

**THE HILL ON FILM:
Hollywood's Take on the United States Congress and Its Members**

Michael Canning
U.S. Foreign Service (ret.)
Movie reviewer, *The Hill Rag*

Prepared for delivery at the 1997 Annual Meeting
of the American Political Science Association,
The Sheraton Washington Hotel, August 28-31, 1997.
Copyright by the American Political Science Association.

Abstract:

Beginning with the classic *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, the article traces chronologically mainstream motion pictures featuring congressional settings or characters. It contends that Hollywood's need to simplify and dramatize is essentially at odds with the complex work of Congress, and that moviemakers, reflecting both a general public disdain for politics and the tone of U.S. popular culture, focus on scandals and corruption on the Hill, on the lone wolf against the entrenched institution, while eschewing congressional values of legislative give-and-take and compromise. Perhaps only with films on electoral politics (e.g., *The Best Man* and *The Candidate*)-- which offer conflict and clear winners and losers--has Hollywood come close to depicting congressional actors that are both dramatic and authentic. The piece concludes with skepticism about whether Congress will ever be genuinely represented in the movies and then muses on the prospect that Hill business may be merging more and more into show business.

With the Republican Party's storming of Capitol Hill in 1995 after their stunning November 1994 electoral triumph, there flared a new consciousness of the American Congress as a policy-defining body: for a time, powder-haired Newt Gingrich graced TV's evening news as much--even more¹--than ginger-haired Bill Clinton.

For many Americans, this 104th Congress as the fomenter of political action and issues was new, the President having been so long the key actor in national politics and the Congress so often the re-actor. For one who lives on Capitol Hill and follows politics--but who also reviews movies--this Hill takeover and, especially, its ample TV exposure, evoked questions of how our national legislature has appeared over time in another popular medium--that of the Hollywood feature film.

Congressional Cinema: Conceived in Corruption

In viewing products of the commercial entertainment industry, any regular observer of the Congress is ever aware that such films are hardly *realistic* portrayals of our national legislature and its works. In the most comprehensive study of American political films, *Reel Politics*, professor Terry Christensen states that such movies "seldom point out fundamental defects in the system, and they rarely suggest that social problems can be solved by collective or communal action. They simplify the complex problems of a complex society and solve them quickly and easily so we can have a happy ending" (1987, 8). Further, popular forms of drama, like the movies, typically presuppose a pointed conflict which can be summarily and tidily resolved. Such factors explain while whole spheres of important congressional activity, such as casework or constituency services (which would be particularly hard to dramatize) or home district chores, are effectively absent from these films.

Likewise, committees, where veteran Hill watchers say the real business of Congress is done (Fenno 1966 and 1973; Manley 1970), barely figure in congressional cinema. It has been noted that real committee work--"slow, complicated, and undramatic--makes unpromising material for fiction films" (Paletz and Lipinski 1995, 1424). The rare use of committees in films features either the sexy investigative hearing (like the built-in pugnaciousness of the House Committee on Un-American Activities) or the testy Senate confirmation battle, both with obvious potential for human conflict. One prominent documentary, *Point of Order* (1964), an epic condensation by Emile de Antonio and Daniel Talbot of the Army-McCarthy hearings of ten years earlier, showed that the investigative committee could contain the stuff of real human drama, confected, as it was, "into a compact 97-minute Punch-and-Judy political spectacle ending in the pratfall of a demagogue" (Sarris 1970, 117). Still, the film attracted more political aficionados than movie fans.

As fascinating as the committee game can be to political junkies (witness the steady devotees of C-SPAN), it still would take some doing to make its procedures ring with the more overt drama that Hollywood favors. Perhaps one can, straining very hard,

¹ Even in his pre-Speaker days, Gingrich was characterized as a "classic show horse" by Hedrick Smith, "more interested in promoting confrontations and ideas than in passing legislation" and with "his own special flair for video politics" (*The Power Game*, 1988,141).

imagine a scene where the perky but pugnacious freshman Congresswoman from Ohio Julia Roberts locks horns with the handsome but hustling Senator from Michigan Mel Gibson in a House-Senate Conference committee wrestling with the intricacies of an agricultural subsidies amendment.... But perhaps not.

It really could not be otherwise. In reviewing American motion picture history, writer/critic James Monaco reminds us that “it was the homogeneous factory system of the studios that most subtly reflected (or inspired) the surrounding political culture. Because Hollywood movies were mass-produced, they tended to reflect the surrounding culture--or, more accurately, the established myths of the culture--more precisely than did the work of strongly individual authors” (1981, 219). One of the longstanding premises of that surrounding culture deems politics as basically deceitful and politicians as barely redeemable.

Such a dismissive outlook on politics, and especially the Congress, is hardly new. Observe Paul Boller, Jr.’s remark that “Congress-bashing is almost as old as the Federal Government itself”² or James Sterling Young, characterizing the dominant public view of “power-holding as essentially a degrading experience” in *The Washington Community, 1800-1828* (1966, 56). Even in our young republic, Young found, Americans had “a culturally ingrained predisposition to view political power and politics as essentially evil” (59).

This sourness about congressional institutions has not been confined, of course, to the average American citizen.³ In the political science literature, such negative views have been chronicled among university students (by Nelson 1995), within the national news media (Robinson 1981, Rozell 1994, Davidson and Oleszek 1994), and even inside Congress itself (Mayhew 1974, 141-165, Price 1992), where members seem ever ready to boost their own individual reputations at the expense of their own institution. As Fenno reported in his landmark *Home Style*, members on their home turf denouncing the Congress in far-away Washington has become an intrinsic part of the almost permanent phenomenon of “running against Washington,” a strategy which he sees as “ubiquitous, addictive, cost-free, and foolproof” (1978, 168). Entire books have been dedicated to the erosion of civility in our legislature--*The Decline of Comity in Congress* (Uslaner 1993)--and even to the distressing subject of *Congress as Public Enemy* (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995).

Reflecting these broadly-held societal premises, the dominant theme of movies featuring the U.S. Congress is that our national politics as practiced is a thoroughly corrupting process, an enterprise for villains. These are popular *dramas*, after all, filtered through a popular sensibility and duly mirrored by a pliant Hollywood. This viewpoint has been often heightened by the distance--physical and psychic--between L.A. and D.C., two outposts with vastly different mindsets and mores.

² Boller provides a wealth of examples of how Congress has been roasted over the years in a chapter on “Congress-Bashing” (*Congressional Anecdotes*, 1991, pp. 12-27).

³ Burdett A. Loomis puts the citizen’s case bluntly: “Let there be no mistake about congressional popularity: The legislative branch, despite its putative ties to ‘the people,’ has never won great adulation from the public at large” (*The Contemporary Congress*, 1996, 43).

This overall surly view allows, even encourages filmmakers and script writers, as audience surrogates, to feel superior to their political characters and to usually endow them with either whopping ineptness or considerable cynicism. In the latter case, it often means that the nasties get the best lines!

If a motion picture politico is *ever* redeemable, it is usually only because he is that rare worthy who is a combination of naif and “White Knight,” able to appeal cleanly to The People (read: the movie-attending public) because he is essentially one of them. In this way, he is no different than all the thousands of American solo heroes that have appeared in all the thousands of Western films, police stories, detective flicks, and--most recently--alien invasion tales the dream factories have churned out over the decades.

Congruent with this primitive view of an American hero on celluloid is his chaste rectitude, his principled stance--Gary Cooper with his taut chin, John Wayne with his unflinching gaze. This is an *individual* who must act on his own, who must vanquish--not disarm--his opponent, who sees any compromise as corrupt and unmanly. Yet, of course, compromise (also popularly known as “wheeling and dealing,” “horse-trading,” “hustling,” “peddling votes,” “logrolling”) is the very lifeblood of politics. Ergo: politicians are nothing but evil double-dealers, base betrayers of principle. Thus does show biz view and condemn political biz.

The following chronological survey reviews those political movies which have a significant *congressional* element, either treating the Congress itself or one or more of its members, rather than those films concentrating on the Presidency or other aspects of the American government. Thus well-known or worthy titles like *State of the Union*, *All the King's Men*, *The Last Hurrah*, *Dr. Strangelove*, *Fail Safe*, *All the President's Men*--as well as more recent films like *A Few Good Men*, *In the Line of Fire*, *JFK*, *Nixon* and *Dave*⁴ --are not discussed here.

While the films described below vary greatly in their content, quality, and verisimilitude, collectively they do mirror at least some of the changes in U.S. legislative mores, especially as regards campaign styles and media involvement, as well as showing some sense of coalition building and party infighting. The best of them have some real grounding in U.S. politics; politics being no fantasy in American life, some of these films try to make it look authentic.

Soft Focus: Early Looks at Congress

While there were occasional movies in the early sound era which starred congressional characters (like *Washington Masquerade* and *Washington Merry-Go-Round*, both from the landmark campaign year 1932), any review of congressional

⁴ *Dave* does parade Tip O'Neill and half-a-dozen senators but only in cameos, not in any meaningful roles.

movies might best begin with Frank Capra's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), the classic fable of the unsophisticated Little Man taking on the big, corrupt forces and winning by dint of persistence and pluck.

Impressionable youth leader Jefferson Smith stumbles into the Senate to fill an unexpired term, and, in innocently launching a boy's camp, runs up against senatorial cynicism and ruthless political boss Jim Taylor. With Jimmy Stewart in a memorable performance as the callow Jeff Smith, this picture may be the most optimistic ever made on American politics (at a time when public opinion on Congress was less well defined). While it tells a tale of political corruption and venality, it also finally celebrates the institution of the U.S. Senate as superior to the men that make it up.⁵ Critic Richard Corliss sees "the argument of the entire film is for the purity of childhood and against the tarnished pragmatism of 'grownups'" (1974, 281). Jeff's Boy Rangers, aroused by a decent, upstanding guy, act as democracy's saviors; politics, by nature corrupting, can only be redeemed by the pure at heart.

The Senate filibuster has been often maligned by congressional reformers as the last refuge of parliamentary scoundrels, yet, in *Mr. Smith*, this floor device is used to heroic effect.⁶ The U.S. Senate would not allow Capra to shoot in its chamber, so a duplicate chamber was created--a perfect replica done by a crack Hollywood design team. The film is worth revisiting also to see the memorable cast, including Jean Arthur as Saunders, the tough cookie secretary with a heart, Claude Rains as Smith's mentor, the once noble, now flawed Senator Joseph Paine, and Edward Arnold wholly incarnating the blustering Boss Taylor.

Belying the conventional Hollywood line that movies about politics do no business, the picture was second only to *Gone With the Wind* in 1939 box office receipts (Christensen 1987, 45) and was nominated for 11 Oscars. Though hugely popular, the picture also "received a great deal of flak and vilification from several notable politicians...and journalists, the gist of whose censure was that *Mr. Smith* ridiculed democracy" (Hirschhorn 1990, 89).

While *Mr. Smith* is fable, the 1947 film, *The Senator Was Indiscreet*, is farce, the more gentle farce of its day. Written by Charles MacArthur and directed by the comic playwright George S. Kaufman (his only directorial effort), the film traces the fortunes of the bumbling Senator Ashton (William Powell) as he undertakes a run for the presidency. His only qualification is that he has kept a tell-all diary which will blow

⁵ As *The New York Times* reviewer of the time, Frank S. Nugent, saw it: "Although he is subjecting the Capitol's bill-collectors to a deal of quizzing and to a scrutiny which is not always tender, (Capra) still regards them with affection and hope, as the implements, however imperfect they may be, of our kind of government". The comedy, he added, is "a stirring and even inspiring testament to liberty and freedom..." (in Amberg, ed. 1970, 181). More contemporarily, Terry Christensen (1987, 47), thinks Capra's intent is to show that "there is a problem because something isn't working properly, but the problem is minor, caused not by faults in the system or its institutions, but by bad men..."

⁶ Film historian Clive Hirschhorn, noting Capra's attention to detail, reported that Stewart's genuine hoarseness during the filibuster sequence "was achieved by having (him) swab his vocal chords with a mercury solution until the desired level of hoarseness was reached" (*The Columbia Story*, 1990, 89).

the lid off his party if it ever gets out. This is very broad satire, with Ashton's style matching the classic windbaggy of Senator Claghorn from Fred Allen's popular radio show of the time. His goofy campaign including such promises as altering cows so they produce malted milk, offering a three-day work week with eight days pay, and having letters written on tissue paper so they won't weight down mailmen's backs!

This is not so much a cynic's look at congressional politics as a wiseacre's. The satire is more silly than biting, and requisite punches are pulled, e.g., no specific political party is named--all those pols are alike, after all. Almost forgotten now, *The Senator Was Indiscreet* is amusing to see today to find which political jokes still work and which do not--and to see Powell (who played Nick Charles in the popular *Thin Man* series) incarnate perhaps the stupidest legislator in motion picture history.⁷

The Farmer's Daughter (1947) is a sort of spirited fairy tale of how the eponymous heroine--in writer James Agee's words, "comes to the metropolis, plants her housemaid's-knee firmly in the sweetbreads of high society, and makes the most of her advantage" (1958, 247). As Katrin, Loretta Young (in an Academy Award performance) plays a resourceful farm girl of Scandinavian origins who comes to work as an omnicompetent maid at the manse of a wealthy Congressman Morley (Joseph Cotton), but shows enough political gumption to end up running herself--and winning her own race for the House (from another party). Katrin's political awakening comes at a campaign rally, which one observer found particularly good fun, "with candidates mouthing elaborate, nonsensical dialogue (Thomas 1980, 192).

As in *Mr. Smith*, the politics of the state are controlled by an all-powerful machine, though this one is more patrician than plebeian, and run by none other than Ethel Barrymore, heading her son Morley's party. Also as in *Mr. Smith*, the film is innocent and warm-hearted, with a benign view of a legislator which would be almost impossible today.

1952 brought the routine *Washington Story*. Once again, the premise involved an apparent scandal, as a smart woman reporter (Patricia Neal) comes to D.C. to expose corruption. Instead, in best Hollywood fashion, she falls for an honest congressman (Van Johnson). Sharing the basically optimistic view of solons shown in *Mr. Smith* and *The Farmer's Daughter*, the filmmakers acquired access to Capitol Hill and the Pentagon for their movie in those less security-conscious days. No blockbuster, it was laconically nailed by film chronicler Leslie Halliwell as a "standard flagwaver which takes itself a shade too seriously" (in Walker, ed. 1992, 1203).

Low Angle: Sourness and Sinners

The post-war period and the Cold War might be said to have contributed to a more somber political mood in the country, and film's product reflected it. Just a year after the blithe *The Farmer's Daughter* came a film with a thoroughly cynical bent: Billy Wilder's *A Foreign Affair* (1948) is set in postwar Berlin rather than Washington,

⁷ The only possible competition here might be Burt Reynolds' gross parody-- in the trashy *Striptease* (1996)--of a Florida congressman as randy nincompoop who heads the "Subcommittee on Sugar."

but one of its leads is a U.S. Senator. Interestingly enough for another film made in the late forties, the legislator is again a woman (no female lawmaker has had a major role in a Hollywood picture since). Senator Phoebe Frost, played by veteran Jean Arthur, is portrayed as a mousy, anal-retentive stickler sent to investigate U.S. military black-marketing. If anything, the picture suggests that a serious legislator who sticks to business must be a drudge and a prude. Arthur trades in the feistiness of her character in *Mr. Smith* to melt in the arms of an amoral Army captain.

Critic Richard Corliss particularly lamented Arthur's treatment, saying that when she was "let loose, it is not to blossom but to fester" and to wear what, "after much morbid consideration, I can describe as the ugliest dress in a forties movie" (1974, 146). Her capitulation to the captain is a particularly coarse example of the Sam Rayburn dictum: "To get along, go along."

At the peak of the Red Scare, Hollywood dutifully mirrored the fears of many Americans with a spate of anti-commie productions. Among them was *Big Jim McClain* (1952) starring none other than John Wayne as a stalwart House Un-American Activities Committee staffer going after Reds with ominous foreign accents in Hawaii; only the opening offers Washington scenes, with actual members of the HUAC performing on screen. This movie seen today is likely to bring on fits of unintended hilarity.

Some political films of the period offered congressmen as important featured characters, if not leads, to activate the plot. A good example is the surreal thriller *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) which displays one of the more obtuse and odious legislators on film, Senator Iselin, modeled in part on Senator McCarthy and played by James Gregory. Utterly without scruple and thoroughly manipulated by his scheming wife (Angela Lansbury), he also performs blatantly stupid acts, such as his unlikely invasion of a Pentagon press conference to denounce the Secretary of Defense as a commie. The liberal Senator of the piece is, in turn, a puffy, ineffectual prude (played straight by comic actor John McGiver), who gets blown away at the refrigerator door. Contrast these with the featured senator (Edmond O'Brien) in *Seven Days in May* (1964) who, though a blowhard and a drunk, at least turns out to be one of the saviors of the constitutional system threatened by arch right-wing General Scott (Burt Lancaster)! It should be noted, however, that another senator in the film is eager to turn over the country to a conspiracy.

Coarse ambition is the fundamental flaw for Congressman Johnny Fergus (Hal Holbrook) who panders to the youth vote to win a senate seat in *Wild in the Streets* (1968), a cheesy, vapid satire which posited a rock singer as president. Fergus has, at bottom, a modicum of decency, and tries to turn back the squalid youth movement he has loosed--including an assassination attempt on the senate floor--but ends up in a "Paradise Camp" for those over 35. The movie "managed to simultaneously exploit and send up the youth culture, which was already turning sour" (Christensen 1987, 122). It contains the most demented floor scene in this genre: the entire Senate high on acid (slipped into the D.C. water supply) and giddily voting for enfranchising 14-year-olds!

If *Mr. Smith*, *The Farmer's Daughter*, *The Senator Was Indiscreet*, and *Washington Story* were more benign than most congressional films that came after, Otto Preminger's *Advise and Consent* (1962) is about as contemptuous of

congressional politics as any such film since. Based on a best-selling novel by Allan Drury, *Advise and Consent* traces a nasty Senate confirmation battle over a controversial nominee for Secretary of State, Robert Leffingwell (Henry Fonda), seen as too leftist (and “egg-headed”) for senate conservatives, led by Southern curmudgeon Seabright Cooley (Charles Laughton).

Though the film achieves a new naturalism in depicting the senior body, it essentially reveals a world replete with ignoble characters and sordid events, constituting a grim picture of U.S. Senate politics. For example, Leffingwell’s cause is pressed viciously by Senator Van Ackerman (George Grizzard), a *rara avis* in congressional movies as a liberal politician who is unrelentingly iniquitous. Its plot turns on two primal fears of the era, the horror of world communism--personified by the “leftist” nominee--and the dread of homosexuality--expressed through the blackmail of a key senator, Brig Anderson (Don Murray) by Van Ackerman. As in *Mr. Smith*, however, the institution and the political process finally work, triumphing over the frailties of individual members.

Upon its release, the movie, rather like *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, was much criticized by patriotic groups (and by some critics, too) as presenting to the world a perverted and inaccurate picture of American democracy. The outcry was strong enough for Preminger to publicly defend his film on freedom-of-speech grounds. On the set of *Advise and Consent*, Preminger stated that he was “showing America as it is, with all its good sides, its democracy and freedom and, on the other hand, not hiding criticism of our own institutions, will make it clear to...people all over the world that we have freedom of expression.” (Pratley 1971, 138). From 30 years perspective, one might argue how much Preminger’s “freedom of expression” is merely simple pandering to the box office.

However true or false its picture of congressional life, *Advise and Consent* gave movie fans a second look at that wonderfully recreated Senate chamber (from *Mr. Smith*) and an all-star cast. Besides Fonda, Laughton, and Murray, the film starred Walter Pidgeon as a courtly senate majority leader and Peter Lawford as a playboy senator (appropriate for an actor who had married into the family of then-President Kennedy). Several veteran stars of the 1930’s and 40’s--Gene Tierney, Franchot Tone, and Lew Ayres--were brought out of virtual retirement by Preminger. It was the last film performance for screen legend Laughton, ripely overplaying the role of the oleaginous Southern senator.

The film was the talk of the town when it was filmed⁸ and it was the last motion picture in which Hollywood was allowed to have significant access to the Senate (outside the chamber).⁹ It features, for political history buffs, now quaint on-location

⁸ Christensen noted that “President Kennedy entertained the filmmakers at the White House while the movie was being made” (1987, 107).

⁹ Catherine Eisele, writing in the March 19, 1997 edition of *The Hill*, observes that because the filming of *Advise of Consent* “disrupted the halls and offices of the Russell Building, Senate officials have since denied use of the Capitol building and grounds to commercial film and television crews” (28). The latest turndown, Eisele writes, was for director Stephen Spielberg to film his historical feature *Amistad* in the Old Supreme Court Chamber in the Capitol.

scenes of the Capitol, the street tram running alongside the Russell Building, and the Senate's underground shuttle, among others.

Closeup: Three Winners

One arena where politics posits a natural drama is in the context of a campaign. Here is the chance for a genuine and obvious antagonists, where the outcome is in doubt, where there exists the rhythm and momentum of a contest with one and only one winner. It should perhaps be no surprise then, that two of the best motion pictures involving congressional characters should take place in such an electoral milieu. A third superior congressional film convinces because of a star lead performance and a convincing Hill atmosphere. All three share a fundamental of most good motion pictures: a stellar script.

One of the campaign films, *The Best Man* (1964), is based on a play (and screenplay) by American novelist and gadfly Gore Vidal and presents the contending forces at a major national political party convention. Again, Henry Fonda (himself somewhat of a political activist) plays a major role, this time as an intellectual liberal William Russell in the Adlai Stevenson mode challenging conservative senator Joe Cantwell (Cliff Robertson) for the party's presidential nomination.

Though now three decades old, the film, directed by then-TV veteran Franklin Schaffner, has elements that spring from yesterday's headlines. Its portrayal of political "dirty tricks" foretells the Watergate years, and its stress on negative campaigning mimics the 1992 and 1996 American general election campaigns. The issue the film raises of the relevance of a candidate's private life to his political performance reflects recent debates on this issue regarding the Clinton Administration. Most prescient of all is Vidal's use of a nervous breakdown as the fateful stigma in a candidate's past. This was eight years *before* Senator Tom Eagleton was dropped from the 1972 Democratic Party ticket because it was learned he had undergone psychiatric treatment.

Film critic Andrew Sarris, in reviewing the film for *The Village Voice*, pointedly brought out *The Best Man's* own contemporary parallels:

Over the years, Fonda has become entrenched as Hollywood's populist of the Left... Against Fonda's classic awkwardness, Robertson's compressed grace makes its own comment on the modern politician losing in passion what he gains in poise. In fact, Robertson can serve double duty in 1964 as an approximation of both Dick Nixon and Bobby Kennedy, on record as two of Gore Vidal's lesser enthusiasms. To round out the analogies, Fonda portrayed young Abe Lincoln more than a quarter century ago, and Robertson young Jack Kennedy less than a year ago (1970, 157).

The great cinematographer Haskell Wexler, long a champion of radical political causes, shot the picture in a newsreel-like black-and-white which is as fresh and vivid as when it first appeared. For some observers, *The Best Man* gained in its transition from the stage, in part because film can make such material more palpably real.¹⁰ Even

¹⁰ Sarris added that the film "profited in its adaption to the screen simply by being exposed to the hot air

today, *The Best Man* stands up as well as showing--and questioning--some of America's political premises.

Even more effective at portraying a campaign contest is Michael Ritchie's *The Candidate* (1972), which follows a California senate race between a young, handsome reformer Bill McKay (Robert Redford) and a crafty, conservative incumbent Crocker Jarmon (Don Porter). Though 25 years old now, it remains a most convincing study of a senatorial election, showing how a campaign is put together, how diverse--even barely reconcilable--political alliances are forged, how campaign managers can come to dominate the candidates themselves, and how the media is used and manipulated for the best coverage (TV monitors punctuate the film throughout). In spirit and flavor, the film remains surprisingly contemporary--if you can get beyond the flared pants and hair styles.

Much of *The Candidate's* striking verisimilitude stems from the people who made it, themselves quite involved in and committed to political causes. The screenwriter, Jeremy Lerner (who won an Academy Award for his screenplay), had been a speech writer for Eugene McCarthy in 1968. Director Ritchie had shot campaign commercials for a real senator from California (John Tunney). Even the campaign consultants in the film were drawn from real-life practitioners.¹¹ Like *The Best Man*, the film was somewhat clairvoyant, this time in anticipating the New Politics campaign of California Governor Jerry Brown.

Redford himself was a political activist who, even though he was best known as a romantic lead, was willing to take on the part of an idealist who loses sight of his ideals after being sucked into the campaign process. In later films, such as *All the President's Men* (1976), as producer and star, and the 1994 *Quiz Show* (which contains a congressional committee hearing scene), as director, Redford continues to scrutinize America's political history.

A favorite of commentators and critics,¹² *The Candidate* bores in on its campaign yet manages to keep a cool eye on the proceedings. The dilemma of the contemporary candidate who is competent at winning elections but who knows precious little about how to *govern* has never been more deftly captured than at the end of the film when the newly-minted but befuddled senator, huddled with his campaign manager

of Southern California" and added that "the interplay of helicopters, walkie-talkies, and double entry television screens establishes the cinema's ascendancy over the theater as the medium of modernity" (1970, 157-158).

¹¹ Christensen wrote of McKay's media man's crisp assessment of the virile candidate's opponent: "The voters, he says, will look at Jarmon and think 'the Crock...can't get it up anymore' " (1987, 128).

¹² Writer /critic James Monaco, in assessing *The Candidate*, found that "as a portrait of the mechanics of the media-dominated electoral process in which the political operatives' main work is to establish a semifiction that is eminently salable, the film is nothing less than brilliant" (1979, 360). John Simon's review in *The New Leader* praised its subtle and ironic tone, concluding: There are two kinds of films: those that tell us what to think, and those that merely invite us to think; *The Candidate*, sensibly and sensitively, understates" (*Reverse Angle*, 1982, 80).

in a stark hotel room, achingly asks “What do we do now?” It’s the kind of scene which presages the kinds of questions which might have been heard in the aftermaths of victories by the Carter and Clinton campaign forces.

A fullblooded congressional film that takes off from where *The Candidate* ends--electoral victory--and carries it into the Senate chamber itself is *The Seduction of Joe Tynan* (1979), a smart, semi-realistic take on congressional life scripted by and starring Alan Alda as Senator Tynan from New York. What seduces here, of course, is congressional power, the necessary maintenance of which produces the sundry pressures that color the politician’s life.

With his long-suffering wife (Barbara Harris) and family back home (a rare acknowledgement of the existence of a home district life), Senator Tynan is subject to both the wiles of an attractive labor lawyer (Meryl Streep)--a second seduction--and to the compromising of his political views as he contests the naming of a racist judge to the Supreme Court. Paralleling the ambiguous finale of *The Candidate*, *Joe Tynan* also leaves its protagonist hanging, as he savors the cheers of a convention crowd while looking into his wife’s forlorn face. The edgy Alda embodies the bright politician living at the cusp of ambition, and his telegenic, sound-bite style presages much of what American politics have become in the last 20 years.

The film, directed by Jerry Schatzberg, offers ample Hill detail and lore, has a feel for smart dialogue, and contains some memorable performances, particularly that of Melvyn Douglas as the fading, senile Senator Birney. The dark side of Congress is not ignored, of course. As Paletz and Lipinski noted in “Movies on Congress,” some senators (like Rip Torn’s gumbo-stuffed Sen. Kittner) in *The Seduction of Joe Tynan* are shown as “variously lecherous, immoral, or senile, and the legislative process as characterized by manipulation and frustration” (1995, 1422).

Christensen, in *Reel Politics*, feels that

...*Joe Tynan* reflects political reality. More than most films about politics, it rings true on the personal costs of political life, its small compromises, and its corruptions. The process is convincingly portrayed without resorting to dirty little secrets...and thus keeping the melodrama within the realm of credibility. Joe Tynan’s great strength, like that of *The Candidate*, is its feel for politics and politicians. Bill McKay and Joe Tynan face the horrors and carry on. They may sell out, but we understand why because the movies make sure we continue to like them. However cynical these movies are, they are more realistic than other movies about politics because they keep their politicians human. Their view may be less than reassuring, but their truthfulness is an advance for political movies (1987, 171).

Quick Cuts: The Contemporary Congress

Films with even limited congressional content in the next decade were few, and some of that content was patterned, for some reason, around historical investigative hearings of the Fifties. Needless to say, we do not see a parade of heroes.

One of the most important films of the 1970’s, *The Godfather, Part II* (1974), features the time-worn device of the legislator bought by the Mafia, in this case a Senator Geary from Nevada, played by whiskey-voiced G.D. Spradlin in what critic Pauline Kael labeled “a juicy bit of satire; he looks and acts like a synthesis of several of our worst senators.” (1976, 402). The film includes an effectively recreated meeting of a

Senate committee investigating the Mafia during which the Godfather Michael Corleone (Al Pacino) blatantly lies, and the paid-for senator dissembles. It was a time (recently post -Watergate, post-Nixon) of political incredulity which probably matches our own, and conservative critic John Simon at the time chided the film as “trendily cashing in, on the one hand, on current political alienation, and, on the other, facilely abetting such disaffection and cynicism: better an honest gangster than a crooked politician, the film is saying, as if those were the only possible choices” (1982, 168).

Another political film of the period got its licks in against the long-defunct HUAC: Martin Ritt’s *The Front* (1976) starred Woody Allen as Howard Prince, a nerdy stand-in for a trio of black-listed TV writers. The film ends with a climatic HUAC hearing, wherein worried Woody finally gets religion before the swine of the committee and hits them with a four-letter word, which earns him a prison jaunt. That expression of what HUAC could do to itself was, if nothing else, a long-desired payback by the scenarist, Walter Bernstein, himself a black-listed writer. In the Sylvester Stallone vehicle, *F.I.S.T.* (1978), about the rise and fall of a Jimmy Hoffa-type labor leader, veteran Rod Steiger incarnates Senator Andrew Madison, heading a kind of Kefauver racketeering committee. John Simon (again) found the character “interestingly ambiguous,” feeling “his muckraking is so smug and self-righteous as to cast doubt on his highmindedness” (359).

The 1980’s also produced relatively few movies on political institutions, and none looked very seriously at the Congress. A farce like *Protocol* (1984) offers Goldie Hawn as a ditzzy if sincere bar-maid who stumbles into a State Department job and then into international intrigue, only to get civic religion, to which she testifies before a Congressional investigating committee. Her testimony is striking enough to launch her into a House seat--in an updated, cynical parody of *The Farmer’s Daughter*.

Director Sidney Lumet’s *Power* (1986) starring Richard Gere as Peter St. John, a hot-shot campaign consultant, tries to be very cool and up-to-date--as well as fashionably scornful about the game of electoral politics. The congressional element is modest: St. John has befriended a retiring senator (E.G. Marshall), and he takes on the management of a new candidate for the vacant seat, in so doing contesting his old mentor Wilfred Buckley (Gene Hackman). This senatorial campaign--which contains some dim echoes of *The Candidate*--is, however, only one of several pursued during the movie, and the film feels as chopped up as the consultant’s harried life.

Lumet and his screenwriter are trying something new in American political films with *Power*, concentrating almost exclusively on the behind-the-scenes campaign practioners, the handlers, rather than the political principals, and, while there is no reason such a focus could not be effective, here the dramatic tension is lacking. The writing betrays the intent, the plot is a spongy muddle, and the chilly protagonist displays an unconvincing conversion at its end (the most convincing part of the film is Gere’s elegant wardrobe). The movie-going public stayed away.

A competent courtroom thriller, *Suspect* (1987), has a Hill dairy lobbyist (Dennis Quaid) as one of its leads, though little of the picture evidences congressional content. The little it has is typically compromising and corrupt. Quaid is a slick and smug hustler--which makes him an effective lobbyist, of course--and, the movie suggests, he wins the vote of a key female representative by bedding her.

Much less serious is *Three for the Road* (1987), a rightfully obscure comedy with Charlie Sheen as a naive Senate staffer hired to drive his boss's incorrigible daughter to a rigorous school. The senator in this film, made up in best blow-dried fashion, is as pernicious a politician as has been recently portrayed in movies,¹³ willing to exile his child to save his political skin. From its inception, the film is an unmitigated mess, presenting a senator who serves on Ways and Means and opening with a credit sequence showing Sheen gunning his motorcycle supposedly to the U.S. Capitol--which is actually the State Capital of Little Rock, Arkansas (some kind of clumsy premonition of Clinton?).

Tracking Shot: Congressional Cinema in the Nineties

Though movies on congressional themes hardly have a track record of boffo box office, Hollywood studios continued to find and develop enough scripts on those themes to produce a mild boomlet in congressional films during the early 1990's. *Guilty by Suspicion* (1991), resuscitates the HUAC (Hollywood screenwriters continuing to get even), which serves yet again as the villain trying to bring down Robert DeNiro as a principled Hollywood director. The recreation of the committee hearings were reasonably effective as docudrama, with an accurate "newsreel" feel, but the overall story lacked bite.

True Colors (1991) delineates the parallel lives of an ambitious go-getter, Peter Burton (John Cusack), willing to do anything to gain a House seat and erase a proletarian past, and his college roommate Tim Garrity (James Spader), an upper-crust, upright Justice Department lawyer who eventually comes to challenge Burton and his nefarious campaign practices. Richard Widmark does his best to bring some verisimilitude to the role of a complex, if flawed lawmaker, who eventually becomes father-in-law to the the social-climbing Burton.

True Colors contrasts (rather obviously) the class difference between the WASP Garrity and the prole Burton--acting like a small-time Willie Stark. The film also displays, once again, the thoroughgoing cynicism about politics so prevalent in Hollywood tales. Burton's creed is the crass "Don't get caught," and the script is littered with one-liners like: "Only two things can really wreck a man's political career--being caught with a live boy or a dead girl." But smart cracks can't stop the film from straying far from Capitol Hill business and substituting cheap dramatic confrontation for what could be the intrinsic theatrics of political life.

The first outright political comedy set in the Congress since *The Senator Was Indiscreet* is *The Distinguished Gentleman* (1992), wherein comedian Eddie Murphy plays a small-time Florida confidence man who steals a congressional seat only because he shares the last name (Johnson) of a popular--and ignobly deceased--incumbent. The movie is rare among Hollywood efforts in that it tries showing a congressman actually functioning with staff, making deals, sizing up fellow members,

¹³ His only current competition might be the megalomaniacal senator played by Ron Silver in the futuristic--and silly-- Jean-Claude Van Damme vehicle *Time Cop* (1994); he hatches a plot to clone himself in the future so as to rule the world.

working with lobbyists, and fashioning legislation. It also, very facilely, shows the work of a representative as turning on the same kinds of deception the Murphy character already practices as he sleazes his way into a committee ("Power and Industry") rich in political payoffs. Thus we have Congress as Con Game.

Like many other recent Eddie Murphy films, however, *The Distinguished Gentleman* depends too much on the star's toothy charm without a solid, incisive script to back him up. That script is also dated, presenting a House culture in the early 1990's which hearkens back to the days of all-powerful committee chairmen (personified by scenery-chewing Lane Smith as a House icon). It's a harmless diversion, perhaps, but punchless, too, and, ultimately, typically demeaning about congressional life.

James Spader shows up again in *Storyville* (1992), this time running for Congress as the scion of a well-connected New Orleans clan. The film is, however, much less about a congressional race than about the colorful and debauched politics of Louisiana--Huey Long morsels in a gumbo of requisite clichés. It is a lame attempt by director Mark Frost (co-creator of TV's *Twin Peaks*) to offer a contemporary version of the Long legacy, dressed out with plot twists and a banal murder mystery.

In other recent movies with a Washington setting, legislators continue to show up in minor roles as necessary accoutrements to a story in the capital. A recent example is Senator Rumsen (Richard Dreyfuss), a cocksure rightwing Republican from Kansas who challenges Michael Douglas as *The American President* (1995). This comedy-drama, reminiscent of *The Seduction of Joe Tynan*, tries to be smart and accurate about Washington's political life, but the senatorial character is underwritten and lacks dimension as an adversary. He appears principally as a vehicle for quips, as when he wonders rhetorically if the prez's girlfriend (Annette Bening) should be called the "First Mistress."

Perhaps the most interesting congressional film of the 1990's thus far is *Bob Roberts* (1992). This is very much Tim Robbins' opus--he wrote, directed, and starred; it covers the rise of a conservative troubadour who becomes a senatorial candidate in Pennsylvania. In this, it bears some resemblance to Elia Kazan's *A Face in the Crowd* (1957), wherein a folksy hillbilly singer (Andy Griffith) develops into a national demagogue through the power of television. Using the framing device of a British TV crew covering Roberts, the film is deliberately shot in mock-documentary style, showing the guitar-picking, down-home candidate on the campaign trail, turning old Bob Dylan sentiments on their heads. A nice twist is that Robert's adversary (a liberal incumbent indelicately labeled Brickley Paiste) is played by none other than Gore Vidal, ex-candidate and author of *The Best Man*. Thus, motion pictures finally offer Vidal the elective office he had unsuccessfully sought on the real stump twice.

Most mainstream movie critics found much to praise in *Bob Roberts*. Richard Corliss, writing in *Time* magazine, compared the film favorably to the earlier Vidal effort by labeling it "The Best Man for the 90's." He agreed with filmmaker Robbins that "the perfect candidate for this era of moral confusion would be a millionaire folk singer, a charismatic opportunist who can twist Woody Guthrie into Pat Buchanan by warbling 'This Land Was Made for Me'" (1992, 65-66). On the other hand, more conservative commentators, like John Simon, writing in *The National Review*, decried the "self-congratulatory smugness of sequence after sequence" (1992, 62-63) in the film.

With Robbins a reigning cinema liberal, he surely meant his film to be a devastating critique of current political trends, much as Redford did with *The Candidate* twenty-five years before. It was first released, in fact, right after the Republican Party was wrapping up their 1992 convention in Houston, just as the Ritchie-Redford vehicle was released during the convention summer of 1972.¹⁴

Yet *Bob Roberts*, while done with some flair, ultimately lacks the deeper, cleaner bite of the best satire. As Paletz and Lipinski note, the film “may undermine its credibility and effects by exaggerating Roberts to the point of unbelievability” (1995, 1421). It’s too easy to dismiss the phony Bob as a serious contender, and his evident success means that the film’s makers have, once again, only the most cynical view of a dimwitted electorate. This film, as so many of the others, shows a national politics that is so much worse than the reality, a reality the American movie-going public, ever skeptical about politics, seems unwilling to acknowledge or accept.

It’s A Wrap: Conclusion

There has been and continues to be, thus, a considerable contrast between the relatively one-dimensional Hollywood view of the American congressional politician and the more complex, multi-dimensional reality where that figure actually resides. One commentator, Jonathan Alter, recognized this in faulting *True Colors*--as well as other political feature films--in these terms: “Much of the real Washington is too dramatic for filmmakers to handle...,” he wrote, “Perhaps (it doesn’t) square with those misty Capitol-dome shots.” Alter wrote that the movie men missed “the truly juicy stories because they impose character and theme rather than letting them grow out of the fertile subject they have chosen” (1991, 96). He has a point. As people who come to know the field well--precisely because of its inherent human comedy--the “real” business of congressional politics, rather than the contrived Tinseltown version, should rightly be a natural source for drama (always given the right script, of course).

Yet, given that Hollywood’s view on politics and its practitioners mirrors, and will continue to mirror, much of the American public, it is unlikely that a more realistic, more comprehensive treatment of congressional life will ever prevail on screen, except in isolated cases.

In *Congress as Public Enemy*, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, after enumerating the reasons for negative views of our national legislature, lament that the “citizens’ big failure is that they lack an appreciation for the ugliness of democracy” (1995, 157).¹⁵ Yet movies (as well as television) can be of little help here since they will inevitably favor pulchritude. Further, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse warn that “If we fail to teach the

¹⁴ The author indelibly remembers being present at the 1972 Democratic Convention in Miami Beach when campaign cars with bull horns and Bill McKay posters plied the Beach in mock rallies as part of the publicity for the release of *The Candidate*. Such plugs were absolutely indistinguishable from the other--real--candidate’s campaign pitch efforts.

¹⁵ An old anonymous crack is pertinent here: “There are two things you don’t want to watch being made; one is sausages; the other is laws.”

American public that...debate and compromise are not synonymous with bickering and selling out, operational support (for the Congress) will never be forthcoming” (161). Just so, but that “bickering and selling out,” as we have seen above, is exactly what much of the popular arts, personified by motion pictures, have been emphasizing for decades.

Where American politics and picture-making *do* seem to be coming ever closer together, however, is in the way our politicians may be becoming more and more like actors--and vice versa (consider Ronald Reagan as exhibit number one)--and our politics more like show business.

Bob Roberts may thus be more prophetic about congressional and electoral politics than we are now willing to admit. After all, the contemporary performer and politician probably have more in common now than ever before. Even the movies themselves are beginning to recognize this, witness the Julie Kavner persona in *I'll Do Anything* (1994), who, in expressing a litany of grim similarities of Hollywood and Washington, sums them up as both known for the “same spiritual bloodletting.”

American politics have become, especially in the last decades, much more a public affair, less played out in private chambers and “smoke-filled rooms” and more often running the “political video race” (Smith 1988, 130). Especially with the expansion of television coverage, “playing to the crowd has become much more rewarding than playing to the club” (Easterbrook 1984, 64). Or, as another observer has noted, “The television cameras now reflect the glare of a watchful public, and the new media-oriented members of Congress do their best to play to the crowds” (Uslaner 1993, 53). One media consultant felt that the pressure to form a public persona has produced a new style of legislator:

..they're not so much issue-oriented, they're just people, they're showboats and there are a lot of those people in any class of Congress, much more so I suspect than there were ten years ago. [Why?] Because of media, because it does attract a different kind of person or a person who adjusts to the reality of the best thing to do (Robinson, 1981, 94).

Politicians appear, more and more, to bear the attributes of thespians. To began with, most congressmen and senators--as ever--are still lawyers, very often of the performing, courtroom type who showed a bent for debate or public speaking when young and were rewarded for it, much as actors' egos were early salved with applause. But even beyond this glib, public persona, our lawmakers must “look good” on TV and on the House and Senate floor, they must memorize and deliver lines, they must declaim on issues,¹⁶ they must work all the media for the best possible PR, they must *perform* constantly for their constituency-cum-audience. In lieu of agents, they now have media advisers.

More and more Hollywood stars, meanwhile--like Warren Beatty, Charlton Heston, Barbra Streisand, Tom Selleck, Robert Redford, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Tim Robbins, etc.--have become identified with our partisan politics, especially during

¹⁶ David Mayhew, writing more than 20 years ago, noted the trend “that candidates running for Congress have been relying increasingly on position taking,” one of the three core electorally oriented activities he identified for congressional actors (1974, 179).

campaign seasons. The two coasts may even be moving closer together in some kind of psychic tectonic drift. After all, in just the last few years, the Congress has welcomed into its ranks the likes of Sonny Bono, Fred Dalton Thompson, and Fred Grandy.¹⁷ More are likely to follow.

The U.S. Congressman or Senator has been moving towards Hollywood style much faster than Hollywood seems to be moving towards Washington style. The strongest parallel may come down to a fundamental characteristic of both the politician and the performer: the need for the approval of the public, the need for applause.

Long-time political practitioner and observer Elliott Richardson, quoted by Hedrick Smith (1988, 94-95), had an apt metaphor. "Washington is really, when you come right down to it, a city of cocker spaniels," said Richardson, a cabinet member in the Nixon and Ford Administrations. "It's a city of people who are more interested in being petted and admired than in rendering the exercise of power." Rather like movie stars.

¹⁷ Grandy, perhaps unwittingly, suggested just how close these two old professions have become. "What I really wanted to do was act," he once said, "Eventually, I split the difference and went into politics" (Barone and Ujifusa, 1993, 485).

REFERENCES

- Agee, James. 1958. *Agee on Film: Reviews and Comments*. New York: McDowell, Obolensky, Inc.
- Alter, Jonathan. 1991. "True Colors" (review). *Esquire*. May, pp. 96-100+.
- Amberg, George, comp. 1971. "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" (review dated October 20, 1939, by Frank S. Nugent)). In *The New York Times Film Reviews: A One Volume Selection, 1913-1970*. New York: An Arno Press Book.
- Barone, Michael and Grant Ujifusa. 1993. *The Almanac of American Politics 1994*. Washington, D.C.: National Journal Inc.
- Boller, Paul F. Jr. 1991. *Congressional Anecdotes* (chap. II). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Christensen, Terry. 1987. *Reel Politics: American Political Movies from Birth of a Nation to Platoon*. New York: Basil Blackwell.
- Corliss, Richard. 1974. *Talking Pictures: Screenwriters in the American Cinema 1927-73*. Woodstock, New York: The Overlook Press.
- _____. 1992. "Bob Roberts" (review). *Time*. September 7, pp. 65-66.
- Davidson, Roger H. and Walter J. Oleszek. 1994. *Congress and Its Members* (chap. "Being There"). Washington: Congressional Quarterly Press, pp. 155-156.
- Easterbrook, Gregg. "What's Wrong With Congress?" *The Atlantic*. December 1984.
- Eisele, Catherine. 1997. "Spielberg Denied Close Encounter at Capitol." *The Hill*. Washington, D.C. March 19, pp.1+.
- Fenno, Richard F. , Jr. 1966. *The Power of the Purse: Appropriations Politics in*

- Congress. Boston: Little, Brown and Co.
- _____. 1973. *Congressmen in Committee*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co.
- _____. 1978. *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co.
- Hibbing, John R. and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse. 1995. *Congress as Public Enemy: Public Attitudes Towards American Political Institutions*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Hirschhorn, Clive. 1990. *The Columbia Story*. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc.
- Kael, Pauline. 1976. *Reeling*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co.
- Loomis, Burdett A. 1996. *The Contemporary Congress: The Changing Environment of Congressional Politics*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Manley, John F. 1970. *The Politics of Finance: The House Committee on Ways and Means*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co.
- Mayhew, David R. 1974. *Congress: The Electoral Connection*. New Haven: The Yale University Press.
- Monaco, James. 1979. *American Film Now*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- _____. 1981. *How to Read a Film: The Art, Technology, Language, History, and Theory of Film and Media*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Nelson, Michael. 1995. "Why Americans Hate Politics and Politicians." *P.S.: Political Science and Politics*. March, Vol. 28 (1): pp.72-77.
- Paletz, David L. and Daniel Lipinski. 1995. "Movies on Congress." In *Encyclopedia of the United States Congress*, pp.1420-1426. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Pratley, Gerald. 1971. *The Cinema of Otto Preminger*. New York: A.S. Barnes and Company.
- Price, David E. 1992. "Ethics and the Work of the Legislator." In *New Perspectives on the House of Representatives*, ed. Robert L. Peabody and Nelson W. Polsby. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Robinson, Michael J. 1981. "Three Faces of Congressional Media." In *The New Congress*, ed. Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein. Washington: The

American Enterprise Institute.

Rozell, Mark J. 1994. "Press Coverage of Congress." In *Congress, the Press, and the Public*, ed. Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein. Washington: AEI/Brookings.

Sarris, Andrew. 1970. *Confessions of a Cultist: On the Cinema, 1955/69*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Simon, John. 1982. *Reverse Angle: A Decade of American Films*. New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc.

_____. 1992. "Bob Roberts" (review). *National Review*. November 2, pp. 62-63.

Smith, Hedrick. 1988. *The Power Game: How Washington Works*. New York: Random House.

Thomas, Sam, ed. 1986. "The Candidate." In *Best American Screenplays*. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc.

Thomas, Tony. 1980. *The Films of the Forties*. Seacaucus, New Jersey: The Citadel Press.

Uslaner, Eric M. 1993. *The Decline of Comity in Congress*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

Walker, John (ed.). 1992. *Halliwel's Film Guide* (eighth edition). New York: Harper Collins Publishers.

Young, James Sterling. 1966. *The Washington Community, 1800-1828*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, chapter 3.

