

Wag the Dog
(Comedy) (1998)

Major Characters

Conrad Brean	Robert DeNiro
An extremely cynical and intelligent advisor who specializes in “fixing” political crises. In this case, he decides to create the illusion of a war so that the American public will not become obsessed with a sex scandal involving the US President.	
Stanley Motts	Dustin Hoffman
A very superficial, rich and stereotypical Hollywood movie producer who agrees to “produce” the war that Brean wants to start.	
Winifred Ames	Anne Heche
An assistant at the White House who works with Conrad and Stanley on the plan to keep the American public focused on the war, rather than the President’s sexual problems.	
Sergeant William Schumann	Woody Harrelson
An insane and very unstable soldier in a military prison, who is accidentally chosen to be the “rescued hero” of the war.	
Fad King	Denis Leary
A friend or associate of Stanley’s who is supposedly good at thinking of new ideas, names and products that can be sold to the public (A “fad” is a product or idea that becomes extremely popular, but only for a short period of time).	
Johnny Green	Willie Nelson
Another friend of Stanley’s who writes and sings country music.	
Senator Neil	Craig T. Nelson
A conservative US Senator who is running for President, who tries to use the sex scandal as a way to convince people to vote for him.	

Plot Summary

This is probably one of the most cynical movies ever made about American politics. It is the story of Conrad Brean, an amoral political consultant who agrees to help the President of the United States survive an explosive scandal, in which a young teenage girl publicly accuses him (the President) of having made inappropriate sexual advance at her while she had been visiting the White House. Brean does not care whether the charges are true, but he is determined to manipulate the public so that they will not focus on these charges, at least until after they vote in the upcoming Presidential elections.

The accusations become public just 11 days before the nation will vote, and while the President is visiting China. Brean must act quickly, and thus with the help of White House assistant Winifred Ames, he travels to Hollywood in order to talk to Hollywood movie producer Motts. Brean decides the best way to keep the public’s attention off the scandal is to create “a crisis,” and he therefore convinces Motts to produce various scenes in a completely fictional war against the small European country of Albania.

Over the next several days, Brean, Motts and their various partners successfully convince the American public that Albanian terrorists were in the process of moving a small nuclear bomb across the Canadian border and into the United States. Unfortunately, other powerful forces within the government, including Senator Neil and the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) appear to be fighting Brean and Motts, and they seem to end the crisis before it can truly help the President. Therefore, in one last desperate move, Brean and Motts create “an American war hero,” Sergeant William Schumann, whose rescue they hope will save the President in a giant explosion of patriotism. Ultimately, Brean’s plan appears to succeed, but the democracy may be injured beyond repair....

A Brief Note on the Timing of this Movie’s Release: When *Wag the Dog* appeared in the Fall of 1998, President Bill Clinton was fighting for his political survival because of the sex scandal involving Monica Lewinski. The makers of this film were certainly aware of the problems that Clinton was having, but what happened in the weeks after it came out was truly ironic. Clinton seriously considered going to war with Iraq, just as the Lewinski scandal was leading to his impeachment by the US Congress, and naturally, many accused him of acting more to save his Presidency than to protect national security. The events of December 1998 showed that reality can be as interesting and ridiculous as fiction.

TIMELINE THIS MOVIE

Possible Questions for Class Discussion

1. Could this happen in real life? *Has* this happened in real life? In the United States? In your country?
2. What does this movie seem to be saying about politicians and politics?
3. What is more manipulative, politics or advertising?
4. Is there a single admirable character in the film?
5. How would you describe Stanley Motts to a friend? And Conrad Brean? Would you let your daughter marry either of them?
6. In the movie, the US started a war on the Muslims in Albania. Not a real war, but a war. Even so, did this war remind you of anything else the US has done? Iraq?? This movie was made in 1998. That was five years before the US invaded Iraq. I find that amazing.