

Operation Argo in Book and Film

Argo: How the CIA and Hollywood Pulled Off the Most Audacious Rescue in History, by Antonio Mendez and Matt Baglio (Viking, 2012), 310 pages, notes, bibliography, no index.

Argo, produced by Ben Affleck, George Clooney, and Grant Heslov; directed by Ben Affleck; screenplay by Chris Terrio (GK Films and Smokehouse Pictures, 2012).

Reviewed by David Robarge

CIA's daring and imaginative operation to exfiltrate six US diplomats from Tehran after the takeover of the US embassy there on 4 November 1979 has become one of the Agency's best-known success stories since its acknowledgement in 1997. Using an elaborate deception that included a fake movie production company, forged passports and travel documents, cover stories, and disguises, two operatives from CIA's Office of Technical Service (OTS)—Tony Mendez and "Julio"—took the Americans from the residences of the Canadian diplomats, where they had been hiding for nearly three months, to Mehrabad Airport on 28 January 1980. After several increasingly tense hours as they went through security checks and waited through a flight delay, the eight boarded a Swiss Air jet to Zurich. The US diplomats—or "houseguests," as they came to be known—arrived in the United States a few days later to a boisterous welcome.

The CIA's role in the Americans' escape remained secret for nearly 18 years. According to Mendez, "the only leak of any significance came shortly after the story broke, when Jack Anderson said on his syndicated radio show that two CIA officers acting as 'mother hens' had led the six through Mehrabad Air-

port. We assumed that Anderson had a source inside the CIA, but the story never gained traction."¹ Instead, the Canadian government got all the credit, courtesy of reports by Jean Pelletier, the Washington correspondent for Quebec's *La Presse*, who later wrote a book about what would be dubbed "the Canadian Caper."² Meanwhile, in a secret ceremony at CIA Headquarters in May 1980, Mendez and "Julio" received Intelligence Stars—the Agency's second highest honor.

CIA decided to reveal its hand in the rescue in 1997 during its 50th anniversary commemoration when it designated 50 officers as Trailblazers, who "by their actions, example, and innovations or initiative, have taken the CIA in important new directions and helped shape the Agency's history."³ Tony Mendez was one of them. His citation did not mention the Argo operation,⁴ but Tim Weiner of the *New York Times* soon asked for an interview because, according to Mendez, someone had leaked details about the exfiltration to him. Agency leaders decided to have Mendez go public with the story, and David Martin interviewed him about it on the *CBS Evening News*. Mendez's account first appeared in a classified issue of this journal in 1998. It was reprinted in the 1999–2000 unclassified

¹ Mendez and Baglio, 294.

² Jean Pelletier and Claude Adams, *The Canadian Caper* (William Morrow, 1981). A movie on Canadian television, *Escape from Tehran: The Canadian Caper*, followed later that year. Pelletier found out about the missing Americans soon after they went into hiding but agreed to the Canadian government's request that he hold the story until the danger to them had passed. When he learned on 28 January 1980 that the Canadian embassy in Tehran was going to close, he concluded that the Americans had gotten out, and his paper published his report the next day. Historian Robert Wright, in *Our Man in Tehran: Ken Taylor, the CIA, and the Iran Hostage Crisis* (HarperCollins, 2010), provides a comprehensive account of the Canadian government's indispensable part in the exfiltration.

³ "CIA to Mark 50th Anniversary, Honor 'Trailblazers,'" <https://www.cia.gov/news-information/press-releases-statements/press-release-archive-1997-1/pr091097.html>.

⁴ "Mr. Mendez is recognized for founding the development and engineering capability in the Agency's operational disguise program. His ideas led to the design and deployment of a series of increasingly sophisticated tools that enabled operations officers to change their appearance convincingly. "'Trailblazers' and Years of Service," <https://www.cia.gov/news-information/press-releases-statements/press-release-archive-1997-1/trailblazers.html>.

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edition of *Studies*.⁵ He later wrote about the operation in the first of his two memoirs, *The Master of Disguise*,⁶ and then in the book under review. In the meantime, the story had also been picked up in a *Wired* article in 2007.⁷

Mendez's previous versions are better. His article in this journal is the most thorough, and the account in *The Master of Disguise* is the most readable. Its breezy writing aside, *Argo* is too long and has too many digressions, which are especially noticeable in the audiobook version. Mendez may have tried too hard to use *Argo* as an all-purpose publication: an autobiography with personal details not found in his other books, an insider memoir about life as a CIA officer, and a thorough recounting of the planning and execution of the escape. The result is an unbalanced story. The tale of the exfiltration itself takes too much time to get going; Mendez and "Julio" do not arrive in Tehran until page 231 of the 298 pages of narrative. Once they get there, the pace accelerates so quickly that the crux of the operation takes only three of the book's 18 chapters.

The movie *Argo* is one of only two nonfiction films about CIA's history—the other is *Charlie Wilson's War*—and is such a departure from Hollywood's usual outlandish portrayals, some of which stretch credulity in proclaiming themselves to be based on actual events, that it merits attention for that reason alone.⁸ It also deserves the acclaim it has received, including Academy Awards for best film, adapted screenplay, and film editing. Ben Affleck has put together a well-shot, fast-paced thriller that effectively mixes contemporary news footage and reenactments and, at least for about the first hour and a half, stays reasonably close to what happened—by cinematic standards, anyway.

Affleck's professed interest in historical accuracy is underscored in the montage at the end of the movie: a series of juxtaposed look-alike images of the real houseguests and the actors portraying them, and the true and staged events. The interior sets, clothes, eye-

glasses, cars, and other lifestyle paraphernalia are generally true to life, in large measure because Affleck used Tony Mendez as a technical adviser and consulted with other current and former CIA officers (including this reviewer) to make sure he got the look and feel of the Agency in the late 1970s correct.

As detailed on IMDb.com (the Internet Movie Database), however, many errors in history and production slipped through.⁹ Some stand out, like misstating the political dynamics in Iran in 1953 that prompted the CIA-led covert action to remove Prime Minister Mossadegh from power and bring the shah back into the country; showing Ted Kennedy's victory speech in the March 1980 presidential primaries speech two months before it occurred; claiming that British diplomats turned the Americans away, when in reality they harbored them initially but judged the location unsafe and agreed with the escapees that they should approach the Canadians; and having an Iranian official write in Farsi in the wrong direction. Other flaws are trivial, like misplacing two *Star Wars* figures in a display in Mendez's son's bedroom or putting a record player needle on the wrong album cut to play the song that is heard.

The movie-in-a-movie sequences in *Argo* are played mostly for laughs—they are Affleck's mild satire on the business that has brought him so much success. The Hollywood environment he depicts reeks of opulence, shallowness, and hypocrisy. Actors John Goodman and Alan Arkin give memorable performances as, respectively, the make-up genius John Chambers, with whom Mendez had worked before, and "Lester Siegel," the made-up producer who embodies a composite of stereotypical moviemaking personalities who routinely bite the hands that make them rich. For the *Argo* operation, however, the cover production company called Studio Six (named for the number of houseguests) proved indispensable. It provided all the off-screen accoutrement needed to backstop the phony movie just in case some inquisitive Iranian checked: an office, phone numbers, business

⁵ Antonio J. Mendez, "CIA Goes Hollywood: A Classic Case of Deception," *Studies in Intelligence* 42 No. 2 (June 1998), 1–16; reprinted in *Studies in Intelligence*, Winter 1999–2000, 1–16 available at <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/winter99-00/art1.html>.

⁶ Antonio J. Mendez with Malcolm McConnell, *The Master of Disguise: My Secret Life in the CIA* (William Morrow, 1999). Reviewed by Jim Steinmeyer in this journal: <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol46no1/article09.html>.

⁷ Joshua Bearman, "How the CIA Used a Fake Sci-Fi Flick to Rescue Americans from Tehran," *Wired*, on-line edition, 24 April 2007.

⁸ Pseudohistories like *The Good Shepherd* and historical fiction productions like *The Company* do not count. Wikipedia, "CIA in Fiction," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CIA_in_fiction. The article is mistitled, as it deals only with television, movie, and video game portrayals and does not mention novels.

⁹ Internet Movie Database, "Argo" page, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1024648/trivia?tab=gf&ref_=tt_trv_gf.

cards, posters, ads in trade papers, and staged events like a publicized script reading. The ruse was so successful that Studio Six received proposals from legitimate producers, among them Steven Spielberg.

Inevitably, “Hollywoodisms” appear throughout the film, mainly to simplify the plot and make it more compelling to moviegoers. After they fled the embassy compound, the Americans did not stay together but split into two groups. Initially, there were only five—one who worked elsewhere joined them later—but six are seen from the outset. Most of them stayed with the Canadians’ chief immigration officer—the late John Sheardown, who is not shown—rather than with Ambassador Ken Taylor, whose part gets less attention than it deserves. At previews, Canadian critics complained that their country got short shrift, and Affleck had to make some adjustments.¹⁰

The atmospherics of the experience of the houseguests were very different from what is seen on the screen. They experienced far more boredom than tension, they never had to hide in a crawl space, and they never went to the bazaar or anywhere else outside the residences. No Iranian officials were aggressively pursuing them, and their pictures were never reconstructed from the mass of shredded documents taken from the embassy. After Mendez meets the Americans—“Julio” never appears—they received his plan with excitement and optimism, not fear or resignation. Overall, the rescue operation, from planning to execution, went far more smoothly than is portrayed. The Mendezes’ marriage was not strained, so the scenes with Tony and his son and wife—especially the implied reconciliation at the end—are pure sentimentality.

The most egregious departures from reality come in the latter part of the movie. The White House role is seriously misrepresented; President Jimmy Carter, who approved the operation on 23 January, never changed his mind, and the scenes when Mendez “goes rogue” and his boss has to make a trick call to presidential advisor Hamilton Jordan to get last-minute reapproval are fanciful. Most of what happens at the airport after the Americans arrive is contrived. They did not have problems obtaining their tickets or get stopped at security checks, and the ever-skeptical Joe

Stafford did not become the hero of the hour by using his fluent Farsi to win over a group of suspicious guards. An Iranian official, hot on the Americans’ trail, did not call the bogus production company in Hollywood to verify the Argo cover story. Lastly, the outrageously unrealistic chase scene on the runway never took place; the laws of physics would not have allowed it anyway.

Mendez’s book collaborator, Matt Baglio, justified these inventions in an interview:

There were some tense moments in the airport. There were some times when [the Americans’] documents were inspected, and there were some questions about photos, their flight was delayed. I think the film was very truthful....There wasn’t this chase, as is portrayed in the film...but it captures the tension. I think it’s very truthful in the sense that when you’re making a movie in a cinematic way you need to portray the inner tension that these people were dealing with. Audiences aren’t going to be satisfied with checking documents. One of the fascinating aspects of the real world of espionage is that it’s really all about the details. And there can be a lot of drama in a guy checking a cache or an ink, the quality of a paper or a document, but that’s just not going to translate very well on the big screen. So you’ve got to look for ways to engage the audience.¹¹

Viewers who have appreciated quality espionage and counterintelligence movies like the BBC production of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* and the French film *Farewell*, which place a premium on sophisticated character development, low-key taut action, clever staging, and steadily building suspense, will differ with Baglio on what will keep audiences’ attention.

Argo could have been more accurate and more entertaining if Affleck and his associates had not missed opportunities to add truthful substance, drama, and a little humor to the plot. We first see Mendez asleep in an unkempt room amid Chinese carry-out containers and empty beer cans. We might better understand his slovenliness if we knew that he and some OTS colleagues had been working practically nonstop for days on ideas to help free the American hostages in the embassy. One of them was a complicated effort to create a body dou-

¹⁰ An e-book self-published by one of the houseguests, now retired Foreign Service officer Mark Lijek, equally credits the Canadians and the CIA. See *The Houseguests: A Memoir of Canadian Courage and CIA Sorcery* (Amazon Digital Services, Inc., 2012).

¹¹ Matt Baglio interview on National Public Radio, 25 December 2012, <http://www.npr.org/2012/12/25/167537259/fact-checking-argo-a-great-escape-that-takes-some-leaps>.

ble of the shah, whose entry into the United States for medical treatment had incited the embassy takeover. The plan was to have the fake shah leave the United States for a third country for long enough to enable the Carter administration to negotiate the hostages' release. The White House did not approve the seemingly far-fetched concept, but it is part of the back story to the *Argo* operation and could have enriched the script.

The same goes for Mendez's successful exfiltration of an Iranian asset codenamed RAPTOR out of Tehran soon before the hostages were taken. Mendez tells the story in detail in both his books, and he says that what he learned in getting the Iranian out made him confident he could do the same for the houseguests. In the movie, even with a brief flashback sequence, he could have allayed their concerns far more readily if he had mentioned that he had just done a similar operation in the same place instead of just giving vague assurances that "This is what I do." No wonder Joe Stafford had doubts.

The episode in which Mendez discovers that the Canadians had misdated the visas of their guests could have led to some scenes of technical suspense reminiscent of the old *Mission: Impossible* television series. Likewise for the activities of the Canadian govern-

ment back in Ottawa—the hurried, closed-door meetings, the passage of special legislation to provide the forged passports, the efforts to keep Pelletier from running his scoop—none of those politically interesting scenarios made the script. Back in Tehran, the mock interrogation of the Americans by the Canadian official dressed in military garb and carrying a swagger stick might have been played as the seriocomic incident it was. Instead, the one-dimensional Affleck again gets to monopolize the action. Finally, the impromptu break from the group in the airport waiting room of one of the houseguests to stand in the shorter nonsmoking line for the first document inspection showed that the Iranians were not bothering to match the two parts of the entry-exit documents—one of the potential hitches in the escape plan that had potential for true-to-life tension in the movie.

It is encouraging that Hollywood may be more willing to consider making films that depict the reality of CIA's history and are not just the usual fiction fodder of renegade operatives and incoherent conspiracies.¹² The genesis of the movie *Argo* demonstrates that screenwriters, producers, and directors hungry for ideas for true, audience-engaging stories don't really have to look that hard to find them.



¹² For an overview of the subject, see the recent survey of CIA's relationship with the entertainment industry by Tricia Jenkins, *The CIA in Hollywood: How the Agency Shapes Film and Television* (University of Texas Press, 2012). The book is reviewed in the "Intelligence Officer's Bookshelf" in this issue.