

By Naomi Wolf

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By peddling the lie that CIA detentions led to Bin Laden's killing, you have become a Leni Riefenstahl-like propagandist of torture.



Director Kathryn Bigelow holds her 2010 Academy Award for The Hurt Locker. Photograph: Paul Buck/EPA.

Dear [Kathryn Bigelow](#) ,

The Hurt Locker was a beautiful, brave film; many young women in film were inspired as they watched you become the first woman ever to win an Oscar for directing. But with [Zero Dark Thirty](#), you have attained a different kind of distinction.

Your film Zero Dark Thirty is a huge hit here. But in falsely justifying, in scene after scene, the [torture](#) of detainees in "the global war on terror", Zero Dark Thirty is a gorgeously-shot, two-hour ad for keeping intelligence agents who committed crimes against Guantánamo prisoners out of jail. It makes heroes and heroines out of people who committed violent crimes against other people based on their race – something that has historical precedent.

Your film claims, in many scenes, that [CIA](#) torture was redeemed by the "information" it "secured", information that, according to your script, led to Bin Laden's capture. This narrative is a form of manufacture of innocence to mask a great crime: what your script blithely calls "the detainee program".

What led to this amoral compromising of your film-making?

Could some of the seduction be financing? It is very hard to get a film without a pro-military message, such as The Hurt Locker, funded and financed. But according to sources in the film industry, the more pro-military your message is, the more kinds of help you currently can get: from personnel, to sets, to technology – a point I made in [my argument about the recent militarized Katy Perry video](#).

It seems implausible that scenes such as those involving two top-secret, futuristic helicopters could be made without Pentagon help, for example. If the film received that kind of undisclosed, in-kind support from the defense department, then that would free up million of dollars for the gigantic ad campaign that a film like this needs to compete to win audience.

This also sets a dangerous precedent: we can be sure, with the ["propaganda amendment" of the 2013 NDAA, just signed into law by the president](#), that the future will hold much more overt corruption of Hollywood and the rest of US pop culture. This amendment legalizes something that has been illegal for decades: the direct

funding of pro-government or pro-military messaging in media, without disclosure, aimed at American citizens.

Then, there is the James Frey factor. You claim that your film is "based on real events", and [in interviews, you insist that it is a mixture of fact and fiction, "part documentary"](#). "Real", "true", and even "documentary", are big and important words. By claiming such terms, you generate media and sales traction – on a mendacious basis. There are filmmakers who work very hard to produce films that are actually "based on real events": they are called documentarians. Alex Gibney, in [Taxi to the Dark Side](#), and Rory Kennedy, in [Ghosts of Abu Ghraib](#), have both produced true and sourceable documentary films about what your script blithely calls "the detainee program" – that is, the regime of torture to generate false confessions at Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib – which your script claims led straight to Bin Laden.

Fine, fellow reporter: produce your sources. Provide your evidence that torture produced lifesaving – or any – worthwhile intelligence.

But you can't present evidence for this claim. Because it does not exist.

Five decades of research, cited in the [2008 documentary The End of America](#), confirm that torture does not work.

[Robert Fisk provides another summary](#) of that categorical conclusion. And [this 2011 account from Human Rights First](#) rebuts the very premise of Zero Dark Thirty.

Your actors complain about detainees' representation by lawyers – suggesting that these do-gooders in suits endanger the rest of us. I have been to see your "detainee program" firsthand. The prisoners, whom your film describes as being "lawyered up", meet with those lawyers in rooms that are wired for sound; yet, those lawyers can't tell the world what happened to their clients – because the descriptions of the very torture these men endured are classified.

I have seen the room where the military tribunal takes the "testimony" from people swept up in a program that gave \$5,000 bounties to desperately poor Afghans to incentivize their turning-in innocent neighbors. The chairs have shackles to the floor, and are placed in twos, so that one prisoner can be threatened to make him falsely condemn the second.

I have seen the expensive video system in the courtroom where – though Guantánamo spokesmen have told the world's press since its opening that witnesses' accounts are brought in "whenever reasonable" – the [monitor on the system has never been turned on once](#) : a monitor that could actually let someone in Pakistan testify to say, "hey, that is the wrong guy". (By the way, you left out the scene where the [CIA dude sodomizes the wrong guy](#) : Khaled el-Masri, "the German citizen unfortunate enough to have a similar name to a militant named Khaled al-Masri.")

In a time of darkness in America, you are being feted by Hollywood, and hailed by major media. But to me, the path your career has now taken reminds of no one so much as that other female film pioneer who became, eventually, an apologist for evil: Leni Riefenstahl. Riefenstahl's 1935 *Triumph of the Will*, which glorified Nazi military power, was a massive hit in Germany. Riefenstahl was the first female film director to be hailed worldwide.



Leni Riefenstahl directing her crew at the Nazi part rally in Nuremberg, 1934, for her film *Triumph of the Will*. Photograph: Friedrich Rohrmann/EPA.

It may seem extreme to make comparison with this other great, but profoundly compromised film-maker, but there are real echoes. When Riefenstahl began to glamorize the National Socialists, in the early 1930s, the Nazis' worst atrocities had not yet begun; yet abusive detention camps had already been opened to house political dissidents beyond the rule of law – the equivalent of today's Guantánamo, Bagram base, and other unnameable CIA "black sites". And Riefenstahl was lionised by the German elites and acclaimed for her propaganda on behalf of Hitler's regime.

But the world changed. The ugliness of what she did could not, over time, be hidden. Americans, too, will wake up and see through Zero Dark Thirty's apologia for the regime's standard lies that this brutality is somehow necessary. When that happens, the same community that now applauds you will recoil.

Like Riefenstahl, you are a great artist. But now you will be remembered forever as torture's handmaiden.