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Iraq Doc Makers: Serious Doubts About Troop Surge

With President Bush announcing a "new way forward" in Iraq that includes the addition of some 21,000 troops, W&W fielded reaction from four filmmakers who have spent the last few immersed in all aspects of the country and the conflict there.

Each of the director has an Iraq-themed documentary that has made it to the Oscar documentary short list, which will be winnowed down to five nominees on Jan. 23. Their perspective on what to do next in Iraq are as varied and nuanced as the people and issues they cover in their works. But all had significant doubts about the President's new strategy, even if they varied on the merits of the American mission and the need to continue the U.S. presence there.

Deborah Scranton, director of "The War Tapes," a chronicle of the front line struggle against the insurgency, filmed by the soldiers themselves: "I can understand the whole argument that we need stability and to restore order before we move forward. But on the other hand, you are fighting what



by so many accounts seems to be a civil war unfolding and you wonder, 'If they put this many boots on the ground, what is to stop [insurgents] from just hanging out until we go away?' I don't know what the answer is. I think it is very complex. ... I always think of the iceberg. What we see is just the tip. There is a whole lot underneath there, and I don't even begin to pretend what all that stuff is.

"From my experience, when I heard [the 21,000 troop] number, I thought, 'I don't see how this translates to 21,000 boots on the ground, as if they were all infantry guys or Marines.' It is going to mean support soldiers, other people who go over in other capacities. And if you extrapolate the number that General Petraeus really wanted, it was 150,000.

"I do think there is a large disconnect between the American public and those who serve in the military. Over 95% of Americans have no personal connection to this war, where they have a relative or friend who is serving in Iraq. But I think it is very important that we remember that we are a country at war, that we understand what war looks like and what it feels like, and what we are asking these men and women to do in our name."

"We were at the Tribeca Film Festival, with five of the soldiers, and a woman in the audience stood up and asked, 'What can I,' then she corrected herself and said, 'What can we do to help these soldiers?' Brandon Wilkins, whose footage opens the film, very eloquently said, 'Get to know one.'"

Patricia Foulkrod, director of "The Ground Truth," which follows soldiers and their struggles through recruitment, training, combat and homecoming, in which they encounter an uncomprehending public and an indifferent government: "When you are around these soldiers, the thing that you hear all the time is they cannot believe the way the news works in America. It is so different than the way things really are there. They feel like we've forgotten them. Well, to have this election and then to ask them to stay longer? To do more? This doesn't take a toll on anybody except our soldiers.

"This surge in troops is really going to make things much worse because what we are really talking about is people are not going to come home. I don't think any one of us can comprehend what it is like to be in combat for a day, let alone months and months on end. Every day is whether you are going to live. That kind of stress we never hear about. It is bad P.R. And you don't have to have killed someone or to have had some gut wrenching awful experience in Iraq to come home a mess. Very few people talk about that.

"I woke up this morning thinking that I should talk to Focus Features about getting some copies [of the film], then get on a plane to Washington and deliver a people to as many people in Congress as I can possibly show it to.

"I don't see how this new Congress can forget in a couple of weeks what the American public voted for. I think that there was a real feeling, for the first time in six years, that what people felt was actually being manifested in the vote. But to have it be just the beginning of January and to have the administration come up with this as their best plan? It is like saying 'I was in a four car collision so I am just going to keep driving down the road with no tires, and hope I don't kill too many people.' That is not what you do. You get out of the car. You get the vehicles off the road."

James Longley, director of "Iraq in Fragments," a portrait of the country through two years of the war, as seen through the eyes of Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds: "If they are simply adding to the number of troops that are already there, who are taking part in a failed policy, a failed occupation of the country, and they are not going to do anything substantially different, and I can't imagine that they will, then I really don't see how that will improve the situation. Iraq right now is suffering because of growing divisions between political interest groups in the country. The United States is very much a part of those divisions, and not a solution.



"One of the things we are asking the government to do right now is to crack down and lessen the influence of groups like the Sadr group. We make demands of the Iraqi government and we put prices on their non compliance. So everyone in Iraq realizes that the United States is there with things that it wants and things that it is trying to achieve. ...The people of Iraq have suffered a great deal under this occupation. I think the feeling among the majority of the Iraqis who want the United States to leave is based on the premise that the United States is not there to help them, and is not helping them. So at this point, what are they doing in the country? They keep moving the goal posts for what they want in the country and they keep talking about what they want to achieve and so forth. But really what they are trying to achieve is a government which will stay in power and which will do the bidding of the United States in Iraq.

"The Democrats would do well to cut off funding. Or they can acquiesce. I think it is more likely they will acquiesce, but if they are smart they will actually act in a way that has an impact."

Laura Poitras, director of "My Country, My Country," a journey into war-ravaged Iraq in the months leading up to the January, 2005 elections, through the eyes of a doctor and political candidate: "It is not clear to me what is new about the strategy and what is being laid out, because all of these things of trying to protect people and supporting the government and supporting the political process, all of those things are what we have been claiming all along. And the situation continues to deteriorate. Listening to it, it seems so little so late.

"I just did a screening at the War College. These were all officer types who are making decisions and studying war planning, and I talked to people what they thought of the idea of a troop increase. And every one said

they didn't think this was going to solve anything. And that is coming from the military.



"We are viewed as a curse in the country. If you get too close to Americans and you are an Iraqi, you can get killed. We just created this huge instability. Dr. Riyadh, who I filmed, says he has seen more than 100 friends of his assassinated. I recently go an email from him where he said he has four friends in local government who were found dead with drill holes in their head.

"Personally I believe that we have a moral obligation to stop the bloodshed in Iraq because the United States is largely responsible for the chaos that is entering its fourth year. ...We can't pull out our resources. What I would wonder is if there was any way we could reach out to the international community to come up with a peacekeeping plan in conjunction

with a pullout. I don't think we just withdraw all of our troops. The country is hemorrhaging, and I think it is our responsibility to stop the hemorrhaging. But what is not getting said is, 'Hasn't this project already failed, and what do we do now?'"

Photos, from top: Sgt. Zack Bazzi in "The War Tapes"; followers of Moqtada Sadr at a rally in "Iraq in Fragments"; and Dr. Riyadh at Abu Ghraib in "My Country, My Country."