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David Houghton
University of Central Florida

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Lost Lesson From 'Argo': Dignified Restraint in Face of Victory

By David Houghton
UCF Forum columnist
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It is one of the most remarkable stories in the CIA's history, and a long untold story of the 1979 Iran hostage crisis.

The new movie *Argo* tells a tale that has long been known to Iran hostage-crisis specialists as the "Canadian Caper," but about which the details were not fully declassified until the late 1990s.

And although President Jimmy Carter is often accused of timidity and weakness in foreign policy, this very daring and risky plan went ahead with his full authorization and knowledge.

In the subsequent years he never made use of the whole thing for political gain, which some of today's politicians could learn from. Indeed, his restraint in discussing the matter is probably the main reason most of us never heard of all of this until now.

In order to understand the story, we first have to go back to Nov. 4, 1979, the day the U.S. embassy in Tehran was invaded by radical Iranian students. Many of the students wrongly assumed the building was the site of a new plot to depose their hero – the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini – from power, in a similar scheme to one the British and the CIA implemented in 1953 in order to depose another Iranian leader, Mohammed Mossadegh.

In 1979, it would be our innocent diplomats – initially 66 of them – who paid the price for this. Their job was to stamp passports and issue visas. But as hostages, they would become pawns in an internal power struggle within Iran, a handy political device for Khomeini as he sought "hate-figures" to unite the country behind him.

This is where the *Argo* story really begins, a fascinating twist in an otherwise well-known tale. Six hostages managed to escape from the embassy compound in the confusion of the assault. Stranded in a city where anyone in any way associated with the Shah of Iran could be shot in the street, they were sheltered by Canadian Ambassador Kenneth Taylor and his colleague John Sheardown.

President Jimmy Carter then called in the State Department and the CIA to assist the Canadians in getting these six *de facto* hostages out. But how to do it?

Should they smuggle the hostages over the border into Turkey, perhaps bribing Iranian guards to look the other way? Too risky, with a high chance of detection.

Should some sort of paramilitary extraction operation be launched? Again, far too risky, and it might get the hostages inside the embassy killed in retaliation.

The State Department wanted to portray the six Americans as teachers of English, but someone pointed out that all the English-teaching schools were closed. The Canadians wanted to pass the Americans off as Canadian nutritionists inspecting Iranian crops, but it was noted that they were unlikely to visit revolutionary Iran in the winter.

Into this mix of proposals, Tony Mendez of the CIA – played in *Argo* by Ben Affleck – became the advocate for what seemed like a truly bizarre third alternative.

Why not create a fake sci-fi movie called *Argo*, and give the Americans Canadian passports, together with fake identities suggesting that they are working on the bogus movie? A whole apparatus for the movie would have to be set up in Hollywood, just in case anyone checked, and there would have to be a “real” script.

Regardless of what cover story was used, Mendez and a colleague would have to fly into Tehran to coach the six in the deception and ensure that they were ready to play their roles. Mendez actually left for Iran with three different cover story options in his suitcase (teachers, nutritionists and filmmakers).

He pitched all three to the six Americans on his arrival, and it was they who decided to go with the *Argo* option.

Did it make much difference that they chose the fake movie cover? Who knows, because in real life the Iranian immigration officials never actually challenged the Americans on their credentials.

But Mendez, Taylor and Sheardown all risked their lives for those of the six Americans.

One of the major lessons of the “Argo incident,” as it will probably come to be known now, is that Carter was the kind of president who practiced dignified restraint in the face of victory.

I doubt whether many recent presidents can claim to share that attribute.

UCF Forum columnist David Houghton is an associate professor of political science at the University of Central Florida and can be reached at David.Houghton@ucf.edu.