Is War the Real National Pastime?

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In his provocative documentary "Why We Fight", director Eugene Jarecki asks whether Washington's foreign policy is overly preoccupied with the idea of military supremacy, and if the military has become too important in US life.

Jarecki interviews subjects from across the political spectrum, including Wilton Sekzer, a retired New York police officer whose son died in the Sep. 11 attack on the World Trade Centre; Bill Kristol, editor of the neo-conservative Weekly Standard; Gore Vidal, a prominent author and liberal commentator; James Roche, secretary of the US Air Force; and US pilots identified as Fuji and Tooms, who dropped the first bombs over Baghdad when the Iraq war broke in 2003.

Following are excerpts from a recent interview IPS conducted with the award-winning filmmaker.

Q: Tell us why you chose this title for your film.

A: Actually, this is the title of a series of films made during World War II by the legendary director Frank Capra. It seems to me that in the past 60 years, the reasons for American war have changed and become far more complicated for everyday people to understand.

The film asks the question, why we fight. I cannot say that it provides an answer, because it wasn't really my goal to provide a single answer. It was my goal to bring together voices from a wide range of experts and the insiders, people touched by American war who could become a kind of chorus of concern looking more deeply at the issues involved and the stakes implied than customarily happens in our shallow news media outlets.

It looks at today's critical situation in Iraq and it's impossible to look at the history of American war over the past half century without naturally being reminded of the crisis in which we now find ourselves.

Q: Have you faced any problems in terms of distribution?

A: If you are a filmmaker trying to cover a politically sensitive subject in the United States, America has suffered such a degradation of our open media system in recent years, such a shift away from the values of a democratic society, that problems arise long before the distribution phase. At the very start, the struggle to get financing for a film like this in the United States would have proved immediately prohibitive. So we moved overseas to the BBC, to Canada, to France and Germany, to countries whose media systems are far more open than ours, and in many ways shame ours.

Q: Has the movie been shown in Iraq?

A: It has not been shown in Iraq. There has been a movement by the British forces television to show the film to their own troops serving in Iraq, but it has not been shown in Iraq.

Q: In the movie, you have interviews with US weapon manufacturers and footage of weapons manufacturing sites. How did you manage to get access to those sites?

A: Well, you know, I worked very hard to reach out to people all across the spectrum, and when you are making a film about war, you are dealing with people at all levels. And in order to secure access to these people, in general one had to go through the Pentagon. We were involved in a very serious inquiry and not in an ambush, a kind of tough love for America and the American story.

Q: You highlighted the speech of US Pres. Dwight D. Eisenhower (1953û1961) in which he expresses his deep concern over the "military-industrial complex". Do you agree with those who would rather describe this phenomenon as "military-industrial-prison-media complex"?

A: Yes, unfortunately, what Eisenhower is talking about is the concern that the interests of corporations have been placed ahead of the interests of the people. That can take many forms, whether it's military-industrial or pharmaceutical or media. There are so many industries in America that can have undue, unwarranted influences on the affairs of the state.

In many ways, Eisenhower is simply noting the rise of special interests in the United States. [But] the military-industrial complex has a special distinction as a special interest. The enormity of its business and the way in which it operates it makes more difficult in times of threats [when] you can insulate military-industrial special interests from the kind of oversight and review that others feel might be needed. So the military-industrial complex is a sort of favoured nation among special interests.

Q: You focused on the invasion of Iraq. How do you view the recent developments regarding Iran's nuclear programme and the threats Tehran is facing?

A: I think the concern of course is to what extent the conflict with Iran is another very unfortunate side effect of the calamitous decision on the war in Iraq. You may remember that US policymakers asserted from the start that it would be what they called a "cakewalk". Having gotten rid of Saddam [Hussein], upbeat people would be dancing in the streets, and the country would immediately take a new shape. All of those dreams of course have collapsed. What we now face is a situation of intense chaos. By unseating [Hussein], the United States in many ways liberated the Shia in Iraq and the fundamentalists in Iran who have far more in common with each other.

Q: It is very interesting that in the film you used the footage of [current US Defence Secretary Donald] Rumsfeld's meeting with Saddam Hussein in 1983, when he was the special envoy of Pres. Ronald Reagan.

A: You can't study the history of the current war without following the roots all the way back to the overthrow of Mossedeq (1953) in the interests of British Petroleum. But along the way, there is no way to ignore Ayatollah Khomeini [in Iran]. Along the way, there is no way to ignore Saddam Hussein. No way to ignore that the United States and Saddam Hussein had reasons to ally with each other. The question is, what is it about US foreign policy that makes us these kinds of bedfellows, such that we have to conduct war to unseat them?

Q: Are you hopeful about the realisation of these dreams and aspirations for taking back the republic?

A: I don't know, but I think the hope for America to be a democratic republic is the founding hope. That has always been a work in progress. And there always come challenges. [The communist-hunting Senator Joseph] McCarthy was a challenge, today is a challenge, slavery was a challenge, the death of the Native Americans was a challenge, the eugenics movement before the Second World War was a challenge, the Depression was a challenge.

There have been so many challenges. We have a nation of leaders who cared deeply about this country. But now we face a situation where the stakes are so high that what I would hope to see is that Americans would look into the streets of New Orleans, into the streets of Falluja, and they would see a world that really is not viable. They would see a platform of ideas that are shortsighted, not holistic in nature. These are platforms of ideas that do not meet the needs of everyday people in the shrinking world. And so the question is: Will Americans come to see that with sufficient vigor to have the kind of impact that people need to have on policy and democracy?

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