

Green Zone

HURT LOCKER, Kathryn Bigelow's award winning movie, is a kind of documentary in which the viewer is treated to the repeated prospect that the 'explosive ordinance' being dismantled by the film's low profile heroes might blow up at any moment. The film moves along steadily from one potential explosion to another inspecting the diverse reactions of men faced with death at every turn in the road. There is tension between the foolhardy and the prudent, heroes all, as they attempt simply to do their job in the vicious chaos of the War in Iraq. Some die, others do not, but the reality of an urban insurgency conducted by people prepared to deploy both suicide bombers, and bombs chained to people who have not volunteered to die, is well conveyed. However, the technical excellence of the filming and the blistering veracity of its vision, do not a drama make. Much better in this respect is the much more traditional stance of *Jarhead* in which the unfathomable lunacies of the military regime are juxtaposed with the weird combination of terror and boredom endured by soldiers in the First Gulf War. Here, the experience of the 'platoon' is framed by the irrelevance of their fear and endangerment when set beside the enormous power of modern aerial bombardments. It tells us something about the war, but its didactic purpose does not overwhelm the dramatic exploration of its group of stock characters.

Green Zone by contrast has dispensed with the 'platoon' and given us a singular hero, a kind of detective, cum investigative journalist cum man of principle in uniform. That man is Chief Warrant Officer, Roy Miller, more mature than Jason Bourne, but just as sexy and decisive as Matt Damon always is. Roy Miller with his squad of rather anonymous soldiers is searching for 'weapons of mass destruction'. At great

risk to his life and to the life of his men, they brave snipers, unexploded ordinance, and tumultuous crowds of protesters and looters, in their search for Saddam Hussein's arsenal of WMD. After each nail-biting foray into the back streets of Baghdad and its dusty environs Roy Miller comes up empty-handed. Frustrated, he begins to challenge the decisions of his superiors and the value of the intelligence reports being used to identify the hiding places of the poisonous gas shells and the weaponized nuclear materials; puzzlingly these infernal devices, which everybody thought Saddam's dictatorship had manufactured, are nowhere to be found.

It emerges that there has been a plot between elements of the CIA and the Pentagon to frustrate the pussy footing of the State Department, by concealing the fact that they knew some days before the invasion that Saddam's government had abandoned the manufacture and deployment of such weapons; Roy Miller discovers that CIA elements loyal to White House insiders had sustained the myth of WMD in order to dampen opposition to the invasion, and were now determined to murder a leading Baathist general who knew the truth of their treachery.

It dawns on Miller that these powerful elements not only covered up what they knew all along but steadfastly fed a prominent journalist with lies about Saddam's WMD in order to sanctify the Pentagon's unstoppable juggernaut. They believed that nothing should be allowed to impede the drive to war and invasion, not even the truth.

This conspiracy provides the film with its *raison d'être* for what amounts to a lengthy heart-stopping chase in which Roy Miller is pursued by both Baathist insurgents, and a CIA death squad, that is attempting to assassinate both Roy and the Baathist general, that Roy is attempting to rescue from the evil agents of neo-conservatism, in order to make him a wholesome ally of the of the reconstruction of the new democratic Iraq. We always know, however, that Roy Miller has not lost the plot because despite his evident

bewilderment we know that he is guided by the pursuit of truth, and will eventually find his way.

The Baathist general that Miller is chasing in order to save is, in a startling *coup de theatre*, suddenly shot dead by Roy's Iraqi translator; this brutally reminds us that there might be very good reasons for killing prominent Baathists beyond the self-evidently evil ones of those attempting to conceal the conspiracy to cover up the fact that the White House knew well before the invasion that Saddam Hussein did not have any weapons of mass destruction.

So, Matt Damon's film succeeds by cutting with the grain of popular suspicions concerning the War and George W. Bush. The shuddering 'hand-held' camera style provides the sense of fearsome disorder and the reportage of an embattled war correspondent. This dramatic device is consolidated by the account of a conspiracy, which the film's audience will accept without question; it gives an entirely fictional account of the War the weight of authenticity it might otherwise lack.

The truth is, of course, that no conspiracy 'theory' is required in order to reveal the criminal irresponsibility of those who organized the invasion of Iraq and 'planned' (if that is the word), the subsequent occupation. Driven by an abstract desire to right the accumulated wrongs heaped upon Persia, and the Arab World, by a century of woefully misguided colonial and neo-colonial policies, and to transform the politics of the Middle East, *once and for all*, by installing a model democracy in the turbulent heart of the region, George W. Bush and his acolytes decided to invade Iraq; to remove Saddam Hussein; to install free market capitalism in the *Cradle of Civilisation*; to establish well-regulated institutions in Baghdad; and, to hold free and fair elections throughout Mesopotamia, all within ninety days of toppling the Baathist dictatorship.

Driven forward by a form of voluntarism worthy of Mao Zedong, Joseph Stalin, or Pol Pot, the neo-conservatives around Bush decided that the '*can do*'

spirit of American capitalism, when combined with the awesome power of the Pentagon, could make real whatever they decided to dream up. So, when many expert agencies, including the Rand Corporation, told Rumsfeld that he would need 500,000 soldiers to stabilize Iraq, he decided that 170,000 or thereabouts would be more than enough. Consequently, by the time the officials of the Organization of Really Hapless Americans (otherwise known as the Office for Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance) arrived in Baghdad, looters had done more damage to Iraq's infrastructure than the 'shock and awe' bombardment. All the ministries, public buildings, and state owned enterprises had been looted, often burned to the ground, and in any event were minus windows, electrical wiring, water pumps, furniture, computers, files, financial records, and essential machinery.

The conflicts between the Pentagon, the National Security Council, the CIA, and the State Department, resulted in sustained confusion which was resolved in favour of Republican Party loyalists who deeply distrusted the fluent Arabic and regional expertise of those in the employ of the State Department – they felt that former ambassadors and regional experts were insufficiently enthusiastic about their plan to install free market capitalism and liberal democracy within three months. Consequently, the wise counsel of anybody who actually knew anything about Iraq was brushed aside in favour of the barmy voluntarism and invincible vanity of Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, and Bush.

Enjoy *Green Zone* and Matt Damon's daring do, but forget all about conspiracies and read Rajiv Chandrasekaran's book, *Imperial Life In the Emerald City*, republished in a new edition as *Green Zone* with a lovely picture of Matt Damon on the cover. Unfortunately this marketing strategy will, of course, strengthen the conspiratorial thesis of the movie, but anybody who actually reads Chandrasekaran's account of the occupation will dispense with such nonsense in favour of the almost unbelievable truths concerning the Mother of all Crimes.