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US History

In 2012, critical acclaim, academy awards, and millions of box-office dollars went towards the film *Argo*.¹ A movie about the Middle East and terrorism, *Argo* touches upon this familiar topic in the United States. The film portrays a segment of the Iranian Hostage Crisis of 1979-1981; a tense period of 444 days in which fifty-three American hostages were seized from the American Embassy in Tehran.² *Argo* chooses to ignore those fifty-three victims, and focuses on the successful escape of six Americans from the embassy in November 1979. Tony Mendez, the CIA operative who came up with the ridiculous, yet successful plan to free the six escapees bases the film on his book, “The Master of Disguise.”³ Ben Affleck, the director of the movie, also stars as Mendez, who acts as the biased hero behind *Argo*, a phony science-fiction Hollywood movie created as an excuse to return the escapees back to America.⁴ The film attempts to stay honest about the crisis, but actually incorporates so much fiction that the story loses authenticity. Created to be an American box-office hit, and not a documentary, *Argo* unfairly depicts Iranians, and fails to provide the history that explains why the Iranians acted out through terrorism. Ben Affleck’s, *Argo*, does not embody the facts of the Iranian Hostage Crisis, because it fictionalizes actual events to please an American audience by profiling Iranian’s as clichéd, senseless Middle-Easterners and exposes the United States as the hero who helped the six embassy workers escape.

In order to best understand the way in which the Iran Hostage Crisis was presented in the film *Argo*, it is necessary to understand the history of Iran surrounding the time of the crisis. Prior to the Iranian Hostage Crisis, the

country's oil reserves had been exported to a number of countries thanks to both the 1953 coup d'état which installed a more Western-minded shah, and the consortium of companies (including British Petroleum) who would bring Iranian oil back into the international market. 33 Iran's relationship with the United States was also fairly hostile, as President Carter's administration had chosen to make a point of Iran's human rights offenses; the Shah's regime was opposed and denounced by many groups in the US. At the same time, on the cusp of the 1979 revolution, Carter's administration was willing to back Iran (as the Shah had a much more favorable reputation with American than the future leader Ayatollah Khomeini would have). The Shah himself proved to be an increasingly opulent and Western-styled leader; his attempts to create more secular reforms and modernize Iran were met with resistance by more traditional Shi'a Muslims. Furthermore, some institutions like the SAVAK, his secret police, tortured and executed enemies of the state, making him a cruel and capricious leader even through his controversy. 34 The Shah's love of money and luxury were also seen as signs of moral weakness, and his "White Revolution" (the reforms that tried to Westernize Iran) turned out to be very ineffective and inappropriately handled. 32 This resulted in a populace that cried out for a revolution of their own.

One of the beginning stages of the 1979 Iranian Revolution was the Iranian Hostage Crisis, which is the setting of Argo. The real crisis itself was caused by the ousting of the Shah, who was exiled; diagnosed with cancer, he went to the US in order to get treatment. The Islamist revolutionaries who ousted him were enraged that the US would protect him and deny him the justice they sought; Shah and President Carter were fairly close by that point,

causing controversy for the US's protection of their hated dictator. When the Ayatollah came to power after the revolution, he brought in a new sense of radical Islamist teaching; the Ayatollah's stance was much more anti-American than the Shah's, as well as more conservative and fundamentalist. Sharia law was put into place, and the economy and standards of living in Iran dropped significantly. Because of this fundamental change in the way people lived, and the increasing anger at America, Iranian citizens attacked the embassy and took hostages, keeping them for months. In 1980, when Iraq attempted to invade Iran, the Iranians were forced to enter negotiations with the US, using Algeria as an intermediary (because Iran refused to talk directly to any American representative). The death of the Shah in 1980 put further fuel on the fire, as the Iranians were robbed of their chance to get the revenge they desired. 35

The first six minutes of *Argo* delves into the history of Iran, mentioning briefly facts that the film is based on. This documentary introduction mentions how the U. S and Great Britain overthrew Mohammad Mosaddegh in a coup d'état after he nationalized the Iranian oil that the British had reserves on. The U. S imprisoned this Iranian national leader, and supported the new Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. *Argo* mentions how Reza lived opulently while the Iranian people starved and were tortured by his secret police, the SAVAK. 5 Yet, *Argo* fails to mention the reason why the Tehran University students stormed the U. S Embassy that day in 1979. The truth was that President Jimmy Carter toasted the Shah at a state dinner in Tehran, calling him " an island of stability" in the troubled Middle East. Carter and Reza kept close ties as the Shah tried to westernize the 90% Islamic Iran.

6 The Iranian's felt that the U. S supported the Shah's brutality because in 1979, Carter took him in to get medical attention after he was diagnosed with cancer. 7The Iranian's interpreted this as a direct insult, and this miscommunication inspired the events of the hostage crisis, all of which Argo does not mention in the film. Argo's approach is, instead, to depict the Iranian people as bloodthirsty people out for revenge, instead of the events of 1979 being the result of a simple misunderstanding. Perhaps, if Argo were to have included these facts, the film would not seem so anti-Iranian; but Ben Affleck understood that a pro-American aspect was the only way to attract American moviegoers.

Another way in which Affleck distances the events of the film from the realities of the Iranian peoples' struggle is the focus on filmmaking over politics as a theme in Argo. As previously mentioned, the opening title sequence is done as a series of storyboards, telling the story of Iran through the eyes of Hollywood producers. By definition, then, the story becomes white-washed, oversimplified, and more dramatic and polarizing than it actually was. The facts of the case are literally painted in broad strokes, as cartoonish storyboards show signs of opulence and violence while a female narrator with a vaguely Middle Eastern accent gravely recounts this story. In doing this, Affleck and crew link the very real and complex issues surrounding Iran during that time to a soap-opera, clichéd version of the Middle East that removes all nuance and simply paints the Iranian people as an unmoored sect of people waiting to be saved.

The central element of the story sounds incredible but is in fact true. The CIA did piece together a plan to outwit the Iranians by placing the six escapees

on a scheduled flight from an airport in Tehran, impersonating Canadians working on a non-existent science-fiction film. 8 *Argo* dramatizes the experience of the six escapees, fictionalizing many of the events that actually took place. The truth, which *Argo* artfully obscures, is that the cover story was never tested, and in some ways proved irrelevant to the escape. 9 There is a scene in the film where the six go on a location scout in Tehran to fabricate the story that they are part of a Canadian film crew. 10 According to Mark Lijek, one of the six escapees, the scene is total fiction. 11 In reality, the extent of Tony Mendez's involvement was coming down to Iran (with another CIA agent, not shown in the film), met up with the hiding diplomats, and simply took a flight out of the country. As it stands in the film, however, the location scout scene serves to further depict the Iranians as a stereotypically violent and volatile people; throughout the scene, the diplomats are terrified and scared as their vehicle is crowded with people on every side, holding signs, shouting and banging on the car doors. Once out of the car, the diplomats are shown to be nervous, having trouble remembering their cover stories, but this also comes across as a bit of cultural fear of Iranians. The sense of imminent danger shown to the diplomats at every turn was not actually felt by the real figures; to that end, these things are exaggerated to play up fears of hostile, radical Iranians who might hurt our imperiled white protagonists.

Similarly, the final scenes in *Argo* are incredibly tense, as the six barely make it onto a plane in a high-speed chase with the Iranian police. In the film, the CIA had given them false departure documents for which there were no matching arrival forms. The big climax is a heart-pounding chase down

the runway as members of the Revolutionary Guard try to stop them taking off after realizing that they are the missing Americans. 12 All of this Lijek recounts, never happened. Lijek even says that the escape to get on the plane was well planned in advance and straightforward. 13 These overdramatized scenes only bring inaccuracy to the film in order to force a climax to entertain an audience. While the ratcheting of tension is somewhat understandable for the sake of dramatic license and pacing (a film has to have a climax, after all, and Affleck's approach to the material is adapt the events into a tense political action-thriller), it dilutes the truth of the events if the Iranian characters in the film are forced to be temporarily duped, and run after a plane with machine guns at the ready. If the film stuck closer to the actual events, the sprinkles of Hollywood-over-dramatization would not be so evident to an educated moviegoer.

During this scene is yet another instance of cultural insensitivity and stereotypically volatile depictions of Iranians, tied into the theme of filmmaking. At the airport, when the diplomats are detained and asked to explain what they are carrying, Joe Stafford has the idea to explain the premise of the film *Argo* to them through the storyboards. The way he describes the story allows it to be framed much like the recent 1979 Iranian Revolution, using the trappings of the sci-fi film storyboards to relate to the Iranian officer. "The king of the aliens is destroyed when the people find their courage," says Stafford in the film, essentially playing into this clichéd Iranian officer's desire to see the Shah dead through revolution. By framing the actual story of the Iranian Revolution in a patronizing sci-fi allegory, and having it actually affect the Iranian emotionally, it paints him in a simplistic

and gullible light – it is a scene in which the clever American dupes the simple-minded Middle Easterner, yet another way in which the Arabic characters of the film are shown negatively.

The six American embassy workers escape with the aid of the Canadian Ambassador, Ken Taylor, and not primarily the CIA, as *Argo* depicts. 14 Ben Affleck includes this character in *Argo*, as most of the movie takes place inside this character's home where the six were hiding. Ben Affleck fictionalized many events because virtually all of the obstacles that are thrown at Tony Mendez, the CIA operative who “ saves” the six, are made up. 15 In reality, things went much smoother for the six because Ken Taylor and his fellow embassy employee, John Sheardown (who does not appear in the film) involved themselves much further in the rescue efforts than the movie suggests. The two not only helped to scout the Iranian airport in advance, but they also purchased the tickets, coached the six into having Canadian accents, and set the plan into motion. 16 In the film, Tony Mendez organizes the entire plan while Ken Taylor falsely takes the glory for the success of the plan, suggesting that the Canadians exaggerated their efforts. 17 This is all not true, of course. The goal of *Argo* is to proclaim the CIA and Tony Mendez as responsible for saving the lives of those six Americans, whereas it was actually the involvement of Canada with the U. S and Great Britain, which saved their lives. This inaccuracy is yet again another means to attract an American audience. Ken Taylor recently stated, “ In reality, Canada was responsible for the six and the CIA was a junior partner. But I realize this is a movie and you have to keep the audience on the edge of their seats.” 18 While this is a generous perspective to have, it does diminish

the role that these real people played in the rescue of the diplomats in favor of having an America-centric group of protagonists for a film meant primarily for the American market. The film plays up the American involvement in order to make them seem like the real heroes - the Canadian's involvement is simply glossed over in ending text over the final minutes of the film, which is not nearly enough screen time to appropriately justify such a lessened role in the film.

A reoccurring image in *Argo* is the face of Ayatollah Khomeini, the Iranian Revolution leader and religious cleric. ¹⁹ Although the film only briefly mentions Khomeini's involvement in the Crisis, the repetitive image of Khomeini's face in the background of each scene indicates his overall presence in the situation. The film leaves out that Khomeini was the voice of religious reform from the underground, and the Iranian students who overtook the embassy were his supporters. ²⁰ Khomeini overthrew the Shah and declared Iran an Islamic republic. Khomeini's preaching's were anti-American because he believed in the conservative teachings of Islam, which contradicted the Western world. ²¹ Affleck fails to incorporate this background information on Ayatollah Khomeini because a minority of Americans would want to sit and listen to the thoughts of an Islamic preacher. Furthermore, the monolithic, ominous pictures and depiction of Khomeini as an image paints him as a boogeyman that American audiences are right to fear, instead of the more complex figure who focused more on conservative focus on his own country than involvement with America. Once again, *Argo* centers on Hollywood, and feels more fictional than factual. The depiction of Iranians as a people tends to be somewhat stereotypical

and offensive in the film, relying on the laziest cultural images of Arabs as traditionalist, radical violent Muslims with very few exceptions. *Argo* opens with the exotic sound of a santur, while ravenous Iranian's burn American flags and shout, "Bad, bad, Amri Cah." 22 Protestors look like animals as they stampede the Embassy and run around senseless. These disturbing images are in fact true, and *Argo* incorporates many actual news videos to enliven the experience. On the other front, *Argo* shows news clips from the United States where Americans are enraged, confused, and scared for their fellow citizens. 23 Specifically, the image of yellow ribbons lining the streets in Washington D. C, as a symbol of hope, which appeared both in real life and in the film. 24 The film also portrays the "fake" executions, in which the American hostages would be lined up and fired at without any ammunition, as a method to inflict fear. 25 John Limbert, one of the fifty-three hostages recounted that, "" They came in at 2 in the morning with, I think, masks and guns, pulled us out together to a place, lined us up against the wall, started chambering rounds into their guns, yelling orders. We didn't know what was going to happen I thought we were gone." 26 Despite *Argo's* one-sided American aspect, the film had no choice but to show the truths of brutality and terrorism that occurred in the Iranian Hostage Crisis. Another hostage, Moorhead Kennedy, evoked his beliefs that, " Middle Eastern terrorists are both jealous of Western supremacy and angry at its cultural, political, and moral influence in their societies, particularly its drugs, alcohol, and related sexual habits." 27 Moorhead recollected how the Iranians would be brutal at one moment, and generous the next, suggesting that the Iranians had good hearts but were misguided in their actions. 28 If only *Argo* examined both

the American and Iranian sufferings in 1979, the film could educate viewers as to why Iran acted out, and how Americans suffered. As it stands, however, *Argo* simply shows the Iranians as madmen and tyrants who were completely unjustified in their actions, and does not care to examine the motivations and sympathies of the Iranians as characters.

The Iranian Hostage Crisis was a brutal 444 days in American history, where terrorism and anticipation flooded the United States. The film *Argo*, by Ben Affleck, revokes these feelings by reminding Americans of the sufferings those fifty-nine Americans felt while hostages in Iran. Intended for the American box office, *Argo* over-dramatizes the events of six-escapees from the U. S Embassy in Iran. 29 The film gives minimal history as to why Iran retaliated against America, and this portrays the Iranians as senseless savages. The last thirty-five minutes of *Argo* are pure fiction, as well as many climatic scenes made to entertain an American audience. The movie reeks of Hollywood, as many scenes feel more fictional than factual. However, *Argo* incorporates real news footage to blend history into the movie. Perhaps the Hollywood angle brings lightness into the film, serving as comic relief to lessen the incredibly tense two-hour movie. 30 Had *Argo* explained the history of Iran and why Iran was angry with the U. S, the film would have been less accessible and watchable to the average American moviegoer. In truth, Canada worked alongside the United States to free the six escapees, and the United States angered Iranians in the first place because President Carter supported the Shah, who brutalized the Iranian nation. 31 Therefore, *Argo* is an inaccurate reflection of the Iranian Hostage Crisis because of its

one-sided American interpretation of a situation that faced many different fronts, which are not portrayed in the film.

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