

# ***Baghdad ER:*** **A Closer Look at the Human Costs of War<sup>1</sup>**

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Most Americans are familiar with what is officially called Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) otherwise known as the War in Iraq. While many Americans may not have the opportunity or desire to travel to Iraq to see the OIF in action, they do have the luxury of seeing some of it on television. As a counterpoint to the way Americans typically watch the war, *Baghdad ER* shows the average American the human costs of waging war. The documentary itself features many scenes of violence and up close gore that would be typical of a battlefield emergency room. Home Box Office (HBO) decided to air *Baghdad ER* for the first time on May 21, 2006. Prior to the release date, many anti-war websites wrote articles on the documentary before it was aired citing a press release that the Army released warning of the possible psychological damage that viewing the film could cause.<sup>2</sup> This is not a stretch on the part of the Army. *Baghdad ER* is extremely graphic but, for a purpose. It is not like an American horror movie where there is gore for shock value, there is gore because it exists and needs to be shown.

The jacket of the documentary states that, “*Baghdad ER* is an unflinching look at the Iraq War...”<sup>3</sup> Although the liner notes have no graphic pictures, the descriptive words evoke a feeling of appreciation for the ER doctors in Baghdad. *Baghdad ER* offers the viewer an alternative look at the Iraq War. In the first few scenes the viewer sees an amputated limb being carried to a trash bag. It’s one

of those horrific scenes that is not expected in the beginning of the film. Even after reading the liner notes, the viewer is not prepared for what they are about see. How can one ever really prepare them to see human suffering? These doctors and soldiers are trained, but training and real life are two completely different things. There are many attempts at reviving soldiers who have stopped breathing. There is no shortage of blood and body parts, and the viewer even witnesses a few deaths. The deaths are the hardest part to watch. The viewer would have to have a heart of stone not to feel emotional after they watch someone die. It is a very strange feeling after a soldier has died, the ER goes quiet and it almost seems like the doctors even doubt themselves and think they may have failed in their job. After the corpse is put into the morgue, the doctors said a prayer. They made comment on how young the soldier’s life and service though it never gets any easier.<sup>4</sup> The filmmakers kept this scene in the documentary to show the humanity of the doctors and the soldiers. While, these soldiers are called casualties, they are human beings exactly like the doctors. The prayer goes to emphasize the concern for human life by the doctors at the ER in Baghdad. However, this documentary is not about politics and it is not about to take sides. The filmmakers admit that they “went over [to Iraq] not so much trying to express our own opinions, but trying to figure out how we could hold a mirror up to what was going on and reflect that back to the United States.”<sup>5</sup> *Baghdad ER* may have been criticized for being too violent; however, the documentary uses this violent, horrific footage in order to give a mostly unseen perspective of war.

The war has been presented to Americans through video, pictures, and numbers. The news presents the war mainly in facts and figures without commenting on the human aspect. For example this recent headline off of the website for the Cable News Network (CNN), “26 dead in Iraq ‘revenge killings’”<sup>6</sup> demonstrates that numbers have become

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<sup>1</sup> Natalie Minchillo, an undergraduate communication student at Trinity University, wrote this term paper in December 2006 for a course on documentary film. The course was taught by Professor Aaron Delwiche. Student papers are available online at <http://www.trinity.edu/adelwich/documentary/guides.html>

<sup>2</sup> Democracy Now!. (2006, May 17). *Baghdad ER Documentary On US Military Hospital in Iraq Gets Cold Reception From Army*. Retrieved October 13, 2006, from <http://www.democracynow.org/article.pl?sid=06/05/17/1510218>.

<sup>3</sup> Alpert, J. (2006). Liner notes in *Baghdad ER*. HBO Documentary Films [DVD]. United States: Home Box Office.

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<sup>4</sup> Home Box Office. (2006). *Interview with Filmmakers Jon Alpert and Matt O’Neil*. Retrieved October 13, 2006, from [http://www.hbo.com/docs/programs/baghdader/interview\\_alpertoneill.html](http://www.hbo.com/docs/programs/baghdader/interview_alpertoneill.html).

<sup>5</sup> Home Box Office. (2006). *Interview with Filmmakers Jon Alpert and Matt O’Neil*. Retrieved October 13, 2006, from [http://www.hbo.com/docs/programs/baghdader/interview\\_alpertoneill.html](http://www.hbo.com/docs/programs/baghdader/interview_alpertoneill.html).

<sup>6</sup> Cable News Network. (2006, October 14). *26 dead in Iraq ‘revenge killings’*. Retrieved October 14,

the only things that are real about the Iraq war to many people. The numbers that are most often talked about are casualty counts. These numbers are clean and neat. Most Americans only see these numbers on a page. They do not have to count the amount of dead or dying bodies piling up in the ER like these doctors do. They only have to view totals, nothing like the actual casualties themselves. Many Americans, especially those opposed to the war, have become so attached to these numbers that when the casualty count hit 2000, 1,354 candle vigils were held to commemorate the number. "There is no question but that I would attend a vigil again and take my grandsons again. I do not want to see my boys or anyone's children become names on a list like the one which was read tonight"<sup>7</sup> Many people like Robin think that they have an understanding of the war. Some even think that because they know the names and numbers, they know better than most Americans the human cost of the war. However, the people who know best about this war are those that are fighting in it. Many mothers and fathers who have lost their children in the War in Iraq think that the war has touched them, and it has in some way but, in comparison, these parents do not have to view their children's suffering and death the same way that the ER doctors and the soldiers who are fighting the war have to in their everyday lives. The average American even those who think they are heavily affected by the war go about most of their day not thinking about if they are going to live through the day like a soldier might. Most soldiers in Iraq do not have the luxury of gossiping with their friends, and cooking with their families; their minds are focused on one thing, survival. Further demonstrating this focus on the number instead of the humanity is the fact that these numbers are very easily found. There are many websites<sup>8</sup> that have a live count of casualties including official government sites<sup>9</sup>. These numbers do not reflect the human nature of war. War is not fought with numbers, it is fought

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2006, from  
<http://www.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/meast/10/14/iraq.main/index.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Move On.com Political Action: Democracy in Action. (2005, October). *Vigils to Honor 2,000 Killed in Iraq*. Retrieved October 13, 2006.

<http://pol.moveon.org/iraqvigils/>.

<sup>8</sup> Iraq Coalition Casualties (2006, October, 14) *Iraq Coalition Casualty Count*. Retrieved October 13, 2006, from <http://icasualties.org/oif/>.

<sup>9</sup> Department of Defense. (2006) Retrieved October 13, 2006, from <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/casualty.pdf>

with human lives and emotions. There are very few numbers in *Baghdad ER* because of the stress on the human costs that the filmmakers are trying to present to the viewer.

When viewers are not being bombarded with numbers during the Iraq War segment of a news broadcast, they are watching videos of the war. In one of the most recent videos shown on ABC entitled "Is [the] Iraq War Making Terror Worse?"<sup>10</sup> video depictions of the Iraq War contained footage of American soldiers shooting, a tank ramming a car. The most violent depiction is a bomb going off. During the footage of the explosion, a soldier falls to the ground. This depiction of the war is from a distance, through the glass of the television set, and unrealistically neat and clean. With real-life footage of the ER, *Baghdad ER* is in stark contrast to this news video. The filmmakers, realizing the neat and clean portrayal of the war by the mainstream media, "wanted to do this film because we think it's important that Americans know what's going on over in Iraq, the raw everyday activities. We decided we wanted to embed ourselves in a military hospital in Iraq to show the work of the doctors, and also the true cost of the war."<sup>11</sup> The filmmakers wanted to add in the human aspect of the war that mainstream media has dehumanized with constant analysis of facts and figures.

Like most of America's military struggles, the Iraq war has been fought on foreign soil. There is not comparison that any American today can make to the perspective of an Iraqi viewing the war from a bombed out village. To an Iraqi the war is right outside of their windows; to an American the war is right through the television. The Iraq war has been fought on television and through pictures for the average American. Some people consider these media to be unable to tell them lies; however, most Americans still know little about the horrors of modern warfare. Even the pictures that American's see on television are regulated and altered. The Iraq War is not what many viewers are seeing through the Television; instead, the real war in Iraq is what these viewers are not seeing. This, of course, is the human

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<sup>10</sup> American Broadcasting Corporation. (2006, October 14). *Is the Iraq War Making Terrorism Worse?*. Retrieved October 14, 2006, from <http://abcnews.go.com/International/>

<sup>11</sup> Home Box Office. (2006). *Interview with Filmmakers Jon Alpert and Matt O'Neil*. Retrieved October 13, 2006, from [http://www.hbo.com/docs/programs/baghdader/interview\\_alpertoneill.html](http://www.hbo.com/docs/programs/baghdader/interview_alpertoneill.html).

side of the war. The literal and figurative pain and suffering of a man who has just survived an improvised explosive device (IED) explosion only to see his close friend sitting next to him with no face. CNN and Fox News fail to bring this story to the masses, but *Baghdad ER* tells this gruesome tale.

*Baghdad ER* shows the viewer a side of the war that they don't see on television or understand through numbers. The documentary reflects the war with its graphic depictions of injury. There are a few points that the documentary makes, that most of American television does not. People get hurt in war. Very few scenes of serious violence are seen in the news, and even less depictions soldiers getting wounded. Soldiers lose their lives. The news covers this in the way they think most people will understand, and that is numbers. While numbers are important, a viewer cannot get any sort of a picture of the Iraq War from them. Watching someone pass away creates some sort of connection to the person in the viewer's eyes. It is much harder to make this kind of connection with facts and figures. One of the most moving moments of *Baghdad ER* is when the wounded soldiers call their loved ones. This scene adds a sort of brutal reality to the situation.

This movie also shows that medical professionals and soldiers have quite a bit in common on the front lines of battle. Both of these professions have the power of giving back life or taking life. A soldier's job is to kill. A doctor's job is to save. However, these jobs don't always go as planned. In *Baghdad ER* the doctors are saving the lives of American soldiers and the American soldiers are killing Iraqi fighters. Both doctors in the ER in *Baghdad* and soldiers on the front lines of battle are under tremendous pressure. Both of them live their daily lives under fire, both literally and figuratively. The pressure to perform for both of these professions creates a tremendous amount of stress on these people. One mistake can cost a life, and that life could be theirs. In war most people have an opinion. Many of the *Baghdad ER* doctors share their opinion with the viewers; however, it doesn't matter. During a war soldiers and doctors have a job to do and whether they are for or against the war doesn't matter. The job must be done without bias and the doctors in *Baghdad ER* even though most of them were against the war, still performed their jobs with care and precision. "And they treat anybody who winds up there. They're going to treat an American soldier, they're going to treat an Iraqi soldier, and they'll even treat captured insurgents. And they'll do their best to try and help them. So, it's a very selfless

and noble thing that they're doing."<sup>12</sup> These doctors would never turn away an American or an Iraqi because of their personal beliefs. Not only would that be immoral, it would speak badly about the medical profession. There is nothing that is shown in *Baghdad ER* to even suggest that the doctors in the ER in Baghdad are not selfless, professionals.

That still leaves the question of the amount of gore and blood in *Baghdad ER*. The answer is quite simple. *Baghdad ER* shows blood and gore because it has to. "And in the first two days we were there we probably witnessed four or five amputations."<sup>13</sup> The purpose of *Baghdad ER* is to show the human costs of the Iraq War, and the human cost is not a pretty thing. The human cost of war is not just a body count. Psychological damage cannot be measured in numbers; it cannot be fit into a graph. These doctors see people wounded, dying, or already dead everyday. "I don't know exactly how to explain this, but the psychological danger of being in the hospital was a lot more severe than the physical danger of being out in the street."<sup>14</sup> This takes a toll on even the most experienced ER doctor. "And you focus on doing your job and making sure that you're recording this properly, but you've got to be made out of bricks and cement not to be effected when you see them taking out a saw and hacking somebody's just-smithereened arm up like they're cutting the limb off of a tree."<sup>15</sup> This graphic quote from one of the makers of the film is surprisingly accurate. These doctors are trained to separate themselves from their patients, but these are fellow humans suffering in way that a normal ER doctor could not even imagine. The stress of being on the front lines of the war is unimaginable especially for a doctor who sees only the aftermath of the gruesome war. *Baghdad ER*

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<sup>12</sup> Box Office. (2006). *Interview with Filmmakers Jon Alpert and Matt O'Neil*. Retrieved October 13, 2006, from [http://www.hbo.com/docs/programs/baghdader/interview\\_alpertoneill.html](http://www.hbo.com/docs/programs/baghdader/interview_alpertoneill.html).

<sup>13</sup> Home Box Office. (2006). *Interview with Filmmakers Jon Alpert and Matt O'Neil*. Retrieved October 13, 2006, from [http://www.hbo.com/docs/programs/baghdader/interview\\_alpertoneill.html](http://www.hbo.com/docs/programs/baghdader/interview_alpertoneill.html).

<sup>14</sup> Home Box Office. (2006). *Interview with Filmmakers Jon Alpert and Matt O'Neil*. Retrieved October 13, 2006, from [http://www.hbo.com/docs/programs/baghdader/interview\\_alpertoneill.html](http://www.hbo.com/docs/programs/baghdader/interview_alpertoneill.html).

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depicts this seamlessly with its scenes of gore and blood.

The filmmakers create a sense of what the ER doctors and soldiers are going through and more importantly what they are doing for each other. "You have to remember that the nurses and the doctors are all soldiers too. At one point in the film, a Marine in the hospital says, you know, when one of us is down, it's like we're all down, we all have to stand up and fight for him."<sup>16</sup>The ER doctors are trying to save the soldier's lives and the soldiers are trying to protect the ER doctors. In a specific scene in *Baghdad ER* the doctors are having a get together when bombing starts. The soldiers are , right or wrong, trying to protect the ER facility from being attacked. While, at the same time, the ER doctors are desperately trying to make sure that the soldiers are well and able to either go back and do their job, as many of the soldiers express wishes to do, or to live the rest of their lives in health. *This* war is more than just pictures and numbers; it is an all too human event. This is difficult for many Americans to see. That is exactly what the filmmakers wanted to address. *Baghdad ER* was created to show the average American a different view of the Iraq War and the human costs of this conflict. "You can learn about war by walking through this facility...the horrors of what man can do to man are visualized right here. But we do our best, our level best, to make sure our people survive and make it back to their homes."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Home Box Office. (2006). *Interview with Filmmakers Jon Alpert and Matt O'Neil*. Retrieved October 13, 2006, from [http://www.hbo.com/docs/programs/baghdader/interview\\_alpertoneill.html](http://www.hbo.com/docs/programs/baghdader/interview_alpertoneill.html).

<sup>17</sup> Feury, J(Producer) &Alpert,J (Director) (2006) *Baghdad ER* [Motion Picture] United States: Home Box Office.