



[Vimeo link for this week's film and ALL of Bruce Jackson's and Diane Christian's film introductions and post-film discussions in the virtual BFS](#)

[Zoom link for all FALL 2021 BFS Tuesday 7:00 PM post-screening discussions](#)

The film is available for streaming on Amazon Prime.

Directed by Mike Nichols
Written by Aaron Sorkin and George Crile
Produced by Gary Goetzman and Tom Hanks
Music by James Newton Howard
Cinematography by Stephen Goldblatt
Film Editing by John Bloom and Antonia Van Drimmelen

Tom Hanks ... Charlie Wilson
Amy Adams ... Bonnie Bach
Julia Roberts ... Joanne Herring
Philip Seymour Hoffman ... Gust Avrakotos
Terry Bozeman ... CIA Award Presenter
Brian Markinson ... Paul Brown
Jud Tylor ... Crystal Lee
Om Puri ... President Zia
Ned Beatty ... Doc Long
Mary Bailey ... Doc Long's Secretary

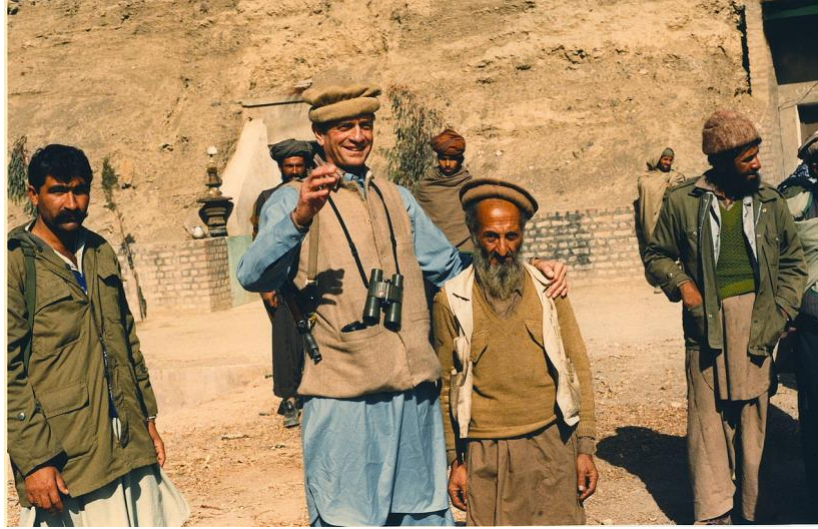
Mike Nichols (director) (b. Michael Igor Peschkowsky, November 6, 1931 in Berlin, Germany—d. November 19, 2014 (age 83) in Manhattan, New York) won the 1968 Academy Award for Best Director for *The Graduate* (1967). He directed 22 films and television shows, which are 2007 *Charlie Wilson's War*, 2004 *Closer*, 2003 “Angels in America” (TV Mini-Series), 2001 “Wit” (TV Movie), 2000 *What Planet Are You From?*, 1998 *Primary Colors*, 1996 *The Birdcage*, 1994 *Wolf*, 1991



Regarding Henry, 1990 *Postcards from the Edge*, 1988 *Working Girl*, 1988 *Biloxi Blues*, 1986 *Heartburn*, 1983 *Silkwood*, 1980 *Gilda Live* (Documentary), 1975 *The Fortune*, 1973 *The Day of the Dolphin*, 1971 *Carnal Knowledge*, 1970 *Catch-22*, 1968 *Teach Me!* (Short), 1967 *The Graduate*, and 1966 *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. In addition, he produced 19 films and TV shows, which are 2014 *Crescendo! The Power of Music* (Documentary), 2011 *Friends with Kids*, 2004 *Closer*, 2003 “Angels in America” (TV Mini-Series), 2001 “Wit” (TV Movie), 2000 *What Planet Are You From?*, 1998 *Primary Colors*, 1997 *The Designated Mourner*, 1996 *The Birdcage*, 1993 *The Remains of the Day*, 1991 *Regarding Henry*, 1990 *Postcards from the Edge*, 1986 *Heartburn*, 1986 *The Longshot*, 1983 *Silkwood*, 1977 “The ‘Annie’ Christmas Show” (TV Movie), 1976 “Family” (TV Series), 1975 *The Fortune*, and 1971 *Carnal Knowledge*. He also appeared in 6 films and television shows—1998 *Instant Dread* (Short), 1997 *The Designated Mourner*, 1967 *Back to Back* (Short), 1960 “Playhouse 90” (TV Series), 1958 “The DuPont Show of the Month” (TV Series), and 1958

“Omnibus” (TV Series)—and wrote 2—2001 “Wit” (TV Movie), 1967 *Bach to Bach* (Short). He was a layout artist in the animation department for 1994 “The Magic School Bus” (TV Series), and performed on the soundtrack for 2007 “American Masters” (TV Series documentary). In addition, he was the original stage director and/or producer for 4 films and television shows—2005 “Whoopi: Back to Broadway - The 20th Anniversary” (TV Movie), 1985 “Whoopi Goldberg: Direct from Broadway” (TV Movie documentary), 1982 *Annie*, 1981 “The Gin Game” (TV Movie)—and is credited with giving “particularly good advice” in the making of 2003 *Capturing the Friedmans* (Documentary).

Aaron Sorkin (writer, screenplay) (b. Aaron Benjamin Sorkin, June 6, 1961 in New York City, New York) won the 2011 Academy Award for Best Writing, Adapted Screenplay for *The Social Network* (2010). He has written 16 films and television shows, which are 2020 *A West Wing Special to Benefit When We All Vote* (TV Special), 2020 *The Trial of the Chicago 7*, 2012-2014 “The Newsroom” (TV Series, 25 episodes), 2011 *Moneyball* (screenplay), 2010 *The Social Network* (screenplay), 2007 *Charlie Wilson's War* (screenplay), 2006 – 2007 “Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip” (TV Series, 22 episodes), 1999 - 2006 “The West Wing” (TV Series, 155 episodes), 1998 – 2000 “Sports Night” (TV Series, 45 episodes), 1995 *The American President*, 1993 *Malice* (screenplay/story), and 1992 *A Few Good Men* (play/screenplay). He also produced 5 films and TV shows, which are 2012-2014 “The Newsroom” (TV Series, 25 episodes), 2006-2007 “Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip” (TV Series, 22 episodes), 1999-2003 “The West Wing” (TV Series, 88 episodes), 2002 “The West Wing Documentary Special” (TV Movie documentary), 1998-2000 “Sports Night” (TV Series, 45 episodes), and appeared in 7: 2011 “30 Rock” (TV Series), 2010 *The Social Network*, 2010 “Entourage” (TV Series), 2006 “The West Wing” (TV Series), 1999 “Sports Night” (TV Series), 1995 *The American*



President, and 1992 *A Few Good Men*.

George Crile (writer, book) (b. George Washington Crile III, March 5, 1945 in San Diego, California—d. May 15, 2006 (age 61) in New York City, New York) produced 4 films and TV shows, which are 2007 “60 Minutes” (TV Series documentary), 1999 “60 Minutes Wednesday” (TV Series documentary), 1982 “The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam Deception” (TV Special), and 1980 “CBS Reports” (TV Series documentary). He has only 1 Hollywood writing credit, 2007 *Charlie Wilson's War* (book), for which he was also credited as a technical consultant.

Stephen Goldblatt (cinematographer) (b. 1945 in South Africa) has 38 film and

television cinematography credits, some of which are 2015 *The Intern*, 2014 *Get on Up*, 2011 *The Help*, 2010 *Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The Lightning Thief*, 2009 *Julie & Julia*, 2007 *Charlie Wilson's War*, 2005 *Rent*, 2004 *Closer*, 2003 “Angels in America” (TV Mini-Series), 2002 “Path to War” (TV Movie), 2001 “Conspiracy” (TV Movie), 1999 *The Deep End of the Ocean*, 1997 *Batman & Robin*, 1996 *Striptease*, 1995 *Batman Forever*, 1993 *The Pelican Brief*, 1992 *Consenting Adults*, 1991 *The Prince of Tides*, 1991 *For the Boys*, 1990 *Joe Versus the Volcano*, 1989 *Lethal Weapon 2*, 1988 *Everybody's All-American*, 1987 *Lethal Weapon*, 1985 *Young Sherlock Holmes*, 1984 *The Cotton Club*, 1983 *Kilroy Was Here*, 1983 *The Hunger*, 1982 *The Return of the Soldier*, 1981 *Outland*, 1980 *Breaking Glass*, 1973 *Odeon Cavalcade* (Short), 1973 *The Mangrove Nine* (Short), 1972 *Pass of Arms*, and 1969 *Forum*. He also worked in the camera and electrical department on 3 films and television shows: 1980 *The Alternative Miss World* (Documentary, lighting director), 1974 “Disappearing World” (TV Series documentary, camera operator), and 1971 *Loving Memory* (camera assistant).

John Bloom (editor) (b. September 12th 1935) won the 1983 Academy Award for Best Film Editing *Gandhi* (1982). He has edited 53 films and television shows, including 2011 *King Kennedy* (Documentary),

2009 "Into the Storm" (TV Movie), 2007 *Charlie Wilson's War*, 2006 *Notes on a Scandal*, 2004 *Closer*, 2003 "Angels in America" (TV Mini-Series), 2001 "Wit" (TV Movie), 2000 *Shaft*, 1999 *The Deep End of the Ocean*, 1996 *The First Wives Club*, 1996 *Last Dance*, 1994 *Nobody's Fool*, 1993 *Screen One* (TV Series), 1992 *Damage*, 1992 *Prague*, 1990 *Air America*, 1990 *Everybody Wins*, 1989 *Jacknife*, 1988 *Bright Lights*, *Big City*, 1987 *Black Widow*, 1985 *A Chorus Line*, 1984 "Mistral's Daughter" (TV Mini-Series), 1983 *Betrayal*, 1982 *Gandhi*, 1981 *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, 1979 *Dracula*, 1978 *Magic*, 1977 *Orca*, 1977 *The Message*, 1976 *The Ritz*, 1974 *The Abdication*, 1973 "The Glass Menagerie" (TV Movie), 1973 "Divorce His - Divorce Hers" (TV Movie), 1972 *Travels with My Aunt*, 1972 *Henry VIII and His Six Wives*, 1971 *Keep Your Fingers Crossed*, 1971 *The Road Builder*, 1971 *The Last Valley*, 1970 *In Search of Gregory*, 1968 *The Lion in Winter*, 1967 *The Last Safari*, 1966 *The Specialist* (Short), 1966 *Funeral in Berlin*, 1966 *Runaway Railway*, 1966 *Georgy Girl*, 1965 *Cup Fever*, 1965 *The Party's Over*, 1964 *Go Kart Go*, 1964 *The Winston Affair*, 1962 *Love Me, Love Me, Love Me* (Short), and 1961 *The Impersonator*. In addition, he worked in the editorial department for 3 films and television shows, which are 1983 *Under Fire* (supervising editor), 1981 "Masada" (TV Mini-Series, editorial consultant), and 1978 *Who'll Stop the Rain* (supervising editor).

Antonia Van Drimmelen (editor) edited 6 films and television shows, which are 2009 "Into the Storm" (TV Movie), 2007 *Charlie Wilson's War*, 2006 *Notes on a Scandal*, 2004 *Closer*, 2003 "Angels in America" (TV Mini-Series), and 2000 *Shaft*. She worked in the editorial department for 9 films and television shows—2003 *View from the Top* (associate editor), 2001 "Wit" (TV Movie, associate editor), 1999 *The Deep End of the Ocean* (first assistant editor), 1996 *The First Wives Club* (associate editor), 1996 *Last Dance* (associate editor), 1994 *Nobody's Fool* (associate editor), 1994 *Camilla* (associate editor), 1991 *Thelma & Louise* (assistant film editor), and 1989 "The Woman in Black" (TV Movie, assistant editor)—and the sound department for 1—

1989 *Chattahoochee* (assistant dubbing editor).

Tom Hanks ... Charlie Wilson (b. Thomas Jeffrey Hanks, July 9, 1956 in Concord, California) won 2 Academy Awards for Best Actor in a Leading Role, in 1994 for *Philadelphia* (1993) and in 1995 for *Forrest Gump* (1994). He has produced 59 films and television shows and acted in 94 films and television shows, some of which are *Pinocchio* (post-production), 2019 *Toy Story 4*, 2017 *The Post*, 2015 *Untitled Cold War Spy Thriller*, 2015 *Ithaca*, 2015 *A Hologram for the King*, 2014 "Toy Story That Time Forgot" (TV Short), 2013 *Saving Mr. Banks*, 2013 "Toy Story of Terror" (TV Short), 2013 *Captain Phillips*, 2012 *Toy Story Toons: Partysaurus Rex* (Short), 2012 *Cloud Atlas*, 2012 "Electric City" (TV



Series short, 21 episodes), 2011 *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, 2011 *Toy Story Toons: Small Fry* (Short), 2011 *Larry Crowne*, 2011 "30 Rock" (TV Series), 2011 "Toy Story Toons: Hawaiian Vacation" (Short), 2010 *Toy Story 3*, 2010 "The Pacific" (TV Mini-Series, 6 episodes), 2009 *Late Show with David Letterman* (TV Series), 2009

Beyond All Boundaries (Short), 2009 *Angels & Demons*, 2008 *The Great Buck Howard*, 2007 *Charlie Wilson's War*, 2006 *The Da Vinci Code*, 2006 *Cars*, 2005 "Magnificent Desolation: Walking on the Moon 3D" (Documentary short), 2004 *The Polar Express*, 2004 *Elvis Has Left the Building*, 2004 *The Terminal*, 2004 *The Ladykillers*, 2003 "Freedom: A History of Us" (TV Series documentary, 7 episodes), 2002 *Catch Me If You Can*, 2002 *The Road to Perdition*, 2001 "Band of Brothers" (TV Mini-Series), 2001 "Scene by Scene" (TV Series), 2000 *Cast Away*, 1999 *The Green Mile*, 1999 *Toy Story 2* (Video Game), 1999 *Toy Story 2*, 1998 *You've Got Mail*, 1998 *Saving Private Ryan*, 1998 "From the Earth to the Moon" (TV Mini-Series), 1996 *That Thing You Do!*, 1995 *Toy Story*, 1995 *Apollo 13*, 1994 "Vault of Horror I" (TV Movie), 1994 *Forrest Gump*, 1993 *Philadelphia*, 1993 "Fallen Angels" (TV Series), 1993 *Sleepless in Seattle*, 1992 *A League of Their Own*, 1992 "Tales from the Crypt" (TV Series), 1992 *Radio Flyer*, 1990 *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, 1990 *Joe Versus the Volcano*, 1989 *Turner & Hooch*, 1989 *The 'Burbs*, 1988 *Punchline*, 1988 *Big*, 1987 *Dragnet*, 1986 *Every*

Time We Say Goodbye, 1986 *Nothing in Common*, 1986 *The Money Pit*, 1985 *Volunteers*, 1985 *The Man with One Red Shoe*, 1984 *Bachelor Party*, 1984 *Splash*, 1983-1984 “Family Ties” (TV Series), 1982 “Mazes and Monsters” (TV Movie), 1982 “Happy Days” (TV Series), 1982 “Taxi” (TV Series), 1980-1982 “Bosom Buddies” (TV Series, 37 episodes), 1980 “The Love Boat” (TV Series), and 1980 *He Knows You're Alone*. He also performed on 10 film and TV soundtracks: 2013 *Saving Mr. Banks*, 2006 “Saturday Night Live” (TV Series), 2004 *The Polar Express*, 2002 *The Road to Perdition*, 2000 *Cast Away*, 1999 *Toy Story 2*, 1996 *That Thing You Do!*, 1990 *Joe Versus the Volcano*, 1987 *Dragnet*, and 1980-1982 “Bosom Buddies” (TV Series).

Amy Adams ... Bonnie Bach (b. Amy Lou Adams, August 20, 1974 in Vicenza, Veneto, Italy) has appeared in 65 films and television shows, some of which are 2020 *Hillbilly Elegy*, 2018 *Vice*, 2017 *The Justice League Part One*, 2016 *Story of Your Life*, 2016 *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*, 2014 *Big Eyes*, 2014 *Lullaby*, 2013 *American Hustle*, 2013 *Her*, 2013 *Man of Steel*, 2013 *Back Beyond* (Video short), 2012 *Trouble with the Curve*, 2012 *The Master*, 2012 *On the Road*, 2011 *The Muppets*, 2010 *The Fighter*, 2010 *Love & Distrust* (Video), 2010 *Leap Year*, 2009 *Moonlight Serenade* (Video), 2009 *Julie & Julia*, 2009 *Night at the Museum: Battle of the Smithsonian*, 2008 *Doubt*, 2008 *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day*, 2008 *Sunshine Cleaning*, 2007 *Charlie Wilson's War*, 2007 *Enchanted*, 2007 *Underdog*, 2006 *The Ex*, 2006 *Tenacious D in The Pick of Destiny*, 2006 *Pennies* (Short), 2006 *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby*, 2005-2006 “The Office” (TV Series), 2005 *Standing Still*, 2005 *The Wedding Date*, 2005 *Junebug*, 2004 *The Last Run*, 2004 “Dr. Vegas” (TV Series), 2004 “King of the Hill” (TV Series), 2002 *Catch Me If You Can*, 2002 “The West Wing” (TV Series), 2002 *Serving Sara*, 2002 *Pumpkin*, 2002 *The Slaughter Rule*, 2001 “Smallville” (TV Series), 2000 *Cruel Intentions 2* (Video), 2000 “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” (TV Series), 2000 “Providence” (TV Series), 2000 “Zoe, Duncan, Jack & Jane” (TV Series), 2000 *The Chromium Hook* (Short), 2000 “Charmed” (TV Series), 2000 “That '70s Show” (TV Series), 2000 *Psycho Beach Party*, 2000 “The Peter Principle” (TV Movie), and 1999 *Drop Dead Gorgeous*. In addition, she performed on 9 film and television soundtracks: 2013 “The Tonight Show with Jay Leno” (TV Series), 2012 *Trouble with the Curve*, 2011 *The Muppets*, 2010 “Late Night with Jimmy Fallon” (TV Series),

2009 *Moonlight Serenade* (Video), 2008 “Saturday Night Live” (TV Series), 2008 *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day*, 2008 “The 80th Annual Academy Awards” (TV Special), and 2007 *Enchanted*, **Julia Roberts ... Joanne Herring** (b. Julia Fiona Roberts, October 28, 1967 in Smyrna, Georgia) won



the 2001 Academy Award for Best Actress in a Leading Role for *Erin Brockovich* (2000). She has appeared in 69 films and television shows, some of which are *The Secret in Their Eyes*, 2014 “The Normal Heart” (TV Movie), 2013 *August: Osage County*, 2012 *Mirror Mirror*, 2011 *Larry Crowne*, 2011 *Love, Wedding, Marriage*, 2010 *Eat Pray Love*, 2010 *Valentine's Day*, 2009 *Duplicity*, 2008 *Fireflies in the Garden*, 2007 *Charlie Wilson's War*, 2006 *Charlotte's Web*, 2006 *The Ant Bully*, 2004 *Ocean's Twelve*, 2004 *Closer*, 2003 *Mona Lisa Smile*, 2003 “Freedom: A History of Us” (TV Series documentary), 2002 *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*, 2002 *Full Frontal*, 2002 *Grand Champion*, 2001 *Ocean's Eleven*, 2001 *America's Sweethearts*, 2001 *The Mexican*, 2000 *Erin Brockovich*, 1999 *Runaway Bride*, 1999 *Notting Hill*, 1999 “Law & Order” (TV Series), 1998 *Stepmom*, 1997 *Conspiracy Theory*, 1997 *My Best Friend's Wedding*, 1996 *Everyone Says I Love You*, 1996 *Michael Collins*, 1996 *Mary Reilly*, 1996 “Friends” (TV Series), 1995 *Something to Talk About*, 1994 *Ready to Wear*, 1994 *I Love Trouble*, 1993 *The Pelican Brief*, 1992 *The Player*, 1991 *Hook*, 1991 *Dying Young*, 1991 *Sleeping with the Enemy*, 1990 *Flatliners*, 1990 *Pretty Woman*, 1989 *Steel Magnolias*, 1989 *Blood Red*, 1988 *Mystic Pizza*, 1988 “Miami Vice” (TV Series), 1988 “Baja Oklahoma” (TV Movie), 1988 *Satisfaction*, 1987 *Firehouse*, and 1987 “Crime Story” (TV Series). In addition, she has produced 7 films and television

shows—2012 *Jesus Henry Christ*, 2011 “Extraordinary Moms” (TV Movie documentary), 2008 *Kit Kittredge: An American Girl*, 2005 “An American Girl Adventure” (TV Movie), 2004 “An American Girl Holiday” (TV Movie), 2003 “Queens Supreme” (TV Series), and 1998 *Stepmom*—and performed on 3 soundtracks—1998 *Stepmom*, 1996 *Everyone Says I Love You*, and 1990 *Pretty Woman*.

Philip Seymour Hoffman ... Gust Avrakotos (Born: July 23, 1967 in Fairport, New York—d. February 2, 2014 (age 46) in New York City) won the 2006 Academy Award for Best Performance by an Actor in a Leading Role for *Capote* (2005). He appeared in 63 films and television shows, some of which are 2015 *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay - Part 2*, 2015 “Happyish” (TV Series), 2014 *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay - Part 1*, 2014 *A Most Wanted Man*, 2014 *God's Pocket*, 2013 *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire*, 2013 *Back Beyond* (Video short), 2012 *A Late Quartet*, 2012 *The Master*, 2011 *Moneyball*, 2011 *The Ides of March*, 2011 “A Child's Garden of Poetry” (TV Movie), 2010 *Jack Goes Boating*, 2009 “Arthur” (TV Series), 2009 *The Invention of Lying*, 2009 *Pirate Radio*, 2009 *Mary and Max*, 2008 *Doubt*, 2008 *Synecdoche, New York*, 2007 *Charlie Wilson's War*, 2007 *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead*, 2007 *The Savages*, 2006 *Mission: Impossible III*, 2005 *Capote*, 2005 *Empire Falls* (TV Movie), 2005 *Strangers with Candy*, 2004 *Along Came Polly*, 2003 *Cold Mountain*, 2003 *Mattress Man Commercial* (Video short), 2003 *Owning Mahowny*, 2002 *25th Hour*, 2002 *Red Dragon*, 2002 *Punch-Drunk Love*, 2002 *Love Liza*, 2000 *Almost Famous*, 2000 *State and Main*, 1999 *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, 1999 *Magnolia*, 1999 *Flawless*, 1998 *Patch Adams*, 1998 *Happiness*, 1998 *The Big Lebowski*, 1998 *Next Stop Wonderland*, 1998 *Montana*, 1997 “Liberty! The American Revolution” (TV Mini-Series), 1997 *Culture* (Short), 1997 *Boogie Nights*, 1996 *Twister*, 1996 *Hard Eight*, 1995 *The Fifteen Minute Hamlet* (Short), 1994 *Nobody's Fool*, 1994 *When a Man Loves a Woman*, 1994 “The Yearling” (TV Movie), 1994 *Szuler*, 1994 *The Getaway*, 1993 *Money for Nothing*, 1993 *My Boyfriend's Back*, 1993 *Joey Breaker*, 1992 *Scent of a Woman*, 1992 *Leap of Faith*, 1992 *My New Gun*, 1991 *Triple Bogey on a Par Five Hole*, and 1991 “Law & Order” (TV Series). In addition, he produced 6 films and TV shows—2015 “Happyish” (TV Series), 2014 *One Armed Man* (Short), 2014 *God's Pocket*, 2011 *Candlesticks* (Short), 2010 *Jack Goes Boating*, and 2005 *Capote*—performed on 2 soundtracks—2012

The Master and 1999 *Magnolia*—and directed 1 film—2010 *Jack Goes Boating*.

Lee Hill: “Nichols, Mike” (*Senses of Cinema* July 2003)



Mike Nichols and The Business of Living

In Andrew Sarris’ fascinating, infuriating (and badly-in-need-of-an-update) manifesto, *American Cinema*, Mike Nichols was dismissed along with Stanley Kubrick, Richard Lester and Norman Jewison as a director whose work was less than meets the eye. Like many hot directors in the 1960s, Nichols wore his style on his sleeve. The two films that insured his A-list status, *Who’s Afraid Of Virginia Woolf?* (1966) and *The Graduate* (1967), gleefully utilised all the toys available to a thirtysomething boy wonder of that period: self-conscious editing and cinematography, stylised production design, hypernaturalistic acting, and a willingness to break down the crumbling dictates of the Hays Code. Until the mid-’70s, Nichols, like many of his peers, embraced the European ideal of the personal filmmaker. He continued to choose projects that gave cinematic expression to a tragicomic sensibility forged in the mid-1950s and early ’60s when the director was then best known as one of half of the improvisational duo, Nichols and May.

Then around 1975, Nichols dropped out of the virtual reality of New Hollywood. For almost a decade, he directed plays or executive produced television or film projects. When he returned to feature filmmaking with *Silkwood* in 1983, a sea change had occurred in his work.

Although *Silkwood* was an ostensibly ’60s film dealing with corporate corruption, political activism, class and gender, the film was, at its core, a character study about a woman and her friendships. *Silkwood* was also unadorned by the

visual flourishes (especially those that annoyed a hardline auteurist like Sarris) that had made him such a quintessential '60s director. The film would also be the last time until *Primary Colors* (1998) that Nichols would make a film about the kind of big ideas—politics, war, sex, death, alienation, etc.—that were *de rigueur* for a director of his stature and autonomy. That kind of seriousness would be satisfied through his theatre work, most notably David Rabe's *Hurlyburly*, Tom Stoppard's *The Real Thing*, Ariel Dorfman's *Death and The Maiden* and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting For Godot*. However, the films would focus almost exclusively on the politics of the personal: the process by which individuals and groups interact on a daily basis, the minutiae of the business of living, and the gap between domesticity and romance in relationships. Conflicts which Nichols often sought to explore through romantic comedy.

This major shift in ambition and approach by Nichols did not endear him to critics, although his films continued to be successful with audiences. David Thomson says his post-'60s work made you walk out of the cinema, wondering why did they ever bother to make this? Such elegant dismissiveness may make Thomson fun to read, but does little to explain or illuminate what Nichols does. Nichols has become a kind of anti-Kubrick, an enigmatic filmmaker who uses his power to make seemingly modest, self-effacing film soufflés. Outside of the usual film junket type publicity, there has been little serious commentary about Nichols' work (the only book length study on Nichols by Wayne H. Schuth came out in 1978, when many assumed he had retired from film). Yet beneath the laughter, Nichols' ironic sensibility remains remarkably consistent in the second half of his filmmaking career. It is a form of irony that may be out of fashion with those for whom irony means never having to think too deeply about any one idea for too long, but for those trying to reconcile the gap between dream and nightmare in their waking life, Nichols work continues to resonate.

Born in Berlin on November 6, 1931 as Michael Igor Peschkowsky, Nichols came with his German-Jewish family to the USA when he was seven. The death of his father when he was twelve

dealt a financial blow to his family. Although he was raised with aspirational middle class values, he worked hard to win scholarships that got him a place at the University of Chicago. It appears he grew quickly disenchanted with academic life. He supported himself with odd jobs including janitor, post-office clerk, hotel night clerk, and stablehand (the last led to a life long interest in raising horses). He dropped out to study acting with Lee Strasberg in



New York and then returned to Chicago to work and perform with a group of young actors that formed The Compass. This restaurant/cabaret/theatre (whose history and legacy is beautifully documented in Janet Coleman's book) brought Nichols into contact with Alan Arkin, Severn Darden, Barbara Harris, Roger Bowen, Paul Sills and other brilliant, eccentric,

temperamental talents.

Of this group, Elaine May became the most important figure in Nichols' personal and professional life. They quickly formed a creative partnership developing inspired comic riffs on the archetypal man-woman dynamics: mother/son, boyfriend/girlfriend, doctor/patient, student/teacher, etc. After leaving The Compass, they became superstars of the Satire Boom of the period. Along with Lenny Bruce, Jules Feiffer, Mort Sahl, Lord Buckley, and Terry Southern, they were pioneers in extending the range and subject matter of American comedy. From 1956 through 1961, Nichols and May achieved mainstream success by making fun of the mainstream middle class sacred cows—going to college, dating and sexual etiquette, psychoanalysis, the distinction between high and low culture, doing the right thing with respect to one's parents/employer/spouse/president/personal God. The recordings and film footage of their best years has for, the most part, not dated. Although they poked fun at the middle class, they did so from the inside out. The delightful agony of making the first romantic move on a date, the banality of talk-show chatter, the difficulty of explaining a career choice to one's parents, or the officiousness of doctors, funeral directors, or other figures of good standing in the community remain fertile situations for comic and satiric study. Over time they developed a repertoire of popular skits, but

each live performance took on the quality of jazz. In fact it was this high-wire quality that led to Nichols and May parting ways. May was easily bored and wanted to improvise more, whereas Nichols loved to refine and fine-tune what already existed. By the time Arthur Penn directed them in *An Evening With Nichols and May*, the two were sick of working with each other.

After his debut on the Great White Way with Neil Simon's *Barefoot In The Park*, Nichols quickly became a highly sought after Broadway theatre director. His reputation as a kind of renaissance boy wonder helped him set up his first two films, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *The Graduate*. The former was a pitch-perfect translation of Edward Albee's absurdist play about an academic couple gone to seed. Nichols was also one of the few directors to take the formidable talent and star power of Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton and use it to good purpose. The unforgiving cinematography of Haskell Wexler and the grimness of Richard Sylbert's set design also heightened the desperation of Martha and George's marital prison.

If *Virginia Woolf* demonstrated Nichols' genius for translating theatre to film, *The Graduate* proved Nichols could achieve greatness with modest source material. Charles Webb's novel is a spartan tale about disaffected youth that resembles a mouse squeak compared to the lion's roar of Philip Roth, William Burroughs, Thomas Pynchon, or Richard Brautigan. Yet working closely with Buck Henry (after an earlier draft by Calder Willingham), Nichols turned a minor book into an iconic '60s film.

With Dustin Hoffman as Benjamin Braddock, Nichols helped to usher in the dominance of a new kind of male actor in American films. As is often the case with social satire, Nichols was accused of superficiality, misogyny, ripping off Fellini, and various other cinematic war crimes by critics who resented the film's broad appeal. Although the film barely references the counter-culture (despite a major section of the film being shot in Berkeley), it vividly captures the uncertainty, distrust of authority, and willingness to take risks experienced by the baby boom generation. Yet the film's famous ambivalent

ending also suggests that this same generation may prove to be more reactionary and selfish than their parents at day's end. *The Graduate* remains a powerful fable about the difficulties of rebellion in a consumer culture where choice is rampant and yet illusory.

Mike Nichols once jokingly referred to *Catch-22* (1970) as his "green awning film". After a major success, the studios would let you make a film about

people walking under a green awning. The logic being if it were a hit, they had bet on a sure thing. If it were a flop, Mr. Auteur would go back to being a hired hand and deliver bums on seats with his next picture.

Impeccably designed and cast, Nichols mammoth adaptation of Joseph Heller's classic anti-war novel was released just after Robert

Altman's *M*A*S*H* stunned

critics and audiences with its irreverent combination of gore and slapstick. Nichols' film appeared too calculated and fussy compared to the rawness of Altman. The passage of time reveals that there is very little wrong with Nichols' film. The period detail is spot on. The special effects are near flawless, combining real aerial footage with back projection. Alan Arkin is a sympathetic Yossarian. The various character parts played by a veritable who's who of acting talent (including Jon Voight, Bob Newhart, Anthony Perkins, Martin Balsam, Paula Prentiss and Art Garfunkel) reinforce Nichols' interpretation of the novel as a series of insane black-out sketches. And yet, in spite of the film's picaresque quality, Nichols' film, thanks to Buck Henry's script, with its repeating dream sequence set in a damaged bomber cockpit, is as immaculately structured as one of Harold Pinter's celebrated screen adaptations. In spite of its undeserved reputation as a failure (even Nichols finds it difficult to like the film), *Catch-22* endures as one of the finest achievements of the era. If only all "failed films" were this well crafted, thoughtful, full of comic energy, and beautiful to look at (David Watkins' cinematography is as near visionary as Vittorio Storaro's work on *Apocalypse Now*).

Nichols recovered from the negative reception of *Catch-22* with *Carnal Knowledge* (1971). Jules Feiffer's original screenplay is a scathing deconstruction of the sexual attitudes of males who



came of age in the '50s. As the two college pals, Jonathan (Jack Nicholson) and Sandy (Art Garfunkel), get older, their adolescent randiness grows into something darker. Jonathan begins to hate the women he lusts for...a form of self-loathing that freezes into literal and metaphorical impotence.

Sandy slides into and out of suburban complacency only to be reborn as a weekend hippie escaping a mid-life crisis by chasing younger women.

Neil LaBute has tried to replicate *Carnal Knowledge's* unremitting view of the battle of the sexes, but his work lacks the sense of tragedy Nichols and his cast invest into the film. Sandy and Jonathan are victims as much as predators; men adrift in an illusory world of choice.

By the mid-'70s, the seemingly limitless choices available to Nichols would lead to confusion in his own work. *Day of The Dolphin* (1973) and *The Fortune* (1975) are somewhat unsuccessful attempts to rework genres—the political thriller and the bedroom farce, respectively. Nichols inherited *Dolphin* from Roman Polanski, who realized it was hard not to make even the most serious film about talking fish look not a little ridiculous. Yet if the film is no *Kluge* (Alan J. Pakula, 1971), it can still hold up its head high thanks to the sheer craft and conviction with which it is made. Marketed as a family picture, it probably introduced an entire generation of youngsters to fatalistic endings and Kissingeresque realpolitik.

The Fortune had the (no pun intended) misfortune of starting like a mad-cap road movie and then downshifting into an Beckett-like one setter thanks to Carol Eastman's unfinished screenplay. Warren Beatty, Jack Nicholson, and Stockard Channing play the accidental *menage à trois* with an aphetamine-like enthusiasm. The Coen Brothers are reportedly big fans of *The Fortune* and one can detect that everything-and-the-kitchen-sink quality in their more problematic films like *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1993) and *The Big Lebowski* (1998).

The poor critical and commercial reception of these two films dealt a serious blow to Nichols' confidence as a director. He left *The Last Tycoon* during preproduction (Elia Kazan took over). Then after a highly publicised on-set dispute with Robert De Niro, Nichols abandoned *The Man Who*

Looked Like Bogie after several days of filming. Nichols' professional life was also complicated by divorce and struggles with depression. He dealt with these setbacks by concentrating on his work in the theatre where he continued to have enormous success. He also executive produced the moderately successful, *The Family*, for ABC television, an innovative series that was a precursor to the likes of *thirtysomething* and *Six Feet Under*.



Following the aforementioned *Silkwood*, Nichols seems to have been reborn. As he told an interviewer, his aesthetic had changed: "you use the technical things to make people completely unaware of technical things." Nichols the expressionist had become Nichols the seamless craftsman.

Yet his post-'60s/'70s work yields many discreet pleasures and insights. If *Heartburn* (1986) was nowhere near as brutally honest as Nora Ephron's source novel, it did feature some wonderful character playing from the likes of Milos Forman, Jeff Daniels, Catherine O'Hara and Kevin Spacey. Far more successful was *Biloxi Blues* (1988) which features one of the most ravishing opening and closing shots in a service comedy ever made. I would argue that the film is probably the greatest Neil Simon adaptation after *The Odd Couple* (Gene Saks, 1968). As an alternative look at life during wartime, the film would make a wonderful double with John Boorman's *Hope and Glory* (1987). The interplay between Matthew Broderick as the young recruit and Christopher Walken as the semi-psychotic drill sergeant is revelatory in its combination of laughter and melancholy.

Working Girl (1988) and *Postcards From The Edge* (1990) highlighted Nichols as one of the few mainstream directors to make films for women confronting choices. If the satire in neither film is as sharp as *The Graduate* or *Carnal Knowledge*, Nichols' ability to bring surprising performances from his cast remained. Melanie Griffith has rarely been as good before or since *Working Girl*. While the various cameos in *Postcards* enhance the concept of Hollywood as a *Cheers*-like bar where everyone knows your name until of course a bigger name comes along. Gene Hackman almost steals *Postcards* as the veteran director who delivers some hard won

wisdom to Meryl Streep's drug sodden character. *Postcards'* film-within-a-film opening was also a sly nod to those in the audience wondering where Nichols the stylist had gone.

Regarding Henry (1991) and *Wolf* (1994) were both attempts to examine masculinity in crisis as viewed from New York's Upper West Side. Once again, Nichols' ability to bring out interesting performances from his cast was present, but the scripts were unworthy of someone so effortlessly clever and witty as Nichols. The Nichols fan had to content himself with subsidiary pleasures—Annette Bening's warmth and Guiseppe Rotunno's cinematography in *Henry* or Ennio Morricone's sensual score for *Wolf*.

The Birdcage (1996), a remake of *La Cage aux folles* (Edouard Molinaro, 1978), matched Nichols' gifts with the material for his most cohesive film in ages. The film also reunited Nichols with Elaine May. Her knack for making a feast out of misunderstandings and red herrings rejuvenated a project which could have been another paint-by-numbers big studio remake. Nichols and May both understand that the source material is essentially *Charley's Aunt* with racier dialogue, but they manage to bring a lot of the then-contemporary debate about family values into the mix. Although the film is in the final analysis a farce, it is certainly more beautiful to look at than Molinaro's original.

Primary Colours released in the same year as Warren Beatty's out-of-nowhere samizdat *Bulworth* (arguably the greatest film Donald Cammell never got around to directing) also had the misfortune to coincide with the real-life satire that became the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal. Adapted from Joe Klein's bestselling satire, *Colours* was intended to be the final word on the diminishing returns of old style Roosevelt liberalism in a new political universe of post-modern spin. Instead, the film looked suspiciously like instant nostalgia to many viewers and critics. Like *Catch-22*, *Primary Colours* will eventually earn the respect it deserves. Few American films of recent years have cast such a thorough, critical, yet sympathetic look at the people and processes that shape public policy. The film is also a return to the epic themes that distinguished Nichols'

most celebrated films.

Judging by the evidence of his most recent work, *Wit* (2001), and the as-yet unreleased *Angels In America* (both made for HBO), Nichols is undergoing yet another major shift in his work. *Wit* was an almost Kubrickian look at death and dying. Emma Thompson's near monologue blocked out with the



precision of the drill instructor scenes in *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) and just as intense and harrowing. *Angels*, from all accounts, could be Nichols' *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1980). Tony Kushner's award winning play has been reconfigured as a multi-part series with Al Pacino as

Roy Cohn, as well as the tantalising likes of Simon Callow, Mary Louise-Parker, Michael Gambon, and Jeffrey Wright.

In spite of a puzzling lack of sustained critical study, Nichols has continued to influence a new generation of film directors. Sam Mendes, Wes Anderson, Spike Jonze, Steven Soderbergh, Whit Stillman and the Coen Brothers have all rescued irony from the tarpit that has become post-modernism. Anyone seriously wanting to learn about film acting would be remiss not to watch at least one Nichols' film. Regardless of his lack of interest in some of the scripts he is filming, there is nothing complacent about Nichols' love of actors. He is neither overly reverent or uncaring about their status. His recent virtuoso performance in Wallace Shawn's *The Designated Mourner* (filmed by David Hare in 1996) shows a man who is not afraid to take the same risks he demands from his cast. There is arguably no more unforgiving or moving dissection of well intentioned, middle class complacency committed to celluloid in recent years. It is a performance made all the more so because it comes close to being autobiography.

Nichols is after all a director who has enjoyed enormous critical and commercial success for almost five decades. He was always more boy wonder than *enfant terrible*. As a consequence, he has paid the price at times for being more liked than disliked. As a filmmaker, he has made puzzling choices (why *The Fortune*, *Regarding Henry* or *Wolf* and not *Blue Movie*, *Remains Of The Day*, or *All The Pretty Horses?*), but then he is not alone in making

the odd misstep. For many years, Nichols has paid the price of being Hollywood and Broadway's Mr. Success, but he has not lost his experience of not quite fitting in with a system that has rewarded him so often. His work, as seen as much as one can, as a whole, has been about individuals trying to go about the business of living with as much dignity, good humour and hope as they can muster. The world appears to conspire against these efforts. It is in this gap between reality and desire that Nichols finds a brand of humour and tragedy that is uniquely his.



“Questioning the Story” (Chasingthefrog.com)
Why did Charlie Wilson want to help the people of Afghanistan?

Despite being liberal on social issues, Texas Congressman Charlie Wilson was a fervent anticommunist. After being urged by Houston socialite Joanne Herring, Charlie agreed to visit the Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan. He made his first trip to Islamabad, Pakistan in the fall of 1982. He met with President Zia (a meeting that had been arranged by Joanne Herring), and he visited the Afghan refugee camps and hospitals in northern Pakistan, which were home to approximately 3 million Afghans. Charlie Wilson's biography suggests that he was deeply moved when he visited the children, many of whom had been maimed by Soviet land mines and weapons, including the ominous Mi-24 Hind Helicopter. "I left those hospitals determined that as long as I had a breath in my body and was a member of Congress, that I was gonna do what I could to make the Soviets pay for what they were doing" (*The Real Charlie, CharlieWilson'sWar.net*). The Soviets had killed an estimated 10% of the population of Afghanistan in three years' time. By the end of the war in Afghanistan, the Soviets had taken the lives of more

than 1,000,000 Afghans. Each time that Charlie had visited the refugee camps and hospitals, he donated blood to help those suffering. -History Channel, The True Story of Charlie Wilson

Is Charlie Wilson's War a round-about attempt to provide an opinion on present day politics?

After a *TIME* magazine interviewer implied that the movie's depiction of the US involvement in Afghanistan directly relates to the US in Iraq, Tom Hanks corrected him by saying, "This isn't about Iraq. ...*Charlie Wilson's War* is about something happening in 1980." Hanks obviously wants to avoid having his film associated with the recent string of left wing Iraq flavored box office failures.

For the most part, the movie is not about Iraq, but a postscript to the movie quotes the real Charlie Wilson as saying, "We f---ed up the endgame." Mr. Wilson is referring to how the Mujahedeen, whom the US supplied with weapons in Afghanistan, eventually flowered into the Taliban and backed Osama bin Laden's war against the US. This brief criticism of US foreign policy left liberal critics of the film disappointed that the movie did not emphasize this point more strongly. *Newsweek* critic David Ansen asks of the filmmakers, "Is this admirable restraint or cold feet? Are they afraid of spoiling the feel-good uplift of Charlie's victory with the harsh downdraft of history? It's as if *Titanic* ended with a celebratory shipboard banquet, followed by a postscript: by the way, it sank."

Tom Hanks, who purchased the rights to George Crile's biography, *Charlie Wilson's War: The Extraordinary Story of How the Wildest Man in Congress and a Rogue CIA Agent Changed the History of Our Times*, stated during a November 2007 Oprah interview, "I think Charlie Wilson is a fascinating example of how things can get done from the oddest quarters. That you would jump to a conclusion, that you would adhere to a stereotype about a no-good do nothing guy from a little section of Texas that doesn't mean anything, and in fact a guy like that can change the world, which is an example to all of us quite frankly."

Perhaps Hanks is alluding to another obvious political statement that the movie is trying to make, that an elected official with a moral compass worse than that of Bill Clinton can still get things done. In this way, the movie is reminiscent of the 2000 drama *The Contender* starring Joan Allen, which attempted to separate a sexual orgy in a woman's past from her ability to do her job in office. That film was released a

month before the US presidential election that came directly after the scandalous years of Bill Clinton. Similarly, *Charlie Wilson's War* comes on the eve of a presidential election year, this time involving Bill Clinton's wife Hillary as a candidate. Is it only a coincidence then that actor and producer Tom Hanks, a supporter of Hillary Clinton's (he has contributed \$2,300 to her presidential campaign) has made an effort to focus on the film's ability to see past Charlie Wilson's moral flaws (CNN.com)?

Did the original screenplay end with a shot of the Pentagon in flames?

Yes. The real Charlie Wilson and Joanne Herring succeeded in having parts of the movie's script omitted, which had suggested that they were responsible for seeding the events of September 11, 2001. This included a shot of the Pentagon in flames at the end of Aaron Sorkin's original screenplay. When she first read the script, Texas socialite Joanne Herring says that she "practically choked." She and Charlie Wilson were aghast at the screenplay's implications that they had abetted Al Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden. "Can you ever predict a war?" Joanne argues. "The shelf life of a Stinger missile is five years. There's no weapon we got them that can be used today." Herring and Wilson brought in famed Houston attorney Dick DeGuerin, who helped pressure Universal and the producers to change the script. -*NY Daily News*

I heard Rudy Giuliani's name mentioned in the movie, what role did he play in the Charlie Wilson real story?

It is likely no coincidence that the movie more than once mentions 2008 Republican Candidate Rudy Giuliani's fight, as part of a Justice Department investigation, to convict Congressman Charlie Wilson. Then a famed-prosecutor and U.S. Attorney from the Southern District of New York, Rudy Giuliani headed a 1986 ethical investigation into the Texas Congressman's supposed drug use in a Las Vegas hot tub, a conviction that could have jeopardized Wilson's ability to get weapons into the hands of the Afghans. Giuliani's ethical harassment of

Charlie Wilson becomes a punch line in the movie. Contrarily, the movie casts Democrats like John Murtha in a positive light.

How did the real life Joanne Herring become involved with Afghanistan?



In the movie *Charlie Wilson's War*, Joanne Herring (Julia Roberts) sets up a meeting between Charlie Wilson (Tom Hanks) and President Zia of Pakistan. The meeting proves effective after Charlie visits wounded and starving Afghans living in refugee camps in Northern Pakistan. What he sees further ignites his existing

hatred toward the Soviet Union, inspiring him to demand an increase in the defense appropriations for Afghanistan. In real life, Joanne Herring served as honorary consul to both Pakistan and Morocco. This is how she developed connections in the region. Joanne was also a conservative Houston socialite, political activist, businesswoman, and former talk show host. Her friendships with politicians like future Secretary of State James Baker added to her political influence.

How did Joanne Herring convince Charlie Wilson to help the Afghan rebels?

In the movie, Joanne (Julia Roberts) invites Charlie Wilson (Tom Hanks) to a party at her house, where she has sex with him in order to help persuade him to find a way to get more money appropriated for Afghanistan. Charlie Wilson's biography reveals that Charlie and Joanne were dating in 1980. In fact, for a short time they were engaged to be married, suggesting that Joanne Herring's influence over Charlie was more significant than a random act of intimacy. -*Biography.com*

Did Gust Avrakotos first meet Wilson on the day Wilson learned he was being investigated?

No. In the movie, we see Congressman Charlie Wilson's well-endowed secretaries running in and out of Wilson's office, humorously interrupting his meeting with Gust Avrakotos (Philip Seymour Hoffman). The true story behind *Charlie Wilson's War* reveals that Charlie and Gust did not meet until later, when Wilson approached the CIA to inquire

about better weapons for the Afghans. -

SuburbanChicagoNews.com

Robert Parry: “Hollywood’s Dangerous Afghan Illusion: ‘Charlie Wilson’s War.’” (Global



Research, 12 April 2013)

A newly discovered document undercuts a key storyline of the anti-Soviet Afghan war of the 1980s – that it was “Charlie Wilson’s War.” A note inside Ronald Reagan’s White House targeted the Texas Democrat as someone “to bring into circle as discrete Hill connection,” Robert Parry reports.

Official Washington’s conventional wisdom about Afghanistan derives to a dangerous degree from a Hollywood movie, “Charlie Wilson’s War,” which depicted the anti-Soviet war of the 1980s as a fight pitting good “freedom fighters” vs. evil “occupiers” and which blamed Afghanistan’s later descent into chaos on feckless U.S. politicians quitting as soon as Soviet troops left in 1989.

The Tom Hanks movie also pushed the theme that the war was really the pet project of a maverick Democratic congressman from Texas, Charlie Wilson, who fell in love with the Afghan mujahedeen after falling in love with a glamorous Texas oil woman, Joanne Herring, who was committed to their anti-communist cause.

However, “Charlie Wilson’s War” – like many Hollywood films – took extraordinary license with the facts, presenting many of the war’s core elements incorrectly. That in itself might not be a serious problem, except that key U.S. policymakers have cited these mythical “facts” as lessons to guide the current U.S. military occupation of Afghanistan.

The degree to which Ronald Reagan’s White House saw Wilson as more puppet than puppet-master is underscored by a newly discovered document at Reagan’s presidential library in Simi Valley, California. I found the document in the files

of former CIA propaganda chief Walter Raymond Jr., who in the 1980s oversaw the selling of U.S. interventions in Central America and Afghanistan from his office at the National Security Council.

The [handwritten note](#) to Raymond appears to be initialed by then-National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane and instructs Raymond to recruit Wilson into the Reagan administration’s effort to drum up more Afghan war money for the fiscal 1985 budget. The note reads:

“Walt, Go see Charlie Wilson (D-TX). Seek to bring him into circle as discrete Hill connection. He can be very helpful in getting money. M.” (The notation may have used the wrong adjective, possibly intending “discreet,” meaning circumspect and suggesting a secretive role, not “discrete,” meaning separate and distinct.)

Raymond appears to have followed up those instructions, as Wilson began to play a bigger and bigger role in unleashing the great Afghan spending spree of 1985 and as Raymond asserted himself behind the scenes on how the war should be sold to the American people.

Raymond, a 30-year veteran of CIA clandestine services, was a slight, soft-spoken New Yorker who reminded some of a character from a John le Carré spy novel, an intelligence officer who “easily fades into the woodwork,” according to one Raymond acquaintance. But his CIA career took a dramatic turn in 1982 when he was reassigned to the NSC.

At the time, the White House saw a need to step up its domestic propaganda operations in support of President Reagan’s desire to intervene more aggressively in Central America and Afghanistan. The American people – still stung by the agony of the Vietnam War – were not eager to engage in more foreign adventures.

So, Reagan’s team took aim at “kicking the Vietnam Syndrome” mostly by wildly exaggerating the Soviet threat. It became crucial to convince Americans that the Soviets were on the rise and on the march, though in reality the Soviets were on the decline and eager for accommodations with the West.

Yet, as deputy assistant secretary to the Air Force, J. Michael Kelly, put it, “the most critical special operations mission we have ... is to persuade the American people that the communists are out to get us.”

The main focus of the administration’s domestic propaganda was on Central America where Reagan was arming right-wing military juntas

engaged in anti-leftist extermination campaigns. Through the CIA, Reagan also was organizing a drug-tainted terrorist operation known as the Contras to overthrow Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista government.

To hide the ugly realities and to overcome popular opposition to the policies, Reagan granted CIA Director William Casey extraordinary leeway to engage in CIA-style propaganda and disinformation aimed at the American people, the sort of project normally reserved for hostile countries. To oversee the operation – while skirting legal bans on the CIA operating domestically – Casey moved Raymond from the CIA to the NSC staff.

Raymond formally resigned from the CIA in April 1983 so, he said, “there would be no question whatsoever of any contamination of this.” But from the beginning, Raymond fretted about the legality of Casey's involvement. Raymond confided in one memo that it was important “to get [Casey] out of the loop,” but Casey never backed off and Raymond continued to send progress reports to his old boss well into 1986.

It was “the kind of thing which [Casey] had a broad catholic interest in,” Raymond shrugged during a deposition given to congressional Iran-Contra investigators in 1987. Raymond offered the excuse that Casey undertook this apparently illegal interference in domestic politics “not so much in his CIA hat, but in his adviser to the president hat.”

Raymond also understood that the administration's hand in the P.R. projects must stay hidden, because of other legal bans on executive-branch propaganda. “The work down within the administration has to, by definition, be at arms' length,” Raymond noted in an Aug. 29, 1983, memo.

As one NSC official told me, the campaign was modeled after CIA covert operations abroad where a political goal is more important than the truth. “They were trying to manipulate [U.S.] public opinion ... using the tools of Walt Raymond's trade craft which he learned from his career in the CIA covert operation shop,” the official said.

From the NSC, Raymond organized inter-agency task forces to bombard the U.S. public with

hyped-up propaganda about the Soviet threat in Central America and in Afghanistan. Raymond's goal was to change the way Americans viewed these dangers, a process that the Reagan administration internally called “perception management.”

Scores of documents about this operation were released during the Iran-Contra scandal in 1987, but Washington-based journalists never paid much

attention to the evidence about how they had been manipulated by these propaganda tactics, which included rewarding cooperative reporters with government-sponsored “leaks” and punishing those who wouldn't parrot the lies with whispering campaigns in the ears

of their editors and bureau chiefs. [See Robert Parry's [Lost History](#).]

Even after the Iran-Contra scandal was exposed in 1986 and Casey died of brain cancer in 1987, the Republicans fought to keep secret the remarkable story of this propaganda apparatus. As part of a deal to get three moderate Republican senators to join Democrats in signing the Iran-Contra report, Democratic leaders dropped a draft chapter on the CIA's domestic propaganda role.

Thus, the American people were spared the chapter's troubling conclusion: that a covert propaganda apparatus had existed, run by “one of the CIA's most senior specialists, sent to the NSC by Bill Casey, to create and coordinate an inter-agency public-diplomacy mechanism [which] did what a covert CIA operation in a foreign country might do. [It] attempted to manipulate the media, the Congress and public opinion to support the Reagan administration's policies.” [See Consortiumnews.com's “[Iran-Contra's Lost Chapter](#).”]

Raping Russians

Hiding the unspeakable realities of the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan was almost as high a priority as concealing the U.S.-backed slaughter in Central America. Reagan's pet “freedom fighters” in Afghanistan as in Nicaragua were tainted by the drug trade as well as by well-documented cases of torture, rape and murder.



Yet, Raymond and his propagandists were always looking for new ways to “sell” the wars to the American people, leading to a clash with CIA officer Gust Avrakotos, who was overseeing the Afghan conflict and who had developed his own close ties to Rep. Charlie Wilson.

According to author George Crile, whose book *Charlie Wilson's War* provided a loose framework for the movie of the same name, Avrakotos clashed with Raymond and other senior Reagan administration officials when they proposed unrealistic propaganda themes regarding Afghanistan.

One of Raymond's ideas was to get some Russian soldiers to “defect” and then fly them from Afghanistan to Washington where they would renounce communism. The problem, as Avrakotos explained, was that the Afghan mujahideen routinely tortured and then murdered any Soviet soldier who fell into their hands, except for a few who were kept around for anal rape.

“For Avrakotos, 1985 was a year of right-wing craziness,” Crile wrote. “A band of well-placed anti-Communist enthusiasts in the administration had come up with a plan they believed would bring down the Red Army, if the CIA would only be willing to implement it. The leading advocates of this plan included Richard Perle at the Pentagon. ... [NSC aide] Oliver North also checked in briefly, but the man who set Avrakotos's teeth on edge most was Walt Raymond, another NSC staffer who had spent twenty years with the CIA as a propagandist.

“Their idea was to encourage Soviet officers and soldiers to defect to the mujahideen. As Avrakotos derisively describes it, ‘The muj were supposed to set up loudspeakers in the mountains announcing such things as “Lay down your arms, there is a passage to the West and to freedom.”’ Once news of this program made its way through the Red Army, it was argued, there would be a flood of defectors. ...

“Avrakotos thought North and Perle were ‘cuckoos of the Far Right,’ and he soon felt quite certain that Raymond, the man who seemed to be the intellectual ringleader, was truly detached from reality. ‘What Russian in his right mind would defect to those fuckers all armed to the teeth,’ Avrakotos said in frustration. ‘To begin with, anyone defecting

to the Dushman would have to be a crook, a thief or someone who wanted to get cornholed every day, because nine out of ten prisoners were dead within twenty-four hours and they were always turned into concubines by the mujahideen. I felt so sorry for them

I wanted to have them all shot.’

“The meeting [with Raymond's team] went very badly indeed. Gust [Avrakotos] accused North and Perle of being idiots. ... Avrakotos said to Walt Raymond, ‘You know, Walt, you're just a fucking asshole, you're irrelevant.’”

However, as Crile wrote, Avrakotos “greatly underestimated the political power and determination of the group, who went directly to [CIA Director] Bill Casey to angrily protest Avrakotos's insulting manner. The director complained to [CIA operations official] Clair George, who responded by forbidding

Avrakotos to attend any more interagency meetings without a CIA nanny present. ...

“Avrakotos arrived for one of these White House sessions armed with five huge photographic blowups. ... One of them showed two Russian sergeants being used as concubines. Another had a Russian hanging from the turret of a tank with a vital part of his anatomy removed. ... ‘If you were a sane fucking Russian, would you defect to these people?’” he had demanded of Perle.

“But the issue wouldn't go away. Perle, Raymond, and the others continued to insist that the Agency find and send back to the United States the many Russian defectors they seemed to believe, despite Avrakotos's denials, the mujahideen were harboring. ...

“It had been almost impossible to locate two prisoners, much less two defectors. The CIA found itself in the preposterous position of having to pony up \$50,000 to bribe the Afghans to deliver two live ones. ‘These two guys were basket cases,’ says Avrakotos. ‘One had been fucked so many times he didn't know what was going on.’”

Despite this knowledge about the true nature of the Afghan “freedom fighters,” the Reagan administration – and the “Charlie Wilson's War” moviemakers – concealed from the American people



the inhuman brutality of the jihadists who were receiving billions of dollars in U.S. and Saudi largesse. The movie depicted the Soviet soldiers as sadistic monsters and the mujahedeen as noble warriors, just as Ronald Reagan and Walter Raymond would have wanted. (Raymond died in 2003; Reagan in 2004; the movie appeared in 2007.)

But the Reagan administration did calculate correctly that Wilson from his key position on a House Appropriations defense subcommittee could open the spigot on funding for the Afghan muj.

Learning Wrong Lessons

While it’s not unusual for Hollywood to produce a Cold War propaganda film, what was different about “Charlie Wilson’s War” was how it was treated by Official Washington as something close to a documentary. That attitude was somewhat a tribute to the likeable Tom Hanks who portrayed the womanizing and hard-drinking Charlie Wilson.

Yet, perhaps the biggest danger in viewing the movie as truth was its treatment of why the anti-Soviet jihad led to Afghanistan becoming home to the Taliban and Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaeda terrorists in the 1990s. The movie pushed the myth that the United States abruptly abandoned Afghanistan as soon as the Soviet troops left on Feb. 15, 1989.

All across Official Washington, pundits and policymakers have embraced the lesson that the United States must not make that “mistake” again – and thus must leave behind a sizeable force of U.S. troops.

For instance, the New York Times’ [lead editorial](#) on May 1, 2012, criticized President Barack Obama for not explaining how he would prevent Afghanistan from imploding after the scheduled U.S. troop withdrawal in 2014, though the Times added that the plan’s “longer-term commitment [of aid] sends an important message to Afghans that Washington will not abandon them as it did after the Soviets were driven out.”

The abandonment myth also has been cited by senior Obama administration officials, including U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan [Ryan Crocker](#) and

Defense Secretary Robert Gates, as they explained the rise of the Taliban in the mid-1990s and al-Qaeda’s use of Afghanistan for plotting the 9/11 attacks on the United States in 2001.

In late 2009, Defense Secretary Gates reprised this phony conventional wisdom, telling reporters: “We will not repeat the mistakes of 1989, when we

abandoned the country only to see it descend into civil war and into Taliban hands.” However, that narrative was based on a faux reality drawn from a fictional movie.

Gates knew the real history. After all, in 1989, he was deputy national security adviser under President George H.W. Bush when the key decisions were made to continue covert U.S. aid to the mujahedeen, not cut it off.

The truth was that the end game in Afghanistan was messed up not because

the United States cut the mujahedeen off but because Washington pressed for a clear-cut victory, rebuffing Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev’s proposals for a power-sharing arrangement. And we know that Gates knows this reality because he recounted it in his 1996 memoir, *From the Shadows*.

The Real History

Here’s what that history actually shows: In 1988, Gorbachev promised to remove Soviet troops from Afghanistan and sought a negotiated settlement. He hoped for a unity government that would include elements of Afghan President Najibullah’s Soviet-backed regime in Kabul and the CIA-backed Islamic fundamentalist rebels.

Gates, who in 1988 was deputy CIA director, opposed Gorbachev’s plan, disbelieving that the Soviets would really depart and insisting that – if they did – the CIA’s mujahedeen could quickly defeat Najibullah’s army.

Inside the Reagan administration, Gates’s judgment was opposed by State Department analysts who foresaw a drawn-out struggle. Deputy Secretary of State John Whitehead and the department’s intelligence chief Morton Abramowitz warned that Najibullah’s army might hold on longer than the CIA expected.

But Gates prevailed in the policy debates,



pushing the CIA's faith in its mujahedeen clients and expecting a rapid Najibullah collapse if the Soviets left. In the memoir, Gates recalled briefing Secretary of State George Shultz and his senior aides on the CIA's predictions prior to Shultz flying to Moscow in February 1988.

"I told them that most [CIA] analysts did not believe Najibullah's government could last without active Soviet military support," wrote Gates.

After the Soviets did withdraw in February 1989 – proving Gates wrong on that point – some U.S. officials felt Washington's geostrategic aims had been achieved and a move toward peace was in order. There also was mounting concern about the Afghan mujahedeen, especially their tendencies toward brutality, heroin trafficking and fundamentalist religious practices.

However, the new administration of George H.W. Bush – with Gates moving from the CIA to the White House as deputy national security adviser – rebuffed Gorbachev and chose to continue U.S. covert support for the mujahedeen, aid which was being funneled primarily through Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency, the ISI.

At the time, I was a Newsweek national security correspondent and asked my CIA contacts why the U.S. government didn't just collect its winnings from the Soviet withdrawal and agree to some kind of national-unity government in Kabul that could end the war and bring some stability to the country. One of the CIA hardliners responded to my question with disgust. "We want to see Najibullah strung up by a light pole," he snarled.

Back in Afghanistan, Najibullah's regime defied the CIA's expectation of a rapid collapse, using Soviet weapons and advisers to beat back a mujahedeen offensive in 1990. As Najibullah hung on, the war, the violence and the disorder continued.

Gates finally recognized that his CIA analysis had been wrong. In his memoir, he wrote: "As it turned out, Whitehead and Abramowitz were right" in

their warning that Najibullah's regime might not fall quickly. Gates's memoir also acknowledged that the U.S. government did *not* abandon Afghanistan immediately after the Soviet departure.

"Najibullah would remain in power for another three years [after the Soviet pull-out], as the United States and the USSR continued to aid their respective sides," Gates wrote. Indeed, Moscow's and Washington's supplies continued to flow until several months after the Soviet Union collapsed in summer

1991, according to Gates.

Crile's Account

And other U.S. assistance continued even longer, according to Crile's *Charlie Wilson's War*. In the book, Crile described how Wilson kept the funding spigot open for the Afghan rebels not only after the Soviet departure in 1989 but even after the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991.

Eventually, the mujahedeen did capture the strategic city of Khost, but turned it into a ghost town as civilians fled or faced the mujahedeen's fundamentalist fury. Western aid workers found themselves "following the liberators in a desperate attempt to persuade them not to murder and pillage," Crile wrote.

U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan Robert Oakley began to wonder who were the worse bad guys,

the Soviet-backed communists or the U.S.-supported mujahedeen.

"It was the leaders of the Afghan puppet government who were saying all the right things, even paying lip service to democratic change," Crile reported. "The mujahideen, on the other hand, were committing unspeakable atrocities and couldn't even put aside their bickering and murderous thoughts long enough to capture Kabul."

In 1991, as the Soviet Union careened toward its final crackup, the Senate Intelligence Committee approved nothing for Afghanistan, Crile wrote. "But no one could just turn off Charlie Wilson's war like that," Crile noted. "For Charlie Wilson, there was something fundamentally wrong with his war ending then and there. He didn't like the idea of the United States going out with a whimper."



Wilson made an impassioned appeal to the House Intelligence Committee and carried the day. The committee first considered a \$100 million annual appropriation, but Wilson got them to boost it to \$200 million, which – with the Saudi matching funds – totaled \$400 million, Crile reported.

“And so, as the mujahideen were poised for their thirteenth year of war, instead of being cut off, it turned out to be a banner year,” Crile wrote. “They found themselves with not only a \$400 million budget but also with a cornucopia of new weaponry sources that opened up when the United States decided to send the Iraqi weapons captured during the Gulf War to the mujahideen.”

But even then the Afghan rebels needed an external event to prevail on the battlefield, the stunning disintegration of the Soviet Union in the latter half of 1991. Only then did Moscow cut off its aid to Najibullah. His government finally fell in 1992. But its collapse didn't stop the war – or the mujahideen infighting.

The capital of Kabul came under the control of a relatively moderate rebel force led by Ahmad Shah Massoud, an Islamist but not a fanatic.

However, Massoud, a Tajik, was not favored by Pakistan's ISI, which backed more extreme Pashtun elements of the mujahideen.

Rival Afghan warlords battled with each other for another four years destroying much of Kabul. Finally, a disgusted Washington began to turn away. Crile reported that the Cross Border Humanitarian Aid Program, which was the only sustained U.S. program aimed at rebuilding Afghanistan, was cut off at the end of 1993, almost five years after the Soviets left.

Rise of the Taliban

While chaos continued to reign across Afghanistan, the ISI readied its own army of Islamic extremists drawn from Pashtun refugee camps inside Pakistan. This group, known as the Taliban, entered Afghanistan with the promise of restoring order.

The Taliban seized the capital of Kabul in September 1996, driving Massoud into a northward retreat. The ousted communist leader Najibullah, who had stayed in Kabul, sought shelter in the United

Nations compound, but was captured. The Taliban tortured, castrated and killed him, his mutilated body hung from a light pole – just as the CIA hardliner had wished seven years earlier.

The triumphant Taliban imposed harsh Islamic law on Afghanistan. Their rule was especially cruel to women who had made gains toward equal rights under the communists, but were forced by the Taliban to live under highly restrictive rules, to cover themselves when in public, and to forgo schooling.

The Taliban also granted refuge to Saudi exile Osama bin Laden, who had fought with the Afghan mujahideen against the Soviets in the 1980s. Bin Laden then used Afghanistan as the base of operations

for his terrorist organization, al-Qaeda, setting the stage for the next Afghan War in 2001.

So, the real history is quite different from the Hollywood version that Official Washington has absorbed as its short-hand understanding of the anti-Soviet Afghan war of the 1980s.

The newly discovered document about bringing Charlie Wilson into the White House “circle as discrete Hill connection” suggests that even the impression that it was “Charlie Wilson's War” may have been more illusion than reality. Though Wilson surely became a true believer in the CIA's largest covert action of the Cold War, Reagan's White House team appears to have viewed him as a useful Democratic front man who would be “very helpful in getting money.”

Most significantly, the mythology – enshrined in the movie and embraced by the policymakers – obscured the key lessons of the 1980s: the dangerous futility of trying to impose a Western or military solution on Afghanistan as well as the need to explore negotiation and compromise even when dealing with unsavory foes. It wasn't the mythical U.S. “abandonment” of Afghanistan in February 1989 that caused the devastation of the past two decades, but rather the uncompromising policies of the Reagan-Bush-41 administrations.

First, there was the ascendancy of propaganda over truth. The U.S. government was well aware of the gross human rights crimes of the Afghan “muj” but still sold them as honorable “freedom fighters” to the American people. Second, there was the



triumphalism of Gates and other war hawks, who insisted on rubbing Moscow's nose in its Afghan defeat and thus blocked cooperation on a negotiated settlement which held out the promise of a less destructive outcome.

Those two factors – the deceit and the hubris – set the stage for the 9/11 attacks in 2001, a

renewed Afghan War bogging down tens of thousands of U.S. troops, America's disastrous detour into Iraq, and now a costly long-term U.S. commitment to Afghanistan that is expected to last at least until 2024. With a distorted account of "Charlie Wilson's War," Tom Hanks and Hollywood didn't help.

COMING UP IN THE FALL 2021 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS 43:

November 9 Asghar Farhadi A SEPARATION (2011)
 November 16 Hsiao-Hsien Hou THE ASSASSIN (2015)
 November 23 Chloé Zhan NOMADLAND (2020)
 November 30 Rob Reiner THE PRINCESS BRIDE (1987)

CONTACTS:

...email Diane Christian: engdc@buffalo.edu
 ...email Bruce Jackson bjackson@buffalo.edu
for cast and crew info on any film: <http://imdb.com/>

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