

Breaking Down Anti-Gay Dogma

Evangelicals remain one of the principal obstacles to the full acceptance of gay Americans as people deserving equal rights and equal respect. But even in those religious circles, pressure from more tolerant Evangelicals especially the young is breaking down the barriers, Rev. Howard Bess writes.

By the Rev. Howard Bess

American culture is moving rapidly toward full acceptance of gay people, but Evangelical Christians remain one of the last strongholds of anti-gay attitudes with the standard line among the Evangelical faithful still that the practice of same-sex sexual relationships is sinful.

Yet within Evangelical colleges, pro-gay student organizations are emerging and intolerance toward gays is ebbing. Though there are still too many Bible-misquoting Evangelicals, respected Evangelical scholars have stopped writing books about the Bible's rejection of homosexuals. Many Evangelicals now admit that neither prayer nor reparative therapy can change sexual orientation. Reparative ministries and counseling centers have largely disappeared.

At what may be the Evangelical flagship college in America, Wheaton College outside Chicago, there is now a thriving organization of Wheaton graduates putting pressure on the college to rethink issues related to sexual orientation. Membership now tops 500 and includes gay graduates and gay supporters.

I am one of those supporters though I am not gay. Wheaton College is my alma mater and I am proud to be a Wheaton graduate. I found Wheaton to be a home for a rigorous academic education, and Wheaton's student body and faculty comprised the greatest group of people I have ever known. They were dedicated, hard-working and highly principled. To them, Christ was Lord; nothing else was so important.

Wheaton College was the birthplace of 20th Century Evangelicalism. Billy Graham was our most famous graduate. Its campus, nestled safely in Chicago's west suburbs, was where I learned to think. I still wear a Wheaton College sweatshirt, and I still claim the Evangelical identification.

When I was a Wheaton student I pledged that I would not smoke, drink alcoholic beverages, dance, play cards or attend movies. During my time there, I kept the pledge faithfully, though I now believe the Wheaton pledge was on the wrong side of culture. Those old standards have long since disappeared, but behavior is still a matter of great importance at Wheaton College. In recent years,

opposition to same-sex sexual behavior has become a leading issue.

When I was a student at Wheaton College, I was not aware of any gay classmates. That was the case until my 40th class reunion. Then, a female classmate came out of the closet. Now, I know there were others. The closet was closed tight in the 1950s. Not so today.

As in all movements, there appears a voice that speaks the mind of the entire movement. That voice belongs to Steve Slagg, a recent graduate of Wheaton. He has written an epistle to Wheaton College and it is a masterpiece of truth-telling with high emotion. He loved being at Wheaton, but his presence was a four-year experience of high-level stress.

In his story, Slagg wrote two words that force the issue. **We exist!** Those two words have become the slogan for gay students at Evangelical colleges all across the country. **We exist!**

While not recognized by the college, support groups for gay students now meet on or near the campus. So, a piece of the truth is now out in the open. There are a significant number of gay students on the campus of Wheaton College. The response of the Wheaton College administration has been conciliatory, but unyielding in its position that all same-sex sexual activity is wrong, wrong, wrong.

What is happening at Wheaton College is happening all across the country. Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, is another highly respected Evangelical institution. Calvin has been a bit more responsive to their gay students. Without relinquishing the stated policy about same-sex sexual behavior, the college provides open forums at which sexual orientation and practice is discussed. The school is attempting to welcome its gay students. Attitudes have become casual and for students it is no big deal.

At another leading Evangelical university, Seattle Pacific, the approach is a bit different. Recognizing the rising tide of acceptance for gay people among the nation's youth, Seattle Pacific has an unofficial club called Haven. It has been organized by students and meets on campus, though it has been turned down twice for official recognition.

The University administration has been friendly, but an official embrace is not yet in sight. A University official told a Christianity Today reporter that the school wants to make the University a safe place in which open discussion can take place. Across the nation from Westmont to Baylor to Cedarville, the word is out. **We exist!**

Evangelicals can no more resist full gay acceptance than Wheaton College could

maintain its standards from 60 years ago of no card playing, no dancing and no watching movies.

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The Depressing ‘Zero Dark Thirty’

Exclusive: Director Kathryn Bigelow in both *Zero Dark Thirty* and *The Hurt Locker* presents stories of heroic Americans operating in a world of either apathetic or crazy Muslims, with little explanation of the whys behind the conflicts. This lack of context makes her films vacuous and depressing, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

When I watched the get-bin-Laden movie *Zero Dark Thirty* at a theater just outside Washington D.C., I was struck by how silent the audience was from beginning to end with almost no reaction to the climatic killing of the terrorist leader or to the film’s lame stabs at humor.

For instance, the screenwriters apparently thought they had crafted a funny line when the CIA officer in charge of torture says he’s returning to a desk job at CIA headquarters because he’d grown tired of seeing so many “naked men,” i.e. the detainees he’d been torturing. I heard one person in the audience emit an uncomfortable laugh.

Mostly the film played out from its graphic scenes of torture through the plodding search for Osama bin Laden to the carefully depicted Seal Team Six assault on the compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan in a silent, darkened theater.

Clearly, the strength of the movie was its documentary-style presentation of the climactic nighttime assault, though the film failed to explain how meticulously Seal Team Six had prepared for indeed, rehearsed the attack.

Apparently, for dramatic effect, director Kathryn Bigelow ignored that part of the story so she could pretend that her heroine, the obsessed CIA analyst Maya, was getting her CIA superior – and the White House – to act by using a magic marker to scribble the number of days she’d been waiting on the window to his office.

However, when the raid finally commences, it’s clear that many of those days had been devoted to careful preparation. Everyone in the commando unit knew

precisely where they were going, what to expect, and how to proceed. What was remarkable about Bigelow's depiction of the raid was its businesslike precision.

But my takeaway from that segment was that the commandos of Seal Team Six could best be described as methodical killers, moving through the compound and systematically killing each man they encountered, whether armed or not. After shooting a target, they then fired two more shots into the motionless body to make sure the person was dead.

While the scenes in the darkened house were nerve-wracking even though the outcome was already known the American attackers came across as less heroic than professional. You're left with a sense that these warriors had been on many similar missions with similar deadly results.

As shown in the movie, the commandos displayed few emotions even when they killed bin Laden. Afterwards, they simply continue with business as usual. They corral the terrified children and the women; they rush through their work removing computer hard drives and other useful intelligence; they extract bin Laden's corpse in a body bag; they fend off curious neighbors; they demolish a damaged helicopter; and they fly back to their base in Afghanistan where they sort out the captured intelligence and put bin Laden's body on a gurney.

Then, for dramatic effect, director Bigelow has Maya serve as the CIA expert who conclusively identifies bin Laden's body before she heads off to a military cargo plane where she is the only passenger for a return trip to the United States and where she breaks down in tears.

Assessing the Raid

Despite criticism of the movie for its disputed suggestion that torture elicited important clues in the hunt for bin Laden, Bigelow deserves some credit for not transforming the raid into a moment of melodramatic catharsis.

The scene of the U.S. commandos shooting bin Laden in the head when he opens his bedroom door and then pumping a couple of extra shots into his collapsed body while bin Laden's children watch is not the sort of theatrical climax that one might have expected from a John Wayne or Bruce Willis movie.

Whatever the audience felt about the necessity of killing bin Laden as revenge for his mass murder of innocents or as prevention against him plotting more terrorist mayhem there had to be mixed emotions at his denouement. There also should have been reflection on the various American crimes that have been committed in the years after 9/11, including the ugly torture of detainees and the bloody invasion of Iraq, which had nothing to do with 9/11.

Which brings me to my biggest criticism of Bigelow for this movie and for her Oscar-winning *The Hurt Locker*, a drama about U.S. demolition experts defusing “improvised explosive devices” in Iraq. Both movies treat the inhabitants of the countries mostly as scenery and provide almost no historical context for the events that Bigelow portrays.

In *The Hurt Locker*, you’re presented with a framework in which U.S. military personnel somehow find themselves in Iraq trying to save both Americans and Iraqis from bombs planted by other Iraqis, presumably because those Iraqis must be pathological “bad guys.” The American bomb crews sacrifice greatly for the benefit of all, doing their best to frustrate these evil-doers.

Bigelow treats the Iraqis as either props for her drama or as villains, i.e. crazy terrorists. If you didn’t know the history, you’d be lost regarding the background of an unprovoked U.S. invasion of Iraq and a military occupation that many Iraqis were resisting.

Similarly, in *Zero Dark Thirty*, Bigelow offers the thinnest of historical context. The film starts with a black screen and 911 calls from desperate people dying in New York’s Twin Towers. It then jumps to the torturing of detainees and CIA interrogators doing the unpleasant work of extracting information to prevent future terrorist attacks.

The Missing Back Story

What’s missing is any explanation of how we all got here. The movie might have at least referenced some of that history. In summary:

In the 1980s, the Reagan administration exploited the passions of radical Islam in a conscious strategy to undermine the atheistic Soviet Union, with the CIA printing Korans for distribution in Soviet-occupied Afghanistan and the neighboring Soviet provinces.

By spending billions of dollars to sponsor an Islamic jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan, the Reagan administration attracted waves of militants from around the Arab world, including the wealthy Saudi extremist Osama bin Laden who then led bands of non-Afghan jihadis in the fight against the Soviets.

Next, George H.W. Bush’s administration rebuffed overtures from Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev for a withdrawal of Soviet troops and Afghan peace negotiations, to be followed by a coalition government to prevent Afghanistan from descending into political anarchy.

However, senior aides to Bush, including his deputy national security adviser Robert Gates, preferred a triumphalist approach toward Gorbachev’s removal of

Soviet troops and his offers of compromise. Instead of a unity government, the first Bush administration pressed for a total victory of the CIA-backed Islamists, ultimately leading to years of Afghan chaos and the eventual rise of the Taliban. [See Robert Parry's [America's Stolen Narrative](#).]

The Bush administration's triumphalism also prompted President George H.W. Bush to rebuff Gorbachev's proposals for getting Iraq to withdraw its troops from Kuwait in 1991. Bush instead favored a politically satisfying ground war that included basing American troops in Saudi Arabia, the immediate provocation that made America the new enemy for bin Laden and his Islamic extremists.

Muslims around the world also identified with the plight of the Palestinians who have faced decades of violent mistreatment at the hands of Israel with the financial and political backing of the United States.

None of this important history is referenced in *Zero Dark Thirty*. Like *The Hurt Locker*, Bigelow's new movie just thrusts Americans into a situation where they are the victims and you get no clue as to why these Muslims keep acting so nutty, including blowing themselves up in suicide attacks.

Thus, there is an implicit racism in Bigelow's depiction of the Muslim world, much like how *Gone with the Wind* treats white Southerners and African-Americans. By leaving out the outrages of slavery, *Gone with the Wind* encourages viewers to sympathize with the struggling Confederates.

In Bigelow's movies, by leaving out the context of U.S. imperialist adventures in Afghanistan and Iraq, you are invited to identify with the Americans and see Muslims as irrational troublemakers.

This is not to say that Bigelow is a racist. Indeed, her documentary-style presentation of the Abbottabad raid avoiding the usual Hollywood pressures to cast everything in a simplistic "good-guy/bad-guy" frame would argue against that suspicion. However, she does accept another troubling Hollywood cliché, focusing on the travails of white Americans operating among swarthy and dangerous Muslims.

It was Bigelow's failure to widen the frame of *Zero Dark Thirty* that ultimately makes it a profoundly depressing movie, sending viewers off into the dark night with no new understanding of the whys behind this bloody struggle.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).

Hit Movies Miss Mideast Realities

Oscar buzz is humming about two movies recounting real-life chapters of U.S. policy in the Middle East the get-bin-Laden film “Zero Dark Thirty” and the escape-Iran drama “Argo.” But neither provides an in-depth examination of the reality behind the events, writes Winslow Myers.

By Winslow Myers

Maya is the name of the determined protagonist of *Zero Dark Thirty* who pursues Osama bin Laden to his death. Controversies generated by the film include whether torture was essential to the success of the original mission, whether the producers were given special access to the CIA, and whether the film amounts to propaganda that excuses illegal methods of countering terrorism.

Director Kathryn Bigelow has been accused of wanting the film to be seen as both documentary and fiction, not unlike the way Rush Limbaugh wants to be seen as both a factual cultural power broker and mere entertainer.

Zero Dark Thirty, along with actor-director Ben Affleck’s film *Argo*, a thriller based on the joint CIA-Canadian rescue of six American diplomats during the 1979 Iranian hostage crisis, can generate some useful reflection upon American methods for achieving security in a dangerous world.

Both films pander to crude stereotypes of malevolent, swarthy-skinned, bearded jihadis. They intensify the “us and them” paradigm that suffuses our thinking about a region of the world going through paroxysmal changes.

Argo begins with a brief montage that acknowledges the U.S. role in the creation of modern Iran. The film mentions that the C.I.A. overturned Iranian elections in the 1950s, deposed the popular democratically elected Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953, and installed the Shah, causing severe blowback. We experienced more blowback when bin Laden was with us against the Soviets (during their Afghan War) before he was against us (leading to our Afghan War).

Ironically, *Argo*’s reduction of Iranians to brutal thugs is countered by the supremely subtle and human Iranian 2011 film of director and writer Asghar Farhadi, *A Separation*, in which an Iranian couple must decide whether to move to another country to provide opportunities for their child, or stay in Iran to care for a family member with Alzheimer’s; a work vastly higher in quality than either *Argo* or *Zero Dark Thirty*.

The two American films celebrate our ingenuity, courage and perseverance against

adversaries, but our own integrity requires that we look more deeply into the dominant narrative that produced them.

While these are “only” films, *Zero Dark Thirty* points us back to the painfulness of the events out of which it came, illuminating the questions: How and when can the “war on terror” come to an end, and how will we know when it does? In the same way, *Argo* questions how to prevent a war between us, or Israel, and Iran, a war that would resolve nothing.

Bin Laden was apparently motivated to attack the West out of revenge, the ancient paradigm of an “eye for an eye.” In an extensive 2002 letter to the American people, printed in the British publication *The Observer*, bin Laden laid out his specific justifications for horrific violence against innocents.

He began by citing passages from the Koran that give permission to Islamists to fight “disbelievers.” Immediately this sets up a pathological context, because it contains what philosophers call a performative contradiction:

He proclaimed Islam as a universal religion, but his vision was radically exclusivist. He believed that a universal God is on the side of pure Islam against impure or non-Islamists. Religionists of many faiths, including Christianity, have occasionally fallen into this moral trap.

Bin Laden went on to say that he and his colleagues are fighting the U.S. because the U.S. supports Israel against Palestine. He was explicitly anti-Semitic; to him the creation of Israel was a crime, implying no willingness to accept a more inclusive, multi-ethnic vision of the region’s future.

Not all of bin Laden’s justifications for violence were based in irrational fantasies of revenge. He raised issues, like the deaths of hundreds of thousands of children in Iraq as the result of U.S. sanctions, or our double standards about whom we allow to have nuclear weapons and whom we do not, that have also been raised by patriotic and loyal Americans.

When I spoke at a Rotary club a few years ago, I said that however horrific bin Laden’s crimes were, it was important to hear his rationalizations and understand his frame of reference. It was important to consider what effect actions of our own, like stationing troops on bases in Saudi Arabia, had upon extremists, or those who could be recruited to their ranks from amongst offended citizens, and it was important to bring murderers to trial as ordinary criminals rather than exterminate them. A number of listeners to my talk stood up and walked out.

Our decision to assassinate bin Laden was not an act of restorative justice. Killing him would not have brought back to life those who perished on 9/11. It

was an act of retributive, consciously decided, cold-minded payback.

In the intent eyes of our heads of government as they followed the actions of the Navy Seals, eyes that included a winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, it was possible to see how an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.

In the nuclear age, this lack of moral imagination becomes a great deal more important than the issue of how entertaining or truthful are the products of Hollywood. Our planetary misery and fear will never decrease by an endless cycle of revenge and counter-revenge.

A pathological level of revenge is built into the very deterrence that rationalizes the possession of massive nuclear arsenals, the mother of all performative contradictions: a revenge-cycle that could kill us all, as it very nearly did in the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962.

Shouldn't any sane narrative of our response to terrorism include fewer drones that create more terrorists than they kill, and a few more initiatives of reconciliation between the West and Muslim regions? It is past time to set aside, from the trillions we spend on weapons and war, a few millions for a Department of Peace.

Otherwise we are fooling ourselves, moving deck chairs around on the Titanic. "Maya" is the Sanskrit word for illusion.

Winslow Myers leads seminars on the challenges of personal and global change, is the author of "Living Beyond War: A Citizen's Guide," serves on the Advisory Board of the War Preventive Initiative, is a member of the Rotarian Action Group for Peace, and writes for PeaceVoice.
