

Stop-Loss (2008)

Rated R. Our ratings: V- 5; L- 6; S/N-2. Running time: 1 hour 53 min.

*My days are past, my plans are broken off,
the desires of my heart.
They make night into day;
'The light,' they say, 'is near to the darkness.'
If I look for Sheol as my house,
if I spread my couch in darkness,
if I say to the Pit, 'You are my father,'
and to the worm, 'My mother,' or 'My sister,'
where then is my hope?
Who will see my hope?
Job 17:11-16*

In a more just world theBrandon King is welcomed home millions who will flock toby his proud parents. theaters to cheer at the fictional violence of films like Paramount Pictures Kings of the Street would also take in this film which deals with the lingering effects of violence, as well as the unfair military system that thrusts soldiers back into violent situations when they think their service time is up. That is not happening, unfortunately. Like earlier Iraq War-related films, such as In the Valley of Elah and Rendition, director Kimberly Peirce's film has performed poorly at the box office. Also like them, this is a film that matters.

Brandon King (Ryan Phillippe) is a conscientious squad leader in Iraq who makes a fatal mistake while he and his men are manning a checkpoint. A car drives by with one of the passengers shooting at the soldiers. Brandon and his men leave their post and set out in hot pursuit. Amidst the narrow alleys of the city they find themselves led into an ambush, resulting in the death of a soldier, several insurgents and civilians killed, and the crippling of another soldier. When Brandon and the surviving soldiers return to Brazos, Texas, they are treated to a parade and heralded as heroes. Despite this, each is haunted by their war experience. One arises in the night with pistol in hand and digs a fox hole in his yard—or is it a grave? Another takes his wedding presents and blasts away at them with his rifle. All seek escape in drink and the local honky tonk.

Brandon reaches the boiling point when he is returning his military gear and is told that he has been “Stopped-Loss,” meaning that the President has ordered him to stay in the service. Angry over what he considers the betrayal of the contract he had signed, he goes AWOL. Accompanied by Michelle (Abbie Cornish), the sympathetic fiancée, of his best friend, Steve Shriver (Channing Tatum), Brandon heads east in his car. His destination is Washington, DC, where he naively hopes to talk with the US Senator who had glad-handed him at the Welcome Home ceremony. Along the way he visits one of his injured men, now an amputee in a VA hospital, and the family of the soldier killed in Iraq. Here he learns of the underground movement of other disaffected veterans, and so he visits them and learns how he can contact an anti-war lawyer for the purchase of a false I.D. so he can flee to Canada.

The film presents a bleak picture of the aftermath of the Iraq War. Part war thriller, part road genre, and part protest movie, the film ends on an ambiguous note. There are several flaws which stretch our credulity, but the film raises serious issues that only sometimes are covered by the pundits

criticizing the war. The conclusion is very debatable as to whether or not the filmmakers lost their nerve in order to deliver more of an upbeat tale. Despite this, it is a film worth seeing and discussing.

For Reflection/Discussion

A possible spoiler at the end.

1) What do you think of the filmmakers' viewpoint—biased? How are the various soldiers' resorting to alcohol typical of movie male stereotypes? And yet how are the depictions of the lingering effects of killing more realistic than the usual Hollywood thriller or action movie?

2) What do you think of the combat scenes? How does this show the ambiguity in fighting a war of insurgency in a land with such a different culture?

3) Why do you think it is important for the men to believe that the cause they were fighting for is just? Do you believe that Brandon's rebellion is due to self-interest or because he questions the justness of the war?

4) What do you learn about the life of soldiers who have revolted and gone AWOL? Of the scene at the V.A. hospital?

5) If you look through the reactions of various viewers at the IMDb site, you will discover a wide variation of opinions. How do you think that the writer's view of the war and of the current Administration in Washington affects the opinion? What about your own views?

6) What did you think of the ending? After such a radical reaction at first, does Brandon's final decision seem to make sense? That is, were we ever shown the struggle which led him to decide whether or not to flee the country? Do you believe the ending was a cop-out, or what?