

Jingoistic ‘Zero Dark Thirty’ Highlights the Mission

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Rating: **3.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Despite an obsession for killing a single man to represent a foggy revenge, “Zero Dark Thirty” is an effective thriller in the actual re-creation of that Navy Seal operation. Directed by Kathryn Bigelow (“The Hurt Locker”), the all-star cast is led by a miscast Jessica Chastain.

The centerpiece of the film is the killing – on May 2, 2011 – of Osama Bin Laden, the supposed mastermind of all that is evil in the post-9/11 universe. Bigelow breaks down the actual mission, from the first terror-filled days of September 11th, to the actual bullet that was expended from the chamber of USA weaponry to liquidate the terrorist. The first two-thirds of the film is the research, torture techniques and outside-the-box investigations that leads to the ultimate assignment, filmed with a methodical precision that heightened the tension, despite knowing the outcome. Like her previous “The Hurt Locker,” Kathryn Bigelow knows how to structure a military realism that hits home, but in this film she falls short in characterizing the operatives leading up to the mission.

It begins with September 11th, 2001, the day America was attacked from terrorist forces, which is determined to be facilitated by Osama Bin Laden, leader of the group known as al-Qaeda. For the next ten years, the build up to the final mission that finally kills Bin Laden is broken down, carried out through one particular CIA operative code named Maya (Jessica Chastain). The first assignment she witnesses is the torturing of an al-Qaeda underling for information.



Jessica Chastain is CIA Operative Maya in ‘Zero Dark Thirty’
Photo credit: Columbia Pictures

Through the years, as more intelligence operations are implemented to get the “most dangerous man in the world,” more danger starts to surface. Joseph Bradley (Kyle Chandler) – the CIA Islamabad Station Chief – begins to wonder about Maya’s obsession about the mission, and even the head of the CIA (James Gandofini) takes an interest in her quest. It all culminates in the mission in early May of 2011, which successfully avenges the years of investigation.

The best part of the film is the staging of the actual “kill Bin Laden” mission, which encompasses the last third of the film. Done as a night raid, the atmosphere around each step of the military intervention is thick with intrigue. The night setting also washes any color from the proceedings – conducted through cinematographer Greig Fraser – which adds a tone of doom and mystery to a situation in which the outcome is already known.

What doesn’t work, and almost hijacks the whole film, is the miscasting of Jessica Chastain as Maya. Not to dismiss her earnest performance as an obsessed CIA operative, but the film tactically misuses her low necklines, tight jeans, glossy red hair and white teeth as an actual agency representation. It becomes unbelievable, and hurts the absolute seriousness the film desires to be. The script – written by Mark Boal – doesn’t help her either, as she is put through a pool of emotions that are designed to take advantage of her gender vulnerability, to represent all our fears? Maybe if she had been de-glamorized a bit, it might have worked better, but it made the preliminaries to the actual mission somewhat disingenuous.

Another problematic circumstance built into the film is the jingoism of the United States of America as the principle bearer of morality regarding Bin Laden. Nothing is shown to be overwrought in this pursuit, despite a draining of treasury, a formation of the “investigate-anyone” Homeland Security and a perpetuation of fear from the Bush administration (“mushroom cloud”) that defined the decade. There was a obvious celebration from the Navy Seal team once they got their man, but it felt like the locker room after a Super Bowl win, rather than a grim reminder of the horrors of legal murder. Now we’re comfortable?



Joseph Bradley (Kyle Chandler) confronts Maya in ‘Zero Dark Thirty’
Photo credit: Columbia Pictures

In general, it seems that America wishes for a delineated enemy, like Germany and Japan of World War II, and “Zero Dark Thirty” provides that in Bin Laden, but by winning this battle how much of the war is won? The killing of a sick old man is a serious symbolic “victory,” in a war without end, but why is it suppose to make us feel better? Somebody told us that Osama Bin Laden is the scapegoat for all that is evil, yet evil remains in the world, even in the “Homeland.” As the great Walt Kelly once said, “we have met the enemy, and he is us.”

The film may give you a temporary feeling of USA superiority, but in the atmosphere outside the theater, the fight goes on. We need to keep challenging the notion that we can’t blame everything on the “enemy,” if we’re not willing to acknowledge our own fatalistic sins.

“Zero Dark Thirty” continues its limited release in Chicago on January 4th and opens everywhere on January 11th. See local listings for show times and theaters. Featuring Jessica Chastain, Kyle Chandler, Jason Clarke, Mark Duplass, Joel Edgerton and James Gandolfini. Written by Mark Boal and directed by Kathryn Bigelow. Rated “R”



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By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [15]
Senior Staff Writer
HollywoodChicago.com
pat@hollywoodchicago.com [14]

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