



Heroism on the High Seas: Piracy, Type T Personality, and Perspicacity

A Review of

Captain Phillips (2013)

by Paul Greengrass (Director)

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Reviewed by

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[Warning: This review contains spoilers.]

Captain Phillips is a lengthy exposition of piracy on the sea off Somalia. It is a reenactment based on a true event that happened on April 8, 2009, although questions about the film's authenticity have been raised (Escobedo, 2013). Aside from the question of truth value, the film is an intense, dark, and fearsome depiction of an event usually thought of as a 19th-century phenomenon. Indeed, it was apparently the only hijacking of a U.S. cargo ship in over 200 years.

The film stars Tom Hanks as Captain Richard Phillips, a family man from Vermont who is a professional captain of commercial ships, in this instance of the container ship MV Maersk *Alabama*. An example of the piracy endemic in Somalian waters in the early 21st century, the *Alabama* is set upon by Somalian pirates. The recruitment of the pirates in Somalia is a complex, crowd-sourced scramble by men looking for the payoff from successful piracy, possibly veterans of this crime and aroused by the size of this particular ship and its potential value. There is the implication that a significant figure or figures are behind this piracy, that it is a relatively organized enterprise operated like an old-time union in which daily hires are identified at the docks, with only a limited number being signed on for any particular pirate action. It is implied that such piracy is not the work of small groups of improvising lone wolves.

This piracy is low tech, with small unsophisticated boats including a small, unimpressive "mothership" that follows smaller motorboats into the action. The contrast of the simple, low-tech, low-cost pirate equipment with the enormous high-tech, expensive *Alabama* with its extensive communication facility and state-of-the-art navigation system is dramatic. The situation is reminiscent of the use of box cutters by hijackers to take control of state-of-the-art airplanes on 9/11 and bring down the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center.

Aboard the *Alabama* the atmosphere is a palpable fear of these pirate-infested waters as the crew is preparing for the dangerous journey. Drills are undertaken. Captain Phillips is authoritative in the preparation, seeming to be perspicacious in understanding the threat.

The script and the setting give a true sense of reality to the preparation scenes. Of course, the viewer brings to the film the public knowledge of 21st-century piracy in Somalian seas and the modus operandi of most of these attacks.

There are few surprises in the movie. The acting is generally outstanding, with Hanks doing his well-known "steady against threat/against the odds" approach (e.g., his roles in *Cast Away* and *Apollo 13*). The much-reported leadership and heroism of the real Phillips seem well depicted. Some 240 miles off shore from Somalia, the pirates attack his ship. As it is impossible for a massive container vessel to outmaneuver the small craft the pirates use, the captain uses the major defense they have available, a powerful water-hosing system that operates around the entire perimeter of the ship, to ward off attackers. These hosings, however, prove ineffectual and are easily outwitted by the pirates, who, it should be noted, are well armed with assault rifles and possibly more. It is the lack of arms on the *Alabama* that stands out and reveals the Achilles heel of commercial shipping in the area at that time. The crew members are depicted as not wanting to be armed. One wonders at the validity of this depiction, given that the crews on these ships face possible death at the hands of pirates. But the absurdity of unarmed multimillion dollar commercial vessels in that region in 2009 is abundantly clear.

Of the four pirates who attack the *Alabama*, one is a violent psychopath, one is a somewhat sympathetic figure, one has a limited profile, and the cool-headed leader, Muse (played by Barkhad Abdi), struggles to contain his gang and stay on the task of getting the target ransom. The pirates' acting is superb, with some individual personalities emerging. The leader, Muse, is continuously on the edge of losing control of his crew, particularly of the biggest and strongest member, the "psychopath," who would prefer to kill Phillips rather than deal with ransom negotiations with the U.S. Navy. The emotional contagion (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994) among the pirates is high, and Muse's rational leadership is always challenged. Aside from the harried Hanks, the most convincing characters are the pirates. They are able to get Phillips off the *Alabama*, despite the ship's crew fighting back creatively, escaping with Phillips in a covered, powered lifeboat and attempting to reach land with their ransom victim.

The most intense scenes take place in the small crowded lifeboat. Phillips's heroism is readily apparent when he offers himself to the pirates to save any of his crew who might potentially be killed: "If you want to shoot someone, shoot me," he says to the pirates. Such a sacrifice is highly risky and shows key qualities of "Big H" heroism (Farley, 2010) including risk taking and generosity/altruism, traits considered part of what has been called the "Type T personality" (Farley, 2001). Big H heroism also often includes courage and strength, high motivation, and competence, among other traits.

Phillips's nemesis, pirate leader Muse, shows some of the same traits, which creates a sort of hero/antihero equation. Leading a small crew of edgy, undisciplined pirates against a massive American container ship requires considerable risk taking. Unlike his "psychopath" crew member, Muse does not want to kill Phillips. He just wants the ransom for his boss, crew, and presumably himself. He has a dream of America, a sense of how he might live there with the spoils of his piracy.

There is a sub-rosa respect between Phillips and Muse as leaders, sharing in a sense the psychology of this traumatic event. Muse seems chastened when Phillips asks him, in effect, "There's got to be something better than being a fisherman and kidnapping people." "Maybe

in America," Muse responds, implying that people in America, a First World country, have opportunities for a better life. Muse in fact exemplifies a stereotype image of a Third World figure: Thin and gaunt, the other pirates call him "skinny." The grinding poverty, despair, and suffering of Somalia might be seen as motivators for the hijackings and piracy, but they are not explored in the film.

While a captive in the lifeboat, Phillips shows stress yet also resilience, compassion, and even generosity toward one pirate with a foot injury. But he maintains continuous attention and alertness for opportunities for escape, which he finally achieves in a life-risking leap from the lifeboat into the open nighttime ocean when U.S. Navy SEALs and Navy ships arrive in force. However, no effective help is provided him, and he is recaptured by the pirates.

The final scenes begin when Muse takes his own risk and agrees to go with Navy SEALs to a Navy ship to negotiate the ransom while Phillips remains a captive on the lifeboat. Once Muse is aboard the Navy ship, SEAL sharpshooters kill all the pirates on the lifeboat, and Phillips's ordeal is over. Muse later ends up in an Illinois prison, seeing America at last, but as a nightmare more than a dream.

Phillips, upon regaining his freedom, tries to release his pent-up emotions, showing the emotional toll of the ordeal, but a Navy nurse in what might be labeled *abrupt triage psychotherapy* helps him restore his characteristic self-control. Survival and heroic and inspirational leadership are Phillips's contributions to the *Alabama's* incident, as portrayed in the film.

The film starts out slowly, gaining momentum as the piracy takes place, but it seems lengthy. There is not enough clear depiction of characters or complexity of plot to sustain viewers' interest. The action is much like the pervasive news stories of violence we see so much of. Hanks gives an intense performance and engages viewers. Abdi as Muse is also interesting, but not as much of his character is revealed. Viewers learn something about Somali piracy, little about Somali pirates, see a pirate leader with some positive features, and see an American commercial shipping captain reveal heroism under fire. The psychology depicted is rather straightforward, and there is little insight provided into the characters or the complex factors underlying this 21st-century form of piracy.

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