

# Arts & Letters

## FILM

[*Stop-Loss*]

### No Exit

By Kara Hopkins

WATCHING “Stop-Loss” in a nearly empty Washington theater, I had a fantasy. On the back row sat the staff of the *Weekly Standard*. Then the senators who make windy speeches about “fighting terrorists there so we don’t have to fight them here.” Maybe a row of radio-show hosts who play “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue” from the safety of their studios. Then right in front, the president and his war cabinet, spending two hours with the pawns they keep sending back to the bloody chessboard. Three tours. Four. Five.

Of course it didn’t happen that way. Not only did D.C. skip “Stop-Loss,” the rest of the country did too. It opened in seventh place at the box office. Americans aren’t looking to be entertained by something they’d like to ignore. I counted just nine heads in the dark—three with haircuts indicating they had already seen plenty.

“Stop-Loss” is less a great movie than a worthy experience. It isn’t meant to be enjoyable. The film opens in Tikrit with a jangle of images, grainy and unfiltered, narrated in the dialect Tom Wolfe called “F--k Patois.” Boredom cuts to piety turns to joking shifts to terror.

Staff Sergeant Brandon King (Ryan Phillippe), nearing the end of his second tour, leads his men into an alley ambush. Only half walk out. Stamped on the

young Texan’s brain: his friend’s bloodied face, a grenade rolling across the floor, bullet holes in a child’s chest. The images follow him home.

Director Kimberly Peirce found inspiration in the hand-held videos shot by her brother’s friends while he served in Iraq. The messiness suits her, and she doesn’t press hard after a point. Apart from a few soapbox moments, “Stop-Loss” doesn’t sermonize about the morality of the Iraq War. The human wreckage suffices.

King’s unit returns to Texas, but Peirce doesn’t allow the tension to dissipate. Her young men are still tight-wound and combat-ready. They endure their parade, kiss their girls, then embark on a full tour of the Little Shop of Horrors that is post-traumatic stress disorder. Binge drinking? Check. Random rage? On full display. Pulling guns on strangers? Impotence? Hallucinations? Flashbacks? Abuse? All present. When a troubled soldier walks over a hill, it’s a safe bet that he won’t be back. Suicide was the only symptom not yet catalogued.

This dramatic compression diminishes the gravity of the situation—a pit-fall of setting reality to cinematic pace. Every returning vet isn’t tormented by a legion of demons. But if even a small percentage of the 650,000 soldiers who have served in Iraq or Afghanistan bear psychic scars, theirs is indeed a “long war.”

King seems able to cope. He survived and is getting out. Until he isn’t. As he tries to turn in his gear, King learns that he, like 81,000 other American soldiers, has been stop-lossed on the president’s order. Fine print rules. He will be returning to Iraq.

Up to that point, the young sergeant has been poster-boy bland—square-jawed and humorless. Of course he played high-school football and has a gritty mom and stoic dad. He does the hometown proud and doesn’t speak out of turn. But this asks too much.

Borrowing his best friend’s Jeep and fiancée, the winsome Michelle (Abbie Cornish), King takes off on a cross-country odyssey to see a senator in Washington who will surely set things right. The earnestness endears. “Why don’t you write a letter to the editor while you’re at it?” another AWOL soldier quips. King ends up with an old liberal fixer who slides a Canadian passport across the table.

But he’s too good a soldier to walk away without a fight. The values that came with the uniform declare war on each other: duty and humanity, brutality and decency. “You know that box in your head where you put all the bad s--t you can’t deal with?” he confesses. “Well, mine is full.”

His best friend re-enlists. “This is something I can be proud of,” he says, thumping the medals on his chest. “Did you think I’d end up selling cars? This is safety.” Another man from King’s unit—blinded, burned, missing an arm and a leg as a result of the Tikrit ambush—speculates that if he could go back and be killed in action, his family would get green cards. Another admits, “I miss blowing s--t up.” There is no easy ethic here.

But in the end there’s an obvious course for Sergeant King. He does the right thing—and it feels wrong. ■

Rated R for violence and profanity.

[Steve Sailer will return next issue.]

## BOOKS

[*The Strange Death of Republican America: Chronicles of a Collapsing Party*, Sidney Blumenthal, Union Square Press, 352 pages]

# Premature Burial

By Tom Piatak

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL'S latest collection of essays, *The Strange Death of Republican America: Chronicles of a Collapsing Party*, certainly has passages of wit and insight. Blumenthal generally succeeds in justifying his contempt for the Bush administration and the neoconservatives. Unfortunately, his disdain does not stop there; he also reveals a dislike for all varieties of conservatism and an alienation from the rather large part of America that does not share his leftism. This estrangement, shared by many in the Democratic Party elite, suggests that Blumenthal's conclusion—that Bush and the neocons have destroyed the Republican Party—is premature.

Blumenthal presents the Bush administration as an unhealthy mix of sycophantic incompetents, such as Condoleezza Rice and Alberto Gonzales (“cipher, enabler, and useful idiot”), and neocon fanatics, such as Douglas Feith and Paul Wolfowitz. He finds the right anecdotes to illustrate both obsequiousness and ideological extremism, quoting, for example, chief of staff Josh Bolten saying to Bush every morning, “Thank you for the privilege of serving today.” Wolfowitz’s fanaticism is well shown by his prediction about the “liberation of Iraq”: “when that regime is removed we will find one of the most talented populations in the Arab world, perhaps complaining that it took us so long to get there. Perhaps a little

unfriendly to the French for making us take so long to get there. But basically welcoming us as liberators. ...There’s not going to be the hostility. ...There simply won’t be.”

Blumenthal understands the source of the neoconservatives’ ideology, describing them as “Leninist-like ideologues” and noting, “neoconservatism had its origins as a strain of Trotskyism.” He rightly pegs Dick Cheney as a fervent neocon and a driving force of the Bush administration’s agenda: “Cheney’s involvement with neoconservatism has been continuous for more than three decades.” Furthermore, Blumenthal accurately identifies the centrality of Israel to the neocon calculus: “The neocon logic in favor of the Iraq war was that the road to Jerusalem led through Baghdad.” And he is on target in his assertion that “the terrorists are a real but not existential threat, that they should not be misconstrued as the central problem in our foreign policy, and that their presence can be coped with through confidence, fortitude, and intelligence.”

Yet this book is also tedious—do we really need half a dozen essays on Valerie Plame?—and marred by unrelenting partisanship. The author is exercised over Bush’s commutation of Libby’s sentence, but was that action less justified than Bill Clinton’s full pardon of Marc Rich? Indeed, Blumenthal still carries a torch for the Clintons that the rest of the liberal media, distracted by the glow of Obamamania, has dropped. Our foolish intervention in the Balkans is described as “an example of U.S. leadership,” Bob Woodward is criticized for his “envious contempt for Bill Clinton (and Al Gore),” Bush’s problems stem from his determination “to do everything opposite from what Bill Clinton had done,” and one repentant Bush staffer is portrayed as seeking absolution by performing the only penance that can blot out his Republican sins, “preparing to disappear for the next ten years in Africa for the HIV/AIDS initiative of the Clinton Foundation.”

Blumenthal even describes the 2008 election as the most important since

1860, with one vision of the presidency, “whose founding father was George Washington,” clashing with another, “whose founding father was Richard Nixon.” One almost expects to read how Bill Clinton could not lie about chopping down the cherry tree, and how Hillary—under constant sniper fire—crossed the Delaware.

Hillary’s tall tale about her adventures in Bosnia, and Obama’s 20-year association with Reverend “God Damn America” also suggest another weakness of Blumenthal’s book: the Republican Party may not be dead after all. Even though Bush has been a disastrous president and McCain is stubbornly attached to many of Bush’s worst policies, such as a desire to spread democracy by force, a wish to erase the border with Mexico, and an unalterable commitment to globalism and free trade, he is doing rather well in the polls. A recent Rasmussen survey showed McCain topping Clinton 51 percent to 43 percent and beating Obama 51 percent to 43 percent.

It is, of course, possible, even likely, that the Democrats will win the victory that they think eight years of Bush should give them. But any coalition that can survive the Bush presidency is strong, not weak. And if McCain is elected, it will be clear that the Republican Party is alive, despite Blumenthal’s obituary.

The book also suggests, perhaps inadvertently, why the coalition assembled by Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan might pass its latest test. The Republicans have been successful for many years because they have convinced most Americans that, in important ways, the GOP is the more American of the two major parties. An engineer friend of mine, who has broad paleoconservative sympathies and no love for Bush, captured this view perfectly in 2004 when he told me that the Kerry-Edwards slogan of “For a Stronger America” should really have been “For a Stranger America.” And Republicans have had no better helpers in creating this image than Democrats, whose distance from the nation’s mainstream was brought