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From Zero to Hero: The CIA and Hollywood Today

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Abstract:

This article examines the production, content, and public reception of *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Argo*. The two Oscar-winning films are placed within the context of the Central Intelligence Agency's efforts to engage more creatively with America's entertainment industry over the last two decades. While *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Argo* are just two of the CIA's most recent collaborations with Hollywood, it can be argued that, together, they represent the organization's greatest achievements so far in refashioning the image of US intelligence on the silver screen.

Two forty-million-dollar movies celebrating the real-life efforts of the Central Intelligence Agency competed for Oscars in early 2013. *Zero Dark Thirty* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2012) focused on the agency's dogged, ten-year hunt for the leader of al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden. *Argo* (Ben Affleck, 2012) dramatized the CIA's 'exfiltration' of six American embassy officials during the 1979-1981 Iranian hostage crisis. While *Argo* eventually captured the headlines on Oscar night by winning the Academy Award for Best Picture, the fact that two of the year's most prestigious movies championed US intelligence suggests that Hollywood now views the CIA more positively than at any other stage in the agency's history. More intriguingly, the production history of these films indicates that what some might see as Hollywood's volte-face on the CIA can be related to the agency's recent efforts to engage more creatively with America's entertainment industry.

There is a long and rich history of American and other filmmakers scapegoating the CIA for US foreign policy misdemeanors. Since the agency's birth in the early years of the Cold War, and especially following revelations of CIA malfeasance during the Watergate era, Hollywood has usually cast the CIA in one of five basic ways. The first depicts the agency as obsessed with assassination [*Three Days of the Condor* (Sydney Pollack, 1975), *Syriana* (Stephen Gaghan, 2005)], while the second constructs the CIA as rogue operatives acting without political oversight [*The Amateur* (Charles Jarrott, 1981) and *Clear and Present Danger* (Phillip Noyce, 1994)]. The third category of films portrays the agency abusing its own officers and assets [*Body of Lies* (Ridley Scott, 2008), *Spy Game* (Tony Scott, 2001)], while the

fourth and fifth present the CIA as either hopelessly ineffective [*Hopscotch* (Ronald Neame, 1980), *Spies Like Us* (John Landis, 1985)] or shamelessly immoral [*The Osterman Weekend* (Sam Peckinpah, 1983), *Rendition* (Gavin Hood, 2007)].¹

Hollywood's long-running antipathy towards the CIA has aroused the ire of many inside the agency over the years. In 1999, Bill Harlow, CIA Director of Public Affairs during the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations, expressed frustration with the entertainment industry's typecasting of the agency's officers as "evil, terrible, malicious folks," citing *In the Line of Fire* (Wolfgang Petersen, 1993) as a perfect example.² Likewise, agency veteran Chase Brandon complained about the preponderance of villainous CIA officers in political thrillers "always fomenting revolution or serving as hit men."³ For years on screen, the CIA had "been imbued with these extraordinary Machiavellian conspiratorial capabilities," Brandon protested, and the effect was both insulting and harmful.⁴

¹ Tricia Jenkins, *The CIA and Hollywood: How the Agency Shapes Film and Television* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 17-26.

² Harlow in Vernon Loeb, "The CIA's Operation Hollywood: 'Company of Spies' Wins Raves from Image Conscious Agency," *Washington Post*, Oct 14, 1999, www.washingtonpost.com.

³ Brandon in David Robb, *Operation Hollywood: How the Pentagon Shapes and Censors the Movies*, (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2004), 149.

⁴ Brandon in Paula Bernstein, "Hardest-Working Actor of the Season: The C.I.A.," *The New York Times*, Sept 2, 2001, www.nytimes.com.

In an effort to counter these images, the CIA began working directly with Hollywood in the mid-1990s, and soon hired Chase Brandon, one of whose cousins was the actor Tommy Lee Jones, as its first Entertainment Industry Liaison. Brandon's job was to educate filmmakers about the role of the CIA, to use the agency's assets to negotiate for more favorable representations in scripts, to encourage filmmakers to publicize CIA successes, and to guide producers during their research. Brandon worked in this position for over a decade and his successors have continued to follow his agenda. In 2007, for example, Paul Barry established a website titled "Now Playing" that drew on declassified agency archives to recommend possible story lines for writers and producers to explore through film – about, say, the CIA's secret tunnels in Cold War Berlin or the agency's more contemporary role in air crash investigations.⁵ More recently, members of the CIA's public affairs team have focused on connecting CIA leaders with writers and directors working in the pre-production stage of projects in order to secure more positive images of the agency in the final product. As a result of these activities over the past two decades, the CIA has been able to influence the content of many texts, including *Alias* (ABC, 2001-2006), *JAG* (NBC, CBS 1995-2005), *The Agency* (CBS 2001-2003), *In the Company of Spies* (Showtime, 1999), *The Recruit* (Roger Donaldson, 2003), *The Sum of All Fears* (Phil Robinson, 2002), *Covert Affairs* (USA,

⁵ "Now Playing Archive," Central Intelligence Agency, last modified July 2010, <https://www.cia.gov/offices-of-cia/public-affairs/entertainment-industry-liaison/now-playing-archive.html>.

2010-) and *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011-). While *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Argo* are just two of the CIA's most recent collaborations with Hollywood, it can be argued that, together, they represent Langley's greatest achievements so far in refashioning the image of US intelligence on the silver screen. The rest of this article explains why.

Zero Dark Thirty

Zero Dark Thirty first came to public prominence in the summer of 2011, when the Chairman of the US House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security, Peter King, alleged that President Barack Obama cynically planned to use the movie as part of his campaign for re-election in November 2012. Contrary to what many conspiracy theorists subsequently thought, *Zero Dark Thirty* did not originate in the White House. Neither did it emerge as a fully formed propaganda piece, as some people might have later deduced, from the CIA's Public Affairs Office. The movie was instead the brainchild of two filmmakers who combined a reputation for political independence and commercial nous with impeccable credentials in military and intelligence circles.

In their multi-Academy-award-winning 2009 drama about a US bomb disposal team in Iraq, director Kathryn Bigelow and screenwriter Mark Boal made what some in the Pentagon regarded as a near-perfect war movie.⁶ Based on Boal's

⁶ See June 15, 2011 email from Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs Douglas Wilson to Benjamin Rhodes, Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications. This email, and others like it, were made publically available

experience in 2004 while embedded with a US Army bomb squad in Iraq, *The Hurt Locker* depicted the immense physical and psychological effects that asymmetrical warfare had on modern soldiering. Following the success of *The Hurt Locker*, Bigelow and Boal embarked on a project about the US government's long, frustrating search for Osama bin Laden, focusing on the 2001 siege at Tora Bora in eastern Afghanistan. When, in May 2011, President Obama dramatically announced that US Special Forces had killed the 9/11 mastermind in a compound near Abbottabad in Pakistan, Bigelow and Boal quickly shifted the focus of their project to that raid and the intelligence efforts that led to it. Eighteen months later, in December 2012, *Zero Dark Thirty* premiered. The film centered on Maya, a CIA analyst played by Jessica Chastain, who spends over ten years trying to find bin

through www.scribd.com by *Judicial Watch* after its FOIA lawsuit regarding the relationship between the government and *Zero Dark Thirty's* filmmakers. For links to these documents, see "Judicial Watch Obtains DOD and CIA Records Detailing Meetings with bin Laden Raid Filmmakers." *Judicial Watch*, May 22, 2012, www.judicialwatch.org/press-room/press-releases/13421/ and "Judicial Watch Obtains Stack of 'Overlooked' CIA Records Detailing Meetings with bin Laden Filmmakers," *Judicial Watch*, August 28, 2012, www.judicialwatch.org/press-room/press-releases/judicial-watch-obtains-4-to-5-inch-stack-of-overlooked-cia-records-detailing-meetings-with-bin-laden-filmmakers/. Also see, Gregg Zoroya, "Veterans Say 'The Hurt Locker' Gets a Lot Right and Wrong'," *USA Today*, Feb 19, 2010, www.usatoday.com.

Laden. The first two acts of the film revolve around Maya's research into the leads generated from detainees tortured during the CIA's notorious black site program. Eventually, Maya locates the name and whereabouts of bin Laden's courier, who is tailed to the hideout. The movie's final, climactic act recreates the US Navy SEALs' helicopter assault on bin Laden's hideout, providing a series of daring action sequences in a production that otherwise concentrates on the cerebral hunt for, as the tagline put it, "the world's most dangerous man."

Zero Dark Thirty is by no means the first Hollywood movie to benefit from official assistance. We can trace the close links between Washington and the US film industry to at least the First World War, when the Committee on Public Information run by George Creel produced documentary features like *Pershing's Crusaders* (Herbert C. Hoagland, 1918).⁷ During the battle for hearts and minds during the Cold War, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the US Atomic Energy Commission and the United States Information Agency were among the many government agencies that recruited filmmakers to the nation's cause.⁸ The Pentagon especially has a long track record of lending men and equipment to productions that might

⁷ David Culbert (ed.), *Film and Propaganda in America: World War 1* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1990), 90-116.

⁸ Tony Shaw, *Hollywood's Cold War* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

boost the military's image – hence the “guidance” on bomb-disposal training given to *The Hurt Locker's* actors at Fort Irwin in California in 2007.⁹

However, the support *Zero Dark Thirty* garnered among different branches of the US national security bureaucracy - all, in some respects, competing for top billing in the story of bin Laden's execution - is quite remarkable. Government documents made publically available by *Judicial Watch* show that in June 2011 the Obama White House was itself “trying to have visibility” into the various projects about the bin Laden raid then being proposed by filmmakers but that it preferred the idea of assisting Boal and Bigelow's because “this is likely the most high profile one.”¹⁰ Documents also imply that some in the Obama Administration hoped to influence Boal's depiction of the raid as a politically “gutsy decision” by the President since there was, based on the intelligence, only a 60-80% certainty that the al-Qaeda

⁹ “A Few Words With 'Hurt Locker' Star Jeremy Renner,” *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, July 29, 2009, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=111325645>; Lawrence Suid, *Guts and Glory: The Making of the American Military Image in Film* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2002).

¹⁰ June 15, 2011 email from Rhodes, Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications to Wilson, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, then-CIA Director of Public Affairs George Little, and Deputy White House Press Secretary Jaime Smith. See “Judicial Watch Obtains Stack.”

leader was actually in the Abbottabad compound.¹¹ If bin Laden had not been there, the White House would in all likelihood have been publically humiliated.

That same month, Boal impressed public affairs officials at the Department of Defense by his stated desire to depict the bin Laden raid as a model of coordination between the Pentagon and CIA. Douglas Wilson, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, knew the filmmakers well, and paid tribute to their previous work and for the support they were giving to military family organizations.¹² Eric Olson, Chief of the US Special Forces Command, was also enthusiastic about Bigelow and Boal's project, but insisted on keeping it secret. Emails reveal that Olson wanted "to shape the story to prevent any gross inaccuracies" but he did not "want to make it look like the commanders think it's OK to talk to the media [about covert operations]."¹³ Due to a paucity of records, it is unclear what the Special Forces Command's role eventually was in making *Zero Dark Thirty*.

Of all of the branches of government, it is the CIA that involved itself most in the development of *Zero Dark Thirty*. The agency realized that the way many Americans would remember and process the events leading up to bin Laden's death

¹¹ E-mail, June 9, 2011, Robert Mehal Public Affairs Officer, Defense Press Operations, to Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence Michael Vickers et al. See "Judicial Watch Obtains DOD and CIA Records."

¹² Email, Jun 15, 2011, Wilson to Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications, Benjamin Rhodes.

¹³ Email, June 13, 2011, Douglas Wilson to Michael Vickers et al.

might be significantly influenced by the feature film, since it would be the first and best promoted about the subject. Other television productions would inevitably appear, but the agency may have suspected (correctly) that these would downplay the CIA's long-term role in favor of the SEALs' more dramatic kill mission.¹⁴ "We don't 'pick favorites' [but] it makes sense to get behind the winning horse," Marie Harf in the CIA's Public Affairs Office noted in a June 7, 2011 email. "We really do have a sense that this is going to be *the* movie on the UBL operation – and we all want CIA to be as well-represented in it as possible."¹⁵ Based on the filmmakers' extensive contacts in the military and intelligence fields, CIA officials also felt confident that "Mark and Kathryn" would be sympathetic to their interests and work to construct a positive portrayal of the agency's role in the operation. "As he did with the *Hurt Locker*, [Boal is] very concerned about operational security and will take any of our concerns into account," Harf told colleagues in a June 30, 2011 email, before concluding that Boal "seems committed to representing the Agency well in what is a multi-million dollar major motion picture."

Both the CIA and the filmmakers understood that a sense of accuracy and authenticity was the key to *Zero Dark Thirty's* success. The agency therefore arranged for the filmmakers to have access to the "vault" – the room where much of the Navy SEALs' tactical planning occurred— and to tour the CIA's basic facilities

¹⁴ For instance, *SEAL Team Six* was a 2012 television film chronicling the unit's Abbottabad raid that aired on the National Geographic Channel.

¹⁵ Email, June 15, 2011 from Harf to classified recipients.

and museum. The agency also helped Boal verify the accuracy of the floor plan that the set designers used for their full-scale replica of bin Laden's hideout, including information regarding its third floor where bin Laden lived that was not available in open-sources.¹⁶ More importantly, the CIA's Office of Public Affairs set up multiple meetings for Boal and Bigelow with people who could offer expert, inside information on the long search for bin Laden. These included a translator involved in the Abbottabad raid; the unnamed Director of the Counter Terrorism Center; the CIA Director's Chief of Staff, Jeremy Bash; the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence, Michael Vickers; and Deputy Director of the CIA, Mike Morrell. This assistance was offered with the "full knowledge and full approval" of CIA Director Leon Panetta.¹⁷

Though the CIA's Office of Public Affairs claims not to "review or sign off on scripts,"¹⁸ its staff held at least five conference calls with Boal during which scripting discussions took place. "From an Agency perspective," a CIA memo obtained by Gawker.com states, "the purpose for these discussions was for OPA officers to help

¹⁶ E-mail, July 14, 2011, Mark Boal to Marie Harf.

¹⁷ June 15, 2011 e-mail from Wilson to Rhodes.

¹⁸ March 25, 2014 email from Christopher White, CIA Office of Public Affairs, to Shaw.

promote an appropriate portrayal of the Agency and the Bin Ladin [sic] operation.”¹⁹ Marie Harf informed colleagues in a June 30, 2011 email that Boal had agreed to share scripts and details about the movie with the Office, “so we’re absolutely comfortable with what he will be showing.” In a July 20, 2011 email, Boal thanked another OPA staffer, George Little, for supporting the project inside the agency, claiming that it “made all the difference,” and praised Harf for logging “many, many extra miles on this project with total finesse.” The CIA reciprocated by allowing Boal access to a grand ceremony for military and intelligence officials held at the CIA complex, where, according to several newspaper accounts, Director Panetta revealed “top secret” information about the raid on bin Laden’s compound, including the name of the Navy SEALs unit which had carried it out.²⁰

At first glance, the support that the CIA gave to *Zero Dark Thirty* might seem surprising. Historically, the CIA has only assisted filmmakers and television producers if their projects present the agency in entirely positive terms. *In the Company of Spies*, *The Agency* and *The Sum of All Fears* are all excellent examples of this. In contrast, in 2001 the CIA refused to assist *Spy Game* because it disparaged

¹⁹ Adrian Chen. “Newly Declassified Memo Shows CIA Shaped *Zero Dark Thirty*’s Narrative,” *Gawker.com*, May 6, 2013, <http://gawker.com/declassified-memo-shows-how-cia-shaped-zero-dark-thirty-493174407>.

²⁰ See for instance, Josh Gerstein, “Report: Leon Panetta Revealed Classified SEAL Unit Info”, *Politico.com*, June 5, 2013, www.politico.com.

senior CIA management.²¹ A year later, the agency looked equally askance at *The Bourne Identity* (Doug Liman, 2002) on the grounds that it heavily featured assassinations.²² As recently as 2008, Entertainment Industry Liaison Paul Barry vetoed support for scripts featuring CIA agents using torture, labeling such scenes out-and-out “showstoppers.”²³ Yet harrowing scenes of officially prescribed torture are an integral component of *Zero Dark Thirty*; the film also shows the CIA making serious errors.

It is clear from documentation available that the CIA did not need *Zero Dark Thirty* to present a highly sanitized portrait of the agency’s part in the early War on Terror. While the CIA did successfully negotiate out a scene featuring one of their operatives drunkenly firing shots from an AK-47 while standing on a rooftop in Islamabad, and another in which a dog was used as an “enhanced interrogation technique” (EIT),²⁴ the agency let other adverse scenes stand. One, which was based on a real-life incident at Camp Chapman in Afghanistan in 2009, sees a friend of Maya’s, CIA analyst Jessica (Jennifer Ehle), allowing a Jordanian “asset” to enter a US military installation in Afghanistan without going through security checks because she believes he has high-level access to al-Qaeda and will be spooked by the guards.

²¹ Brandon in Zoe Black, “Showbiz Gossip: Features,” *Wales on Sunday*, Oct 14, 2001.

²² Brandon in Josh Young, “24, Alias and the New Spook Shows,” *Entertainment Weekly*, Sept 21, 2001, <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,254697,00.html>.

²³ Interview with Paul Barry, CIA Headquarters, March 4, 2008, by Jenkins.

²⁴ Chen, “Newly Declassified.”

The Jordanian turns out to be a false double agent who detonates a bomb, killing a group of senior military and CIA personnel (including Jessica) standing nearby. A CIA memo states that this scene “clearly raises unpleasant history” for the agency but that Public Affairs officials chose not to request modifications because its details had been widely reported in the press.²⁵

Other scenes in *Zero Dark Thirty* also raised “unpleasant history” but they too appear to have garnered little to no pushback. Halfway through, for instance, the film references the CIA’s falsification, at worst, or terrible analysis, at best, regarding the presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq – misinformation that helped justify an entire war. This comes in the form of a row between a CIA administrator and the National Security Advisor about whether or not President Obama should raid the suspicious compound near Abbottabad. When the CIA administrator suggests that the President is allowing short-term political considerations to cloud his judgment of national security matters, the advisor bluntly reminds him (and viewers) of the CIA’s lack of rigorous intelligence-gathering in the past and states that the Obama administration is justifiably demanding harder evidence to avoid repeating history.

Yet the above scenes pale in significance compared with the heavy depiction of torture in *Zero Dark Thirty*. The first twenty-five minutes of the film revolve around an extended torture sequence, which features one of the CIA’s interrogation experts, Dan Stanton (Jason Clarke), torturing Ammar (Reda Kateb), a detainee who the

²⁵ Ibid.

agency (correctly) believes knows the details of a future terrorist attack. Viewers see that Ammar's face has been beaten, and over the duration of the sequence, the captive is stripped naked, physically humiliated, starved, waterboarded, and locked inside a cramped box. During this entire time, Ammar does not reveal the information he possesses, but while he is stuffed into the box, the attack the CIA was trying to stop unfolds. Ammar does not know this, so when he emerges from the box completely disoriented and fatigued, the officers trick him into thinking that he has already given up the names of the perpetrators (which they now know), provide him with a nice meal, and Ammar then talks freely, giving up intelligence about his al-Qaeda contacts and, most importantly, bin Laden's courier.

Zero Dark Thirty implies that men like Dan and Ammar exist in numerous CIA black sites around the globe and that the agency has been engaging in the torture and interrogation of prisoners for many years. In fact, Dan tells Maya at one point that he is leaving the field for a desk job in Washington because he needs to do something "more normal for a while" given that he has seen over one hundred "naked men" at this point. We also see Maya analyze the recorded interrogations of several other detainees from around the world who provide information about the courier, and she visits other prisoners in person. Although it is not always clear if these detainees are in the custody of the CIA or of friendly governments, many are shown being tortured, and when Maya travels to conduct an interview with one detainee in particular, he agrees to talk to her simply because he has "no desire to be

tortured again.”²⁶ The CIA’s use of torture was well-documented by journalists in the ten years prior to *Zero Dark Thirty*’s release, so the agency may have felt safe in supporting the film given that its practices had been discussed in open sources (and with no major punishment resulting). There is fragmentary evidence that the torture scenes were “toned down” in the final cut following advice from certain “national security experts” that they were “overwrought,”²⁷ but we might still expect the CIA to have made a more concerted effort to ameliorate the film’s torture images. Documents indicate that, outside of the agency’s objection to the use of dogs as an interrogation technique, the only other concern it had related to a scene that involved Maya participating in a waterboarding sequence. The Office of Public Affairs emphasized that “substantive debriefers” like Maya “did not administer EITs” and Boal said “he would fix this.”²⁸ In the final film version, Maya does not actually pour water down the detainee’s throat, but she does pass Dan the water he needs for the procedure – hardly a revision that sugar-coated the use of torture in the field.

What each of these examples indicates, then, is that, at least for *Zero Dark Thirty*, the CIA adapted a new, more pragmatic approach to working with filmmakers.

²⁶ Steve Coll, “Disturbing and Misleading,” *The New York Review of Books*, Feb 7, 2013, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2013/feb/07/disturbing-misleading-zero-dark-thirty/>

²⁷ Peter Bergen on “Is ‘Zero Dark Thirty’ Fact or Fiction?” *CNN*, December 23, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=endscreen&NR=1&v=H1RYWHAHY3M>.

²⁸ Chen, “Newly Declassified.”

Instead of flatly refusing to assist Boal and Bigelow because their film depicted torture and raised questions about the CIA's past effectiveness, the agency decided to collaborate on the project in order to positively shape as much of its content as it could. This is likely due to the fact that much of the "negative" material Boal and Bigelow included was already on journalistic record, but also because the film, overall, still depicted a major CIA victory: finding the location of bin Laden.

Additionally, the CIA appears highly dedicated in *Zero Dark Thirty* and as an essential part of the United States' and the West's security apparatus. The movie leaves no one in doubt as to why the CIA feels pressured to go to new lengths, such as torturing extremists, in order to fight terrorism. Indeed, *Zero Dark Thirty* begins by playing the real sounds of 9/11, of desperate telephone calls from those trapped in a burning World Trade Center in New York. Later on, it reenacts or shows news footage of iconic terrorist incidents, such as the bomb attacks on London's subway system in 2005 and on the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad in 2008, just in case viewers are losing sight of the bigger picture.

In *Maya*, the CIA also boasted a new kind of hero, one who distanced the agency from its longstanding image as an old boys' network.²⁹ *Maya* is depicted as a

²⁹ Representative of the agency's recent efforts to depict itself as a champion of sexual equality is the Historical Review Program's first thematic declassification project, launched in 2013, "From Typist to Trailblazer: The Evolving View of Women in the CIA's Workforce," CIA.gov, last accessed May 10, 2014, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/collection/typist-trailblazer>.

tenacious, confident and attractive woman, who, despite a lack of resources, is able to not only locate bin Laden but also to convince the President's administration to (rightly) act on her information. Throughout *Zero Dark Thirty* Maya suffers great personal loss and faces numerous dead-ends in terms of her intelligence collection, but she successfully perseveres. Likewise, the film reveals that the chief of US counter-terrorism (played by Fredric Lehne) is a practicing Muslim, thereby refuting age-old claims that the CIA was full of WASPs and that the US had declared war on Islam.³⁰ *Zero Dark Thirty* does a wonderful job of humanizing its CIA characters while conspicuously refusing to humanize its prey, Osama bin Laden. When asked why he had not done this, strikingly Mark Boal said he would not have known where to start.³¹ We might have expected a film about the hunt for the world's most notorious terrorist to have explored his motives, if only a little, but *Zero Dark Thirty* chooses not to.

The consequence is that, for all its transgressive elements, *Zero Dark Thirty* meets the CIA's general criteria for supporting film projects: it increases understanding of the agency, instills pride in its employees, provides a favorable impression of the organization, and suggests a reasonable expectation that the film will generate interest in the CIA, even enhance recruitment. In flaunting the CIA's

³⁰ Greg Miller, "At CIA, A Convert to Islam Leads the Terrorism Hunt," *Washington Post*, March 25, 2012, www.washingtonpost.com.

³¹ "The Writers: Mark Boal on 'Zero Dark Thirty,'" *The Hollywood Reporter*, November 15, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4buK-wRaPvw>.

sleuthing skills, its readiness to torture terrorists and its determination to exact revenge, *Zero Dark Thirty* also has the ability to intimidate America's enemies.

But how much, judging from audience reactions, did the CIA's efforts to fashion a more positive image for itself in *Zero Dark Thirty* pay off? Given its re-enactment of arguably the most dramatic episode to date in the Global War on Terror, *Zero Dark Thirty* was always going to attract significant interest among commentators, politicians and the wider public. However, few could have anticipated the genuine controversy the movie caused, by no means all of which rebounded in the CIA's favor. This was partly due to revelations about official involvement in making the film, but mainly because of wildly differing interpretations of the movie's depiction of torture.

The critical consensus was that, politics aside, *Zero Dark Thirty* was first-class cinematic entertainment – which must have pleased the CIA. “The most important American fiction movie about September 11,” proclaimed the *New York Times*; “an affecting and unexpectedly restrained study of a female CIA agent’s quest to find Osama bin Laden,” thought *Variety*.³² Some film critics pushed further, calling *Zero Dark Thirty* an inspiring exploration of a major CIA success. A group representing the victims of 9/11 soberly called *Zero Dark Thirty* “a rare moment of justice and

³² Manohla Dargis, “By Any means Necessary,” *New York Times*, December 17, 2012, www.nytimes.com; Lynn Nottage, “Lynn Nottage on *Zero Dark Thirty*,” *Variety*, 18 December 2012, 16.

elation,”³³ while The *San Francisco Chronicle*’s critic wryly noted that the movie’s take-home message was “unmistakable:” “Mess with the United States, and not only will the CIA and the special forces find you, but your story will be . . . commodified by American culture . . . as first-rate, mass-market entertainment.”³⁴ *Zero Dark Thirty* also won numerous awards and was nominated for five Oscars, including Best Picture. It took over \$130 million at the box office worldwide, a figure that was almost three times what *The Hurt Locker* had earned and which was far more than other movies centered on the War on Terror had grossed.³⁵

Not everyone read the film as a positive celebration of the CIA, however. Some overseas viewers saw the film in an opposite light, including one reader who commented on *The Guardian*’s website that *Zero Dark Thirty* mostly highlighted the incompetence of the CIA since it took a full ten years for the agency to find bin Laden and because it “took them months to do anything about it” once they knew where he

³³ Daniel Henninger, “Henninger: Hollywood Forgets 9/11,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 20, 2013, www.wsj.com.

³⁴ Mick LaSalle, “‘Zero Dark Thirty’ Review: On Target,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, Jan 3, 2013, www.sfgate.com.

³⁵ “Zero Dark Thirty,” *Boxofficemojo.com*, last modified May 14, 2014, <http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=binladen.htm> and <http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=similar&id=binladen.htm>

was. “It portrayed the CIA as a bunch of clueless naive halfwits,” the reader argued.³⁶ Pakistani cinema owners – who refused to buy the film – understood *Zero Dark Thirty* as “pro-American,” but rather than viewing the CIA and military’s efforts as impressive, resented the depiction of the Abbottabad raid, calling it “humiliating” and “against the interests of the Pakistani nation.”³⁷ This was because US forces are shown conducting such an important military operation without the Pakistani government’s authorization. Some Pakistanis were also disappointed with *Zero Dark Thirty* because it showcased how the CIA had run a fake vaccination program in the region in order to collect the DNA of those living inside bin Laden’s compound (in the film, the program is for polio; in real life, it was for hepatitis B). This scene had the dangerous effect of reinforcing mistrust of Western NGOs working to eradicate disease in the region, and several polio workers have been murdered in the country since the film’s release, escalating violence in the area.³⁸

³⁶ This reader comment was posted by “JonnyA” and can be found in the comments section of Jon Boone, “Zero Dark Thirty: the View from Pakistan,” Jan 27, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jan/27/zero-dark-thirty-view-from-pakistan>

³⁷ Annabel Symington, “What Pakistan Thinks of *Zero Dark Thirty*,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Feb 1, 2013. <http://blogs.wsj.com/indiarealtime/2013/02/01/what-pakistan-thinks-of-zero-dark-thirty/>

³⁸ See, for instance, Zahir Shah Sherazi and Tom Watkins, “Attack Targets Polio Workers in Pakistan, Kills 11,” *CNN.com*, March 1, 2014,

The day *Zero Dark Thirty* opened in the United States, too, leaders of the Senate Intelligence Committee criticized the film, but for very different reasons. Dianne Feinstein, Carl Levin, and John McCain sent a letter of protest to the movie's chief financier, Sony Pictures, calling the film "grossly inaccurate and misleading in its suggestion that torture resulted in information that led to the location of Usama bin Laden."³⁹ This assessment, they argued, was based on their committee's still-classified 6,000-page report detailing the use of EITs in the War on Terror. The trio also wrote to Mike Morrell, now the CIA's Acting Director, and effectively accused the agency of misleading the filmmakers into thinking that EITs had been vital to the bin Laden hunt.⁴⁰ Morell admitted that while *Zero Dark Thirty* gave the "false" impression that torture had been the key to finding Osama bin Laden, "whether enhanced interrogation techniques were the only timely and effective way to obtain information from those detainees, as the film suggests, is a matter of debate that

<http://www.cnn.com/2014/03/01/world/asia/pakistan-attack/>

³⁹ "Feinstein Releases Statement on 'Zero Dark Thirty,'" Feinstein.senate.gov, Dec 19, 2012, <http://www.feinstein.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2012/12/feinstein-releases-statement-on-zero-dark-thirty>.

⁴⁰ "Feinstein, McCain, Levin Ask CIA for 'Zero Dark Thirty' Documents," *Dianne Feinstein*, Jan 3, 2013, <http://www.feinstein.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2013/1/feinstein-mccain-levin-ask-cia-for-zero-dark-thirty-documents>

cannot and never will be definitively resolved."⁴¹ Jose Rodriguez, who headed the CIA's Counterterrorism Center from 2002 to 2004 and then served as director of the National Clandestine Service until late 2007, wrote publicly that only three detainees had ever been water-boarded and that the process of using EITs had always been highly regulated. "To give a detainee a single open-fingered slap across the face," Rodriguez asserted, "CIA officers had to receive written authorization from Washington."⁴² Each of these statements indicated how much the issue of torture played in *Zero Dark Thirty's* reception and what was at stake for both politicians and Agency officials in regards to how its use would be remembered and judged by Americans.

Part of the reason that so much attention was paid to the film's depiction of torture is that *Zero Dark Thirty's* style could not help but invite viewers to evaluate its verisimilitude. The film relied on documentary cinematic techniques, such as shooting with handheld cameras; Boal claimed that his scripts were based on first-hand accounts of actual events; and it was widely known that *Zero Dark Thirty* came with both the CIA's assistance and imprimatur (on television, Leon Panetta, for

⁴¹ Shane Scott, "Acting C.I.A. Chief Critical of Film 'Zero Dark Thirty'," *New York Times*, Dec 22, 2012, www.nytimes.com.

⁴² Spencer Ackerman, "CIA Official Who Destroyed Torture Tapes Squirms at *Zero Dark Thirty* Abuse," *Wired*, Jan 4, 2013, www.wired.com.

instance, called it “great”).⁴³ Some journalists, and not just those on the political left, were troubled by viewers’ tendency to see the film as accurate and authentic and by what they saw as the movie’s hidden bellicosity. With its “liberal-pleasing feminist overlay,” “impressively real-sounding intel jargon” and “cool vibe,” *Zero Dark Thirty* was, according to *New York Magazine*’s David Edelstein, “the most neutral seeming ‘America, Fuck Yeah!’ picture ever made.”⁴⁴ Incensed by what she read as the film’s attempt to “redeem” the use of torture, Naomi Wolf even compared Kathryn Bigelow with Hitler’s favorite filmmaker, Leni Riefenstahl, since both were “an apologist for evil.”⁴⁵ In contrast, the filmmaker Michael Moore, who was far from being a fan of the CIA’s, praised *Zero Dark Thirty* for bravely confronting the difficult questions about counter-terrorism expediency.⁴⁶

Primarily from a Western standpoint, then, the CIA only pulled off a partial-win

⁴³ Panetta interview, “Zero Dark Thirty’ Controversy,” ABC News, January 27, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GCixMIgE_wk.

⁴⁴ “Epic Pileup,” December 10, 2012, <http://nymag.com/movies/reviews/zero-dark-thirty-hobbit-2012-12/>.

⁴⁵ Naomi Wolf, “A Letter to Kathryn Bigelow on Zero Dark Thirty’s Apology for Torture,” *www.theguardian.com*, Jan 4, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jan/04/letter-kathryn-bigelow-zero-dark-thirty>

⁴⁶ Sean Flynn, “Michael Moore Speaks Out on Zero Dark Thirty,” *Daily Kos*, January 25, 2013.

with *Zero Dark Thirty*. On the one hand, the movie reignited a debate about the use of torture that did not serve the CIA well. Instead, it had the effect of depicting the agency engaging in acts that violated international treaties and basic U.S. principles. In other words, the film reminded viewers that intelligence gathering after 9/11 shifted more towards rounding up suspected terrorists, holding them without charge or trial, and repeatedly interrogating or torturing them while they were imprisoned. For a country trying to fight terrorism while also promoting democratic ideals abroad, this shift failed to communicate that the US valued civil liberties and individual freedoms.

On the other hand, *Zero Dark Thirty* helped the CIA shape a high-profile film that emphasized a vital intelligence and military triumph against tremendous odds and that heroicized its agents as grimly determined and smart. Because the CIA had been closely associated with the least creditable aspects of the War on Terror, the film also helped rehabilitate its image within a broader cultural context. After 9/11, the CIA had often been reprimanded for failing to predict al-Qaeda's attacks and disparaged for its use of rendition – the illegal kidnapping of terrorism “suspects” from any country and their dispatch to secret CIA prisons or other places of detention where they were frequently subjected to torture. The agency had also been criticized for its role in Prisoner of War abuses, including torture and murder at Abu Ghraib in Baghdad, and for its “war-by-unmanned-drones,” which featured assassination teams targeting terrorist suspects and which led to a substantial numbers of civilian deaths and casualties. *Zero Dark Thirty* made the use of torture on some levels appear justified, and at the very least highlighted the intensity and

the unprecedented pressure the CIA experienced during the early years of the War on Terror that demanded new means to bring terrorist enemies to justice.

These messages should not be dismissed as insignificant pieces of entertainment, quickly and easily forgotten by viewers. As Michael Parenti notes, Hollywood is a culture industry as well as a business and while its main objective is profit, “the commodities it markets” include characters, values, and ideas that “impact directly public consciousness.”⁴⁷ Furthermore, because movies usually present themselves as honest reflections of life, rather than as highly manipulated narratives, films can function as effective forms of social control as they “insinuate themselves into the fabric of our consciousness [in such a way] as to remain unchallenged, having been embraced as part of the nature of things.”⁴⁸ Stacy Takacs has used this idea to theorize about the effect of post-9/11 entertainment in a more specific way. She argues that the continued obsession with terror-related entertainment has propagated several real, material effects on U.S. culture, including the reorientation of American “social policy away from domestic needs and toward foreign affairs,” the “institutionalized surveillance and suspension of civil liberties,” and the “imperialistic expansion of US power that many in the world find

⁴⁷ Michael Parenti, “Foreword,” in Matthew Alford, *Reel Power: Hollywood Cinema and American Supremacy*, (London: Pluto Press, 2010), vii.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, xiii.

threatening.”⁴⁹ As *Zero Dark Thirty* depicts terrorism as a continually reoccurring threat and partially justifies the use of torture, as well as unauthorized military operations in a sovereign nation, it, like other post-9/11 entertainment offerings, may reinforce the idea that such actions are both valid and necessary.

Argo

Though we cannot be sure, it is likely the controversy over torture in which *Zero Dark Thirty* was still mired on Oscar night in late February 2013 explains why the movie came away with only one Academy Award, in Sound Editing. Several well-known actors had petitioned Academy members not to vote for the film, accusing Kathryn Bigelow of having become “part of the system.”⁵⁰ *Argo*, an altogether different, semi-comedic film about the CIA, was the main winner that night, picking up three awards, including the most esteemed. This must have been galling for Bigelow, not least when *Argo*’s Oscar for Best Picture was announced by none other than Michelle Obama.

We should resist the temptation to view the unprecedented appearance of America’s First Lady at the 2013 Oscars - in front of an estimated television audience of two billion people - as part of a grand promotional conspiracy cooked

⁴⁹ Stacy Takacs, *Terrorism TV: Popular Entertainment in Post-9/11 America*, (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2012), 21.

⁵⁰ Erin Carlson, “Martin Sheen, Ed Asner Join ‘Zero Dark Thirty’ Protest (Report)” *Hollywood Reporter*, January 12, 2013, www.hollywoodreporter.com.

up between the White House and CIA.⁵¹ It is better instead to see *Argo* as a triumph for the CIA's long-term efforts in Hollywood dating from the mid-1990s. Unlike *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Argo* was not made quickly in response to a recent and famous event, one that filmmakers were bound to restage in one way or another and the production of which the CIA could therefore merely "guide." *Argo* retold an obscure, 30-year-old "non-event," one which the CIA had first kept secret and then publicized as part of its fiftieth anniversary celebrations in 1997. *Argo* came about, in other words, as a direct result of CIA public relations.

We might imagine the end of the Cold War to have marked a high point for the CIA but it instead induced one of the worst identity crises in the agency's history. The 1990s were dark times for the CIA: the collapse of the Soviet Union left the agency devoid of a prominent enemy and a shrunken budget, while the revelations that there had been a Soviet mole, Aldrich Ames, at its heart for decades, damaged morale and led some in the US Congress to call for the CIA to be dismantled.⁵² One of the CIA's reactions to this crisis was to update its public relations activities - including establishing a permanent entertainment industry liaison office in

⁵¹ Although there had been appearances by First Ladies and Presidents at Academy Awards ceremonies in the past, none had ever announced the Best Picture winner.

⁵² See for instance, Caleb Carr, "Aldrich Ames and the Conduct of American Intelligence," *World Policy Journal* 11.3 (Fall 1994): 19-28; Christopher R. Moran, "From Confession to Corporate Memory: The Memoirs of CIA Director Richard M. Helms," *The International History Review* 36.1 (2014) 83-84.

Hollywood in 1996 - in order to sell its mission and prove its value both in the past and for the future. In 1997, the agency launched an unprecedentedly lavish publicity campaign to mark, as President Bill Clinton put it, "a half century of CIA service to the nation in protecting American citizens worldwide." Pamphlets, posters and stamps thanked the CIA's officers for what Clinton called their "quiet patriotism." A marketing company was hired to select fifty officers as the agency's chief "trailblazers" since 1947, some of whom were encouraged to tell their hitherto declassified stories to the world at large. Such stories would, in CIA Director George Tenet's combative words, help provide a "fair audit of our performance" and "thereby amend history."⁵³

One of the "trailblazers" to emerge from the CIA's shadows in 1997 was the recently retired Tony Mendez. Rather than working for the more glamorous Directorate of Operations section of the CIA, Mendez's job had been in the Office of

⁵³ 'CIA to Mark 50th Anniversary, Honor "Trailblazers,"' CIA.gov, September 10, 1997, <https://www.cia.gov/news-information/press-releases-statements/press-release-archive-1997-1/pr091097.html>; William J. Clinton, "Remarks on the 50th Anniversary of the Central Intelligence Agency in Langley, Virginia," September 16, 1997, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=54621&st=langley&st1=>; Jeff Dawson, "The Spy Truth That's Stranger Than Fiction," *Sunday Times*, October 21, 2012, 6-8; John Rash, "The CIA Agent Behind the Movie *Argo*," *Star Tribune*, February 8, 2013, www.startribune.com.

Technical Services, where he specialized in forgery and disguise. First briefly on US television in late 1997, then subsequently in a long article in the CIA's quarterly journal, *Studies in Intelligence*, Mendez revealed the truth behind the escape of six US embassy officials from Tehran in January 1980 during the notorious 444-day siege in which Iranian militants had held over fifty American embassy personnel hostage. The officials' getaway in 1980 had not been organized by the Canadian government, as the media was told at the time, but was in fact a CIA "exfiltration" operation led by Mendez. Ingeniously, the CIA disguised the officials, who had been hiding in Canadian residences after sneaking out of the US embassy on the first day of the siege, as a Hollywood film crew scouting locations for a science fiction film set in the Middle East. To help fool the Iranians, Mendez set up a fake film company in Los Angeles and planted stories about the movie, titled *Argo*, in the press. Mendez recounted how, using a combination of this so-bizarre-it-must-be-true cover story, false paperwork and meticulous research into procedures at Tehran's Mehrabad Airport, he and the fugitives walked straight past Ayatollah Khomeini's dreaded Republican Guards and flew to freedom.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Antonio J. Mendez, "CIA Goes Hollywood: A Classic Case of Deception," *Studies in Intelligence* 42.2 (June 1998): 1–16 (classified issue), reprinted in *Studies in Intelligence* (Winter 1999–2000), 1–16 (declassified edition), <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/winter99-00/art1.html>.

In 1999, after he had acquired representation at the famous Beverly Hills talent agency Creative Artists, Langley gave Mendez permission to publish a ghostwritten memoir of his career at the CIA, with the Iranian story as its biggest selling point. While *The Master of Disguise* failed to match the sales figures of the memoirs of former CIA directors like Richard Helms during this era (further proof of the agency's post-Cold War publicity drive),⁵⁵ the book succeeded in attracting interest in Hollywood. In 2002, Mark Burnett, the producer of hit US television shows like *Survivor*, bought the rights to *The Master of Disguise*. A year later, after these rights lapsed, Mendez gave an independent producer, David Klawans, his blessing to pitch the Argo tale around Hollywood. Klawans, who had been researching the tale ever since finding the *Studies in Intelligence* article on the CIA's website in 1999, came close to setting up the Argo project as a cable movie for Turner Network Television. When that deal fell through, Klawans decided to take a leaf out of the CIA's own playbook and plant an article about the Iranian mission in the press, in the hope of enticing movie backers. "The Great Escape," a punchy three-act piece, duly appeared in the technology magazine *Wired* in 2007, penned by a former *L.A. Weekly* staff writer, Joshua Bearman. A subsequent bidding war between two production companies, Brad Pitt's Plan B Entertainment and George Clooney's Smokehouse, led to the latter securing rights to the story. In 2008, the

⁵⁵ Antonio J. Mendez with Malcolm McConnell, *The Master of Disguise: My Secret Life in the CIA* (New York: William Morrow, 1999); Moran, "From Confession."

writer-director Chris Terrio, who had previously worked with Smokehouse, began work on the script, and in 2011 Ben Affleck agreed to direct and star in the movie.⁵⁶

From the CIA's perspective, getting support for *Argo* from two Hollywood heavyweights, George Clooney and Ben Affleck, was most welcome. It virtually guaranteed the movie's commercial success and, because Clooney and Affleck were prominent liberals, forestalled potential allegations that the film was right-wing CIA propaganda. Moreover, the agency had previously enjoyed working closely with both Affleck on *The Sum of All Fears* (2002) and his wife, the actress Jennifer Garner, on *Alias*. On the other hand, Clooney was something of an anti-establishment maverick, known, among other things, for films that either demonized the CIA (*Syriana*) or ridiculed it [*Burn After Reading* (Joel and Ethan, Cohen, 2008)].⁵⁷

Despite *Argo's* focus being a CIA success story, it is therefore perhaps not surprising to learn how much effort the agency's Public Affairs Office put into cultivating strong links with the cast and crew and into shaping the production to match the agency's image requirements. The office arranged for several members of

⁵⁶ Shaw's telephone interview with Joshua Bearman, April 3, 2014; Chris Lee, "Argo' Producer Scours for the Next Stranger-than-Fiction Story," *Los Angeles Times*, January 28, 2013, www.latimes.com; Darby Maloney, "Argo: From Classified CIA Files to Hollywood Movie," *Studio 360 Blog*, December 4, 2012, <http://www.studio360.org/story/249545-argo-from-classified-cia-files-hollywood-movie/>.

⁵⁷ Jenkins, *The CIA in Hollywood*, 72-77, 84-90, 115-129.

the cast and crew to consult with former and current CIA officers in order to get the look and feel of the agency in the 1970s just right.⁵⁸ Many of the actors came away from these meetings “inspired” by the officers’ devotion to duty and determined, as one of them, Bryan Cranston, put it, “to tell their story in all its honesty.”⁵⁹ Chris Terrio and Ben Affleck were in regular contact with the CIA’s official historians to discuss the finer points of the Iranian operation. And, highly unusually, during filming, the office granted permission for scenes to be shot at the CIA’s famous headquarters in Langley, Virginia.⁶⁰

The most important agency influence on *Argo*’s production, however, was Tony Mendez himself. Though publicity for *Argo* presented Mendez as a quiet septuagenarian who would have preferred to carry on enjoying his retirement painting watercolors in rural Maryland rather than being thrust into the limelight, he was well versed in the art of public relations. He also knew exactly what the CIA wanted to achieve with *Argo*. Back in 2001, Mendez and his wife Jonna, who had been a photography expert for the CIA, were technical consultants to the CBS television series *The Agency*. In 2005, Mendez had appeared on television to rubbish

⁵⁸ March 25, 2014 email from Christopher White, CIA Office of Public Affairs, to Shaw; March 21, 2014 email from David Robarge, CIA Chief Historian, to Shaw.

⁵⁹ Cranston in *Argo* production booklet, unpaginated, *Argo* Extended Edition DVD (Warner Bros, 2014).

⁶⁰ March 21, 2014 email from Robarge to Shaw; March 25, 2014 email from White to Shaw; Ben Affleck commentary on *Argo* Extended Edition DVD (Warner Bros, 2014).

the claim made in *Syriana* - a film based partly on the memoirs of a “rogue” former agency operative, Robert Baer - that the CIA was part of a conspiracy to control Middle Eastern oil.⁶¹

During the scripting stage of *Argo*, Mendez was a constant source of information and advice for Affleck and his colleagues. Terrio spent a week at Mendez’s Maryland farm talking about the Iranian mission and the inner life of a CIA operative. The writer developed a firm friendship with the Mendezes, who affectionately christened Terrio their “mole” on the film’s Los Angeles set.⁶² In Washington D.C., Mendez took Affleck on a tour of the city’s espionage hotspots, including the bar where the traitor Aldrich Ames had divulged his deadly secrets to his Soviet handlers. During *Argo*’s production, the Mendezes spent several days on the set. Such was the bond that developed between Affleck and Mendez during the production that the director granted the former CIA operative and his family Alfred Hitchcock-like walk-on parts in the movie. “Tony Mendez is a great American,” Affleck told the world’s media after *Argo*’s release, “and a hero.”⁶³

⁶¹ Jenkins, *The CIA in Hollywood*, 57, 117.

⁶² Tony and Jonna Mendez, “Argo” lecture delivered at the Spy Chiefs: Intelligence Leaders in History, Culture and International Relations Conference, Venice, Italy, May 7, 2014.

⁶³ Tony and Jonna Mendez, “Argo” lecture; “DP/30: Argo,” undated interview with screenwriter Chris Terrio, <http://gregorymancuso.com/2013/02/scripts-argo-director-writer-cast-production/> ; Rosalee Getterman, “Former CIA Agent Gives

Argo's plot is like *Zero Dark Thirty's*, but in reverse. In *Zero Dark Thirty*, the Americans are the hunters, whereas in *Argo* they are the prey; their hideout is not a Pakistani compound but the Canadian ambassador's residence in Iran. *Argo* centers on Tony Mendez's role during the 1979-1981 US-Iranian hostage crisis. Less of an obsessive than Maya in *Zero Dark Thirty*, though equally dedicated and skillful, Tony (Ben Affleck) is the CIA's "exfil" specialist, a job that entails rescuing Americans and the agency's foreign assets from sticky situations in some of the most dangerous parts of the world. In *Argo's* first act, we see why Tony's talents are needed. When, in November 1979, revolutionary Iranian students storm the US embassy compound in Tehran— a "den of spies" supporting the recently-deposed Shah, according to the revolutionaries - six Americans working in the consulate flee and are secretly given refuge by the Canadian ambassador. Two months pass and the Iranian militants' dragnet is closing in; if the fugitives are discovered, they will likely be executed. *Argo's* second act switches to the US, where Tony Mendez develops his outrageous plan to get the six "houseguests" out of Iran by having them pose as a Canadian movie crew working on a film called *Argo*. This involves setting up a dummy film company in Hollywood, run by a real-life Oscar-winning makeup artist. *Argo's* final, nail-biting act shifts back to Iran, where the elaborate exfiltration plan is put into action, led by Tony himself. The houseguests make their great escape from Ayatollah Khomeini's "prison," but only by the skin of their teeth.

'Argo' High Marks for Accuracy," *The Eagle*, March 28, 2013, www.theeagle.com;

Affleck cited in "Tony Mendez," *Argo* production booklet.

If *Zero Dark Thirty* suggests the CIA's public affairs officials had adopted a more pragmatic approach towards Hollywood, *Argo* seems to indicate the officials' greater flexibility and creativity. Since the mid-1990s, the CIA had been happy to support the making of dramas and thrillers about US intelligence, serious-minded films that befitted an earnest profession. Chris Terrio's early draft scripts of *Argo* were richly comic – drawing out the absurdities of the marriage between spies and filmmakers in Mendez's cover plan – and we can imagine the discomfort the CIA would have felt had the movie ended up as some sort of farce or spoof.⁶⁴ While fundamentally a drama, *Argo* is nonetheless very lighthearted in places and viewers are invited to laugh out loud at the antics of the two filmmakers that Mendez recruits to front his Hollywood operation, John Chambers and Lester Siegel, played by the comedic actors John Goodman and Alan Arkin. Affleck's Mendez and his boss Jack O'Donnell (Bryan Cranston) are also adept at the occasional one-liners, thus softening the CIA's image and making the agency's officers (as in *Zero Dark Thirty*) appear more human. *Argo*'s bridging of genres and subjects – suspense, satire, caper, family melodrama, documentary – also widened the movie's appeal beyond espionage buffs.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Kit Borys, "The Painstaking Work of Making 'Argo' Authentic," *The Hollywood Reporter*, February 9, 2013, www.hollywoodreporter.com.

⁶⁵ In real life, John Chambers was best known for his work on the 1960s television series *Star Trek* and the *Planet of the Apes* film franchise, which started in 1968. In appreciation of his work for the CIA, Chambers was the first non-staffer to be

While *Argo* might have come across to many viewers – because of its lightheartedness – simply as an apolitical, feel-good costume drama, the movie can also be seen as a strong advertisement for the CIA. First of all, in some ways *Argo* rewrites history in the agency’s favor. If we recall, *Zero Dark Thirty* shone a light on the CIA’s success in finding Osama bin Laden rather than on the agency’s failure to anticipate 9/11. Similarly, *Argo* turns the CIA’s notorious failure to predict the 1978-1979 Iranian revolution – and the dangers in which this put Americans in Iran – into a story of joyful redemption. In 1979, the CIA came under enormous criticism for failing to protect one of the United States’ key allies in the Middle East, Reza Shah Pahlavi,⁶⁶ and *Argo* alludes to this briefly in an early scene when a senior White House official questions whether the CIA any longer deserves to be called an “intelligence” agency. Later, he and other officials in the White House and State Department are forced to eat their own words, as Mendez proves just how resourceful the CIA can be. One of *Argo*’s final images, a real-life photograph from March 1980 showing President Jimmy Carter congratulating Mendez on the success of his operation in the Oval Office, makes this point loudest of all.

decorated with the agency’s Intelligence Medal of Merit. Susan King, “Argo: John Chambers’ Friends Recall the Renowned Makeup Man,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 23, 2012, www.latimes.com.

⁶⁶ Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2010).

Argo buries or brushes over other facts about the CIA's role in pre-revolutionary Iran that would have embarrassed the agency. Given the movie's claims to authenticity – “based on a true story,” it claims at the start – these are not unimportant. *Argo* opens with a two-minute storyboard prologue. This was inserted by Affleck at a late stage of the production and was designed to show that the Iranian revolutionaries had some legitimate grievances against the United States.⁶⁷ The prologue refers to the coup that the Americans and British engineered in 1953 to evict Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh, whose recent nationalization of oil reserves threatened Western financial interests. The coup led to the return of the shah, whose regime over the following decades became renowned for its opulence and oppression. After *Argo* was released, the CIA's Chief Historian David Robarge criticized this prologue for rehashing myths about the 1953 coup and for not showing that the increasingly authoritarian Mossadegh had largely been thrown out of power by his own people. Documents now prove that the CIA not only played an essential role in the 1953 coup but also provided vital advice and weapons to the

⁶⁷ Cavan Sieczkowski, “Ben Affleck & ‘Argo’ Covert Operation? Film is Iran War Propaganda, Says Conspiracist,” *Huffington Post*, March 14, 2013, www.huffingtonpost.com.

shah's ruthless internal police, the SAVAK, for decades.⁶⁸ *Argo* makes no mention of this. Nor does it draw on the parts of Mendez's memoirs that outline how in 1979 the CIA came up with a plan in which a dead body double for the shah, who was then undertaking hospital treatment in the US for cancer but the revolutionaries wanted sent home for trial, would be used to arrange for the release of the 53 US hostages trapped in the embassy in Tehran. Robarge argued that by incorporating these *Mission: Impossible*-like scenarios, *Argo* could have been "equally exciting" and "more truthful."⁶⁹ Actually, by leaving them out, and thereby distancing the CIA from the shah's discredited regime in the film, Affleck probably did the agency a service.

In most people's eyes, particularly those familiar with spy movies, the CIA specialized in subversion, assassination or high-technology surveillance. None of these were activities with which people living in a democracy felt entirely comfortable. By contrast, *Argo* demonstrates the peaceful, more altruistic side of the

⁶⁸ Malcolm Byrne (ed.), "CIA Confirms Role in 1953 Iran Coup," National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book 435.19 (August 2013), <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB435/> ; David Robarge, "Operation Argo in Book and Film," *Studies in Intelligence*, 57.1, Unclassified Extracts, March 2013, 19-22; March 21, 2014 email from David Robarge, CIA Chief Historian, to Shaw.

⁶⁹ Antonio Mendez and Matt Baglio, *Argo: How the CIA and Hollywood Pulled Off The Most Audacious Rescue in History* (London: Penguin, 2012), 24, 55-59; Robarge, "Operation Argo."

CIA's work - ultimately saving lives rather than taking them. Tony Mendez and his team are specialists in what the CIA terms human tradecraft and deceit. They must out-fox their opponents rather than out-gun them. This requires long-term research and attention to detail – Mendez has an encyclopedic knowledge of Iran's geography, climate and even education system and therefore knows the "houseguests" cannot pose as teachers or cycle out of the country. It relies on talents not normally associated with espionage. Mendez is a first-class artist, for instance, who can forge a visa or passport with ink made from Scotch whiskey. It also calls on an ability to blend calmly and bravely into whatever surroundings the job takes one to, that is to appear ordinary. Mendez plays the part of a movie producer in Hollywood and Tehran by under- rather than over-acting. Finally, it means getting inside the head of one's allies and enemies; in one scene, Mendez breaks the rules and reveals his real name to two of the houseguests in order to secure their trust and thereby persuade them to follow his cover plan.

Of course, *Argo* shows that the CIA is also inventive and audacious. Initially, the State Department is given the task of exfiltrating the houseguests, but it lacks the necessary experience and imagination for the job. Mendez is not only able to think creatively, he is part of an organization that is willing to take risks. At first, everyone - State Department officials and the audience – believes that Tony's Hollywood cover story is crazy. The more they think about it, the more they learn about the CIA's patriotic friends in Tinsel Town, and the more they see how determined Tony is to save the trapped Americans, the more brilliantly courageous the cover story appears.

This appreciation of the CIA's derring-do is brought out most powerfully at the end during the movie's exciting airport sequence. During the actual operation back in 1980, the houseguests' cover story had in fact never really been tested and in some ways proved irrelevant to their escape. Emigration officials barely looked at the Americans and their documentation as they passed smoothly through the airport, partly because Iranian officials were not in fact pursuing them. (True, the Iranians were reassembling shredded files from the US embassy, as the film constantly depicts, but less to identify any escaped diplomats and more to piece together evidence of the embassy's past nefarious activities.)⁷⁰ In *Argo*, however, first Tony bravely opts to take the houseguests to the airport, despite having just been informed that Washington has cancelled his mission in favor of a military rescue operation. Then the fugitives are detained and grilled about *Argo* by scowling Revolutionary Guards, who call the bogus film company's office in Los Angeles for verification. And finally, the Americans' Swissair jet is chased down the runway by furious gun-toting guards who have figured out the ruse, but too late.

Had the CIA been seen to be rescuing a group of faceless US bureaucrats from hostile territory, it is likely many viewers would still have appreciated the agency's

⁷⁰ Mark Bowden, *Guests of the Ayatollah* (London: Atlantic, 2006), 156; Vincent Dowd, citing Mark Lijek, in "Argo: The True Story Behind Ben Affleck's Globe-winning Film," BBC World Service, January 14, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/>; Robarge, "Operation Argo," 21; Mark Lijek, *The Houseguests: A Memoir of Canadian Courage and CIA Sorcery* (Amazon Digital Services, Inc. 2012).

pluck and originality. However, by depicting the escaped embassy officials as “ordinary” American citizens, four of whom were (in truth) married to one another, *Argo* made the CIA’s mission all the more admirable. The film’s conversion of the American diplomatic personnel into an apolitical “family” mirrored the US media’s coverage of the real embassy siege crisis, described at the time by one US government official, Gary Sick, as “the longest-running human interest drama in the history of television.”⁷¹ *Argo* draws heavily on TV footage from the real crisis for added verisimilitude, partly because Chris Terrio had immersed himself in the material.⁷² Like that footage, it also emphasizes the embassy officials’ and houseguests’ fearful innocence by counterposing images of them trapped indoors to the mass of savage Iranians chanting on the streets, fists raised amidst bodies hanging from construction cranes, their fury turned against the Great Satanic United States. Early *Argo* scripts depicted the houseguests bickering over whether the Iranians’ actions were justified in light of the US’s dubious activities in their country, with one of them, Mark Lijek, accusing his wife Cora of suffering from Stockholm syndrome. It is not clear whether these excerpts were deleted for commercial or political reasons.⁷³

⁷¹ Mendez and Baglio, *Argo*, 25; Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 207.

⁷² “DP/30: *Argo*.”

⁷³ *Argo* script, written by Chris Terrio and dated 2011, pp. 23, 59, <http://screenplayexplorer.com/wp-content/scripts/argo.pdf>.

The CIA is, significantly, also presented as comprising “ordinary” Americans in *Argo*. Whites, blacks and Hispanics work for the agency, all of whom get along as if, like the houseguests, they too are a close-knit unit. Tony Mendez is no saint and likes a drink – an occupational hazard perhaps. Like lots of American professionals, his dedication to his work has put a barrier between himself and his wife and son, who are all reconciled at the end of the film (as Tony embraces his wife, we see a fluttering Stars and Stripes in the background).⁷⁴ What distinguishes Mendez from most other American professionals is of course the danger he faces. The ultimate sacrifice made by the CIA’s operatives is brought home most graphically when Tony first enters the agency’s real-life Langley headquarters. To Tony’s right, the camera lingers on the CIA’s iconic Memorial Wall that honors those employees who have died in the line of service.⁷⁵

Finally, *Argo* could easily be read as a film about the CIA’s vital role in the present as well as the past. Back in 1979-1980, the CIA had seen the conflict with Iran as part of a wider war on Islamist terror. Since 9/11, many inside and outside the agency believed Iran had become one of the world’s leading “rogue” states, fomenting terrorism in the Middle East and even plotting to destroy Israel with nuclear weapons. *Argo* did little to ease tensions between Washington and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s government in Tehran, especially with what many saw as

⁷⁴ Early scripts played up Mendez’s flawed hero status far more; he is an out-and-out alcoholic prone to serious accidents. Tony and Jonna Mendez, “Argo” lecture.

⁷⁵ Affleck commentary on *Argo*, Extended Edition DVD.

its stereotypical depiction of Islamist fanatics and its portrayal of the Middle East as a playground for Western trickery. Around the time of the film's release, pointedly the CIA on its website began describing the 1980 Iranian mission as a valuable lesson in counter-terrorism. When promoting *Argo*, Tony Mendez made no bones about the very real threat that he believed contemporary Iran posed to the international community.⁷⁶

Like with *Zero Dark Thirty*, it is striking how many people seem to have interpreted *Argo* as a slice of real history. The use of grainy Super 8 film and stock television footage by cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto, and clever editing by William Goldenberg (who had also worked on *Zero Dark Thirty*), undoubtedly encouraged this. So too did the movie's end credits sequence, which features look-alike images of the real houseguests and the actors portraying them as well as a voice-over tribute to Tony Mendez by former president Jimmy Carter.⁷⁷ Curiously, the CIA's David Robarge praised *Argo* as a rare "nonfiction" film about the agency's history and contrasted it with recent "pseudo-histories," which the CIA had not taken kindly

⁷⁶ "Rescue of the 'Canadian Six' – A Classic case of Deception," CIA.gov, July 23, 2012, <https://www.cia.gov/about-cia/cia-museum/experience-the-collection/text-version/stories/rescue-of-the-canadian-six-a-classic-case-of-deception.html>; Rash, "The CIA Agent"; Mendez and Baglio, *Argo*, final chapter.

⁷⁷ Rachael K. Bosley, "Creative Conspiracies," *American Cinematographer*, November 2012, 52-65.

to, like Robert de Niro's *The Good Shepherd* (2006).⁷⁸ One former director of the CIA, George H. W. Bush, reportedly "loved" *Argo* and watched it several times.⁷⁹ The movie also received plaudits elsewhere, including among some on the political left. "It's a cracker of a film," wrote the illustrious British war correspondent Robert Fisk, who witnessed the Iranian revolution first-hand, "which pushes the reality of the Middle East a little bit nearer to the souls of cinema-goers."⁸⁰ CBS and other US television companies quickly began using excerpts from *Argo* as "news footage" of the US embassy siege or to add color to news reports about US-Iranian relations.⁸¹

As befits a movie that would go on to win the Oscar for Best Picture, *Argo* attracted critical and popular acclaim when it was released in October 2012. Its approval rating on one influential website, *Rotten Tomatoes*, exceeded ninety per cent and it would go on to gross in excess of \$230 million worldwide. Just how many viewers had their thoughts about the CIA or US-Iranian relations reinforced or

⁷⁸ Robarge, "Operation Argo."

⁷⁹ "My Friend Jonathan Loaned his Copy of *Argo* to George H. W. Bush, Who Loved It," *Joshuah Bearman: Writer*, Oct 15, 2013, http://laweekly.blogs.com/joshuah_bearman/2013/10/my-friend-jonathan-loaned-his-copy-of-argo-to-george-h-w-bush-who-loved-it.html.

⁸⁰ Robert Fisk, "Fear and Suspicion of 1979 Captured by Cracking Film; IRAN," *Independent*, January 21, 2013, 26.

⁸¹ Report by CBS news correspondent Elizabeth Palmer on *This Morning*, December 13, 2013, CBS News Transcripts, www.lexisnexis.com, retrieved May 2, 2014.

altered by *Argo* we cannot be sure, but there is evidence to indicate the film had at least some political impact. “Except for social media, the clothes and the music, today’s Iran doesn’t seem very dissimilar from the one in this film,” wrote Kevin Williams on the news website *politisite.com*. “Tony Mendez’s skillfulness, resourcefulness and can-do attitude are refreshing reminders of how lucky we are to have such men and women keeping the wolf from our door.”⁸² Other US commentators and bloggers looked at *Argo* far less favorably. On *slate.com*, critic Kevin B. Lee called the movie a fraud: “Instead of keeping its eye on the big picture of revolutionary Iran, *Argo* settles into a retrograde ‘white Americans in peril’ storyline, recasting the oppressed Iranians as a raging, zombie-like horde.”⁸³

With the CIA unveiling an oil painting to mark the 33rd anniversary of the Iranian mission in early 2013, and pieces of concept art for the original *Argo* appearing on display in spy related exhibitions around the US,⁸⁴ it was only natural

⁸² Kevin Williams, “Argo Reminds US of How It All Began,” *Politisite.com*, February 25, 2013, <http://www.politisite.com/2013/02/24/argo-reminds-us-of-how-it-all-began/>.

⁸³ Kevin B. Lee, ‘Argo F—k Yourself’, *Slate.com*, February 25, 2013, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2013/01/down_with_argo_ben_affleck_s_iran_hostage_movie_is_the_worst.html.

⁸⁴ “Painting Commemorating ARGO Operation Joins Intelligence Art Gallery,” CIA.gov, March 14, 2013, <https://www.cia.gov/news-information/featured-story->

that many people, especially overseas, saw *Argo* as an official film of one sort or another. At an early preview in Toronto, Canadian critics felt deeply aggrieved with the movie's downplaying of its government's crucial role in rescuing the US houseguests. Affleck tried to make up for this by inserting a postscript saying that the CIA's operation "complemented" the Canadian embassy's efforts, while Jimmy Carter stated on television revealingly that "90 per cent of the contributions to the ideas and the consummation of the plan was Canadian."⁸⁵ CIA Director David Petraeus subsequently attended a glitzy reception for *Argo* at the Canadian embassy in Washington D.C., partly in order to dampen Canadian anger.⁸⁶ *Argo* also succeeded in outraging politicians and former diplomats in New Zealand and Britain for falsely claiming that their embassies had turned away the US refugees in Tehran.

archive/2013-featured-story-archive/argo-painting-joins-intelligence-gallery.html; "Spy Exhibition Ends New York City Run On April 7", *PR Newswire*, Mar 1, 2013.

⁸⁵ "Ken Taylor Helps Write New Ending to Ben Affleck's *Argo*," *CBC News*, September 19, 2012, www.cbc.ca; Robarge, "Operation *Argo*," 21; Caitlin McDevitt, "Jimmy Carter: 'Argo' Great But Inaccurate," *Politico*, February 22, 2013, www.politico.com. For the Canadian government's role in the exfiltration see Robin Wright, *Our Man in Tehran: Ken Taylor, the CIA and the Iran Hostage Crisis* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010).

⁸⁶ Stephanie Levitz, "Argo Party Does Damage Control," *Calgary Herald*, February 21, 2013, E2.

It is likely the rumpus caused by these international spats ultimately did more good than harm to *Argo's* box office.⁸⁷

Where *Argo* attracted most criticism was, not surprisingly, in Iran. Over three decades since the shah had been deposed, the very mention of the CIA still antagonized many Iranians regardless of their political or religious affiliation, and it was widely known that the agency had connections with the reformist movement inside the country.⁸⁸ *Argo* was effectively banned in Iran on the grounds of being anti-Iranian propaganda, though DVDs of the film circulated on the black market. Mohammad Hosseini, the country's Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, described *Argo* as "an offensive act" and Western press agencies soon reported that the Iranian government had hired, of all people, the wife and lawyer of the jailed

⁸⁷ Xan Brooks and Saeed Kamali Dehghan, "Alter *Argo*: Iranian Film to Tell Other Side of Hostage Crisis'," *Guardian*, January 11, 2013, www.guardian.com; "Motions—Iran Hostage Crisis—Fictional Representation of Role of New Zealand Diplomats," Hansard Office, New Zealand Parliament. March 12, 2013, http://www.parliament.nz/en-nz/pb/debates/debates/50HansD_20130312_00000008/motions-%e2%80%94human-rights-fiji-%e2%80%94treatment-of-detainees-iran.

⁸⁸ Joseph Fitsanakis, "The CIA's Involvement in Iran Today: A Realistic Assessment," *Foreign Policy Journal*, July 10, 2009, <http://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2009/07/10/the-cia's-involvement-in-iran-today-a-realistic-assessment/>.

international terrorist Carlos the Jackal, Isabelle Coutant-Peyre, to help sue Hollywood. More creatively perhaps, the state-affiliated Arts Bureau announced plans to make Iran's own, big-budget film version of the hostage crisis. As of October 2014, that movie, provisionally titled *The General Staff*, had yet to appear.⁸⁹

Conclusion

The Central Intelligence Agency was the last major US government agency to establish formal relations with Hollywood. Since it did this in the 1990s, the agency's portrayal on screen has not been completely revolutionized. Movies critical of the CIA in one way or another have continued to appear and are likely to do so in the future. Unlike the Pentagon, the agency cannot dangle the carrot of expensive ships, planes and troops in front of needy producers in exchange for official approval of their scripts. Nor can it expect an industry long used to portraying CIA officers as stock villains to simply pull in its horns, especially when allegations of misadventure or malfeasance by the agency continue to make the headlines. One of the drawbacks of an institution being more publicity-friendly can often be to generate greater media scrutiny of its activities.

This said, there seems little doubt that the CIA's overtures to Hollywood over the past two decades have reaped dividends. *Argo* and *Zero Dark Thirty* are perfect illustrations of how a combined long-term publicity strategy and short-term tactical

⁸⁹ Brooks and Dehghan, "Alter Argo"; Aly Weisman, "Outlawed 'Argo' DVDs are Selling by the Thousands in Iran," *GlobalPost*, February 1, 2013, www.globalpost.com.

awareness can help improve an institution's image. Commercial and artistic imperatives trumped political factors in both cases but the movies complemented one another beautifully from the CIA's perspective, with *Zero Dark Thirty* showing the agency's doggedness and *Argo* its inventiveness. Though the films generated greater political controversy than the CIA would have liked, both wore their official influence lightly on screen. Both claimed an inside angle on the CIA's deeds and were accepted as the truth by many viewers. In reality, in important ways each film was as illusory as Tony Mendez's thirty-year-old *Argo* project.