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Screen Propaganda, Hollywood and the CIA

By Julie Lévesque

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“One of the most pervasive trends in 21st century western culture has become somewhat of an obsession in America. It’s called “Hollywood history”, where the corporate studio machines in Los Angeles spend hundreds of millions of dollars in order to craft and precisely tailor historical events to suit the prevailing political paradigm.” (Patrick Henningsen, Hollywood History: CIA Sponsored “Zero Dark Thirty”, Oscar for “Best Propaganda Picture”)

Black Hawk Dawn, Zero Dark Thirty and Argo, those are only a few major recent productions showing how today’s movie industry promotes US foreign policy. But the motion picture has been used for propaganda since the beginning of the 20th century and Hollywood’s cooperation with the Department of Defense, the CIA and other government agencies is no modern trend.

With Michelle Obama awarding Ben Affleck’s *Argo* the Oscar for best movie, the industry showed how close it is to Washington. According to Soraya Sepahpour-Ulrich, *Argo* is a propaganda film concealing the ugly truth about the Iranian hostage crisis and designed to prepare the American public for an upcoming confrontation with Iran:

Foreign policy observers have long known that Hollywood reflects and promotes U.S. policies (in turn, is determined by Israel and its supporters). This fact was made public when Michelle Obama announced an Oscar win for “Argo” – a highly propagandist, anti-Iran film. Amidst the glitter and excitement, Hollywood and White House reveal their pact and send out their message in time for the upcoming talks surrounding Iran’s nuclear program [...]

Hollywood has a long history of promoting US policies. In 1917, when the United States entered World War I, President Woodrow Wilson’s Committee on Public Information (CPI) enlisted the aid of America’s film industry to make training films and features supporting the

'cause'. George Creel, Chairman of the CPI believed that the movies had a role in "carrying the gospel of Americanism to every corner of the globe."

The pact grew stronger during World War II [...] Hollywood's contribution was to provide propaganda. After the war, Washington reciprocated by using subsidies, special provisions in the Marshall Plan, and general clout to pry open resistant European film markets [...]

As Hollywood and the White House eagerly embrace "Argo" and its propagandist message, they shamelessly and deliberately conceal a crucial aspect of this "historical" event. The glitter buries the all too important fact that the Iranian students who took over the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, proceeded to reveal Israel's dark secret to the world. Documents classified as "SECRET" revealed LAKAM's activities. Initiated in 1960, LAKAM was an Israeli network assigned to economic espionage in the U.S. assigned to "the collection of scientific intelligence in the U.S. for Israel's defense industry" (Soraya Sepahpour-Ulrich Oscar to Hollywood's "Argo": And the Winners are ... the Pentagon and the Israel Lobby)

For a real account of the Iranian hostage crisis, a CIA covert operation, Global Research recommends reading Harry V. Martin's article published in 1995: The Real Iranian Hostage Story from the Files of Fara Mansoor:

Fara Mansoor is a fugitive. No, he hasn't broken any laws in the United States. His crime is the truth. What he has to say and the documents he carries are equivalent to a death warrant for him, Mansoor is an Iranian who was part of the "establishment" in Iran long before the 1979 hostage taking. Mansoor's records actually discount the alleged "October Surprise" theory that the Ronald Reagan-George Bush team paid the Iranians not to release 52 American hostages until after the November 1980 Presidential elections [...]

With thousands of documents to support his position, Mansoor says that the "hostage crisis" was a political "management tool" created by the pro-Bush faction of the CIA, and implemented through an a priori Alliance with Khomeini's Islamic Fundamentalists." He says the purpose was twofold:

- o To keep Iran intact and communist-free by putting Khomeini in full control.
- o To destabilize the Carter Administration and put George Bush in the White House. (Harry V. Martin, The Real Iran Hostage Crisis: A CIA Covert Op)

Zero Dark Thirty is another great silver screen propaganda piece which spurred outrage earlier this year. It exploits the horrific events of 9/11 to present torture as an effective and necessary evil:

Zero Dark Thirty is disturbing for two reasons. First and foremost, it leaves the viewer with the erroneous impression that torture helped the CIA find bin Laden's hiding place in Pakistan. Secondly, it ignores both the illegality and immorality of using torture as an interrogation tool.

The thriller opens with the words "based on first-hand accounts of actual events." After showing footage of the horrific 9/11 attacks, it moves into a graphic and lengthy depiction of torture. The detainee "Ammar" is subjected to waterboarding, stress positions, sleep deprivation, and confined in a small box. Responding to the torture, he divulges the name of the courier who ultimately leads the CIA to bin Laden's location and assassination. It may be good theater, but it is inaccurate and misleading. (Marjorie Cohn, "Zero Dark Thirty": Torturing the Facts)

Earlier this year the Golden Globe awards made some analysts criticize Hollywood's dark "celebration of the police state" and argue that the real Golden Globe winner was the military-industrial complex:

Homeland won best TV series, best TV actor and actress. It IS a highly entertaining show which actually portrays some of the flaws of the MIIC system.

Argo won best movie and best director. It glorifies the CIA and Ben Affleck spoke with the highest praise for the CIA.

And best actress went to Jessica Chastain of Zero Dark Thirty, a movie that has been vilified for propagandizing the use of torture.

The Military Industrial Intelligence Complex is playing a more and more pervasive role in our lives. In the next few years we'll be seeing movies that focus on the use of drone technology in police and spy work in the USA. We've already been seeing movies that show how spies can violate every aspect of our privacy— of the most intimate parts of our lives. By making movies and TV series that celebrate these cancerous extensions of the police state Hollywood and the big studios are normalizing the ideas they present us with— lying to the public, routinely creating fraudulent stories as covers for what's really going on. (Rob Kall cited in Washington's Blog, *The CIA and Other Government Agencies Dominate Movies and Television*)

All these troublesome Hollywood connections have been examined in an in-depth report Global Research published in January 2009: *Lights, Camera... Covert Action: The Deep Politics of Hollywood*. The article lists a great number of movies in part scripted for propaganda purposes by the Defense Department, the CIA and other government agencies. It is interesting to note that this year's Oscar-winning director Ben Affleck cooperated with the CIA in 2002 as he starred in *The Sum of All Fears*.

Authors Matthew Alford and Robbie Graham explain that compared to the CIA, the Department of Defense "has an 'open' but barely publicized relationship with Tinsel Town" which, "whilst morally dubious and barely advertised, has at least occurred within the public domain." Alford and Graham cite a 1991 CIA report revealing the sprawling influence of the agency, not only in the movie business but also in the media where it "has relationships with reporters from every major wire service, newspaper, news weekly, and television network in the nation." It was not until 1996 that the CIA announced it "would now openly collaborate on Hollywood productions, supposedly in a strictly 'advisory' capacity":

The Agency's decision to work publicly with Hollywood was preceded by the 1991 "Task Force Report on Greater CIA Openness," compiled by CIA Director Robert Gates' newly appointed 'Openness Task Force,' which secretly debated—ironically— whether the Agency should be less secretive. The report acknowledges that the CIA "now has relationships with reporters from every major wire service, newspaper, news weekly, and television network in the nation," and the authors of the report note that this helped them "turn some 'intelligence failure' stories into 'intelligence success' stories, and has contributed to the accuracy of countless others." It goes on to reveal that the CIA has in the past "persuaded reporters to postpone, change, hold, or even scrap stories that could have adversely affected national security interests" [...]

Espionage novelist Tom Clancy has enjoyed an especially close relationship with the CIA. In 1984, Clancy was invited to Langley after writing *The Hunt for Red October*, which was later turned into the 1990 film. The Agency invited him again when he was working on *Patriot Games* (1992), and the movie adaptation was, in turn, granted access to Langley facilities. More recently, *The Sum of All Fears* (2002) depicted the CIA as tracking down terrorists who detonate a nuclear weapon on US soil. For this production, CIA director George Tenet gave the filmmakers a personal tour of the Langley HQ; the film's star, Ben Affleck also consulted with Agency analysts, and Chase Brandon served as on-set advisor.

The real reasons for the CIA adopting an “advisory” role on all of these productions are thrown into sharp relief by a solitary comment from former Associate General Counsel to the CIA, Paul Kelbaugh. In 2007, whilst at a College in Virginia, Kelbaugh delivered a lecture on the CIA's relationship with Hollywood, at which a local journalist was present. The journalist (who now wishes to remain anonymous) wrote a review of the lecture which related Kelbaugh's discussion of the 2003 thriller *The Recruit*, starring Al Pacino. The review noted that, according to Kelbaugh, a CIA agent was on set for the duration of the shoot under the guise of a consultant, but that his real job was to misdirect the filmmakers, the journalist quoted Kelbaugh as saying [...] Kelbaugh emphatically denied having made the public statement. (Matthew Alford and Robbie Graham, *Lights, Camera... Covert Action: The Deep Politics of Hollywood*)

During the Cold War the CIA's Psychological Strategy Board (PSB) agent Luigi G. Luraschi was a Paramount executive. He “had secured the agreement of several casting directors to subtly plant ‘well dressed negroes’ into films, including ‘a dignified negro butler’ who has lines ‘indicating he is a free man’”. The purpose of these changes was “to hamper the Soviets’ ability to exploit its enemy’s poor record in race relations and served to create a peculiarly anodyne impression of America, which was, at that time, still mired in an era of racial segregation.” (*Ibid.*)

The latest award-winning movie productions show that the Manichean view of the world put forward by the US foreign policy agenda has not changed since the Cold War. The Hollywood-CIA alliance is alive and well and still portrays America as the “leader of the free world” fighting “evil” around the world:

The interlocking of Hollywood and national security apparatuses remains as tight as ever: ex-CIA agent Bob Baer told us, “There’s a symbiosis between the CIA and Hollywood” [...] Baer’s claims are given weight by the Sun Valley meetings, annual get-togethers in Idaho’s Sun Valley in which several hundred of the biggest names in American media –including every major Hollywood studio executive– convene to discuss collective media strategy for the coming year. (*Ibid.*)