

Filmmaker Kathryn Bigelow offered access to US military death squad

David Walsh
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Reports surfaced this week indicating that filmmaker Kathryn Bigelow, who won an Academy Award for directing *The Hurt Locker* (2008), met with Pentagon and CIA officials and was offered access to the Navy Seal team that executed Osama bin Laden in Pakistan on May 2, 2011.

Judicial Watch, the ultra-right media watchdog, sued the Pentagon under the Freedom of Information Act after a column by the *New York Times*' Maureen Dowd in August 2011 noted that the White House had given Bigelow and screenwriter Mark Boal "top-level access" to those involved in the bin Laden killing.

At that time, the film, *Zero Dark Thirty*, was scheduled to open in October 2012, just prior to the presidential election. The opening has subsequently been pushed back to December.

Last week Judicial Watch obtained hundreds of pages of emails and transcripts of conversations, including a July 14, 2011 meeting attended by Bigelow, Boal, Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence Michael Vickers and other Defense Department officials. The transcript reveals that Boal had previously held discussions with top administration officials, including Obama's Chief Counterterrorism Advisor John O. Brennan and Deputy National Security Advisor Denis McDonough.

The release of the documents has been the occasion for grandstanding by right-wing Republican congressman Peter King of New York, who alleged the collaboration between the White House and the filmmakers endangered national security. King claimed that the papers told "a damning story of extremely close, unprecedented, and potentially dangerous collaboration." The Republicans are eager to pounce on any evidence that administration officials are planning to use the bin Laden killing as part of the 2012 Obama reelection campaign, which, no doubt, they are.

However, no one in the mainstream media, the Democratic Party or left-liberal circles would criticize the disclosed collaboration from the opposite point of view, that it is disgusting that award-winning "artists" should be consorting with death squads and their civilian-military handlers. That the US government can and should detain, torture and kill, without recourse to the courts, anyone perceived as a threat is taken for granted by such people. Who in Hollywood today would stand up and denounce such a filthy, pro-military project as *Zero Dark Thirty*?

The latest revelations are a vindication of the WSWs' attitude toward Bigelow, Boal and *The Hurt Locker*. We rejected out of

hand the claim that this was an "anti-war" film. In our original review (*The Hurt Locker: Part of a deplorable trend*), we noted: "A social process is under way. An entire layer of the liberal middle class is accommodating itself comfortably to American neo-colonialism, justifying its attitude by references to the new, 'progressive' administration in Washington that is conducting a different kind of intervention, for different aims. Different in what way no one can quite explain. The corpses continue to pile up."

And in a follow-up article [*The Hurt Locker, the Academy Awards and the rehabilitation of the Iraq war*], we commented, "*The Hurt Locker*, despite claims about its 'apolitical' or 'non-partisan' character, proves in its own unsavory fashion to be a pro-war and pro-imperialist film. ... Bigelow's movie, from a script by former embedded reporter Mark Boal, is not anti-war. It merely pauses now and then to meditate on the heavy price American soldiers pay for slaughtering Iraqi insurgents and citizens. As long as they pull long faces and show signs of fatigue and stress, US forces, as far as Bigelow is apparently concerned, can go right on killing and wreaking havoc."

The Judicial Watch documents reveal Bigelow and Boal to be obsequious and worshipful toward the war criminals who oversee the US military and CIA. Any notion that they are simply portraying the bin Laden killing in an objective fashion is dispelled by a perusal of the various emails and transcripts.

In an email sent May 10, 2011, Boal informs George Little of the CIA's Office of Public Affairs that he and Bigelow "are making a film about the extraordinary effort to capture or kill Usama Bin Laden. Given the historical nature of the subject matter, we intend to make accuracy and authenticity hallmarks of the production, for we believe that this is one of those rare instances where truth really is more interesting than fiction."

It tells us everything we need to know about Boal and Bigelow that they would turn toward those responsible for the extrajudicial execution—an event about which many questions remain and whose perpetrators have obvious motives for concealing the truth—for "accuracy and authenticity."

In June 2011, Boal had a meeting with Robert Mehal, a Pentagon public affairs officer, and outlined the film project. In an email to Under Secretary Vickers on June 9 about the conversation, Mehal noted that Boal had promised not to reveal any military secrets, adding "that he [Boal] was proud of not giving anything away in *Hurt Locker*." Furthermore, the screenwriter had explained that he

wanted “to highlight the great cooperation/coordination between CIA/DoD [Department of Defense] and the extensive Intel work (decade) that culminated in the OP.” Boal told Mehal that assassinating bin Laden was a “Gutsy decision” by Obama.

The July 14 meeting between Vickers, Bigelow, Boal and others is mostly taken up by the Under Secretary’s boasting about the raid on bin Laden’s compound. There is something pathetic about Vickers’ crowing and the filmmakers’ sycophancy. As the WWSW noted in May 2011, “By the time of his death on Sunday ... Osama bin Laden had become largely irrelevant, a sick old man who by all evidence lived under effective house arrest as a ward of Pakistan’s military intelligence. The strategic importance of his demise is generally acknowledged as nil.”

Vickers presents the operation as one of the remarkable military-strategic achievements of our time, and Boal-Bigelow are only too happy to go along with him. And when the Under Secretary tells the filmmakers that the military will make available to them “a guy ... who was involved from the beginning as a planner, a SEAL Team 6 Operator and Commander,” Boal responds, “That’s dynamite,” and Bigelow puts in, “That’s incredible.” At the end of the conversation, Bigelow tells Vickers, “So wonderful meeting you.”

In a remarkable email from June 13, 2011, Defense Department Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs Douglas Wilson writes Vickers that “At the direction of Director [Leon] Panetta, CIA is cooperating fully [with the filmmakers] ... For the intelligence case, they [Boal and Bigelow] are basically using the WH[White House]-approved talking points we used the night of the operation.”

Among the emails are numerous effusive communications back and forth between Boal and various figures at the Pentagon and CIA. One, from a CIA spokesperson, explains that the agency and other US government entities “have been engaging with the film’s screenwriter, Mark Boal. ... Both Mark and Kathryn have told us how impressed they are with the Agency’s work in the UBL [Usama bin Laden] operation and how eager they are to bring that to the screen.”

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The filmmakers were also apparently granted access to “the Vault,” the CIA facility where some of the tactical planning for the bin Laden operation took place.

In August 2011, after the appearance of Dowd’s column and King’s first criticisms of the administration, Boal and Bigelow issued a statement suggesting that the bin Laden assassination “was an American triumph, both heroic and non-partisan, and there is no basis to suggest that our film will represent this enormous victory otherwise.”

All of this is nauseating, but it is especially instructive in the light of Bigelow’s own evolution. Born in California, Bigelow was studying painting at the San Francisco Art Institute in 1971 when, according to Deborah Jermyn and Sean Redmond in *The Cinema of Kathryn Bigelow: Hollywood Transgressor*, “she won a scholarship to the prestigious Whitney Museum in New York, where tutors included Susan Sontag and Richard Serra. Here she developed her interest in the avant-garde art scene, becoming a

member of Art and Language, a British-based group of conceptual artists, and working as an assistant to performance artist Vito Acconci.”

Later, at Columbia University, she came under the influence of Sylvère Lotringer, a French postmodernist philosopher. Lotringer’s web site at the European Graduate School explains how he conceived his role at Columbia: “Confronted with a different leftist intellectual scene in the United States, dominated by the post-Frankfurt School of Marxism, Sylvère Lotringer decided to disturb its order by introducing more fluid ideas of power and desire as formulated by Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Michel Foucault.”

What all these figures shared in common was a rejection of Marxism in favor of Nietzscheanism and other forms of irrationalism and a deep hostility to the working class and socialism.

Following the death of Jean Baudrillard, one of the worst charlatans of postmodernism, Bigelow told *Le Nouvel Observateur* in France that, in regard to her film *Strange Days* (1995), “Baudrillard exerted a strong influence on my thinking. His prescient notion of hyper-reality—of a world in which the image feels more real than the original—was a constant inspiration, like a developer’s wash, coloring every frame, informing the film.”

What else did Bigelow learn from Lotringer and company? Speaking of her first, short film, *The Set-Up* (1978), twenty minutes of two men beating each other up while Lotringer and another philosopher “deconstruct” the images in a voiceover, Bigelow told interviewer Gavin Smith, “And the piece ends with Sylvère [Lotringer] talking about the fact that in the 1960s you think of the enemy as outside yourself, in other words a police officer, the government, the system, but that that’s not really the case at all, fascism is very insidious, we reproduce it all the time.”

Various false claims have been made for Bigelow’s intellectually murky and dramatically unconvincing films (*The Loveless*, *Near Dark*, *Blue Steel*, *Point Break*, *Strange Days* and others), including by the authors of *The Cinema of Kathryn Bigelow: Hollywood Transgressor*. Jermyn and Redmond argue, in the typical jargon, that Bigelow is “a film-making artist who is able to transcend the collective, industrial and commercial constraints of the Hollywood cinema machine to *individually* *author* her films in innovative and transgressive ways.”

From the radical art and underground film scene of the 1970s in New York to the promise of a meeting with a death squad commander. Bigelow has “transgressed” the boundaries of elementary political decency and principle, entering directly into the service of the American state and its drive for global domination.



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