

Does *Zero Dark Thirty* Promote the Use of Enhanced Interrogation Techniques?

A review of the film



Zero Dark Thirty

(2012)

Kathryn Bigelow (Director)



Reviewed by

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One of the questions buzzing most insistently about *Zero Dark Thirty* is whether it condones, critiques, or even promotes what have been called “enhanced interrogation techniques” to capture Osama bin Laden and others in the U.S. “war on terrorism.” This film, directed by Kathryn Bigelow and written by Mark Boal, has been called “the most politically divisive motion picture in memory” (Winter, 2013, p. 26) and the first film about the involvement of physicians and psychologists in the use of enhanced interrogation techniques with detainees in U.S. military custody (Kimmel, 2011).

Zero Dark Thirty depicts the obsession of a female Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operative, Maya, played by Jessica Chastain, to hunt and capture Osama bin Laden. It is based on Boal’s experiences as an embedded reporter with the U.S. Army in Iraq and first-hand interviews with military and intelligence officials involved with the search for bin

Laden; the phrase “zero dark thirty” refers to the early morning dark hours before sunrise (“zero dark”) when the Navy Seals approached bin Laden’s compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan.

The film, nominated for five Academy Awards, was Number 1 at the U.S. box office in the first week of its release (Lang, 2013). It is now on over 200 top-10 lists, and Chastain’s performance has been called “brilliant” (Mead, 2013) and “convincing” (French, 2013). The film is the second collaboration of Bigelow and Boal; their first was *Hurt Locker*, for which Bigelow was the first female director to win an Academy award, and Boal won for Best Original Screenplay.

Bigelow has remained famously terse about her methods or about the fact that it is unusual for a woman to make war movies. One’s attention is captured by the roles of women associated with the film: The film was also produced by a woman (Megan Ellison), distributed by a woman (Amy Pascal, the cochairman of Sony Pictures), and starred a woman, and a female director made an explicit war movie with a female lead who, despite scorn and dismissal from her male colleagues, was able to use her intelligence to find bin Laden.

The failure of *Zero Dark Thirty* to capture the nomination for Bigelow as Best Director is attributed by some to limited support for the film because of the controversial depiction of water boarding and other torture techniques. But it is worth noting that neither Ben Affleck for *Argo* nor Tom Hooper for *Les Misérables* was nominated (The Bigelow snub, 2013). In fact, at the Washington, DC, premiere, Bigelow, Boal, and former Sen. Chris Dodd, who is now head of the Motion Picture Association of America, faced criticism that the film changed history about the role of “enhanced interrogation techniques” in capturing bin Laden. Writer Naomi Wolf called Bigelow a “Leni Riefenstahl-like propagandist of torture” (Wolf, 2013, p. 1).

Documented voices in the government spoke out against torture, such as the military Judge Advocate General Corps and the Pentagon’s top lawyers, who called it a violation of the Geneva Conventions and the UN Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment and Punishment (Reifer, 2013). Former Defense Secretary Leon Panetta wrote to John McCain that “some” detainees had been subjected to enhanced interrogation techniques, and that “whether these techniques were the ‘only timely and effective way’ to obtain such information is a matter of debate and cannot be established definitely” (Winter, 2013, pp. 26, 29, 30). In addition, a 6,300-page report by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence concluded that enhanced interrogation did not work, and John O. Brennan said that senior intelligence officials and President Obama were “misled about the enhanced interrogation program” (Soufan, 2013, p. 4).

Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), head of the Senate intelligence committee, Carl Levin, and John McCain wrote a letter to Sony chairman Michael Lynton calling the film “grossly inaccurate and misleading” (LaSalle, 2013, p. E2) and asked for an investigation into the CIA for possible leaks. Feinstein wrote a letter to acting CIA director Michael Morell asking

whether the CIA sent classified materials or misleading information to Bigelow on the use of “enhanced interrogation techniques” (Ed, 2012; Marinucci, 2013).

After that, Morell posted a statement on the CIA website that any impression that “enhanced interrogation techniques” were the key to capturing bin Laden were false but that some information used to capture bin Laden did, indeed, come from these techniques. Bigelow and Boal responded that the film accurately showed what credible CIA sources said, that the film was not a documentary (Steinmetz, 2013), and that they had wanted Sony Pictures to add a disclaimer that the film was fiction and only “based on” a true story.

Before the film was shown, Bigelow read a statement to the audience that it had started a “national conversation” and that she “tried to bring this story to the screen in a faithful way” (Steinmetz, 2013, para. 3). She and Boal were not at first going to write a story about the capture of bin Laden (Scott & Dargis, 2013). In an interview with Martha Raddatz of ABC News after the film’s debut, Boal remarked, “The research was over there in a pile, and I had to write a screenplay, make a movie, . . . capture the underlying essence of the underlying reality,” and “there was no single ‘underlying reality’ . . . that anyone . . . would agree on” (Steinmetz, 2013, para. 3).

The film hit a nerve. Protestors outside the Newseum in Washington, DC, dressed as detainees in orange jumpsuits with black bags over their heads and arms behind their backs stood in front of a sign saying “Cruel, Inhuman, and Degrading.” Code Pink demonstrators held a sign saying “Women Say NO to Torture.”

The role of the CIA is also an issue raised in the film. What does it hide, and what does it reveal? Does it use the label *classified* to hide information from the public? Does it leak inaccurate descriptions? Is government supervision of the CIA a good thing? Is it used to cover up information or provide more transparency? What is the role of government interference in art? The film also raises a question about how much President Obama knew about these events. The film dialogue contains lines such as, “The president needs proof . . .” “The president wants to know . . . Give us options.” In the film Chastain is counseled, “You don’t want to be the last one holding a dog collar when the Oversight Committee comes.”

Michael Moore (2013), in an essay in *Reader Supported News*, claimed that President Obama’s brief appearance on a background television in one of the movie scenes shows him giving the message that eight years of torture did not capture bin Laden; that the time had come to use intelligence to get him. Even though torturing someone to get the name of bin Laden’s courier, Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti, did produce crucial information, the CIA is said to have had this name for the previous 10 years and misplaced it until 2010. Nor was torture necessary to bribe a Kuwaiti informant with a new Lamborghini or to listen to the courier’s call to his mother in order to locate the compound in Abbottabad where bin Laden had been hiding.

So, concluded Moore (2013), “that really should be the main takeaway from *Zero Dark Thirty*: That good detective work can bring fruitful results—and that torture is wrong” (para. 6). Moore maintained that the salient question is not “whether torture works” but “is it

morally right or wrong?": Do we, as taxpayers, condone and support such behavior? And he reminded us that Bigelow did in fact call torture "reprehensible" in a *Colbert Nation* interview. She defended the film:

I feel we got it right. I'm proud of the movie, and I stand behind it completely. I think that it's a deeply moral movie that questions the use of force. It questions what was done in the name of finding bin Laden. (Winter, 2013, p. 27)

Film critic Peter Howell (2013) concluded, "Anyone who calls *Zero Dark Thirty* pro-torture is not only wrong, but clearly not paying attention" (p. 1). He noted the increasing disillusionment with torture among the lead CIA operatives in the film, and he applauded Bigelow and Boal for crafting a film that is true to the subtle and contrary realities of war.

Critic Anne Hornaday (2013) agreed by observing that a statement by Maya's friend Jessica (Jennifer Ehle) summarizes the film's main perspective: "Here's to the big breaks, and the little people that make 'em happen." Although luck, perseverance, bribery, and relationships also play a role in the eventual capture of bin Laden, the film's austere tone leaves the viewer with more questions than answers: Is the world a safer place since we killed bin Laden? Do the ends justify the means? What is the role of the CIA and the impact of American's war on terrorism?

What About This Film Is Relevant to Other Situations?

On February 2, 2013, we learned that in Milan a court tried and found CIA agents guilty of practices that were "alleged to have led to torture" (CIA Convictions, 2013, p. A2), apparently the first time that any CIA agents have been so convicted. And in Mali that same day, soldiers were using methods of torture similar to water boarding (Callimachi, 2013).

But most relevant to this review are these questions: Was the American Psychological Association (APA) involved in the development or deployment of any of these enhanced interrogation techniques? What did it know about the use and outcome of torture techniques?

I was a member of the APA Council of Representatives during the time that APA was discussing the role of psychologists regarding torture at Guantanamo, and I remember hearing arguments pro and con about whether psychologists should be involved in any way with torture. The film *Doctors of the Dark Side*, a documentary by Martha Davis, has been acclaimed by Robert Jay Lifton as "an extraordinarily valuable film" (<http://www.doctorsofthedarkside.com/>) that raises disturbing views of the psychologists' role in developing "research" and "consulting" to military psychologists that provided the basis for enhanced interrogation techniques.

Although psychologists have warned against the slippery slope of the human tendency to be drawn into evil (Milgram, 1963; Zimbardo, 2007), APA has maintained that psychologists are needed at interrogation sites in order to protect prisoners (Moorehead-Slaughter, 2006; Pope, 2011; Rubenstein, 2011). In contrast, the American Psychiatric Association has concluded that no psychiatrists should have any relationship whatsoever with torture or interrogations and has set up policies to ensure this does not happen (Kimmel, 2011), and some psychologists are calling for the annulment of APA's Psychological Ethics and National Security (PENS) report (American Psychological Association, 2005; Arrigo, Eidelson, & Bennett, 2012).

The most important thing about these films, then, is that they raise public awareness and, as Chastain said in the film, promote a "conversation" (Winter, 2013, p. 27). There is still much to learn and do, but opening these questions to professional awareness is a significantly important first step.

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