

Movie discussion resource
Engage with culture without disengaging your faith.

Argo (DVD)

Genre: Historical drama thriller (2012)

Rating: M

Length: 120 minutes

Starring: Ben Affleck (Tony Mendez), Bryan Cranston, Alan Arkin, John Goodman

Director: Ben Affleck (third feature film)

Producers: Grant Heslov, Ben Affleck, George Clooney

Screenplay: Chris Terrio (based on 'The Master of Disguise' by Antonio J. Mendez and 'The Great Escape' by Joshua Bearman, and the assistance of newly declassified CIA documents)

(2013 Best Picture – Academy Awards, Director's Guild, Screen Actor's Guild, Producer's Guild & BAFTA – but strangely no Academy nomination for Ben Affleck as Director)



Brief synopsis

Based on true events, the film begins with the storming of the U.S. embassy in Tehran in 1979 in retaliation for the U.S. providing refuge for the recently deposed Shah. Six U.S. workers escape and hide in the home of the Canadian ambassador and the other U.S. workers are held hostage in the Embassy. The US State Department begins to explore options for rescuing them from Iran. A CIA specialist is brought in for consultation and criticizes the proposals. Inspired by watching a sci-fi film on TV, he proposes creating a cover story that the escapees are Canadian filmmakers, scouting locations in Iran. In collaboration with a Hollywood make-up artist (John Goodman) who has previously crafted disguises for the CIA, and a film producer (Alan Arkin), a phony film studio is set up to 'produce' the film. The clock is ticking as the Iran revolutionaries in the U.S. Embassy are literally piecing together the clues, and the escapees know time is against them.

Questions for discussion

Some general questions might provide enough framework for you to discuss the movie:

- ❖ What stood out as the main points/highlights in the movie?
- ❖ What themes are explored?
- ❖ What assumptions were embedded in the story?
- ❖ What challenged you? What questions did it raise for you?
- ❖ Are there aspects of the story that resonated with your own experience or with the experience of others in a similar situation?
- ❖ Are there biblical or theological themes or characters that come to mind?

U.S. and British interests in Iran – a brief history

America's foreign policies directly led to the hostage crisis (1979-81), and the film begins with a history lesson that provides the context, and demonstrates that the Iranians did not do this out of baseless malice. Iran, a predominantly Muslim-Shiite populace was ruled by a series of monarchies. The last was Reza Shah Pahlavi who obeyed British colonial control to access oil resources. There were competing interests within Iran, chiefly Syed Ruhollah Moosavi Khomeini, who was an Ayatollah (spiritual leader). In the 1950's, the Iranian populace democratically elected Dr. Mohammad Mosaddeq who nationalized the country's resources. During this struggle for nationalization of resources and autonomy for Iran, and in a period of increasing civil unrest, Pahlavi, at the request of the British MI6, left the country to plot the overthrow of Prime Minister Mossadegh, with the CIA. In August of 1953, the CIA successfully backed a coup to oust Mossadegh (he was subsequently imprisoned until death) and re-instituted both the Shah Pahlavi, and placed a prime minister more in favour of Western interests. Ayatollah Khomeini, who had cast his lot with Mossadegh, earned the ire of Western-backed governments. The ire reached an apex when Khomeini publicly denounced the Shah in 1964, for which the former was placed under house arrest, and subsequently exiled. Khomeini based himself in Iraq in 1965 until ordered to leave by

Saddam Hussein in 1978. He stayed in France until his return home during the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979. By 1978, the Iranian populace, angered with an American-backed regime, could no longer be contained, and forced Shah Pahlavi to leave during a series of intense national strikes and clashes with the military, who were overwhelmed by sheer numbers of anti-Shah protesters. As Khomeini assumed power, the new government learned that the Shah Pahlvi had sought asylum in the United States, ostensibly for treatment of lymphoma. When the newly formed theocratic regime and revolutionary guards became aware of this, they helped a group of university students to overrun the US embassy in Iran, and held Americans hostage for over a year. (Ibrahim Khider, <http://ikhider.com>)

Crises in the world do not 'just happen' in a vacuum. There are always overt or covert events that provide the catalyst, and as in *Argo* may be kept secret for decades, or may never be known publicly. **Discuss** other similar situations of which you are aware. **Discuss** the reason for the emergence of Wikileaks as a way of revealing what is happening in the background and hidden from public knowledge. While politics is secondary in the film, **discuss** the way its portrayal of the U.S. as a 'superpower under siege' serves as a topical comment on its place in the world today.

Non-violent solutions

'Operation Eagle Claw' was a U.S. military operation ordered by President Jimmy Carter to attempt to end the Iran hostage crisis. Its failure, and the humiliating public debacle that ensued, damaged American prestige worldwide, and probably played a major role in Carter's defeat in the 1980 U.S. Presidential election. Contrast this with the military precision of the killing in Pakistan of Osama bin Laden, a CIA led operation. Legal and ethical aspects of the killing, such as his not being taken alive despite being unarmed, were questioned by a few (including Amnesty International) but generally welcomed by the U.S., UN, NATO and European Union and a large number of governments. It may have contributed to Obama's re-election as President, by demonstrating his preparedness to use military solutions, and as the execution of 'justice' for bin Laden who was judged responsible for the 9/11 attacks.

Argo shows a non-violent, creative intervention. The CIA agent Mendez is the antithesis of the Jason Bourne character, living off his wits not his guns. The plan is risky (beefed up for Hollywood but not as suspenseful as the film shows - there were no car chases by Iranian security forces with guns ablaze; Iran took several years to reconstruct shredded American embassy documents; and the disguised American embassy staff left the Iranian airport quietly). Yet, even during this tense operation, Mendez was informed that it had been cancelled and that a military rescue was being planned instead.

Discuss the propensity for military intervention and the secondary value of negotiation, dialogue, and even compromise.

The allure of cinema and filmmaking

Following the Khomeini Revolution in 1979, Iranian filmmakers went into exile. From 1979 to 1985, only about 100 features were released in Iran. Khomeini's censorship was strict. For a time, foreign films were cut, and then banned altogether. It is fascinating in this context that the Iranian cultural office would be so helpful to the 'Canadian' film crew and that the planned rescue had even a glimmer of hope for success. Perhaps, such is the allure of cinema and filmmaking. In many countries, western films are viewed with contempt for their content, western values and depictions of sexuality.

Discuss the universal attraction of cinema as a vehicle for storytelling.

Discuss the way films 'carry culture', and the way values are embedded in films.