Wag the Dog

Dir. Barry Levinson
Character map

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Character Map

- **The President**: Involved in sex scandal; seeking re-election.

- **Stanley Motss**: Hollywood producer who ‘produces’ the fake war.

  - **Conrad Brean**: Spin expert; has the idea for the fake war; eventually orders Motss’ death.
    - **Winifred Ames**: Works for the President; seeks to limit the effects of the sex scandal.
    - **Agent Charles Young**: CIA agent who detains Ames and Brean; calls off the ‘war’.

  - **Willie Schumann**: Dangerous criminal recruited to play the role of a war hero.

  - **Johnny Dean**: Folk singer; writes and performs songs about the fake war.
  - **The Fad King**: Expert in popular culture; helps with the media campaign.
  - **Liz Butsky**: Assists with the media campaign.

- **Agent Charles Young** hires
- **Conrad Brean** hires
- **Stanley Motss** recruits
Wag the Dog

OVERVIEW

About the director/producer

Wag the Dog (1997) was directed and produced by Barry Levinson. Levinson began directing comedy television in the 1970s, and made his feature-film debut as a co-writer on two films by legendary comedy filmmaker Mel Brooks: Silent Movie (1976) and High Anxiety (1977). His first major success came with comedy-drama Diner (1982), for which he wrote the screenplay, in addition to serving as director. The screenplay was nominated for an Academy Award, although it lost to John Briley’s script for Gandhi (1982). Levinson’s next major success was with The Natural (1984), about the life of a baseball great, based on the novel of the same name by American writer Bernard Malamud and starring Robert Redford. The Natural received strong reviews and was nominated for four Academy Awards.

Levinson’s biggest critical and financial success was Rain Man (1988), a drama starring Dustin Hoffman and Tom Cruise, which he co-wrote and directed. Rain Man was the highest-grossing film of 1988 and garnered four Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Actor in a Leading Role (for Dustin Hoffman), Best Director and Best Original Screenplay. Other significant films by Levinson include Good Morning, Vietnam (1987), Bugsy (1991), Toys (1992), Disclosure (1994) and Sleepers (1996). He was also an executive producer of the HBO prison drama Oz during its run from 1997 to 2003.

About the screenwriters

The screenplay for Wag the Dog, based on the novel American Hero (1993) by Larry Beinhart, was initially developed by Hilary Henkin. Henkin wrote the original script, although it was substantially revised by renowned playwright and screenwriter David Mamet. Mamet won a
Pulitzer Prize for his play *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984), which was adapted into a successful film (for which Mamet also wrote the screenplay) in 1992. He has also received an Academy Award nomination for *The Verdict* (1982), as well as for *Wag the Dog*. Mamet is noted for the swift, often abbreviated style of dialogue he gives to his characters. You may notice this style at various points throughout *Wag the Dog* – for instance, in the White House staff’s meeting with Conrad Brean at the start of the film.

**Synopsis**

*Wag the Dog* follows the efforts of a group of public relations and media advisers, all working for the President of the United States of America, to fabricate a news story in the lead-up to an election. When the President is accused of sexual misconduct against a Firefly girl (‘Firefly’ being the name of a group of girls similar to Girl Scouts who are visiting the White House), a mysterious adviser, Conrad Brean (Robert De Niro), is brought in. He decides to manufacture a war with Albania to distract the public’s attention and to encourage sympathy and patriotic feeling, thus increasing the President’s chances of re-election. Brean first instructs the President’s advisers to feed the media ambiguous misinformation about a ‘B-3 bomber’, linked to some kind of ‘crisis’ (2 g). The advisers deny the media’s questions about the crisis in a suggestive enough manner to imply that the war is real.

As the war is an entirely fictitious event, a story to be played out on television sets across the United States, Brean seeks the help of Hollywood producer Stanley Motss (Dustin Hoffman). Brean wants Motss to ‘produce’ the war in the manner of a Hollywood film. Motss recruits to his team three individuals: creative consultant Liz Butsky (Andrea Martin), popular-culture guru the ‘Fad King’ (Denis Leary) and alcoholic folk musician Johnny Dean (Willie Nelson). The group spend that night, and subsequent days, crafting propaganda to promote a war that does not
exist, seeking to engage the public’s sympathy and to steer attention away from the sex scandal. In a studio, the team fake footage of an Albanian girl and her kitten fleeing from Albanian terrorists. They also compose songs in celebration of the war effort.

The jig appears to be up when agents from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) apprehend Conrad Brean and White House staffer Winifred Ames (Anne Heche), informing the two that they know there is no war. However, using his skills of persuasion, Brean appears to convince the arresting agent that the ‘war’ is legitimate, and Brean and Ames are released. The persuasion, it turns out, is temporary: the CIA soon spread the news that the war is over. Requiring the media’s attention to remain fixed on the war and away from the Presidential scandal, the team fabricate news stories of a war hero left behind enemy lines, ‘like an old shoe’ (10 d). To help sustain the sympathetic ‘old shoe’ metaphor, they seek a soldier named Schumann (Woody Harrelson) from one of the military’s ‘special programs’ to play the role.

The Schumann they are provided with turns out to be a deranged convict from one of the military’s ‘special prisons’. After a plane carrying Schumann, Brean, Ames and Motss crashes en route to Washington, the group seek help at a local gas station. The owner, after coming across the mad Schumann terrorising his wife, shoots him dead. While this appears to leave the team in dire straits yet again, Motss suggests presenting Schumann as a soldier who died tragically in the plane crash; to him, this is an even better ‘story’. In Washington, they hold a military funeral for Schumann.

Having achieved a spectacular turnaround in the President’s approval ratings, the team’s work is complete. However, the egotistical Motss threatens to let the cat out of the bag by publicly taking credit for the hoax. At Brean’s signal, Motss is taken away by the Secret Service and killed. The film concludes with the outbreak of what appears to be a real conflict in Albania, while we are informed of the government’s intention to send troops ‘back in’ to ‘finish the job’ (18 d).