**Former White House Aide Reviews 'Argo'**

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Argo tells the story of the six American diplomats who narrowly escaped the U.S. embassy in Tehran as the Iran hostage crisis erupted in late 1979. Gary Sick, who served as the principal White House aide for Iran during the Iranian Revolution and the hostage crisis, reviews the film.

**Transcript**

NEAL CONAN, HOST:

Almost exactly 33 years ago, Iranian activists stormed the American Embassy in Tehran and held 52 U.S. citizens hostage for well over a year. But six American diplomats escaped the embassy at the last minute and took refuge in the home of Canada's ambassador. A new movie called "Argo" tells the story of a CIA agent, played by Ben Affleck, who dreams up a plan to get them out of Iran, disguised as a film crew scouting locations for a science fiction movie. Here, he presents his idea to the secretary of state.

(SOUNDBITE OF MOVIE, "ARGO")

BOB GUNTON: (as Cyrus) Aliens and robots?

BEN AFFLECK: (as Tony) Yes, sir.

GUNTON: (as Cyrus) You're telling me that there is a movie company in Hollywood right now that is funded by the CIA?

AFFLECK: (as Tony) Yes, sir. There are only bad options. It's about finding the best one.

GUNTON: (as Cyrus) You don't have a better bad idea than this?

BRYAN CRANSTON: (as Jack) This is the best bad idea we have, sir, by far.

CONAN: If you've seen "Argo" and have questions about how closely it sticks to what really happened, give us a call: 800-989-8255. Email: talk@npr.org. And you can join the conversation on our website. Go to npr.org. Click on TALK OF THE NATION.

Back in 1979, Gary Sick served as the Iran specialist on the White House staff. He worked for both Presidents Carter and Reagan. He's now a professor at Columbia University School of Politics and International Affairs, and he reviewed "Argo" for the online magazine Al Monitor and joins us now on the phone. Nice to have you with us again on the program, Gary.

GARY SICK: Neal, it's very good to talk to you as always.

CONAN: And back in 1979, did you know about the six, quote, unquote, "house guests" of the Canadian ambassador?

SICK: I was not involved in the operational planning or the creation of the film studio or any of the fake science fiction movie. But I was aware as were many people in the government that a number of our people from the embassy had managed to escape. And we all knew that we had to be very careful what we said so that the Iranians would not recognize that fact. They didn't know that those people had been there. They didn't know that those people were missing. And that was a national secret of some significance.

CONAN: It was interesting. Back in those days, I remember there was great frustration. We couldn't get an exact count of how many diplomats were being held. There was a reason for that.

SICK: Exactly. And, you know, several magazines wanted to print pictures of everybody in the embassy, and they, you know, the state department argued with them vociferously not to do that. I think one did, and the Iranians didn't seem to notice. So, you know, despite what the film suggests that they were spending their full time trying to figure out who all the people were in the embassy, in reality the Iranians had their hands full with the hostages that they had, and I don't think that there were a lot of people working overtime to do it.

CONAN: There is a line in the movie that after they escaped the embassy, and we've seen very dramatic scenes of it being stormed, that they went first to the British and New Zealand embassies, looking for sanctuary and were denied.

SICK: You know, governments are very cold blooded about their national interests. I think they knew the - those governments knew full well that if they accepted those people there, put them up, hid them from the Iranians that, in time, the truth would have to be known and they would have to close their embassies. In fact, the Canadians did have to close their embassy for some time after this - the Canadian caper, so-called, took place, but the Canadians were willing to do it. And I think Americans have a reason to be tremendously grateful to the Canadians and specifically to Ken Taylor, the ambassador there, who basically risked his whole embassy for our sake, for the sake of six of our people. And that was a very good thing. I'm particularly sad by the fact that the current Canadian government

...for our sake, for the sake of six of our people. And that was a very good - and I'm particularly sad by the fact that the current Canadian government has closed their embassy in Tehran, which means that if anything like this should happen in the future, the Canadians wouldn't be there. I regret that very much.

CONAN: There's another character inside the Canadian embassy who is portrayed in the film, and that is the Iranian housekeeper, who comes in to clean and helped take care. She is, of course, aware that this six people are living there for along time. In the film, she eventually twigs(ph) as to who they really must be. And yet, when she's presented by - questioned by one of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, saying how long are those people have been living there, she gives the cover story, just two days.

SICK: That's right. And I think although Iranian people come off looking pretty bad in this movie, they harassed the people who go to visit the mall - to the bazaar, there are, you know, constant demonstrations in the street, fanatic group wandering the streets. The Komitehs taking law into their own hands. And all of that was true, up to a point, anyway. But the other thing people forget is a lot of Iranians, first of all, went about their daily business as they always had. And secondly, had a soft spot in their hearts for Americans, especially individual Americans as opposed to the government of the United States. So I'm glad at least one person in this movie, an Iranian person, was shown up as having a heart. And I think that was a very good point.

CONAN: Yet, is that factually accurate so far as you know?

SICK: As far as I - I don't know, honestly. But I do know that there were Iranians who basically were prepared to assist the United States in a lot of ways after the revolution took place, and who retained a respect for the United States that was real. And, you know, that I think to some degree, the people who makes the argument that Iran is our worst enemy in the world and that we can never come to terms with them, forget about the fact that there are indeed a lot of Iranians who don't share that view and we're at risk of actually driving them away.

CONAN: From the opinion polls I've seen, the United States is most popular abroad, probably, in Iran.

SICK: Strangely enough, that really is true.

CONAN: Let's get a caller in on the conversation. Our guest is Gary Sick, who worked in the White House as the Iran specialist at the end of the Carter and the beginning of the Reagan administration's. Of course, that encompasses the time of the hostage crisis. We're talking about the historical accuracy of the film "Argo," which is just out in theaters, directed and starring Ben Affleck. 800-989-8255. Email us: talk@npr.org. And Ferris(ph) is on the line with us from Chicago.

FERRIS: Good day, gentlemen. Gary, this is intriguing. I just the movie Sunday with my first wife, and we were terrifically entertained. And, of course, wondered where the film took its license to depart from the reality. And a few things that come to mind are - I'd like to mention a few of them. One is the reassembly of the shredded paperwork by the children of Iran to reconstitute the faces of the six that were taken in by the Canadians.

CONAN: The - these are the documents shredded by American diplomats as the embassy is being stormed. And we see pictures of very young children working on the floor to reassemble the strips of paper in jigsaw-puzzle style to repair, not just the pictures but documents that had been shredded. Gary Sick, is that...

SICK: There were people, certainly, in the revolution, and the people who took the embassy, who spent months and months and months doing exactly that, putting the shredded bits together. I have - I've never heard before the movie, that the Iranian children were used to do this. I really doubt that very much.

FERRIS: What about the departure of the Swiss-Air flight was very theatric - very climactic in the movie based on the closeness of the military and the law enforcement driving under the wings of the airplane as it left the ground. Any idea whether that - they took license with that?

SICK: That was pure fiction.

FERRIS: I see.

SICK: Nothing like that happened at all. Basically, they went to the airport. They were passed through. They did, in fact - somebody took their passports into another room, and they were scared. He came back and handed it to them. They went on their way. The flight took off. There was a slight delay, but the flight took off. There was no chase. And, you know, there was a lot of tension. Certainly, the people who were getting out were as tense as they could possibly be. But in the movies, you want to make it a little bit more. So having an airplane chased on the tarmac make great film stuff, but it was just not true.

FERRIS: Three strikes and I'm out. What about the reluctance of the one young man who eventually was depicted in the movie as the one who was able to speak Farsi and communicated with the screeners at the airport. He was reluctant to put his life on the line and eventually seemed to be the one of the heroes of the movie by the implication that had he not been able to speak Farsi and negotiated that with the - there - being there on a film mission. In other words, he carried out quite a conversation.

SICK: The...

FERRIS: And the idea was that he saved the day at that - the final station during the airport security.

SICK: Again, it's great theater. There was, in fact, that fellow in the group of six really thought that it wasn't going to work. That it was too complex. That it was too theatrical. And, you know, a number of people in Washington share that view, that this was really over the top in terms of creating a false film company, a film and all of that. But he resisted, but he eventually then joined in with the group when they left, and he was just one of the group as they went through. As far as I know, he displayed no particular heroism on the way out but, again, made a terrific story.

FERRIS: Are there any theories of...

CONAN: Paris, we want to give somebody else a chance.

FERRIS: ...any conspiracy theories with (unintelligible) who...

CONAN: Ferris, Ferris, we want to give somebody else a chance.

SICK: Is it Gary Sick? How do I spell...

CONAN: You're hogging the airtime, Mr. Paris.

FERRIS: How do I spell Gary's last name?

CONAN: Sick, S-I-C-K.

FERRIS: Thank you, gentlemen.

CONAN: Thank you very much for your call. We're talking with Gary Sick about the new film "Argo" and its basis in reality. You're listening to TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News. And let's go to Justin. Justin with us from Ogden, Utah.

JUSTIN: Yeah, hi. I was wondering about how the government was able to keep the whole operation classified when a foreign - and for all intents and purposes - and any government was involved and was able to piece everything together by the end.

CONAN: You mean the Canadian government or the Iranian government?

JUSTIN: Oh, I'm sorry, the Iranian government.

CONAN: OK.

(LAUGHTER)

CONAN: Gary Sick?

SICK: I'm not sure I understand the question. It was because of the sensitivity that it had to be kept a secret. Obviously, if the Iranians learned about it, clearly, they would crackdown. They would take the people. They would put them in the embassy, hold them hostage as well. So - and the fact it had to be kept secret was - there was no question about it. And once it was over, they, you know, they let the Canadians take complete credit. The CIA was not even mentioned. And the reason for that, if you saw the movie, the first two minutes or so is spent giving a brief, but rather telling, history of the United States and Iran, about the United States' intervention with most Mosaddegh in 1953. The CIA was involved in that, and the Iranians have never forgotten it.

The thinking was that if the Iranians learned that the CIA had anything to do with it, they would go berserk and perhaps harm some of the hostages that there were there. So they were very careful. They let the Canadians take credit for it. And it was not really until, I think, about either 10 years later that the operation was declassified, figuring that no further harm could be done.

CONAN: During the Clinton administration. There is, at the end, a voice-over by former President Carter, who said he might have wanted to release information about American involvement, so he could have gotten some of the credit. He did not win the subsequent presidential election. But in the meantime, he said we did, of course, get all of the hostages home safely and without using violence. True enough as far as it goes, but, of course, he's skipping over the part where he tried to launch a mission to rescue the hostages but it failed.

SICK: That's correct.

CONAN: We're talking with Gary Sick about the film "Argo," which shows the U.S.-CIA's efforts to smuggle six American diplomats out of Tehran back in 1979 disguised as a Canadian film crew. And, Gary, I was interested in your review. You thought the best parts were, in fact, set not so much in Hollywood or Tehran, but Hollywood.

SICK: I just love that part. I mean, we had Alan Arkin and John Goodman playing Hollywood insiders. And they're the ones who supposedly set up this fake company and put out the story about the movie and hoodwinked Hollywood. And, of course, one of the amusing things is that Hollywood is kind of a Tinseltown - you believe anything. I mean, nothing is too crazy to be true, and so nobody even blinked at the idea that they were going to make a sci-fi movie about this and that they're going to film it in the Middle East and so forth. Nobody raised an eyebrow. In fact, they were flooded with calls of people wanting to act and direct and do all kinds of things.

So - but those two were - the best writing of the film was reserved for them, and it was just a comic duo with repartee back and forth without Hollywood. And it just tears Hollywood apart, but it's all very funny. And I, you know, they obviously had a really good time doing it, and the audience just roared.

CONAN: Let's go next to Nicole and - oops. Nicole, are you there? From Long Island?

NICOLE: Hi. How are you? This is Nicole. I'm from Long Island, New York, and I saw "Argo." I thought it was fantastic, very thrilling. I was wondering, with regard to the historical aspect. When, you know, folks would knock on the door at the Canadian embassy, and you would see the six houseguests, you know, dashed to the trap door. It seems very reminiscence of, you know, what would have happened in Germany with the hiding of the Jews and things like that. Was that, in fact, true or not? Because that was very tension-filled, that they were sleeping there and hiding there. And how much of that was true?

SICK: As far as I know, it was fundamentally true. They were living in this - it was comfortable quarters. They had an awful lot to drink. So they had an unlimited supply of scotch and wine, and various other things and practically nothing to do to entertain themselves. So there was a good bit of drinking that went on. But they also stayed away from the windows. They did not go outside where they might be observed and so forth. They were basically living like prisoners in a gilded cage, I guess. I mean, there was - they were comfortable quarters.

Whether they had a trap door for them in case of a Revolutionary Guard or somebody coming in, I honestly don't know. I've never heard any reference to that other than in the movie. That may have been added as a touch. But the fact is that foreigners, the Iranian government, is not permitted to enter a Canadian diplomatic territory. So it would only be with the approval of the ambassador. And so, my guess is that they had no such instances. They did have cases, however, where airplanes flew over, helicopters flew over, and they quickly rush away from the windows and stayed outside.

CONAN: Nicole, thanks very much for your call.

NICOLE: Thank you so much.

CONAN: And, Gary Sick, thanks very much for your time today.

SICK: Neal, a pleasure to be with you.

CONAN: Gary Sick is now a professor at Columbia University. He recently wrote a review of the film "Argo" for the online publication A-Monitor. Tomorrow on TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News: SCIENCE FRIDAY, presidential polls. This is NPR News.

<http://www.npr.org/2012/10/18/163171549/former-white-house-aide-reviews-argo>