

Opposition emerges in film industry to Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty*

David Walsh
14 January 2013

Voices of protest have been raised in Hollywood against Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty*, an account of the hunt for Osama bin Laden, which endorses the actions of the Central Intelligence Agency, the US military and the systematic use of torture.

In a statement published January 9 in *Truthout* ("And the Academy Award for the Promotion of Torture Goes to ..."), actor David Clennon explains, "I'm a member of Hollywood's Motion Picture Academy. At the risk of being expelled for disclosing my intentions, I will not be voting for *Zero Dark Thirty*—in any Academy Awards category."

Clennon goes on, "Everyone who contributes skill and energy to a motion picture—including actors—shares responsibility for the impressions the picture makes and the ideas it expresses. ... So Jessica Chastain won't get my vote for Best Actress. With her beauty and her tough-but-vulnerable posturing, she almost succeeds in making extreme brutality look weirdly heroic."

The Emmy-award winning actor (best known for his role on television's *thirtysomething*) writes, "If, in fact, torture is a crime (a mortal sin, if you will)—a signal of a nation's descent into depravity—then it doesn't matter whether it 'works' or not. *Zero Dark Thirty* condones torture. ... If the deeply racist *Birth of a Nation* was released today, would we vote to honor it? Would we give an award to [German filmmaker] Leni Riefenstahl's brilliant pro-Nazi documentary, *Triumph of the Will*?"

It is entirely to his credit that Clennon has made this statement, and spoken out against Bigelow's film, which has received almost universal, shameful praise from the US media and its so-called "film critics."

According to CBS's Los Angeles affiliate station, veteran actors Martin Sheen and Ed Asner have also appealed "to other actors to vote their conscience on whether to reward the movie [*Zero Dark Thirty*] with a win on Oscar night."

Sony Chairman Amy Pascal issued a defensive statement in support of her studio's film, asserting, "*Zero Dark Thirty* does not advocate torture. To not include that part of history would have been irresponsible and inaccurate. We fully

support Kathryn Bigelow and [screenwriter] Mark Boal and stand behind this extraordinary movie."

Only a multi-millionaire Hollywood film executive, who thinks she can make up reality as she goes along, could have added this preposterous and hypocritical comment: "We are outraged that any responsible member of the Academy would use their voting status in AMPAS as a platform to advance their own political agenda. ... To punish an Artist's right of expression is abhorrent. This community, more than any other, should know how reprehensible that is."

One feels safe in suggesting that if a new version of the Hollywood anticommunist blacklist were to be launched tomorrow, the overwhelming majority of studio chiefs would sign up without a moment's hesitation.

Clennon's public statement and related events no doubt indicate revulsion against Bigelow's film within sections of the industry. That she was left out of the Academy Awards best director nominations, announced last week, was an indication of some degree of opposition. Bigelow was hailed as the first woman to win an Oscar for best director for *The Hurt Locker* in 2010. At the time, entirely false claims were made as to that work's "anti-war" credentials.

This time around, with even less to go on, various liberal and "left" figures insist that Bigelow is being subjected to unfair attacks.

Scott Mendelson, for example, on the *Huffington Post* website, writes that Bigelow has "been called a warmonger, an apologist, and yes, a Nazi. ... All because Bigelow and Boal didn't spoon-feed their opinions to the audience in a way that made for easy digestion. They didn't have a fictionalized scene where a character explicitly explains to the audience how they got each piece of vital information over the eight years during which the film takes place. They trusted the audience to make the connections."

Filmmaker Michael Moore has chimed in, disgracefully, with support for Bigelow as part of a wider and equally disgraceful defense of the Obama administration. On Twitter January 9, Moore asserted, "I'm sorry, but anyone who claims that *Zero Dark Thirty* endorses torture either hasn't

seen the movie or wasn't paying attention.

"*Zero Dark 30* makes it clear: 7 yrs of torture under [George W.] Bush doesn't find Osama bin Laden. [Barack] Obama elected, torture stops, guess what? WE FIND BIN LADEN."

Moore's statement fully accepts the so-called "war on terror," which his own *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) associated with the American elite's drive for global domination. His miserable comments help explain how and why the official anti-war movement has folded up its tent and gone away under Obama.

Moore went on to say, "Also, this is a MOVIE. It is a work of art & tells a great story. 'Depiction does not imply endorsement,' says the director & she's right."

He was paraphrasing Bigelow's comment at the New York Film Critics Award ceremony earlier this month: "I thankfully want to say that I'm standing in a room of people who understand that depiction is not endorsement."

It is difficult to conceive of a more dishonest or self-deluded comment. Mendelson, Moore and Bigelow, first of all, leave out one minor detail: *Zero Dark Thirty* (which borrows its very title from the US military) was developed and made with the fullest cooperation of the military, the CIA and the highest echelons of the American government. Is it likely that the latter would have facilitated a work that offered criticism of their activities?

As we reported last May, Bigelow and screenwriter Boal, a former "embedded reporter" in Iraq in 2004, were given "top-level access" to those involved in the bin Laden killing. They were even offered the opportunity, which they jumped at, to meet with a member of the US Navy Seal death squad involved in the assassination.

Right-wing media watchdog Judicial Watch, for its own purposes, 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. Brennan, the man in charge of the murderous drone program, has recently been nominated as CIA director.

The transcripts and emails reveal Bigelow and Boal as accomplices of these top murderers in the US military and intelligence apparatus.

In an email to Vickers on June 9, 2011, for example, Pentagon media official Robert Mehal spoke glowingly of Boal, who 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.

When Vickers, at the July 14, 2011 meeting, told Bigelow and Boal that the military would make available to them "a guy ... who was involved from the beginning as a planner, a SEAL Team 6 Operator and Commander," Boal responded, "That's dynamite," and Bigelow put in, "That's incredible." At the end of the conversation, Bigelow told Vickers, "So wonderful meeting you."

Bigelow, supported by Moore and others, claims *Zero Dark Thirty* is neutral in relation to the events it depicts. "The film doesn't have an agenda and it doesn't judge," she told the media. "I wanted a boots-on-the-ground experience."

This is spurious. *Zero Dark Thirty* tells its "great story" from the point of view of the CIA and its torturers. Its supposed objectivity is a self-conscious aesthetic stance. Bigelow has long been fascinated with violence and brutality and those bold enough to carry it out, without regard for commonplace concerns. (For example, this bit of sophomoric dialogue from anti-hero Bodhi [Patrick Swayze] in Bigelow's 1991 *Point Break*: "See, we exist on a higher plane, you and I. We make our own rules. Why be a servant of the law ... when you can be its master?")

We noted in regard to *The Hurt Locker* that the film "glories in and glamorizes violence, which the filmmaker associates with 'heightened emotional responses.' All of this, including its element of half-baked Nietzscheanism, is quite unhealthy and even sinister, but corresponds to definite moods within sections of what passes for a 'radical' intelligentsia in the US." *The Hurt Locker*, we pointed out, "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 same can be said, in spades, for the new film, with its pro-imperialist storyline and fascist overtones.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact