

PROGRESSIONS OF A DANGEROUS MIND

Rich, pretty and... brave.
With *Syriana* and
Good Night, And Good Luck
George Clooney cuts
through America's culture
of fear with the most
powerful political
double-bill in a decade.

WORDS **MATT MUELLER**

Three years ago, George Clooney ended up somewhere he didn't want to be — on the cover of a rabidly pro-Bush magazine with the word 'Traitor' emblazoned across his face. The actor's crime? Daring to suggest in interviews that maybe a few questions should be asked before Dubya dispatched 150,000 troops to Iraq. Dubbed un-American by baying right-wingers, and with people turning out to protest his movies, things were looking dicey, career-wise, for the one-time *ER* star-turned-movie heartthrob — especially since there wasn't exactly an outpouring of public support from his peers.

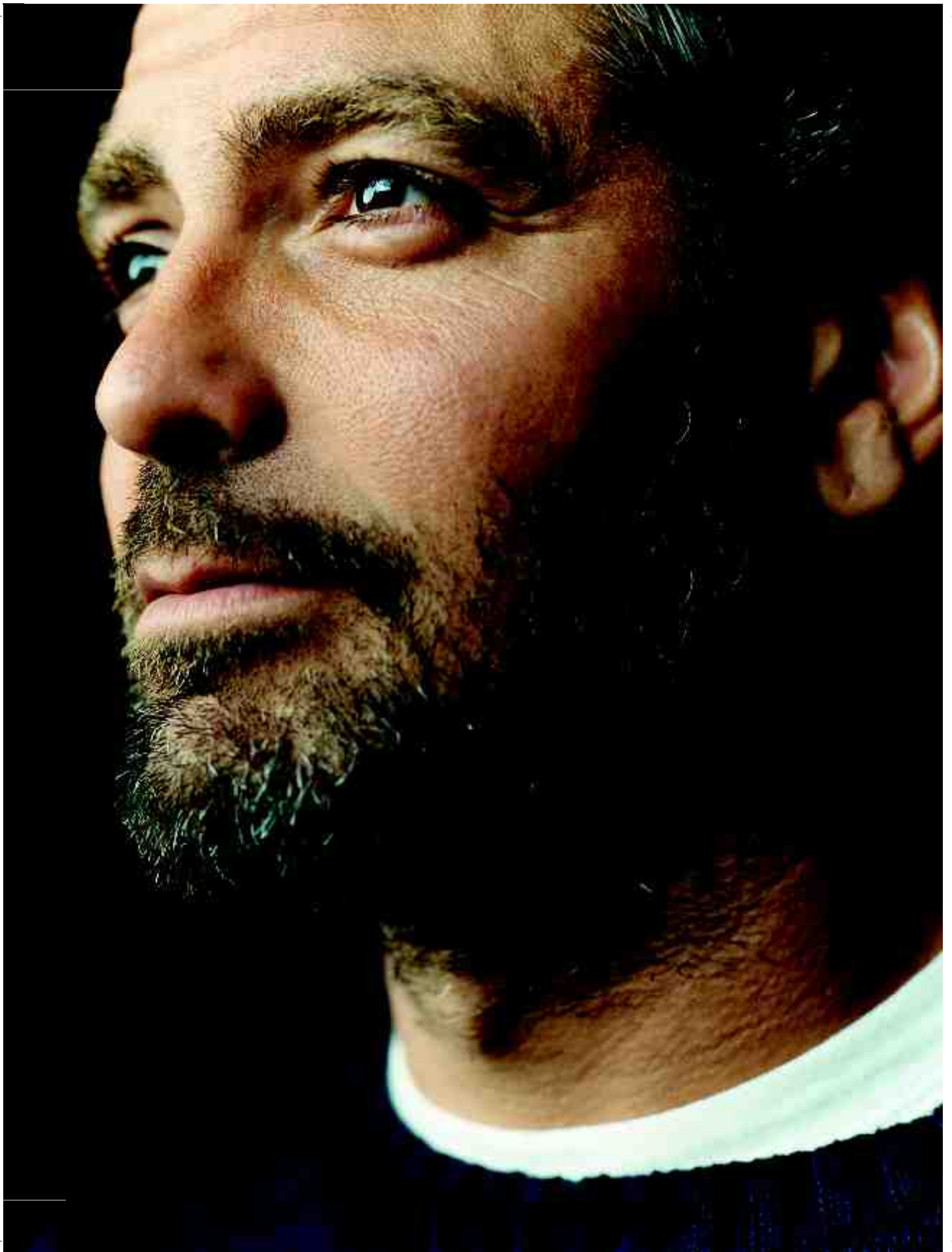
But did Clooney sneak off, tail between his legs, and leave the shit-stirring to rabble-rousers like Michael Moore? Like hell he did. He stuck to his guns, and now he's come out punching with a pair of politically charged films which put paid to the notion that, while good little superstars may occasionally be allowed to jump around on Oprah's sofa, they should really stick to the job of flashing their megawatt smiles and keeping *heat* magazine in business. Sure, he's been helped by a shift in the ideological winds but with *Good Night, And Good Luck* and *Syriana*, Clooney is flipping a two-fingered salute at the Hollywood rulebook that lists things not to do if you want to stay standing.

"I'm a fan of trying things that are going to polarise at times," says the urbane and self-effacing star. "And I'm in a lucky position to push some of those things through. It'll get us in trouble every once in a while, but I like that. We have gone through a period of time in the last few years where asking questions makes you unpatriotic, and that's a bad place to be."

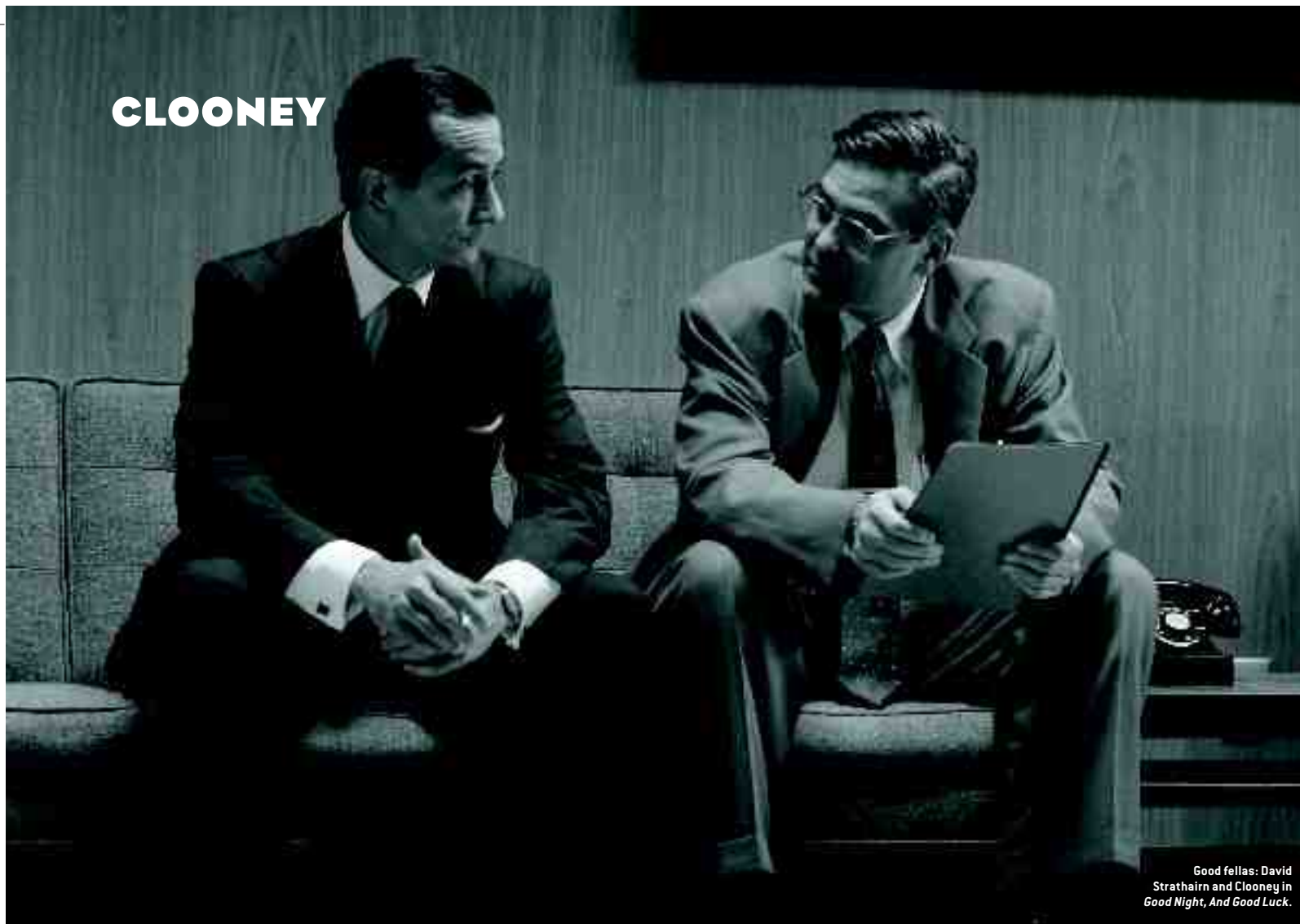
Good Night, And Good Luck focuses on legendary US anchorman Edward R Murrow's 1953-54 on-air battle against the bullying, communist-baiting tactics of Senator Joseph McCarthy and his House Un-American Activities Committee hearings. Clooney's second time in the director's chair — he also co-wrote the film and plays the supporting role of Murrow's producer and confidante, Fred Friendly — it's an unabashed salute to Murrow (brilliantly played by David Strathairn), who stood up to McCarthy in another era where dissent was considered unpatriotic. But while Clooney's movie may be in black-and-white, the issues it raises are anything but. In its own mellow way, *Good Night* is the most provocative American film to date in this era of the Patriot Act and "enemy combatants" at Guantanamo Bay.

Clooney might have broadcast news hard-wired into his DNA. He grew up the son of a former anchorman, whose own refusal to kowtow to corporate pressures cost him a fair number of >>

ADDITIONAL REPORTING SCOTT FOUNDAS AND JENNY COONEY. © CPI — SYNDICATION



CLOONEY



Good fellas: David Strathairn and Clooney in *Good Night, And Good Luck*.

jobs over the years. As a child, Clooney and his sister spent hours wandering the halls of stations where their father Nick worked, while at home, at an age when most kids were being spoon-fed fairy tales, he was regaled with stories of Murrow's courageous on-air exploits. "It was the high-water mark," Clooney recalls. "That, and Walter Cronkite coming back from Vietnam in 1967 and saying it was a stalemate over there. My dad would say those were the two times you could point to broadcast journalists actually changing policy."

Not surprisingly, *Good Night, And Good Luck* isn't the first time Clooney has set a film in and around the kinetic atmosphere of live television production. His 2002 directorial debut, *Confessions Of A Dangerous Mind*, told the wild and woolly tale of *The Gong Show* impresario Chuck Barris' supposed odyssey from lowbrow TV producer to globe-trotting CIA hitman. By then, Clooney, who studied broadcast journalism himself before switching to acting, had already been toying with the idea of telling Murrow's story, even co-writing a script for a TV biopic. That project never achieved lift-off, but America's changing mood got Clooney thinking about Murrow again.

"There was a certain revisionist history about McCarthy — books being written about how he was right and Murrow was wrong," he says. "I wanted to remind people that it wasn't about whether or not one or two of the people that McCarthy had named ended up being communists. The issue was using fear to erode civil liberties. There is a responsibility we must always have: you're either a criminal and you have the right to face your accuser, or you're a prisoner of war and you have Geneva Convention rights. But the minute you say, 'No, these guys are just detainees,' then we start to erode civil liberty."

Instead of being the conventional biopic he'd originally envisioned, *Good Night* limited its focus to the Murrow-McCarthy face-off. And rather than hire an actor to play the senator, Clooney used archive footage of the HUAC hearings and other McCarthy appearances, integrating them seamlessly into recreations of Murrow's original broadcasts. In short, he would do exactly what Murrow had done five decades earlier — he'd use McCarthy's own words to back the junior senator from Wisconsin into a corner.

"I had to deal straight with it," he says. "We double-sourced every single scene in the movie. We couldn't play loose with any of the facts, because if you find one thing that's wrong, you can say the whole thing is bullshit. And even with the best actor in the world playing McCarthy — say you get Kevin Spacey and he plays it perfectly — most people would say we were making him too much of a buffoon. Because he was a buffoon. When we tested the film, a lot of people asked, 'Who's the actor playing McCarthy?' We want to take out an ad in *Variety*: 'For Your Consideration, Best Supporting Actor, Joe McCarthy.' I think he could win..."

It's not every Sexiest Man Alive who namedrops Jean-Luc Godard and DA Pennebaker, as Clooney does when discussing his influences for *Good Night*. But then he's been industriously chipping away at his Gorgeous George façade for years in movies like *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and *Solaris*. For his other new movie, *Syriana*, he piled on the paunch — and ended up paying a hefty price for it (more on that later).

"If you look at the guys who actually survive over the years, they find a way to get out of that box," he says, leaning in close, as he tends to do when he wants you to know he's really leveling with you. "The Sexiest Man Alive? It's embarrassing, but it's still a compliment. It's one of those things that there's no right way to answer. It's also sort of a backhanded slap, because it usually means you're an idiot. But the guys who survive those things — the master of it all is Paul Newman — become character actors along the way, because you can't sustain the other thing. Sean Connery can, but most of us can't. I don't want to be 60 years old and doing love scenes with 35-year-old actresses. I have an interest in being 65 years old and doing

CH-CH-CHANGES The evolving mug of George Clooney...



GURNING

Return Of The Killer Tomatoes, 1988

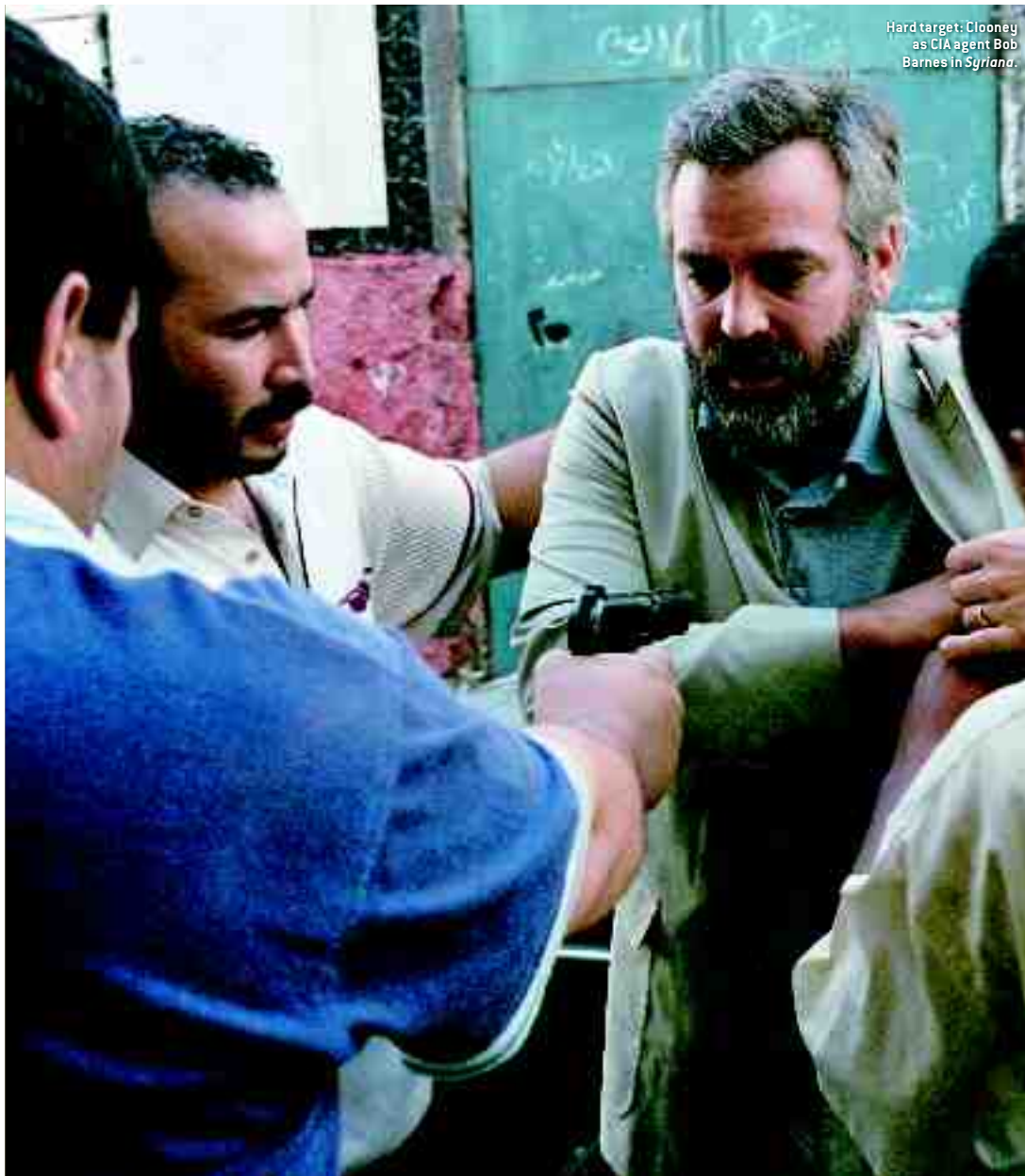
George tackles produce-from-Hell, the red blighters attacking in the form of human beings (don't ask). Our guess is that Clooney studied his mugging performance before signing up for the Coens' *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*



GURNEY

ER, 1994-99

George utilises his puppy dog eyes (and displays a fondness for tilting his head like a dog hearing a distant whistle) as Dr Doug Ross. Charm or smarm, it was enough to capture Hollywood's attention...



Hard target: Clooney as CIA agent Bob Barnes in *Syriana*.

to say to the studio, 'We're going to do *Ocean's Twelve*, but I want to be able to do *Syriana* and some other films you guys aren't going to want to do,' I feel like that's okay. I want to be able, at 70 years old, to look back and think, 'These were the projects that were close to me, when no one was encouraging me to do them and many people were discouraging me to do them.'

Based on Bob Baer's first-person account of the campaign against global terrorism, *See No Evil*, *Syriana* is writer/director Stephen Gaghan's most high-profile outing since his 2000 Oscar-snatching screenplay for *Traffic*. Like that film, which unravels a tangled knot of connections in the drug trade, *Syriana* penetrates the amoral politics of the global oil industry, spanning from Texas to the Middle East, through the eyes of a handful of individuals caught in a vast, interconnecting web. Clooney plays a middle-aged CIA agent who executes a job in Beirut, only to have a stinger missile intercepted by an unknown Arab during the operation; while other subplots involve a financial analyst (Matt Damon) who forms an unlikely alliance with an idealistic Gulf prince (Alexander Siddig) and a young Pakistani (Mazhar Munir), whose harsh struggle eventually leads him into the arms of a radical Islam group.

"There are going to be people who will be very angry at the idea that we showed how suicide bombers could be formed, instead of just categorising them as evil," says Clooney. "With *Syriana* we're going to get beaten up in some places. Fair enough, because we've taken a stand. It's not an attack on the Bush administration, but it is an attack on the system that has been in place for 60 or 70 years – oil always being at the centre of it."

'Syriana's portrayal of suicide bombers will get us beaten up in some places'

the kinds of roles I watched Newman do at 65. There'd be nothing better than to be able to do a film like *The Verdict* and be a guy who's all washed up. I think the only way to survive as an actor is to continually grow and change. But that's why you direct, too. You want to have some fallbacks. To me, directing's where I'm going to go. I enjoy it. I like being the boss."

It's about more than fallbacks, though. Clooney knows full well that clout like his comes around only rarely in the film industry and doesn't last for very long when it does. He's determined to make the most of his spell at the top of the tree, and, since 2000, that's meant ensuring his production

company Section Eight (formed with Steven Soderbergh after they became firm friends on *Out Of Sight*) has balanced blockbusters like *Ocean's Eleven* and *Twelve* with edgier fare like *Good Night, Syriana* and Soderbergh's forthcoming, lo-fi experiment *Bubble*. Section Eight has also championed and protected the work of filmmakers they admire – Todd Haynes with *Far From Heaven*, Christopher Nolan with *Insomnia*.

"When they do that retrospective about your life," he growls at *Total Film*, "no one's going to give a shit that you had 15 films that opened number one at the box-office. What they care about is what you had to say and where you stood. As long as I'm able

With a full salt'n'pepper beard, a cleverly constructed receding hairline and 30 pounds of extra flab, Clooney convincingly disguises himself as a shabby spook near the end of his career. To get into the skin of his character, he invited Baer to his villa at Lake Como. When the former agent turned up with a sizeable gut, Clooney started to fatten himself up. "The next time I saw him I was 30 pounds heavier – and he had suddenly become really trim and fit-looking," he recalls ruefully. Then, while shooting a scene in which his character is tortured, Clooney tore his dura – the membrane around his spine that holds in the spinal fluid – when he fell off a table. "We shot that scene >>

ALL STAR MOVIESTORE



BATTY

Batman & Robin, 1997

George bounds onto the A-list as Batman number three in film number four... and falls flat on his rubber-coated phizog, shot down by Arnie's leaden puns and Schumacher's dum-dum visuals. Time to get smart...



SMARTY

Out Of Sight, 1998

George takes a walk on the wild side as cool-crim Jack Foley in Soderbergh's classy Elmore Leonard adap. Equally idiosyncratic work with David O Russell, the Coens and Soderbergh [again and again] followed.



TACHY

Confessions Of A Dangerous Mind, 2002

George hoists the megaphone and turns in a flash biopic of Chuck Barris, '70s gameshow host and 'CIA hitman'. *Good Night, And Good Luck* cements his directing credentials.



CLOONEY

POWER GAMES

George isn't the first big-name star to use their clout to secure funding for brave personal projects...

JANE FONDA



Fonda achieved stardom in *Barbarella*... then used her fame to push the feminist cause (*Klute*, *Nine To Five*) and rally against the Vietnam War (*Coming Home*). Spent the '80s in a leotard.

JOHN WAYNE



Big John was one helluva star but his politics sucked. The powerhouse lead in many of John Ford's 'print the myth' Westerns, he played similarly fast and loose with 'Nam. Check out his hilariously heroic antics in *The Green Berets*.

WARREN BEATTY



Beatty's liberal attitudes to sex are matched by his politics. He directed and starred in such hot potatoes as *Reds* and *Bulworth* and has often been known to pound pavements on the Democrats' campaign trail.

TIM ROBBINS



The tallest man to ever win an Oscar is the darling of the liberal left and makes damn sure everyone knows it. Frequently spouts his views and uses his Art as a soapbox in movies such as *Bob Roberts*, *Dead Man Walking* and, um, *Top Gun*.

SEAN PENN



Never one to staple his flapping lips, Penn unleashed an agonising howl against capital punishment in *Dead Man Walking* and twanged nerves with *The Assassination Of Richard Nixon*. Pretty feisty (if rather wooden) in *Team America*, too.



Chameleon Clooney (clockwise from left): as a grief-stricken astronaut in *Solaris*, a soldier in *Three Kings* and a buffoon in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*



'I don't live my life in a bubble. I want to feel like I'm getting into trouble'

20 or 30 times and in one take you actually see the desk go over and my head hit it. I think that was the time it happened," says the actor, who's had surgery twice to repair the damage. "It was my own fault. I'm 44, not 34, and I was doing all the things I could do when I was 170 pounds, not 207 pounds."

Despite the resulting short-term memory loss and chronic headaches, *Syriana* was still worth all the pasta for Clooney. Dense, talky and challenging, it's ultimately about the world's reliance on cheap oil, the corrupt military-industrial web that keeps it flowing and the human price paid to keep it that way. In other words, it's one of the most radical films to be bankrolled by a Hollywood studio since the '70s (Warner Bros signed the cheque, to the tune of \$50 million).

"*Syriana*," chuckles Clooney, "makes *Good Night, And Good Luck* look like a Disney film."

It is easy to snicker about movie stars with mansions on Lake Como who take on the mantle of crusader, but you can't take the piss out of Clooney for wanting, as he says, to "shine a light" on issues such as poverty in Africa and global debt. And he does leave you with the impression that, while he loves being the centre of attention, he could easily walk away from it all and never look back. He has fought hard to get where he is — that story about the kid from Kentucky who drove out to LA with \$300 to his name and slept in a friend's closet until he could afford a place of his own has been spun ad nauseam. But his success hasn't

made him cautious, and he's willing to take the knocks, too. Critical reaction to *Good Night, And Good Luck* was good in the States, but not rapturous (though the awards bodies have gone for it, with Clooney earning a Best Director nomination from the Directors Guild of America and the Golden Globes, who also recognised his turn in *Syriana*. The results will have been announced by the time you read this). Meanwhile, there's still plenty of reluctance to take him seriously as both actor and director. Surely, the thinking goes, he can't be *that* good at so many different things...

"I'm a big kid," he says. "And I deserve that kind of criticism. I can't argue the idea of freedom of speech and then say, 'Don't say bad things about me!' You've got to take hits and I can handle that."

If there's one thing you learn after a few days drifting in and out of Clooney's universe, it's that he isn't happy unless he's making things difficult for himself. He got paid \$1 to write, direct and act in *Good Night* and even mortgaged his LA home to help scrape together its \$7 million budget; he doubled his earnings with *Syriana*.

"What's the worst thing that can happen?" Clooney asks rhetorically, shrugging. "I've already made more money and been more successful than I ever thought I'd be. I'm not stupid with my money. I've got it saved up. And it's enough to get me through. If everything went to hell today, I've got a house in Italy I can sell. I can live off of that for the rest of my life. I lived in a closet for three years; I can live in a one-bedroom apartment now. I don't travel with an entourage. I just don't feel that need. I'm afraid that if you put that bubble around you, then you lose touch with everything else that's going on in the world. And I want to feel like I'm getting into trouble..."

Good Night, And Good Luck opens on 17 February and is reviewed on page 35. *Syriana* opens on 3 March and is reviewed on page 40.

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