

Baghdad ER: Censoring The Iraq Invasion

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Last night I watched "Baghdad ER," an HBO documentary about the 86th Combat Support Hospital in the Green Zone. It is 63 minutes of unrelenting and graphic depictions of amputations, etc. While it was given official benediction by the Pentagon initially, there are signs that it is pulling back. Both this documentary and "The Road to Guantanamo," a film I reviewed a while back, are facing censorship:

Two new films which expose unpleasant truths about Guantanamo and the battle for Iraq are coming under pressure from censors in the United States.

The Motion Pictures Association of America has censored a poster advertising a film about the Tipton three, called The Road to Guantanamo, that showed a hooded and blindfolded man hanging by his shackled wrists. Also, the makers of Baghdad ER, a documentary about a US military combat hospital, told the Guardian yesterday that Francis Harvey, the secretary of the army, had demanded last-minute changes to the film.

The Guantanamo film ran into difficulties with the MPAA last month when it submitted its advertising material for customary review. To the surprise of Howard Cohen, president of Roadside Attractions which is distributing the film in the US, the association demanded that the poster for the R-rated film be toned down.

"It was the head in the burlap sack that pushed it over the edge for them," Mr Cohen said. The film will be advertised instead by a poster which shows only a pair of shackled hands and arms. "It's outrageous that they are objecting to this image . . . They are saying . . . children in the US should not be allowed to see what it is we are doing to people in Guantanamo." The MPAA offered no comment.

The makers of Baghdad ER say the senior leadership of the Pentagon has turned against their film, despite cooperation during its making in Baghdad and a positive reception at screenings at military bases. "Somebody wearing a tie and not a uniform seems to have a political agenda and is trying to influence this film," said the director, Jon Alpert.

?The Guardian, May 18, 2006

One imagines that the Pentagon might have been asleep at the wheel when it gave the green light to allow Jon Alpert to make a film like "Baghdad ER." Although it ostensibly hails the brave men and women in uniform who are sacrificing life and limb to win freedom for the Iraqi people, it has a deeper subversive message?namely that this war is an obscene waste, both for Iraqis and Americans.

Anybody who has followed documentary film over the past 30 years or so will recognize his name immediately. He is exceptionally bold and critical-minded, as this excerpt from a December 18, 1981 report would indicate:

Jon Alpert (interviewing a Salvadoran soldier): Who flies the helicopters for you?

Unidentified Salvadoran soldier [subtitled]: The pilots are American.

Jon Alpert: The U.S. State Department denies American pilots are being used. El Salvador denies their soldiers cross the border [into Honduras]. But we saw the soldiers - and we saw their work. We saw this man shot in the head. Still alive are his wife and four children.

Alpert deliberately avoids any kind of editorializing in "Bagdad ER" as should be obvious from this quote on the HBO website: "We went over there not so much trying to express our own opinions, but trying to figure out how we could hold a mirror up to what was going on and reflect that back to the United States. We thought that would really be the most valuable thing we could do."

However, simply by allowing home viewers to see the awful results of IED attacks, etc. it can only intensify opposition to the war. "Baghdad ER" reminds us that nearly 18,000 men and women have been wounded during the 3 years of occupation. Although body armor and rapid medical response, such as the kind seen in this documentary, have saved many lives, there are still thousands of young people all around the USA who are blind, missing limbs, brain-damaged and suffering immense chronic pain from their wounds. No wonder the Pentagon wants to suppress this worthy documentary.

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