

The Canadian-Less Caper: The Controversy Surrounding Oscar-winning film Argo

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Dr Steve Hewitt, Senior Lecturer in American and Canadian Studies

"Controversy doesn't necessarily help a film. The most controversial Hollywood film during the recent award season was Kathryn Bigelow's depiction of the CIA's hunt for Osama bin Laden, Zero Dark Thirty. The movie's depiction of torture, and its suggestion that torture provided information that eventually led to bin Laden's whereabouts, generated considerable media chatter and numerous attacks on the accuracy of the film. Ultimately, it appears to have hurt the film's Academy Award prospects: it won only one technical Oscar in a tied result with another film.

On the other hand, the big winner of the night was Argo, the Ben Affleck film about the escape of six American diplomats in a CIA operation and, with the help of the Canadian government, during the Iranian hostage crisis in 1980. The discussion and controversy around Zero Dark Thirty has in some ways obscured the fact that Argo has also not evaded considerable criticism from a number of directions.

Some have noted Argo's lack of historical accuracy, particularly in the final 20 minutes of the film, which contains fabricated and overly dramatised events surrounding the departure of the six Americans from Tehran's international airport. The Iranian government - but also citizens of Iran living outside their country - have attacked the one-dimensional depiction of Iranians who are largely "othered" in the film, portrayed in the process as angry and uncivilised with little explanation as to their thinking and motivations. Still others have noted the irony that a film, which opens with a criticism of the Central Intelligence Agency's role, along with Britain's MI6, in toppling a democratically elected Iranian prime minister in 1953, ends up being a film in which the CIA and some of its agents are the heroes.

The most emotional and sustained criticism of the film, however, has emerged not from the main protagonists in decades of tense relations, Iran and the United States, but from Canada. That's because Argo provides what is essentially a completely different version of a story that to many Canadians is a well-known and celebrated victory for their country; one which has also generated considerable pride in much of Canada along with a great deal of gratitude from the United States. In the Affleck version, the Americans and the CIA occupy the forefront of the story with the Canadian diplomats, who courageously sheltered the six Americans, and the Canadian government sitting on the margins.

Ironically, in the aftermath of the escape of the six and in the following 17 years until 1997, the story of Argo was dominated by Canada and Canadians. The then dominant narrative told of a heroic Canadian rescue mission that became known throughout the country as "The Canadian Caper"; it was an event celebrated in a made-for-television movie that depicted the derring-do of Canada's diplomats and government. Nor was it just Canadians patting themselves on their collective backs. Across the United States at the time banners were hung from bridges thanking Canada, as did celebrities on American television and thousands of American schoolchildren who wrote box after box of thank you letters to Canada's then Prime Minister, Joe Clark. President Ronald Reagan even awarded a medal to Ken Taylor, Canada's ambassador to Iran, who eventually became an American citizen, setting up a home in New York City where he lives to this day.

Missing from all of the adulation and celebrations, however, was the role of the CIA in the operation, the focus of Argo. Out of concern for the safety of the American hostages still being held in Tehran, the CIA involvement was not made public at the time and it remained secret until 1997. The US government was content for Canada to take all of the credit and Canada - particularly in the English-speaking parts, used to always being in the American shadow and continually overlooked or underappreciated - revelled in the adulation. It reached the point, in the months after the escape of the diplomats, that the Canadian government discussed internally about not going too far so as to be seen to be exploiting the goodwill of the American people and their politicians, including one congressman who pledged to never allow another word of criticism in Congress of the infamous Canadian seal hunt.

In some ways, then, Argo is redressing the historic imbalance by downplaying the Canadian role and emphasising the important part of the CIA and its agent Tony Mendez. It was he who organised and planned the escape, albeit with the assistance of Canadian diplomats and the Canadian government which created six fake passports to be used by the American diplomats. In taking this emphasis, though, Affleck's Oscar-winning film has played directly into perpetual English-Canadian insecurities about the country's relationship with the US and about its lack of a clear and distinctive identity. These perpetual demons in the psyche of English-speaking Canadians means that Argo will not be preferred viewing for years to come."