

Wag the Dog: Not everyone is fooled

David Walsh
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Film comment: Wag the Dog, directed by Barry Levinson, screenplay by Hilary Henkin and David Mamet

Wag the Dog is a funny and pointed film about American political life, with remarkable relevance to contemporary events. The US president is running for a second term. When, only 11 days before the population is to go to the polls, he is accused of sexually molesting a teenage girl, his spin-doctors go into action. Their aim is to distract the public by creating a war with Albania.

Dustin Hoffman is marvelous as Hollywood producer Stanley Motss, hired by the president's advisers to whip up public opinion in favor of war. Motss, who feels his efforts as a producer have gone unrecognized, meets every crisis with the refrain, "This is nothing!" and regales his listeners with horror stories drawn from his life in the film industry.

Certain moments of the film stand out: the recording of a heartfelt "We are the World"-type anthem, sung by a racially and sexually correct chorus, promoting the worst sort of jingoism and militarism; the transformation of a video clip of an actress running across a studio soundstage holding a bag of Tostitos into "news footage" of a terrified villager—with a kitten in her arms—escaping Albanian terrorists.

Wag the Dog demonstrates at the very least that there are substantial numbers of people in this country who increasingly see through the cynical manipulations of the politicians, their consultants and the media. Barry Levinson's film, moreover, is not simply an angry response to immediate events, a piece of agit-prop. It reflects thinking, over an extended period of time, about a whole host of issues in American society: the pervasive dishonesty and corruption; the generally degraded state of politics; the transformation of news programming into a branch of entertainment; the opportunism of so many artists. The film deserves to be seen.



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