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## Iraq war is hell on the bottom line at the box office

**By Joe Garofoli San Francisco Chronicle**

Jabbar Magruder is an active duty Army National Guard sergeant who served 11 months in Iraq. He was hoping that stateside Americans would get a glimpse of what the war was like when several dramas featuring the Iraq conflict either in the foreground or the background hit theaters this fall.

Few have. Despite A-list casts — including Robert Redford, Meryl Streep and Tommy Lee Jones — and generally good reviews, war-related dramas tanked this fall at the box office, failing to attract a substantial audience during Hollywood's serious film season. And now, with the lighter holiday movie fare blanketing screens beginning this weekend, the cultural window to bring narratives about the war to multiplex patrons is closing.

The public apathy Magruder has seen toward the Iraq conflict seems to be carrying over to the movie theater. Part of that theatrical indifference can be attributed to a nationwide flat lining of box office receipts this fall; last weekend was the lowest-attended mid-November weekend in 14 years, according to Brandon Gray, publisher of the online box office monitor Box Office Mojo.

But to some Iraq veterans, like Magruder, who have tried to raise awareness about the war's perils, the apathy represents a larger disconnect many Americans feel toward the war. Implicit in the Redford, Streep and Tom Cruise film "Lions for Lambs" is a challenge to filmgoers to become impassioned about the war.

Few received the challenge; box office gross for the film dropped 59 percent nationally last weekend, its third in theaters. Its two-week gross was \$13.8 million, low for a film that cost a reported \$35 million to make. Contrast "Lions" with "Saw IV," the serial-killer bloodbath that has already earned \$63 million in its fifth weekend.

"I thought that with the casts (of these films), at least a portion of America would go to see them," said Magruder, a 24-year-old who is taking pre-med classes at California State University in Northridge and is the Los Angeles chapter president of Iraq Veterans Against the War. Like many soldiers, he joined the service out of a sense of duty and, because his family had limited financial means, to pay for college.

"America doesn't want to deal with Iraq, period," Magruder said. "There's just apathy. And that's what a lot of veterans, no matter what their position on the war, are finding when they come back home."

Some analysts and filmmakers thought the movies might capture the attention of Americans hungry for stories about Iraq at a time when mainstream media coverage of the war is drying up — or to challenge the views of those dissatisfied with news coverage. But the films that told soldiers' stories at the multiplex this fall — "In the Valley of Elah," "Lions for Lambs," the controversial "Redacted" and even those with a vaguer connection to the war in the Middle East, such as "Rendition" and "The Kingdom" — never found much of an audience. "The Kingdom," starring Oscar-winner Jamie Foxx, was the top earner with \$47 million, "which is a low gross for a Hollywood action picture," Gray said. "Rendition," starring Oscar-winner Reese Witherspoon, has taken in \$9.7 million and "In the Valley of Elah," \$6.7 million.

"Maybe there are some civilians who don't know how real it is," said Army Sgt. Selena Coppa, who served time with intelligence units in the Middle East. She teared up when she saw "In the Valley of Elah," especially for its portrayal of the difficulties returning

vets can face. The 24-year-old New Yorker is “a nitpicker about stuff in movies. I look for something that isn’t right. But that film got it right. Maybe if you haven’t been through it, you wouldn’t get it.”

“The war doesn’t end for us when we come home,” said Geoff Millard, the 26-year-old Washington, D.C., chapter president of Iraq Veterans Against the War. The Army National Guard veteran was honorably discharged earlier this year. He joined the service as a 17-year-old who grew up in a poor neighborhood in Buffalo, N.Y.

Most hauntingly realistic to him was the soldier in “In the Valley of Elah” who was struggling after his return home. When that character was overseas, Millard said, he couldn’t wait to come home. Now that he was back, he was so uncomfortable that all he could think about was returning

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