

# Hollywood's Waterboard: Review of the CIA's "Zero Dark Thirty"

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*The Oscar nominations have been announced and despite much hope on this side of the pond there is no place for Skyfall in the Best Picture category. There is, however, a place for not one but two spy films telling good old fashioned patriotic tales: Argo and Zero Dark Thirty. Argo tells the 1979-80 story of the 'Canadian Caper', part of the Iran hostage crisis in the wake of the '79 revolution. Zero Dark Thirty is the first big budget, big name production to depict the official story of the hunt for Osama Bin Laden, culminating in his death in May 2011. Along with Lincoln, it is looking to be a great year for chest-beating, flag-saluting U!-S!-A!-chanting types.*

Like *Skyfall*, *Zero Dark Thirty* is primarily a human story, focusing on the work of one CIA agent who is trying to find Bin Laden. Unsurprisingly, she is an attractive, young, white female, the demographic of character with the broadest appeal in the Western world. 'Maya' is shown tracking down Bin Laden over a number of years via a closely-trusted courier. Her insistence and persistence are a major factor in the success of the narrative in reaching its bloody climax. The other major factor is torture.

The film opens with an audio montage from 9/11, including the most-discussed 'is this real world or exercise?' dialogue from the NORAD tapes. With the horror of the attacks still ringing in our ears we are thrown forward several years and shown a 'black site' at an 'undisclosed location' where we are party to extended scenes of 'enhanced interrogation techniques'.

## Hollywood's Waterboard

The 'detainees' are portrayed being waterboarded, beaten, constantly degraded and insulted, generally abused and in one scene dehumanised by being made to strip naked and then led around on the floor via a dog collar and lead. The sexual undertones to all this, particularly when S&M bonkbuster *50 Shades of Grey* is the most successful book in recent memory, are presumably intended to titillate the audience. This is Hollywood torture, where attractive young white spies dominate and humiliate tall dark strange terrorists.

This theme of dehumanising the 'terrorists' while sympathetically humanising the intelligence agents torturing them makes up most of the first hour of this lengthy film. The implication is clear: the torture was a necessary response to 9/11. This is the first major untruth of *Zero Dark Thirty*, as everything from the court record to declassified CIA 'interrogation' manuals proves that torture was an accepted practice in the more secretive agencies of governments in the US and beyond for decades prior to 9/11.

There has been considerable criticism of the film's apparent advocacy of torture in both the mainstream and alternative media, and some criticism of whether it is accurate to portray torture as being essential to the success of the hunt for Bin Laden. Even acting CIA director Michael Morell said that the film, 'creates the strong impression that the enhanced interrogation techniques that were part of our former detention and interrogation program were the key to finding Bin Laden. That impression is false.' That torture was not only a necessary response to 9/11 but also that it was essential in finding the alleged sponsor of 9/11 – Bin Laden – is the second major untruth of the movie.

Despite this criticism, the question that hasn't been asked is whether anything in this story is actually true. Despite immense and perhaps unprecedented official co-operation in the making of *Zero Dark Thirty*, it struggled with basic facts. For example, the film includes what was obviously a quite expensive CGI-laced reconstruction of the bus bombing in London on 7/7. The film not only gets the route number of the bus wrong, it also shows it blowing up while moving rapidly (which it certainly wasn't) and in the wrong spot in Tavistock Square.

These are quite basic details that one can establish with only a few minutes research. That the filmmakers got these facts wrong illustrates that they weren't really concerned with accuracy, but with telling a story in such a way that it would have an emotional impact. The simulated bus explosion is just about the only action in the opening 40 minutes of the film that isn't either torture sequences or CIA agents drinking coffee and looking stressed. It livens up what is otherwise a horrifying but very tedious narrative.

## Did they find Bin Laden?

According to *Zero Dark Thirty*, and much of the official information leaked or published before the film's release, the CIA found Bin Laden's courier and right-hand man Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti and he led them to the house in Abbottabad. However, they were unable to get any kind of photographic or otherwise physical evidence of exactly who was in the house, and therefore whether it was Bin Laden.

The movie includes a scene showing then CIA director Leon Panetta asking his analysts how certain they are that Bin Laden is actually in the large, walled house in Abbottabad. The answer comes back: 60% sure, with the notable exception of our sympathetic, flame-haired go-getting protagonist, who is 100% sure. We never see what Panetta said to President Obama because, despite Judicial Watch's efforts to claim so, this wasn't actually a party political film. It was something far, far worse than that. The presence of James Gandolfini – a man most famous for playing neurotic, serial killing gangster Tony Soprano – as head of the CIA is a sick joke that symbolises what this film is truly about.

According to the film the CIA and DOD were far from certain that they had actually found Bin Laden before the raid took place. Nonetheless the order is given, and two stealth helicopters are provided for the job of getting over the Afghan border into Pakistan to carry out the assault. The action is notably understated, with no musical score underpinning the various packs of SEALs running around the house shooting at people. This is presumably to give the climax a realistic feel though it only requires a brief examination to find problems and questions.

The film offers a third version of events in the third floor of the house in Abbottabad. Initial,

officially-supported reports say that Bin Laden, or whoever the man was who was killed on the third floor of the house, used a woman as a human shield and fired shots at the encroaching SEALs before they killed him.

This story stood until it was directly contradicted in the 2012 book *No Easy Day: The Firsthand Account of the Mission that Killed Osama bin Laden*. In that book the pseudonymous Mark Owen says that 'Bin Laden' was unarmed and did not use anyone as a human shield. Instead, he records how he was behind the 'point man' going up the stairs and that 'Less than five steps' from the top of the stairs he heard gunfire. Apparently, 'Bin Laden' was shot when he ducked his head out from inside the room where he died. *No Easy Day* replaced *50 Shades of Grey* at the top of the bestseller lists shortly after September 11th 2012.

*Zero Dark Thirty* contradicts this again, showing no exchange of fire or human shields, but showing several SEALs waiting at the top of the stairs (not one with 'Mark Owen' a few steps further down). They whisper 'Osama', and then when 'Bin Laden' opens the door they shoot him in the face. While this is considerably closer to 'Mark Owen's version than to the White House version, it doesn't fully replicate either story.

There are no sequences in *Zero Dark Thirty* depicting any kind of DNA testing, or the reported burial at sea that officially explains why there can be absolutely no external verification of who the man was that the SEALs shot on the third floor of that house. Following the mission *Zero Dark Thirty* shows the body of 'Bin Laden' being flown back to a base in Afghanistan where it is quickly and unequivocally identified by the female CIA agent.

'Maya' is then shown getting into an immense cargo plane to fly home (on her own, a typically Pentagonian waste of resources) whereupon she breaks down and cries. Again, the message is clear: what's at stake here is not an illegal military operation and deception on a grand scale, but the fact that this pretty young woman doesn't have anything to focus her life on anymore.

## Official Secrets

The Bin Laden raid of early May 2011 was conducted in near-total secrecy. No word of it leaked out beforehand. In fact, and as *Zero Dark Thirty* highlights, by April 2011 there wasn't much talk about Bin Laden and many people thought he was already dead and perhaps had been for several years. It appears that no one even told the Pakistanis, despite the assault taking place on their soil.

It seems that the CIA had no specific information linking Bin Laden to the house before the raid. The process by which the body was identified after the raid has been shrouded in secrecy. FOIA requests from major mainstream news and 'reputable' lobbying organisations have been refused. The DOD denies having a death certificate or any records of DNA testing or an autopsy. They have also denied having any photographs of the body.

The DOD have released a small number of largely-redacted emails from people on the USS Vinson involved in the preparation and burial of the body. While it does seem that a body was wrapped and buried at sea, none of the emails provide any confirmation of whose body it was and less than a dozen people were informed about what was happening. No sailors watched the sea burial. An email summarising the burial notes that, 'The paucity of documentary evidence in our possession is a reflection of emphasis placed on operational

security during the execution of this phase of the operation.’ The CIA have acknowledged that they hold some relevant records, both documents and photographs, but they have refused to release anything at all and so far the courts have backed them.

To fill the space left by ‘the paucity of documentary evidence’ we have been offered *Zero Dark Thirty* and we can expect a handful of copycat movies in the years to come. It is a film that enjoyed truly extraordinary co-operation from the CIA, not just from the Office of Public Affairs but from everyone they dealt with in their pre-production meetings. Even this was a largely secret matter, that we only know about now because the extremely partisan group Judicial Watch obtained many pages of emails detailing meetings between Kathryn Bigelow and Mark Boal and various people from the DOD and CIA.

## Filling in the blanks

What is abundantly clear from these emails is just how enthusiastic the CIA were about the project, almost as though they had been sitting around waiting for someone to call them and ask about the Bin Laden raid. The DOD were slightly more reticent, but ultimately very keen to help. One email from July 17th 2011 details how meetings between CIA officials and Bigelow “went really, really well. Mr Morell gave them 40 minutes, talked some of the substance again, told them we’re here to help with whatever they need, and gushed to Kathryn about how much he loved ‘The Hurt Locker’.”

Another CIA email says that, ‘We really do have a sense that this is going to be *the* movie about UBL – and we all want the CIA to be as well-represented in it as possible.’ Another email from the same person – Marie E Harf of the Office of Public Affairs – says, ‘I know we don’t pick favorites but it makes sense to get behind a winning horse... Mark and Kathryn’s movie is going to be the first and the biggest. It’s got the most money behind it, and two Oscar winners on board.’ It wasn’t all one way as another email records how Mark Boal ‘agreed to share scripts and details about the movie with us, so we’re absolutely comfortable with what he will be showing.’

The CIA even granted the filmmakers access to ‘The Vault’, an office where some of the key planning for the raid took place. Similarly in one meeting with Boal and Bigelow the DOD even suggested a specific Navy SEAL for them to talk to about the raid. These agencies have been so secretive about the assault itself, even when it is the mainstream news asking for information, and yet both the CIA and DOD were apparently willing to tell two Hollywood filmmakers all about it. This is not just a hypocrisy, to fail to release evidence to the public while offering maximum possible information and assistance to Hollywood filmmakers. It is the double dealing ‘secrecy’ of the security state.

In amongst the inaccuracies, the official revisionism, the humanising of faceless, murdering institutions and the endless glowering of the protagonist there is a dynamic at play that is crucial to understand and to resist. The same pattern of behaviour can be found across almost all security services: refuse to release any facts, but give huge support to the fiction. Just as the FAA/NORAD recordings asked ‘Is this real world or exercise?’ we might ask of *Zero Dark Thirty*: is this real world or myth-making? All the documents cited in this review can be download [here](#), and they are perhaps as important for what they don’t record as they are for what they do.

The ultimate effect of this dynamic is the advancement of the security state. Whoever was truly in that house in Abbottabad were actually killed, there appears to be no dispute about

that. There is no good reason, and certainly no hard evidence in the public domain, to believe that among those killed was Osama Bin Laden. By refusing to release any evidence, but giving tremendous assistance to a Hollywood film depicting them in a very sympathetic light, the CIA and DOD have got away with murder, and even managed to get huge numbers of people to praise them for murder.

Indeed, the most poignant moment in the whole film, complete with emotive swelling music and softly edited slow-mo is when the SEALs have to blow up the downed stealth helicopter. It is as though amongst all the murder and torture and traumatising of children and adults alike the loss of a helicopter is the greatest tragedy. This truly alienated, immoral and boring film will no doubt win awards and make a handsome profit, but it is a vehicle for ongoing secrecy and ongoing violence. It deserves to be boycotted, or at least to only be watched for free online at zero profit to the people who made it.

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