

Movie Review: 'Taxi to the Dark Side'

by Arthur Salm

Dilawar picked up the wrong fare.

On Dec. 5, 2002, the young Afghani taxi driver gave a ride to four men. Afghani forces stopped the car at a roadblock, detained Dilawar and his passengers and turned them over to the Americans, citing suspicious material they claim to have found in the trunk.

â€˜TAXI TO THE DARK SIDEâ€™™ was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature

RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) They were taken to a hellhole called Bagram prison. Dilawar, who U.S. command later determined was innocent of any crime or intent, was hooded, handcuffed, chained to the ceiling and beaten so severely that his legs would have had to have been amputated, had he lived.

He didn't. He was dead in five days.

"Taxi to the Dark Side" (nominated for an Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature) is a methodically constructed, step-by-step detailing of how the Bush administration's policy of condoning torture trickled - flowed, really; poured - down the chain of command to inundate the largely untrained troops in the field, or, more to the point, in the detention centers.

The film includes photos and grainy film clips from Abu Ghraib - where some of the Bagram guards were sent after the U.S. invasion - that are one step beyond horrifying. Let's just say that if you're familiar only with what was published in mainstream newspapers and magazines, you have no idea.

But ... how can such things happen? (Or, perhaps, be?)

Writer, director and eerily soft-spoken narrator Alex Gibney ("Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room") begins the investigation by interviewing The Guys Who Did It.

"You start looking at these people as less than human, and you start doing things that you could never dream of," says Sgt. Ken Davis.

"You put people in crazy situations, they're going to do crazy things," says Pfc. Damien Corsetti.

Then he works his way upstream, until:

"That's very vague. What does that mean?" - President George W. Bush, on Article III of the Geneva Conventions ("There shall be no outrages to human dignity").

The men who carried out the torture, who were instructed by military intelligence to "soften up" detainees for interrogation, to "break" them, tell us that they were not trained in these methods. As, indeed, no one should be, not least because, as appalled former FBI interrogator Jack Clooney explains, they don't work.

And certainly not least because, well, it's torture, by any reasonable interpretation of the hard and hard-to-look-at evidence the film presents.

And the rule of law? The Constitution?

"We have to work, though, sort of on the dark side," Vice President Cheney is shown explaining. "We've got to spend time in the shadows." And that's where this taxi has taken us. The fare, Gibney's film suggests, will be steep.

Director: Alex Gibney. Running time: 1 hour, 43 minutes. Rated R. 4 stars.

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