

STOP-LOSS ____ (7.5/10)

Painful view of Iraqi war's true-life consequences

Written by Mark Richard

Written by Kimberly Peirce

Directed by Kimberly Peirce

Ryan Phillippe ... SSgt. Brandon King
Joseph Gordon-Levitt ... Tommy Burgess
Rob Brown ... Isaac 'Eyeball' Butler
Channing Tatum ... Sgt. Steve Shriver
Victor Rasuk ... Pvt. Rico Rodriguez
Terry Quay ... Al 'Preacher' Colson
Matthew Scott Wilcox ... 'Rabbit' Lankford
Connett Brewer ... Curtis
Timothy Olyphant ... Lt. Col. Boot Miller
Abbie Cornish ... Michelle

Senator Orton Worrell: Your country needs you to go back.

You know it's the right thing to do.

Brandon King: Sir, I've always done the right thing.

And this is wrong.

Passport Issuer: Here's your new ID. If you go, you're gone for good.

What kind of movie?

Is Stop-Loss a war movie—showing in grim detail the nature of the Iraqi war—, a buddy movie—Brandon King (Ryan Phillippe) and his four buds who have managed to survive multiple tours of duty are returning to their Brazos, Texas, homes: "Mission Accomplished," so let's party and get on with our blessed lives—, or a cause movie—government say "Whoops, just kidding, it's crucifixion... the President put us under 'stop-loss' and you have to go back, like, until we say leave."?

Like *Bonneville*, the movie I reviewed last week, *Stop-Loss* would be classified a small movie with a relatively new writer/director team. It also has some very accomplished younger actors who play the Army soldiers returning from Hell to a heroes' welcome... or at least what passes for a heroes' welcome in this day and age when everyone with an IQ of dirt knows that the Iraq war was based on a complete package of lies going all the way to the top—of the chain of command and of the Carlyle Group corporate boardrooms. We'll discuss that later, and I'll try to remain calm.

In the DVD Special Features, director Kimberly Peirce, casting her soldiers, states she was looking foremost for the quality of masculinity. (Or at least the ability to project masculinity on screen.)[1]

The five buddy Army friends project their masculinity, and occasional insanity, quite well: Phillippe—*Flags of Our Fathers*, *Crash*, *Breach*—is the protagonist, the leader of the pack who deals front and center with the stop-loss order; Joseph Gordon-Levitt—*The Lookout*, *Brick*—plays Tommy who has enough issues to keep busy all the shrinks in Texas; Rob Brown—*The Express*, *Finding Forrester*—is pretty much the token black (Eyeball) but makes good use of what screen time he gets; Victor Rasuk—*Bonneville* (!)—has quite an important role as the Hispanic Rodriguez, and handles it adroitly; and

finally Channing Tatum—Coach Carter—plays Steve Shriver, Brandon's best friend from wayback, and he's got more physicality than the rest of them... he also has Michelle (Abbie Cornish), at least initially.

Plot context...

Note I did not say "plot," because I'm highly sensitive to giving away too much of the story of any given movie. My policy is to defer to the plot description of what the Netflix jacket tells me... and Netflix tells me Stop-Loss is about five friends from Texas who survive tour(s) in Iraq, then return to their home town, where the leader (Brandon) is told he's been stop-lossed. Further, Brandon makes an issue of what seems clearly to him an arbitrary abuse of power. To the point of considering escape from the rotted system and from the US, which would technically be considered desertion and, hence, a major crime... I think, a felony.

Certainly not an unrealistic set of circumstances. The movie has a lot of realism going for it right out of the chute: from the special features, we learn they film the original street-war footage from Morocco. The war sequences have a grueling authenticity; all the gory ravages of what the world's biggest military power does to civilian populations it decides to liberate. And it isn't too wonderful for the liberators either; naturally the neighborhood folks are resistant to change, and represent a clear and present danger to the foot soldiers of the democracy-foisters.

It's simply awful. How does one describe it? It's like a perpetual SWAT team raid on marijuana smokers who shoot back. But it's in real-people neighborhoods, too, people who speak a funny language. Often the victims of the no-knock pursuits are women and children, noncombatants who live in bombed out shacks that used to be homes. Yes, this is a good war... for the glory of Liberty and Liberty's Christian Deity. All the women and children who perish from grenades and bullets are getting what they deserve for having had to live under a horrible Mideast dictator. You're welcome. Just be glad that you're the innocent victims.

Still the cost in American-soldier carnage is high, too. Many die. For a glorious purpose! But many more are horribly injured, such as Private Rodriguez. The scene where Victor Rasuk represents Rodriguez from his recuperation environment is quite impressive. Just imagine that scene—and hundreds of others with men and women who aren't optimistic— and you'll understand the imperative of peace... as a species we simply must learn how to stop war. Sorry for the soapbox. It's only a movie review.

The cause...

The essence of Stop-Loss lies not in its eloquent concrete testimony for the virtues of peace, rather in what is the proper human (American) response to the exercise of arbitrary state-executive power. By the 13th Amendment, and, indeed the entire premise of the US Constitution, involuntary servitude is not an option. If the president or anyone else who claims kingly powers wants to stop-loss or in other ways violate the government's solemn contract with a citizen, it's too bad for them.

But if you're an (extra)ordinary soldier like Brandon King, you don't lay it out like a syllogism: you simply know "that the president is fucked in the head." (Or words to that effect.) On Brandon's real-guy lawful behavior meter, the act of pulling a soldier's retirement is fundamentally wrong, and he won't stand for it. It's un-American. So, yes, it does set in motion a chain of events that takes him through the Heartland—initially for the purpose of meeting his Senator (who has told Brandon that he'll pull strings for him)

then to NYC where an underground-economy attorney can get Brandon papers to Canada.

I really like this movie from the 'real-people' standpoint. I like the character Brandon King, too, a lot, his moral honesty and strength. Just thinking now, *Stop-Loss* brings to mind *Running on Empty*, starring Judd Hirsch, Christine Lahti, and River Phoenix. In that movie, antiwar protestors who accidentally injure a man while bombing a Napalm lab remain on the run from the feds a generation later. You see the true costs in people's lives for acting according to principle... or at least what they sincerely regard as such.

Not gonna tell you how *Stop-Loss* unfolds, though. I will say this: you will definitely come to a sympathy for the men and women who have been lied into doing the most horrible things for the government. Herbert Spencer says: ""When men hire themselves out to shoot other men to order, asking nothing about the justice of their cause, I don't care if they are shot themselves." I say, "Well, they should have been smarter, but they were lied to." It's simply a helluva deal, I want to cry. It's very difficult to remain unmoved by real people trying.

By the same token, for the banksters and their puppets who consciously create the killing and maiming fields, drawing and quartering is too good.

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[1] Candidly, when you start dealing with real human characteristics of actors, the reality is probably buried in the unknown. Who knows whether Ryan Phillippe is truly masculine? Going back a year or two, Rock Hudson appeared to be one of the manliest men in history—I'll never forget him as the submarine captain in *Ice Station Zebra*, as the sub is plunging to apparent oblivion, placing a hand on the shoulder of a crying lieutenant who was losing it, praying incoherently, he says: "Son, please be quiet. We're trying to think here."—but in his real life was gay (not that there's anything weak with that).

2009 August 06

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Stop-Loss | Ryan Phillippe | Iraq War | Army Wounded | Buddy Movies | Texas