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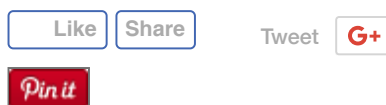


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## Film Review: War Machine

*Brad Pitt nails it as a four-star general out to win an unwinnable war in this savage, often hilarious but tonally uneven satire skewed at thinking adults.*

By [Erica Abeel \(Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93\)](http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/Term/93) May 23, 2017



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*War Machine* is a movie you want to love. Written and directed by Aussie David Michod (the terrific gangster film *Animal Kingdom*), it lobs a grenade at the American military, specifically the behemoth of the title that masterminds ventures into foreign countries, raising the brass to lofty heights while whacking the little guys, soldiers and civilians alike. It's anchored by Brad Pitt in a near-career-best turn as a macho four-star general who fancies himself a modern-day Patton.

And it could hardly be a better moment for an absurdist war story born of a leader's arrogance and delusions, conveyed as both reality and savage parody—thereby blurring the line between both.

Yet *War Machine* is hard to totally embrace because the tonal shifts from parody to pathos—especially regarding the victims of warfare—make for an unsettling ride. And Michod's broadside is sometimes too on-the-nose—worse, didactic, as if a documentary by Michael Moore had been born again as a feature film.

Framed by a voiceover from a narrator the viewer won't identify till later, General Glen McMahon (Pitt) blasts onscreen like a rock star to take command in Afghanistan, convinced he's the one who can bring the "forever war" to a triumphant close. His strategy is not only to defeat the insurgents, but to transform the society so that joining the insurgency offers little incentive. In Pitt's spot-on

portrayal, McMahon fulsomely mouths all the slogans we're accustomed to hearing on the news: America is in Afghanistan in the interests of "nation-building" and to "win hearts and minds." In reality, of course, McMahon's vision only serves to put his soldiers at risk in a population terrorized by gunfire and air strikes.

Inspired by the late Michael Hastings' book *The Operators*, the plot includes an appearance by President Hamid Karzai (the ever-game Ben Kingsley), portrayed as a clownish dignitary with a perpetual cold. (He graciously thanks McMahon for "inviting me to participate in the theatre of it all.") The General alternates pep talks with his inner circle—"Let me affirmate [sic] our ideals"—with a constant demand for more troops. A troubling sequence with a rebel soldier dramatizes the damage, often psychological, incurred by the foot soldiers harnessed to McMahon's folly. Tilda Swinton, camping it up as a German reporter with loose dentures, reps the filmmaker's POV, declaring at a press conference, "You'll never win the war...your ambitions are delusional." Her views are seconded by the voiceover, revealed as the jaundiced account of the quagmire by a reporter for *Rolling Stone*.

The yes-men and sycophants surrounding McMahon are sketched in by a sterling ensemble that milks laughs by playing it straight. The weak link is Topher Grace as a PR guy along for the big payday, making little of a satire-ready role. As McMahon's neglected spouse, Meg Tilly—a lookalike for Laura Bush—delivers a cringe-making turn that plays like an outtake from a different film. Lakeith Stanfield is a standout as a corporal about to implode, who dares to speak truth to power.

The best reason to see *War Machine*, though, is Brad Pitt. He nails the bluster, bravado and, yes, charisma, of a military megalomaniac. He hilariously channels the burred macho voice, and wears a priceless expression of amazement at his own awesomeness. Pitt has even mastered the character's strut—think of George W. Bush's arms-akimbo gait—and slightly bowlegged jogging style. The film keeps reprising those lonely jogs at 5 a.m., initially to mark McMahon's iron discipline, but then, as his project flags, his isolation and impending fall.

Pitt's portrait could be called cartoonish and without modulation. Yet maybe that rigidity is of a piece with a man unacquainted with nuance. Not only has Brad Pitt impressively come into his own as an actor—he's reset himself as a humanist/activist who takes on politically freighted work aimed at adult viewers, and supports such stellar art films as *Moonlight*. In *War Machine* he lends his talents to a story that aims not only to entertain, but to lampoon and condemn blind military might.

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