

Scott Z. Burns' *The Report* exposes CIA torture, then absolves the Democrats

Joanne Laurier
29 November 2019

The Report, written and directed by Scott Z. Burns and screened at this year's Toronto International Film Festival, is a film dramatization of the events surrounding the US Senate Intelligence Committee's investigation into and writing of a report on pervasive CIA torture under the Bush administration. The film has now opened in the US.

Burns previously produced *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), featuring Al Gore, and has written several screenplays for Steven Soderbergh (*The Informant!*, *Contagion*, *Side Effects*, *The Laundromat*).

The production of the CIA torture document, which involved working through millions of pages of reports, cables, etc., took more than three years. It was completed in July 2012. Another two years passed, thanks to CIA and other obstructions, before the Intelligence Committee in April 2014 voted to publish a version of the executive summary and findings. Eight months later, after further efforts to suppress or excise portions of the document, the revised executive summary, findings and recommendations, 525 pages long, with many redactions, were made public in December 2014.

The original 6,700-page report remains unpublished to this day, blocked by the CIA and the entire US political establishment on "national security" grounds. Even the fragmentary portions that emerged, however, revealed the fiendish and sadistic methods adopted by American imperialism in its drive to subjugate the world.

Burns' film importantly points to some of this, but its fatal flaw is its essential attachment to the Democratic Party and, in particular, the reactionary figure of California Senator Dianne Feinstein. It refuses to face up to the reality that the use of Gestapo-like methods by the US military and their defense or cover-up by the ruling elite revealed, as the WSWWS said at the time, that American democracy was in shambles. "The CIA torture program itself was only an extreme expression of a break with bourgeois legality that characterizes *every aspect* of US policy," we wrote.

As the movie opens, still under the Bush administration, Dan Jones (Adam Driver), the principal author of the

eventual report, has just come from the FBI to work for the Intelligence Committee. Dianne Feinstein (Annette Bening) tasks him with leading an investigation into the CIA's use of torture after the 9/11 attacks. That work, including the production of an initial report in early 2009, will last some six years.

Among many other things, Jones and his team discover that at least 119 individuals had been targeted by the CIA program involving the use of "enhanced interrogation techniques" (EITs), contrary to the agency's claims that the number of individuals involved was "less than a hundred." This was only one in a sea of CIA lies. The committee finds that at least 26 of those individuals (or 22 percent of the total) "did not meet the standard for detention"—that is, they were entirely innocent victims.

The CIA retains two outside contractors—Air Force psychologists James Mitchell (Douglas Hodge) and Bruce Jessen (T. Ryder Smith), who had no field experience with respect to interrogation and had only prepared a research paper on how CIA agents could resist torture. Nevertheless, in 2006, the value of the CIA's base contract with the company formed by the psychologists with all options exercised was in excess of \$180 million; the contractors had received \$81 million by the time of the contract's termination in 2009.

Horrifyingly, these pseudo-scientists, along with various CIA operatives and officials, devise and oversee techniques, fully in the spirit and tradition of Nazi experimentation, such as sleep deprivation in which a detainee is forced to stand with his arms shackled above his head, nudity, dietary manipulation, exposure to cold temperatures, cold showers, "rough takedowns," confinement in coffin-like boxes, "rectal hydration" and "rectal feeding," and the use of mock executions. (One of the operatives, a sinister individual known only as "Bernadette," played by Maura Tierney, seems to be a composite character largely based on now-CIA Director Gina Haspel.) Guards strip detainees naked, shackle them in the standing positions and douse them repeatedly with cold water. The movie shows one detainee succumbing

fatally to the most vicious torture.

Some of *The Report's* most chilling and intense scenes depict the torture while dead-faced CIA personnel coldly evaluate the effectiveness of their methods.

This fascistic indifference extends to government figures such as John Yoo (Pun Bandhu), the attorney who pens the notorious “torture memos” that help legalize the EITs. Jones concludes that because the detainees “looked a little different, spoke a different language, it made it easier” for CIA agents to torture them.

Ted Levine plays the monstrous John Brennan, who oversees and wholeheartedly defends the CIA’s actions. Barack Obama made Brennan his chief counterterrorism adviser during his first term and elevated him to the post of CIA director in his second. As noted, Brennan and the White House work together to attempt to suppress the Senate report, withholding documents from the committee and then sitting on the completed draft of the report for two years.

Under Brennan, the CIA spies on Jones and the other Senate staffers preparing the report, hacking into their computers, thus violating the constitutional separation of powers, the Fourth Amendment ban on arbitrary searches and seizures, and a number of US laws.

The film is relatively hard-hitting in certain ways, but pulls its punches at decisive moments. The depiction of Feinstein as an anti-torture crusader is especially false and even obscene. One of the wealthiest members of Congress and married to an investment banker, the California senator has been for a quarter century a reliable backer and ally of the US military-intelligence apparatus. She has defended the National Security Agency spying programs and denounced whistleblowers such as Edward Snowden, Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning as criminals and traitors. (The movie includes her denunciation of Snowden.)

After the release of the Intelligence Committee report in December 2014 was met with the unapologetic defense of torture by Brennan, along with Bush administration officials, Feinstein issued a groveling statement praising Brennan for showing “that CIA leadership is prepared to prevent this from ever happening again—which is all-important.”

Since its opening in theaters in mid-November, Burns’ *The Report* has received generally favorable reviews. Unsurprisingly, none of the reviewers refer critically to the overall role of the Democratic Party and Feinstein in particular. Often, in fact, Bening’s performance as the California Senator has been singled out for praise. *Variety*, for example, writes: “Nowhere is the balance of idealism and practicality, valor and hard-headedness, more exquisitely embodied than in Annette Bening’s superb performance as Dianne Feinstein.” One’s stomach turns.

In a recent interview with the British Film Institute

website, Burns expressed explicit support for the CIA, no doubt colored by the Democratic Party’s ever-closer embrace of the military-intelligence apparatus in its conflict with the Trump administration: “I think our story is about a few people at the CIA. Also ... there were a lot of people at the agency, then and now, who want to do the right thing, who uphold the law. *The intelligence communities in our country and in all of the Five Eyes [intelligence alliance comprising Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and US] are really important. So it’s not a condemnation of the CIA. It’s a commentary on what happens in any government when we lose accountability.*” [Emphasis added.]

No one has been punished for the massive crimes carried out under the Bush administration, from an illegal war of aggression in Iraq that claimed over a million lives to the systematic torture of detainees. The inability to hold anyone accountable for the grisly torture program exposes the breakdown of constitutional forms of rule in the United States.

As the WWSWS wrote: “The United States is run by a gigantic military-intelligence apparatus that acts outside of any legal restraint. This apparatus works in close alliance with a financial aristocracy that is no less immune from accountability for its actions than the CIA torturers. The entire state is implicated in a criminal conspiracy against the social and democratic rights of the people, internationally and within the United States.”

The Report would have the viewer believe that the criminal activity by the Bush administration and the Republicans was put a stop to—perhaps haltingly and inadequately—by Obama and the Democrats. In clichéd Hollywood manner, Dan Jones is elevated to the stature of a solitary American hero who saved the day.

This flies in the face of social and political reality. The American war drive continued under Obama using somewhat different tactics and techniques—drone strikes, “kill lists” and the prosecution of new wars in Libya and Syria. The daily headlines, of course, reveal that the eruption of imperialist violence continues under Donald Trump.

The Achilles heel of Hollywood liberal and “left” filmmaking continues to lie in its alliance with one of the parties fully complicit in the crimes and oppression carried out by the American capitalist social order.



To contact the WWSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact