

# State of Play: More of Washington's conspiracies

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*Directed by Kevin Macdonald, screenplay by Matthew Michael Carnahan, Tony Gilroy and Billy Ray, based on the television series written by Paul Abbott*

*State of Play* is a political thriller, based on a mini-series broadcast by the BBC in 2003. The filmmakers have transposed the events to the US and condensed six hours to two. The general shape of the events has remained the same.

In the film version directed by Kevin Macdonald (*The Last King of Scotland*), newspaper reporters Cal McAffrey (Russell Crowe) and Della Frye (Rachel McAdams) discover that the deaths of two individuals on the same day in Washington, one by shooting and the other from an apparently accidental fall onto subway tracks, are linked. The connection proves to be a congressional investigation, presided over by Rep. Stephen Collins (Ben Affleck), into a giant private security company.

The married Collins, young and ambitious, with his eyes perhaps on the White House (and an old friend of McAffrey's), is drawn into a scandal because he was having an affair with the young woman, the leading researcher for the congressional committee, who fell or was pushed from the subway platform. (The Gary Condit-Chandra Levy affair in 2001, along with others, comes to mind.)

Editor Cameron Lynne (Helen Mirren) puts immense pressure on McAffrey and Frye to come up with a sensational story, even if it implicates Collins. The newspaper, with new corporate owners, is undergoing serious financial difficulties. In fact, the American version of *State of Play* is nearly as concerned with the parlous state of the newspaper industry as it is with anything else.

McAffrey is an "old-style" journalist, who uses his connections in various institutions to turn up new facts; Frye is a blogger, who "churns out copy every hour" (in her boss's admiring words), far more comfortable in front

of her computer screen. The pair, at first antagonists, learn to trust and respect one another. They pursue the story with some determination and also a certain degree of irresponsibility, putting themselves at odds with powerful political forces and the law.

The story takes several twists and turns, as it treats one or another feature of contemporary Washington life, and we encounter some of the human flotsam and jetsam of the nation's capital: corrupt politicians, ruthless corporate directors, lobbyists and ex-military types for hire.

There are interesting elements here, as well as formulaic and familiar ones. As noted, it follows along the general lines of the British series, including a final, significant twist that seems one too many and weakens the thrust of the piece.

The BBC version is somewhat more knowing, agile and swifter-moving. The British, with several hundred years of parliamentary and government skullduggery behind them, do political thrillers well. The television version benefits from the presence of Bill Nighy, James McAvoy, Kelly Macdonald and others. When the six hours is over, one regrets not being in their company any longer.

On the other hand, the British series somewhat fatiguingly follows the ins and outs of the personal relations between several of the leading characters, without any especially remarkable results. I was personally grateful that the equivalent relations in the film were handled briefly and succinctly. "American speed" (or "Hollywood speed," at any rate, since the director and his leading performers come from Britain, Australia and Canada) sometimes pays off.

There is no catastrophic drop-off in quality from the mini-series to the film. Some of the same strengths and weaknesses can be found. The events, originally created by Paul Abbott, hold our attention—they certainly speak to aspects of contemporary life and find more or less vivid and convincing recreation. Crowe, McAdams, Mirren and

Robin Wright Penn (as Collins's wife) all do well. One of the calmer, more human moments occurs early on in a telephone conversation between McAffrey and Anne Collins (Wright Penn). Jason Bateman offers a really exquisite turn as a sleazy public relations man, capable of nearly any act of minor infamy, but also susceptible to pangs of conscience. The film proceeds efficiently, if a little turgidly.

*State of Play* is made with a certain hostility toward the corporate bandits who have profited handsomely from the Iraq invasion and occupation. Collins, in a hearing, accuses PointCorp of committing atrocities against civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan. He asks the company's CEO whether it is true that his personal net worth has gone up by \$250 million since the invasion of Iraq. Such moments have substance to them.

If by "state of play" the script's authors mean "the current situation," then the film, if taken at face value, suggests that American democracy is in a very bad way. The corporation at the center of the controversy, the Blackwater-like PointCorp, a defense contractor hoping to benefit from the virtual privatization of Homeland Security, is pursuing \$30-40 billion in government contracts—"wrath of God money," as one of McAffrey's informants puts it. They have obviously bought themselves numerous mouthpieces in Washington, including US senators.

Within the framework of the film, it is more or less taken for granted that any one of a number of interested parties (business, political circles, the military) is capable of carrying out murders to advance its interests. In passing, *State of Play* also makes reference to the use of sex scandals to settle scores or manipulate the political process.

All in all, Macdonald's movie adopts a fairly jaundiced view of goings-on in Washington, a view undoubtedly shared by most of the American and world population. In polls conducted in the US, about half of those responding generally indicate that "most" of Congress is corrupt (everybody else presumably believes that only "some" in Washington are on the take), while another recent survey revealed that large majorities in every income category (including those earning \$150,000 and over!) think the rich have "too much power" in America.

*State of Play* belongs among those "conspiracy" films, whose number has undoubtedly expanded sharply since 2000-2001, which often combine "left" and right elements, in sometimes disorganized and unlikely combinations. A variety of films (as disparate as *The*

*International*, the *Bourne* series, *Vantage Point*, *Shooter*, *The Da Vinci Code*, *Minority Report*, *High Crimes* and many others) envisions conspiracies on the part of the military, the CIA, the White House, giant global corporations and banks or the Church, aimed at seizing political power, accumulating vast wealth ... or covering up secrets about previous anti-democratic conspiracies.

The various social processes and phenomena, however, are generally dealt with haphazardly, thoughtlessly. The most unlikely combinations of events are too often presented. A filmmaker might imagine, for example, that some vast financial concern is plotting to undermine the US economy, or a rogue element in the military is planning to establish a dictatorship, and the best he or she can come up with as a response is the activity, let's say, of a lone (violent or even perhaps homicidal) gunman, often an ex-agent himself, who comes out of the woodwork to save democracy and the country.

It doesn't seem to occur to any of the writers or directors that a situation in which leading institutions or figures could be plotting against the people is a *universally* diseased one, that cannot be remedied by the removal of this or that bad apple.

*State of Play* is not the weakest of recent films along these lines, keeping its wits about it, for the most part. But there are also unlikely and conformist elements. Has any politician from either of the two major parties conducted a crusade against profiteering in Iraq and Afghanistan? The suggestion itself invites derisive laughter. And a major Washington newspaper taking on those same forces? Only a Hollywood screenwriter could dream up something so farfetched.

*State of Play* entertains, but every film genre, including the thriller, would be improved vastly by a more coherent and insightful grasp of the way society actually works.



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