

THE REPORT (2019): NARRATIVE OUTLINE

Director: Scott Z. Burns

Screenwriter: Scott Z. Burns

Screenplay: <https://deadline.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/the-report-final-produced-script.pdf>

Based on: The US Senate Intelligence Committee study of the CIA's Detention and Interrogation Program and, in part, on the *Vanity Fair* article, 'Rorschach and Awe' by Katherine Eban.

A note about the timeline: *The timeline is important in terms of the political landscape in which the events unfold: Republican George W. Bush was president from 2001 to 2009 (with Dick Cheney as his vice president). His successor, Barack Obama, a Democrat, was in office from 2009 to 2017. The investigation that is the subject of The Report relates to a programme introduced in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. In 2009, as well as a Democratic president in the White House, the Democrats controlled the House of Representatives and Senate (the two branches of Congress), giving the party considerable power. In midterm elections held in 2010, the Republicans won a House majority and in 2014 also took control of the Senate. This all becomes relevant as the story unfolds.*

ACT ONE (PAGES 1 TO 32)

We meet our protagonist, Dan Jones, 30s, and discover that he works in a secure basement office.

We learn he's been working on a project for five years.

We see Dan take a file, the 'Panetta Review'.

Dan talks with a lawyer, Clifford, who warns him he might be in trouble

Dan sneaks the file out of the building

Dan is warned he could go to jail for taking the file.

The title card is inserted, *The Torture Report*, with the word 'Torture' then redacted.

In 2003, Dan, new in Washington DC and hoping to work in national security, is turned down for a Senate staffer job with Denis McDonough.

Commentary: *Note the use of a simple tourist souvenir – a Washington DC snow globe – to visually tell us that Dan's new in town and excited to be here. This image comes back in a subtle way later in the story, as idealism turns into realism.*

We jump forward to 2007, where Dan, now a staffer for the Senate Intelligence Committee, is asked by the committee's head Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein to look into the circumstances surrounding destroyed tapes of interrogations of Al-Qaeda detainees.

Now in 2009, after working on a report for two years, Dan's findings prompt Feinstein and a majority of her committee to conduct a fuller investigation into the CIA detention and interrogation programme.

Dan is chosen to lead the investigation.

Feinstein's assistant Marcy warns Dan the investigation could go to a dark place.

Dan is taken to his secure off-site basement office and the classified nature of his work is emphasised.

We meet the members of Dan's team, and they get to work.

Dan searches for the terms 'September 11' and 'Al-Mihdhar', which throw up internal CIA documents.

We are taken back to 2001 and the day of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. It is revealed that some of the hijackers were known to the CIA.

The flashback continues with Vice President Dick Cheney talking on TV about the need to work 'in the shadows' of the intelligence world and ensure that the relevant agencies do not have their hands tied.

The upper echelons of the CIA meet to discuss going after Al-Qaeda. It's made clear the agency will do what it takes to bring those responsible to justice and prevent future attacks.

Commentary: *Flashback as a screenwriting device is often criticised, but The Report highlights its effectiveness. Not only does it show us what Dan uncovers, rather than just have him explain it, but the flashbacks help to give the effect of compressing an extended timeline. The flashback sequences fill in the gaps and bring the past into the present. Dan and his team find out what we get to see dramatized, keeping the action dynamic and compelling. Another good example of the well-used flashback can be found in The Social Network (2010) which counters the extended timeline and multiple versions of the events.*

Back in 2009, Dan briefs Feinstein that much of what the agency was doing with regard detention and interrogation was kept from then Secretary of State Colin Powell.

Feinstein reveals that the Republicans have withdrawn from Dan's study.

We learn that President Obama's attorney general is conducting a criminal investigation into the CIA, meaning his team can no longer speak with anyone involved in the programme.

Dan decides to investigate each detainee, setting up the next flashback, which relates to Abu Zubaydah and results in the CIA taking over the interrogation process from the FBI, which adopted gentler approach.

Two psychologists ('the contractors') share their technique for getting prisoners to talk by inducing 'debility, dependency, and dread', including waterboarding, denying sleep and keeping people in stress positions.

In 2009, Dan reveals that Zubaydah was then subjected to the brutal interrogation technique.

Dan speaks to an FBI agent about Zubaydah.

This scene incorporates an extended flashback, in which we see in detail just how much things changed when the CIA contractors took charge of the interrogations.

Dan tells Feinstein that Zubaydah's Al-Qaeda role was exaggerated for the interrogation techniques to receive legal approval.

Overview: *As you can see, much has happened in the first 32 pages. We know who the story is about and the issues at hand. We also know about the climate post-9/11 and the determination of the CIA to bring those responsible to justice, by whatever means necessary, and to prevent further attacks. Dan's commitment to his task is clear, as is the desire of Senator Feinstein to reveal what was going on. The obstacles include the Republicans and the CIA, both of which have a vested interest in keeping the programme secret. In terms of the issue of torture, the counterpoint (that it was justified) has been introduced but it's clear that the filmmakers are arguing in opposition to the use of the enhanced interrogation technique. The questions raised so far therefore include:*

- What else will Dan's investigation reveal?*
- What further obstacles and dangers will he face?*
- How will the CIA respond to his findings?*
- What is in the Panetta file?*

ACT TWO PART 1 (PAGES 32 TO 57)

In a flashback sequence, we see Zubaydah waterboarded.

Commentary: *These flashbacks offer a stark look at what ‘interrogation’ actually means in the context of the programme. One of the advantages of film is that it can put audiences at the centre of the action and show them up close the real world impact of the social issue you are dramatizing.*

A physician’s assistant, Nathan, who was present, tells Dan that Zubaydah was actually drowning during the waterboarding.

The next flashback sets out the arguments for and against the use of torture, with a CIA official asserting that the US must ensure another 9/11 doesn’t happen, while Nathan asks what treatment a captured US soldier would receive.

When Dan briefs Senator Whitehouse, he introduces the fact that the CIA was discussing the use of torture or ‘enhanced interrogation’ before they had detainees in custody.

In 2002, CIA lawyers put forward a legal opinion is that the President can order torture if it provides ‘unique intelligence’ (essentially, if it works, it’s legal).

Back to 2009, Dan makes clear that President Bush was not aware of the programme until 2006.

The action shifts to a second detainees, Gul Rahman and we flash back to 2002 to see the brutal interrogation meted out to the detainee.

Commentary: *Notice how the script constantly underlines its position on the social issue. In scene after scene, there is no doubt which side we are supposed to take (not least in the clichéd CIA toughs sent in to do the dirty work in what is described in the script as a ‘horrific dungeon’). However, the constant use of flashback to the immediate aftermath of 9/11 reminds us that the world was a very different place back then; a world in which the normal rules arguably didn’t apply.*

Now in 2010, Dan tells Feinstein that Rahman died in custody and that the circumstances are detailed in a CIA report.

Dan’s anger is palpable: ‘They f***** killed a guy and nobody was held accountable?’ he rails to a colleague.

Commentary: *Character development can be a problematic issue in ‘procedural’ stories, as the protagonist is often reduced to being a conduit through which the audience discovers the truth about whatever the investigation reveals. In these types of stories, the character arc may not be prominent, but the revelations should still leave the protagonist changed in some way.*

Dan finds the Panetta review, the CIA director’s own review of the programme, which tallies with his findings. He puts it in a drawer.

Commentary: *It is clear by now that Dan is truly committed to his task. One simple way in which the screenwriter dramatized this visually is to have Dan be already hard*

at work, hyped up on caffeine when his colleagues arrive at work. He also foregoes the small talk, diving right in to his latest discovery.

The next sequence of modern-day and flashback involves Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (KSM) and other detainees being tortured, overall revealing that waterboarding did not produce any important information, yet the CIA persevered.

Commentary: *Note how many times the interrogation is watched by Bernadette and other CIA officials. Not only does this highlight the chain of command, it also reminds us that no one stepped in to stop the interrogations. Again, there is no doubt as to which side we are supposed to take. It's also an effective device to have Dan read, partly in voice-over, from the CIA internal memos as we then see the CIA's actions dramatized.*

When Dan tells Feinstein KSM was waterboarded KSM 183 times without success, she asks rhetorically why, if the technique works, why they had to do it some many times.

At midpoint, Dan is angrily accosted by a CIA operative who was present during the waterboarding, who tells him the report 'will never see the light of day'.

Overview: *This section of the story introduces the torture programme and its escalation, even as it became clear that it wasn't working.*

The stakes are raised as Dan gets ever more emotionally and practically involved with his investigation. This is revealed through his fatigued demeanour and the extra hours he works, which his colleagues note. He has grown from committed staffer into an angry investigator, as he digs into the events of 2002 to find ever more incriminating evidence relating to the behaviour the CIA perpetuated in the name of national security.

This character development is important as the story gathers momentum back to the opening sequence, in which the threat of jail hangs over Dan. The questions at the end of the Act Two Part 1 are:

- What else will the investigation reveal?*
- Will the report ever see the light of day?*
- What further obstacles will Dan and Feinstein face?*

ACT TWO PART 2 (PAGES 57 TO 93)

Dan tells Senator Whitehouse that no charges were ever brought against those responsible for destroying the tapes of interrogations of Al-Qaeda detainees, prefacing the idea that no one will be held accountable for anything to do with the interrogation programme.

In a 2004 flashback sequence, we see the media coverage of Abu Ghraib prison, where photos have emerged of the inmates being mistreated by US troops.

The CIA decides to continue with the programme, following its recertification by National Security Advisor Rice.

Commentary: *This is a story that requires the audience to pay attention. There is lots of information, government agencies, investigations, reports and names thrown around, and the viewer must pay attention to keep up. In return, the filmmakers keep the action moving forward and allow the audience to follow along. Don't be afraid of complexity; just be aware of how you're presenting the information, so that the audience doesn't lose the thread and give up.*

Now in 2011, Dan reacts angrily when he sees Cheney on TV wrongly claiming the interrogation programme helped lead to the capture of Osama bin Laden.

Feinstein asks Dan rhetorically, 'So, if the CIA got bin Laden, then who cares what else it did?', adding there would be no need for accountability.

Commentary: *Note how the screenwriter shakes up the static nature of the story. Not only is this accomplished through the extensive flashbacks, but through the use of actual TV coverage, diagrams, photos, meetings between different people, changing locations, voice-over, and new characters brought in. While this is a procedural, there is plenty of movement and visual storytelling going on that keeps the audience's interest as the story and Dan's investigation head into the Act Two weeds.*

When Feinstein attempts to discuss Dan's findings with the White House, McDonough makes clear that the senator cannot expect support from the government.

Now into 2012, one of Dan's team members pins up the final detainee that has been identified – number 119, Muhammad Rahim.

Commentary: *A fictionalised character in a film that dramatizes real events reacting (wordlessly) to another film that dramatizes real events – a neat device that asserts The Report's authenticity. It's also interesting to note the reaction to Zero Dark Thirty (2012), which included criticism of its historical inaccuracies, moral ambiguity towards torture, and for asserting that waterboarding and the other techniques worked, going against what Dan and his team uncovered during their investigation, hence the fictional Dan's reaction to the TV ad.¹*

¹ Read one such review of *Zero Dark Thirty* here:
<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2013/02/07/disturbing-misleading-zero-dark-thirty/>

We flash back to see the CIA discussing Rahim's treatment, which clearly isn't producing the required results, calling its legality into question.

Back in the present, Dan tells Feinstein that in 2008, in light of the Rahim interrogation, the CIA reviewed the interrogation programme, for the first time.

Dan completes his (7,000-page) report and faces the members of the Intelligence Committee, who vote to approve the report, which will be sent to the CIA for comment.

The CIA disagrees with the conclusion that the programme did not work.

McDonough tries to get Dan to back off about the CIA before offering a sit-down, so the agency can give Dan its side of the story.

Commentary: *Note the touch of humour that creates organic levity in an otherwise quite downbeat story, as McDonough comments on Dan's weighty 7,000-page report: 'The Bible tells the history of mankind in less than that.' In heavy-going stories, it doesn't hurt to give the audience a little light relief, as long as it fits with the tone and context of the story. It further emphasises Dan's dogged commitment to his task. Also note another change of location, with McDonough catching up to Dan while he's jogging.*

The CIA disputes aspects of the report and asks Dan to remove material, while Feinstein tells him to keep it in.

Feinstein tells Dan to stop meeting with the CIA and praises the comprehensive nature of his report before suggesting it may not be made public.

Dan is contacted by Evan, a National Security reporter for the *New York Times* (NYT), who asks him about rumours that the report will not see the light of day. Dan doesn't comment.

Senator Udall tells Dan that the upcoming confirmation of Caroline Krass as CIA general counsel offers an opportunity to break the stalemate over the report. Dan tells him of the existence of the Panetta review.

The opening sequence, in which Dan removes the review from his drawer and leaves the building is replayed. He locks the report in a safe.

Commentary: *Note the proactive nature of the protagonist as he takes matters into his own hands, taking a risk that threatens his career and freedom – think back to the idealistic Dan we met in 2003 during the McDonough interview and how much the process of compiling the report has changed him. This is the character arc in action, and a good example of how to develop character in a 'dry' procedural.*

At the Krass confirmation hearing, Udall uses his time to grill her on the report findings, bringing up the Panetta review, asserting the accuracy of Dan's work. Krass has no answer to Udall's assertions.

Feinstein realises that Dan must have told Udall about the internal review and takes Dan to task.

CIA officers ransack Dan's off-site secure basement office, taking hardware components and research, as well as accessing his computer.

CIA officers tell Senators Feinstein and Chambliss that Dan and his colleagues illegally gained access to the agency's computer network and got hold of the classified Panetta review. The officers want Dan dismissed.

Dan reacts angrily to the accusation that he's a hacker and that the CIA accessed the secure offsite basement office.

Feinstein's assistant Marcy tells Dan that a criminal referral has been filed and that Dan needs a lawyer. The whole idea is to discredit the findings of the report.

Dan talks with the lawyer, but won't reveal anything classified, even though he's facing a possible jail sentence.

Clifford tells Dan that the CIA is trying to turn him into a 'zealot' and that he could land in prison for 20 years

Clifford tells Dan he has a 'sunlight' (i.e. visibility) problem, not a legal problem.

Overview: *This section of the story is all about increasing the action and obstacles facing Dan and Feinstein. By the end, it seems as if the report will remain hidden, meaning all Dan's hard work has been for nothing, while he might be facing a long prison term. The questions at the end of Act Two Part 2 are therefore:*

- *Will Dan face criminal prosecution?*
- *How far is the CIA willing to go to keep the report under wraps?*
- *Is Dan willing to see this through to the end?*
- *Will the report see the light of day?*

ACT THREE (PAGES 93 TO 116)

Dan reaches out to the *NYT* reporter, Evan, and tells him something going on with regards Senate computers being hacked.

Commentary: *There is an interesting dynamic here of the investigator turning whistleblower.*

Feinstein confronts Dan over a *NYT* story about the CIA computer searches and asks what he thinks of whistleblower Edward Snowden before reminding him that she views Snowden as a traitor.

Dan's offer to resign is rejected.

At a meeting with McDonough, Feinstein demands an apology from Brennan over the hacking allegations.

Inspector General Buckley tells Brennan that he has recommended the Department of Justice launches a criminal investigation into the CIA over the officers entering the secure off-site location without permission.

Commentary: *Throughout, we can see in action the principle of wins and losses for the protagonist. While conflict and obstacles are important, it's equally important to give the 'good guys' a few victories along the way.*

Dan finds out the charges against him are being dropped and is told to summarise the report so Feinstein's committee can vote on releasing it.

There follows a lengthy redaction process, in which the CIA attempts to quash the story and hide the identities of those involved in the programme.

The Democrats lose big in the election, including Dan and Feinstein's ally, Udall. Feinstein will no longer head up the committee and the report may never come out. However, there is still a window for its release.

Commentary: *With around 12 pages / minutes left, this is the final blow for the protagonist, as it appears the CIA has negated all his work to date, first by redacting the executive summary and now the Republican majority.*

Dan pushes Feinstein to use her remaining time as head of the committee to release the report summary but she is reluctant, in light of new terrorist intelligence.

Dan takes the Panetta Review and his report to a meeting with the *NYT* reporter, Evan, who tells him that the President Obama had already dismissed the idea of an independent review of the detainees' treatment and that Dan was essentially sent on a fool's errand.

Dan eventually decides that the report needs to come out through the official route, rather than via a newspaper leak.

Commentary: *Note how the story sets up Dan's climactic decision and the actions he takes. We already know he's willing to take classified material and to contact the press, so this final action is within his developed character. We also know that he's*

removed material from the building before without being accosted by security. Further, he is personally invested in the report seeing the light of day. Feinstein's imminent removal as head of the committee also sets the ticking clock in motion. However, he's also proven himself a committed staffer who is reluctant to go outside official channels. It all fits with what we already know and have seen. It also highlights that stories without explosive action can still be effective in building tension and reaching a dramatic conclusion.

Feinstein raises the issue of the report and the White House's position with McDonough. She receives support from other senators support Feinstein.

Commentary: *The screenwriter inserts a scene showing the Capitol building with snow on the ground. This takes us back to Dan's snow globe from the beginning.*

Speaking on the Senate floor, Feinstein asserts that releasing the report is an opportunity to face an "ugly truth and say, 'never again'". She then yields to Senator McCain, a Republican, who denounces the CIA's torture programme.

Commentary: *In the film, the fictional Feinstein yields to the actual John McCain, delivering his words to the Senate in 2015. Another nod to authenticity and a touch of poignancy, as Sen. McCain died in 2018.*

The international press covers the release of the report and a TV news host says its release means the CIA will now be held to account.

An insert lets us know that Dan left the committee after the report was released.

We learn that Feinstein and McCain jointly sponsored legislation to prevent the CIA bringing back the interrogation programme. We also find out that no one in the CIA was every brought to justice for the programme.

Final comments: *The final act serves to ramp up the tension, while bringing the story to a (mostly) satisfying conclusion. The threads are drawn together – such as the Panetta Review from the opening sequence – and placed into context. Dan remains undeterred from his task. Likewise, Feinstein grapples with the political complexities to get the report publicised, finally enjoying bi-partisan support in her efforts. Overall, this is a well-structured procedural, with a strong 'everyman' protagonist, who goes up against the CIA and exposes to the world the use of the enhanced interrogation techniques. While there are times when the story gets a little bogged down, it is mostly well-paced, and the use of flashback ensures we are constantly reminded of the horrific treatment meted out to the detainees.*

For more, take a look at our [free ebook](#), *Uncovering the Truth: Whistleblowers and Investigators*. You can also read our [review](#) of *The Report*.