John Kiriakou blew the whistle on the CIA and changed American history forever

By COOPER WOODWARD
Associate Sports Editor

In the years following 2001, the U.S. found themselves reeling from the fresh, painful wound of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The vast majority of the country was focused on rebuilding and very few people cared about what was happening behind closed doors. Most people didn't want to know. One person decided that they needed to.

That man was John Kiriakou.

A 14-year veteran of the CIA, Kiriakou wasn't some low-level desk officer. He was part of the team that captured Abu Zubaydah, a high-ranking al-Qaeda operative and associate of Osama bin Laden, in 2002.

But his journey to fame begins long before Zubaydah's arrest.

Kirakou joined the CIA out of graduate school at George Washington University, where he was recruited by psychiatrist Jerrold Post. Post, posing as a professor, gave Kiriakou an assignment to write a physiological profile on his boss. Kiriakou aced the assignment and Post officially brought him into the CIA.


ILLUSRTATION BY KATERINA PARIZKOVA

In the early part of Kiriakou's CIA career, he was sent all over the place. He began his time as an agent as a Middle East analyst specializing on Iraq. From there, he moved to Bahrain to serve as an economic officer with the U.S. embassy. He would eventually return home to work in the Directorate of Operations.

After his final stint abroad as a counter-terrorism operations officer in Greece, tragedy struck his homeland as the 9/11 attacks rocked the foundation of the U.S. to its core. In that chaos, Kiriakou was promoted to Chief of Counterterrorism Operations in Pakistan. The role put him on the front lines of the War on Terror, leading capture after capture of al-Qaeda fighters, including Zubaydah.

While his 2004 departure into the private sector ended his time in public service, his work as an agent would be felt for years to come. That impact began in 2007.

On Dec. 10 of that year, Kiriakou sat down with ABC News and dropped the news heard around the world. He would reveal that while Zubaydah was in custody he would be waterboarded, a technique considered torture under international law.

It was the first breadcrumb in a long trail of questionable ethical behavior of prisoners at the hands of the U.S. Government.

Two years later, the full picture came out and it was worse than anyone could've imagined. Zubaydah wasn't just waterboarded once, or twice or even a handful of times. He was waterboarded 83 times over the course of a month.

Zubaydah wasn't the only one who was tortured. Prisoners in facilities such as Guantanamo Bay were subject to beatings, binding in contouring positions, sleep deprivation, sexual assault, abuse and confinement in coffin-like boxes. All for results that Kiriakou believed didn't work.

The program Kiriakou helped expose was darker than even he had known.

Instead of investigating the CIA's tactics, the Senate Intelligence Committee turned its attention to Kiriakou. Prosecutors called him "a reckless leaker," while former intelligence colleagues described his actions as "reprehensible" and "a betrayal of the trust the U.S. Government put in him."

In 2012, the government indicted him on one count of violating the Intelligence Identities Protection Act, three counts under the Espionage Act and one count of making false statements. An indictment that carries a 45-year sentence.

Instead, he pled guilty and was slapped with a 30-month sentence in a low security facility in Loretto, PA. He followed his conscience and paid the price.

Kiriakou was released in 2015 and has refused to be quiet since. He has taken every microphone handed to him through podcasts, interviews, op-eds, panels and everything in between.

Since that fateful day in 2007 to now, his argument has not changed; a democracy cannot function when its government hides what it does in the name of its people. Torture wasn't just morally wrong, it didn't even work.

"I love this country more than anything else in the world, and I want it to do the right thing," Kiriakou said in an interview with The Diary of A CEO. "We're a country of laws and we have to obey our laws."

Now in his 60s, Kiriakou is still making the rounds to anyone that will listen. He's still saying the same stuff he did in 2007 and still insisting the American public has the right to know.

Ranking 2025 Best Picture Nominations

By ZACHARY REAGAN
Staff Writer

At the end of an awards season that has felt like its own marathon came the finishing line of the Oscars' Best Picture. This year has seen some of the stiffest competition for this award in a long time, with many comparing to the likes of some legendary lineups, like 2020 ("Parasite," "Once Upon a Time in Hollywood," "The Irishman," "Little Women") or 2008 ("There Will Be Blood," "No Country for Old Men.")

Don't get me wrong, I liked every nominee for Best Picture this year, but some way more than others. There were also some pretty bad snubs for this award, in my opinion, and I think they deserve honorable mentions. "Sirāt" (Dir. Oliver Laxe), "It Was Just An Accident" (Dir. Jafar Panahi) and "No Other Choice" (Dir. Park Chan-wook) are all foreign films that landed in my personal top 10 of the year. Honestly, all of the foreign pictures in awards contention this year were phenomenal, and made up so much of the substance of such a strong year for movies. All are worth checking out. But without any more fluff, here's my ranking of the nominees from worst to best.

5. 'SINNERS' (4.5 STARS)

We're getting into the true heavy hitters here. It's tough to say much that hasn't already been said about "Sinners." Despite what might be considered a low placing, I've seen it more than any other film on this list, and to be honest, the rewatchability might be its strongest attribute. Creator Ryan Coogler excellently nails down the time period of the antebellum South, with awesome costumes, characters and music that could've only come through that era.

This film just oozes charm and definitely has that X-factor too. I doubt anyone will forget the musical vision in the middle of the movie. As the now most-nominated film in Oscar's history, it's clear that it's captured the hearts of its contemporaries just as much as the general public. I would've been elated seeing this cast rush the stage for Best Picture. Unfortunately for Coogler, the Academy decided it was Anderson's night.

4. 'THE SECRET AGENT' (4.5 STARS)

Even as a complete rookie to Brazilian cinema, I can tell that director Kleber Mendoça Filho's most recent film is one of those ones. As the tagline suggests, 1977 Brazil was a place of great mischief under its military dictatorship. It was a bit of a lawless land, and Filho used a lot of his own memory growing up in Brazil during this time to inform decisions about the film.

His political thriller utilizes actor Wagner Moura to his fullest potential. Not to be outdone by all of the twin performances of 2025, Moura plays three distinct characters, but mainly portrays academic researcher Armando Solimões, who tries to disappear under a fake name, Marcelo Alves. The film treats these two as sort of separate characters, but we know they have the same being, chasing the same goal. Moura also plays Armando's son Fernando in the final scene of the movie, showing how political trauma continues to torment later generations if it's not addressed.

This film is a true love letter to Brazil, from the casting, the performances, the music and atmosphere. My main gripe is that, as an outsider, this was tough to follow on first viewing. It was, of course, my own problem, and a repeat viewing was incredibly rewarding. If you feel you can't spare the time, I recommend reading up on the time period before or after to get a better sense of what the time was like. This one was snubbed pretty badly in my opinion, seeing no wins from its four nominations, but the next one got it even worse.

3. 'MARTY SUPREME' (4.5 STARS)

I thought Timothee Chalamet deserved the Best Actor this year for his performance. While Michael B. Jordan undoubtedly deserved the award as well, it felt like the industry's punishment of Timothée Chalamet for being a little too loud. I felt this was vindicated, seeing Sean Penn win his category after doing pretty much no campaigning, and he didn't even bother showing up for the ceremony. The whole thing rubs me the wrong way, since it feels like a power move. I mean, most of the input about the award I've been seeing has been hating on Chalamet instead of giving Jordan his flowers.

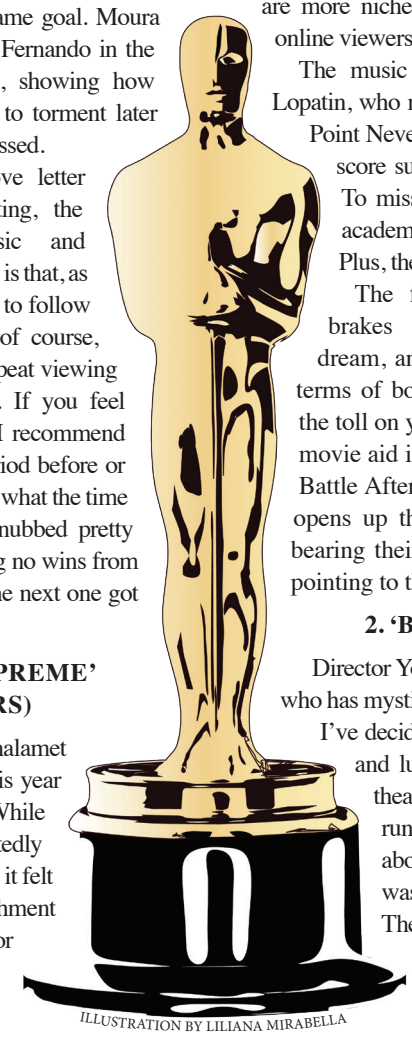
ILLUSTRATION BY LILIANA MIRABELLA

Outside of the awards drama, "Marty Supreme" still needs its flowers, too. It's the pivotal Safdie romp. Director Josh Safdie takes everything he and his brother did on "Uncut Gems" (2019) and pushes the envelope. He infuses the movie with more New York influence, making the main character even more unlikable, but somehow, you root for Mauser more. The cast of characters is more zany, and the meta pop culture references are more niche and rewarding to chronically online viewers like me.

The music builds on this trend. Daniel Lopatin, who makes solo music as Oneohtrix Point Never, adds more instruments to his score suited for more complex motifs. To miss a score nomination from the academy is a failure on all accounts. Plus, the synths just absolutely rip.

The film itself is an all-gas-no-brakes story about the American dream, and what it takes from you, in terms of both in terms of the effort and the toll on your psyche. All aspects of the movie aid in its tension, and unlike "One Battle After Another," I feel that it really opens up the members of its ensemble, bearing their flaws while more explicitly pointing to their intentions.

2. 'BUGONIA' (4.5 STARS)

Director Yorgos Lanthimos is a filmmaker who has mystified and amazed me every time I've decided to watch one of his movies, and luckily, I got to this one in the theaters on the very last day of its run. Every time I made a claim about the plot in the moment, it was almost immediately refuted. The twists and turns this film took were unpredictable and, at times, jaw-dropping.

Actors Emma Stone, Jesse Plemons and newcomer Aidan Delbis all deliver career-defining performances, in my opinion. Plemons is one of the bigger Academy nomination snubs, missing out on best lead actor, but getting replaced by Moura is begrudgingly acceptable. And although Ethan Hawke carried "Blue Moon" (2025), my heart aches that Plemons isn't on that shortlist instead.

This score manages to be even more wonky and genre-bending than "One Battle," which sort of robbed some of my enjoyment of its strongest aspect. The dark and eerie tone of the score helps elevate the tense scenes in the basement, and when we finally move out, it's like an eruption. All in all, "Bugonia" has earned Lanthimos a lifelong fan out of me.

1. 'SENTIMENTAL VALUE' (5 STARS)

I could say the same for Joachim Trier. After watching this and his 2021 piece, "The Worst Person in the World" in back-to-back days, Trier's talent of capturing the beauty in the mundane is unlike anything I've ever seen.

The decision to forge the Borg family home into a character at the beginning of the film was a genius one. The way it personifies the relationship between all of the characters who occupy it is a beautiful display.

The acting in this movie is on another level. Actors Renate Reinsve, Inga Ibsdotter Lilleaas and Stellan Skarsgard would all have won their respective acting Oscars if I were given a say. Not to say the seasoned Elle Fanning doesn't deserve her praise, nominated alongside Lilleaas. The way they all encapsulate the tenuous father-daughter relationship, each in their own way, felt incredibly raw and real.

Both times I've seen this, when Labi Siffre's "Cannock Chase" appeared in the end credits, I was floored by the chills. I realized I was always bound to love this film. Trier and Reinsve have also earned the permanent yes from me, and if given the choice, their "Sentimental Value" would be my Best Picture winner.

An extended version of this story can be found on quchronicle.com.