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| |  | | --- | |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | | [John Denvir](http://docs.google.com/bios.htm#denvir)     |  | | --- | | **Read other reviews:**  [Internet Movie Database](http://www.us.imdb.com/Title?0076686)  [All Movie Guide](http://allmovie.com/cg/avg.dll?p=avg&sql=A43771) |       The President and the Attorney General tell us that in this time of national emergency patriotism requires that we trust the government not to abuse its powers. But a fresh viewing of Ingmar Bergman's *The Serpent's Egg* convinces me that patriotism counsels just the opposite course of action. | **Patriotism** by John Denvir  Over 3000 people died in the World Trade Center attacks. The victims were as blameless as you or I. So it is natural that we ask that the terrorists who planned the attacks be punished and that all necessary steps be taken to prevent other such heinous crimes.  Our leaders tell us what steps are necessary in this new "war against terrorism." Some of the new weapons seem to contradict just those principles we see America as representing. We are told that suspected aliens are to be tried by military courts without normal due process guarantees, that lawyer-client conversations are subject to government eavesdropping, that over a thousand aliens are being held incommunicado in government prisons, and that thousands of muslim students are to be required to submit to questioning by government agents.  The President and the Attorney General tell us that in this time of national emergency patriotism requires that we trust the government not to abuse its powers. But a fresh viewing of Ingmar Bergman's *The Serpent's Egg* convinces me that patriotism counsels just the opposite course of action. Suspicion, not docility, is the proper response.  *The Serpent's Egg* is set in Germany in 1923, a time of runaway inflation, extremist politics of left and right, and a growing anti-Semitism stirred by the nascent Nazi movement. The plot concerns two unemployed circus performers who are stranded in Berlin without means of support. They face their predicament with completely different attitudes. One, Manuela (Liv Ullman), constantly displays a trusting, positive attitude. She never loses faith that things will get better, and when they don't she's likely to blame herself instead of others. Manuela is a very likeable person. Her brother-in-law Abel (David Carradine) is anything but likeable. He's suspicious, self-pitying, ungrateful to those who try to help, and prone to sudden bouts of violence. Abel repels us just as much as Manuela attracts us.  Yet Abel's paranoia serves him better than Manuela's trust does her. Her docility prepares her for the role of victim in a Nazi plot which Abel's suspicious nature enables him to uncover and escape.  I draw from this the moral that sometimes trust is not a virtue. Paradoxically, it is in times of national emergency that suspicion of government is most necessary. It's then that the temptation to sacrifice our democratic liberties on the altar of national security is most strong. The patriotic citizen, especially the patriotic lawyer, has a duty to demand that the government make its case whenever it proposes a curtailment of civil liberties.  What sort of suspicions should we harbor about the use of military tribunals? The government tells us that they are necessary to prevent the disclosure of national security secrets, but that seems a specious argument in light of the fact that we already have laws in effect that protect such secrets in federal courts. Why would the government still want military tribunals? Maybe they know that federal courts will not accept hearsay evidence and would reject confessions where detainees have been subjected to torture or degrading treatment such as long periods of sleep deprivation. There is no proof that the government is using improper tactics; we have no information on how these detainees are being treated because they have not been allowed access to lawyers. But we do know that our closest allies, Britain and Israel, have used such tactics against suspected terrorists.  There is also something very troubling about rounding up tens of thousands of Arab students for questioning. Not only is there the haunting memory of the World War II incarceration of Japanese-American citizens, but also the lack of any proven connection between these students and the September 11 attacks. One suspects that the government might use small student visa violations unrelated to terrorism as levers to force Arab students to spy on legal groups which oppose American policy. This was a favorite tactic of the communist secret police in East and Europe during the Cold War. And, unfortunately, we also have a history of unlawful subversion by the FBI of lawful groups like Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference.  Maybe I am being a little paranoid; perhaps we can trust John Ashcroft to go no farther than absolutely necessary in the curtailment of democratic liberties. I hope so. But until we know exactly what the government is doing, my take is that the patriotic stance demands that we ask questions and demand evidence. Docility is not a democratic virtue, nor is suspicion of government a democratic vice.  Posted December 13, 2001  **Would you like to comment on this article? 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