

## 'Zero Dark Thirty,' torture and the costs of catharsis

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**Z**ero Dark Thirty," Kathryn Bigelow's film about the hunt for Osama bin Laden, bends over backward to avoid triumphalism. (The closest it comes is in the dazed smile of a soldier who realizes that he has fired the fatal shot.)

All the same, it is a drama of revenge, a fact that will ultimately outweigh its status in the torture debate.

The last 25 minutes of the film, depicting the raid on bin Laden's compound, seem to unfold in real time. The Navy SEALs move methodically through the house, which, like them, we view through the muddled green of night vision goggles.

Except for a few blasts of explosives and bursts of gunfire, the scene unfolds in eerie quiet. Women and children are rounded up and bound with flex cuffs. On an upper floor, the head of a man appears in a doorway. (Osama?)

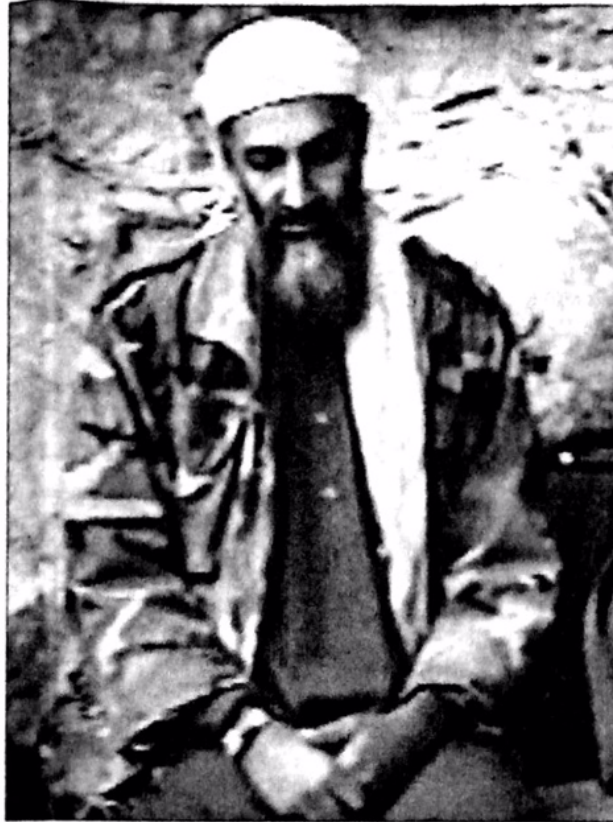
Bin Laden is shot so abruptly we are not quite sure we even saw it. With lightning efficiency, the SEALs stuff computer materials into trash bags, destroy their disabled helicopter and fly away on the other one. We know from other accounts that the whole thing lasted less than 45 minutes.

In another era, the confrontation with bin Laden would have inspired a leisurely, John Wayne-style reckoning. We would have seen villain and avenger amply lit, their expressions vivid, before the villain was dispatched.

Bigelow, who has said she wanted to be as faithful to events as possible, resists these satisfactions. On the other hand, she has not attempted a documentary. "Zero Dark Thirty" is a throwback to 1970s-era New Journalism, whose practitioners adapted fiction-writing techniques to nonfiction accounts (and exposed the hazards of doing so).

The suspected terrorist tortured in the movie's early scenes is a composite character. Maya, the skittish young beauty at the film's center, is based on a woman who played a lead role in locating bin Laden, but a close resemblance (we are told) was deliberately avoided.

We accept such devices, I think, because of our deep need for the film's promised catharsis.



Osama bin Laden in an Oct. 7, 2001, photo from al-Jazeera, via AP

Bigelow defends her torture scenes by noting, rightly, that at least for a time, the CIA employed such methods in its hunt for bin Laden.

For many viewers, the movie will suggest that they worked. I myself found the link ambiguous. The tortured detainee does finally offer some information, but in a scene where he is being treated well (and evidently tricked).

At best, his disclosure is insufficient. In the film's account, years of dogged sleuthing, and data that turned up in a forgotten file, were finally the key to identifying bin Laden's courier, and hence cornering him in Abbottabad, Pakistan, the night of May 1, 2011.

Though it may influence Oscar night in a few weeks, the torture discussion is essentially a rerun of the debate that flared just after the raid.

In an op-ed published May 11, 2011, Sen. John McCain, citing intelligence sources, noted that none of the three detainees known to have been water-boarded (including Khalid Sheik Mohammed) supplied the name, whereabouts or other vital information on the cour-

er. (In fact, KSM provided false information.) The best information came from a detainee questioned in "standard, noncoercive" ways.

Debating points aside, fears that "Zero Dark Thirty" is a brief for torture are misplaced. Mostly, the film asks us to confront larger questions.

American moviemakers turn out simplistic revenge dramas by the hundreds, knowing that we will go see them. But this one aspires to a more complex accounting of the gains and losses.

By killing bin Laden, did we prevent ourselves further harm? Materials gathered in the raid suggested that he was far more involved in Al-Qaida's ongoing activities than intelligence officials had thought. (For instance, he was at work on plans to assassinate President Obama, and to carry out a massive Sept. 11 anniversary assault.)

Would capturing bin Laden have been better? The Abbottabad raiders apparently were given only the narrowest possible grounds for taking him alive (naked and hands up might have done it). They knew that they were on a kill mission.

In confronting terrorism, killing has proved much easier, and less risky to our own forces, than taking prisoners and putting them on trial. But it is not a ringing endorsement of the rule of law — the core value we like to believe we are promoting to the world.

Finally, at what price to ourselves, and the Mayas we employ, do we indulge in the abuses some prefer to call "harsh interrogation techniques"? What if torture works and it destroys those who practice it?

The Abbottabad raid, inseparable from all these questions, will become one of our necessary epics. Its story will be told and retold as we work the slaughter of Sept. 11, 2001, into our history.

But, like other revenge tales, it will spawn new ones. ("Zero Dark Thirty" does not linger over the children who cowered in the dark, enduring the terror of American might.)

Leaving the theater, we feel relief, certainly, that this daring mission was completed. But who expected it to feel so hollow?

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