

Ben Affleck's *Argo*: An embrace of US foreign policy

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24 October 2012

Directed by Ben Affleck, screenplay by Chris Terrio

Argo, a new political thriller starring and directed by Ben Affleck, has earned critical praise and a number two spot on the box office charts for the second straight week. The film is based on declassified information about a little-known episode during the Iran hostage crisis of 1979-1980.

In the midst of the Iranian Revolution against the Shah, Washington's brutal puppet, a group of demonstrators stormed the US embassy in November 1979, capturing and holding 52 Americans for 444 days. Six American diplomats present in the embassy that day escaped and secretly found shelter in the home of the Canadian ambassador. The film recounts the story of the CIA's rescue of these six.

Two months after the chaotic scenes at the embassy in Tehran, the group's safety is increasingly in doubt. Back in the US, CIA 'exfiltration' expert Tony Mendez (Ben Affleck) concocts a plan to pose as a member of a Canadian film unit scouting locations for a *Planet of the Apes*-inspired science fiction movie. The success of the scheme, the best of the bad ideas proposed, requires selecting an actual script (hence "Argo"), assembling a Hollywood production team and promoting the planned film to the press. Mendez enters Iran, posing as the film's producer, and must lead the group in their exodus.

A couple of contrived close calls aside, the film manages to hold the viewer's interest not so much through the non-stop action so often resorted to in films of this genre. Instead, Affleck attempts to convey tension through blending archival and newsreel footage

from the time. The filmmakers are relatively restrained in their use of suspense sequences, inserted in a storyline with occasionally comic dialogue.

Holding one's interest, however, is one thing, but to leave an impression, to say something meaningful about the conditions of life—and history—is quite another. The power of the media and information, in contrast to the power of the gun, emerges as a theme: hence, a mock execution staged in front of a camera, musings about whether the revolutionary fervor in Iran is all for media consumption, the fake movie project itself ... In the end, there's not much that's fresh on offer in *Argo*. The subplot of the absentee father, struggling to maintain a relationship with his son, comes off as especially trite and predictable.

Far more problematic are the implications of the film's portrayal of the hostage crisis and the rescue operation. The events of 1979-1980 did not emerge fresh from the ether. The US government and the CIA in particular played a direct role in the 1953 coup that reinstalled the Shah of Iran in power. A quarter century of absolute rule and brutal suppression of all resistance in Iran depended first and foremost on support from Washington. Wide layers of the country's population were outraged by America's role by 1979.

While this history of neocolonial intervention is acknowledged in a minute or two of narration at the film's outset, what dominates throughout the remaining two hours is something quite different. We're meant to embrace the CIA hero, chuckle at Hollywood's collaboration with the intelligence apparatus and view the Iranian masses as the enemy.

The brief reference to past (and ongoing) crimes is included to provide a semblance of balance, but then this history is essentially pushed aside and forgotten. It plays no active role in *Argo*'s events and serves, in the end, to provide a certain veneer of objectivity to a work that promotes the operations of US imperialism. Decades of repression, torture and murder are one thing, but, after all, six American lives are at stake!

For the filmmakers, who included co-producer George Clooney, "It was always important to us that the movie not be politicized," Affleck told interviewer Romain Raynaldy. "We went to great pains to try to make it very factual and fact-based, knowing that it was going to be coming out before an election in the United States when a lot of things get politicized. We obviously couldn't forecast how terrible things would become now, but even when we made the movie, we saw some resonance to countries that were in tumult ... Just because a part of the world is undergoing strife and tumult, it doesn't mean you stop examining it, looking at it or talking about it. I think that would be a bad thing."

One always reads such comments with amazement.

Indeed the present "strife" in the region cries out for more, not less, coverage in film and art more generally. However, genuine art uncovers deeper truths, it doesn't evade them in a cowardly fashion by contenting oneself with superficial "facts" and trivial episodes.

Affleck's love affair with the CIA, known around the world (and in Iran in particular) as Murder Inc., is disgusting. Former agent Mendez was heavily involved in the making of *Argo*, Affleck noted. The actor-director explained to Raynaldy, "It was really inspiring to meet Tony. He was steeped in this movie. It was Tony's story, Tony's point of view."

Hollywood's empty-headedness makes a host of directors, writers and performers vulnerable to pressures and moods, and social forces, that they may only be partially aware of. Affleck seems oblivious to the fact that his film, whether he likes it or not, has become part of the effort by the American ruling elite to drag the US into a war with Iran.

But does thoughtlessness make his activities any more excusable? Can the filmmakers be entirely blind to the context in which their film was shot and released: a decade of US military occupations on either side of Iran, ongoing covert operations and economic warfare, and relentless and growing threats of military intervention by the US and Israel?

No doubt, shameful as it is to point out, the presence of Democrat Barack Obama in the White House makes the war drive more acceptable to film industry liberals. The film that first brought Affleck fame, *Good Will Hunting* (1997), which he co-wrote with Matt Damon, referred approvingly to left academics Howard Zinn and Noam Chomsky, who, whatever else one wants to say about them, were public opponents of the US invasions of the Middle East.

Fifteen years later, Affleck, apparently in quest of renewed box office success and a return to superstardom, finds himself in the middle of the drive to demonize Iran and the Iranians. There's not much more to be said.



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