Thoughts on Clint Eastwood’s *American Sniper*

By Dan Klein

I caught the movie belatedly on the small screen. I found it rewarding. The Chris Kyle character was well drawn, memorable, effecting. I didn’t find the movie that gripping or suspenseful.

As for war, at first, when the movie concluded, I felt the balance was perhaps a bit on the jingoistic, identify with the war-hero side of the relevant line of propriety. But after sleeping on it I felt that the movie showed the shallowness of Chris Kyle’s faith in the justness of the violent campaign he was prosecuting. The film gave a lot of time to Kyle’s personal background, private life, thoughts, and sentiments, and never showed anything of depth in his knowledge or reflection about the campaign. As for direct display of his shallowness, perhaps the leading moment was when he told his wife that Biggles got killed because he had lost conviction in the campaign, as reflected in Biggles’s letter read by Biggles’s widow at his funeral. The viewer can see that the faith of this hero, Kyle, is based on very superficial knowledge and reflection. Not just the glory of his deeds, but any redemption whatever, would depend on the soundness of that faith, and Kyle is depicted as having only a superficial posture toward that matter.

What I saw in the Chris Kyle character was devotion to a perceived larger duty and service, his belief that he was saving American soldiers and protecting ordinary Americans from future terrorist attacks, and trading that off against smaller, more local duties, the care, sympathy, and happiness of his family, including his own self-preservation. His calling took over his life, and family and other smaller personal interests grew insipid.

The film more or less showed that Kyle’s motivation for soldiering was not bloodlust, nor to make himself sexy, nor to enjoy any kind of glory. The film showed him as a young man riding rodeo, so perhaps he was a thrill seeker, a daredevil. But, in retirement, after four tours, he was despondent. The despondency wasn’t from horror recalled, or regret, or remorse. Without the calling he felt empty; he had trouble adjusting to life without it. The film affirmed the idea that people can have a genuine, even sublime willingness to sacrifice the happiness and solace of their family, and put themselves at risk of death and dismemberment, to serve what they sincerely believe to be the larger good.

By making Kyle’s larger calling the Iraq war, Clint Eastwood raises a huge eye-brow at sincerely serving the putatively larger good. The Iraq War is so obviously controversial, and in fact a failure, that the whole film expresses skepticism about the degree of responsibility behind our sincere obsessions and enthusiasms. The film strikes a splendid equipoise between encomium for sincere service to the larger good and the skeptical maxim: Curb your enthusiasm. (Dirty Harry meets Larry David.) The war is just the particular illustration.