

Extremely weak results in Robert Redford's *Lions for Lambs*

By Peter Daniels
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Directed by Robert Redford, screenplay by Michael Matthew Carnahan

Lions for Lambs is one of a considerable number of films made in the last few years about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Some of them, while leaving important political and historical issues unexplored, have nevertheless successfully dramatized the horrific consequences of the US invasions and occupations of these countries. *Lions for Lambs*, however, shares most of the weaknesses and none of the strengths of earlier films on this subject.

Noted actor-director Robert Redford (*Ordinary People*, *Quiz Show*) has cast himself in the film, along with such major names as Tom Cruise and Meryl Streep. The end result, nevertheless, is extremely weak, both from a dramatic standpoint and in terms of shedding any new light on the ongoing conflicts. One must assume that the screenplay, by Matthew Michael Carnahan (*The Kingdom*), reflects the director's outlook. It adds up to liberal perplexity and a careful refusal to expose the real roots of the militarism of the Bush Administration. The film consists largely of dialogue concerning the US quagmire in the Middle East, yet the word "oil" is never mentioned.

Problems begin with the basic structure of the movie. It cuts back and forth between three story lines, to limited effect. The first story concerns Republican Senator Jasper Irving (Tom Cruise), who has granted an exclusive hour-long interview to noted journalist Janine Roth (Meryl Streep). Irving's aim is to use the media to present a new war plan to advance US aims in Afghanistan. Cruise does a fairly credible job as a smooth-talking politician oozing sincerity and announcing a new escalation of the conflict in purposely bland and reassuring language. Republican presidential aspirant Mitt Romney comes to mind.

Streep's character is perhaps modeled on a female Bob Woodward. The journalist is presented as feeling somewhat guilty for having naively swallowed the earlier arguments for the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Streep veers between occasional sharp questioning and tongue-tied retreat. The overall impression is that of watching an internal debate over tactics within the US ruling elite. The journalist challenges the Senator, but only with statements that are very old news. "We armed Saddam in the 80s," she says at one point. "How can you not want to look at the past?" A few minutes later she adds, "Why did we send 150,000 troops to a country that didn't attack us?"

Why, indeed? The film never goes beyond this level of mealy-mouthed criticism, with questions that assume "good faith" on the part of the Bush Administration and the US military, and suggest that ignorance and arrogance are the only causes of the disaster.

The second of the story lines is even more stilted. Dr. Stephen Malley (Redford), a college professor, is reading the riot act in a rueful and fatherly sort of way to a brilliant but wayward student of his, Todd Hayes (Andrew Garfield). Hayes is a stereotype, the frivolous and privileged upper middle class student who has no convictions or passion about anything. The problem here is that he says absolutely nothing and we learn little. Hayes exists only to give Malley the chance to pontificate.

Dr. Malley is, it's fairly clear, a kind of alter ego of Redford himself—a world-weary liberal and humanist, a man whose faith in humanity is constantly being tested but who refuses to give up. In the course of his discussion with Hayes, Malley refers to two other students, Ernest Rodriguez (Michael Pena) and Arian Finch (Derek Luke). Ernest is Hispanic and Arian is black. These two also function as little more than

symbols and pretexts for the professor to explain his views on the war and on social conditions in the US.

Ernie and Arian, it seems, are model students, poster boys for affirmative action, and young men who absorb Malley's call for social commitment and responsibility by deciding to enlist in the army and head for Afghanistan. The professor suggests that the fundamental division in America is a racial one, or at any rate that between the prosperous majority and the largely minority poor. Explaining why Ernie and Arian have enlisted, Malley tells Todd, "The first ones who sign up are the ones we don't treat very well." "The privileged take a big step back when it comes to recruiting," he adds.

Malley explains that he was completely opposed to the decision of his students to volunteer for the war, but "that doesn't mean I didn't revere" what they did. Thus, Redford makes clear his surrender to the chauvinist propaganda about "supporting our troops," which must take precedence over whatever criticisms or doubts one has about the war.

The third thread of the film follows the tragic outcome of Ernie and Arian's decision to enlist. Here the film provides some "action," though it is of a highly improbable kind. The two inseparable friends find themselves on a snowswept Afghan battlefield, one having fallen from a helicopter and the other jumping after him. They are injured but alive, as the action follows the suspenseful efforts by their comrades to rescue them. Much of the concluding half of the film is devoted to this. The outcome gives Redford the chance to touch all bases once again: criticism of the war and its tragic consequences, coupled with admiration for US soldier "heroes."

Of course, the individual American soldier is not to blame for the war crimes being committed, but *Lions for Lambs* doesn't explore any of the issues raised. The illegal and unprovoked imperialist aggression is not called by its right name. The majority opposition to the war and the majority sentiment for the complete withdrawal of US troops is likewise not discussed. The reasons for the media support for the war drive are also reduced to the level of self-delusion. At one point, Roth makes an allusion to General Electric's takeover of NBC in the early 1990s, explaining that "ad revenue and ratings" are now the determining factors in the coverage of television news. The basic economic and

political driving forces behind the role of the media are largely obscured by this comment.

The fundamental class gulf between the soldiers—who are the victims in most cases of an "economic draft," having joined because there is little other opportunity for them—and the architects of the war that has killed nearly 4,000 US troops and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and Afghans is nowhere indicated in this film.

Indeed, to the extent the character played by Redford sees a class gulf in the U.S., he places himself among the privileged, as reflected in his comment about "the ones we don't treat very well."

One of the exchanges between the senator and the journalist sums up the confusion and the cowardice of *Lions for Lambs*. "Do you want to win the war on terror? Yes or no?" Irving demands of the liberal journalist. She is completely tongue-tied and essentially silent in response, and they move on. One can only assume that the filmmaker identifies with the journalist on this score. Horrible mistakes have been made. The "war on terror" has been waged wrongly, but... The opponents of the war are at a terrible disadvantage, Redford is suggesting, because we all agree on the need for the war on terror.

Here, Redford is speaking like the supporter of the Democratic Party that he is. The conceptions advanced in this film would not be out of place in a Democratic foreign policy plank calling for "redeployment" of US forces or a renewed emphasis on diplomacy and other tactical shifts, while maintaining the basic American presence in that part of the world.

Official or semi-official Democratic Party liberalism, which has to conceal or ignore so much (including the filthy role of the Democrats themselves), is largely incapable of presenting an adequately complex picture of events or human beings; much-needed truthful and compelling films about subjects like the Iraq and Afghanistan wars will come from another source.

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