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| |  | | --- | |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | **Paul Bergman** is Professor of Law at UCLA Law School. He is co-author of *Reel Justice* (Andrews and McMeel, 1996) and recently published *The Movie Lawyers' Guide to Redemptive Legal Practice,* 48 UCLA L. Rev. 1393 (2001).     |  | | --- | | **Read other reviews:**  [Taunya Lovell Banks](http://docs.google.com/practice_banks.htm)  [Carrie Menkel-Meadow](http://docs.google.com/practice_meadow.htm)  [Jeffrey Thomas](http://docs.google.com/practice_thomas.htm)  [George Cardona](http://docs.google.com/practice_cardona.htm)  [Official site](http://abc.go.com/primetime/thepractice/index.html)  [Internet Movie Database](http://www.us.imdb.com/Title?0118437)  [All Movie Guide](http://allmovie.com/cg/avg.dll?p=avg&sql=A242083) |       People must live by the law's precepts every day, and fight and die to preserve it for future generations.          According to this episode of *The Practice*, nobody is interested in the truth and the legal system is incapable of producing it. | |  | | --- | | **Grieving Americans Find No Solace in *The Practice***  by Paul Bergman  *The Practice*, the series about the trials and tribulations of a small Boston law firm, premiered for the 2001-2002 television season on September 23, 2001 in a "special" two-hour episode. In *The Candidate*, Bobby Donnell, Ellenor Frutt and the rest of Donnell's law firm represented a popular Massachusetts state senator charged with murdering his wife's lover.  After receiving conflicting advice from the members of the firm, the senator went on television and admitted to killing the man, but claimed that he was not guilty of any crime because he thought that he was protecting his wife's life. He had come home with his daughter from the movies and heard strange noises coming from the bedroom. Thinking that his wife was being attacked, he quickly got his gun and ran into the bedroom to find a strange man on top of her. He shot and killed the man, only to learn soon after that he had caught his wife and her lover "in flagrante delicto." If believed by the jury, the senator's story would constitute the defense of "imperfect self-defense," because he mistakenly but reasonably believed that he killed to protect his wife's life.  This season debut episode aired less than two weeks after suicide terrorists said to be Muslim extremists hijacked four airplanes on September 11, 2001, and crashed them the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington D.C. About 6000 people died, the economy fell apart and Americans were shocked and paralyzed at the enormity of the crimes. Americans were looking for hope and inspiration, but it was hard to find in the news in the days following September 11, 2001.  In the pre-television days of World War II, movies offered solace and bolstered spirits by offering positive images of America that would make audiences feel proud and believe that what their children and friends were dying for was noble and just. Some of the most important images were of the American legal system. *The Talk of the Town* (1942), starring Cary Grant, Ronald Colman and Jean Arthur, is a prime example. Colman is Michael Lightcap, a law professor who awaits his confirmation to the U.S. Supreme Court by renting a cabin and writing a legal treatise. Lightcap's unexpected co-tenants are the cabin's owner Nora Shelley (Arthur) and Leopold Dilg (Grant), a prison escapee who was wrongly convicted of arson and murder. Dilg's whereabouts are eventually discovered and he is brought to court. The courthouse is stormed by an angry mob intent on hanging Dilg. Just in time, Lightcap rushes into court with the actual murderer and fires a gun to stop the mob in its tracks.  Lightcap sends the mob home with a stirring speech proclaiming the value and sanctity of the American legal system. He tells them that the law is what makes them free people in a free country, and that the rest of the world is crying out for that law. He scolds the townspeople for sullying a courtroom with weaponry (apparently forgetting for the moment the gun that he fired to get their attention). People must live by the law's precepts every day, and fight and die to preserve it for future generations.  Any Americans looking to the premiere episode of *The Practice* for similar inspiration about the legal system would have been sadly disappointed. Both the prosecutors and the defense attorneys spend much of their time hurling accusations of impropriety at each other and trying to influence the jury pool by making statements to the media. Ellenor Frutt, the senator's old friend and lawyer, improperly advises him to take a shower to wash off any blood splatters before calling the police to report the shooting. Even children have no scruples about committing perjury, as the senator's teenage daughter takes the stand to testify to the made-up story she planned with her parents, only to tell an even more outlandish one.  According to this episode of *The Practice*, nobody is interested in the truth and the legal system is incapable of producing it. The judge, thinking that justice has been done, is satisfied when the senator pleads guilty to a lesser offense in exchange for a reduced sentence. However, the episode ends with a third version of "what really happened," one known only to Ellenor and the family.  The legal system that Michael Lightcap so proudly held up to audiences in 1942 now is portrayed as just another manipulable cog in the market economy. I doubt that anybody in the airplanes, the World Trade Center or the Pentagon would have been willing to die for it on September 11.  Posted October 17, 2001 |   **Would you like to comment on this article? Please submit your comments** [**here.**](http://docs.google.com/newsnviews.htm#Submit%20your%20own%20comments) |  |  | | --- | | [Top of page](#gjdgxs) |  |  | | --- | | [Home](http://docs.google.com/index.html) | [Silver Screen](http://docs.google.com/silver_screen.htm) | [Small Screen](http://docs.google.com/smallscreen/small_screen.htm) | [News & Views](http://docs.google.com/newsnviews.htm) | | |