

Taxi to the Dark Side: Murder of young Afghan driver exposes US torture policies

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One of the few well-deserved Oscars at last month's Academy Awards went to *Taxi to the Dark Side*, a disturbing documentary feature by Alex Gibney that exposes the Bush administration's use of torture, rendition and other criminal violations of the Geneva Conventions. Gibney, who also directed *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* (2005), delivered the only significant speech at the tightly-regulated event.

In the few seconds allocated to prize-winners Gibney said: "I think my dear wife Anne was kind of hoping I'd make a romantic comedy but honestly, after Guantánamo, Abu Ghraib, extraordinary rendition, that simply wasn't possible.

"This is dedicated to two people who are no longer with us. Dilawar, the young Afghan taxi driver, and my father, a Navy interrogator who urged me to make this film because of his fury about what was being done to the rule of law. Let's hope we can turn this country around, move away from the dark side and back to the light."

The "dark side" is a reference to a comment made by US Vice President Dick Cheney who was asked on NBC's "Meet the Press" a few days after the 9/11 terror attack what the Bush administration would do in pursuing the perpetrators.

"We have to work the dark side, if you will," Cheney replied. "We're going to spend time in the shadows. A lot of what needs to be done here will have to be done quietly, without any discussion, using sources and methods available to our intelligence agencies ... It'll be vital for us to use any means at our disposal, basically, to achieve our objective."

Gibney's 106-minute documentary methodically draws out the legal implications and terrifying human results of Cheney's cold and calculated repudiation of the rule of law.

Taxi to the Dark Side opens with an examination of the murder of Dilawar, a 22-year-old taxi driver from the poverty-stricken village of Yakubi in eastern Afghanistan, by US military forces at Bagram Air Base in December 2002. Dilawar and three of his passengers were captured by the Northern Alliance who falsely accused the men of firing rockets at the Camp Salerno military base.

Five days after being handed over to American forces, Dilawar was dead, killed by US Army interrogators who shackled him to the ceiling by his wrists and subjected him to sleep deprivation and savage beatings for hours on end. The initial official military report claimed that Dilawar had died of "natural causes". A subsequent autopsy revealed, however, that his legs had been reduced a pulp and that even if he had survived, it would have been necessary to amputate them.

After Dilawar's death, his three passengers were sent to Guantánamo and held there without charge for 15 months until March 2004, when they were released and returned to Afghanistan with letters stating that they posed "no threat" to US forces. A subsequent inquiry revealed that a local Northern Alliance commander perpetrated the rocket attack on Camp Salerno in order to secure ongoing American support.

The documentary goes on to point out that US forces have incarcerated over 83,000 people since the "war on terror" began, with 93 percent of those detained in Afghanistan captured by local militiamen in exchange for US bounty payments. So far, 105 prisoners have died in captivity, with 37 of these officially classified as homicides.

After American journalists exposed Dilawar's murder, the US military and the Bush administration employed its "bad apples" defence, simply blaming the soldiers immediately involved.

The documentary systematically demolishes this claim. Using interviews with the interrogators and other primary sources, it establishes irrefutably that the principal responsibility for this and other war crimes lies with the US military high command and the Bush administration.

Taxi to the Dark Side details how the illegal methods at Bagram were applied at the Guantánamo Bay internment camp and then Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. Captain Carolyn Wood, the officer in charge of interrogations at the Bagram base where Dilawar was murdered, was awarded the Bronze Star for valor and, following the US invasion of Iraq, dispatched to help establish the brutal and sadistic regime at

Abu Ghraib.

The documentary contains footage from Abu Ghraib previously censored by US authorities and points out that while military reservists Lynndie England and Charles Graner were prosecuted and imprisoned over the torture at the prison, they were responding to directives from above.

Rear Admiral John Hutson explains in the documentary: “What starts at the top of the chain of command drops like a rock down the chain of command, and that’s why Lynndie England knew what Donald Rumsfeld was thinking without actually talking to Donald Rumsfeld.”

Gibney and his editor Sloan Klevin skillfully counterpose footage of Cheney, Bush, Rumsfeld and other officials claiming that the administration was opposed to torture against the real evidence. There is an interview with the Justice Department’s John Yoo, who redefines torture as “extreme acts” that would lead to the organ failure and death.

Yoo attempts to explain why the US president should have an unlimited right to authorise torture and other measures and why prisoners captured in the “war on terror” have been deprived of their habeas corpus rights and legal protection under the Geneva Conventions.

Former British Guantánamo detainee Moazzam Begg also provides damning evidence. Begg was seized in Pakistan during February 2002, transported to Bagram, where he was held for almost a year, and then moved to Guantánamo.

In a bizarre twist Begg was asked by the US military to identify and testify against US soldiers who abused Dilawar in Bagram Air Base. Even as the US military asked him to provide evidence against the soldiers, it continued to hold him indefinitely without charge and refused him access to a lawyer. He was eventually released from Guantánamo and repatriated to Britain in January 2005.

Human rights lawyer Clive Stafford Smith explains how the Bush administration has used the 9/11 terror attacks to reverse long-standing legal principles and incarcerate prisoners indefinitely without charge. His description of procedures at Guantánamo is chilling.

Using interviews with the US Navy former general counsel Alberto Mora, FBI interrogator Jack Cloonan, Alfred McCoy and others, *Taxi to the Dark Side* exposes the so-called “ticking-bombing” justification for the use of torture and White House claims that interrogators have been able to extract “valuable intelligence” through water-boarding and other torture methods. One of the cases noted in the film concerns Abi Faraj al-Libbi, who was tortured, including with the use of water-boarding, and “confessed” to links between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda. This entirely false “evidence” was used in Colin Powell’s infamous speech to the United Nations to justify the US invasion of Iraq in

2003.

Taxi to the Dark Side is part of a growing list of important documentaries—*Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) and the *Road to Guantánamo* (2006), to name two—that could be used as evidence in any future war crime hearings against the Bush administration. What is missing in these documentaries, however, is any clear explanation as why these violations of the US Constitution and the Geneva Conventions have emerged or a detailed exposure of the role played by both major political parties in this process.

Republican Senator John McCain and Democrat Senator Carl Levin are shown in *Taxi to the Dark Side* challenging Alberto Gonzales at Senate hearings as the former US attorney general attempts to justify the use of torture. But the opposition of McCain and Levin to torture is not based in any principled opposition to imperialist war or militarism. They have argued that torture produces “faulty” intelligence and weakens or discredits the war on terror. In fact, McCain publicly supported President George W. Bush’s recent veto of a bill that would have prohibited the CIA from using cruel, inhumane or degrading techniques, including water-boarding, during interrogations.

Nor does Gibney make any accounting of the fact that since 9/11 the Democrats have uncritically embraced the so-called “war on terror” and endorsed laws establishing the legal and political framework within which torture and rendition now occurs. This includes the Patriot and Military Commission Acts, the illegal Guantánamo Bay incarcerations as well as ongoing funding for the illegal occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq. Documentary filmmakers urgently need to turn their attention to these important political realities as well.

A trailer of Taxi to the Dark Side is available on YouTube.



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