National Religious Campaign Against Torture

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TAXI TO THE DARK SIDE: A DISCUSSION GUIDE

ABOUT THIS FILM[i]

Winner of the 2008 Academy Award® for Best Documentary Feature as well as a 2008 Peabody Award, **Taxi to the Dark Side** takes an in-depth look at the highly questionable interrogation practices used by United States military guards on prisoners in Afghanistan, Iraq and Guantanamo Bay in the years following 9/11. Beginning with the story of an innocent young Afghan taxi driver named Dilawar, who was killed while being held in Bagram prison in 2002, Taxi to the Dark Side tells the grim, cautionary saga of how the U.S. government, desperate to draw out information from a top Al Qaeda leader detained in Guantanamo Bay, approved the use of cruel and unusual interrogation techniques that bordered on torture - which were systematically imported to other US prisons abroad. In examining the interrogation practices used in Bagram, Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay, the film includes shocking photos, archival footage, expert commentary, and interviews with several soldiers stationed at prisons in Afghanistan and Iraq. These guards admit to using unorthodox techniques - including isolation, ceiling handcuffing, sleep deprivation, strip humiliation, "water boarding," threats by menacing dogs, sexual abuse and more - that they say were condoned and even approved by their superiors, despite being in clear violation of the humanitarian rules outlined in the Geneva Conventions.

More info about the film is available at HBO.com.

BEFORE THE SCREENING: BACKGROUND

In 2004, photos taken by soldiers at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq provided graphic evidence of prisoner abuse by U.S. personnel. Since then, reports of torture being used on detainees have flooded in from other prisons in Iraq, Guantanamo Bay, Afghanistan, Eastern Europe and elsewhere.

What is torture?

Under the UN Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, torture is, "any act by which severe pain or suffering, physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession…" Following 9/11, however, the U.S. Department of Justice asserted that physical torture "must be equivalent in intensity to the pain accompanying serious physical injury, such as organ failure, impairment of bodily function, or even death," and mental torture must result in psychological harm that lasts "months or even years." The Department of Justice has since backed away from that position , however, the Military Commissions Act of 2006 relaxes U.S. commitment to international law and denies legal protections to detainees, and the Executive Order of July 2007 explicitly allows the CIA to continue to use undefined and undisclosed "alternative interrogation techniques." Legislation passed by Congress in February 2008 would have required all government agencies, including the CIA, to adhere to the standards in the Army Field Manual (which prohibits most abusive interrogation techniques, and requires interrogators to follow a sort of "golden rule" standard in deciding what techniques are acceptable). Unfortunately, President Bush vetoed the bill.

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AFTER THE SCREENING: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What does your faith teach you about the dignity of human life? How should an innocent person be treated? A suspected terrorist? A confirmed terrorist? Does it make a difference?

- One soldier discussed his struggle with morality versus what was commonly accepted in the context of not wanting to betray his fellow soldiers. Alex Gibney, Producer and Director of the film, said in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*[ii], "These [soldiers investigated over Dilawar's death] are regular guys. Not bad apples. The administration has referred to the abuses at Abu Ghraib as the work of a few bad apples. But like the movie's title, most of us have a dark side, and we will go there under certain circumstances."

  If you were in the position of the soldiers who were told to "soften up" the "terrorists," what would you have done? What *should* the soldiers have done?

- The soldiers were told that the prisoners fell outside of the Geneva Conventions. What circumstances, if any, justify treating a person in a manner outside of the Geneva Conventions?

- In the same interview as above, Mr. Gibney said, "Most of the issues that I look at are not, in my view, purely 'political' issues; they are moral issues that transcend political allegiances. Most of the interview subjects in 'Taxi' are soldiers and/or career military…. My films deal with corruption and the abuse of power. I am interested in how 'good people' do bad things. [But] I'm more inclined to look at the way reckless -- sometimes well-intentioned -- people make 'bad barrels' that corrode us all."

  What policies ["bad barrels"] were put into place that encouraged these 'good people' to do bad things? What action can be taken to change those policies?

- What is the role of U.S. citizens in preventing the adoption of such policies? What is the role of faith groups?

To find out more about how to support the work of the National Religious Campaign Against Torture and to help persuade elected officials to halt U.S.-sponsored torture, visit our website.

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[i] Excerpted from HBO.com: <http://www.hbo.com/docs/programs/taxitothedarkside/synopsis.html>.

[ii] Gibney, Alex. Interview with Beckey Bright. "Director Explores 'Dark Side' of U.S. Treatment of Detainees." Wall Street Journal. 28 Apr. 2007. 7 July 2008 <http://online.wsj.com/public/article/SB117763344614784224-ZST8nVC26dwAj_vVsm__o7CjVdg_20080429.html?mod=tff_main_tff_top>.