



Taxi to the Dark Side Discussion Guide

Director: Alex Gibney

Year: 2007

Time: 109 min

You might know this director from:

Finding Fela! (2014)

The Armstrong Lie (2013)

We Steal Secrets: The Story of Wikileaks (2013)

My Trip to Al-Qaeda (2010)

Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room (2005)

FILM SUMMARY

Stunningly crafted, TAXI TO THE DARK SIDE delves into the dirty underworld of torture as an interrogation technique in the U.S. War on Terror. It focuses on Dilawar, a 22-year-old farmer and taxi driver living in the small village of Yakubi in Afghanistan, who was wrongly taken into U.S. military custody and tortured to death at the Bagram Internment Facility. Through interviews in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Guantanamo Bay, we begin to understand that highly controversial torture techniques were encouraged under the Bush administration.

TAXI TO THE DARK SIDE presents a stark, unforgiving portrayal of the devious methods employed to get information at any cost. In the words of Vice President Dick Cheney, soldiers were encouraged “to work the dark side... to get mean, dirty and nasty.”

Following the September 11, 2001 attacks, the U.S. government convinced the American public that it should do anything necessary to bring the perpetrators to justice and prevent a future attack. But waterboarding? Sleep deprivation? Standing for 40 solid hours? Forced nudity? TAXI TO THE DARK SIDE examines the torture methods approved under the Bush administration and displays the sheer chaos in which U.S. soldiers received instructions from their leadership. With very little information and without any proper training, soldiers were under enormous pressure to produce the guilty, and then were imprisoned themselves for using methods they’d been instructed to use. Herein lies yet another dark side to a dirty, expensive and arguably illegal war.

FILM THEMES

The outrage, fear, anger and pain produced by the 9/11 attacks was so intense, even the most liberally minded individuals sought justice. The U.S. administration utilized these emotions to enact a reign of torture.

IN THE PALM OF HIS HAND

America and other Western nations were shocked by 9/11. How could one small group of people destroy the lives of so many on a single day? The Bush administration saw the opportunity to capitalize on a mourning nation who was easily coerced onto the war bandwagon. With so many innocent civilians slaughtered on American soil, only a full-fledged War on Terror could rectify such sorrow. The Bush administration fed the American people their own fear and anger. Meanwhile, they fed the torturous war from 2001 until Bush left the presidential office in 2009.

WHAT GENEVA CONVENTION?

The Geneva Convention was negotiated in the aftermath of WWII to establish international laws for the humanitarian treatment of war, prohibiting cruel and inhumane treatment of detainees. Common Article Three of the convention bars torture, cruel, inhumane, and degrading treatment, as well as outrages against the human dignity of prisoners of war. During the War on Terror, the Bush administration chose to brashly ignore the very laws that had been agreed upon, as if they had been excluded from laws that every nation was to abide to.

THE ACCOUNTABLE

Within the U.S. Armed Forces, the chain of command holds everything in place. What is decided at the top trickles down like water onto the bottom rungs. The soldiers who instigated torture methods (by suspending captives from the ceiling by handcuffs, forcing them to stand naked with dark hoods over their heads, depriving them of sight and sound, etc.) had received orders from their superiors, who had received orders from the offices of President Bush. The only individuals ever held accountable for such abuses were the low-ranking soldiers, those who were merely following orders, while the powers on top walked away free. While encouraging unjust actions, high-ranking officials stood clean on the sidelines, giving orders that bent the rules, then jumped ship.

A NEW KIND OF DEMOCRACY

Democracy is defined as “an organization or situation in which everyone is treated equally and has equal rights.” Many argue that the War on Terror, specifically the use of torture as an interrogation technique, is an erosion of democracy’s core values. Swiftly passing The Patriot Act (“Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism”) in October of 2001, Bush shifted the boundaries of democracy, tailor-making it to suit his objectives so that he could use any and all tools necessary to win his war.

“We were being told to rough up Iraqis that wouldn’t cooperate. We were told they were nothing but dogs. You start looking at these people as less than human, and doing things to them you would never dream of. That’s where it got scary.”

Sergeant Ken Davis

“Put people in crazy situations and people do crazy things.”

Pfc. Damien Corsetti,

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. Where were you on September 11, 2001? Do you recall your initial reaction to the 9/11 attacks?
2. Did you feel any differently about the Middle East and its people following 9/11?
3. Due to the extreme nature of the bloodshed caused by the 9/11 attacks, do you think the Bush administration should have been allowed to take such extreme measures in bringing the perpetrators to justice?
4. Do you know anyone who has been a victim of torture?
5. How aware were you of the torture methods being utilized in the War on Terror before watching TAXI TO THE DARK SIDE? Had you heard of waterboarding before seeing the movie?
6. Should Afghani and Iraqi families such as the Dilawars, who lost a son, husband and father to wrongful imprisonment and torture, be compensated by the U.S. government?
7. Do you feel that increased security at U.S. airports has made the nation a safer place? Do the restrictions deter terrorists from acting?
8. Do you believe there is ever a situation extreme enough to justify the use of torture as an interrogation technique?
9. How did your feelings about the U.S. change after 9/11? Do you feel the nation has become a safer place? Do you feel it has become more paranoid?
10. Should the Guantanamo Bay detention camp (also known as GITMO) be closed, or is it still playing a valid role in the fight against terrorism?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- TAXI TO THE DARK SIDE is one of 10 documentary films featured in “Why Democracy?”, a series examining modern democracy around the globe.
- The Discovery Channel initially bought the rights to TAXI TO THE DARK SIDE, but soon after announced it would not air it due to its controversial nature. HBO then bought the rights and aired it in September 2008.
- TAXI TO THE DARK SIDE won nine awards, including an Oscar for Best Documentary, Best Documentary Feature at the Tribeca Film Festival, and Best Documentary at the Chicago International Film Festival. It was nominated for an additional three awards, including an Emmy for Outstanding Investigative Journalism.
- As stated in the Army Field Manual, which contains procedures for soldiers in the field, “Experience indicates that the use of force is not necessary to gain the cooperation of sources for interrogation. Therefore, the use of force is a poor technique, as it yields unreliable results, may damage subsequent collection efforts, and can induce the source to say whatever he thinks the interrogator wants to hear.”
- “We got more information out of a German general with a game of chess or Ping-Pong than they do today with their torture,” said Henry Kolm, an MIT physicist who was assigned to play chess with Hitler’s deputy, Rudolf Hess.
- With the story of Dilawar as a starting point for TAXI TO THE DARK SIDE, filmmaker Alex Gibney said that he first saw the makings of a strong film when he began interviewing the interrogators and guards who had worked at Bagram prison.
- In a 2009 study, 49% of Republicans and 24% of Democrats stated that the use of torture to gain information from suspected terrorists is justified.
- Waterboarding, a common form of torture, can cause extreme pain, dry drowning, damage to lungs, brain damage from oxygen deprivation, broken bones due to struggling against restraints, permanent psychological damage, and death. Abu Zubaydah, an al-Qaeda member, was waterboarded 83 times in 2002 for 10 pieces of information. Whether the garnered information was reliable or useful remains unknown.
- The U.S. originally leased Guantanamo Bay from Cuba as a coaling and naval station in 1903. Since 1938, the U.S. has paid Cuba \$4,085 annually to lease the property. The base includes a cinema, golf course, gift shop, and McDonalds open to the U.S. military and Guantanamo construction workers. 149 prisoners remain.
- 93% of prisoners sent to Guantanamo Bay were handed over to the U.S. military by Afghani and Pakastani warlords. Only 7% of prisoners were captured by coalition forces.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Read *The Guantánamo Files: The Stories of the 774 Detainees in America’s Illegal Prison* by Andy Worthington, which tells the story of each individual kept at this famed detention center.
2. Join CLOSE GUANTANAMO, to help “end 12 years of injustice.”
3. Join TASSC, Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition. “TASSC International is the only organization in the United States founded by and for survivors of torture.”
4. Enroll in Amnesty International’s Stop Torture campaign.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.