

January 27, 2003

To Whom It May Concern:

As a documentary filmmaker who has worked in Vietnam, I cast a cold, even skeptical eye on new films purporting to tell the 'real' truth about our American war there. Haven't we been there, done that? Hasn't the public itself moved on?

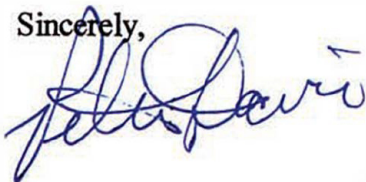
Then last week I saw Achilles in Vietnam, and I've changed my mind. I wish Achilles in Vietnam could be played on every network for a week, be shown in every school every semester to every junior high and high school student. That is how essential I believe this film to be in its depiction of the effects of war. Because it reaches back into ancient history and myth, Sandy Berkowitz' wonderful, gripping film goes far beyond politics to universalize the experience of armies clashing, of soldiers trying to kill one another. Berkowitz' film is so moving I really don't know how to approach it critically; in fact, I can't approach it any way but emotionally. It is simply devastating.

If I force myself to step back from the film, I can see that Berkowitz' weave of Troy and Vietnam is brilliant, aided by the author of the original book as well as historians and classicists, each of whom I think is both well chosen and well utilized. But of course what touches me so deeply are the veterans themselves. By the end of the film I felt I'd been with new-yet-old friends for an evening. Friends who had been permanently altered, damaged, by what our country sent them to do. I am confident Berkowitz' Odysseus film will be made with the same compassion and talent he used in making the Achilles film, and therefore I enthusiastically recommend that his new film receive the highest level of support.

My own film on Vietnam, Hearts and Minds, has now been in circulation over twenty-five years. I'm glad I made it, glad to have received an Academy Award for it, glad it's being seen by a new generation, but if I had my choice of showing our policymakers Berkowitz' film or mine, I wouldn't hesitate for a moment to choose his. He shows so movingly what war does to the people who fight it – and has done from the days of the Trojan War until the present – that quite beyond politics, policies or even opinion, Berkowitz gives the best reasons, the human ones, for not initiating violence. His painful, redemptive film is the filmmaker's own best reference, but I'm proud to add my own backbench cheer, along with my hopes that Sandy Berkowitz makes the companion film to Achilles in Vietnam as soon as possible.

Thank you for your attention.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "John David", written in a cursive style.