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| |  | | --- | |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | [Rob Waring](http://docs.google.com/bios.htm#waring)     |  | | --- | | **Read other reviews:**  [Internet Movie Database](http://www.us.imdb.com/Title?0120188)  [All Movie Guide](http://allmovie.com/cg/avg.dll?p=avg&sql=A180980) |     Russell could not have foreseen that his film, where U.S. soldiers operating as outlaws bully Arabs by flashing bogus letters of authorization from President Bush, would have such hyper-relevance in 2002. As we struggle to reconcile basic tenants of international law and humanity with America's War on Terrorism, *Three Kings* serves as a reminder of how national self-interest and hubris can warp ethics. | |  | | --- | | ***Three Kings*: Cinematic Lessons for the War on Terror**  by Rob Waring  If you are ready to regain a healthy skepticism about America's use of military power in the post-9/11 era, there is a film at your local video store available to assist you. I skipped *Three Kings* by director/screenwriter David Russell (*Flirting with Disaster*) when it was released in the final months of the twentieth century, because the studio promoted it as an action/adventure flick. However, Amazon.com describes it as "a confident hybrid of *M\*A\*S\*H*, *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, and *Dr. Strangelove*," and that's pretty close. I would add *Catch-22* to that list, and argue that *Three Kings* is the best film to date about the morality of America's military policing actions.  The setting is the Gulf War (Operation Desert Storm), immediately after the 1991 cease-fire. The U.S. and its allies had just completed a military campaign that killed more than 100,000 Iraqis and destroyed the civilian infrastructure of Baghdad. After regaining control of Kuwaiti oil fields, America stopped the war abruptly, leaving Saddam the Satan still in power. Groups in the south and north then rose up in rebellion at the U.S.'s urging, but unchallenged Iraqi soldiers were slaughtering whole villages. (Some of the survivors serve as extras in the film.)  The number of Americans killed was so small that deaths from accidents and friendly fire exceeded the number killed by the enemy. Most U.S. troops never saw any bloodshed; as portrayed in the film, the war for them was like a camping trip in the desert.  Russell could not have foreseen that his film, where U.S. soldiers operating as outlaws bully Arabs by flashing bogus letters of authorization from President Bush, would have such hyper-relevance in 2002. As we struggle to reconcile basic tenants of international law and humanity with America's War on Terrorism, *Three Kings* serves as a reminder of how national self-interest and hubris can warp ethics. (The U.S. was all too eager to invade Afghanistan, but now wants little to do with making it work as a nation.)  The theme that assaults viewers repeatedly is that most Americans did not see the reality of the Gulf War. U.S. military commanders believed they were fighting a media war, in which winning American public support for the conflict was as important as any military effort to "liberate" Kuwait and "defeat" Iraq. Sound bites that seemed reasonable to American ears when coming out of the mouths of State Department or Pentagon briefers are laughable in the film when uttered by infantrymen who confront Iraqi soldiers, revolutionaries and refugees.  The comedy is at its darkest when an Iraqi army interrogator asks an American soldier he is torturing to explain the difference in their causes, and the soldier (played by Mark Wahlberg) answers in sound bites. The soldier's shallow justification of the need to liberate the people of Kuwait (one of the world's richest nations) seems even more ridiculous than his dark-skinned torturer's desire to exact revenge for the pain suffered by black pop singer Michael Jackson--forced into plastic surgery to conform in a white world.  Another scene lampoons America's expectation that other peoples would blindly follow because America is right. (One post-Gulf War effort was in fact called "Operation Just Cause.") George Clooney, as the leader of an outlaw incursion into Iraqi territory and one of the "kings" in the title, tries to obtain a fleet of Kuwaiti limousines "liberated" by the Iraqis. Playing a caricature of Uncle Sam in an army recruiting poster, he tries to con Iraqi dissidents into giving him the cars so that he can help them fulfill President Bush's desire that they rise up against Saddam. They join in his pro-American pep rally, but, seeing through his exploitation and false promises, demand payment in full.  Just as during the realm of George I, American officials today explain questionable military and human rights policies by saying that we are the good guys--therefore policies in our national interest must be just and everyone should follow us (that, and the fact that we are strongest military power in the world). The overriding message in the film is that those with institutional values can only see the goals of those institutions. They ignore any reality--no matter how inhumane--that conflicts with those goals. In the new world order, America's narrow wartime agenda has nothing to do with bettering the lives of Arabs.  The film brings this home when, in the end, Clooney and his "kings" face a terrible choice. As outlaws who have rejected institutional values, they are only people capable of humane action.  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