

The Iron Triangle
Directed by Eric Weston

By Pat Aufderheide

THE VIETNAM WAR ENDED 15 YEARS ago and yet it has taken this long to abandon the stereotypical references to the Viet Cong," announces the press kit for *The Iron Triangle*, as if the producers hoped for a promotional firestorm of controversy.

But trend watchers can relax. Stereotypes endure in this odd feature film, although they follow the lines of transmutation in recent films about the war.

Touting itself as the first film to tell the war from the Vietnamese perspective, it is instead yet another grunt's-eye view. That perspective—seen in films as diverse as *Platoon*, *Good Morning, Vietnam* and *Dear America*—is a moral safe haven where sentimental values can be maintained while bumping blame upwards to officialdom (U.S. politicians, the Communist Party) and broader social forces (politics, war).

The film, an independent production studded with familiar faces, breaks no new ideological ground and provides no insights to match Neil Sheehan's recent and powerful book, *A Bright, Shining Lie* (see *In These Times*, Feb. 8). Nor does it dare an interpretation from "the

The Iron Triangle, the leaden film angle

Vietnamese" perspective. It does, however, allow ample screen time for the trials of a Vietnamese soldier within his platoon, based on a Vietnamese soldier's diary and lib-

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erally laced with gambits eclectically drawn from *The Deerhunter*, *Platoon* and other recent films.

Buddies under the skin: *The Iron Triangle* (the title refers to a hot battle zone at the southern end of the Ho Chi Minh Trail) tells the intertwined story of two men, one an American officer (Beau Bridges) and one a Viet Cong grunt (Liem Whatley, a Vietnamese with an American stepfather). The American officer, Capt. Keene, is a tough guy with a soft heart, fighting simply because "my country called," and moved to anger only when the savage South Vietnamese officer insists on brutalizing and killing prisoners. You can tell he has his doubts about the war, because after his platoon conducts a search-and-destroy mission on a village, he glumly translates a U.S. pamphlet dumped by helicopters. "It says we're their friends. Friends," he says.

The film also tracks a Vietnamese platoon (narrative problems resolved by a retrospective voice-over by Bridges). Ho is a nice city kid, a Vietnamese analogue to Chris in *Platoon*. He's been pulled into the war after his schoolteacher father was murdered by the South Vietnamese military. He's at odds with Khoi, a lifer and Communist Party official, and on the good side of his commander.

Keene and Ho meet in an ambush, when Ho takes Keene prisoner but Khoi claims him. Khoi behaves just as brutally to his prisoner as the South Vietnamese military man had in an earlier scene, and Ho decides to take Keene to his commander himself. When the American forces meet up with the Viet Cong contingent in search of Ho and Keene, this unlikely buddy film has its final climax.

This is a war film that does not abolish the good-guys/bad-guys distinction that drives the classic war film. But it dislocates the traditional enemy. Here, the bad guys are everywhere except among the American forces in the field and in the characters of Ho and his troubled commander. (Haing Ngor

plays the commander with the earnest meticulousness he brought to the role of Dith Pran in *The Killing Fields*. As a Cambodian, with an understandable deep grudge against the Vietnamese and against Communist rhetoric, he says he took the role because the gods saved his life "to tell the world, to wake up the world's opinion, to let you know how cruel the Communist regime is.")

Vietnamese officials, both North and South, are shown as amoral and vicious. Among Westerners, a non-American takes the role of bad guy. French musical and movie star Johnny Hallyday plays the body-

The Iron Triangle is really just another grunt's-eye view of Vietnam.

guard for a luscious Vietnamese propaganda leader with flinty-eyed enthusiasm. "Let them kill each other off," he advises Keene.

This crazy war: The film makes a case against ideology, and for common humanity. Keene gambles his life on something in common with Ho, as he forewarns us in an initial voice-over: "We couldn't have been more different. Maybe we couldn't have been any more alike. But soon

this crazy war would bring us together." And Ho says to his doomed platoon buddy, "We have always been told that the end justifies the means, but not this way." Ed Artis, a Vietnam veteran who was the film's military adviser, says in press materials, "There was a lot of compassion in Vietnam. It wasn't all combat."

But compassion is played out here within the confines of muffled ideology. The crucial drama is Ho's struggle for humanity within his own platoon. Its poignancy is bought not so much at the cost of a diffuse anti-communism as much as it is at the cost of simply delegating an explanation for "this crazy war" into the ether.

The Iron Triangle has a topical interest, because it is indeed the first film to offer a significant amount of screen time to any Vietnamese character (although *Good Morning, Vietnam* gave two Vietnamese characters some revealing moments). But it will fade rapidly, partly because the film is executed unconvincingly (the script problems are grossly signalled with the resort to clumsy narrative voice-over). It will also fade rapidly because of the banality of the central point, that even enemies are people. It is a point that has consistently been overridden by ideological and political interests, as the hapless victim-heroes of *The Iron Triangle* exemplify. ■

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Reagan aftermath: Congress demands fairness from FCC

ing room. As Matthew Rinaldo (R-NJ) put it, the doctrine "is a simple reminder to broadcasters of their obligation under the law." Jim Cooper (D-TN) said we need a Fairness Doctrine until broadcasters stop saying "Stay tuned"—or, as one d.j. he lis-

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tens to say, "Lock it in and tear the knob off"—rather than urging their listeners to switch stations to get a diversity of opinion. Members muttered in sympathy when Michael Oxley (R-OH) explained how upset he was with broadcasters "whose IQs were probably not higher than the highest number on the FM dial" rallying support against the pay raise.

But Al Swift (D-WA) cut through the rhetoric. "Let's get on with it," he said. The issue was simple: The FCC had "defied Congress," and now "the jurisdictional issue has got to be dealt with." W.J. "Billy" Tauzin (D-LA) agreed: "I am doggone sick and tired of having someone other than Congress making communication policy, whether his name is [FCC head] Patrick or [Judge] Greene [who handled the divestiture of AT&T]."

Jurisdiction may be all that is set-

tled by the highly probable passage of the bill. Everyone expects that the Supreme Court will have the last word. The day after the hearing, an appeals court ruled that the FCC's decision abolishing the doctrine was valid, although it did not rule on the unconstitutionality of the doctrine. The decision apparently will not affect the legislation.

Broadcasters won't lose. Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman John Dingell (D-MI), leader in the jurisdictional battle, assured them. "Once this issue has been disposed of, once we have been freed of the oppression of addressing this matter," he said, "we can then entertain requests for preferred treatment from the broadcasters." He was referring to, among other things, "must-carry" legislation (requiring cable systems to carry broadcast signals).

Legislators have personal reasons to care about the doctrine. Provisions of the law related to it (and still enforced) guarantee political candidates, among other things, the right to reply to station editorials for their opponents and to reply to attacks on them by opponents' supporters.

Beyond this jurisdictional battle,

trading of chips and safeguarding of politicians' self-interest, is there an issue in the public interest here? Hearing witness Thomas Goodgame, president of Westinghouse's Television Station Group (which operates five powerhouse stations), argued that "broadcasting is a special privilege—the privilege to serve the public. With that privilege come certain obligations," he said. "The concept of the Fairness Doctrine is so basic to good broadcast journalism that, frankly, at times I find it difficult to figure out what the fuss over the doctrine is all about."

In fact, there's a lot more fuss than facts on the way the Fairness Doctrine has worked. Since it has most often functioned as a guideline for program managers, and when acted on has mostly been used at the station level in private negotiations, it's hard to pin down either "chilling effects" or imbalance.

Hard evidence: That's why a report by the U.S. Public Interest Research Group (USPIRG) and the Safe Energy Communication Council (SECC) released at the hearing was big news. It provided rare hard evidence of the effectiveness of the doctrine and the implications of its absence. Although several corollaries of the doctrine were not abolished by the FCC decision, including balanced coverage of ballot issues, the study found that many radio and TV stations didn't know that.

USPIRG and SECC looked at 432 radio and TV stations that had sold time to industry advertisers on

election issues during the last election. The beverage industry on recycling and litter bills in Montana and New Jersey, the tobacco and insurance industries on California propositions, a Washington oil industry coalition on toxic waste cleanup, and the nuclear utility industry on a safe energy question in Massachusetts were all given time. Citizens' groups who approached stations for rebuttal time got a mixed response.

Nearly a third (31 percent) of the stations were not aware they had any such obligation. And of them, almost half (44 percent) refused to present opposing points of view. Still, the regulation was effective in more than half of those cases, once citizens' groups reminded the station of the law.

By contrast, almost all (98 percent) of those stations that acknowledged the responsibility for balance on ballot issues agreed to air opposing points of view, most without negotiation.

The quality of public affairs coverage on radio and TV doesn't hang solely on the Fairness Doctrine. Other deregulation, the changing market and the tastes of American information consumers have a lot more to do with what we get to hear about. But if the evidence displayed at the House subcommittee hearing was any indication, broadcasters still need to have a reminder in writing that they use the public airwaves at the cost of public service. ■

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IS OFFICIAL: CONGRESS IS MAD AS HELL at the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), and it's not going to take it anymore.

In a hearing February 9, the House telecommunications subcommittee launched a fast-moving attempt to recodify the Fairness Doctrine. And it showcased evidence that broadcasters may still need it.

In August 1987 the FCC declared it would no longer enforce the Fairness Doctrine, which for decades had required broadcasters to air controversial issues and to do so fairly. The deregulation-happy Reagan FCC had decided it was unconstitutional.

Many broadcasters were delighted. They had argued the Fairness Doctrine infringed on their First Amendment rights and "chilled" their coverage of controversial issues. Many public interest and issue groups, from left to right, were angry. They argued, as had the Supreme Court decision on the doctrine in 1969, that the viewers' and listeners' rights were paramount.

Congress had watched the Reagan-era FCC steadily chip away at its constitutional mandate, and the Fairness Doctrine became the place where it drew the line. But Reagan vetoed a recodification in the 100th Congress. So with the new administration Congress is trying again. It was the first item on the subcommittee's agenda this session.

FM IQs: A one-note chorus arose on both sides of the dais in the hear-

El Salvador

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political bombshell by agreeing to participate in the upcoming presidential elections providing they were postponed from March 19 until September 15. The FMLN said that if its conditions were accepted it would mobilize its base in support of the Democratic Convergence, the left-wing coalition containing the two parties allied with the FMLN in the Democratic Revolutionary Front (FDR), Guillermo Ungo's National Revolutionary Movement (MNR) and Ruben Zamora's Popular Social Christian Movement (MPSC).

The FMLN proposal reversed their decade-long rejection of elections, which they had dismissed as part of the U.S. counterinsurgency strategy.

President Duarte initially rejected the guerrilla proposal as unconstitutional, calling it a "proposal for war." The State Depart-

ment, however, said that Duarte hadn't really meant that and pressured him behind the scenes to not categorically reject it and at least make a counterproposal to hurt the guerrillas politically. Eventually Duarte softened his line.

Rightist reversals: The rightist Arena Party had also initially rejected the proposal. But realizing that opposing peace is bad politics in an election year, Arena reversed itself and proposed an amnesty that would allow the five FMLN *comandantes* to come to the Arena-controlled Assembly to explain their proposal.

Finally, the Christian Democrats also reversed their position, and candidate Fidel Chavez Mena said they seek a consensus response to the FMLN proposal along with the other parties.

Some on the right have said that the FMLN proposal isn't serious, that the FMLN proposed it expecting it to be rejected. Although the FMLN might have expected it to be re-

jected, they still had to be prepared for the possibility they would have to carry out their promises.

Does the FMLN now believe it could edge out the ailing Christian Democrats to win the second position in the first round and stand a chance to beat Arena in a second round?

It's clear that the FMLN proposal has succeeded in interjecting the issue of the war and a possible accord with the FMLN into the heart of the pre-election debate. By proposing a break with the established electoral schedule, the FMLN is setting the precedent that perhaps other issues can be negotiated, whether or not they technically violate the 1983 constitution.

The Bush administration is faced with a dilemma. Its policy has been predicated on trying to keep the left out of power by destroying it militarily. But it's becoming clear that this policy hasn't worked, and that instead the FMLN is gaining both militarily and

politically.

Washington can continue to reject the FMLN, as it once shunned the PLO as a "terrorist" group, and simply wait for the guerrillas to launch new offensives and eventually an insurrection. Or U.S. policy-makers can bite the bullet and recognize that the left, including the Marxist-oriented FMLN, is a representative force in the country which cannot be shot or ignored away but can be negotiated with. That's a tall order for Washington officials long conditioned by knee-jerk anti-communism.

In El Salvador the U.S. has allied itself with an army and a rightist oligarchy responsible for the slaughter of tens of thousands of real and suspected leftists. It has spent \$3.2 billion in a country of 5 million people to crush a homegrown revolutionary movement that is today stronger than ever. It would seem that some fresh thinking is in order. □

Chris Norton is *In These Times'* correspondent in El Salvador.

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—Robert Sherrill,
The Nation,
November 28, 1988

Anti-choice

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former head of the abortion surveillance unit of the Federal Centers for Disease Control. The unit was closed early in the Reagan administration.

Anti-choice groups have never tackled the issue of unplanned pregnancy. Instead, they have routinely denied that unintended pregnancy is a problem and continue to aggressively fight efforts to provide government support for family-planning clinics and sex education in schools.

Battle scars: Now, as the Supreme Court appears likely to further restrict abortion rights, the anti-choice movement is poised to inflict what it hopes will be the final blow.

By emphasizing women's health issues, anti-choice leaders are attempting to steer the fight back to its original battleground. Restrictive abortion laws were passed in the late 19th century because legislators reasoned that the operation was unusually dangerous. At the time approximately one-third of women who underwent abortions suffered long-term physical consequences, if not death.

The restrictive abortion laws also were backed by people who had their own agendas. Physicians, for example, wanted total control of the medical profession and hoped to eliminate the need for the midwives who performed many abortions. Other concerns included the increasing use of abortion by married, native-born Protestant women, which threatened the then-majority Protestant population.

But over the last 50 years advances in medical technology have removed most, if not all, of the health risks related to abortion. According to a Guttmacher Institute study, a woman carrying a pregnancy to term is almost eight times more likely to suffer irreversible physical harm than a woman who undergoes an abortion.

But medical research is being lost in the fray. The anti-choice forces are mounting a publicity war in which facts are dismissed and unsubstantiated claims are honored.

"Our basic mission is to assist women who have been injured by abortion and to warn other women who are considering it," says the American Rights Coalition's Wysong. "We are spreading the word that this [abortion] is a dangerous and abusive procedure. And we are certainly having an impact. Have no doubt about that." □