A Woman With Throw-Weight

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Nicole Kidman was in a luxurious penthouse suite at the Century Plaza Hotel in Los Angeles last month, holding court before rapt television crews eager for news about her and her new film, "The Peacemaker." George Clooney, her popular co-star, and Mimi Leder, the film's director, were in the next two suites, engaged in similar light Hollywood chatter.

At the end of the hall—at the most unusual stop on a publicity tour arranged by the DreamWorks SKG studio—a short, curly-haired woman from Washington wearing serious eyeglasses was talking about the dangers of nuclear smuggling and describing life at the Russian, Ukrainian and Eurasian office of the National Security Council.

Jessica Stern, a former White House specialist on such esoteric topics as chemical arms and nuclear materials accounting, was there as the real-life model for Kidman's "Peacemaker" portrayal of a lissome, brainy heroine who chases terrorists and saves Manhattan.

It's a movie that makes a Washington job with long hours and relatively modest pay look considerably more glamorous than it is.

Kidman's character, a little-noticed junior government analyst when the movie begins, quickly moves to the center of the action and becomes dizzy with power. After diagnosing the hidden cause of a nuclear detonation in Europe, she pairs up with Clooney—who plays a charming, Oliver North-like, forget-the-rules colonel—and travels with him to Austria, Turkey and Bosnia to try to hunt down the culprit.

Imagine that, writing a classified report in Washington alerting your bosses to a deadly international crisis and then being allowed to get on a plane and try to follow it up yourself.

In a scene that will particularly titillate aspiring NSC staffers, Kidman's character stands up at one interagency meeting to declare she is personally issuing a presidential directive that will shut down traffic and impose martial law in New York City—something many people would have no doubt like to do.

The film is of course a huge exaggeration of Jessica Stern's actual role and authority, as she is quick to say. "No one would make a movie about my real job," says Stern, who came to the NSC in September 1994 at the age of 37 on a two-year Council on Foreign Relations fellowship.

Stern, an intense analyst with a deadly laugh, says, "I was spending all my time writing memos and running meetings, not chasing nuclear warheads around the world. In the movie, they take a bureaucrat and put her in the field. Come on, it's fiction."

Stern's abrupt immersion in the world of big-budget filmmaking—"very much a Dorothy-from-Kansas story," she says—began several months after the NSC press office asked her to chat with Leslie Cockburn, a freelance journalist who was writing a magazine article with her husband, Andrew, about the dangers of nuclear smuggling in the former Soviet Union.

Stern, who had studied chemistry before getting her doctorate at Harvard (with a dissertation rivetingly titled "The Control of Chemical Weapons: A Strategic Analysis"), first became interested in the topic of nuclear smuggling while employed as a postdoctoral fellow in the intelligence division at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California, where nuclear bombs are designed.

A fluent Russian speaker, Stern decided to make the smuggling threat her specialty at the White House. "I wasn't building a career in the bureaucracy and I could afford to be very focused on one issue, to be myopic," she says. As the only scientist there with a nuclear obsession, she was picked to chair two interagency committees of fellow worriers about the illicit transfer of bombs or bomb-making materials to rogue states. She also helped plan how the government would respond to a serious smuggling incident.

"She had a great deal of knowledge and a great deal of passion," said Nicholas Burns, the former NSC Russian specialist who hired her.

Stern spent much of her brief time at the NSC trying to galvanize interest in the topic among senior policymakers distracted by more immediate foreign policy crises. "It was extraordinary that you had a woman running this group, with a very strong technical background," Cockburn recalls thinking. "She knew her stuff, was very young, in the middle of this maelstrom of nuclear issues."

Cockburn thought Stern would be the perfect model for the central figure in a film treatment on the subject that she and her husband had crafted from
George Clooney gives a hand to Nicole Kidman in “The Peacemaker.”

Eventually, they chatted over dinner at the Four Seasons Hotel here, and Schiffer presented Stern with a one-page contract allowing the studio to make one or more movies about her life and even—in an apparently routine but still eye-popping clause—authorizing the studio to create a theme park based on her experiences.

Schiffer never explained what DreamWorks had in mind, but a theme park based on an NSC staff job would perhaps have rides in which tourists are showered with competing talking points, forced to sit through deputies’ meetings without nodding off, or ordered to brief the press after tense international summits. Not exactly fun for the entire family.

Stern demurred while the proposal was reviewed by an NSC lawyer but eventually signed on as a technical consultant for the $50 million film. She was paid just $45,000, which she used to buy a Volvo 850.

In return, she advised the filmmakers on matters such as the layout of the White House situation room, the location of Russian missile bases, the names of various warheads and weapons, and the wonky jargon that nuclear experts throw at one another. She tried at one point to insert a plug into the script for the Nunn-Lugar program initiated by Congress to fund Russian warhead destruction, but the studio balked.

Like Stern, Kidman’s character in the movie is a scientist who worked at Livermore, runs a smuggling working group, and in Stern’s words is “young, junior, single-minded and—dare I say—pushy?” She adds, “Most films show the feds as villains. This film shows there are real heroes in the government, although it obviously exaggerates the role of the NSC.”

Stern’s role provoked a profile in Vogue magazine and an appearance on CBS’s “60 Minutes.” (She had done the program only a few times because “we don’t have a TV that works at our house.”) Since then, she has spoken at several forums sponsored by groups seeking to publicize the continued danger of nuclear arms, including a session following last week’s Washington premiere that also featured a grim map marking the blast damage from a potential detonation here.

One hundred forty of the tickets at the premiere were given by the studio to current members of the NSC staff, and as various scenes portrayed real or fantastic slices of government life, there were ripples of knowing laughter. The staffers particularly seemed to enjoy when Clooney and Kidman each hung up hot lines and he boasted he had just talked with the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Kidman grinned and trumped him by saying she had just talked to the president.

NSC executive secretary Glynn Davies noted that in real life, the presidential directive Kidman’s character issues on the spur of the moment “would have to come from the president, and it would take forever because every lawyer in town would scrub it, and 18 meetings would be held to review it.”

“We all scribble words to the president,” Davies said. “It’s all heavily intellectual. To actually go out in the field and kick butt, that’s a huge fantasy.”