

The CIA's Hollywood Release: "Zero Dark Thirty", or How People Lose Their Humanity

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I was shaking as I walked out of Zero Dark Thirty, the new film about the CIA's 10-year search for Osama bin Laden. Shaking and queasy. Wanting to hear from others in the audience, I asked people questions as they streamed out... What did they think of the film? Overwhelmingly, people answered positively... with smiles.

Did they think the film upheld or condemned torture? Some answered that it didn't take a stand, just showed the facts. But many said they felt it upheld torture, that it portrayed it as essential to Osama Bin Laden's capture. And what did they think of torture? While a couple people answered that they supported it outright, many said they didn't think it was right, that America shouldn't use torture. So how did they feel about liking a film that upholds something they would otherwise find deplorable? Several people said it's just a movie and shouldn't be taken so seriously. One woman said she appreciated coming to understand, from the CIA's perspective, why they used torture. And far too often, the answer was, "It's complicated."

And here you have the point of this highly ideological film: to make acceptable, or perhaps "complicated," to people who consider themselves progressive the acts of this empire, to celebrate revenge against "America's enemies," to get you to sympathize with the criminal monsters who are carrying out these acts and to cheer for the "protection of the homeland," no matter the price. "For god and country," says the Navy SEAL after killing Osama bin Laden.

While there has been some controversy about the film from different quarters, and a too small handful of sharp critics, it's getting rave reviews from a whole range of liberal journalists. It's already being nominated for awards, and there is buzz about Oscar nominations.

Zero Dark Thirty begins with harrowing audio recordings from people inside the World Trade Center as it's on fire and about to collapse.

It portrays the CIA in a heroic fight to get the bad guys, with one agent in particular, Maya (played by Jessica Chastain), with enough grit and determination to see it through. After hearing the voices from 9/11, we are transported to a CIA black site where a detainee is being tortured, strapped up by the arms. The torturer in charge, Dan (played by Jason Clarke), explains to Maya that the detainee "has to learn how helpless he is." And then we watch as he is thrown to the ground and waterboarded.

And what is waterboarding, exactly?

A towel is thrown over the man's face and a jug of water poured directly into his throat without pause. This makes the tortured feel as if they are drowning to death, suffocation by water. *New York* magazine quoted a doctor who works with survivors of torture: "Some victims were still traumatized years later." One patient he described couldn't take showers, and panicked when it rained. "The fear of being killed is a terrifying experience."

But if you are watching *Zero Dark Thirty*, and have begun to feel uncomfortable, you are reminded that the person that this is happening to helped to "murder 3,000 people" on September 11. "Your Jihad is over, this is what defeat looks like," says Dan. No need for concern, these are the just deserts. And if the detainee wanted it to stop, he could just give Dan the information he wants.

It doesn't stop there. There is sleep deprivation, stress positions, the use of dog collars, humiliation and shoving a man into a tiny box where you can hear only his screams.

There has been a great deal of controversy about whether the film shows a connection between this torture and the supposed victory in capturing Osama bin Laden (including from sections of the US establishment who want to disassociate themselves from the Bush regime while furthering his policies with a different face). But if you watch the actual film, it is undeniable. The way the story line goes, the detainees give information because they've been tortured. While the film portrays the first detainee we witness being tortured only giving the needed information over a quiet lunch, it is the fear of being tortured again that gets him to speak. Another detainee is told he can stay imprisoned in Pakistan or be sent to Israel. "I have no wish to be tortured. Ask me a question, I'll answer."

And what do the filmmakers say? Director Kathryn Bigelow said:

"We depicted a variety of controversial practices and intelligence methods that were used in the name of finding bin Laden. The film shows that no single method was necessarily responsible for solving the manhunt, nor can any single scene taken in isolation fairly capture the totality of efforts the film dramatizes."

So torture, what she calls an "intelligence method," wasn't *solely* responsible for bin Laden's capture, it was *partially* responsible. Jessica Chastain admitted that there was a link made in the film to the needed information and the torture to get it, but went on that this was a "murky, gray area we're still learning about."

And once again we find ourselves feeling that "it's complicated."

There is nothing complicated about torture.

To quote from Alan Goodman in *Revolution* newspaper:

"Let's make it plain: torture is, literally and in essence, a crime against humanity. Like rape, it is a systematic attempt to violently degrade people and rob them of their very humanity. Any government which not only tolerates such things but which, from its highest offices, justifies and insists on them as 'instruments of policy'... any government which does not, once this has been exposed, prosecute the perpetrators but instead provides them in advance with immunity...reveals itself as a system that requires such crimes, and such criminals, for its functioning. Any people that does not

resist such crimes, and demand prosecution of the torturers and, even more so, those who formulated the policy at the highest levels, reveals themselves to be *complicit* in those crimes. And in passively allowing the humanity of others to be degraded and attacked, they lose their own." ("[The Torture Memos ... And the Need for Justice](#)," *Revolution*, May 17, 2009, online at revcom.us)

To go along with this, to obfuscate this with a haze of "complexity," is to let great crimes take place in your name.

Who Is the CIA?

But there is a larger question that has to be asked about the whole premise and point of the film. Who the hell is the CIA anyway? The filmmakers have tried to argue that this is a film that doesn't take a stand, they're just showing the facts.

In an interview, Kathryn Bigelow said: "I think it was important to humanize the hunt... These are people who have sacrificed a great deal, live in arduous conditions, risk their life in some cases for our safety. So I think it's an interesting portrait of dedication." Or elsewhere, Bigelow has said: "at the heart of this story is a woman with tenacity, dedication and courage." Chastain gushed about the character she played: "She's such a bad-ass, capable and strong, standing on her own, it was an honor to play her." And she later called her character a hero.

Let's get real. The CIA is a nest of spies and murderers who are responsible for crimes throughout history—assassinations, fomenting coups, torturing people in the sickest of ways and other crimes throughout the globe... in the service of U.S. imperialism.

In 1953, working with the British, the CIA engineered a coup against Iran's elected president, Mohammad Mossadegh, in part because he threatened U.S. and British oil interests. They then went on to install the Shah of Iran who created a special police force which tortured people for decades. *What was heroic about that?* In 1960, the CIA helped stage a coup in the Congo to get rid of the nationalist government headed by Patrice Lumumba, which came to power after decades of colonial rule. With the CIA's assistance, Lumumba was murdered by Mobutu Sese Seko, who brutally presided over the newly named Zaire as a U.S. neocolony, violently crushing attempts to build rebel movements.

What was heroic about that? In 1965 in Indonesia, as a military regime headed by General Suharto came to power in a CIA-engineered coup, hundreds of thousands of people (up to a million according to some accounts) were massacred—communists and people accused of being communists. *What was heroic about that?* On a different September 11, in 1973, the CIA orchestrated the overthrow of the elected government of Salvador Allende in Chile by the fascist general Pinochet. Mainstream sources document the death of some 3,000 people at the hands of Pinochet, and Chilean revolutionaries have said that 30,000 people were killed. Many more were tortured or forced into exile during Pinochet's 17-year rule. *Again I ask, what was heroic about that?* And I could keep going... Vietnam, Laos, Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Nicaragua...

Or look at the CIA in relation to Afghanistan and how Osama bin Laden got his start in the first place:

The fact is that the U.S., and the CIA's "work" in particular, had everything to do with the growth of the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan and the spread of Islamic fundamentalism in the whole region. In 1979, the former Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. The Soviet Union at the time was a revisionist (that is, a phony "communist") country, an imperialist superpower that was seriously contending with the U.S. for dominance in many parts of the world. The U.S. deliberately provoked the invasion of Afghanistan, in order to (in the words of Zbigniew Brzezinski, national security adviser to then-President Jimmy Carter) give the Soviet Union "its Vietnam War."

Then through the 1980s, the CIA, in partnership with the reactionary regimes in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, carried out a massive covert war in Afghanistan by funneling more than \$3 billion in arms and aid to the reactionary Islamic fundamentalist fighters. The U.S. strategy was to make the war much longer and more violent, destructive, and costly for the Soviets. By the time the Soviets were forced to withdraw in 1989, more than a million Afghans had been killed and one-third of its population driven into refugee camps. This CIA-led insurgency against America's imperialist rivals is where Osama bin Laden got his start. This is where the seeds of al Qaeda and the Taliban were first sown.

The current U.S. war in Afghanistan has never been simply a response to 9/11. The 2001 invasion grew out of a decade of U.S. planning before 9/11 aimed at seizing greater initiative and hegemony in the Middle East and Central Asia. In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union (in which the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan was a big factor), the U.S. imperialists faced a new obstacle in dominating this crucial region of the world—the very same Islamic fundamentalists that the U.S. had built up in the 1980s. The Taliban is a reactionary force that brings down horror on the people. But that is not why the U.S. invaded Afghanistan in 2001—and why Obama is now greatly expanding that war. And of the two opposing reactionary forces, U.S. imperialism and Islamic fundamentalism, the U.S. has done—and is doing—much greater harm in the world, as even the partial list above of CIA crimes shows. ("[CIA's Decades of Criminal Service](#)," *Revolution*, February 7, 2010, online at revcom.us)

There is nothing to uphold about any of this! And let's be clear: this is not about "our safety"—this is about the extension and defense of the American empire. But even if it were about the safety of American lives, letting all this go down would be wrong and immoral. It would be to make a devil's bargain: "You can go do what you do to the people of the world, just keep me safe and we'll not only go along with it, we will cheer." No! As Bob Avakian has said, "American Lives Are *Not* More Important Than Other People's Lives." (*Basics* 5:7)

CIA "Heroes" Raining Death From the Sky

In a quickly passing moment in the film, we watch Maya reviewing a drone strike. Watching a missile fired from afar. Later in the film, the CIA station chief in Pakistan, Joseph Bradley (played by Kyle Chandler), has to be sent back to the U.S. because he's been named in a lawsuit filed by the family of a victim of a drone strike. We see protesters but know nothing about what's happened or really why they're protesting. "The ISI [the Pakistani intelligence agency] fucked you," says Maya, painting the station chief as the victim.

But what's the real story here?

A Pakistani journalist sued the CIA station chief because his brother and son, both government employees, were killed in a CIA drone strike on their home in North Waziristan

in December 2009. No warning, no due process, the CIA rained death from the skies. Thousands of people have been killed in these drone strikes, hundreds of civilians among them, including children.

But the film does not tell this story. This is not about the blood on the ground, the tears of the children who lost their parents, the lives of the people who lost limbs... this is about “the heroes on the ground” who are perpetrating these crimes.

And I have to say here that the filmmakers can’t have it both ways. Bigelow said the film does not uphold torture, they are just showing what happened, that it “doesn’t have an agenda and it doesn’t judge.” Bullshit! While it can actually be important to show what happened, this film is not doing so to expose the crimes. If you call the criminals perpetrating torture and war crimes “heroes” who sacrifice on our behalf, what are you saying about the acts they are committing?!

History Did Not Begin With September 11

While this film begins with the events of September 11, 2001, and this is the only context provided for the film, this is not where history began. In a dramatic speech in the film, one CIA official says, “They attacked us on land in ’98, by sea in 2000, and by air in 2001. They murdered 3,000 of our citizens in cold blood. Your job is to bring me people to kill.”

This is the logic of a wounded conqueror, the top-of-the-heap gangsterism—you poke me in the eye, I have to burn down your whole village. The death of 3,000 people is a genuine horror, but the powers-that-be were not horrified at the loss of human life. That number means nothing to people who preside over the deaths of many hundreds of thousands times more than that as part of the normal workings of their system worldwide.

And this is where the entire framework of the film has it all wrong. The “war on terror” is a war for empire. And understanding this from Bob Avakian is key to understanding the actual terms:

What we see in contention here with Jihad on the one hand and McWorld/McCrusade on the other hand, are historically outmoded strata among colonized and oppressed humanity up against historically outmoded ruling strata of the imperialist system. These two reactionary poles reinforce each other, even while opposing each other. If you side with either of these “outmodeds,” you end up strengthening both.

While this is a very important formulation and is crucial to understanding much of the dynamics driving things in the world in this period, at the same time we do have to be clear about which of these “historically outmodeds” has done the greater damage and poses the greater threat to humanity: It is the historically outmoded ruling strata of the imperialist system, and in particular the U.S. imperialists. Bob Avakian, BASics 1:28

The film’s website says this is “the story of history’s greatest manhunt for the world’s most dangerous man.” That this can be said with a straight face shows the depth of delusions the filmmakers and anyone who can take this seriously have fallen into. Osama bin Laden was a reactionary, but in a million years he couldn’t have even dreamed of massacring people on the scale of the U.S. government—not only in U.S. history but even in just the last 10 years.

Since 2001, in Afghanistan, thousands of civilians have been killed directly by U.S.-led invasion and occupation forces. In the war on Iraq beginning in 2003, more than 100,000 civilians have been killed and over four million people have been driven from their homes. Just think of those numbers of human lives—on top of a legacy of genocide, slavery, coups, assassinations, the training of death squads around the world, and the use of nuclear weapons that murdered hundreds of thousands in an instant, and mutilated millions more. This has been done in cold blood and without remorse. Through a combination of the first war on Iraq in 1991 and the 10 years of sanctions that followed, a million people were killed, including half a million children.

Then-Secretary of State Madeline Albright defended this. In a *60 Minutes* interview, Albright was asked by Lesley Stahl, “We have heard that half a million children have died. I mean, that’s more children than died in Hiroshima. And, you know, is the price worth it?” And Albright replied, “We think the price is worth it.” (The video of this interview can be seen online at YouTube—search for “Albright” and “Stahl.”)

Since World War 2, the U.S.—through its wars, proxy wars, and military interventions—has directly or indirectly caused the deaths of at least 10 million people: three million in the wars in Korea and in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia; at least two million in Iraq (including the sanctions and the invasions); a million in Indonesia; six million in the Congo (with the past 10 years of war in which the U.S. has been complicit through its ties to Kagame of Rwanda); hundreds of thousands in Mozambique and Angola (through sponsoring Renamo and Unita); 200,000 in Guatemala; 20,000 in Nicaragua; 75,000 in El Salvador... etc, etc.

Again, the “world’s most dangerous man”?! Whoever Osama bin Laden was, this is a scale on which he couldn’t have even dreamed of functioning.

Obama—Furthering and Heightening the Bush Program

There is an implicit criticism in the film that Obama ended the detainee and torture program, and that he wasn’t moving fast enough to OK the raid on bin Laden’s compound.

Obama at one point in the film says: “America does not torture.” Later in the film, the CIA analysts are briefing Obama’s advisors on what they’ve found and the likelihood of this being where bin Laden is hiding. Maya is shown as dogged and tenacious, counting down the days they’ve known about this compound and not gone after it. The audience is supposed to be frustrated when the president’s adviser says, “The president is a thoughtful, analytical guy. He needs proof.”

The answer provided in the previous scene: “You know we lost the ability to prove that when we lost the detainee program—who the hell am I supposed to ask: some guy in Gitmo who is all lawyered up?”

Think about this—some guy being held in a military prison in Guantánamo Bay who is “all lawyered up.”

Goddamn those basic rights like the right to an attorney. They’re getting in the way of our ability to strip anyone of their legal rights, they’re a hassle and obstacles to the “heroes on the ground.”

But what’s the story with “Gitmo” anyway?

The U.S. prison at Guantánamo was set up in 2002 explicitly to avoid U.S. laws that give some basic rights to prisoners. More than 782 men were brought there from around the world, a majority of them seized in Afghanistan and Pakistan as a result of U.S. bounties of up to \$25,000. Most of these men, the U.S. government *admitted*, had *NO* role in fighting the U.S. Until 2004 they had not even the right to be told why they were held or have legal representation. The Bush regime used “enhanced” interrogation, i.e., torture, including waterboarding, sleep deprivation, and physical, psychological and sexual abuse for years. There are still 166 prisoners there, most of whom were cleared several years ago to leave, under indefinite detention without trial. And they are still being tortured—with solitary confinement and routine force feedings.

But even beyond this, what are Obama’s actual “standards of proof”? They are still—as they were under Bush—what is seen to be in the interests of American empire. For example, in targeting a whole region for drone strikes, Obama’s official policy is that if you are a young man who is killed by one of these missiles, you are counted as an insurgent unless *after you are dead* someone can come forward and prove that you’re innocent.

While Obama has made some cosmetic changes, he has not stopped the systematic use of torture in the basic functioning of the U.S.’ repressive apparatus. In the U.S. itself, there are tens of thousands of prisoners (though no one knows the exact number) kept in solitary confinement, robbed of human contact, and suffering full sensory deprivation and violent “cell extractions,” practiced regularly. By any moral or legal standard, this constitutes torture. Obama decriminalized and codified torture when he refused to prosecute those responsible for this during the Bush regime, letting war criminals off.

At the U.S. air base in Bagram, Afghanistan, Obama not only expanded the prison, he has fought to prevent detainees from having any access to lawyers or due process. This prison is considered *far worse* than Guantánamo. Tina Foster, a human rights lawyer, said: “Our clients who have been released more recently report exposure to extreme temperatures, sleep deprivation, prolonged isolation and other torture that is still ongoing. Bagram has always been a torture chamber...” Hundreds of people remain detained without charge, trial or judicial review—some having been held for almost ten years. The CIA, of course, also detains and tortures people at secret prisons throughout the world, and maintains a program of rendition, in which they send prisoners to other nations to be tortured.

This is part of the overall ways Obama has furthered and heightened the Bush program: using drone strikes eight times more than Bush, continuing and legalizing warrantless wiretaps, legalizing indefinite detention without due process based on executive say-so, covering up the massacres of civilians and holding Bradley Manning, a prisoner of conscience, in jail in conditions that are internationally recognized as torture. And even worse, those who opposed these same crimes under Bush have fallen into silent passivity or even loud celebration.

Do Not Stand By in Complicit Silence

Zero Dark Thirty is a terribly harmful film. It upholds—and trains people in—an America-first fanatical get-the-bad-guy-at-any-cost patriotism. It celebrates ignorance of the crimes of this government and tremendous and violent arrogance. It is a film that celebrates imperial revenge.

After Maya’s colleague is killed by a suicide bomber, she says, “I’m going to kill everyone

involved in that op and then I'm going to kill Osama bin Laden." She calls herself a "motherfucker" and you're supposed to cheer. Someone who won't take shit, America first and fuck the rest, we're not fucking around with that namby-pamby human rights bullshit, we're coming after "America's enemies."

Think I'm exaggerating?

The official website of the movie has a link to a video game, "Medal of Honor Warfighter," with a special "Zero Dark Thirty" edition advertising the ability to "join the greatest manhunt in history." It goes on to say that "Medal of Honor Warfighter allows players to step into the boots of the soldiers who led the hunt for Bin Laden and takes you to the locations where only the most elite dare enter." They advertise one game where you can "roam the treacherous hills and navigate the unforgivable terrain to take down enemies and achieve victory."

This from a film where you never meet anyone from the countries the CIA is operating in who is not some form of evil incarnate. In fact, the only favorable Muslim character in the film is a CIA agent in a DC office.

All this calls to mind the glee and titillation of the Roman coliseums where the audience could watch torture and torment as a spectacle. Or to draw on a more recent, if fictional, example, the sick excitement of those in the capital watching "the hunger games."

This is not, as some of the people I spoke to after seeing the movie said, "just a film that shouldn't be taken so seriously." Bullshit! Films have content. And while one shouldn't be narrow or reductionist about art and culture, it can play a big role in shaping people. A friend I saw it with said they were afraid of what this movie could turn people into. And they are right to be afraid.

To be complicit in the face of war crimes, all one has to do is nothing. That is what hiding in false "complexity" allows. This is wrong and immoral. The actions of the U.S. over the last 10 years, and beyond, need to be called out and resisted, not celebrated. People need critical thinking, not blind allegiance.

We need to stand on principle, give voice to and make common cause with the people of the world in opposition to the crimes our government is committing in our name. We don't need sycophants to a system of brutality, exploitation and murder.

Do not become numb to the crimes of your government because it is unpleasant to confront.

Do not stand by in complicit silence or enthusiastic cheers while the humanity and rights of others are systematically stripped away.

Wake up, speak out, stand up.

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