

Patriots Day: An ode to law enforcement and repression

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Directed by Peter Berg; screenplay by Berg, Matt Cook and Joshua Zetumer

In *Patriots Day*, director Peter Berg and actor Mark Wahlberg, in their third film together, set out to tell the story of the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing. Like their previous films, *Lone Survivor* (2013), about a Navy Seal team's efforts to take down a Taliban leader in Afghanistan, and *Deepwater Horizon* (2016), about the 2010 oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, *Patriots Day* communicates what is essentially the official version of events.

As usual, Berg and Wahlberg ignore the broader social forces at work in the events they dramatize, remaining instead at the tabloid level of "human interest," which drifts into a kind of right-wing populism. They continue to celebrate the police and the military.

As the film opens, it is the evening before the marathon. We are first introduced to police sergeant Tommy Saunders (Wahlberg), a fictional character. He is coming off suspension and, as one last punishment, is ordered to work crowd detail at the marathon's finish line.

Also introduced are a number of characters, both civilian and police, based on real victims of the bombing or participants in the subsequent manhunt, whose lives will converge at the race. In *Patriots Day* their lives are perfectly happy, even idyllic. One can feel the manipulative hand of the filmmakers here. They are setting the audience up for a tear jerker. Indeed, for the first 20 minutes or so of the film one is just waiting for the other shoe to drop, so to speak.

Then comes the horrible violence of the event, sudden and devastating. Three people are killed, including 8-year-old Martin Richard. More than 200 are injured. We see severed limbs in the street, pools of blood. First

responders are overwhelmed and confused, but leap into action. Wounded family members, separated and taken to different hospitals, struggle to find one another. Sergeant Saunders comes to play a leading role.

As the immediate chaos begins to subside, FBI Special Agent Richard DesLauriers (Kevin Bacon) arrives on the scene with Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick (Michael Beach). Along with Boston Police Commissioner Ed Davis (John Goodman), they discuss the possibility of terrorism. DesLauriers is initially reluctant to call the bombing an act of terrorism. He warns it will be picked up by CNN, create a panic and lead to an anti-Muslim backlash. But after a brief look at the shrapnel littering the site, DesLauriers relents and confirms the terrorist attack. The FBI takes over the case, setting up a massive command center.

It doesn't take long to discover the attackers were brothers Tamerlan (Themo Melikidze) and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev (Alex Wolff). Tamerlan, 26, is abusive, while Dzhokhar, 19, is merely dumb and disconnected. Why are they doing this? The only semi-political statement either of them makes occurs when Tamerlan reveals himself to be a 9/11 conspiracy theorist, claiming the attacks were engineered by the US government to make Muslims look bad and carried out with the help of actors.

Their identities revealed, the brothers go on the run. They plan to set off more bombs in New York. First they murder a police officer at MIT in a failed attempt to steal his gun. Then they hijack the car of a Chinese immigrant, holding him hostage until he is able to escape when the brothers stop at a gas station. With information provided by the escaped hostage, the police quickly zero in on the Tsarnaevs. Tamerlan is killed in an intense firefight involving machine guns and

explosives. Dzhokhar goes into hiding and becomes the target of an unprecedented and highly militarized manhunt.

Despite the genuine horror of the marathon attack, a heinous and reactionary act, the most disturbing sequences in *Patriots Day* are not those depicting the carnage unleashed by the Tsarnaev brothers, but the anti-democratic response of the state (and the filmmakers' endorsement of it). The inhabitants of Boston and the surrounding metropolitan area—comprising roughly one million people—are ordered to shelter in place while militarized police forces occupy the city and conduct warrantless house to house searches.

We wrote at the time that, “What history will remember as most significant about the events in Boston will not be the bombing near the marathon’s finish line or the perpetrators or their motives. What will be remembered instead will be the unprecedented military lockdown of an entire major American city, with military vehicles in the streets and heavily armed soldiers going house to house—tromping through living rooms, bedrooms and kitchens, staring down their assault rifles at terrified, barefoot families in their pajamas.”

For the filmmakers, the mass repression was undertaken with some reluctance by law enforcement, but ultimately proved necessary and was reasonably well received by the public. Berg and Wahlberg have taken a look at the actions of the police in Boston and responded not with revulsion but with enthusiasm. “There are a lot of reasons Mark and I wanted to make the film,” Berg told one audience after a screening at the AFI Fest in Hollywood, “and one of them is to be unapologetic in our support for law enforcement. One of the things we saw in Boston was the very best of law enforcement and a reminder of why we’re so lucky to have these men and women serving us, ready to come to our rescue and our defense and to sacrifice so much when we and our loved ones and our families are in trouble.”

A scene in which Tamerlan’s wife Katherine (Melissa Benoist) is interrogated by members of an unidentified US intelligence agency also disturbs. When Katherine, held in custody but not told her Miranda rights, protests, saying “I have rights!” the agent interrogating her says smugly “You ain’t got

shit, sweetheart.” She is then prevented from the leaving the room, though she is not under arrest. The filmmakers appear to relish the moment.

Is there anything about the official account (or official life) that Berg and Wahlberg are willing to question? It doesn’t appear so. What did they understand of the events going into filming, and what conclusions did they draw during and after filming? What do they make of the Tsarnaev brothers?

“We did a lot of work on the Tsarnaev brothers,” Berg recently told film critic Mark Hughes, “and developed a reasonable interpretation for how this came to be, this radicalization, most of which is just basic mental illness in my opinion. Not particularly interesting.”

The brothers, in short, were crazy. That’s the end of it. Does this explain anything? In fact, there are many unanswered questions surrounding the Tsarnaevs and their activities—none of them pursued by Berg, Wahlberg and company. Above all, there are the brothers’ evident connections to US intelligence agencies and anti-Russian groups in Chechnya. Tamerlan, in particular, was well known to both the CIA and FBI. In what is something of a brief moment of (private) embarrassment and frustration for the agents involved, someone mentions they “might know this guy.” The true significance of that fact, however, is essentially ignored.

The stuff of real life is entirely absent from this film. In its place are populist mythologies about salt-of-the-earth cops and banal monologues about love conquering hate. The taste for revenge is also present. When the victim of the Tsarnaevs’ carjacking tells a cop to “Go get those m-----rs!,” one has the feeling it is the motto and mood of the entire work.

In the end, Berg and Wahlberg have given us a film thoroughly in line with the sentiments found in all the official commemorations of these events and the media coverage surrounding them. It is yet another example of Hollywood in the service of the state.



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