

DOC NYC Film Festival 2022: Part 2

We Are Not Ghouls and *The Corridors of Power*: Two films probe or fail to probe US responsibility for genocide and torture

Erik Schreiber
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This article is the second in a series devoted to the 2022 DOC NYC Film Festival, which took place from November 9 through 27. Part 1 is available here.

We Are Not Ghouls (2022), directed by Chris James Thompson, is a valuable documenting of the violation of basic democratic rights, including systematic torture, that United States authorities inflicted on its detainees during the “war on terror” initiated by the George W. Bush administration.

Thompson’s film tells the story of Binyam Mohamed, an innocent man detained in the notorious Guantánamo Bay prison as an enemy combatant. The film does not explore the geopolitical reasons for the war on terror but serves as a powerful witness to its barbarity.

Yvonne Bradley, who volunteered to defend Mohamed when she was serving as a US Air Force Judge Advocate General (JAG) defense attorney, recounts her experiences. A practicing Christian, Bradley believed that the US would hold fair trials for Guantánamo detainees, whom she thought were “the worst of the worst,” as the government incessantly claimed. She explains how she became convinced that the charges against Mohamed were groundless and that he had been tortured.

While living in the United Kingdom, Mohamed became a Muslim. He traveled to Afghanistan in summer 2001 to find “the real Islam” and was unable to leave the country after the September 11 events. Attempting to return to the UK, he reached Pakistan, where he was arrested for having a forged passport. He was flown to a series of undisclosed locations, where he was tortured. He endured forced nudity, the cutting of his genitals, sleep deprivation, total darkness, psychological manipulation and six months of loud music. He lost more than 30 kilograms during this time.

Washington falsely accused Mohamed of having associated with Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the alleged

architect of the 9/11 attacks. Bradley found that there was no evidence that the two had ever met. Moreover, she discovered a conflict of interest underlying the system established to try Guantánamo detainees—or rather to railroad them and obtain convictions, as she puts it. It was Mohamed, she came to see, and not Bradley’s peers or superiors, who was telling her the truth. “I realized that in some sense I had been had,” she says. Bradley courageously refused to go along with the drumhead trial and came close to being court martialed.

After an unspeakable ordeal that lasted for almost seven years, Mohamed was released and returned to the UK, where he lives under surveillance. He was never convicted of any crime, and the US government has never apologized to him. Mohamed and other former detainees sued the British government over its collusion in their torture. The UK paid Mohamed an undisclosed sum, doubtless to bury the matter as quickly as possible.

Mohamed was released during the presidency of Barack Obama, and the film shows the latter’s infamous remark that the nation must “look forward, as opposed to looking backwards.” The Democratic president not only shielded torturers from accountability, but also continued the illegal domestic surveillance programs that Bush had initiated.

Though now a “free” man, Mohamed is permanently changed. “I don’t feel happiness or sadness,” he said. He describes himself as “dead” and says that, for him, “Guantánamo is not over.” Nor is it over for the several dozen prisoners still detained there, most of whom have never been charged with any crime.

The Corridors of Power (2022), directed by Dror Moreh (*The Gatekeepers*), is another matter.

This documentary ostensibly seeks to understand why the United States, which adopted the slogan “Never again” after the Holocaust, has repeatedly failed to prevent genocide.

The documentary covers much of the same ground as the book *A Problem from Hell* (2002) by Samantha Power, the Harvard professor who later became a member of President Barack Obama's National Security Council and served as US ambassador to the UN from 2013 to 2017.

Power is no neutral observer. She has been an active participant in many of the worst crimes of US imperialism over the past two decades.

As the WSWS explained in 2014, Power was a leading advocate in the Obama administration of "the so-called policy of R2P (responsibility to protect civilians) as the foundation for 'humanitarian' interventions. Waving the flag of 'human rights,' the most hypocritical of all justifications for imperialist war, Power was a leading advocate of the US-NATO war for regime-change in Libya, which toppled and murdered Muammar Gaddafi, leaving the country awash in violence and chaos three years later."

Moreover, Power was a key promoter of the US proxy war for regime change in Syria, helping to foment a sectarian civil war that killed over 100,000 people, and "then using this catastrophe created by imperialism as justification for more direct intervention."

In the UN, she pursued Washington's "criminally duplicitous" policy of defending Israel's murderous policy in Gaza.

The orientation of *The Corridors of Power* to Samantha Power as a political figure and to the Democratic Party precludes an honest answer to the question about genocide that it poses.

The very first talking head we see is former Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, an extreme right-winger who seized on the September 11 attacks to press for the illegal invasion of Iraq. Next comes former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who, under presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, supported the carpet bombing of Cambodia, the Indonesian invasion of East Timor and right-wing dictatorships in Chile and Argentina. Former secretaries of state Madeleine Albright, who urged President Bill Clinton to send troops to Bosnia, and Colin Powell, who lied to the United Nations about Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction, also appear. What qualifies any of these blood-soaked criminals to pontificate about questions of human rights? Their appearance in this context is frankly repulsive and immediately reveals the film's fatal flaws.

The documentary not only fails to challenge the statements of these mass murderers, but also covers up incriminating information to paint a more favorable (or at least slightly less damning) picture of US policy. For example, the film shows Clinton's visit to Rwanda, during which he apologized for not having intervened to stop the genocide of 1994. But it does not mention that US policy in Rwanda was

guided by the aim of inflicting a serious defeat on its rival, French imperialism. The policy succeeded, at the cost of at least 500,000 Rwandan lives.

Similarly, the film tacitly accepts the Clinton administration's professed humanitarian motives for intervening in Kosovo in 1999. There is no discussion of the terrorist campaign of the US-backed Kosovo Liberation Army or of the economic and geopolitical motives behind the US intervention. Nor does the film mention the atrocities against Serbs that Croatian President Franjo Tuđman oversaw with American approval.

We do, however, occasionally get glimpses of the truth. Power mentions that Washington was willing to overlook Saddam Hussein's gassing of the Kurds in 1988, because it considered Iraq's interests (e.g., undermining Iran) to be parallel to those of the US. Revealingly, Power remarks that Obama, a winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, often dismissed her concerns about genocide with comments like "We've all read your book, Samantha."

Nevertheless, the film obscures the objective interests underlying US foreign policy with abstract comments about "human nature" and "selfishness." It argues that policy is made by imperfect people who sometimes have incomplete information but implicitly have good intentions. In fact, we are talking about not just any "people," but representatives of the ruthless American ruling class, which consciously uses the defense of human rights (as today in Ukraine) as a pretext for military interventions intended to improve its geostrategic position.

To be continued.



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