazing 6.8 percent in 1962 after the armistice). Algeria remained full of French teachers, doctors, and technicians. The French constructed a flattering narrative for themselves: they had “given” Algeria its independence because they wanted to, thus providing for the world a model for decolonization and modernization.

To the surprise of few, a darkness descended on Algeria. The first victims were the harkis, those who had served in the French army. Perhaps as many 100,000 were slaughtered, often with great sadism, being made to swallow their French medals before execution. Then the revolution turned on itself: Ben Bella, the country’s first president, spent most of the 1960s in an Algerian prison, as he had spent much of the 1950s in a French one. But France was done with it.

So how could the Algerian war not speak to us? Its example has long resonated in Israel, and many even hoped that Sharon—a successful military man of the Right—could do what no liberal Israeli leader could accomplish and withdraw Israel from the West Bank.

But now its lessons are dear to America as well as we search the horizon for a leader who can explain to the country—especially to the military and to the Republican Party—that its destiny doesn’t lie in the long-term occupation of Arab lands. The rhetoric that justifies the Iraq War as part of colossal battle against “Islamofascism” could be lifted almost directly from the French colonial intellectual slogans of the 1950s—and is no less self-deluding. To leave Vietnam, America needed a man of the Right, Richard Nixon. Today, when we need our own de Gaulle to achieve a “victory over ourselves,” we don’t even have a Nixon. ■

Reality Cinema

Soldiers armed with cameras make gritty, if conflicted, auteurs.

By Michael Brendan Dougherty

The popular D.C. rock club, the Black Cat, is a place young Washingtonians go to forget about politics. Among indie-rock aficionados, it is known for introducing alternative bands to the federal city before they get their big break or, more likely, break up. But lately, instead of dancing to punk music, hipsters in tight black jeans and horn-rimmed glasses are sitting down with their pints of Guinness to take in a movie.

The documentary being screened, “The War Tapes,” is composed of footage captured by three New Hampshire National Guardsmen while they were stationed in Iraq in 2004. The opening scene takes place in Fallujah as troops clear out buildings after the bombardment of the insurgent-controlled city. The audience isn’t quite sure how the camera is attached to the soldiers’ gear, but the perspective is eerily like that of a video game: a gun juts out from the bottom of the screen. The squad enters a building. Ambush! The gunfire is overwhelming, and the camera jerks desperately to the right, searching for the source of the attack. This audience has probably spent hundreds of hours watching action films, but no Hollywood tricks can capture the kinetic energy of having the cameraman battle for his life.

This frantic scene dissolves into the opening credits, and we are introduced to our three subjects—Sgt. Steve Pink, Sgt. Zack Bazzi, and Spec. Mike Moriarty, who were offered cameras to document

their experience. Director Deborah Scranton assembled the documentary out of the tapes she received from the soldiers interspersed with footage of family members at home.

The soldiers’ politics are only glancingly referred to in the film. Pink laughingly pointed out that his decision to join the Guard was less than well thought out: “I saw this poster ... and I needed help with tuition and I made a rash decision.” Bazzi reads *The Nation* even while on base and constantly refers to his love of being a soldier. Moriarty drove himself to Ground Zero in 2001 to film the debris and demanded of his military recruiter, “You slot me into a unit only if it will go into Iraq.” All three were stationed in the Sunni Triangle at Camp Anaconda, which soldiers commonly call “Mortaritaville.” They spend their time guarding convoys of contractor trucks and dreading IEDs.

Sergeant Pink is humanized through his expressive writing. Pictures of carnage are narrated with excerpts from his diary, in which he compares flesh hanging off bones to cheese sliding off pizza. While some audience members hissed when “Halliburton” was mentioned, the soldiers’ words were treated with silent respect, no matter how much they offended our civilian sensibilities. Recalling the broken bodies of insurgents being eaten by dogs, Pink said he didn’t want to stop them: “I’m glad these guys are dead. Let [the dogs] fill their bellies.”

Moriarty scored points with the Black Cat crowd for his droll humor and affection for Iraqi children. As a teenager approaches the base to sell some exotic-looking knives, Moriarty teases, "Tell your uncle, stop setting up IEDs; start selling knives instead." Though he returned home with long-term disabilities, Moriarty expresses no regret: "I'm so glad I went. I hated it with a godawful passion, and I will not go back. I have done my part and I feel like it's someone else's turn. My views of the war haven't changed..." The audience witnesses the strain combat has put on him and on his marriage. Referring to his short temper, his wife plaintively says to the camera that war "had changed him. ... There are days I don't like him but I love him." Perhaps to the disappointment of such an antiwar audience, Moriarty sums up his feelings by saying, "Let's all stop crying about whether we had reason to go in there or not because we can fight about that forever. It's a done deal. We're in Iraq. Support what it takes to make this thing work or shut up."

HE STILL SPEAKS PROUDLY BUT WITH A HINT OF SADNESS: "I LOVE BEING A SOLDIER. THE ONLY BAD THING ABOUT THE ARMY IS YOU CAN'T PICK YOUR WAR."

Bazzi speculates that only a half dozen guys in Charlie company voted against Bush "and none of them talk about it." As he watches a KBR truck unload human waste into a field, he jokes that he has been sent to Iraq to "bring democracy and good vegetation." When he returns home, he still speaks proudly but with a hint of sadness: "I love being a soldier. The only bad thing about the Army is you can't pick your war." This sentiment closes the film.

It won Best International Documentary awards at both the Tribeca and Britdoc film festivals and been positively reviewed across the political spectrum.

Each reviewer seems to find support for his own views. Kevin McCarthy enthused in *The Nation*, "A film shot by US soldiers in Iraq and sanctioned by the military may turn out to be the most powerful statement yet against the Iraq War." But in *The Weekly Standard*, Michael Fumento testified in favor of this "desperately-needed antidote to the mainstream media-produced baloney broadcast daily into our homes."

The filmmakers insist that they tried to tell a story about these soldiers regardless of politics. "I believe the power of film, image and sound, is in its ability to evoke empathy," said director Deborah Scranton. "If war negates humanity, then film—especially film that shows war from the inside—can ensure that even when we fight, we hold on to and bear witness to our humanity." That's a sentiment with which Robin Bell, the organizer of the Black Cat event, can wholeheartedly agree.

Bell is a videographer and visual artist. Not one to make a spectacle of himself, he thanked everyone for

coming and promptly said, "I'm going to shut up and put on a trailer."

Asked whether these screenings would induce some members of the audience to become antiwar activists, Bell speculates, "I don't know if people wake up the next day and do something dramatic. They may have some idea that Halliburton is in Iraq, but when they are able to see what that means ... they can make a more well-informed statement." When it's pointed out that "The War Tapes" doesn't have an explicitly antiwar message, Bell isn't fazed: "The films speak for themselves. If it's really well made, a movie gets

passed along. It drops into people's everyday conversation." For Bell, the screenings can't be directly compared to Vietnam-era teach-ins—he archly points out that this more didactic tradition of activism "still exists across the spectrum. The Religious Right does that all the time—usually on Sundays."

Many progressive groups have started screening documentaries to raise awareness on their issues. "Sir, No Sir," which chronicles dissent spreading through the ranks of the Vietnam era Armed Services, is being shown at college campuses, churches, and community groups around the country almost every week. Last year, one screening in Norfolk, Virginia led active-duty soldiers to organize their own antiwar movement.

Michael Moore's "Fahrenheit 9/11" and Al Gore's Oscar success with "An Inconvenient Truth" have raised the profile of political films, and even the Right is attempting to get into the act. Former senator Rick Santorum plans two film projects—one documenting American cultural decline, the other tying "Islamic fascism" to radical elements of the global Left.

But sweeping cultural change seems to be far from Robin Bell's mind. His political concern for social justice is serious, but he has incorporated it into his passion for cinema. Looking to the future of Resistance Theatre, he cites David O. Russell's 1999 film, "Three Kings," which was set in the first Gulf War. But his voice rises sharply when he speaks about Lewis Milestone's "All Quiet on the Western Front." Just viewing the 1930 masterpiece, Bell says, "can raise awareness of the effects of war. The story behind it is amazing." Bell talks about these films like a teenager gushes about his latest crush. For him, these aren't just important works or vehicles for political expression—they are beloved friends, and he cannot wait to introduce them to others. ■

A Poodle Shall Lead Him

Much as the British PM is derided as the U.S. president's pet, Blair popularized his "ethical foreign policy" long before Bush fell under the neocon spell.

By **Brendan O'Neill**

LONDON—On both sides of the Atlantic, it has become fashionable to refer to British Prime Minister Tony Blair as President George W. Bush's "poodle." Where the leaders of other European states, most notably France and Germany, snubbed Bush's bombardment of Iraq, Blair stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the president, yapping his approval of his master's destruction of the Ba'athist regime.

In Britain, at least, you cannot open a newspaper or a magazine without reading that Blair is the president's panting pet. Last year, following the embarrassing overheard conversation between Bush and Blair at the G8 gathering in Russia—where the president greeted the PM with the words "Yo, Blair!" and thanked him for the sweater he gave him—a writer for the *Guardian* said Blair had become Bush's "servant." It is clear, said Ros Taylor, that Bush "exploits" the "feeble Blair."

Under the headline "Yo, Bush! Start Treating Our Prime Minister With Respect," the tabloid *Daily Mirror* said the unguarded exchange reinforced "the damaging public image of Blair as the US President's poodle." A new book by the British writer Geoffrey Wheatcroft titled *Yo, Blair!*, published this month, argues that the consequence of Blair's slavish relations with Bush is that British politics, if not British land, has become colonized by the neocons.

When Blair meekly lined up with the Bushies to support Israel's bombing of

Lebanon last summer, the British left-leaning weekly *The New Statesman* demanded, "Unhitch us from the Bush chariot." The magazine spoke for many in the latte-drinking classes when it warned against allowing Bush to continue "to set the bearings of our moral compass."

In popular culture, too, Blair is blasted for sucking up to Bush. In 2005, the Pet Shop Boys, those aging survivors of 80s synthesizer pop, had a hit with "I'm With Stupid," in which they imagined Blair thinking of Bush in the following terms: "See you on the TV / Call you every day / Fly across the ocean / Just to let you get your way." In short, Blair is the sycophant in chief to the commander in chief. The British film "Love, Actually" had Hugh Grant playing a posh, slightly dithering but affable PM blatantly based on Blair—only this PM distanced himself from the American president (played by a sneering Billy Bob Thornton) in scenes that were cheered in some British cinemas.

It is of course true that Blair has been unquestioningly supportive of the Bush administration's disastrous war in Iraq. He has recently announced that British troops will start withdrawing, but alongside Australia's John Howard, Blair has been one of a dwindling number of world leaders that Bush has been able to rely upon to provide an internationalist gloss to America's wars.

So isn't it accurate to portray Blair as an obedient, fetching pup to Bush's rottweiler? Not at all, in my view. Indeed,

one might argue that Bush is Blair's poodle. Many of the worst aspects of the Bush Doctrine—its reduction of world affairs to a black-and-white tableau of good and evil; its disregard for state sovereignty; its cynical claim to be acting in the interests of humanity—were inherited by the neoconservatives from Blair's "ethical foreign policy" of the 1990s.

Tagging Blair a "poodle" absolves him of responsibility for his key role in creating today's attack-dog militarism. For while he may have been a nodding dog over the Iraq War, he also helped to shape what has come to be known as the Bush Doctrine.

Blair was executing bloody wars of intervention for years before the neocons took the White House in 2001. He stormed to power in the British general election of 1997 on a ticket of cleaning up Parliamentary politics at home (following years of "sleaze scandals") and fixing other people's problems overseas. He announced that his government would pursue an "ethical foreign policy," one that was proactive, interventionist, and would do battle with "wickedness" wherever it lurked.

Blair was a key architect of the NATO-led bombing campaign of Yugoslavia in 1999. Where President Bill Clinton provided the military muscle for that war, which killed 600 civilians in Yugoslavia and left large parts of the country in ruins, Blair is widely regarded as its author and salesman. Blair also sent British troops to Sierra Leone. In 1998, he and Clinton