

# Body of Lies and Flash of Genius: One closer to the truth than the other

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*Body of Lies* directed by Ridley Scott, screenplay by William Monahan, based on the novel by David Ignatius; *Flash of Genius* directed by Marc Abraham, screenplay by Philip Railsback, based on the article by John Seabrook

If the "war on terror" is a legitimate undertaking and the CIA its legitimate tool, veteran director Ridley Scott's new movie *Body of Lies* gives legitimate advice on how better to prosecute the supposed conflict. According to the film, American spies are commendably ruthless, but an ingrained democratic attitude hinders secrecy and single-mindedness thereby eroding the effort.

"Trust no one. Deceive everyone," recommend the film's production notes. "Turn your back for a second and you will be used," says Scott. "And if you are running an organization that is important to national security, without that attitude you will be weaker and vulnerable."

Based on the novel of the same title by *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius, Scott's film stars Leonardo DiCaprio as CIA operative Roger Ferris who in the course of the film maneuvers in three Middle Eastern countries. He works under the direction of his amoral superior Ed Hoffman (Russell Crowe), in co-opting "good Arab guys" to hunt down "bad Arab guys."

One of these more-or-less honorable Arabs is Hani (Mark Strong), the suave chief of the Jordanian General Intelligence Department. The GID, Hani explains to Ferris, tortures for punishment (lying and disloyalty), not to obtain information—"a very different thing." Ferris is seemingly in accord, so a relationship is cemented. Moreover, the film's opening sequence makes clear that "finger nail factory" tactics are not effective as intelligence gathering tools, serving rather to embolden insurgents.

The right to collaborate with Hani involves following the Jordanian's golden rule: Always tell the truth. Truth-telling is an unusual trait for an American agent, who generally comes in the form of the man at the helm, the duplicitous and racist Hoffman.

Ferris is Hoffman's man on the ground, his most effective (translation: most reckless) operative. He charges into danger with gusto, blasting away at suspected terrorist safe houses. He is not averse to using innocent people as decoys to trap the bin Laden-clone Al-Saleem (Alon Abutbul). Seductive pyrotechnics—a Scott trademark—get the adrenaline pumping and romanticize neo-colonialism.

*Body of Lies*, on the whole, is a retrograde fantasy. Its characters are unconvincing inventions. Ferris is sensitive, caring and remorseful when he slays. He speaks fluent Arabic and respects Middle Eastern culture, but bloodies his hands at every opportunity. In a particularly poorly executed scene, Ferris is being tortured after his capture by Al-Saleem. Searing pain does not prevent the American spy from

lecturing his tormentor about the corrupting influence of oil money, likening him to a Western capitalist. The words "oil" and "capitalist" come out of left field, as if Scott were temporarily stricken by a guilty conscience.

As well, a US military base is referred to by the indigenous population as a "house of war." Nonetheless, Ferris has no problem wooing an Iranian/Jordanian nurse, Aisha (Golshifteh Farahani), who never questions what Ferris does as an American "political advisor." Further, they meet under conditions in which she is treating him for suspicious wounds. The characters seem carefree and oblivious to political circumstances, although Ferris could just as well be sporting a CIA T-shirt or handing out CIA business cards. When Ferris is introduced to Aisha's sister, she tells Ferris she admires the Jordanian king for his opposition to the Iraq war. (In fact, King Abdullah visited Iraq in August to express support for the American puppet regime.)

Then there is Ed Hoffman (Crowe) who hates "towel heads," doesn't care about "cultural insecurity issues," and conducts the business of "saving civilization, honey" with a cell phone in his ear while attending to paternal chores. One wonders why Crowe has affected an Arkansas accent for his thoroughly dislikable persona. On the other hand, the Jordanian Hani is sheer elegance as the dictatorial head of a cruel spy outfit. Hani and his methods seem to be the envy of the film's creators, who feel that the CIA has been weakened by, as Ignatius puts it, "second-guessers and special pleaders." This accounts for the fact, says Ignatius, that "our CIA has a permanent 'kick-me' sign on its backside."

On the emotional level, the film is not cohesive. Perhaps unconsciously Scott is not completely in sync with Ignatius's aggressive, pro-war views. The former's preoccupation with being an action movie director occasionally seems at odds with the script's full-blown propagandism. For example, Ferris is the Hamlet to Hoffman's Claudius, although they are on the same team. At times, the film appears to be unintentionally squeamish about the American operations in the Middle East. Ferris is a Doubting Thomas, and therefore absolved of wrong-doing. He walks away smelling like a rose. Scott's not truly clear about things, so neither is Ferris.

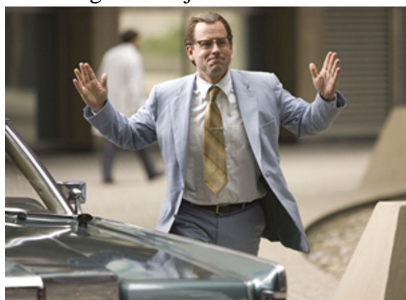
The film's sloppy, half-hearted elements stem from a lack of concern, and willful ignorance, about American foreign policy. Should the US be in Iraq, asks the film? "Putting on my naïve hat for a second," says Scott, "I like part of their [America's] intentions," but admits that perhaps deservedly, the "United States is coming down to size." He then describes as "crazy" anyone who dares call for the withdrawal from Iraq. While Scott may feel that the "CIA is becoming in danger of losing its punch," there is no question in the minds of the film's creators about of the supremacy of the US's powerful digital

communications technology. If agents have their weaknesses, Scott thankfully feels that Big Brother-like monitors with targeting devices ensure asymmetry in a primitive part of the world.

While Scott has uncertainties, Ignatius is solid in his assessment: "We encourage people to risk their lives for our vision of a better world, and when the going gets tough, we leave them hanging. We did that at the Bay of Pigs, in Vietnam—in Lebanon in the early 1908s—in Nicaragua with the Contras and now we are in the process of doing it in Iraq." *Body of Lies* in an erratic, confused manner tries to point out certain difficulties that threaten "staying the course."

### **Flash of Genius**

By 1963 the massive crisis and decline of the American Big Three automakers still lay ahead, although difficulties and stagnation were already apparent. That year, a 36-year-old Detroit engineer, Robert Kearns, invented the intermittent windshield wiper. Up to that point, Big Three engineers had failed to crack the wiper inefficiency problem. Ford managed to steal Kearns's invention and market it as its own. *Flash of Genius* by long-time producer and first-time feature film director Marc Abraham chronicles the arduous, decades-long battle to right the injustice.



*Flash of Genius*

"Flash of Genius" is a phrase used to legally define the 'light bulb moment' or impulse for an inventor's idea.

A Catholic and father of six children, Kearns (Greg Kinnear) teaches while he tinkers in his basement to figure out "why couldn't a wiper work like an eye lid? Why couldn't it blink?" Solving the problem before industry experts, Kearns is told by a Ford supervisor that he "won the wiper competition." Because it is a safety item, Ford convinces Kearns that the law requires disclosure before a contract can be signed. Five months after Kearns revealed his design to Ford, he was dumped by the automaker who claimed it had devised its own system.

Shortly after, Ford unveils with great fanfare an electronic intermittent windshield wiper, the first in the industry. (In 1974, GM followed suit and in 1977, the intermittent wiper appeared on Chrysler, Honda, Rolls-Royce and Mercedes vehicles, to name a few. By 1989, Ford had sold 20.6 million cars with the wiper for a profit of over \$550 million. Today, over 145 million cars carry the wipers invented by Kearns.)

Kearns initiates a lawsuit against Ford in 1978, and it consumes the engineer. Admonishing his skeptics, he says, "It's just a windshield wiper to you, to me it's the Mona Lisa." Kearns's life—and sanity—disintegrate. His devoted wife Phyllis (Lauren Graham) leaves with the children. As the years pass, his oldest son is drawn to his father's deep sense of the rightness of his cause and begins to assist in

the lawsuit.

Eventually the rest of his brood rally to support him. In happier times, when a wiper manufacturing enterprise was on the horizon, Kearns had anointed his family "the board of directors." The film is at pains to make clear the Kearns was not motivated by money, but by the theft of his identity as an inventor, a vital social asset. When his suit finally goes to court, he forcefully tells the jury that "Ford wants to make you believe my life's worth nothing."

The heart of the film is the trial that begins in 1990, at which time most of Kearns's patents have expired. Kearns is his own counsel after being abandoned by a lawyer (Alan Alda) who had extracted a settlement agreement from the auto giant. Kearns is stubborn and refuses to settle. A checkbook is "how justice is dispensed in this country," says the irritated Alda character. For Kearns, a settlement, whatever the price tag, is unacceptable if wrongdoing is not acknowledged. ("To accept money from Ford would have been like admitting it was O.K. for them to do what they did."). He is challenging Ford on behalf of all creators in his situation.

On many occasions before and during the trial, Kearns is approached by a sleazy Ford attorney resembling a hit man—who offers huge sums of money to drop the lawsuit—to no avail. In the courtroom, a slick Ford legal counsel tries to make the case that Kearns did nothing more than rearrange already existing parts. Kearns has a wonderful rebuttal: he reads the opening sentences of Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*, arguing that not a single word in the book originated in the mind of the author. Yet, it was Dickens's arrangements of the words that made the novel a work of literary genius.

In the 1990s Kearns won some \$30 million from the automakers, states the film's postscript. He died in 2005.

*Flash of Genius* is a sincere and moving work, although somewhat pedestrian. Its two leads (Kinnear and Graham) perform with a sense of urgency and conviction. There is obviously something in Kearns's story that is germane to today's environment of rampant corporate criminality. Aspects of Kearns's near ruination, personally, financially and mentally, conjure up images of present-day suffering induced by a corporate aristocracy. It is the worst of times.

The filmmakers have condensed the real timeline of events, but this does not explain why so much the world outside of Kearns's is not present. As in most films today, the references to social context are generally superficial and the more difficult task of imparting to the film some form of genuine historical framework is avoided. Detroit was a major city in the throes of an unprecedented decline during the time that Kearns was battling Ford. If this actuality had somehow made its way into *Flash of Genius*, it would have underscored the film's poignancy.



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