

Lack of Full Disclosure Trips Up ‘American Sniper’

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Rating: **2.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – A straightforward story about the military marksman Chris Kyle is pretty much told in “American Sniper,” by director Clint Eastwood. But what is left out of the movie – Kyle’s right wing politics and a depiction of his fate – is more curious than what is actually presented.

Chris Kyle was a kill master, a Navy Seal who became the go-to for providing cover for ground troops and blasting insurgents in Iraq. His black and white vision of America-good, enemy-bad is merely hinted upon in the movie, but his extended biography reveals a madness for this absolutism that in essence nullifies his “world record” kill quota – not to mention that Iraq is pretty much a zero-sum game for America. But politics aside, the story of Chris Kyle could have used more balance, in the midst of some decent performances by Bradley Cooper as the sniper and Sienna Miller as his home front wife.

Chris Kyle (Cooper) is a aimless cowboy in Texas who decides to sign up for the Navy Seals after September 11th. He is a hunter, and shows a high proficiency on the firing range. While in training, he meets a woman named Taya (Sienna Miller), and the twosome’s relationship eventually becomes marriage. About this time, Chris gets his assignment as a sniper in Iraq.



Bradley Cooper (right) as Chris Kyle in ‘American Sniper’

Photo credit: Warner Bros.

His job consists of determining who the enemy is, and then killing them. This involves some moral dilemmas, such as women and children as targets. On the home front, Taya goes through a worrisome pregnancy, and even when Chris is home on leave he is never really present. The

warrior has problems without his war, until it ultimately catches up with him.

Bradley Cooper and Sienna Miller give passionate performances as Chris and Taya Kyle, nuanced beyond even what the script gives them. Cooper is virtually unrecognizable behind his beard and warrior’s gaze, and really honored the memory of Kyle, who (according to the film) was known as the “legend” by his fellow warriors. Miller is a consummate pro, she embodies even a domestic role with enough subtlety to symbolically represent the homeland in opposition to her soldier husband.

The battle scenes are tense, but perfunctory. Clint Eastwood had an eye for framing and choreographing a sniper scene for maximum effectiveness, but had trouble balancing these scenes with Kyle’s difficulties on the home front. And when the ultimate fate of Kyle is revealed, Eastwood’s decision to defer to the heroics of his career makes the inner Chris Kyle impossible to reach.

In real life, Kyle was a reactionary, and his reaction to September 11th was to make the enemy the scapegoat and America the good cop to the world. That may work in the band-of-brothers atmosphere of wartime camaraderie – and within the fog of war – but it had to jolt Kyle when he came back to an indifferent America, who had been lied into war in the first place. All those facets of Chris Kyle were unexplored by Eastwood.



On the Home Front: Sienna Miller as Taya in ‘American Sniper’

Photo credit: Warner Bros.

And yes, he is allowed to do that as a filmmaker. Eastwood made a couple of excellent films in 2006 with war as a subject, “Flags of Our Fathers” and “Letters to Iwo Jima,” and his statements in those stories were emotional and human. “American Sniper” could have used more of that influence, because in the end you can’t help but feel sorry for Chris Kyle, hero on one end of the spectrum, and fraught with indifference on the other end. In tilting the atmosphere undeniably toward the hero side, Eastwood does the humanity of Kyle a disservice.

“American Sniper” was nominated for Best Picture for the upcoming Oscars. I wonder what those who voted for it wanted. Was it the hope that having a record number of kills against the “enemy” would restore some pride in the folly of the wars of the last 12 years? To what end?

“American Sniper” opens everywhere on January 16th. Featuring Bradley Cooper, Sienna Miller, Kyle Gallner and Ben Reed. Screenplay adapted by Jason Hall. Directed by Clint Eastwood. Rated “R”



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By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [15]
Writer, Editorial Coordinator
HollywoodChicago.com
pat@hollywoodchicago.com [14]

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