

A New Film Blows the Whistle on War

If the press is the “fourth estate,” the cinema is arguably the fifth. “Official Secrets” indicts Blair, Bush, and other mass murderers in the court of public opinion—at a theater near you.

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Official Secrets, co-written and directed by Gavin Hood, is one of the best movies ever made about investigative reporting and whistle-blowing—a film in a league with All the President’s Men and Snowden.

Like the 1976 Watergate classic starring Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman as Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, and Oliver Stone’s 2016 drama about exposure of the National Security Agency’s clandestine mass warrantless surveillance program, the U.K.-set *Secrets* is based on a true story.

The film is about Martin Bright, a reporter with *The Observer* (played by Matt Smith), and Katharine Gun, a translator for the British government (played by Keira Knightley). Gun is responsible for what Pentagon Papers leaker Daniel Ellsberg [called](#) “the most important and courageous leak I have ever seen. No one else – including myself – has ever done what Gun did: tell secret truths at personal risk, before an imminent war, in time, possibly, to avert it.”

In early 2003, during the lead-up to the U.S. attack on Iraq, Gun came across an email from a shadowy National Security Agency official named Frank Koza. It revealed U.S. plans to spy on U.N. Security Council members in order to blackmail them into voting for a resolution approving a military offensive against Baghdad. The resolution was seen as key to providing the strike with a fig leaf of legitimacy from the international community for a war based largely on the dubious proposition that Saddam Hussein possessed “Weapons of Mass Destruction.”

In the movie, Gun had already begun doubting President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair’s pretext for assaulting Iraq. She is shown yelling at the television, such as when David Frost interviews Blair and she shouts “bloody liar!” at the screen. (*Secrets* enhances its verisimilitude by intercutting news clips with the actors’ dramatizations.)

To further complicate matters, Gun’s presumably Muslim husband Yasar (Palestinian actor Adam Bakri) is a Turk with a sketchy immigration status. The troubled translator surreptitiously prints out Koza’s message, and wrestles with her conscience as she tries, Hamlet-like, to decide what to do.

When the hard copy of Koza’s email is leaked to the *The Observer*, it ignites an internal fight. The British Sunday newspaper has been co-opted by the Blair government: In exchange for preferential treatment, including high level access, the liberal-leaning *Observer* has favored war, giving Blair “left cover” for attacking Iraq.

But journalists Bright and Ed Vulliamy (Rhys Ifans) of *The Observer's* sister newspaper, *The Guardian*, a daily, argue for publishing the nefarious scheme. "You're the press, not a PR agency for Blair," Vulliamy insists to cautious editors.

After Vulliamy tracks Koza down, *The Observer's* management relents and publishes Bright's report in a March 2, 2003, front-page article headlined, "Revealed: U.S. Dirty Tricks to Win Vote on Iraq War." All hell breaks loose: Gun is charged with violating the Official Secrets Act, which prohibits disclosure of confidential state information. She becomes a *cause célèbre* and is defended by Ben Emmerson (Ralph Fiennes), a human rights attorney in the William Kunstler/Michael Ratner tradition.

At nearly two hours long, *Official Secrets* raises a number of philosophical and political issues. Following a private screening, Hood agreed with my observation that the film is of a piece with his 2007 *Rendition* and 2015 *Eye in the Sky*. The South African filmmaker referred to these features as his "trilogy," as all three focus on different disturbing aspects of the post-9/11 "war on terror."

Rendition dramatized the U.S. intelligence community's pernicious policy of shipping terrorism suspects off to overseas black op sites to be tortured and imprisoned, absent being found guilty of any crimes. *Eye* challenged the ethics, accuracy, and efficiency of drone warfare.

Although Hood has also directed such crowd-pleasing Tinseltown blockbusters as 2009's *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*, this trio of hard-hitting, well-made features boasting top talents including Meryl Streep and Helen Mirren has placed the Johannesburg-born director in the vanguard of filmmakers shooting thought-provoking movies about the issues of the day. *Tsotsi*, Hood's 2005 film about a violent young South African thug who takes care of a baby, won an Academy Award for Best Foreign Film.

Previously known primarily for lighter entertainment, including 2003's *Love Actually* and the *Pirates of the Caribbean* film franchise, Knightley has lately been taking on more serious roles, like her portrayal of a feminist novelist in 2018's *Colette*. As Gun, she plays a truth teller who risks all for believing she "worked for the British people"—not a government lying the U.K. into a costly, completely avoidable war.

At a private screening of *Secrets* in Hollywood, the real-life whistleblower Katharine Gun remarked that Knightley "did a great job. It was like watching a different person's life. She was so intense [the way she] portrayed emotions. It affected me."

At the same screening, the real-life Matthew Bright agreed that Knightley's performance is "very impressive," saying she "did lots of research and was very powerful." As for being depicted by Matt Smith (who plays Prince Philip in Netflix's *The Crown* and The Doctor in the BBC TV series *Doctor Who*) Bright admitted, "It's odd to watch one's self [onscreen]."

Hood, meanwhile, said he recently met with Daniel Ellsberg in San Francisco and drew parallels with the subject of his film. "This story is not about a-larger-than-life person. It's about someone like us. We all work for organizations—but most people are afraid. Until they think it's really bad. Here's someone [Gun] who acts, who examines her conscience. The personal story has a historical effect."

Unlike Gun, who stood up to the state by trying to avert the needless shedding of blood,

Tony Blair and George W. Bush were never hauled into a court of law for lying us into a totally unnecessary war. The P.M. and prez didn't face a Nuremberg tribunal or International Criminal Court at The Hague. But they have not escaped scot-free—now *Official Secrets* is holding them accountable.

If the press is the “fourth estate,” the cinema is arguably the “fifth estate.” By combining mass entertainment, drama, and first-rate acting with a true tale of an ordinary woman who stood up to the powers-that-be, *Official Secrets* indicts Blair, Bush, and other mass murderers in the court of public opinion—at a theater near you.

Official Secrets opens nationwide August 30. Watch the trailer below.

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L.A.-based film historian/reviewer Ed Rampell co-authored the third edition of “The Hawaii Movie and Television Book.”

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