

Sheepdog or sheep?

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [March 4, 2015](#) issue



In a scene in *American Sniper*, Chris Kyle (Bradley Cooper) is told by his father (Ben Reed) that there are three kinds of people in the world: There are sheep, helpless and clueless. There are wolves, dangerous and predatory. And there are sheepdogs, who protect the sheep from the wolves. The father's story serves as a justification for the career of the "most lethal sniper in U.S. military history."

In the opening scene, an Iraqi child is running toward a unit of American soldiers with a grenade in his hand. Will Kyle kill the child and protect his friends? Director Clint Eastwood cuts away, leaving us in suspense.

The suspense works. This is a riveting film. Every war movie is in essence a pro-war movie, even when it tries to be against war. The depiction of soldiers suffering on behalf of a nation makes us accept subconsciously the rationale: this is a great sacrifice for a great cause. The young men and women going door-to-door looking for bad guys in Fallujah or Sadr City are taking terrible risks on our behalf. It must be justified.

Kyle is no ordinary sniper. He has 160 "confirmed kills," and in the book on which the film is based, Kyle claims hundreds more "unconfirmed kills." "Aim small, miss small," his instructor says. "Aim big, miss big." Aim for a shirt button and hit the shirt. Aim for the person, and you miss altogether. Kyle never misses in this film. And everyone he hits "had it coming." He becomes famous for his exploits. When he finds the job too safe, he volunteers to go door-to-door with marine units, who

lionize him for his expert protection.

But Kyle's work comes with costs. As he piles on tour after tour, Kyle's relation to his family deteriorates. He is irritable at home, flinching at noises and nearly attacking the family dog. Kyle's PTSD is mild compared to that of many others, but it extracts a serious toll on Kyle and his family.

When Kyle dies, his funeral is held at the Dallas Cowboys' stadium. The film shows his coffin set over the Cowboys' star and a bugler playing. We get it: this is an American hero. We are the sheep he protected.

This unabashed patriotism has made for great ticket sales—\$169 million after two weekends. At my local theater the line wrapped around the block on opening night. Cooper is magnificent. He becomes Chris Kyle. I am sensitive to how often southern accents are done badly in movies, but Cooper's clipped twang is so spot-on Texan that I quit thinking about it after one scene.

While the sheepdog metaphor serves as a justification for Kyle's actions, his motivation has darker layers. He places a skull insignia from a graphic novel everywhere he goes—a sign of the Punisher, a character from the Marvel universe who keeps score of wrongs and avenges them. Kyle is more judge, jury, and executioner than sheepdog. His other insignia is a crusader's cross. This not-so-subtle sign plays right into the worst stereotypes of America's role in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Kyle never questions the premise that the world needs sheepdogs. While he's home on leave he receives a letter from a friend expressing fear and anxiety about his role in the war. Soon afterward the friend dies. "That letter got him killed," Kyle pronounces with shocking certainty. Questions should not be asked. Doubts should not be raised. Kyle does not think questioning merely wrong; he thinks it deadly.

Yet the film raises questions. In one scene Kyle meets his brother on a tarmac in Afghanistan. On the surface, Jeff Kyle (Keir O'Donnell) appears far more traumatized than Kyle. "Fuck this place," he says. Why are we here? The question remains unasked and unanswered, but still hovers.

And when people fight and kill for "our freedom," who is the "we" they defend? Those who serve in the armed forces are often greater servants of our society than those of us who ask the question. Their lives are on the line, while the rest of us

question the meaning of war from our safe homes, listening to NPR.

Yet in this movie soldiers ponder whether they are sheepdogs or sheep. Are those they kill deserving of death? In one scene a group of angry Iraqis cries out, "This is a good man you killed." The marines drive away, perplexed, unsure, and even disgusted by the sudden ambiguity. When you are the punisher, the avenger, even the protector, you fire first and ask questions later. Or never.

Christians tell a different story. There is one shepherd. We are all sheep. The thief comes only to steal, kill, and destroy. But the shepherd comes to give life.

How can we square this with the sheepdog story? I don't think it can be done.