

# Arts & Letters

## FILM

[*State of Play*]

### Capitol Offense

By Steve Sailer

"STATE OF PLAY" is an intermittently intelligent Capitol Hill thriller based on a celebrated 2003 BBC miniseries. The story was Americanized by at least five competent Hollywood hacks, such as Tony Gilroy, who wrote the similar "Michael Clayton," one of George Clooney's movies about a murderous corporate conspiracy that goes all the way to the top.

The new film starts out much like "Michael Clayton," with Ben Affleck as a Gary Condit-like congressman. (Politics may be show business for ugly people, but Affleck's convincingly wooden performance suggests that Congress is for handsome but mediocre thespians whose range is restricted to acting sincere.) The representative's Chandra Levy-like staffer, who is investigating a Blackwater-like mercenary-monger, is hit by a subway train.

After the politician persuades his Silda Spitzer-like wife to stand by him at a news conference where he admits to the affair, he hides out in the disheveled apartment of his former college roommate, an old-fashioned investigative journalist at a declining *Washington Post*-like newspaper. The besieged congressman discloses that he thinks his mistress was murdered because she was getting too close to the truth: the Blackwaterish firm is going to take over America with its private army.

Brad Pitt was cast as the reporter

hero of "State of Play," but walked away at the last moment due to script objections. I admired, however, the way the later plot developments undermined the clichés of Clooney's conspiracy genre. The boring truth is that in America, politically connected CEO's seldom rub out their rivals. As the Jane Harman-AIPAC wiretap scandal demonstrates, Washington conspiracies are mostly talk. Moreover, Russians and Mexicans scoff at the small sums that buy our politicians, such as the congressman caught with \$90,000 in his freezer. (Though now that so many trillions have gone up for grabs, perhaps we can hope our oligarchs will at least give us some satisfying entertainment in return for our bailout billions by starting to shoot each other over the money.)

With Pitt out, a pudgy Russell Crowe jumped in. Like Jeff Bridges in "The Big Lebowski," Crowe looks fat and happy in a role in which abs don't matter. Early in this decade, Crowe was the finest leading man in Hollywood, starring in "Gladiator," "A Beautiful Mind," "Master and Commander," and "Cinderella Man." Since then he seems to find himself with empty stretches on his schedule, perhaps because he's seen as an ornery party animal. (On New Year's Eve in 1999, while the rest of the world was timidly hunkering down in fear of Y2K glitches, Crowe celebrated with millennial gusto, getting himself arrested for disturbing the peace three times.) Crowe's Aussie manliness carries him through his under-rehearsed role, and the celebrity's personal distaste for journalists adds complexity to what could have been a routine hagiography.

To chase down the conspiracy, Crowe's veteran reporter teams up with a callow blogger (the ever-perky Rachel McAdams of "Wedding Crashers").

Much banter about the rivalry between print and online journalism ensues. Yet the movie misses the key personality difference between traditional media and the more Aspergery culture of the Web: newspaper reporters converse constantly, while Web people prefer Google to human contact. Blogger Matthew Yglesias recently declared, "Definitely the whole time I was employed at *The Atlantic* I never once returned a voice-mail. ... In general, I'm not a fan of talking on the phone..."

The movie portrays Crowe's aging reporter as a solitary man, trudging alone to confront the powerful in their lairs. In reality, as Evelyn Waugh's *Scoop* made clear, traditional reporters are most comfortable in packs, where they can gauge what's "appropriate" to ask and to write from the consensus of their colleagues.

Just when the strident soundtrack—synthesizers and militaristic drums relentlessly barking "Tense up!"—and now mandatory shaky-cam cinematography have almost ruined a decent if predictable story, an amusingly florid Jason Bateman shows up as a hedonistic public-relations consultant, seemingly to contrast the greed of the flack with the nobility of the crusading journalist. The film's countless screenwriters, though, are aware that reporters, such as the *New York Times*' Judith Miller, who pipelined so much pro-Iraq War propaganda, are often just more respectable PR agents, publicizing messages in return for access to newsmakers.

From there, the movie keeps departing from its earlier vast-corporate-conspiracy rut, ending with a plot twist that, while contrived, is surprisingly believable. ■

Contains violence, profanity, including sexual references, and brief drug content.

## BOOKS

[1848: Year of Revolution, Mike Rapport, Basic Books, 496 pages]

# Springtime of Their Discontent

By Septimus Waugh

IN EUROPE, we are living in stirring times. The long-drawn rumbles of discontent against the European Union suddenly seem more menacing as the effects of the worldwide recession begin to bite. This ever more insistent beat of opposition to the EU finds powerful echoes in Mike Rapport's lucid analysis of the background to the European upheavals of 1848. Writing before the disaster of the credit crunch, however, he did not always hear these reverberations.

Other historians have maintained that the failure of the liberal constitutionalists and radical republicans to sustain a united front against the absolutist monarchies of Europe in 1848 planted the seed that led to the militaristic unifications of Italy and Germany. In this view, the collapse of liberalism in 1848 meant that the effective opposition to the power of the Austrian empire lay solely in the hands of the Prussian and Piedmontese monarchies. So although two new nations, Germany and Italy, may have germinated in the "Springtime of Peoples" of 1848, their democracies proved to be weak flowers that were easily subverted by the Fascist and Nazi revolutions of the early 20th century.

Rapport, by contrast, believes that the authoritarian regimes of the last century were a hiccup in a much more hopeful process. For him, 1848 represents the first bloom of a truly European consciousness. The revolutionaries, he points out, made very similar demands in every country throughout Europe,

calling for political representation, social justice, and the self-determination of peoples. The Frankfurt parliament even went so far as to advertise itself in three European languages (English, German, and French), which Rapport regards as the first awakening of the European community. Similarly, while the "velvet Revolutionaries" of Eastern Europe in 1986 may have wished to separate themselves from all previous revolutionary traditions, Rapport maintains that they were following on from the bloodless liberal uprisings in the March days of 1848.

He observes two concrete improvements gained through the agency of the failed revolutions of 1848: the end of serfdom throughout Europe and the end of the belief in the divine right of kings. Though the first was a demand of the liberal parliaments in Europe, its concession by the monarchies had the effect of transforming the peasantry into valuable allies against the radicals and the urban proletariat when revolutionary activity turned more violent in the summer and autumn of 1848. As for the divine right of kings, after 1848 all the ruling princes of Europe, save the tsars, understood that they could not rule without some form of popular consent.

Despite being charmed by Rapport's transparent optimism, I suspect that the reader of 2009 will be more intrigued by the gloomier aspects of his book, of which there are plenty because his descriptions are so complete. In his introduction, Rapport expresses his intention of allowing the reader to draw "her or his own conclusions and connections from the evidence," albeit with the aid of "what I hope will be a helpful nudge."

Today, these nudges might feel a bit like a small child tugging at a parent's sleeve to draw his attention to a wonderful ice cream stall, while, unfortunately, the parent's attention is concentrated on some impending catastrophe. At the same time Rapport does remain true to his aim of presenting the facts in a non-judgmental way. This is a very complete book with an enormous bibliography of primary and secondary texts.

Such erudition does not prevent the story from being gripping. Rapport enlivens his account with well-chosen and entertaining quotations from contemporaries such as Tocqueville and Marx. For example, Marx observed that, if ever German revolutionaries were to storm a railway station, they would first buy a platform ticket.

Although the subject is vast, Rapport is a riveting narrator who remains in masterful control. While campaign maps, a glossary, and a *dramatis personae* might have been a help for the uninitiated, the book offers a breathtaking array of concise and witty pen portraits that endow it with the quality of popular history.

In Rome, we see Pius IX dithering between being a republican pope and a reactionary—reaction won. There, too, is Mazzini, who in March 1849 turned the city into a Utopian republic where nobles and workers loved each other, and where even Catholics and Jews practiced religious tolerance. In Venice, the reader discovers the plucky Manin desperately trying to preserve the newly founded republic from Austrian onslaught. Garibaldi, meanwhile, marches all over Italy with his wife and his hundred Argentinians. Poles and Hungarians, Saxons and Frenchmen, Serbs and Prussians also find a place in the cast, all finely depicted.

Then there are the reactionaries: the generals Windischgrätz and Radetzsky; Bismarck and Louis Napoleon, the latter half clown, half brilliant political opportunist; and a whole gallery of kings, emperors, and grand dukes of the Austrian Empire. Rapport not only makes space for excellent character portraits, he also covers the social and military history of the urban upheavals and the military campaigns that were fought in Italy and Hungary in 1848 and 1849.

In Rapport's analysis, 1848 is a very hopeful year. He claims that it reignited hopes sown in the French Revolution of universal suffrage, social justice, and women's liberation. The evidence he offers for the last is scant, however: a Neapolitan princess who travels up and