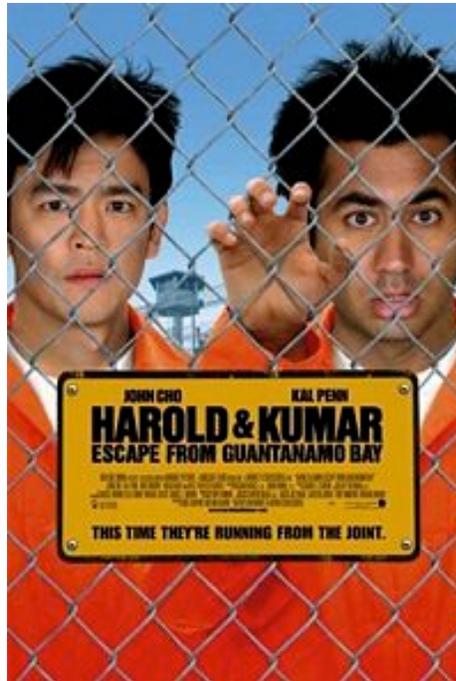


No Longer Trapped in the War on Terror: *Harold & Kumar Escape From Guantanamo Bay*

Directed by Jon Hurwitz and Hayden Schlossberg
(New Line Cinema, 2008)

Review by Judith K. Boyd



Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay, Theatrical Poster

Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay, the recent film from directors Jon Hurwitz and Hayden Schlossberg, is an unlikely candidate to be considered a prophetic commentary on American culture. It is, simply put, a terrible movie. With a ridiculous storyline, poor editing, extremely crude humor, weak dialogue, and the world's worst President George W. Bush impersonation, it would be easy to dismiss this film as just another stoner movie that glorifies sex and drugs (preferably experienced at the same time). Despite these flaws, it is worth taking a moment to consider what this film means in the broader historical narrative of cultural change following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and how it may reflect public perception of homeland security. This movie represents a significant step forward in our attempt to escape from the "war on terror" that has overshadowed American culture for the past seven years. Building upon the classic theme of buddies on a road trip, Hurwitz and Schlossberg have written and directed a movie that could only be created several years after September 11, 2001. Although the movie repeatedly departs from reality for the sake of a laugh, it is critical that viewers recognize this absurdity for what it ultimately represents: a cathartic

release from what Ian Lustick has characterized in his book *Trapped in the War on Terror* as “a specter that haunts America – the specter of terrorism.”¹

Escape from Guantanamo Bay is a sequel to Hurwitz and Schlossberg’s previous film *Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle*, in which viewers were introduced to Harold Lee (John Cho) and Kumar Patel (Kal Penn), two best friends who get the munchies after smoking marijuana and decide nothing but White Castle hamburgers will satisfy their cravings. A madcap adventure ensues and, through occasionally brilliant and often raunchy humor, the viewer is challenged to reconsider racial and social stereotypes while the pair goes on their quest.

Now back from White Castle, the buddies decide to go to Amsterdam to track down the love of Harold’s life, Maria (Paula Garcés), and to take advantage of that city’s tolerant drug culture. At the airport, Kumar discovers that his ex-girlfriend Vanessa (Daneel Harris) is about to marry Colton Graham (Eric Winter) – the son of Texas aristocracy with connections to the Bush family.

From this point on, Hurwitz and Schlossberg invite us to join them in a complete departure from reality. To fully appreciate this flight of fancy, it is useful for the reader to pause for a moment and recall American culture following September 11, 2001. Immediately after the attacks of September 11, 2001, President Bush gave notice to the American public that they were no longer safe:

The American people need to know that we're facing a different enemy than we have ever faced. This enemy hides in shadows, and has no regard for human life. This is an enemy who preys on innocent and unsuspecting people, runs for cover.²

American society experienced a disturbing new feeling of vulnerability that led to a public expectation the federal government would respond to this susceptibility as a national security matter. The government’s solution was to declare “a war against terror,” both domestically and internationally. Military action abroad was accompanied by increased security measures domestically.

This sense of an enemy lurking in the shadows or living amongst American neighborhoods as part of a sleeper cell waiting to be activated resonates throughout popular culture. In best-selling novels and prime-time television shows, terrorists (almost always of Middle Eastern descent) plot and carry out dastardly deeds to strike a blow against America. But there is also a sense of fear regarding our own government – what is it doing in secret places with secret things? When the government is not forthcoming about its methodology – perhaps out of a legitimate need to maintain secrecy – people go to the darkest places of their minds and imagine what could be going on. The result is an image of the Department of Homeland Security as an Orwellian ‘Big Brother’ government agency.

Hurwitz and Schlossberg builds upon post-9/11 “war on terror” stereotypes to create the basic narrative for a film that is completely detached from the real governmental efforts to fight terrorism. Due to their non-Caucasian appearance (Harold is of South Korean descent and Kumar of Indian descent) and a mistaken belief that Kumar’s marijuana bong is a bomb set to explode mid-flight, Harold and Kumar are suspected of being Middle-Eastern terrorists trying to blow up their plane on its way to Amsterdam. The plane immediately returns to the United States where Harold and Kumar are met by a maniac deputy secretary of Homeland Security (Rob Corddry) who gives them a

graphic demonstration of what he thinks of the Constitution's Bill of Rights and then promptly sends them to Guantanamo Bay.



Deputy Secretary of Homeland Security Ron Fox (Rob Corddry) interviewing Harold (John Cho, left) and Kumar (Kal Penn, right)³

After narrowly escaping from a “meat sandwich” delivered by prison guards who appear to have trained in the backwoods where *Deliverance* was filmed, the pair hitches a ride back to the United States with a group of illegal migrant Cuban boat-people. Harold and Kumar spend the rest of the movie trying to outrun Homeland Security, evade white supremacists, and survive the mushroom-induced delusions of Neil Patrick Harris (playing a spoof of himself), in a cross-country trip from Miami to Texas. In Texas, Harold and Kumar hope their well-connected friend Colton, about to marry Kumar’s ex-girlfriend, can use his political connections to convince the government they are not terrorists.

Harold and Kumar ultimately find themselves – literally – falling into the Texas ranch of President George W. Bush. Much to their astonishment, President Bush offers them some of his “stash” of marijuana and confirms what some might have always suspected: while you cannot trust the government, it helps to have friends in high places within the government. After a presidential pardon, Harold and Kumar are free to rescue Vanessa from the back-stabbing Colton, find Maria, and gallivant through Amsterdam, high on both love and drugs.

Following 9/11, American citizens had a decision to make. Despite the threat advisories and increased security measures, President Bush called upon the public to not give in to an atmosphere of fear. By going forward with routine activities such as “playing, worshipping at churches and synagogues, and mosques, going to movies and to baseball games,” Americans will be doing their part to “not give the power of fear to the terrorists.”⁴ And yet, according to Randall Larson in his book *Our Own Worst Enemy*, during the six years following 9/11 Americans have failed to change the way we

think about security.⁵ We have worried too much and about the wrong things, leading to a culture of fear that has us imagining threats more destructive than the damage terrorists are likely to inflict on us and our society.⁶ This has created a homeland security paradox: while Americans are not expected to ignore the threat, we are encouraged to go about our daily lives despite the threat.

If popular culture serves as a reflection of public concerns on a continuing basis, then this film demonstrates that terrorism may no longer hold the tight grip it once did on American society. There appears to be a growing gap, as Jack Goldsmith describes, between “the government’s view of the terror threat and what it thinks must be done to stop it, and the public’s view of the matter.”⁷ Immediately following 9/11, Hollywood adjusted storylines and delayed movie releases in an abundance of caution so as not to offend public sensibilities.⁸ In recent years, lampooning the actions of the government to “increase” our security or questioning the wisdom of curtailing civil liberties in furtherance of the “greater good,” has become tolerable and profitable. With this film, Hurwitz and Schlossberg have combined homeland security and terrorism themes with slapstick and jokes about bodily functions to create a film that appeals to the lowest common denominator of American culture. While we may not remember much about this film, we should mark its release as a clear indication that the trap has been sprung and the public has finally been released from the war on terror.



Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay, Image from Movie Soundtrack ⁹

MPAA rating: Rated R (for strong crude and sexual content, graphic nudity, pervasive language and drug use).

Running time: 1:42.

Opening: April 25, 2008.

Starring: John Cho (Harold), Kal Penn (Kumar), Rob Corddry (Ron Fox), Roger Bart (Dr. Beecher) and Neil Patrick Harris (as himself).

Written and directed by: Jon Hurwitz and Hayden Schlossberg; photographed by Daryn Okada; edited by Jeff Freeman; music by George S. Clinton; production design by Tony Fanning; produced by Greg Shapiro and Nathan Kahane. A New Line Cinema release.

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¹ Ian S. Lustick, *Trapped in the War on Terror* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), ix.

² U.S. Executive Office of the President, "Remarks by President Bush at Photo Op" (Washington D.C.: The White House, September 12, 2001), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010912-4.html>.

³ http://www.boston.com/ae/movies/blog/2008/04/box_office_repo_1.html

⁴ George W. Bush quoted in "Transcript of Bush Speech in Atlanta," *CNN.com*, November 8, 2001, <http://archives.cnn.com/2001/US/11/08/rec.bush.transcript/>.

⁵ Randall J. Larsen, *Our Own Worst Enemy* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2007), 15-17.

⁶ Lustick, *Trapped in the War on Terror*, ix.

⁷ Jack Goldsmith, *The Terror Presidency* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 191.

⁸ Lynn Spigel, "Entertainment Wars: Television Culture after 9/11" *American Quarterly* 56, no. 2 (June 2004), 250.

⁹ *Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay* Soundtrack, <http://a11news.com/58/harold-and-kumar-escape-from-guantanamo-bay-soundtrack>.