

by Vince Beiser

# Paul Haggis

Paul Haggis is currently unemployed. This is unusual for a writer/director with five Academy Award nominations and a small platoon of Oscars in his trophy case. Two of his most recent films—*Crash*, which he wrote, produced, and directed, and *Million Dollar Baby*, which he wrote—won the little statue in the Best Picture category, among others. But these are unusual times; Hollywood's screenwriters, including Haggis, are on strike for the first time in almost twenty years, demanding a cut of whatever money the studios eventually make selling their wares over the Internet. The way things are going, Haggis might still be out of work by the time of next year's Academy Awards, when his most recent film, the anti-Iraq War drama *In the Valley of Elah*, will be up for consideration.

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Haggis, genial, blue eyed, and balding at fifty-four, hasn't always dealt with such weighty matters in his work. He spent decades in the mire of mass-market television, writing for shows like *The Love Boat*, *One Day at a Time*, and *The Facts of Life*. Until a few years ago, he was best known for co-creating *Walker, Texas Ranger*.

Fed up, Haggis decided to gamble on a shot at the big screen in 2001. On his own time, he wrote a script about a female boxer, and managed to get Clint Eastwood to star in it and direct it. It paid off: *Million Dollar Baby* was a huge hit with audiences and critics. Haggis followed it up with *Crash*, an exploration of racial and class tensions in Los Angeles, which not only was another commercial success but made Haggis the only person to have ever written two back-to-back winners of Best Picture Oscars. He also wrote Eastwood's diptych of World War II movies—*Flags of Our Fathers*, a look at the propagandistic exploitation of American soldiers, and *Letters from Iwo Jima*, which tells the story of the Pacific island battle from the Japanese side. *Letters from Iwo Jima* was the third movie written by Haggis in three years to get an Oscar nomination for best film.

Eastwood was also key in getting *In the Valley of Elah* made, which turned out to be no easy feat. It's not exactly a crowd-pleaser, even now with popular opinion so soured on the war. The film, based on a true story, centers on a young American soldier who comes home from a traumatic tour in Iraq, only to turn up murdered and mutilated in the New Mexico desert. The soldier's Vietnam vet father gets brushed off by the authorities until a lone local cop agrees to help him investigate the killing—an investigation that leads them back to a war crime. (Tommy Lee Jones plays the father, Susan Sarandon his wife, and Charlize Theron the cop.)

Haggis took a break from walking the picket lines to talk over a decaf cappuccino in a tony Santa Monica café about that movie, political movies in general, and why a Canadian like him loves America so much.

**Q** • You've called the studio's refusal to share Internet revenues "another example of massive corporate greed."

**Paul Haggis:** Yes, exactly. I do not think that's a radical position. I believe it's just an easily observable fact.

I know some of these studio executives, and they're good people, but I think they become blinded by this corporate system. Somehow we've come to the understanding in this country over the years that it's not the people who make the goods, even those that create art or books or movies or songs, who should profit by them. It's the people that put the money up for them

that should profit.

There's something that's so basically corrupt about any system in which a good and fair profit is not enough. There has to be more, every year, every quarter, because your stock price has to rise.

**Q: It's pretty clear corporations are being greedy about this new revenue stream. But a lot of people look at the strike and say, "Hollywood writers get paid so much already, what are they complaining about?"**

**Haggis:** It's a misconception, but it's a popular misconception. There are very few guys like me. I make a lot of money. I didn't always, but in the last three or four years, I've made a lot of money. But who this really affects are the writers who make thirty, forty thousand dollars a year, which is a great many Writers Guild members.

You'd be surprised how many writers, or how many actors, if they miss a paycheck or two, they've got nothing. As a writer or an actor you can have four or five jobs in one year and then have none for two years. You can be put on hold for a month for a job that you think you've got and then find out you don't have it and be paid nothing for that month.

**Q: Let's talk about *In the Valley of Elah*. You started trying to make it in 2003 and had a hard time.**

**Haggis:** Right after we invaded Iraq, I put a sign on my lawn that said, "War is not the answer." That sign was either defaced, ripped up, or stolen every week. I had to replace that sign twelve times. When I ran out, I put up a sign that said, "We support our troops, bring them home now." That one disappeared about ten times. And that's in Santa Monica, one of the most liberal communities in America!

Even here at that time, every second car had the American flag on it, every second car had a bumper sticker that said, "Support Our Troops." None of those bumper stickers meant "support our troops." They meant "support the war." It was stunning to see how thin the veneer of progressiveness is in this community. When we're threatened, it's very easy to appeal to our basest natures.

The radical rightwing pegs Hollywood as a leftist town, which is *completely* wrong. There are a lot of actors, writers, and directors who talk a liberal agenda of some sort . . . but all the studio bosses, for as long as there have been studios, have all been as far rightwing as you can possibly imagine. And now all the studios are owned by multinational corporations, which are not usually bastions of the left. So all the actors, writers, and directors—or at least a great

majority of them—live in fear because we're all insecure, we all want that next job, we all want to be loved, and we don't want to piss off some studio chief who won't hire us for the next movie. That's why you hear this story that we're all on the left, but when there's a demonstration, you count how many actors actually come out. If there's a half dozen, that would be a big day.

**Q: When you brought the idea of *In the Valley of Elah* to studios, what did they tell you?**

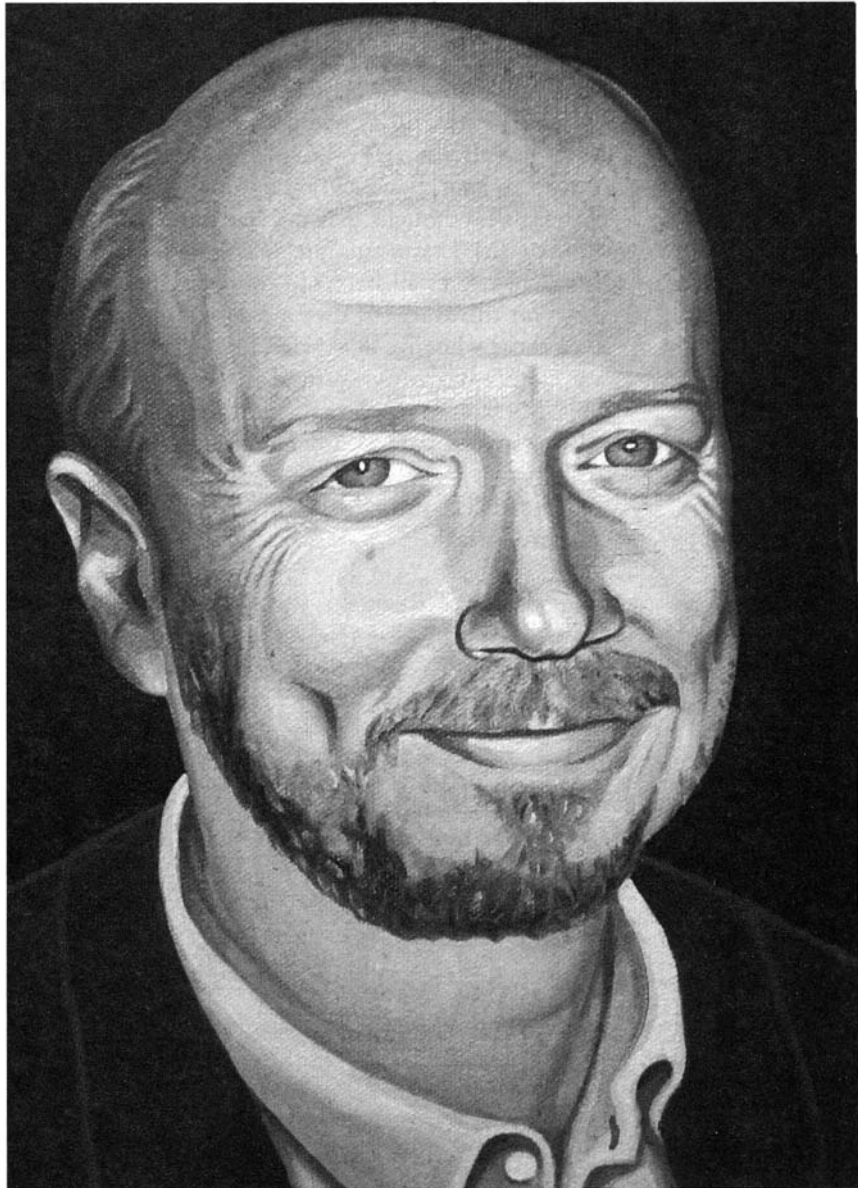
**Haggis:** They kill you with yes in this town. No one ever says no. They say, "Yes, this is a great story, we'd love to do it, let me just find the right people to put it with so we can take it to the next step." And then those people just never appear. They didn't really want to offend me because they heard that *Crash* was pretty good, and thought they might want my next movie, which they hope will be more marketable than this one. But they knew they weren't going to do this one.

So I took it to Clint Eastwood. His politics are very interesting. You can never pin him down on anything. I took a risk, and sent it to him, fully thinking he might call me back up and say, "You commie bastard, never talk to me again." But he read the thing, and called me back a day later and said, "Wow, that's difficult material." And I said, "Yes, but I think it's the truth, and it's happening to many men and women." And he said, "Yes. I'll help you get it made." So he called over to Alan Horn, the COO of Warner Brothers, and asked him to take me seriously. And because of that I was able to write the script. We got the financing independently. We did it for a very low budget. I asked the actors to do it for very little money. They jumped at the chance.

**Q: I'm not surprised Susan Sarandon jumped at it, but Tommy Lee Jones?**

**Haggis:** I didn't ask anyone's politics before I sent it. I mean, my politics are fairly well known within this community. And I thought, my point of view is too easy to dismiss. It's on the far left of the argument. I said, a) it's unfair to argue a movie from that point of view and b) I don't think it's good drama. I wanted to do a political film that is as nonpartisan as can be, because I wanted to do a story that was American. I wanted to tell an American tragedy. Whether you're a Democrat or Republican or progressive—it's a shared tragedy.

I wanted to tell it from the position of a man who is a very proud American. Whether we agree with his politics or not, we recognize him to be that iconic American figure. His sin is the same as mine, and every



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other American's, and that's pride. We think we know what's right. With excessive pride comes blindness. I wanted the story to be this blind man who slowly opens his eyes, and as he opens his eyes and sees the truth, he's almost destroyed by it. And I wanted to tell it in a way that didn't vilify the troops, that didn't vilify those who thought that the war was right.

Now the Democrats are pointing their finger at Bush, saying it's all his fault. Well, no, it's not. They voted for this war, and they are continuing to fund it. Even those who give lip service, saying they oppose the war, vote to continue to fund it. So I say, this is our fault. My fault as much as the next man's, because even if I was against the war, I didn't do enough to stop it.

**Q: The title comes from the valley where David fought Goliath.**

**Haggis:** In that story, this young boy offers to fight a giant that all the king's bravest and strongest warriors won't fight. It's a story of incredible bravery. This kid

was, like, fourteen years old, and he stepped up there with this stone and stood there as this giant charged. Incredibly brave. When we hear these stories we think, "My God! I want to be like that."

So, these boys [American soldiers] go off wanting to be heroes, thinking that they're going there to support freedom. And then they find out they're doing the opposite. They realize that they're not the David, they're the Goliath. They end up doing things, seeing things, that they can't live with. They're killing civilians; they have to face that on a daily basis. They have to walk through that village and see that mother dead with her child in her arms.

Now if these were bad men, it wouldn't affect them. But these are good men. Even the ones who don't really know anything know that this shouldn't be happening. And so it affects them. Maybe we can see through their eyes and empathize. Maybe we can see how it's destroying them. Maybe we can see how it's destroying our society. And then maybe we'll change something. It's not a murder mystery, it's a

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moral mystery. It's not about who did it, it's about who's responsible.

But I also thought, what kind of king sends a boy to fight a monster that he won't fight himself? I mean, how cowardly, how corrupt, are the leaders sending those men over there unprepared for what they're going to face?

This isn't just about Bush. It goes back a long time, if you look at the history of our wars. That's the way we solve disputes. By invading people. Somebody should stand up and say, "That's not American. That's not the America I love."

**Q: You're from Canada originally. What makes you such an American patriot?**

**Haggis:** Well, I've lived here for thirty years now. I mean, I love being a Canadian, but I truly identify with America. I love America so much. I just don't recognize it anymore.

**Q: What do you love so much about it?**

**Haggis:** The hope. That's what it represents to the world and has always represented—the hope for a better life and a better world. We have a duty to protect and support that hope with not just our words, but with our deeds. This could be a great country. It needs to be a great country. It's our responsibility as citizens to make that happen, every single one of us.

**Q: Who's your pick for President?**

**Haggis:** We worry about Republicans getting another four years. I'm very worried about that, too, but I'm actually more worried about the wrong Democrat getting the next four years. The wrong one will start saying things like "withdraw with honor." We've heard phrases like that before, and they led to thousands and thousands of deaths. Democrats always want to look tough, and this is not the time to swagger.

I like Kucinich. I think he's a good man.

**Q: How much difference can a film make on a specific policy issue like Iraq?**

**Haggis:** I don't know what any individual action ever does. But I talked recently to Daniel Ellsberg. He's one man who did one thing. If you have to look at a pivotal point where public opinion changed in the Vietnam War, it would be when he released the Pentagon Papers. So one person can make a difference. Can one film? I don't know. We do them because we hope so. If you change the right mind, then that person can perhaps change the world.

**Q: *Crash* also grappled with a lot of powerful social issues.**

**Haggis:** The themes are very similar. The theme of intolerance is a big one that runs through both of them.

With *Crash*, I just wanted to fuck viewers up. I wanted to sit you down in your seat and make you feel really, really comfortable with everything you believe. All those secret little thoughts you have, I wanted to say, "Shh, shh, it's fine. We all think that way." And as soon as you get comfortable, I wanted to start twisting you around in your seat, until when you walk out, you didn't know what the hell to think.

**Q: *In the Valley of Elah* hasn't really done that well at the box office.**

**Haggis:** No, it's done terrible. Great in France, though. But you don't do pictures because the audience is ready for them. You do them because there's something gnawing at you, something inside.

**Q: If your purpose though, is to have an impact, to change people's minds . . .**

**Haggis:** Oh yeah, I'm very disappointed. But I am proud of the fact that it did best exactly where I wanted it to do best—in the Midwest and the South.

I think that's largely because their children are affected by this. Walk through Santa Monica and try to find somebody who knows a young man or woman who's in this war. Here, war is an intellectual concept. If you lose your son or daughter, it's no longer an intellectual matter.

I went to a screening of this film where we invited troops, veterans, family members. It was very emotional. A lot of people stood up and spoke afterwards about their experiences. I walked out to the lobby, and a woman came up to me and said, "This film was really hard to watch. My husband came home from the Iraq War and hung himself his first year back." I talked to her for a couple of minutes, and then another young woman comes up to me and she says, "It was heart breaking for me. My son was in the war, and he was stationed in Baghdad, and he came home and he shot himself." I walked outside, and another woman comes up to me, and says, "I was in tears. Thank you so much for making it. My husband was in the Iraq War, and I hate myself for saying this, but when he came home I was terrified of him. I felt so awful about that, until he killed himself two weeks later."

Three women, within the course of seven or eight minutes, none of whom knew each other. That's what's happening in this war. ♦