A reply to Michael Moore's defense of *Zero Dark Thirty*

David Walsh
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Filmmaker Michael Moore, in a comment published on the *Huffington Post* web site January 25, has come to the vigorous defense of Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty*. Bigelow's deplorable pro-CIA film has provoked criticism and outrage, including in the Hollywood film community itself.

Bigelow's film follows the efforts of a determined CIA operative, Maya (Jessica Chastain), over the course of nearly a decade to track down Osama bin Laden. She journeys to various agency facilities where detainees—suspected of some connection to the September 11, 2001 attacks—are being interrogated, and observes and sometimes participates in the torture.

Rebuffed at numerous points by agency higher-ups, isolated, working long hours, distressed by the deaths of fellow agents, Maya persists in her detective work and sees her efforts bear fruit in the form of bin Laden's assassination during the US military-CIA raid on his compound in May 2011. *Zero Dark Thirty* was created with the unprecedented cooperation of Pentagon, CIA and White House officials, all of whom clearly viewed the prospective film as a useful vehicle for publicizing and boasting about their efforts. As part of his research, screenwriter Mark Boal—previously an embedded reporter in Iraq—met with John Brennan, chief of the drone assassination program and currently Barack Obama's nominee to head the CIA.

The Bigelow-Boal work is "embedded filmmaking" of the most reprehensible and even sinister variety. These are individuals who would find a way to defend any crime perpetrated by the American authorities. *Zero Dark Thirty* accepts entirely the framework of the "war on terror" as set out by the Bush-Cheney administration and defended, with some minor modifications, by Obama. It takes at face value the pretense of the US government military-intelligence apparatus and media that 9/11 had no pre-history, that it "changed everything" over night, that all the measures taken since then—even if they "*sometimes* crossed moral lines" (in Bigelow's words)—were sincere efforts to defend the American population from terror attacks.

But these are all lies, as Moore knows perfectly well, or once knew. In his *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), for example, the filmmaker noted the comment of Trent Lott on the day the Patriot Act was introduced, "Maybe now we can do things we've wanted to do the last 10 years." Moore, the film's narrator, interjected "A dictatorship would be a heck of a lot easier, no question about it. I mean, they had all this on the shelf somewhere. Ideas of things they would like to do. And they got 9/11 … and they said, 'It's our chance. Go for it.'" He mused later in the film, "Was this really about our safety? Or was something else going on?"

Already in *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), Moore noted that following September 11, 2001, Americans "were gripped in a state of fear" and that "a lot of people are making a lot of money off of it and a lot of careers off of it. And so, there's vested interests, a lot of activity to keep us afraid. … And the greatest benefit of all of a terrorized public is that the corporate and political leaders can get away with just about anything."

Now Moore solidarizes himself with a film that begins with the desperate voices of 9/11 victims and, by implication, treats the subsequent invasion of the Middle East and Central Asia by hundreds of thousands of US troops and agents as the appropriate response to that crime. At one point in *Zero Dark Thirty*, a CIA official thunders at his assembled underlings, "They attacked us! They murdered three thousand of our citizens!"

Bin Laden and his ilk represent a thoroughly reactionary element, and the September 11 attacks were heinous acts. However, American presence in the region did not begin on the day following that event. Bigelow and Boal choose to omit decades of US intervention in the Middle East and Afghanistan, the plundering of energy supplies by American and other multinationals, Washington's support for every bloody dictatorship in the region, the murder of countless Iraqis over the past two decades, the complicity with the Israelis in their oppression of the Palestinian people, the endless violence and humiliation inflicted on the Arab peoples. Shamefully, Moore now omits this too.

Moore refers in his *Huffington Post* column to bin Laden's past connections with the CIA, describing the Saudi Islamic fundamentalist as "a crazed religious fanatic, a multi-millionaire, and a punk who was part of the anti-Soviet mujahideen whom we trained, armed and funded in Afghanistan back in the '80s," but only as part of an effort to contrast the Bush administration's policy unfavorably to the current one. Bin Laden, writes Moore, was "a godsend and a very useful tool to the Dick Cheneys and Don Rumsfields of the world."

As though the Obama administration were any less cynical and duplicitous in its use of this "bogeyman" (Moore's phrase), stage-managing his grisly killing for what it hoped would be maximum effect!

Moore insists that "anyone of conscience" will conclude that the brutal behavior of the CIA agents in the first portion of *Zero Dark*

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Thirty "is morally not right." Audiences will be "repulsed by these torture scenes."

That is not the issue. Many erstwhile liberals now discussing waterboarding as part of polite dinner chatter would no doubt be horrified by the latter's reality. Their argument, and the film's, is that these practices are unfortunate, and perhaps overzealously carried out, but *necessary*, because they are the only means of protecting the US from attack. (Typical in this regard is the recent foul column by Richard Cohen of the *Washington Post*, "On torture, a debate we need.") As Maya angrily tells her superior at one point, "If you want to protect the homeland, get bin Laden."

Whether Bigelow personally or her film approves of torture as such is not the issue, in any event, although we are inclined to believe she is fascinated by all manner of unhealthy things. The filmmaker endorses the legitimacy of the so-called war on terror, the policy of neo-colonialist conquest, which renders the brutalization of hostile populations and the abuse and murder of those who resist inevitable.

Ignoring this fundamental reality of imperialist operations, Moore's arguments carry no weight whatsoever.

His central theme in the *Huffington Post* is that *Zero Dark Thirty* highlights the transition from the Bush to the Obama administration, which he takes to be a decisive step away from "torture porn to … detective work."

The gravitational force of Moore's support for Obama and the Democratic Party influences every argument in his column and makes them particularly stupid. Why, he asks, did the CIA supposedly halt its torture of detainees, marked part of the way through the film. "The answer is provided on a TV screen in the background where you see a black man (who apparently is the new president) and he's saying, in plain English, that America's torturing days are over, done, finished," he asserts.

The Obama administration has continued and deepened the war on constitutional rights and the democratic process, arrogating to itself the power to execute American citizens without due process and organizing a "kill list," which the president personally pores over, of targets for assassination. Leaving aside the Guantanamo Bay detention center, which represents institutionalized torture and remains open, as well as the treatment of Bradley Manning, we are not as convinced as Moore that the CIA and US military have not kept up their systematic violence and abuse, perhaps not as brazenly, perhaps through proxies.

Overall, *Zero Dark Thirty* is a disgusting film, banal and tedious when it is not gloating about US military power and hardware. Maya and her colleagues stride around Afghanistan and Pakistan as though they owned those countries, and seem genuinely bemused when they encounter protest, gunfire and bombs.

What Moore terms "a disturbing, fantastically-made movie" is not, by any objective standard, a serious artistic effort. The personalities are undeveloped and predictable. The dialogue is wooden and contrived, delivered in a "no-nonsense," staccato style. The effect is something akin to that produced by an especially hardboiled comic book.

In general, Bigelow and Boal have organized their film around putting military and CIA criminals in the best possible light. If they torture, it stresses them out. If they shoot defenseless women, their motives are pure.

Bigelow's specialty has become portraying the toll that wars of conquest and related activities take on their perpetrators. How tiring, how exhausting it is for Maya to preside over interrogation sessions or watch countless hours of detainee torture! "How rundown you look!," admonishes a friend at one point. Maya has no boyfriends, indeed, no friends at all. She sacrifices everything. The CIA director asks her at one point, "What else have you done for us besides bin Laden?" She replies, meaningfully, "Nothing, I've done nothing else." Bigelow provides us numerous shots of Chastain's anguished face, the single most memorable image in the film.

Perhaps the most offensive and ludicrous paragraph of Moore's piece is his presentation of the film as a triumph for feminism. "*Zero Dark Thirty*—a movie made by a woman (Kathryn Bigelow), produced by a woman (Megan Ellison), distributed by a woman (Amy Pascal, the co-chairman of Sony Pictures), and starring a woman (Jessica Chastain) is really about how an agency of mostly men are dismissive of a woman who is on the right path to finding bin Laden. Yes, guys, this is a movie about how we don't listen to women."

This is where the pursuit of identity politics has landed Moore. Maya is a vicious thug, along with her male counterparts. Neither she nor anyone else expresses any regrets about the sadistic torture. (Her boss tells a colleague, "I ran it [the torture program]; I'll defend it.") She tells the military death squad being organized to carry out the assassination of bin Laden, "You're going to kill him for me." She's a monster.

Much more could be said about Moore's evolution, and there will be ample opportunity to say it. In 2004, at the time of his endorsement of former army general Wesley Clark for the Democratic Party presidential nomination, we noted that the filmmaker, "like many others in America's middle class protest circles, bases his political judgments largely on impressions. Insofar as his impressions coincide with or include a sympathy for the working class or genuine feeling for its suffering, he can produce valuable work. …"

However, we continued: "Everything is reduced to immediate and practical concerns. In this manner, the essential framework of American bourgeois politics is accepted uncritically. Thus, Moore remains entirely imprisoned within the current political setup, obliged to choose between this or that section of the establishment." This has now propelled him into the camp o f the most ruthless enemies of humanity and social progress.

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