

The American President

The latest in a long line of films about our Chief Executive, *The American President* couches in romantic comedy terms a serious point about what kind of a private life we allow our most public citizen. What kind of balance does our society (and media) allow between our president's personal attributes and desires and his professional competence? How much can the one impinge on or influence the other? Or, less ponderously, can the President go out on a date?

The latter is the way the dilemma is initially stated in Rob Reiner's *The American President*. President Andrew Shepherd (Michael Douglas), a widower, is riding high in the polls when he bumps up against environmental lobbyist Sydney Ellen Wade (Annette Bening), pushing hard a bill on which the president is soft. Intrigued with Wade (and buoyed by good numbers), Shepherd sends Wade flowers, invites her to a state dinner, and eventually has her over to the White House for a sleepover. But as the romance blossoms, his popularity plummets as both political nemesis Senator Rumson (Richard Dreyfuss), wondering out loud "Is she the First Mistress?," and the niggling Washington press corps, questioning the affair, raise the inevitable "character issue."

Shepherd's crack White House staff, led by chief of staff A.J. MacInerney (Martin Sheen), domestic policy advisor Lewis Rothschild (Michael J. Fox), press secretary Robin McCall (Anna Deavere Smith), and pollster Leon Kodak (David Paymer), try to keep him in line, attempt to keep his eye on the legislative ball (a crime bill as well as environmental legislation are crucial), and urge him to speak out and act presidential. There are waverings, wafflings, misunderstandings between the couple before President Shepherd finally steps to the mike in the White House Press Office to deliver a credo that cements his popularity anew. The question of whether a President can balance his personal and public goals is answered with a resounding "yes."

This is romantic comedy, not farce, and director Reiner and screenwriter Aaron Sorkin (the two worked together previously on another Washington-based movie, *A Few Good Men*) apparently worked hard to make it credible as a story of contemporary Washington. Reiner and Sorkin had several visits to the White House, including two days Reiner spent trailing President Clinton. The lead actors got private tours to get the feel of the place. The production and design teams were given special access to the mansion and were allowed to take measurements of the rooms to recreate sets and to duplicate art works from White House Museum sources.

All this results in a production that *looks* right. Though Hollywood sets, the White House rooms and settings of the film are accomplished; physically, this is as convincing a Washington movie as any made. Scriptwise, Mr. Latham does an overall good job. The dialogue of the president's aides seems especially right: jangly, quick, smart, and nervy all at once--constantly balancing deference for the President with getting in his face--and trying to get a life. The pollster, for example, at a holiday party, chides a colleague: "'It's Christmas; didn't you get the memo?'" Or the hyper Rothschild, dreading a future policy prospect, notes that "It's always a guy in my position who ends up doing 18 months in Danbury minimum security prison."

One of the wittiest conceits of *The American President* is the difficulty the cosseted Chief Executive has in performing the most mundane tasks. Just ordering flowers, using a credit card, or going out for a drive become arduous or impossible

tasks, frustrated by the stifling cocoon of the Presidency.

Still, along with its general verisimilitude, the movie sometimes gets it wrong. A state dinner's protocol is messed up, with the four principals (two presidents and their mates) sitting at the same table. The President--rather than the Secretary of Labor or some lesser aide--personally goes to St. Louis to avert an airline strike. Rothschild, from a White Situation Room, hurls obscenities at a congressman--not bloody likely! Then, too, there are plot diversions that are clumsy or unnecessary: a Libyan air attack is introduced too facilely, just to demonstrate presidential *machismo*, and a compromising photo of Sydney shows up as a plot device which is never followed up.

Folks on Capitol Hill should enjoy mocking the film's running joke of the lobbyist Sydney having trouble being on time at the White House from her place on from Capitol Hill "because of traffic on Dupont Circle."

But further adding to the film's believability are the performances, led by Annette Bening, a radiant Sydney whose intelligence and charm make it easy to understand why the President falls for her. She is utterly natural in conveying both the whip-smart lobbyist and the nervous object of presidential affection, cowed as anyone would be by The Presence. Michael Douglas's Shepherd is a bit stolid, but not damagingly so. He gets some good lines and gets to show some tender moments with his 12-year old daughter, played by Shawna Waldron with artless appeal. For some of those moviegoers who may worry about it, he also keeps his clothes on in this one!

The secondary roles are well done. Martin Sheen as A.J. personifies the decent, old-shoe sounding board for Shepherd, the perfect behind-the-scenes, number two man. Anna Deavere Smith convinces as the alert press secretary, insisting on the straight story to both feed and foil the press. David Paymer does nicely as a Supernerd, full of pollster paranoia. Michael J. Fox, when first reading the script for his character, said he thought of Lewis Rothschild as Jiminy Cricket, "always in the President's ear." The parallel is apt: he is ever the chirrupy voice of conscience literally bugging his boss. Fox, whose career has been in a slide, resuscitates himself with this role.

Among the major featured players, only Richard Dreyfuss seems wasted in the role of the conservative senator. The character, who gets scant screen time, is little more than a scheming ranter, lacking complexity and weight. If Senator Rumson had been a more worthy opponent to the President, the film would have been richer.

My readers should be aware that the thin characterization of the right-wing senator is just one more element of *The American President's* unabashed leftish bias. Reiner and Co. haven't fudged on the ideology (like 1993's *Dave*, for example): Shepherd is a blatant--if hard-headed--liberal Democrat pushing issues like gun control and the environment. Worse, he appears more decisive--and just as well-briefed--as Bill Clinton! Conservative and Republican movie fans be forewarned: this film might make your blood boil.

(*"The American President"* is rated PG-13 for periodic profanity and sexual situations.)

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