

Arts & Letters

FILM

[*In the Valley of Elah*]

In the Shadow of the Valley

By Steve Sailer

THOUGH IT IS OFTEN ACCUSED of imposing a political agenda on the public, Hollywood isn't organized to churn out topical movies quickly. Thus, only now, 54 months after the invasion of Iraq, is a major feature film about the war's impact premiering.

"In the Valley of Elah" is a modest-budget drama laden with luminaries. Oscar-magnet screenwriter Paul Haggis ("Crash" and "Million Dollar Baby") directs fellow Academy Award winners Tommy Lee Jones, Charlize Theron, and Susan Sarandon in a spare, somber, and moving police procedural.

"Elah" is based on the notorious 2003 murder of Spc. Richard Davis by his fellow soldiers shortly after their unit arrived stateside from combat in Iraq. At some point after a drunken brawl outside a strip club, Davis was stabbed 32 times. His comrades-in-arms then dismembered his body, burnt it, and hid his remains in the woods.

Working from Mark Boal's *Playboy* article, Haggis wrote the central role of the victim's father, a laconic retired Army sergeant and former military policeman in Vietnam, for his mentor Clint Eastwood, but the 77-year-old told him he had retired from acting. So

Haggis turned to 61-year-old Tommy Lee Jones, who, as his formidable performance in "Elah" demonstrates, is still very much in his prime.

In this fictionalized retelling, Jones receives a phone call from the Army that his son has gone AWOL. He immediately drives to the base to search for him, bringing his decades of experience finding soldiers on benders. Yet neither the MPs nor the local cops are much interested in this routine disappearance, and they resent the father's imposing martial presence—his pants as sharply creased as his face—as a taciturn rebuke to their bureaucratic apathy.

When a hacked-up body is found in the brush, however, Theron, a city detective promoted from meter maid because (as her chauvinist colleagues repeatedly remind her) she'd been sleeping with the boss, admits that the old soldier is the superior sleuth and forms a wary alliance with him. In a touching scene, Jones tells the single mother's young son a bedtime story of how the boy David fought the giant Goliath in the Valley of Elah.

As a director, Haggis's strength is that he's not intimidated by his screenwriter's fame. Haggis edited out an hour of his own dialogue, making "Elah" far quieter than the brilliant but showy "Crash." Here, Haggis lets his superb cast carry the film through long silent takes.

For example, the morning after the corpse is sent to the coroner for identification, Jones is awakened by a knock on his motel room door. Outside is a soldier in full-dress uniform. Having worn this same uniform to deliver the same message to other parents, the despairing father knows what's coming. For 15 seconds he struggles to prepare himself to receive the blow in the only way he

knows, willing his tired body to stand at rigid military attention.

In a brief role, Sarandon might be even better than Jones. Having lost her older son to a helicopter crash in training, she asks her husband, "Couldn't you have left me just one?" When he protests that he didn't tell their boy to enlist, she responds that their son couldn't have grown up in their home without feeling that he'd never be a man until he served. Jones has no answer.

While murders in most movies are the result of cunning conspiracies that can be satisfyingly unraveled, real-life killings like this one frequently transpire among drunk or drugged-up young men for motives that remain hazy—Davis's killer refused to testify—and might well turn out to be just plain stupid.

Into this vacuum, Haggis boldly ventures, theorizing that the soldiers were suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder caused by guilt over their abuse of Iraqi civilians—war crimes that are inevitable due to the very nature of urban counter-insurgency warfare.

Perhaps, but Haggis isn't a strong enough visual director to make the flashbacks to Iraq sufficiently nightmarish. And do veterans really murder each other more than other young men kill their companions? Or is the Davis killing semi-famous because it was the kind of atypical man-bites-dog story that the press loves?

Movies like "Elah" that are ripped from the headlines give the screenwriter too much of an excuse to leave in implausible events because, hey, it's a true story, so it's not my fault if it seems unrealistic. ■

Rated R for violent and disturbing content, language, and some sexuality/nudity.

BOOKS

[*Cheney: The Untold Story of America's Most Powerful and Controversial Vice President*, Stephen F. Hayes, HarperCollins, 592 pages]

A Valentine for the Veep

By Gary Brecher

THEY SAY the Byzantines were debating what sex angels were while the Turks' cannon were destroying the walls of Constantinople. So I guess we shouldn't be surprised that Stephen Hayes, a clean-cut lad who looks like he ought to be named Chad, has just rushed out this 500-page bio gushing over every stage of Dick Cheney's life. You might think Hayes was doing a postmortem to show where Cheney went wrong, but *au contraire*. Hayes's whole effort aims to prove that Iraq wasn't Cheney fault—and besides, the war was a good idea! It's going great!

That's the kind of logic you get from Hayes—and that's the good part. Before the 200 pages on Iraq, you have to plow through 300 pages about the childhood, college career (if you could call it that), and home life of Richard Cheney. Let me summarize this part in half a sentence: dullest guy in the world.

Reading this book recalls what veterans say about war: hours of boredom interrupted by a few minutes of terror. Three hundred pages of tedium interrupted by 200 pages of passing the buck—or rather, the dinar.

This book is written strictly for the 15 percent of America that still loves Dick Cheney. They'll swallow any nonsense because admitting that he was wrong about Iraq means acknowledging they were wrong, too, and these conceited jerks would sooner see America humiliated and bankrupt. But if you're not part

of the neocon cult, you'll have a hard time getting through. I barely made it out of the chapters covering Cheney's boyhood.

Only an intelligence agency could come up with a backstory this boring. The only interesting thing anybody in his family ever did was when his mom played women's softball back in the 1930s, before it was considered normal for women. (So I guess it is genetic after all, or am I not allowed to say that?) Anyway, the rest of the family has the kind of history you'd forget in a second—just long lists of folks with three two-syllable names.

Then came the great day when Thomas Herbert Cheney married Margaret Ellen Tyler. You can tell she was a natural to join the family because she had three names with the proper number of syllables. And their union was blessed with Richard Bruce (!) Cheney.

Poor Stephen Hayes. He's forced to strain all of his journalistic muscles built from years of practice at *The Weekly Standard* to make Cheney's boyhood sound interesting. He writes like he trained at *Pravda*, meaning he spends most of his time licking Cheney's boots like a commie hack doing a bio of Kim Il Sung.

For example, Cheney had a paper route. So did I. But listen to the way Hayes tells it: "Cheney started working early, at the age of nine, mowing lawns and delivering the *Lincoln Journal Star*. Each day, Cheney would get a bundle of papers delivered to his house. He sorted them, folded them, and wrapped them with a rubber band. Then he grouped them in a bag, draped it over his bicycle handlebars, and pedaled throughout College View firing newsprint missiles at front porches."

Wow! I didn't know having a paper route counted as military experience. And to think that little Dick not only fired those newsprint missiles at unsuspecting front porches but "sorted them, folded them, and"—let's not forget—"wrapped them with a rubber band." Straight out of Horatio Alger! Talk about seeds of greatness!

The sad truth is that up until he landed us in Iraq, Cheney was just plain dull—so dull that hardworking Hayes

jumped on that paper-route bit like it was biographical gold. And he was right. Compared to most details of Cheney's early life, this was high drama.

Young Dick went to a tech-nerd summer camp called "The Cherubs Program" and enjoyed driving drunk, accumulating two DUI convictions to add to what Hayes calls "his already impressive résumé." In truth, the only impressive thing on Cheney's résumé was that he got into Yale, even though he did it because a big donor liked him and called up the admissions office. Once there, he flunked out. Twice. Or, to quote Hayes, Cheney suffered from "poor academic performance." Yeah. The kind where they cancel your scholarship and tell you to get the hell out. Then let you back in next year. Then flunk you out again.

This is awkward for the poor biographer, who wants to make Cheney out to be the deep thinker of the DUI Duo, aka the Bush administration. And the way Hayes goes about explaining why Cheney bombed so bad at Yale is like a shorter version of his story about why Cheney bombed so bad, so to speak, in Iraq. Both times, the answer is simple: everybody else is to blame.

In the Yale case, it was the university's fault. Hayes calls this chapter "To Yale and Back," which I guess is one way of looking at it. Cheney, you see, was just too pure for those Ivy League elitists: "When Dick Cheney arrived at Yale he brought the West with him." Yeah, I can just see those limp-wristed Yalies now:

"I say, old boy, where did those dreadful buffalo herds come from?"

"Oh, that dreary freshman Cheney dragged them along with him. What a bore!"

Even the freshman football coach at Yale was a durn egghead: he published a book called *Fundamental Football*, which Hayes calls "an indication that the academic maxim 'publish or perish' may have extended from the classroom to the stadium."

Well, by gosh, all that intellectualism was too much for Mr. Wild West. He and his buddies just wanted to drink beer, watch "Maverick" on TV, and engage in