

Mr. Smith Goes to Washington

By Robert Sklar

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In the late 1930s, more securely atop the pinnacle of American cinema than the Hollywood sign, Frank Capra could afford to be bold. Over a five-year span he had won three Academy Awards as best director, for "It Happened One Night" (1934), "Mr. Deeds Goes to Town" (1936) and "You Can't Take It With You" (1938). The first and last of these titles had also been picked as best picture. In 1939 he ended a four-year term as Academy president and assumed leadership of the new Screen Directors Guild. Ambitious and apparently unassailable, he was able to launch a project that others had tried but failed to get off the ground: a controversial story involving corruption in the United States Senate, released in 1939 as "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington."

Years later, in his 1971 autobiography "The Name Above the Title," Capra related a tale about a visit he supposedly received, when he had fallen ill following his first Academy Award, from a mysterious "little man ... completely bald, wearing thick glasses" who admonished him to his artistry for higher purposes than screwball comedy. "Mr. Deeds" was the first of the more serious endeavors that followed. Then came, among others, "Mr. Smith," "Meet John Doe" (1941) and "It's a Wonderful Life" (1946). These are among the most honored and cherished works in America's film heritage. Yet they also strike many viewers as ambiguous and troubling.

Among Hollywood's most significant filmmakers, Capra's reputation is surely the most contested. His four major titles on political and social themes – "Deeds," "Smith," "Doe," and "It's a Wonderful Life" – are instantly recognizable for similarities of style, story, and character that, taken together, add up to a unique signature. What some call "Capraseque," however, others not so flatteringly label "Capracorn." The films feature naïve, small-town idealists fighting against the ruthless power of political machines, media barons, capitalist predators, and urban elites. Defeated and humiliated, these overmatched innocents are rescued by the moral might of an aroused community, but the otherwise powerless little people whose united support acclaims the downcast heroes as natural leaders. Uplifting and sentimental, Capra's political films seem to offer a consoling myth of national character that has captivated audiences over generations. At the same time, they've been attacked as conformist, demagogic, manipulative, phony.



Claude Rains and Jimmy Stewart as congressmen on the Senate floor. Courtesy Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Online Collection

In recent years Capra's critics have interpreted this divided opinion about the director as stemming, in part, from previously unacknowledged divisions within the films themselves. It's as if, following his mythical visitation from the hairless stranger, Capra consciously decided that his serious films had to be inspirational, while at the same time he was unable to suppress a more fundamental instinct for tragedy. The result is that an uneasy dualism between cheerfulness and dread pervades these films. Their resolutely upbeat last-minute victories and vindications can't erase the deeply disquieting effects of earlier defeats and heartbreaks. "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" is a clear case in point.

"Mr. Smith" stemmed from an original short story, "The Gentleman from Montana," by Lewis R. Foster (which won the film's only Academy Award, out of eleven nominations, including best picture and best director). It was loosely based on the early career of U.S. Senator Burton K. Wheeler, who was attacked and falsely indicted when, as a freshman senator in the 1920s, he fought corruption in the presidential administration of Warren G. Harding. The Hays Office, mindful of pending Senate bills that would have adversely affected the movie industry, discouraged other studios from going ahead with the story. But once it fell into Capra's hands, his clout prevailed.

In Capra's version, from a screenplay by Sidney Buchman, an idealistic scoutmaster, Jefferson Smith (James Stewart), is improbably chosen to fill an interim Senate vacancy from a graft-ridden western state. In Washington, D.C., the gawky young legislator gazes with awe on the monuments and symbols of the nation's democratic heritage, while he becomes an object of ridicule from his worldly Senate colleagues and a cynical press corps.

Gradually, however, Smith's dedication and vision win over his initially caustic secretary, Saunders (Jean Arthur) whose character in *Mr. Deeds*, a reporter, went through a similar transformation toward that naïve hero). Smith's plan to build a national boys' camp on wilderness land in his home state comes into conflict with the political boss who runs the state and schemes to build a dam on the same site. Smith is devastated when learns that his senior colleague, Senator Joseph Paine (Claude Rains), whom he idolizes, is in on the crooked deal. Slandered by Paine, ruined, and about to be tossed from the Senate, Smith finds solace and strength (and Saunders' support) at the Lincoln Memorial and launches a one-man Senate filibuster.

Here, leaving behind the Wheeler story and 1920s scandals, Capra's larger themes come strongly into play. For the filmmaker was clearly shaping his depiction of American political institutions for the contemporary moment, and it was no coincidence that the film's October 1939 premiere took place several weeks after Germany invaded Poland, starting World War II in Europe. Capra enlisted the then well-known radio commentator H.V. Kaltenborn for an on-screen appearance as a live radio reporter on Smith's filibuster. Noting the presence of diplomats from foreign dictatorships in the Senate gallery, Kaltenborn comments that Smith's action represents "democracy's finest show."

But is it anything more than a show? It turns out that Smith's home state bears a striking relationship to those foreign dictatorships. The political boss controls the local press and twists the news against Smith, while employing brutal thugs to keep opposing viewpoints from reaching the public. Thousands of telegrams pour into the Senate – nearly all of them against Smith. Despairing, exhausted,

Smith collapses. But he has rekindled his senior senator's sense of rectitude. Shamed, Paine tries to commit suicide. He recants his role in the boss's nefarious schemes. Amid pandemonium, Smith belatedly triumphs.

When the film premiered in Washington, the congressional response was decidedly negative. How dare Hollywood paint senators as corrupt and the Senate susceptible to demagogic manipulation? But in the longer haul, Capra's apparent intentions prevailed among critics and spectators. "Mr. Smith" was recognized as a film that dramatized the fragility of democracy at a time of world crisis, as well as the necessity for citizens individually and collectively to stand up for their beliefs and their nation's democratic traditions. Despite the final plot reversals and Smith's ultimate validation, the political boss's capacity to unleash ruthless violence and blatantly slant the news has not yet been confronted.

Mr. Smith is at base a somber film, laced both with uplift and unease. Yet a stark recounting of its narrative trajectory risks overlooking how much its seriousness rests on a comic foundation. With roots both in silent comedy and the 1930s screwball genre, Capra deployed a superb cast of character actors lighten the heavy political going through pace, with, and human warmth. Thomas Mitchell as a report and Guy Kibbee as the state governor are two among many supporting players worthy of mention, and Harry Carey, a cowboy star of John Ford's silent westerns, was an inspired choice as president of the Senate. To a dramatic tale concerned with the values of a modern western state and, more broadly, a perilous moment for western civilization. Carey conveyed the craggy integrity of Hollywood's legendary Old West.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

The late Robert Sklar was a member of the National Film Preservation Board as well as a film scholar and author of the 1975 book "Movie-Made America."