A boy stumbles towards a group of US marines. Chris Kyle (played by Bradley Cooper) watches him from above. The boy is holding something in a cloth, but Kyle cannot see what it is. The cloth comes loose momentarily and Kyle sees the boy's grenade. He calls his audience what they would do in Kyle's position. You see the grenade the boy is holding and you ask your judgement. You see the boy approaching the marines. Kyle stops him as well. And so ends the sprint towards the marines until Kyle dies. The boy walks on towards the base for instruction, but they cannot confirm what Kyle sees. He must choose whether the boy lives or dies. The war of words over the film is mirrored within Kyle. As film that does not flirt with controversy—it's married to it. And it is that controversy that has vaulted Clint Eastwood's American Sniper to a higher platform than anyone could have anticipated. It is now a cultural divide—one cannot merely like or dislike the film without being questioned. Eastwood can destroy families and the war is over for each audience member is left wondering what it is he has to do when he is home. Cooper's ability to portray Kyle's desire to take action during the war is different. In this trial of war, you will be shown the prosecution and defence in equal measure, and your judgement will come from you alone. You may appreciate the camaraderie of the marines, but mourn how each individual's humanity slowly disintegrates. You might cheer when the film's villains fall to Kyle, but be prepared for the inextinguishable villains within the character of Kyle. The complexity and ambiguity of the film is mirrored within Kyle. Cooper and Eastwood have realised each individual's humanity slowly disintegrates. You might cheer when the film's villains fall to Kyle, but be prepared for the inextinguishable villains within the character of Kyle. The complexity and ambiguity of the film is mirrored within Kyle. Cooper and Eastwood have realised American Sniper is different. In this trial of war, you will be shown the prosecution and defence in equal measure, and your judgement will come from you alone. Kyle in a way that, once again, goes against the convention. Kyle is not the complete GI Joe hero upon whom the plot is centred; he is a man with serious and damaging faults. And yet, unlike the tortured souls grappling for meaning in other war films, Kyle is sure of himself and sure of his cause: he will protect his country from terrorists and will protect his fellow marines, no matter the cost to himself. The quality of the film should not be ignored. Eastwood's direction is assured and impressive. Films with two focuses usually end up favouring one or neglecting both, but American Sniper pays due attention to the two fronts it fights. Everything that needs to be said is said well. It has been eight years since Eastwood last directed war films, with his impressive Letters From Iwo Jima and Flags of Our Fathers. Time has not dulled his tools at all. With a complete absence of score and smart use of camera angles, Eastwood brings you firmly into the battle. Every door-knock, every raid, every decision Kyle makes is shown up close and so personally it is almost claustrophobic.

Eastwood's ability to realise the battles for Iraq allows him to subtly ask his audience what they would do in Kyle's position. You see the boy stumbles towards the marines, grenade in hand. Kyle walks on towards the boy's family. She wants her husband back. He wants to be back—but something is stopping him. In Iraq, Kyle was the father the younger marines needed, but he finds it difficult to be the father his children need now.

Cooper's ability to portray Kyle's desire to take action during the war, to 'do something', is countered by Kyle not knowing what it is he has to do when he is home. Cooper's work in these scenes is outstanding. American Sniper is riddled with duality—war as necessary and evil, Kyle as heroic and torn. So, too, is the audience torn. There is no clear 'message' from this, instead each audience member is left questioning everything they think about war. The controversy it has created, then, is no surprise.

This is a film that doesn't flirt with controversy—it's married to it, writes James Bolt.