

BODY OF WAR

Interviews About The New Documentary

Featuring Tomas Young, Director Phil Donahue and Filmmaker Ellen Spiro

(TOMAS) When we were attacked on 9-11, there were not soldiers standing up saying, "Hey, we were attacked by Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Libya, and Egypt. That must mean Iraq's the central front of the war on terror." And my simple thing to say here is, support the troops. Support their safe return and their being used properly to defend the country and the Constitution because that's what we signed up for. We did not sign up to be used as gunboat diplomats in an arbitrary war.

Welcome to a special production of the Center for Emerging Media. I'm Marc Steiner, and That's Tomas Young. He's a 26 year old veteran of the Iraq War, who's paralyzed from the chest down. He was shot in Iraq on April 4th, 2004. He'd only been in country 5 days.

(MARC) Now, you were only 18 when you went in?

(TOMAS) I was actually; I went in at the age of 17 to look for college money because my family was not going to be able to afford to pay for me to go there myself. So, I figured instead of looking for Pell Grants and Stafford Loans and things, I'd go ahead and enlist and try to get college money that way. Unfortunately, I was medically discharged due to tendonitis in the shoulders but was told I could re-enlist after a period of two years. Had no plans to ever revisit an Army life, but September 11th happened and I was 22 at that point. And so, after I sat there riveted and watched the whole thing all day and then, two or three days later I saw George Bush reliving out his glory days as a Yale cheerleader with the megaphone in his hand talking about going to smoke the evildoers out of their caves and bringing them to justice. And, as I've been prone to saying, I guess, I've watched too many crime dramas on tv because I figured you go after the evidence and chase the bad guys. Another example I've been using is on December 8th 1941, we didn't set plans to go about and attack the Chinese because they had a similar complexion to the people that actually attacked us. And, the only way I knew to react was to re-enlist and to defend my country and its Constitution from being under attack.

Tomas is at the center of of a new documentary film called Body of War. It's produced and directed by veteran journalist Phil Donahue and filmmaker Ellen Spiro. Phil met Tomas when he was a patient at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. Phil Donahue wasn't sure where to take the story from there.

(PHIL) I went to the media reform conference in Saint Louis. On the way home I am sitting next to DeeDee Halick, who is a long time progressive voice, And I am saying I met this kid at Walter Reed and I feel we should see him, is it possible I could make a movie? And she gets out her laptop, on the airplane, and she gives me—Mobilus Media, Austin Texas. And female voice answered the phone, and thank god she recognized me, that was speed bump one, I got past! And we had a blind date. It was really blind. She knew me from tv but hell, she didn't know me, and I saw her work and thought it was wonderful but I didn't know what kind of person she was, so it was a leap of faith for both of us. We go to Kansas city, we go off to see Tomas and boy, Ellen just bought this story right now.

In part, film is an intimate and raw look at the reality of Tomas's life as he struggles to manage his myriad health problems and adjust to the world in this new body. The film is no holds barred in many senses, especially it it's depiction of very private, personal issues that Tomas contends with on a daily basis.

(MARC) When you made this documentary with Phil Donahue and Ellen Spiro, you obviously made a decision to allow your life to be exposed, literally and figuratively, to the world. Talk a little about that how you felt about that, and why you did that.

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(TOMAS) At the very beginning of the process, I was mindful, I minded my p's and q's, or at least I tried to. But eventually, as the filming went on, I came to the idea that the more the viewer sees about my daily life and what I go through, I hope they'll consider the ramifications and consequences of making rash decisions to enlist out of a certain patriotic feeling, examine the evidence, find out what was going on. As I've said before, if I had had Dionne Warwick's psychic friends on speed dial and she could've told me what was going to happen, I might not have joined. And likewise, if I had been shot and paralyzed in Afghanistan, where I felt the fight was valid, there would be no Body of War, you and I would not be speaking, I would take my government money, go home, and shut the hell up.

But that isn't what happened. And because he feels that he was disabled in a fight that was invalid and unjust, Tomas speaks out against the war—and lets the audience into intensely private moments. In this scene, Tomas's mother Cathy helps him insert a catheter into his penis.

[MOVIE CLIP 1: CATHETER BEING INSERTED IN CAR]

(MARC) You made a film the two of you that is graphic in its depiction of what it is like to be a paraplegic from catheters in his penis to talking about an erection, to all the other emotions he felt as a man in the a wheelchair and you were really graphic and no holds barred to describing what his life was like. I mean, A, I am interested in that effect on you and how Tomas felt in having his life laid out there like that.

(ELLEN) well Phil was committed to showing his truth, his reality, and the bodily functions were part of that story, and if you see someone in a wheelchair you don't think about everything else that is going on. But because we were able to spend a lot of time with Tomas he became more comfortable and he began to see the reason why it would be good to show certain things. But we also filmed those things that you referred to as so graphic as times where Tomas, and his mother in one scene, are in control. So they have reached the point where they can actually laugh about this stuff. See you got a tragic thing going on but you have humor too and that is where Tomas can transcend any blow that is dealt to him. He is hysterically funny. I knew on our first visit to see him when he said to me that soldiers voting for Bush is like chickens voting for Colonel Sanders, and he was all doped up but he had this wit and this humor. So there is that part of the film too that lifts us up from the tragic moments.

It isn't just Tomas's personal and sometimes tragic private moments that we are witness to. Tomas's mother Cathy sent her oldest son off to war. He came home a paraplegic. And now her middle son, Nathan, is about to go to Iraq for the first time.

[MOVIE CLIP 2: CATHY SPEAKING ABOUT NATHAN GOING TO IRAQ]

(ELLEN) Tomas's mother Cathy is in this situation where she has Tomas who has come home from Iraq paralyzed from the chest down. She has another son, Nathan, who is in our film, who gets deployed to Iraq during the course of the film. So she sees one son go off to war while this other son has come home and it is an interesting family. It really is a microcosm of the whole country. We have red and blue in this one family. You have a stepfather and a brother who are gung ho, pro bush, pro military. And then you have Tomas and his mom whose feelings have changed because of this particular war.. But Tomas's mother really is an incredible balancer of these two elements.

(MARC) Because she is still married to the guy who is called a ditto head in the film

Despite the fact that Cathy actively fights against this Iraq War, she is married to a man who supports the war. It almost seems unfair that this woman, whose son was paralyzed in the war, should have to defend her anti-war stance to her husband.

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[MOVIE CLIP 3 OF CATHY AND HER HUSBAND ARGUING]

(TOMAS) I like that they're called ditto heads because when you make a copy it's called a ditto, essentially. So, you just take what he says and go, "yup," and you make a carbon copy of it in your brain and that's what you tell people. But their marriage has survived because in relationships as in magnetics, opposites tend to attract. But my step-dads political ideologies aside, he still stands behind me for standing up for something I believe in, and he supports my mom and my kid brother, which is a lot more than I can say for many other, for any other man that has come into my family's life. He takes care of my mom and my little brother, so I love him for it, regardless of how we see politics.

(MARC) That's good, man. I like that. So, how is your little brother?

(TOMAS) The one in Iraq or the littlest one?

(MARC) The littlest one, yeah.

(TOMAS) He at times can be quite the spitfire. He's energetic and very easily excitable. He's a very energetic kid who marches completely not just to one drummer, but a whole damn rhythm section. He goes his own way, but unfortunately right now my mom has both my brother and my own Department of Defense photo they take of you in basic training. She has them both framed on the wall, and he's said many times that he can't wait to get his picture up on the wall next to ours. So, I've got nine years to make sure that he understands that he needs to do that safely and responsibly. If this war in Iraq is still going on when he's old enough to serve, I will lock him up in my basement to keep him from going to Iraq.

(MARC) But other than that, you don't mind him serving.

(TOMAS) No, I consider the military to be a very valid and honorable thing, a noble and honorable thing to do, when it's used right. Defending the country and its Constitution is one of the greatest things we can do as Americans. But when you volunteer and are used in the complete wrong way, under fabricated evidence, I can understand how it would drive enlistment numbers down, but defending the country is a great thing when you're actually called upon to defend the country and not be used and not be used as gunboat diplomats.

(MARC) What about your brother Nathan who's been there twice, right?

(TOMAS) He is over there right now on his second deployment. He's scheduled to come back sometime around the end of the year, unless, the Bush administration's already said that that's pretty much what's going to happen. And he's looking forward to getting out once he gets home. He's been stop-lossed, as many of our soldiers have, which by the way, conveniently enough, was not a practice that was around in Vietnam, 'cause who knows how many more tours John McCain would have had to do after he came back. He's been stop-lossed. He's ready to get out. He realizes, as I've heard a lot of people over there, they have no idea what the hell they're fighting for. They're there to worry about their friend to the left, and to the right, and themselves. Self-preservation is the main key that drives many of the soldiers there.

That sense of self preservation is a little difficult to maintain once they get home. may not be of any use to the soldiers once they get home. Tens of thousands of returning Iraq War veterans are in need of serious physical and mental health care. The veteran's administration and the veterans system in this country are not ready to take care of what this war has caused. In the documentary, Tomas is introduced to Bobby Muller, a disabled Vietnam War veteran who heads Vietnam Veterans of America, who draws a contrast between the care he received over 30 years ago and what Tomas received when he came home.

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[MOVIE CLIP 4 OF BOBBY MULLER]

(MARC) what struck me was, when they had this conversation was, .one the one hand we had this medical technology that kept alive this 28k men and women alive who were injured but we haven't moved far enough in the veterans administration to take care of the men and women who were hurt better than during Vietnam, that was startling what Bobby Muller said, that was startling!

(ELLEN) Because we have this sense that Vietnam veterans were treated like less than human beings and now we have Iraq vets coming home and they are being treated worse than the Vietnam veterans. There is a huge number of homeless people, mentally ill people. Tomas, even though he had a film crew following him around, as Bobby said, got short shrift. He did not get the care that he needed and when we arrived at his house, his care consisted of piles and piles and piles of of medications, not the real treatment, the physical therapy, the stuff that he needed.

[MOVIE CLIP 5 OF TOMAS READING OFF MEDICATIONS]

(MARC) I don't think America really understands how little we are caring for these veterans.

(PHIL) Well it is all rhetoric, these are words. Oh the troops, the brave troops, the courageous troops. Our brave-it goes on and on! And the troops come home and the VA doesn't call them back. I mean, this is the ultimate hypocrisy.

(ELLEN) Tomas likes to say if you want to do something to support the troops, go down to your local homeless shelter and volunteer because you will find a lot of them there.

(MARC) So, when you talked to Bobby Muller and he was saying to you that you need to get better treatment, you need to take hold of things, what's happened since the film, and your treatment, and you physically? Have you...?

(TOMAS) Well, it's very interesting. Over the past couple months, for some reason I can't quite put my finger on, I myself have been receiving better care. Maybe it's because I have a documentary coming out. And I asked about that. I asked some people from the VA and they've told me that there's now better oversight in taking care of veterans and making sure claims are processed quickly, and things of that sort. Although I have been lied to by the VA several times before, all I really have to say is that if that's the case, then it would be about high time to, as they say, lift the veil of secrecy, because I hear all the time that news crews are having trouble getting in to film stories about the VA. Considering the way the government and the Bush administration has been, in my opinion, quite fairly derided for its mistakes and shortcomings, I would think they would like to be quick to point out any areas where they might be improving. So, if that's the case then news crews and cameras should be allowed to film the VA getting better instead of not being allowed to watch it stay the same.

As we watch Tomas battle with his physical limitations, we also watch as he and his new bride, Brie, struggle to keep their marriage alive. It's an effort common to the families of many veterans of the Iraq War.

(TOMAS) if this war in Iraq is not going to end anytime in the near foreseeable future, they cannot send my brothers and sisters over there three, four, five times to disrupt not only their personal lives and psychic well beings, but also that of their families, their husbands, wives, and children because as I recently discovered during the filming of the documentary, divorce is definitely one of the unseen casualties of war that is happening at homes all across the country whether those veterans be injured, severely or not, there certainly are psychiatric turmoils that a veteran goes through that some marriages are not strong enough to withstand.

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Many returning veterans and their spouses have reported troubles in their marriages since their return from Iraq. Tomas and Brie had the added difficulty of the challenges brought on by his disability.

[MOVIE CLIP 6 BRIE DISCUSSING THEIR MARRIAGE]

In that clip from the documentary, Brie mentions that she had only had sex with her husband a few times. We learn why in another part of the movie.

[MOVIE CLIP 7 OF TOMAS TALKING DISCUSSING ERECTILE PROBLEM]

This movie is more than a story about a disabled veteran. It's about veterans who are actively fighting this war, and how Tomas finds a home in Iraq Veterans Against the War. In this documentary, Brie tells the story of how Tomas becomes involved in the movement to end the war and to fight for better care for veterans.

[MOVIE CLIP 8 OF BRIE EXPLAINING HOW TOMAS GOT INVOLVED IN ACTIVISM]

(PHIL) first of all Tomas did not want Oh Lad, poor lad, how sad movie-and it certainly isn't that. He wanted to make a statement and so did I. I mean, I wanted this to be an anti-war film, and so did Tomas.

(ELLEN) When we met Tomas he wasn't evolved as an activist. He had antiwar bumper stickers and he had a lot of thoughts in his head, so it was remarkable. Starting from right after his wedding day he decided to go for his honeymoon in Crawford, Texas because he wanted to speak to the President and ask him, why did you send me to Iraq when I signed up for Afghanistan? His story is Tomas finding his voice and finding his voice as an antiwar activist. It is the true story of an antiwar hero, body of war.

As Tomas became involved in activism against the war, he began to see hypocrisies everywhere, in almost every arena of politics.

(TOMAS) If you consider a different issue, it goes right along with the George Bush doctrine on other issues. They're, say for example, very pro-life and against abortion but oddly enough those children that are in poor situations once they've been born because abortion is frowned upon, the same Bush administration doesn't fund, you know, Head Start programs, or help those mothers with their financial burdens, so when you look at it in a military perspective, we've always said that the Army and the military loves to have you in, which on some days that's kind of an iffy situation in itself, but once you get out they really don't feel the need to take care of you, as well. Actually, yesterday, the Congress, thanks to Senator Jim Webb, is debating a new GI bill and it has heavy bipartisan support, except the White House doesn't like it because, in their words, we cannot give our veterans too many incentives to want to leave the military. Which basically, as I'm, I'll admit I'm prone to a bit of cynicism, which means, in essence, they just want to keep sending the soldiers over and over and over again until I guess they, in essence, die, and they don't have to concern themselves with that anymore. They've talked to several senators who are against this bill, and apparently that's the only argument they have, is that we cannot make life so good for veterans that they want to get out.

(MARC) It's madness.

(TOMAS) It's absolutely madness because we volunteer because we love the country and we wish to defend it and the Constitution and all we're asking is that if we come home, we'd like opportunities to

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receive proper medical care, a place to live, if necessary, if we need help with that, and the chance to get a good education because we, if you sign up at the age of 18, you give away a lot of your good college years to go serve your country. It seems only fair that that should be repaid back.

The movie is an intense critique of the Bush administration and all the Senators and Congressmen who voted to give the president the authorization to go to war. It also criticizes another group of people: the media.

[PLAY MOVIE CLIP OF THE WHITE HOUSE CORRESPONDENTS DINNER]

(MARC) What does it say to the two of you—filmmaker, filmmaker, been in the media for a long time, to watch the White House Correspondents dinner and watch your colleagues laughing at that film while Americans and Iraqis are dying in Iraq?

(PHIL) You know I am not going to pass judgment but it says as Ellen says, they are isolated...they don't feel this war; this is the most sanitized war ever. We don't see the pain; this is one of the things that motivated us to do this film. If you are going to send the nation to war, show the sacrifice, stop sanitizing this war. And I look at Tomas and I think of my president—bring it on. These is no affect. This gang in the white house, radicals by the war, are privatizing the war. Imagine! I have an uncle who fought in World War II, I can't imagine what he is thinking now, may he rest. We are going to have private people shooting civilians in a war? I thought, we believe that our film raises the curtain on another part of this war. I happen to think President Bush and the people around him believe, war happens! Isn't it a shame, but it happens. And it is sort of like we are expecting it to happen, and its too bad and we are sorry about those dead people but war happens. And there is no affect here. They don't seem to feel what these families are going through. Neither does most of the nation, these folks are under the radar, they are not seen. That's what we mean by a sanitized war.

(MARC) Don't you think that is part of what we were talking about earlier about the white house correspondents dinner, I mean that was about, looking at for me was saying that people in the media have gotten too friendly with the people they are supposed to be covering.

(PHIL) It's always been that way. Power in the press in Washington has to do with your Rolodex. What we are looking for is journalists who don't care if the White House doesn't call them back. Journalists who don't, who aren't desperate to be popular. Journalism isn't supposed to be popular. Journalists are supposed to tell people what they don't want to hear, supposed to stick their nose under the tent to see what the righteous have in store for us. That is an inelegant thing to do. And it doesn't, it is hard to put that together with you know wanting to be popular and dine with the powerful. It is a very seductive thing and by the way, the journalists will tell you, I have to have my sources, I have to go to dinner...and that's true. But I think it has become more of a, I think a need to be seen in the company of powerful people.

While the movie criticizes the media and President Bush, the real criticism is reserved for those people in Congress who voted in October 2002 to give President Bush the authorization to go to war in Iraq. Throughout the movie, we see C-SPAN coverage of the October 2002 debate. We see congressperson after congressperson standing up to give their testimony on why the country should go to war, parroting, repeating or paraphrasing Bush administration talking points. The film is a direct condemnation of those people who marched to the drumbeat of war and abrogated their constitutional responsibilities as our representatives.

(MARC) So, when you, as you put this film together, I was really fascinated by how it was made, when you did the roll calls and did all the kind of blatant lies that were told by Bush and then mimicked by

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members of the Senate and the house and then you interspersed that with the reality of what Tomas is living through—it was a really interesting choice I thought.

(ELLEN) That was all Phil's decision and he painstakingly watched and edited hundreds of hours of material into this incredible expose. So in addition to this personal heartfelt story of Tomas and his family, we have this expose of how this was scripted. And no one is telling you; you are just seeing it on the screen. The evidence was out there but it was so many hours of material that very few people watched all of the C-Span footage but Phil Donahue is one of the people who did watch it all and made all these connections and when you see it, you see the script.

(MARC) So, when we see and hear the roll call and all the kind of mimicry, talk about that experience for you Phil—A, the tediousness of the work itself, but what must have been happening for you as you are watching it unfold, as you were figuring it out...

(PHIL) The Hysteria of it...Ted Stevens of Alaska "The History will show that the people who stopped Saddam Hussein saved the world!" Stuff like this. John Warner, "Saddam Hussein has a greater arsenal of weapons than Hitler ever possessed." John McCain, the longer we wait the more dangerous he becomes! You can hear the breathing and the heavy breathing and the acceleration of the heartbeat—war war!

[MOVIE CLIP: CONGRESSPEOPLE LISTING CHEMICAL.BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS]

And by the way every major metropolitan newspaper in this country supported this war, and it is important to know how hard it was to vote against the war in October 2002. and by the way, this debate in Congress took place 3 weeks before an election.

[MOVIE CLIP: CONGRESSPEOPLE SPEAKING OUT AGAINST THIS AUTHORIZATION]

That is the point Byrd makes. This will be a blot he says on the Congress and Executive forever—to send men and women into harms way on a political vote that may bring them home dead or harmed.

[MOVIE CLIP: SENATOR ROBERT BYRD SPEAKING]

I mean, he was eloquent. He is begging his colleagues, please HOLD it. Slow down! Wait a minute! And he lost. Only 23, he was only able, 23 senators voted no. 133 members of the house voted no. This resolution passed easily. And by the way it wasn't constitutional. This point is made in our film. We are proud of the part of our film that celebrates the united states constitution.

[MOVIE CLIP: MORE ROBERT BYRD SPEECH]

Isn't that something? How radical is that idea? Only congress can declare war! Byrd makes the point—James Madison said it is too much temptation for one man.

[MOVIE CLIP: MORE ROBERT BYRD SPEECH]

Don't give one man the army, the navy and all the things that go boom. He will use them! You need the collective wisdom of the congress and congress hasn't declared a war in the constitutional sense since the early 40's.

(MARC) So, when you were doing this, did you understand what was going on in the US Congress and how the White House Iraq Group, the WHIG—how they orchestrated all this with the Senators and Congressmen? Were you aware of that before you did this film?

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(PHIL) No. I got smart, I am a slow learner. Bu the more you watched it, you realized there were echoes here—and then suddenly, even I got it. These people were reading these white houses talking points. [MOVIE CLIPS: THE SMOKING GUN] A smoking gun will become a mush—a gun smokes after it has been fired—a gun smokes after —three four people—they just, this was the most superficial bumper sticker debate imaginable.

(TOMAS) And to see them try to add their little conversational flourish to make it seem like their own original thought instead of something that came from Puppet master Cheney's mouth, including some from my own personal side of the aisle, one of which is actually running for President, just resounding on George Bush talking point after talking point (MOVIE CLIP: CONGRESSPEOPLE REPEATING BUSH] it just, you know, it hurts me as a human being to have to watch those things. And, but I do notice that when I have had to watch the movie, which I try not to do very much anymore I will admit, that first string of, but you see this first wave of Aye voters, all these and then you are getting there and every time I watch the movie I am like a kid watching his favorite movie and waiting to quote the parts. I am just sitting there to wait for Robert Byrd to thrust his constitution in the air and go WAIT! Don't rush this through and go off on some of his fiery orations which were just amazing to watch, that in the midst of an election even, when he could have potentially lost his seat although personally even though I am not a member of his constituency, anybody that lives in West Virginia, that tries to run against him would just be considered laughable. But to watch him argue about doing this three weeks before an election was just inane and then to actually get to meet him at the end of the film—it was, within five minutes of our conversation I wanted to ask him to adopt me as a grandson. He is an amazing person to talk to, I mean he has been there for so long, I mean 48 years, to think about the votes he has cast that change the course of America's, it is just incomprehensible. You don't see congressmen and orators like him anymore that are willing to stand up in the face of such great opposition for what they actually believe in. That is truly an amazing man who believes in the power of our government to do great things.

(PHIL) And you know, Robert Byrd, if Robert Byrd had been successful in stopping or slowing down this vote for war, Tomas Young would be walking today. I believe that.

The documentary film Body of War ends as Senator Robert Byrd and Tomas Young meet. We too will end with Robert Byrd, and listen to an excerpt of his speech to the senate in October 2002.

[MOVIE CLIP: EXCERPT OF BYRD'S SPEECH TO THE SENATE]

Thank you for listening to this special production from the Center for Emerging Media. Learn more about the documentary film Body of War at the film's website, www.bodyofwar.com. We've got videos and links and more for you on our website at www.centerforemergingmedia.com. This podcast was produced by Jessica Phillips and Justin Levy. We thank Clean Cuts Music and Sound Design for studio space and technical assistance. And special thanks to our engineer, Devin Murphy. And from the center for emerging media, I'm Marc Steiner. Take care.

Opening Music: Eddie Vedder, Long Nights, from the film Body of War.

Close Music: Eddie Vedder, No More, from Body of War: Songs that Inspired an Iraq War Veteran