

## Guantánamo Memoir Film Skewers George W. Bush, But Exonerates Barack Obama



Jodie Foster and Tahar Rahim in *The Mauritanian*. © 2021 - STX FILMS

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Mohamedou Ould Slahi's Guantánamo memoir, *Guantánamo Diary*, is a book of remarkable power. Written during his incarceration and heavily redacted in its first editions, Slahi's story speaks with first-hand authority of the horror, degradation and brutality of life inside Guantánamo. It has the gravity of a historically significant document of state torture and the rich, intimate texture of a profoundly personal story.

The same cannot really be said of Kevin MacDonald's film adaptation of it, *The Mauritanian*, which was released earlier this year. Though culture site Tatler called the movie "excellent," and French-Algerian actor Tahar Rahim's turn as Slahi has been roundly praised, the critical response has been fairly muted, certainly in comparison to the widespread acclaim that greeted Slahi's book. *The Guardian*, for instance, said that the movie "is content with congratulating itself for being on the right side of history." British right-of-center broadsheet *The Telegraph* called it "no-one's idea of a thrill," and film magazine *Empire* labelled it "well-intentioned but somewhat dull." Despite the involvement of Hollywood heavy-hitters Jodie Foster and Benedict Cumberbatch in key roles, the film has failed to set the world on fire.

And yet, many of the reviews have so far failed to notice one particularly intriguing aspect of *The Mauritanian*. Like dour thrillers of the early years of the “war on terror” such as Gavin Hood’s *Rendition*, which raise complex problems only to defuse them when prisoners are rescued and the dastardly senators responsible for the torture program get what they deserve, *The Mauritanian* is an oddly unsatisfying exposé of the torture program. In fact, its limitations reveal very clearly the political limits of much liberal critique of Guantánamo. Bob Brecher, Emeritus Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Brighton, U.K., cautions against “the liberal conceit that there is a simple relationship between what torture is and how it is represented,” adding that “liberal good intentions and their ideological consequences” are often overlooked in the discussion of torture. *The Mauritanian* is a particularly good example of the lack of depth found in much liberal condemnation of Guantánamo.

Any filmic critique of Guantánamo is, of course, welcome and politically important. The 20-year history of the American island gulag, and the post-9/11 torture program of which it remains the most well-known manifestation, are some of the most important and enduring political scandals of the modern age. And yet they risk losing urgency for many people due to the labyrinthine complexity of the political issues at stake and, frankly, the boredom factor that results from the grinding slowness and obscurity of the legal process.

*The Mauritanian*, then, as a film that accessibly exposes the violence of the torture regime and the legal wrangling involved with defending people accused of terrorism — and that humanizes a detainee in the process! — does valuable and necessary work. But it is the parameters of what the film is and is not able to criticize that really makes it interesting.

One of *The Mauritanian*’s strongest scenes comes roughly two-thirds of the way into the story. Slahi’s ACLU lawyer, Nancy Hollander (Foster) and his military prosecutor-in-waiting, Stuart Couch (Cumberbatch), have both been running into insurmountable obstacles when investigating Slahi’s case. Finally, they each encounter authoritative unredacted documentation of the horrendous torture that was committed against Slahi. As we, the audience, see this degrading treatment from his perspective, the two other lead characters read about it and finally experience a powerful revelation about the shocking torture and routine cruelty that characterize life in Guantánamo. A later scene stages a similar revelation as Slahi gets his day in court and testifies via video link from Guantánamo. He is articulate, dignified, funny and humble; his humanity, as they say, shines through, and soon enough his case is dismissed and he is declared eligible for release. These scenes are interesting because they stage a certain idea about scandal. The truth is exposed, and then, as a direct and uncomplicated consequence, justice is done. Once Couch realizes that Slahi was tortured, he refuses to prosecute the case; once the court sees that Slahi is innocent, he is declared free to go.

Such an understanding of scandal is not only oversimplified, but misleading. [Jamie Johnson](#), a scholar of militarization working in Leicester, U.K., writes that scandal is integral to the way that we understand modern war. This is because the gesture which marks some violent acts (i.e., war crimes, extraordinary rendition, torture) as excessive also marks others as acceptable. That is, when we “expose the truth,” we are not, of course, allowing the light of truth to directly shine through on its own: we are staging a very particular narrative aimed at specific people and for a specific audience, a narrative which draws boundaries around what we are and are not willing to criticize.

He continues:

This form of critique, in which ‘excesses’ are exposed and corrected through official channels of accountability, often works to limit how we understand and respond to certain events. Take, for example, the idea of the war crime. The category of the war crime asserts that there are certain ‘excessive’ acts of violence that are scandalous. However, if you can commit a ‘crime’ against war then presumably there are other forms of violence that are ‘on the right side of the line’. The function of this category is therefore to implicitly endorse and accept these other forms of ‘unremarkable’ state-sanctioned violence. We must therefore be careful not to approach practices of torture and rendition in the Global War on Terror as a scandalous ‘excess’. Doing so fails to do justice to the pervasive harms and injustices that have been done to people around the world in the name of fighting terror.

*The Mauritanian* is interesting because it highlights government-sanctioned atrocities but also simultaneously emphasizes their solution: Bush and Cheney are beaten in court because the justice system functions effectively enough to check executive power. The story is, therefore, misleadingly positive, ending on a high note in which American justice prevails. Anybody familiar with Guantánamo will tell you that this is emphatically *not* the message to take from Guantánamo.

What is more, by ending on Slahi’s triumph in court, *The Mauritanian* only tells the story of roughly half of Slahi’s time in Guantánamo. Slahi was detained for 15 years under Presidents Bush and Obama, but the movie ends eight years into his illegal detention after he wins a landmark legal case against the Bush administration in which he is granted the right of habeas corpus. His seven more years in Guantánamo, when this right was withheld at Obama’s express instruction, are reduced to three brief title cards at the end of the film.

This is especially ironic given that the film is centrally concerned with redaction. **Whole pages of Slahi’s book were blacked out in its first edition**, with the selective removal of crucial details and sentences throughout the book making many other parts of it incredibly difficult to follow (this is, of course, the point of redaction). Likewise, when Hollander finally gets access to the legal files that she needs to defend Slahi, it is box after box after box of redacted documentation.

Though it foregrounds government censorship, *The Mauritanian*, too, is a redacted version of Slahi’s story. Slahi himself is pleased with the adaptation, though he acknowledges that the prison environment and savage mistreatment depicted in the movie is “**like the soft version of Guantánamo Bay.**” But nobody would ask for the torture scenes to be any grimmer: most importantly, the film forces a generic and sentimental legal thriller happy ending, which is inappropriate given the horrendous and damning facts of Slahi’s case.

The final movement of the film is dedicated to Slahi’s triumphant courtroom speech and his subsequent joy at the judge’s decision in his favor. This framing of the story emphasizes Slahi’s victory against the evil Bush and Cheney at the expense of any examination of Obama or Biden’s complicity in the continuing scandal of Guantánamo. Slahi has become known for his extraordinary capacity for forgiveness — “**I’ve wholeheartedly forgiven everyone,**” he has said — and it is undoubtedly true that there is something powerful, and moving, about this. But for *The Mauritanian* to reproduce this forgiveness echoes Obama’s **policy of “looking forward rather than**

backward” — that is, his policy of refusing to prosecute the perpetrators and architects of the torture program. Slahi’s personal, spiritual act of forgiveness, however inspirational, does not license a distorted or selective account of the political responsibility for Guantánamo, which is shared by both Republicans and Democrats.

Of course, no movie can get everything right. In a 2017 article on the 2014 Senate Torture Report, [Lucia H. Seyfarth](#) writes, quite reasonably, that “truth-telling is an area where the perfect should not be the enemy of the good.” But this omission of the more systematic complicity of U.S. policy, politics and society really matters. It exonerates Obama of his most important broken promise, and it makes Guantánamo seem a uniquely Republican atrocity, when in fact, Guantánamo and the torture program are emblematic of the overreach, impunity and atrocity of U.S. empire that is served by politicians on all sides of party politics.