

Kathryn Bigelow and Mark Boal's *Zero Dark Thirty*

CIA-embedded Hollywood liars and their lies

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Zero Dark Thirty, written by Mark Boal and directed by Kathryn Bigelow, was a detestable work for many reasons. The film, released in December 2012 to much critical acclaim, was promoted as the true story of the decade-long hunt for Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, assassinated by the US military in Pakistan in May 2011.

Now we know, thanks to Seymour Hersh and his article in the *London Review of Books*, that, along with everything else, the Bigelow-Boal film was a pack of lies from beginning to end. About the only plot element of *Zero Dark Thirty* that remains unrefuted is that the CIA did indeed operate illegal “black sites” and horribly torture people.

As our original review noted, the film's central figure, CIA agent Maya, is shown “conducting a single-minded pursuit of clues leading to the whereabouts of bin Laden, while bravely battling resistance from the entire male-dominated leadership of the CIA until she finally prevails.

“According to this improbable version of events, the junior female analyst single-handedly brought about the May 1, 2011 raid on the compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan that ended in the assassination of bin Laden and the shooting of several other defenseless men, women and children.”

“Improbable” seems to be the key word here.

Hersh points out in his lengthy piece that bin Laden was not living secretly at the time of his killing in a well-guarded hideout, as depicted in the film, but “had been a prisoner of the ISI [Pakistani intelligence service] at the Abbottabad compound since 2006.” He further explains “that the CIA did not learn of bin Laden's whereabouts by tracking his couriers, as the White House has claimed since May 2011 [seconded by *Zero Dark Thirty*], but from a former senior Pakistani intelligence officer [a “walk-in”!] who betrayed the secret in return for much of the \$25 million reward offered by the US.”

So there was no intense debate at CIA headquarters as to whether bin Laden was actually living at the location in question, an important sequence in Bigelow's film. In the face of rather wishy-washy superiors, Maya boldly insists it is a “100 percent” certainty that the house's mysterious resident is indeed the al Qaeda leader. In actual fact, Pakistani officials had acknowledged to their American counterparts he was there in Abbottabad (“less than two miles from the Pakistan Military

Academy,” and “another mile or so away” from “a Pakistani army combat battalion headquarters,” observes Hersh) and even handed over a DNA sample to prove the point.

Nor was there a deadly shoot-out at the compound. The Pakistani military and intelligence deliberately stood down and let the US Navy Seal team do its dirty work. “An ISI liaison officer flying with the Seals guided them into the darkened house and up a staircase to bin Laden's quarters,” writes Hersh. Bin Laden was unguarded and unarmed, living on the third floor of the “shabby” house “in a cell with bars on the window and barbed wire on the roof.”

Nor did any CIA official identify the body after the murder, as Maya is shown doing in Bigelow's film, because two members of the Seal team obliterated bin Laden, an elderly, seriously ailing man. Hersh writes that “some members of the Seal team had bragged to colleagues and others that they had torn bin Laden's body to pieces with rifle fire. The remains, including his head, which had only a few bullet holes in it, were thrown into a body bag and, during the helicopter flight back to Jalalabad, some body parts were tossed out over the Hindu Kush mountains—or so the Seals claimed.”

So much for the events that Bigelow absurdly claimed only “come along once or twice in a millennium”! So much for what *Zero Dark Thirty*'s director praised as “the brave work of those professionals in the military and intelligence communities”!

Bigelow and Boal hardly made a secret of the fact that they enjoyed intimate and unprecedented cooperation from the CIA and the Obama administration in the development of the project. Emails and transcripts released in May 2012 revealed that the previous July Bigelow and Boal had met with Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence Michael Vickers and other Defense Department officials. Boal had earlier held discussions with top administration officials, including Obama's Chief Counterterrorism Advisor John O. Brennan and Deputy National Security Advisor Denis McDonough.

One of the released emails, from a CIA spokesperson, explained 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.”

The CIA and the administration gave the green light to the film, vetted or had changes made in its script and gloated about its usefulness as propaganda.

One of the principal lines of defense of the filmmakers and their apologists against critics was that *Zero Dark Thirty* did not render a judgment, was apolitical and simply presented the unadorned facts.

Boal evidently chose to believe (and pass on) every bit of information provided to him by the CIA, not exactly an organization known for its scrupulous adherence to the truth.

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."

One doesn't know whether to laugh or ...

In another remarkable email from June 13, 2011, Defense Department Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs Douglas Wilson wrote Under Secretary of Defense 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."

And, as it turns out, those talking points were a series of fabrications.

In a February 2013 radio interview, Boal asserted: "Of course we tried to be as honest as we could. Who would go into a movie like this knowing there's going to be the scrutiny there is, knowing the importance, knowing the deep underlying fissures in our political system on the policy issues and try to play fast and loose? You'd have to be out of your mind to do that." Was Boal out of his mind then? Or had he simply bought into the "war on terror" so deeply that he was incapable of identifying lies when they were told him?

It is almost farcical. This is Boal, in the same radio interview, on the details of the hunt for bin Laden, now exposed as part of a White House-CIA cover story:

"I think that what led to Osama Bin Laden's death is the work of thousands of people over the course of 10 years. We depict some of them. There were many different places that the information came from. Some of it came from the detainee program. A lot of it came out of good old-fashioned sleuthing, detective work, some of it came out of electronic surveillance. There's a whole host of methods, but at the end of the day what the movie is really about that there's a cerebral cortex involved here."

Boal here admits somewhat grudgingly—after all, he is a liberal-minded man!—that only "some" of the information came from "the detainee program," i.e., torture. And, as a result of Boal's including this claim in the film, *Zero Dark Thirty*

became part of the argument in certain circles for the effectiveness of "enhanced interrogation." But, in any case, it was all made up! Interrogations and torture had nothing to do with bin Laden's being located.

Hersh writes: "That US intelligence had learned of bin Laden's whereabouts from information acquired by waterboarding and other forms of torture," a complete invention, was "pushed by [John] Brennan and [CIA director] Leon Panetta." A bunch of retired CIA officers had been called in, according to one of Hersh's sources, "to help with the cover story. So the old-timers come in and say why not admit that we got some of the information about bin Laden from enhanced interrogation?" At the time, there was still talk in Washington about the possible prosecution of CIA agents who had conducted torture."

It is difficult to express in words the contempt one feels for individuals like Bigelow and Boal.

They were both "leftists" of a sort once upon a time. In the 1970s Bigelow (born 1951) was a radical opponent of the Vietnam War, a figure on the artistic "avant-garde scene" and a student of postmodernism at Columbia University. One of her earliest film projects was a critique of US counterinsurgency methods and the use of death squads.

According to Jordan Michael Smith in the *Nation*, Boal (born 1973), a graduate of Oberlin College, "began writing for *The Village Voice* in 1998, documenting concerns about the burgeoning US surveillance infrastructure. ... Boal was also freelancing for *Mother Jones*. In a terrific 1999 cover story, he investigated a garment factory in Kentucky that qualified as a sweatshop because of its below-sustenance wages, dangerous working conditions and intimidation against union organizers."

Both have evolved, along with many other former middle class protesters and dissidents, into enthusiastic defenders of the state and its brutal operations, at home and abroad.



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