

the village VOICE

UNEMBEDDED THE IRAQ WAR FINALLY GETS ITS DEFINITIVE DOCUMENTARY

BY MICHAEL ATKINSON

Now that the Iraq occupation has out-endured the Korean War, and the polls all clock public disap-

War Tapes and *Iraq in Fragments* pull in the fest awards this year, and the media are a monsoon of amoral chitchat about exit

MY COUNTRY MY COUNTRY

A FILM BY LAURA POITRAS

proval of the war at a two-to-one ratio, the time for Laura Poitras's unassailable and whip-smart doc *My Country, My Country* to make a Hearts and Minds-style crater may have already passed. It's the season of the weasel: Embedded prevarications like *The*

strategies and oil prices. (Of course, Hezbollah has succeeded in stealing the headlines this month, just when the Kirkuk body counts were getting so *boring*.) All the same, the average half-literate American knows a bloody miscarriage when they see



one, even if too many stop short of assigning blame and calling for criminal charges.

Still, Poitras, an experienced progressive doc-maker, has made the definitive nonfiction film about the occupation, and as a counterpoint against acres of corporate-spun non-news, it is indispensable. One could righteously assert that it's our duty to walk this walk, particularly since time and again, in the months leading up to the 2005 elections, Poitras manages to be where platoons of U.S. telejournalists have been afraid to go. Her hero is a Sunni activist-doctor named Riyadh, a clear-thinking, educated everyman on a quiet crusade in and around the Triangle to repair whatever damage he can, and to get as many Sunnis to vote as possible—even if it's not for him. (Anti-secularist that he is, he deserves a bumper magnet.) It's a project that even takes him to the fences around Abu Ghraib: "We're an occupied country with a puppet government," Dr. Riyadh says to the pleading prisoners. "What do you expect?"

But Poitras, working alone, also rides with the Kurdish militia, records U.S. military briefings, attends outraged public hearings, listens in on security contractors trying to make sense out of chaos, sits

in Sunni living rooms as shells fall in the street. She never intrudes on her own movie; what we see, remarkably, has the electric heat of a new experience, of seeing what has been heretofore officially proscribed. Best of all, the film is so immaculately constructed that it cannot be dismissed with charges of partisan subjectivity—Poitras covers the waterfront as she avoids ideology and cant, and yet everything that unfolds, from the combat-copter rides over Baghdad to the Arab TV footage of the Falluja bombing, is firsthand evidence of an illegal occupation, an oppressed native people, and an abundance of unjust suffering and death. (Consider the difference in media honesty when an Al Jazeera broadcast describes, as a U.S. network never would, how the potential success of the election will "tempt America to repeat the experiment" in other nations.) At 90 minutes, *My Country, My Country* seems unnecessarily compressed. (Could Poitras pull a Marcel Ophüls and DVD an immersive four-hour director's cut?) But it seems easily the most valuable piece of film to emerge about the war in all of its three-plus years. ■