

# An Incurious 'Zero Dark Thirty'

**From the Archive:** "Zero Dark Thirty," the big-screen chronicling of the manhunt for Osama bin Laden, won critical acclaim for its taut storytelling, but the Oscar-nominated film ignored the complex history between the CIA and its terrorist target, wrote Jim DiEugenio.

By Jim DiEugenio (Originally published Dec. 21, 2012)

On May 2, 2011, under cover of darkness, which is where the film's title *Zero Dark Thirty* comes from, a platoon of Navy Seals was airlifted by two Black Hawk helicopters from Jalalabad in eastern Afghanistan to Abbottabad, Pakistan.

A modified version of the Black Hawk was used because it employed "stealth" technology, i.e., it flew very quietly while being harder to detect on radar than the conventional model. To further evade Pakistani radar, the helicopters flew very low to the ground and deliberately navigated over hilly terrain.



The mission was codenamed Neptune Spear. And it was timed to consume precisely 40 minutes. The Seals operated under the aegis of the CIA and were working from information primarily garnered by the Agency.

Landing near their target in Abbottabad, the Seals cut the power to the large three-story home. They then broke in by detonating explosive charges around the doors and walls. One of the occupants began to fire at the Seals from inside. This man, Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti, was killed after a brief firefight. His wife was shot and wounded. His brother, Abrar, was also shot and killed.

As the Seals progressed through the house, a young man named Khalid was shot on

the staircase. Finally, on the third floor of the home, one of the Seals found the ultimate target of the raid: Osama bin Laden. As bin Laden ran to his room, he was shot in the head and collapsed. Two women tried to shield his body. One of them was shot in the leg.

Bin Laden was shot two more times. His body was wrapped in a body bag and carried on board one of the helicopters. One Black Hawk had been damaged upon landing, so the Seals destroyed it. A back-up Chinook helicopter was called in from nearby to effect the escape. Thus ended a nearly ten-year manhunt for al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden.

Almost immediately after bin Laden's death was announced by President Barack Obama, screenwriter Mark Boal and director Kathryn Bigelow announced their intent to make a film about the manhunt and the Seals mission. That July, just two months after the raid, a high-level Pentagon intelligence officer named Mike Vickers told Boal and Bigelow they would allow a Seal involved in the planning of Neptune Spear to provide them information for Boal's script. According to declassified documents of the meeting, Boal and Bigelow were overjoyed at this opportunity. (Josh Gerstein, *Politico*, May 23, 2012)

Boal said, "That's dynamite!" With equal elation, Bigelow chimed in with "That's incredible."

Boal was also welcomed at CIA headquarters where he was allowed access to a mock-up of bin Laden's Abbottabad compound. Boal was even invited to a CIA ceremony honoring the Seals involved. (*New York Times*, Aug. 6, 2011)

And Boal met with two members of the staff of the National Security Council: Chief of Staff Denis McDonough and Adviser on Counterterrorism John Brennan. But an e-mail from Marie Harf of the CIA revealed that the Agency was trying to keep Boal's visits to Langley quiet. (*Politico*, May 23, 2012)

This privileged access to secret information is troubling. As many have noted, it is ironic that Boal should be allowed this access by the same administration that has made a habit of threatening with indictments anyone who divulges national security secrets.

### **The Movie Version**

*Zero Dark Thirty* is a long movie, running for two hours and 37 minutes, with the raid on bin Laden's compound the penultimate scene taking up about the last 20 minutes of the picture, along with a kind of coda at the end in which the main character, a female CIA analyst on the bin Laden team, identifies the body and is then flown out of Afghanistan.

So, the much longer part of the film involves the tracing of where bin Laden is hiding and convincing the CIA Director and the White House that this intelligence is correct. Yet, one of the problems with the film is that it's a straight detective film. And since we know how it will end, there is virtually no suspense or surprise along the way. The little that there is comes from the actual intricacy of how bin Laden was tracked down. But these are simply little bits of human-interest angles.

For instance, a well-off Arab living in Kuwait is bribed for information by the CIA. The bribe consists of buying him a brand new Lamborghini late one night. The CIA agent makes a car dealer open after hours so his informant can pick the model he wants. In another segment, Maya, the female lead character, has to talk a phone-intercept specialist who is short of men and resources into tracing a suspect's cell phone so she can know where he is. A cohort of hers helps her win the technician over and she ends up being able to monitor the man.

But besides these sidelights, the story as it unfolds is pretty much straightforward and linear. In that sense, it's pretty much a police story. Except that, in this instance, the police are allowed to use questionable ends to justify the result, bringing us to the most controversial aspect of the film its depiction of torture.

And although the film's defenders mostly the movie reviewers who have praised the film have tried to smudge this point, there is little sense in denying it. As Greg Mitchell wrote in *The Nation* on Dec. 12, the film undoubtedly shows that torture played a key role in tracing bin Laden to his compound.

Toward the end, the supervisor of the torturing admits at a meeting with the CIA Director that the key information in the manhunt came from a detainee. The viewer should recall that in the beginning of the film it was this man who was being tortured at a CIA black site and who was the first one to give the CIA a lead on bin Laden's courier, who Maya eventually tracks down.

And as Mitchell adds, "While some of those defending the film have claimed that it shows that torture does not work, or is counterproductive, you don't really see that on the screen." He then adds, commenting on these film reviewers, "From their comments, I expected at least a brief scene where one of the CIA types admits this. No such luck."

Mitchell's comment is accurate. In fact, it is hard not to conclude that the filmmakers endorse these "enhanced interrogation techniques" as justified by controversial law professor John Yoo. I would go as far as to say that Dick Cheney would like this film's attitude toward the subject.

In one clip, Sen. Obama, then a candidate for President, is seen declaring his opposition to the process. One of the CIA agents involved in the manhunt shakes her head in disapproval. Near the end, exposures of the techniques used at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib are mentioned, but are presented as bad since now detainees all have lawyers. The chief torturer (played by Jason Clarke) says early on to one of his subjects, "Everybody breaks. It's simple biology."

Maya is at first seen to be squeamish about the water-boarding of a subject. But as the film goes on, she becomes a hard-bitten professional about the task. The subliminal message being that, if a slightly built young woman can learn to like it, anyone can.

As the reviewer for *The Nation*, Stuart Klawans wrote, "As for the torture the movie revels in it. Arguments that the film exposes torture as abhorrent are absurd. The movie juices the audience on these physical confrontations." (To this author, this might be slightly overstated, but *only* slightly.)

Klawans then went on to address the other issue: "Does the film present torture as the necessary tool for taking down bin Laden? Absolutely." After agreeing with Mitchell about the subject being tortured at the beginning being the source for the name of the courier, Klawans concludes that although Bigelow and Boal have denied giving "the audience the impression that the use of torture was integral" to the goal, he finds this disingenuous on their part.

### **Tolerating Torture**

There are at least two serious problems that Boal and Bigelow should have understood by making this type of presentation about this controversial issue. First, the opinions on these techniques inside the government were not nearly as unanimous as the film denotes.

As Jane Mayer has written, the program "was deemed so illegal, and so immoral, that the Director of the FBI withdrew his personnel rather than have them collaborate with it." But further, even the top lawyer at the Pentagon resisted it so that it would not spread throughout the armed forces. (Jane Mayer, *The New Yorker*, 12/14/2012)

As Mayer notes, this important debate, which reached the highest levels of government, is simply not echoed in the film. Bigelow has responded that "The film does not have an agenda, and it doesn't judge." (ibid) But by not showing the other side of the story, while saying that torture helped nail bin Laden, she is expressing a point of view, since her film does not reflect the true circumstances of the situation. Boal was even worse on this point. He actually said the film showed the complexity of the debate over the issue. It does not.

But further, Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Carl Levin of, respectively the Senate Intelligence Committee and the Armed Service Committee, have written that, "The original lead information had no connection to CIA detainees." They added that a detainee in CIA custody did provide information on the courier but that "he did so the day before he was interrogated by the CIA using their coercive interrogation techniques." (ibid)

It's almost as if Boal and Bigelow took the line they did because they became enamored by the access the CIA had given them. Was this part of a quid pro quo arrangement or were they simply the latest "embedded" media personalities to be seduced by the surrounding culture?

One has to pose that question because their depiction is so one-sided. For instance, unlike what Clarke says in the film, everyone does not break in the end. As Mayer wrote, many prisoners were tortured to death while never revealing secrets. And many others simply created disinformation stories to avoid further duress. And some of that disinformation managed to lead America into the war in Iraq.

But perhaps the worst of all, in the ends-justifies-the-means ethos of the film, this question is never asked: What about those who were swept up by the CIA and sent to a black site yet were totally innocent? There were many of these innocent victims. Mayer mentions one: Khaled El-Masri, who was kidnapped and held in detention for four months. He was beaten up, sodomized, chained and hooded. He could barely speak about the experience without weeping.

As hinted at above, many of the early reviewers were very impressed by the dexterous way the film was made. They therefore ignored this key issue, which seems to me to be an important one. But there are other issues in the story besides this one that seem to me to be important, too. Yet the commentators I have read have not dealt with them at all.

First, when the story about the raid first broke, the message conveyed by official spokesmen was that it was a "kill or capture" operation. As time has gone on, this fig leaf has fallen by the wayside. The film does not cavil about the mission's intent: It was a kill operation all the way.

And keeping with the CIA's single-mindedness, there is never any question as to whether or not killing bin Laden was the wisest thing to do. I posed that question to longtime CIA intelligence analyst Ray McGovern: "Why was he murdered? Would it not have been more productive to capture and interrogate him?"

McGovern replied that he had always felt bin Laden would have been more valuable

alive than dead, but McGovern said that as time has gone on in this battle against terrorists, the ethos has changed. "It would have been a tough decision as to what to do with him if he were taken alive," he said.

McGovern added, "There are grounds for suspicion that he was murdered because he knew too much not just about past U. S. support for him, but relative to 9/11 itself."

### **Simplistic Account**

Again, these two points are of the utmost interest to this subject. In Adam Curtis's excellent documentary, *The Power of Nightmares*, these questions are addressed. And therefore al-Qaeda and bin Laden come off in a much fuller and detailed way than the ciphers they are in this film. Curtis's film is much more complex and compelling than this new docu-drama even though it's a documentary and could not use the narrative techniques of a feature film.

And beyond that, the Curtis film is much more provocative than this one. In the Curtis film, one comes away feeling empowered since the viewer now knows something more about how al-Qaeda and bin Laden began and how those origins were intertwined with the CIA's war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

This "blowback" factor, well elucidated by Curtis, is completely missing in this simplistic film, *Zero Dark Thirty*. And it tells us much about the distribution of films in America today, and our growing propagandistic culture, that the Bigelow film is playing in first-run theaters with a large ad campaign behind it, while the Curtis film which was made eight years ago has yet to find a TV or film distributor in this country.

McGovern's second point is also ignored in the film. Namely, was bin Laden the main force and sole originator of the 9-11 attacks? One would certainly get that message from this film. But again, when I asked McGovern about this issue he replied with something less than complete certainty. He first said that, by admission of almost everyone, including its co-chairs, the 9/11 Commission was "woefully inadequate."

But to me, there may be something even more egregiously wrong with this much-ballyhooed film. It leaves out the fuller history of the pursuit for bin Laden, which began at least five years before the 9/11 attacks. (Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower*, p. 3) At its inception, the investigation was part of the CIA's Counterterrorist Center and it had a nondescriptive name, "but in practice it was devoted to tracking the activities of a single man, Osama bin Laden."

As early as 1993, he had been fingered as an important financier of terror. In 1996, Daniel Coleman of the FBI was sent to a CIA station in Tysons Corner,

Virginia, to review the information the Agency had on bin Laden. He was surprised to find out that they had already built a library of 35 volumes of material on the man. (ibid) On the strength of this file, plus the fatwa (declaration of war) issued by bin Laden that year, Coleman opened a criminal case on him. (ibid, p. 5)

Later in 1996, Coleman met at a safehouse with a Sudanese informer named Jamal al-Fadl. This man claimed to have worked with bin Laden in Khartoum. When shown photos of his associates, Fadl identified most of them. Coleman later found out that Fadl was hiding the fact that he was in America because he had embezzled \$100,000 from bin Laden. (ibid) But beyond that, Fadl informed Coleman about an organization called al-Qaeda, which was operating training camps and sleeper cells and was already quite active, having trained operatives who had performed a bombing in Yemen in 1992 and tutored the insurgents who had downed helicopters in Somalia that year. (ibid)

Fadl went further. He gave Coleman names of the members and drew up their organizational charts. For two weeks, Coleman tested Fadl to see if he could cross him up. The informant never varied his responses. On his own Coleman built up his knowledge of the group, concluding that al-Qaeda was a worldwide network stretching across the Middle East, Africa, Europe and Central Asia. He was especially worried to find out that many of its associates had ties to the U.S. He then concluded that one of its targets was America.

But Coleman's problem was the same as faced by White House counterterrorism adviser Richard Clarke: Almost no one in power took the threat seriously, especially after George W. Bush entered the White House in 2001. Even though Coleman's information grew more refined and precise, the subject was too exotic and bizarre for many other officials to focus on.

Wright's book, which was published in 2006, changes the portrait of the manhunt drawn in the film, which leads viewers to believe that the search began after 9/11 and made its first breakthrough with the torture of bin Laden's followers.

By framing their movie as they do as simply a manhunt for a madman Bigelow and Boal make their film reductive of its materials, failing to address the complex history and the many enduring questions. The shamefully ebullient early reviewers were happy with that, praising the film as taut and "riveting" and "pulse-pounding" displaying what Bigelow likes to call her "boots on the ground" experience.

There is no doubt that the cinematography and editing of the film are well done. But there is nothing really exceptional about the making of this film. Any number of directors, Jonathan Demme, Ed Zwick and many others, could have done

just as well.

And Bigelow really blew it in the casting of Jessica Chastain as Maya. Bigelow has never really been all that interested in acting. (She came to film directing out of painting and therefore is more interested in the visual aspect.) To be kind, Chastain is simply not up to this role. She is an actress who can only deliver the primary colors with little in the way of subtlety and resourcefulness.

If you can imagine what a young Vanessa Redgrave could have done with Maya, in voice inflection, in pattern of facial inquiry and response, in body carriage, you can see how inadequate Chastain really is. But a director who truly understood the demands of the part would not have settled for Chastain in the first place.

Because of all these limitations, all these shortcomings, the film has no overtones, not even any reverberations. When it's over, it's over. And that is really bad considering the enormity of the subject.

To make one apt comparison: Oliver Stone's *JFK* was not simply about whether or not Lee Harvey Oswald shot President Kennedy. It posed an array of other questions about the event: Was the Warren Commission really looking for the truth at all? Did the FBI actually investigate the case? Was Jim Garrison's office wired and infiltrated to prevent him from discovering the real facts about the case? Was President Kennedy killed because he was effecting a withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam?

But Stone didn't ask for help from Washington in making his movie. And he was interested in a lot more than just if Oswald was guilty. Thus, *JFK* was a much richer and thought-provoking film than *Zero Dark Thirty*.

When a film shrinks its canvas instead of enlarging it, it's a good sign that the ambition is simply to chronicle. That is what this film does. And it delivers that chronicling from a dubious and expurgated point of view.

**Jim DiEugenio is a researcher and writer on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and other mysteries of that era. His new book is *Destiny Betrayed* (Second Edition) from Skyhorse Publishing.**

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