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WISCONSIN FILM FESTIVAL

***Taxi to the Dark Side* at the 2008 Wisconsin Film Festival**

Bill Lueders on Saturday 04/05/2008 3:00 pm , (9) Recommendations

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Erwin Knoll, the late editor of *The Progressive*, always used to frame his most formative life experience -- fleeing his native Austria as a young lad and seeing much of his family killed in the Holocaust -- as reflecting not the depravity of the Nazis but the reality of human nature.

“The fact that people are capable of committing such monstrous acts against each other,” he’d say, “is never terribly far from my consciousness.”

I was reminded of this by *Taxi to the Dark Side*, which recounts the Bush administration's decision to green-light the torture of detainees in the aftermath of 9/11. Its particular focus is the murder by U.S. interrogators of an Afghani taxi driver named Dilawar in late 2002; he had been beaten until his legs were “pulpified” and shackled to the ceiling by tormentors to whom his innocence was apparent.

The film, which won this year's Academy Award for best documentary, takes a surprisingly sympathetic view toward these front-line torturers, who were just following orders from the chain of command, all the way to the top. The real villains are Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld -- who, the film notes, have preemptively pardoned themselves for the war crimes they've committed.

It's Cheney who speaks about the need of the U.S. to embrace “the dark side.” As he explained: “It is a mean, nasty, dirty business out there and we have to operate in that arena.” Thus the Bush team gives itself license to behave as terrorists -- heedless of human rights and due process, without regard for the rule of law. At one point, Bush proclaims, “One by one, the terrorists are learning the meaning of American justice.” It's hard not to gasp.

Alfred McCoy, a UW-Madison professor, appears in the film to reflect on how popular culture -- through ridiculous shows like Fox's *24* -- has “created a constituency for torture,” which many Americans are willing to embrace as a justifiable tactic. In other words, we have been taught to be Good Germans.

Erwin, as usual, had it right.

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