

Hollywood and the Carlos Identity

Films discussed: *The Bourne Identity* (1988, miniseries); *The Assignment* (1997)

So confident was the Hollywood left in 1988 of liberal domination of the popular media that they thought they could get away with anything. There is no clearer example of this arrogance than they way they rewrote recent events as their opposite in the mini-series *The Bourne Identity*.

Based on the book by Robert Ludlum, *The Bourne Identity* is about a ploy to catch the terrorist Carlos the Jackal, who in those days was still at large, or at any rate living in Syria. The idea was that an American agent would impersonate another American agent, a pathological killer, and would then dog Carlos's footsteps claiming credit for all of Carlos's kills. This would drive Carlos into a predictable reaction from which he could be tracked and killed.

The later Bourne movies removed the Carlos connection from the plot, with the result that these films are somewhat enigmatic, having to create secret agencies within secret agencies within secret agencies, but that perhaps is more to the post-modern taste as well.

It is not just the identity of Bourne but that of Carlos that the miniseries attempts to disguise. The son of a millionaire Communist, Carlos, whose real name is Ilich Ramirez Sanchez, may have been trained in Cuba (though this is disputed) but did spend time in London as a playboy and leftist poseur before attending Patrice Lumumba University in Moscow, from which he was expelled after joining an Arab demonstration. He joined the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), which was Marxist in ideology and enjoyed Soviet backing, and went to Jordan for training. After the PLO uprising in Jordan was crushed by the King's army, the PLO sent Carlos back to London, where he began to set up his network. He devised a plan to blow up the offices of French newspapers deemed friendly to Israel, and made an alliance with the Japanese Red Army. From this came an attack on a French embassy and the bombing of a cafe. His next action was the attempted shoot down of an El Al airliner though his team only hit a parked Yugoslav airplane. A second attack at the Paris airport ended in a shoot out with security, with Carlos escaping.

It was shortly after this that Carlos displayed the knack of shooting people in the neck, that is played up in the miniseries, as his trademark. Carlos's PLO boss Moukharbal was picked up by the police and led them to an apartment where Carlos was partying. Carlos shot Moukharbal in the neck and also one of the police. He then shot two more police and escaped. Luckily for Carlos, Moukharbal turned out to have been working for Mossad, so the PLO did not hold the killing against him. His next attack was on an OPEC meeting in Vienna where one of Carlos's German recruits shot a policeman through the throat. After killing another policeman they escaped to the airport with a bus load of hostages. There the ex-Nazi Austrian Interior Minister, Otto Roesch, saw them off with a handshake in route to Algiers, where he was received by the Algerian Foreign Minister. His next stop was Libya which forced him to release the Libyan

hostages. He flew to Tunis, which would not let him land, and returned to Algiers. The Algerians paid Carlos tens of millions of dollars (perhaps donated by another Arab government) to release the hostages, and they let Carlos go free, granting him political asylum. France, where Carlos had committed several of his terrorist acts, did not seek his extradition, for fear of offending the Algerians, who were treating Carlos to dinners with senior government officials and provided him with bodyguards. From there Carlos was welcomed to Libya by Colonel Qaddafi who lavished money on him. Next stop was South Yemen, via Qaddafi's private jet, where he met with his PLO bosses, who were displeased that he had not killed the Saudi and Iranian oil ministers. As punishment the PLO expelled him.

In 1976 Carlos was back in Europe. Vacationing in Yugoslavia he was arrested on the demand of the West Germans, but released by the order of Marshall Tito and set to Bagdad where he was received in grand style but feared to stay because the Saudi's were offering a reward for killing him. So he returned to South Yemen where he trained terrorists on the payroll of Qaddafi.

Here is one of the ironies of narrative crafting. The left was always reluctant to act against terrorism, and downplayed the role of states in support of it. But it was the leftist Obama administration that finally eliminated Qaddafi when he crossed their agenda, and Hillary Clinton famously cackled about it during a press interview. Then many in the Alternative right suddenly decided that Qaddafi was the greatest Arab leader of modern times, and did more for his people than did any other government in Africa.

In 1977 Carlos traveled with Libyan agents to Iraq and met with Saddam Hussein who agreed to support him in setting up his own terror network. He also took up with Magdalana Kopp, the girlfriend of one of his associates, and married her in 1979. The miniseries replaces her with a lover who marries a French general in order to gather intelligence through him.

Carlos began to travel internationally. He visited Colombia where French agents attempted to nab him, but blew their cover by talking to each other in French, and to East Germany, where the Stasi monitored his activities. The Germans were already actively training Arab terrorists and later backed Carlos. He also was given a safe base by the Hungarian government, and formed an alliance with Fidel Castro.

Carlo's next attack was an attempt to blow up a nuclear power plant in France, but his rockets failed to penetrate the concrete container shell. This was 1982. That same year his wife was arrested while smuggling money to Paris from their base in Hungary. Carlos retaliated with a string of bombings and assassinations carried out with the cooperation of the East Germans and the Syrians.

By the end of 1983 western governments at last were coming around to the view that the support by Communist states of terrorist gangs was not nice and something should be done about it. That is, it should affect trade talks and similar diplomatic dealings. East Germany and Czechoslovakia banned Carlos, now that there was a price to pay for supporting him. Even

Romania, which had once hired him to assassinate dissidents in Paris and blow up the offices of Radio Free Europe, banned Carlos. The Arabs also decided that they didn't need Carlos.

At the time the miniseries was made, then, Carlos was living in Syria in inactive status due to lack of governments to sponsor and protect his network.

In 1990, however Saddam Hussein reactivated Carlos to run a terror campaign against the United States. But Saddam's invasion of Kuwait cost Carlos his safe haven in Syria which expelled him. He then bounced around between Arab countries, dumping his wife and child for an Arab woman while sheltering in Jordan. Soon Carlos ended up in the Sudan, where Bin Laden, or some version of him, was also hiding out. There he was found by the French who eventually pressured the Sudanese to give him up, if the action were disguised. The French abducted him in 1994 and took him to France where he received a life sentence in 1997.

Carlos then spent his time reading and watching television. He corresponded with Chavez, the dictator of Venezuela where Kopp lived. He even wrote a book justifying himself and cheering on Bin Laden. Carlos appealed his jail sentence, claiming that it is "inhuman and degrading treatment". He converted to Islam and married his lawyer, although still married to his second wife. (You can do that in France.) In the miniseries he gets thrown down a staircase and shot.

And the PLO? Until the more Islamic Hamas took over they ruled the state of Palestine, receiving subsidies from the professedly anti-terrorist Bush administration. Terrorism pays.

But back to 1988 and the miniseries: Here Carlos is a killer, but the only identified political motive is that he kills an American ambassador who is working for a nuclear-free Europe. Now, the nuclear free Europe was a major Soviet initiative of the Breshnev era intended to allow the Soviet Union to blackmail and dominate Western European nations, and break up the NATO alliance. Liberals loved it. In addition, the Carlos of the miniseries sells the intelligence gathered by his lover from the French general indiscriminately: sometimes to the Russians, sometimes to the Americans, and so on.

The Hollywood left took this life-long Marxist, political killer and frequent ally of Soviet block terrorist campaigns and in their portrayal gave him one sole political motive: to frustrate the Soviet strategic initiative favored by the American left. Other than that the miniseries makes him a gun for hire.

Beyond that we get the story elements of a spy thriller well played out. Beside Richard Chamberlain as Jason Bourne there is Jaclyn Smith, then known as "queen of the miniseries" as a Canadian government official caught up in the events, and who as a hot babe easily eclipses the actresses in the movie versions. When Chamberlain was cast in *Petulia*, he was told it was because he resembled an empty Coke bottle, looking great on the outside with nothing much on the inside. This quality make him fit the role of Bourne, who has lost his memory an does not know who he is.

These days plot and coherence suffer in movies, even thrillers, but the fighting is better staged (at least until the method of the jerky camera and cuts every two seconds took over), and the weapons handling much superior. We see, for example, Chamberlain putting a magazine into a submachine-gun and firing away without every chambering the first round. But then it is odd that he loads it at all, as he usually starts each encounter with a fully loaded gun, although he never buys nor carries any ammunition. Common in those days, such firearms gaffs are too easily spotted by today's audiences for the directors to overlook such details.



Oddly for a TV miniseries made in the 1980s, the DVD, in two parts running 188 minutes, is in wide screen format.

Toward the close the politics comes back, with the political equivalence line played up as Bourne denounces the US government men as being killers just like Carlos's gang. (This was madatory at the time.) Then there is a funeral for the one good CIA man, and a French general gives a speech in which he praises the courage and ideals of the dead, which cannot be understood by the current generation that cares only about "profit".

The joke, of course, was on the liberals. When the miniseries came out their beloved Communist bloc was already teetering, and its borders were soon hemorrhaging refugees to the West, for the guards could not be made to shoot them. Only three years later Boris Yeltsin would interrupt a speech by the Secretary of the Communist Party saying "and now for a little relaxation" and then ban the Communist Party in Russia. This put an end to the European base of Carlos the Jackal, and cost the radical Arab states their strategic military backing. This, as much of anything, led to the crushing of Carlos's employer Saddam in the Gulf War and the effective end of Carlos's career.

The Bourne Identity stands witness that on the very eve of these momentous events the liberals thought that they so dominated the media that they could blatantly rewrite recent history, to give a propaganda boost to the Soviet efforts to push through a political victory in Europe. No reviewer would point out the complete distortion of the story, and only the Hollywood left's version would be heard.

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Essentially a work of fiction and hyped up with sex and sensationalism, *The Assignment* is yet another attempt to cash in on the press notoriety of the terrorist Carlos. In distinction from *The Bourne Identity*, this one does refer more or less to the actual Carlos. The movie, however, does not feel a need to adhere to the facts, departing from them in pointed ways.

The movie opens with Carlos's first famous action, the Paris cafe bombing of 1974. This was done to get the French to release another terrorist, which they did, although the French claimed that they did not do so as a result of this bombing. The action was important to Carlos's career, however, as it got him promoted by the Palestinian Liberation Organization from a support role to leader of high profile actions.

The film shows him encountering a CIA counter-terrorism man outside the cafe, whom Carlos recognizes, but who does not see through Carlos's hippy disguise. The CIA man is played by the leftist Canadian actor Donald Sutherland, himself an object of FBI surveillance two or three years before the date of the bombing depicted in the movie. We are led to believe that Carlos was at this time already a hot shot terrorist whom the authorities were trying to track. As Carlos was working under a PLO boss who was a Mossad informant, and it was no secret to intelligence services who and where he was. But until then he was a small fish, not worth going after. The French police authorities had never heard of him.

The next Carlos action in the movie was his famous attack on the OPEC meeting in Vienna. Here the movie is fairly accurate. The needs of cinematic brevity require that many details be left out. The film does, however, feature two of the most famous actions, and it decides to alter them. In the movie the receptionist, seeing the terrorists picks up the telephone to call for help, but stops when the terrorists threaten her with a gun. The real receptionist, Edith Heller, made the call and managed to report the attack, and continued on the telephone until the handset was shot out of her hands. She then attempted to pick up another telephone at which point the terrorists emptied a whole magazine of rounds into the switchboard. The true events would have made for better movie action, and would not have taken longer. So why change the story to make Edith look like a coward?



Secondly, at the airport, when the Austrians send the terrorists away in an airplane with their hostages, and the Austrian Interior Minister, Otto Roesch, sees them off with a handshake, the movie omits the handshake, widely noted in the press as "the handshake of shame", and instead has Sutherland's CIA character attempt to shake Carlos's hand in order to seek an opportunity to shoot Carlos, but he is stopped by his cowardly embassy minder.

The third major departure from reality is the film's playing down Carlos's PLO connections and exaggerating his significance to the KGB. This goes to the heart of the movie, which is about a joint CIA/Israeli plan to discredit Carlos with the KGB so that the KGB will take him out. The fourth distortion is the supposed success of this plan, which costs Carlos his safe havens, especially in Europe.

Now, it is true enough that Carlos lost his safe havens, and that this led, as depicted, to his having to move to more vulnerable locations where eventually the French nabbed him. But the reason this happened has nothing to do with the spy thriller stuff that this film serves up. The reason for the change is something called linkage. Linkage is when matters of military and political concern are allowed to influence diplomatic efforts in economic areas. Depending who is involved, liberal diplomats either hate or love linkage. In the case of South Africa, liberals were enthusiastic for linkage. In the cases of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, they were against it, and the liberal journalists argued that linkage does not work.

But when the governments of the West finally got a little backbone about terrorism, and twisted the arms of the diplomats to put some linkage into trade talks, the support base for Carlos in Eastern Europe disappeared. Carlos had to go into retirement. Then the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait changed Arab politics and cost Carlos, by then working for Saddam Hussein, his safe haven in Syria, and this made him vulnerable to capture.

The Assignment works as an action movie, even if a somewhat cheap one. In the real world, however, the key to success was getting rid of the diplomatic squishes, such as the man at the embassy in Austria in this film.

What has not altered since those days is the propensity of Hollywood to invent narratives, confident that so long as they suit the agenda of the left they will not be contradicted by the journalism industry. The public, however, is far less inclined to believe.