



Nick Prescott's Reviews

Lions for Lambs

Talent: Robert Redford, Tom Cruise, Meryl Streep, Andrew Garfield, Derek Luke, Michael Pena, Peter Berg, Kevin Dunn.

Date of review: Thursday 15th November, 2007

Director: Robert Redford

Duration: 92 minutes

Classification: M

We rate it: Three and a half stars.

Lions for Lambs is not just an assured return to the directing fold for megastar Robert Redford, it's another of the recent cycle of deeply "political" films emanating from Hollywood. Written by Matthew Michael Carnahan and brought to the screen by the combined clout of Redford, Meryl Streep and a very impressive Tom Cruise, Lions for Lambs is timely and extremely thought-provoking.

Screenwriter Carnahan (who also wrote the recent action/espionage/terrorism flick *The Kingdom*, and who has adapted James Ellroy's *White Jazz* for the big screen) has worked with an all-too-real premise here: while American forces are fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan, an ultra-militaristic Republican senator (Cruise) prepares to spin the US media the way he wants them to go, trying to sell an escalation in the conflict with the aim to "win" the War on Terrorism, despite the impassioned pleas of a growing number of people who want the US forces to withdraw. This situation, so vividly recognisable to us as off-screen reality, has been woven into other plot threads so as to both increase on-screen suspense and create a filmic tapestry depicting certain contemporary American ideologies.

As a director, Redford has always chosen his films carefully. His first gig behind the camera was *Ordinary People*, back in 1981, and since then he has directed six further films, including *The Milagro Beanfield War*, *A River Runs Through It* and *Quiz Show*. Like his contemporary Warren Beatty and his modern-day kindred spirit George Clooney, Redford has managed to combine a successful career as a handsome leading man with a kind of high-profile political activism. Beatty financed films like *Shampoo* in the 1970s and made some of his statements that way; Clooney of course makes politically invigorating films like *Good Night, and Good Luck*, *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind* and *Michael Clayton*. While Redford's films haven't always had overtly political content, he has remained an outspoken supporter of social justice and Democrat-style left-of-centre politics throughout his career; he has used his wealth to

support up-and-coming filmmakers, many of them utterly independent of the studio system, and has in that way helped keep the American cinema diverse. Here, with *Lions for Lambs*, Redford has made his most overtly political piece of fiction.

Much of *Lions for Lambs* seems so close to recent real-life events that one could be forgiven for thinking of it as a dramatised re-enactment of the kinds of conversations that happen behind closed doors of all kinds, all over America. To wit: while Republican senator Jasper Irving (Cruise) sells his plan for an escalation of the Afghanistan conflict to journalist Janine Roth (Streep) on Capitol Hill, on the other side of the country, a Californian College Professor (Redford) is giving one of his star students (the young and very impressive Andrew Garfield) a pep-talk about socio-political engagement and the role of students and activists. Meanwhile in the Middle East, a group of soldiers in Afghanistan is being inserted into a precarious mountainous hot-spot to fight on the contested front line. These three stories play out simultaneously, and together they generate significant suspense, some appropriate shocks, and some genuinely thought-provoking ideas. Some will find the film preachy, while others will feel it doesn't go far enough; whichever side of the scale you fall on, this film will certainly be a conversation-starter. If the things we hear from real-life politicians seem to some of us spin-doctored, perhaps the "fiction" we see in the cinema can help fill the gap in the political debate of which we're all a part. *Lions for Lambs* is nothing if not worthy of discussion.

Nick Prescott