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The confused and dangerous 'Zero Dark Thirty'

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By Charles R. Church

Director Kathryn Bigelow and writer Mark Boal lost their way in "Zero Dark Thirty" the moment they staked a claim to journalistic authenticity. "Based on Accounts of Actual Events" lingers across the entire screen for several seconds before the action starts. After that, they had nowhere to hide when challenges to the film's factual accuracy justifiably poured in. Once filmmakers purport to give viewers history, they can't take refuge under the mantle of creative license, as Bigelow and Boal have sought to do.

The central factual claim of ZD30 is that torture (the CIA liked to call it "enhanced interrogation techniques" [EIT]) extracted information from a fictional al-Qaeda-affiliated captive named Ammar. This was the "war name" of Osama bin Laden's courier, Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti, who later was tracked to Abbottabad and bin Laden's compound. After we are treated in the movie to the grisly details of his torment at a CIA black site, Ammar gives up the key fact that finally led us to bin Laden. But the filmmakers' claim is wrong.

In an April 27, 2012, Joint Statement, senators Dianne Feinstein (chair, Senate Intelligence Committee) and Carl Levin (chair, Senate Armed Services Committee) expressed disappointment that Jose Rodriguez, the CIA's former deputy director of operations, "and others ... continue to insist that [the EITs] used many years ago were a central component" in locating bin Laden. "This view is misguided and misinformed...."

Compounding that distortion, the filmmakers keep insisting on torture's total effectiveness. "In the end, everybody breaks, bro, it's biology," Dan, the CIA interrogator, says to his victim. He intones over and over, "If you lie to me, I hurt you." And so he does, in a festival of torture porn. And in the film, at least, Dan is proved right — the fictitious Ammar spills the beans. Later on, when pressed for details on who lived in the compound, the senior CIA official laments the demise of the EITs: "Who the hell am I supposed to ask, some guy at Gitmo who's all lawyered up?" He's suggesting they could have wrung the vital information out of detainees if they still had those techniques.

How could such reputable filmmakers, in telling the thrilling story of America's clearest victory in the War on Terrorism, put out such damaging distortions? Were they seduced by rarified access offered by the CIA element that still seeks to justify the EITs, so they never got to the truth? So they never talked to others at the Company sickened by what it had done? And never spoke to Ali Soufan, the former FBI supervisory special agent who investigated highly sensitive and complex international terrorism cases, including the 9/11 attacks, or the heroes who worked with him? Or did Hollywood's tawdry blandishments — high ticket sales, potential awards and fame — carry away their better judgment? We probably will never know, but I side with Jane Mayer, the recognized authority on post-9/11 torture, who said at a Fordham Law event I attended on Jan. 24: "This would have been a tough movie for Hollywood to fund, if the filmmakers had done it right." In other words, no torture porn sold as the infallible way to the truth, no movie.

The damage done by Bigelow's and Boal's distortions looms as real and substantial, for our nation has never worked through whether to reject torture forever, no matter what the circumstances. America did abandon the EITs almost a decade ago. Both John McCain and Barack Obama during the 2008 presidential campaign vowed never to torture, and Obama made good on his promise the second day in office, when he signed an executive order banning it. But executive orders can be rescinded by a future president, and Mitt Romney campaigned on bringing back the EITs. The same Jose Rodriguez, who also was responsible for destroying video tapes of abu Zubaydah's (see my Sept. 14, 2012, column) and Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri's coercive interrogations, continues to tout the EITs' effectiveness. The popular TV show "24" used to teach us weekly that torture helps to keep us safe. In the Feb. 7 New York Review of Books, Steve Coll tells us that public support for torture has risen significantly in opinion polls during the last several years. Will we return to Dick Cheney's "dark side?" Will no one remember that Ibn al-Sheik al-Libi, who ran an al-Qaeda training camp in Afghanistan, confessed under torture to the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq?

Any chance that the reckoning on our torturing will happen in criminal prosecutions of those who practiced the EITs appears remote; President Obama has rejected such prosecutions. But the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence recently finished its 6,000-plus page study on CIA torture and detention. Based on a review of more than 6 million pages of CIA and other records and buttressed by more than 35,000 footnotes, the report exhaustively describes what was done in our name. Sen. Feinstein believes "it to be one of the most significant oversight efforts in the history" of the Senate.

The SSCI must release the report to the public with as few redactions as possible. Sharing the study with the people would provide the best hope for the reckoning this country so desperately needs, for only when people know all the facts can our nation at long last be done with torture forever.

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