

Et tu, Harvey? The Miramax and Weinstein Co. chief is legendary for his behind-the-scenes manipulation, but every studio participates in "whisper campaigns."

NY Post photo composite

THE KNIFE OF

In a move straight out of 'Zero Dark Thirty,' studios use black ops to burn the competition

BY REED TUCKER

NAME-CALLING. Backstabbing. Unsubstantiated rumors spreading like wildfire. And you thought election season was over. The presidential race may have wrapped up months ago, but an equally vicious and calculating wintertime campaign finally concludes tonight with the 85th Academy Awards. May the best picture win! Or at least the most unscathed.

Oscar smear campaigns have become as much a part of the awards landscape as acting front-runners feigning surprise onstage and bursting into calculated tears. Each year, nearly every film up for the top prize is curiously hit by a negative story designed to hurt its chances.

Have you heard about "Argo"? Factually inaccurate. The story of the Iranian hostage rescue was actually a Canadian operation in which the CIA played a much smaller role than the movie suggests.

How about "Lincoln"? Botched history, too. Connecticut, in reality, voted for the 13th Amendment, which banned slavery.

"Zero Dark Thirty"? It condones torture.

What about "Django Unchained"? It's racist and gratuitously throws around the N-word.

All of these stories have been floating around for the last few months with varying levels of potency. It's difficult to prove where they come from, but it's a safe bet rival studios have a hand in, if not creating them, certainly fanning the flames.

"It's very clandestine, and it's under lock and key," says one Hollywood executive who, like everyone in this story, asked to remain anonymous to avoid career jeopardy.

These attacks are part of the clandestine campaign studios wage to win awards, and theoretically reap bigger



'ARGO' LIED
Critics spread word that Canada's role in the operation was underplayed by Ben Affleck.

It's very clandestine, and it's under lock and key."

— A Hollywood executive, on how a rival studio sabotaged "Zero Dark Thirty"

sales. The two front-runners for Best Picture, "Argo" and "Lincoln," fueled a spending race that totaled as much as \$11 million for billboards, parties and promotional material for academy members. But these overt gestures turn off some voters.

In a much discussed Hollywood Reporter blog post last week, an anonymous director unloaded on nominees he felt were wanting. But he saved special venom for the swag handed out by studios, noting that sometimes he won't vote for a film if its politicking is too desperate.

"I've gotten books, cookbooks and just about everything short of 'Lincoln' condoms," he said. "It's ridiculous."

Which is why so-called whisper campaigns designed to sink the opposition aren't necessarily as overt as political attacks. Negative campaigning strategies are often discussed only in closed-door meetings among the very top executives and a trusted awards consultant.

From there, that consultant might begin to casually mention at parties a narrative the studio would like to take hold. For example, last year's Best Picture nominee "The Help" was hit by murmurs that it was racist.

Another tactic is the anonymous e-mail. In 2011, an unnamed "Academy member" filled inboxes with a plea not to vote for "The King's Speech" because its subject, King George VI, was supposedly anti-Semitic. (The smear, one insider says, was traced to a rival studio.)

A year later, industry e-mail ad-



'DJANGO' IS RACIST
Quentin Tarantino's love of the n-word and irreverent portrayal of slavery, some say, deserve to be shunned.

1,000 STARS

dresses were being spammed with a photo of Octavia Spencer from "The Help," emblazoned with her character's quote about loving fried chicken.

Publicists have also been known to call journalists directly and suggest a storyline involving a rival studio's movie. In 1998, Miramax famously worked overtime to sabotage "Saving Private Ryan."

It planting stories about factual inaccuracies, including how the man "Private Ryan" was based on, Fritz Niland, was found. He wasn't discovered by a crack platoon; he had been lost for a few days after parachuting behind enemy lines and made his own way back to the allied encampment. Miramax's own "Shakespeare in Love" ultimately won Best Picture that year, in one of Oscar's biggest upsets.

Studios and their operatives will do whatever it takes to win Oscars because the stakes are so high. A win could mean tens of millions of dollars in extra money at the box office, DVD sales and licensing fees to TV. Oscar consultants personally benefit, as well. A 2010 lawsuit filed by publicity firm CBB Consulting, which was hired to work on Nicole Kidman's behalf, revealed that the company was due a \$5,000 bonus after the actress got an Oscar nomination for "Rabbit Hole."

One longtime awards player says that the pressure to promote contenders is high and underlings sometimes turn to negative campaigning out of desperation.

Some, however, don't fear the smear stories. Do they even work?

"No, not really," says one Oscar-winning producer whose movie was hit by a whisper campaign. "I think our friends in the press made more of it than it was. We didn't feel the direct impact of it. It's not like we were running for cover."

"I don't think it's that effective," agrees the Hollywood insider. "I think there are a lot of paranoid people who work in the awards industry and think it's effective. At the end of the day, I don't think the negative stuff really hits as much as people think it does. It's just an interesting headline to read on The Huffington Post."

Of course, there are exceptions. "Zero Dark Thirty" appeared to be the Best Picture front-runner back in December before a brouhaha over its torture scenes hit blogs and entertainment outlets. Was the mov-



'LINCOLN' LIED
Dishonest Abe's story showed Connecticut politicians voting against him. In reality, they voted with him.

ie, which claimed to be "based on firsthand accounts," accurate? And was it condoning torture?

Whatever the truth, the controversy has torpedoed any chance of the movie winning Best Picture. Its director Kathryn Bigelow didn't even score a nomination.

"I wouldn't be surprised if some rival studio was behind that campaign, because it has stuck so much," says the executive.

Sony, which released "Zero Dark Thirty," did a poor job of anticipating the backlash, reacted too slowly and was unable to quell the torture

furor, the executive says.

Meanwhile, Warner Bros., the studio behind "Argo," appears to have done a better job of addressing similar charges that its movie took liberties with history. Before the film was even released, director Ben Affleck added a card at the movie's end saying that the "CIA complemented efforts of the Canadian embassy."

"Inglourious Basterds," released in 2009, which might have been open to criticism that it made light of the Holocaust and World War II, was screened early for Jewish groups. Potential whisper campaign and controversy averted.

And while it may seem that Oscar season is getting dirtier, the sad truth is that negative campaigning has been around for decades. Only our awareness has changed.

With Twitter and online coverage, the average person's "understanding and an insight into the process has increased over the years," the producer says.

In 1953 during the height of McCarthyism, "High Noon" stirred controversy after being seen by some as an allegory for blacklisted writers. Conservative John Wayne later called it "the most un-American thing I've seen in my whole life." It lost Best Picture.

"The Color Purple" went 0 for 11 at the 1986 Academy Awards after the film was criticized by the NAACP and others for its "very stereotypical" portrayal of black men.

So whatever movie wins tonight may be less about having the most supporters than having the fewest enemies.

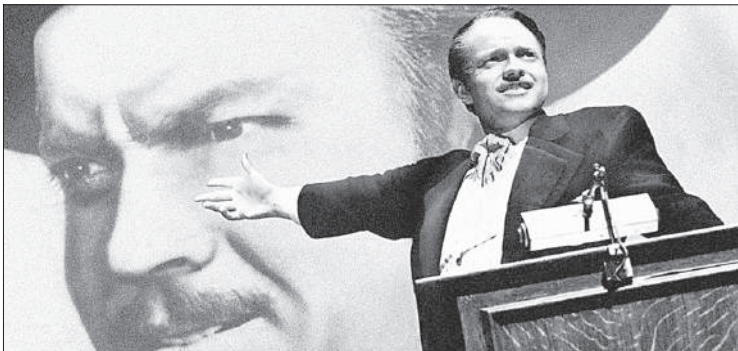
'ZERO' LIKES TORTURE
In one of the most corrosive campaigns, word spread that supporting "ZDT" was saying yes to waterboarding.



The Oscar snub goes to...

Oscar's Top 5 inexcusable oversights

BEN Affleck and Kathryn Bigelow — both directors passed over for nominations at tonight's ceremony — can comfort themselves with the fact they're hardly the first to get snubbed by Oscar. Here are five famous oversights from history. — RT



▲ "Citizen Kane" (1941)

Newspaper titan William Randolph Hearst, on whom the film's main character was based, was so angry with "Kane" that he set out to sink it, banning ads for the movie in his publications and spreading gossip about its director, writer and star, Orson Welles. The film was booed at the ceremony, and it ended up taking home only a writing award.

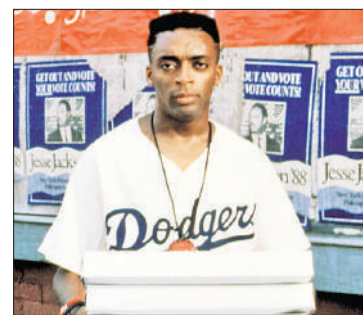


◀ Alfred Hitchcock, for "Vertigo" (1958)

To Oscar's eternal shame, Hitchcock never won Best Director, including for "Vertigo," considered one of the greatest movies ever. When he was finally given a special lifetime achievement in 1968, he walked to the stage and uttered a biting "thank you" — the shortest acceptance speech in Oscar history.

"Do the Right Thing" (1989) ▶

Spike Lee's story about race, violence and New York City proved too controversial for voters. "What film won Best Picture in 1989?" Lee later asked The Hollywood Reporter. "Driving Miss Motherf---ing Daisy! That's why [Oscars] don't matter. Because 20 years later, who's watching 'Driving Miss Daisy?'"



"Saving Private Ryan" (1998)

Fans are still howling that Steven Spielberg's WWII epic lost to romantic trifle "Shakespeare in Love." Insiders credited the win to Miramax boss Harvey Weinstein and his savvy campaign tactics.

"The Dark Knight" (2008)

To goose TV ratings, the Academy Awards expanded the number of Best Picture nominees, from five to as many as 10. Oscar wanted to put worthy blockbusters in contention — a role this Bat-sequel seemed to fit to a tee. Too bad it got ignored.

