

In his new film, *In the Valley of Elah*, Paul Haggis offers a portrait of returned Iraq soldiers which critiques not just the war, but also the way we treat our veterans.

KAY STEIGER | *September 18, 2007* | web only

Two-time Oscar winner, for *Crash* and *Million Dollar Baby*, Paul Haggis uses a powerful and heavy-handed image in the opening scenes of his new film: an American flag flying upside down. "Do you know what that means?" the main character Hank, played by Oscar-winner Tommy Lee Jones, asks the Salvadoran groundskeeper he encounters on his drive out of town to look for his missing veteran son. When the response is negative, he tells the man it's an international distress signal -- and instructs him on how to fly the flag correctly.

The far left has been opposing the Iraq war for some time, but *In the Valley of Elah* tells the story of moderate, middle America coming to grips with the with its grim realities. In a stock murder mystery format, it shows young men (female soldiers are noticeably absent from the film) who go away to war as heroes and return capable of frightening violence. The movie is finally getting people to talk about something on the fringe of most discussions about the Iraq War: What happens to returning soldiers?

The movie begins with Hank Deerfield, a Vietnam Army veteran who gets a call notifying him that his son has gone AWOL days after returning from a deployment to Iraq. Deerfield decides to make the journey to Fort Rudd to investigate his son's disappearance. There, he turns to a local police detective, Emily Sanders (played by Charlize Theron), for help. The story is punctuated by a series of cell phone videos taken by the missing son which depict gruesome and callous scenes from Iraq. Deerfield discovers that his son has been violently murdered and the body dismembered.

Many critics have leveled the complaint that Haggis is clearly **working too hard** to turn middle America against the war and that he's really **just after another Oscar**. Regardless of whether Haggis is after another gold statue, the film presents a story that is **real enough**. The story of Richard Davis' murder, recounted by Mark Boal in a 2004 article for *Playboy* titled "Death and Dishonor," explored the army's investigation into a similar incident near Fort Benning in Georgia.

What's peaking though the fairly transparent plot is the costs of sending soldiers to war -- encouraging them to torture and kill terrorists (or suspected terrorists) -- and returning them home unable to continue with normal lives. A side plot of the film has a woman ahead of Deerfield at the police station there to report her husband's (another recently returned Iraq vet) violent drowning of the family's Doberman Pincher in the bathtub in front of their son. Later in the film he is arrested for drowning his wife, who Theron's character had sent home without helping.

The movie clearly depicts post traumatic stress disorder. But what makes *In the Valley of Elah* portrayal valuable is that it depicts the strain of PTSD on families and communities as well.

Official estimates of how many Iraq war veterans might be affected by PTSD vary, mainly because it's something that affects patients in a matter of degrees, many of which are not necessarily violent. It's a cost of war that's little talked about estimated to cost billions of dollars. Many psychologists, including the American Psychological Association's Education Directorate, **advocate** a public education campaign that would not only teach soldiers and their families what the **symptoms** of PTSD are (often sleeplessness, flashbacks, problems with aggression, and relationship stress) but also instruct the public that PTSD can be a normal reaction to abnormal levels of stress or violence, especially when encountered for long periods of time. Some soldiers are serving tours as long as **15 months**.

Congress has been **debating** what to do about returning soldiers and the possibility of **increased levels** of PTSD. Since the Democrats took control of Congress, the House Veterans Affairs Committee has tacked on increased funding for veterans health care to every war supplemental. What's more, many soldiers come from rural areas, too far from VA facilities to count VA benefits as accessible health care. A Harvard study **estimated** as a result about 1.8 million veterans are effectively uninsured.

Moreover, as the *American Journal of Psychiatry* **found**, mental health illnesses like PTSD are expensive and difficult to treat. They usually require a combination of counseling, working with the families to monitor outpatient behavior, and in some cases, medication. What's more, there's a social stigma attached soldiers -- heroes to so many -- having to admit what is perceived as weakness.

The uncomfortable truth Haggis presents is that people generally presented as heroes are doing horrifying things. The film's greatest

