

Official Secrets 2020

Running time: 112 mins

Director: Gavin Hood

Writers: Gregory Bernstein & Sara Bernstein (screenplay);

Marcia Mitchell & Thomas Mitchell (book *The Spy Who Tried to Stop a War: Katharine Gun and the Secret Plot to Sanction the Iraq Invasion*).

Stars: Keira Knightley, Matt Smith, Matthew Goode, Ralph Fiennes

Synopsis

Official Secrets is based on the true story of GCHQ translator Katharine Gun who leaked to *The Observer* a memo revealing that the United States had eavesdropped on diplomats from countries tasked with passing a second United Nations resolution on the invasion of Iraq.



Keira Knightley and Katharine Gun at the London premiere of "Official Secrets."

Official Secrets-The True Story Behind the film Samuel Spencer 19/10/19 - Newsweek

In a year that the U.S. president is accused of pressuring foreign governments for political gain, the story behind the film *Official Secrets* seems particularly timely. The film is, for the most part, a historical account of the events in 2003, but some things have been changed to aid the drama of the narrative. To separate fact from fiction, *Newsweek* spoke to the real Gun and the journalist who ran the story, Martin Bright, as well as *Official Secrets* director Gavin Hood.

"Obviously, we are compressing a story that took place in real life over a period of a year into two hours. So right there, you are pulling out the highlights," said Hood of the key issue with making *Official Secrets*. This meant that a lot of the things that we see Gun go through in the film actually took far longer in real life. For example, a scene where Gun tries to get her husband out of an immigration detention center actually played out over three days during which she did not know where he was. The real-life Gun said: "The attempt at deportation kind of spiked my stress level again

for another period of my life." However, Gun added that this was nothing on the anxiety she felt when the memo she had leaked ended up on the front page of *The Observer*, which she called "the most stressful memo of my life."

Speaking to Gun, and seeing her in archival footage at the end of the film, it is clear that Knightley didn't try to emulate the look or sound of the real-life Gun. Hood said that this was a purposeful choice by Knightley. "We started wondering whether we should do the blonde hair and the glasses and wondering about prosthetics, but one point Keira said to me, 'You know, the last thing I want is the audience to say, 'Oh, I don't know if I like her blonde,'" said Hood. "And she then said: 'My way into this is what would I as the unadorned, no-makeup, no-fancy-edges Keira Knightley... what would I feel like if this memo landed on my desk?'"

"I think Gavin had a really difficult time telling this story because it doesn't fit into a normal sort of storytelling mode," said Gun. "One of the things that we discovered quite early on when he was interviewing me was that a lot of stuff was just happening in my head. It was what I was thinking, what I was feeling. And he kept thinking, 'How am I going to portray this?'"

"The scene where all of us receive this email and we're discussing the memo, that never happened. [In real life] I saw the email, I immediately thought, 'Oh, my God, this is shocking.' But there's no way I would have expressed that to any of my colleagues," Gun explained. "I think part of the reason Gavin included it was just to kind of share that thought process."

The difficulties of translating Gun's story also made writing the climax of the film tricky. "You get to the end, and there's this court case. If I was writing this as fiction, I need a much longer court case, right? Well, you don't have one and get that almost anti-climactic moment that is a punch in the gut," said Hood.

What the critics said (extracts)

[Peter Bradshaw - The Guardian](#)

Knightley gives a sympathetic performance as Iraq war whistleblower Katharine Gun in this shrewd and relevant spy drama.

[Ann Hornaday - The Washington Post](#)

Although Knightley's Gun often seems to be a passive figure, buffeted by the machinations of those around her, the film's honesty about the enormous personal costs of whistleblowing is a welcome relief from more romanticised heroics.