

New revelations about filmmakers' collaboration with CIA on *Zero Dark Thirty*

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New information has emerged exposing the level of collaboration between the CIA and the makers of the pro-torture *Zero Dark Thirty*, screenwriter Mark Boal and director Kathryn Bigelow. In fact, the reports reveal that the US intelligence agency vetted the film script and insisted on significant changes that Boal subsequently carried out.

There is nothing astonishing here. As the WSWs has noted, what was already known about the extensive discussions between Bigelow, Boal and CIA and Pentagon officials indicated that the filmmakers were capable of anything. However, the new reports underscore their complicity with US authorities and the extent to which the CIA viewed *Zero Dark Thirty*, a fictional accounting of the hunt for Osama bin Laden, as a propaganda coup.

The information makes a further mockery of the efforts by director Michael Moore and other liberals to claim that the Bigelow-Boal film was an “anti-war” or “anti-torture” work. No movie in recent history, in fact, has been so closely followed, and nurtured, by the torturers and assassins at the highest levels of the American state.

A declassified internal CIA memo, released under a Freedom of Information Act request, was recently made available to and published by the Gawker website. The memo describes five conference calls in October-December 2011, during which screenwriter Boal “verbally shared the screenplay for the Kathryn Bigelow-directed Bin Ladin movie with [CIA] OPA [Office of Public Affairs] officers.”

The CIA memo explains forthrightly: “From an Agency perspective, the purpose for these discussions was for OPA officers to help promote an appropriate portrayal of the Agency and the Bin Ladin operation.”

(In another CIA document, released as part of a batch

last year, an agency official urged her colleagues to share information with the screenwriter, explaining, “As an agency, we’ve been pretty forward-leaning with Boal. He’s agreed to share scripts and details about the movie with us so we’re absolutely comfortable with what he will be showing.”)

During their conference calls with Boal, OPA officers objected to a number of scenes in the proposed script. One of those they complained about was an early sequence in which Maya (Jessica Chastain), a CIA operative, participated in waterboarding a detainee and placing him in a small box.

The CIA memo comments, “For this scene, we emphasized that substantive debriefers [such as Maya] did not administer EITs [Enhanced Interrogation Techniques], because in this scene he [Boal] had a non-interrogator, substantive debriefer assisting in a dosing technique. [REDACTED] Boal said he would fix this.” And fix it he did, in the process making Maya a minutely less repugnant figure.

The CIA memo goes on: “Another interrogation scene involved the use of a dog to which we raised an objection that such tactics would not be used by the Agency. Boal confirmed in January that the use of dogs was taken out of the screenplay.”

It is a lie that the CIA does not use dogs on detainees. Kevin Gosztola at Firedoglake notes that Rafiq al-Hami, a Tunisian national, for one, was held in CIA black sites in Afghanistan where he was “stripped naked, threatened with dogs, shackled in painful ‘stress’ positions for hours, punched, kicked and exposed to extremes of heat and cold.” The US military regularly used snarling dogs to terrify prisoners at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib.

The CIA was vigilant about what it would permit Boal to include in his screenplay. They allowed certain

torture sequences only because the latter were already publicly exposed. The agency memo observes, “Overall, the interrogation scenes in the film of [alleged al Qaeda operatives] Hassan Ghul and Abu Faraj will likely include EITs that are already in the public domain from the DOJ [Department of Justice]/Office of Legal Counsel memos.”

Apologists for *Zero Dark Thirty* argue that its torture sequences are so disturbing they would turn any objective observer into an opponent of US policy. In fact, the film’s point is that in the pursuit of an essentially righteous cause, the “war on terror,” and in their zeal to revenge 9/11, American officials may have occasionally (and, all things considered, forgivably) crossed a line. As it turns out, without the CIA’s explicit permission, none of the scenes deemed to be so troubling would have made it to the screen.

The CIA took exception as well to a proposed scene in which “an officer, after drinking fires a celebratory burst of AK-47 gunfire into the air. We insisted mixing drinking and firearms is a major violation and actions like this do not happen in real life [!]. We requested this be taken out of the film. Boal confirmed he took this out of the film.”

The CIA also objected to a lengthy sequence where Maya reviews videotapes of detainee interrogations, some of them involving torture and abuse. The OPA officers claimed that, “detainee sessions were not videotaped and used for research and analysis.” Boal protested that this was “visually ... the only way to show research in an interesting cinematic way.” The CIA relented on this. It is well known that the agency taped interrogations, including the use of waterboarding, many of which videos were later illegally destroyed.

In an email response to Gawker, Boal wrote: “We honored certain requests to keep operational details and the identity of the participants confidential. But as with any publication or work of art, the final decisions as to the content were made by the filmmakers.”

It would not occur to Boal or Bigelow, obedient servants of the American military-intelligence machinery, that making alterations in accordance with the demands of the CIA—including the suppression of agency operations, techniques and conduct—might have any consequences for the final “work of art.”

The political and moral foulness of *Zero Dark Thirty*’s makers, it would seem, has no limits.



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