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ABC's Twisted 'Path to 9/11'

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Factually shaky, politically inflammatory and photographically a mess, "The Path to 9/11" -- ABC's two-part, five-hour miniseries tracing events leading up to the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon -- has something not just to offend everyone but also to depress them.

The docudrama -- allegedly produced as a warning to the United States that the attacks, or something like them, could happen again -- falls clumsily into traps that await all those who make fictional films claiming to be factual. Except this time, the event being dramatized is one of the most tragic and monstrous in the nation's history, not something to be trifled with.

It is hardly surprising that the movie has been preceded by cries of outrage from some of those depicted in it, especially members of the Clinton administration who are shown as, essentially, incompetent.

Even Harvey Keitel, who plays the nominal hero of the film -- former FBI agent-turned-World Trade Center security chief John O'Neill -- when asked in an interview whether he thought the film contained distortions, replied, "Yes, I do," and called on the network to fix them before the film airs.

CNN reported yesterday that former secretary of state Madeleine Albright and Sandy Berger, national security adviser to Bill Clinton (Albright and Berger are played by actors in the movie), wrote to Thomas H. Kean, co-chairman of the 9/11 commission and a consultant on the film, and urged him to use his influence to get ABC to withdraw the film (at press time, it was scheduled to air tomorrow night and Monday night). Albright and Berger say the film puts words in their mouths that they never said and has them doing things they never did.

In a brief news clip yesterday, a smiling Clinton, asked by reporters to comment on the movie, said simply, "I think they ought to tell the truth" -- although defining "the truth" in this case can't be considered a simple task.

Blunderingly, ABC executives cast doubt on their own film's veracity when they made advance copies available to such political conservatives as Rush Limbaugh but not to Democrats who reportedly requested the same treatment. If it's any consolation to Democrats, however, the film at no point suggests that Saddam Hussein -- whom President Bush has tried to associate with the 9/11 attacks -- was involved in the planning or execution of the attacks in any way.

According to the movie, Osama bin Laden -- now the most wanted man in the world and a terrorist whose role in the 9/11 atrocity is not in doubt -- was virtually within the grasp of U.S. intelligence operatives twice during the '90s, after the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center. Islamic extremists left a truck bomb in the

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center's underground parking garage -- hoping, the film says, that the blast would knock one tower off its base and into the other.

Weak-kneed bureaucrats declined to act upon the opportunities to seize or kill bin Laden, the film also says. But the docudrama doesn't stop at criticizing generic bureaucrats -- which would at least have helped sustain a nonpartisan aura -- and aims arts specifically and repeatedly at Albright, Berger, then-CIA chief George Tenet and others in the Clinton administration, most of them made to seem either shortsighted or spineless.

Clinton himself is libeled through abusive editing. A first-class U.S. operative played by Donnie Wahlberg argues the case for getting bin Laden while the al-Qaeda leader is openly in view in some sort of compound in Afghanistan. CIA officials haggle over minor details, such as the budget for the operation. The film's director, David L. Cunningham, then cuts abruptly to a TV image of Clinton making his infamous "I did not have sexual relations with that woman" remark with regard to Monica Lewinsky. The impression given is that Clinton was spending time on his sex life while terrorists were gaining ground and planning a nightmare.

It would have made as much sense, and perhaps more, to cut instead to stock footage of a smirking Kenneth Starr, the reckless Republican prosecutor largely responsible for distracting not just the president but the entire nation with the scandal.

Looking even worse than Clinton is then-U.S. Ambassador to Yemen Barbara K. Bodine. Her name is not prominently featured but her title is, and she comes across as a foolishly intransigent official who defends the bin Laden name and insults FBI agents who visit her office, with O'Neill heading up the delegation. Patricia Heaton, who plays the role, makes Bodine seem especially despicable, a close-minded ignoramus who ironically tells O'Neill, "You are the epitome of 'the Ugly American.' "

Meanwhile as the '90s and the film wear on, we see al-Qaeda faithful training, spewing hatred and, without much trouble, sneaking into the United States and openly enrolling in flight schools, where they learn how to pilot airplanes. One of them, the very portrait of a wild-eyed terrorist, is captured and his laptop computer seized by FBI agents. Incredibly, an official rules that the FBI cannot open the laptop and examine its contents, and it is presumably returned to the terrorist so he can continue his work.

In an attempt to layer a coat of visual veracity over the film, it's shot in the style of some news footage -- the hand-held camera jerking, bouncing, panning wildly. Faces are framed in absurdly intense close-up, so intense it's not always easy to tell whom you're looking at. The gratuitous camera movement and the insistence on reducing people to eyes or noses or mouths become oppressive after only two hours, much less five. This isn't cinematography; it's vivisection.

But aesthetic objections pale in comparison to the legitimate complaints of those who resent the film's being passed off as truth when it apparently is riddled with errors. These are dismissed in a glib disclaimer acknowledging "composite and representative characters and time compression . . . for dramatic purposes." How much drama needs to be added to 9/11?

The film is prominently billed as being based on the report of the 9/11 commission, but one must read the fine print: Also acknowledged, although far less conspicuously in the credits, are three books on the subject.

In a report on "NBC Nightly News" on Thursday, unnamed Clinton administration officials were quoted as saying that some scenes in the film are "pure fiction." Pure fiction doesn't mix well with fact. Executive

producer Marc Platt's quoted defense: It was "not our intention to distort." Whatever the intention -- and Democrats have a right to be suspicious of any product of the conservative-minded Walt Disney Co., which produced the film and owns ABC -- distortion unfortunately seems to have been the outcome.

"The Path to 9/11" appears intent on meting out punishment, not only to some of those portrayed in it but also to viewers who try to make it through the whole grueling assault -- an assault on the senses that may also be an assault on the truth.

The Path to 9/11 (five hours) airs tomorrow night and Monday night at 8 on Channel 7.

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