American Sniper and the Hero Myth

American Sniper, a new film based on the book of the same name, is being released on Christmas Day. Directed by Clint Eastwood and starring and produced by Bradley Cooper, it tells the story of Navy SEAL super-sniper Chris Kyle, widely-praised as the most lethal sniper in American history with at least 160 "official" kills, and apparently many more "unofficial" ones. The film's catch phrase is "the most lethal sniper in history", and the trailer shows Bradley Cooper undergoing a moment of moral doubt before (presumably) shooting a child carrying a bomb. The Hollywood studio is banking not only on the film's popularity, but that Americans will want to spend their Christmas Day watching such morally questionable lethality. The trailer immediately reminds me of another Bradley Cooper role in *The Place Beyond the Pines* (a much better movie than *American Sniper*, by the way), where Cooper's entire character is built around the fact that he killed a man with a young son the same age as his own and felt guilt and regret for the rest of his life.

Digression about the title *American Sniper*: why are there so many films beginning with "American" something or other? Cooper has already starred in one such movie only a year earlier than this one (*American Hustle*), and then we have *American Psycho*, *American Beauty*, *American Pie*, *American Gangster*, *American History X*, *American Outlaws*, and many, many more. I understand that the double iambic rhythm of America's adjectival form lends an especially strong sound that leads to strong titles, and it is hard to find any other nationality adjectives which convey such emphasis (the few scattered examples are exotic rather than emphatic: *The French Connection, The Italian Job, The English Patient, The African Queen, The Manchurian Candidate, The Good German*. Even here we see the definite article almost without exception, which is

never necessary with "American"). Rather than exotic, titles beginning with "American" are meant to be paradigmatic of something true and universal and worthy of such a phonologically forceful appellation. We can speculate that Kyle, in choosing the title for his war memoirs, intended to tap into this paradigm with himself representing the ideal Platonic form of "sniper" or "killer" by means of his qualitative Americanness. It is beyond doubt that director Clint Eastwood and the Hollywood producers agreed.

Moving back to the original story, after 10 years in the military and four tours in Iraq, the real-life Chris Kyle left the Navy in 2009 and started a private security consulting firm in his home state of Texas. One of his priorities was supporting wounded and troubled veterans. When his book was published, he donated the entire $1.5 million check to charities supporting such veterans. He was a devoted family man as well as a noted gun-lover and hunter (it remains unclear whether he killed more human or non-human animals).

Kyle, along with a friend, was killed in 2013 by a troubled ex-Marine who shot him in the back when Kyle took him for his own brand of "therapy" at a shooting range. The funeral was held at the Cowboys Stadium in Dallas to accommodate the huge number of mourners. This man was a hero to millions of people in America. My purpose is not to disrespect Kyle in any way, but to point out some of my thoughts and observations about the circumstances which lead him to become such a hero to so many.

It is obvious that Kyle was a conflicted individual, which is perfectly understandable if we consider the inhuman amount of death and bloodshed he was involved in. Many veterans return from war with PTSD, often despite never even firing a shot or being shot at. War is traumatic, and the training and mindset that prepares an individual for war can sometimes be even more dehumanizing. I recognize the goodwill Kyle felt towards other veterans, but should it be considered the wisest decision to

bring a suicidal, mentally-unstable veteran whom you had never met to a shooting range? Kyle's death, while tragic, is not surprising. Jesus Christ reportedly said "live by the sword, die by the sword". Kyle, a lover of guns, personally killed hundreds of humans with guns. Is it shocking that such a story should end in his own death by gun? Kyle was also a proud Christian man who must have fallen into confusion about the meaning of his Lord's words extolling pacifism. He had more of a mentally of Crusader-against-the-infidel Christian than a turn-the-other-cheek one. Yet this is beside the point as he was not the first man to justify his violence through his religious beliefs, and he won't be the last.

Another relevant thing I found out is that Kyle never expressed any regret or doubt over killing people on such a Herculean scale (here is a quote from his book: "It was my duty to shoot, and I don't regret it. The woman was already dead. I was just making sure she didn't take any Marines with her."). One must imagine that it would become quite routine after a while to aim, shoot, and repeat. This is no video game, however, nor is it aerial bombing, artillery, or even run-of-the-mill machine-gun fire. Every one of those kills Kyle would have previously and skillfully planned, calculated, and then witnessed in gory detail by means of a powerful telescope sight. That such a thing would be desensitizing is understandable. I would not take such a job, but if it were me I would also by necessity strengthen my personal convictions about my own righteousness if only as a way to avoid insanity (another quote from the book: "My shots saved several Americans, whose lives were clearly worth more than that woman's twisted soul. I can stand before God with a clear conscience about doing my job.").

There appear to be some unsavory parts of Kyle's story. First of all, I must ask myself why Navy SEALs and other special operations guys call themselves "silent professionals" when there is nothing silent about the stream of lucrative book

deals and Hollywood productions involving former Navy SEALs and their ilk telling all the dirty secrets about their work (which is to say, how efficient they are at killing other humans). Kyle's book and movie are just one of an entire sub-genre which the French philosopher Jean Beaudrillard would label "war porn", and its popularity in the military and American society as a whole is revealing. Just as in similarly violent video games, the wide-eyed reader/viewer can excitedly imagine himself killing everybody in sight and single-handedly saving the day/winning the war. Such a mindset, while quite common, is psychologically unhealthy for individuals, and politically unhealthy for a democracy.

Kyle also had problems telling the truth. Though apparently no stranger to garden-variety barroom brawls, he invented a story about a bar fight in which he punched out former wrestler, actor, and Minnesota governor (and fellow Navy commando) Jesse Ventura. Ventura sued and was eventually awarded over a million dollars in damages. Kyle also apparently made up a story about killing two guys who tried to rob him somewhere in Texas, which never happened in real life. I wonder why he would feel the need to make up superfluous falsehoods when he was already well-supplied with enough martial anecdotes to win admiration from his armed acolytes. It reeks of the braggadocio and machismo that is all-too-common in the special operations communities. He was also a heavy drinker, like many fellow veterans. Alcohol is one of the most common and most readily available means for veterans to cope with the trauma of war and homecoming. Sadly, we should not be surprised by such a man leading a violent life, even if he is by no means alone.

The idea of the Hero is one that is as old as humanity, and well-documented in the ancient stories of Heracles and Achilles on down the line. Thomas Carlyle famously popularized a theory of hero worship whose exemplars were nevertheless praised as much for their cultural and literary feats as for

their martial and political prowess. Likewise, we will not find today's ersatz heroes in the pages of Nietzsche, whose morally-transcendent, classically-trained heroes would come to rule over the common rabble. The current American myth of the hero is not so sophisticated as its predecessors, whatever their flaws. If we think about Joseph Campbell's famous theory of the monomyth, Chris Kyle could, through the narrative of his book and the film, be seen to follow the universal mythical paradigm of departure, initiation, and return. The thing about Campbell's theory, though, is that it applies to the myths that human societies create, but not to human societies and individuals themselves. In other words, we create the myths that we want to believe. The myth of Chris Kyle and the hero protecting their freedom from evil-doers is one which many Americans would like to believe.

Like I said, Kyle, for all his personal problems, is not himself the problem, but a symptom of a larger problem. He was just doing his job, as horrible as that job was. The real problem is with the segment of society that glorifies this behavior as heroic, holding up Kyle in particular as a super-hero. I think it is twisted logic that holds up people like Kyle, and soldiers in general, as heroes while failing to question the cause or need for war and violence in the first place. In fact, if it has not been clearly enunciated up to this point, I do not care much at all for the term "hero". Heroes are for people who see the world as black and white, good guys and bad guys, us versus them, without much thought for nuance or second-order effects (another telling quote from the book: "Savage, despicable evil. That's what we were fighting in Iraq. That's why a lot of people, myself included, called the enemy "savages." There really was no other way to describe what we encountered there."). I think it is no coincidence that super-hero movies are especially popular at the moment—the desire for super-heroes in adults comes from the same line of thinking, and the same weakness of critical thinking, that produces hero worship. This same line of

thinking also enables the propaganda and social and political environment which facilitates war and stifles dissent against it.

Chris Kyle was no super-hero, let alone hero, though many people (and maybe he himself) saw him as one. The world needs neither fake heroes nor mythical super-heroes with super-human powers or super-human killing ability to be able to solve the world's problems or kill all of the bad guys. The society that produced Chris Kyle and his unquestioning world view will sustain itself with tales of heroes like Chris Kyle who defend our "freedom" from the bad guys. The thing about bad guys is that, to them, the other guys are bad guys, and they are fighting for their own version of "freedom". Killing over 200 "bad guys" is just as ineffective a way to peace or freedom as killing two million "bad guys" if there is no reason why and no plan to stop killing them. This false heroism creates more problems than it solves and multiplies the violence in the world. Chris Kyle did not protect or make anyone safer; his story is one small part of immoral (and probably illegal) war that has only increased the vicious cycle of violent retribution that exists in the world. Such a cycle will continue until someone, dare I say one akin to a real "hero", tries to stop the cycle with understanding, dialogue, and diplomacy. The world does not need heroes; it needs human solidarity.