

Netflix's *War Machine*: A hard-hitting attack on America's military madness

By Joanne Laurier
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Written and directed by David Michôd

The Netflix satire *War Machine* is a forceful work that depicts the futility and madness of war in general and the war in Afghanistan in particular. The film revives a venerable tradition of anti-military and anti-war drama and comedy in the US, which the media and the establishment thought (or hoped) had been thoroughly suppressed and even extinguished.

Written and directed by Australian David Michôd, and produced by and starring Brad Pitt, the film is based on the 2012 non-fiction book, *The Operators: The Wild and Terrifying Inside Story of America's War in Afghanistan*, by the late American journalist Michael Hastings.

Hastings, only 33 when he died under suspicious circumstances in June 2013, authored "The Runaway General," the article for *Rolling Stone* magazine in 2010 that led to the removal of Gen. Stanley McChrystal from his post as ranking US commanding officer in Afghanistan. *War Machine* is a fictional account of McChrystal's tenure in Afghanistan and the events leading up to his firing.

In the movie, Pitt plays a platinum-haired Gen. Glen McMahon who, in 2009, has just been appointed to direct the war in Afghanistan, already in its eighth bloody year. McMahon, according to the narration, arrives fresh from "a successful stint running the secretive special operations killing machine in Iraq." The narrator, Sean Cullen (Scoot McNairy), a *Rolling Stone* journalist, describes the general as "a throwback to another era," his hand "bent into a permanent claw, like it was still clutching a World War II cigar."

With a frozen face and a freakish squint, McMahon runs seven miles before breakfast, sleeps only a few hours a night and has been dubbed "the Lion King, the G-Man, Big Glen and, most commonly, the Glenimal" by his entourage of toadies. Front of that pack is the psychopathic Greg Pulver (Anthony Michael Hall), loosely based on Gen. Michael Flynn—described by a staffer in Hastings' book as a "rat on acid." Other members include Cory Staggart (John Magaro) as McMahon's special operations advisor and Matt Little (Topher Grace) as his civilian press consultant.

Michôd's *War Machine* presents the war in Afghanistan as a debacle, presided over by lunatics and egomaniacs (in Hastings' *The Operators*, the author describes the war as a "clusterfuck" that "defied satisfying analysis").

The mockery directed against America's military and geopolitical policies begins at the outset, when the narrator ironizes, "Ah, America. You beacon of composure and proportionate response. You bringer of calm and goodness to the world."

The conflict is presented as an entirely doomed project. In this regard, the tone is set early on by the journalist-narrator, who refers to "two types of generals in the American military. There are those who

believe they can win in the face of all evidence to the contrary. And there are those who know they can't. Unfortunately for the world, it's the believers who climb to the top of the ladder."

The narrator insists on getting "a handle on the madness of modern American war." He explains that the US military's "counterinsurgency" strategy (McMahon has his own personalized version—SNORPP, short for Systemic Negation Of Repetitive Procedural Practice) runs up against basic political realities. "When ... you've just gone and invaded a place that you probably shouldn't have, you end up fighting against just regular people in regular-people clothes. These guys are what are called insurgents. Basically, they're just guys who picked up weapons 'cause ... so would you, if someone invaded your country. Funnily enough ... insurgencies are next to impossible to defeat."

War Machine's voice-over points out that the British and French tried to hang on to their "crumbling empires" through counterinsurgency and the efforts failed. "You can't win the trust of a country by invading it. You can't build a nation at gunpoint."

The film's version of McChrystal/McMahon's sojourn in Afghanistan includes the general's conflicts with Obama administration officials over release of his initial assessment (which the officials want to sit on and which he subsequently leaks to the US media) and, based on that assessment, his demands for tens of thousands of additional troops. *War Machine* devotes a portion of its time and energy to the Afghan war commander's jaunt across Europe, where he attempts to raise more soldiers from reluctant US allies. It also touches upon his fantasy of winning the "hearts and minds" of the Afghan people, with "the unassailable might and power of our ideals." Helping to pour cold water on that possibility, American officials inform the general that the sole crop the occupying force will permit local farmers to grow is poppies for the heroin trade.

It is not possible or necessary to recount every detail, but certain episodes and themes stand out. They stand out, above all, because they run counter to the official US media and political establishment narrative, which finds almost unanimous expression in film and television. In other words, *War Machine* punches through the big lie.

One of the more striking and lengthier sequences occurs when McMahon encounters a unit of Marines, just back from rest and rehabilitation in Italy, and who we will meet again. A young black soldier (Lakeith Stanfield) complains to McMahon, "I can't tell the difference between the people and the enemy. They all look alike to me. I'm pretty sure they're the same people, sir." To which the Afghan commander replies, "Sometimes when you're dealing with an insurgency, you're not gonna be 100 percent clear on who the enemy is."

Once McMahon has his troop “surge,” he sets out to organize Operation Moshtarak, aimed at removing the Taliban from the town of Marjah and destroying its influence in Helmand Province (which McMahon has just been told by a British military official is “a lost cause”).

During the battle of Marjah the death of an Afghan child traumatizes the same black soldier. A Marine sergeant offers money and empty platitudes to the grieving father. Later, a translator repeats a local man’s blunt protest to McMahon, “And every day that you spend here longer, the worse it will be for them [the residents] when you leave. So please, leave now. Please.”

The pointed portrayal of Afghan President Hamid Karzai (Ben Kingsley), Washington’s puppet, in *War Machine* adds a darkly and lively comic note.

In one scene, McMahon feels obliged to seek Karzai’s approval for Operation Moshtarak, and complains to the president, who he has not been able to reach, that he is not behaving “like a leader.”

Karzai-Kingsley responds sagely, but cheerfully, “But I am behaving like a leader. I’m unavailable. I am as unavailable to you as is your own president. Hmm? You have my approval, General. We both know it was never really mine to give. But... I thank you for inviting me to participate in the theater of it all.”

The performances in *War Machine* reflect genuine thought and commitment. The actors here, for once, are attached to an important reality.

Pitt bears the largest weight in the film, and bears it admirably. He enables us to “get inside the mind [and empty soul] of Glen McMahon,” this madman in whose hands lies the fate of vast numbers of human beings. Much of the role necessarily involves debunking, criticizing, not something American actors have done much of in recent decades. Too often actors want to be loved. Pitt remains unlovable and unattractive virtually throughout, as he should.

The general is a fraud. Supposedly committed to keeping the civilian population alive and sympathetic, he presides over war crimes. He is renowned for his irrepressible energy and determination, but what does that lead to? Destruction, criminality ... His “folksy,” “man of the people” demeanor is another charade. As the narrator points out, “Glen was known as a humble man. But humble in that way that says, ‘My humility makes me better than you.’”

Hall gives Pulver-Flynn (“His official title was director of intelligence, but all I saw was a guy with anger management issues whose life had no meaning without Glen.”) his terrifying due. Tilda Swinton, as a pacifistic German politician who questions McMahon’s crude insurgency “arithmetic,” makes a mark during her brief time on screen.

Not everything in *War Machine* works. There are issues of tone and consistency and pace. The first half of the film is more successful. The European portion, in which we witness the personal idiosyncrasies and misbehavior of McMahon’s team, drags somewhat. Largely secondary issues suddenly arise.

The film does not delve into the larger geopolitical realities behind the war drive in the Middle East and Central Asia. Related to that perhaps, the Netflix movie’s comic, not to say occasionally flippant, element is incompatible at certain moments with the awfulness of the situation. To his credit, Michôd does allow the tragedy to unfold in the film’s culminating scenes, but at times the work suffers from a flatness as it tries to find the proper balance between dark and light.

However, even the failings in *War Machine* have to be seen in historical and artistic context. Michôd, Pitt and company are traveling

in what is relatively uncharted territory in our day. Savagely satirizing and mocking the “glorious” American military, dripping with blood from every pore, has become practically illegal in the US. Widespread popular hostility toward a quarter century of brutal war and toward the politicians and generals who have conducted it finds virtually no outlet in American culture. Here, for once, the pent-up disgust and horror comes through.

Michôd explains in an interview, “The great sadness and the great concern is that we—and by we, I mean the United States and its allies, including my great country, Australia—are not only still at war in Afghanistan, but that this ‘War on Terror’ has expanded now to six or seven other different countries. And it’s shocking to me how seemingly un-newsworthy this stuff is.”

He told another interviewer, “And, at some point, in the process of outlining the movie, I realized that what I wanted to do was not just make a movie about the insanity of war but I wanted to make the movie feel insane. I wanted to create a kind of sharp and pronounced tonal schism between that upper executive level and the boots on the ground in order to make that distinction more pronounced.”

The critics for the most part have been unsettled by *War Machine*. They pick on certain weaknesses as a means of dismissing the film’s sharp and long-overdue critique. *Variety*, for instance, snidely refers to Michôd’s film as a “costly flop,” a “big-budget Netflix misfire” and a “colossally miscalculated satire.” A CNN review headline reads, “Brad Pitt’s ‘War Machine’ fizzles on Netflix.”

These are some of the same people who find complexity and depth in the rubbish Hollywood ordinarily churns out, including its exercises in psychotic violence, along with its superhero and comic book movies.

In fact, if the truth be told, the critics and the media generally identify with the US military and its drive for global hegemony. They instinctively react to any exposure of the institutions that protect their stock portfolios and comfortable lives. They are outraged that the universal consensus about the “war on terror,” another enormous falsehood, is broken through.

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