

Afghan Massacre film reaction
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The sun-bleached fragments of a human jawbone lies half submerged in desert sand and framed by a twist of decaying cloth. This bone was once robed in flesh. This bone was once part of a self-aware being, a person whose consciousness was forever snuffed out.

“How do we get people to care?” read the power point slide following the image.

The slide show, given by John Heffernan of the Physicians for Human Rights, followed “Afghan Massacre: Convoy of Death” a 60-minute film that played at the Skokie Public Library Thursday night.

The film presents evidence supporting allegations that the U.S. military and its allies perpetrated heinous war crimes during the war in Afghanistan.

Heffernan and one of his associates witnessed this evidence: a massive, shallow and makeshift grave in the Afghan desert. Heffernan and his organization have been unsuccessfully lobbying the U.S. government, the United Nations and the Afghan government for over a year to protect the grave as evidence of war crimes.

Hunching down to speak into the faulty microphone, Scott Sanders, secretary of Chicago Media Action, stood before a quiet auditorium of about 100 people. His simple-textured, earth-tone-colored clothes were an indication of his conscientious consumerism. His gleaming gray ponytail streaked down his back like the activist streak in his politics.

His opening speech highlighted the major themes of the event: the actual content of “Afghan Massacre” and the twisted gauntlet through which this information had to travel to be exposed in the United States.

Sanders urged the audience to call and write both mainstream corporate and public broadcasting media so that in the future, access to information as is presented in the film doesn’t have to come from just word of mouth.

“[The media] is increasingly excluding alternative views, as it concentrates it closes up,” Sanders said.

Three activist organizations came together to sponsor the event: Chicago Media Action, an independent media advocacy group; Not In Our Name, a globally-minded political group that reacts to United States foreign relations; and Chicago Filmmakers, an organization motivated to educate Chicagoans through film.

Sanders’ introduction to the film was succinct. He simply called it “moving.”

“Afghan Massacre: Convoy of Death” is an investigative journalism piece that relied heavily on testimony from Taliban prisoners of war and Afghan soldiers of the Northern Alliance.

Katy Gallagher, a 22-year-old resident of Chicago and intern at WTTW Channel 11 and Kelly Larsen, a 23-year-old Chicagoan and employee of Gethsemane Garden Center, expounded upon Sanders’ interpretation.

“The footage was more intimate than I expected,” Gallagher began, “It was thrilling. You could detect this warmth from these people [Taliban soldiers] that have been made out in the American media as cruel and evil...one-dimensional.” Both friends and roommates, Gallagher and Larsen can finish each other’s sentences during conversation.

“They’ve been portrayed as very aggressive people,” Larsen agreed.

“I always knew we were being given a biased viewpoint [of the Taliban in the American media]. The first guy they interviewed. His voice was so soft. It just shocked me: This guy is a human being. And I know this more than most people, but to see it...was very effective on a humanizing level.”

Recalling images of emaciated men wrapped in Red-Cross-issued, hospital-blue blankets, their layers of desert clothing more bandages than apparel, Katy added, “And to see their starving bodies. These people were bones. It was like viewing Holocaust victims.”

Last June WTTW Channel 11, Chicago’s PBS affiliate, refused to air the film. Mitchell Szczepanczyk, president of Chicago Media Action said WTTW cited “unbalanced” reporting as a reason for not airing the piece.

“How far can you really take something?” Larsen asked.

Both the girls agreed that, despite their trust in the integrity of the film, even a skeptic would recognize that the evidence of the mass graves, reinforced by witness testimony, warrants an investigation.

“I feel like if those witnesses weren’t Taliban members –those scary, vague creatures- it [the film] would have been taken more seriously in the American media,” Gallagher said.

Larsen concurred, “And they don’t have any ulterior motives, really. It’s very valid, like Heffernan said, nothing can be taken as hard, full evidence...until an inspection happens they can’t prove anything.”

Gallagher and Larsen went on to point out that Physicians for Human Rights exhumed 15 bodies from a relatively small plot of land (1 meter square surface area, by 1 and a half meters deep). Autopsies performed on these bodies supported witness testimony.

“Afghan Massacre” chronicles a gruesome chain of events at the end of the war with the Taliban.

“The fact that this is some obscure aspect of the war,” Gallagher said, her face flushing with the thought, “in a whole mess of details, 8,000 people stood for the end of the Taliban. As a fairly informed American, I had never even heard the end of the story [of the war].”

After a Taliban uprising at a fortress-turned-military post, American military and their allies commandeered some 8,000 surrendered Taliban soldiers. According to the film, most international media left Afghanistan because John Walker Lindh, Taliban member and American ex-patriot, was captured during this siege. He was the major newsworthy event of the war in Afghanistan.

According to “Afghan Massacre,” however, an incredibly horrific event occurred shortly thereafter, and received no media attention. In order to transport the POWs to a better-equipped jail, the military appropriated civilian owned semi-trucks and loaded prisoners by the hundreds into the cargo containers.

The containers had no ventilation, and soldiers shot into the trucks to create air holes, killing prisoners in the process. During the 20-hour drive to the prison, severe dehydration drove the surviving prisoners to lick sweat and blood off each other in a desperate attempt to procure liquid.

When the trucks arrived, they were full of rotting bodies, sick and wounded prisoners, fecal matter, urine, blood and vomit.

Wounded and unconscious prisoners were executed and buried along with those who died in transit out in the desert. The film alleges all this was carried out by American allies with the full knowledge and guidance of the U.S. military.

All this was conveyed in grainy video images with the red-blue colored cast of a cheap camcorder. The filmmaker said a inexpensive tourists camera was necessary to avoid detection and accommodate time constraints. Gallagher said she felt this film quality added to the gravity of the issues the film raised.

“It made me feel like this isn’t a movie, this is really going on somewhere,” she said, “What is special about it was how close it was to the event. [This is] some of the best footage we’re going see [of the mechanics of war].”

“Afghan Massacre: Convoy of Death” was an effective film, literally, for both Gallagher and Larsen.

Larsen explained: “Of course, any time you learn something new, you feel more strongly about it. You can speak with more authority about it. When you watch something like this, it proves people can make things happen.”

The film has been broadcast on national television in Britain, Germany, Australia, Italy and Belgium. The British Parliament viewed the film and urged the United Nations to protect the gravesite for future investigation.

To date, all efforts to move an investigation forward have either been avoided by the United States or overshadowed in the media by other issues. But for Gallagher and Larsen, the very fact of the film's existence is a step in the direction of eventual justice.

Gallagher said: "We're not so helpless that things can be let to sit. The whole feeling [of the film] was immediate. The immediacy added to the film's importance...how this thing [the allegations and the evidence] can disappear. This is history. This is in history's face."