

Mr. Capra Goes to Washington

"If Aristophaenes came back today," imagined the West Indian Marxist C.L.R. James shortly after World War II, "he would naturally consider it his business to write for the films to which 95 million people go every week. He would arrange for a great film festival for the coming July 4 as a natural part of the celebrations. Then in the presence of the Chief Executive, the Judiciary, Congress and all the notables, in one theater in Washington, the whole population in the same day at the same time would see his film. It would have in it slapstick, a great deal of plain indecency, but precisely because of the present political situation of democracy, the film would contain the most unbridled blows at American democracy, calling things by their names and naming names as well. He would probably put in the film characters easily recognizable as great personages of the day. He would call corruption corruption, and graft graft. He would not imply that though some were corrupt, on the whole everything was not so bad. He would be bitter beyond belief. He would do all this, however, from the standpoint of a lover of his country."

James had entered the United States in 1938, at the acme of Frank Capra's reign as "the most successful American movie director during the 1930s," to quote Thomas Schatz, "whether filmmaking success is measured in terms of box-office revenues, critical and popular acclaim, or Academy statuettes." James quickly came to recognize Hollywood as the "the most striking expression of the tensions and deep crises of American society, occupying a similar relation to the developing society as the writers of 1840-1860 occupied in relation to the America of Webster and Lincoln." But James nonetheless had overlooked what was exhibited in front of his eyes. For on 17 October 1939, 45 senators, 250 congressmen, and several Supreme Court justices attended the premiere of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* at the capital city's Constitution Hall. The Chief Executive and "the whole population" did not attend the opening, but thanks to the motion picture collapse of time and space that, James knew, had created a nationwide mass public, millions of Americans soon followed their leaders into movie palaces around the country. President Roosevelt enjoyed a private screening aboard a battleship a few months later.

Although *Mr. Smith* did not open on Independence Day, it did open with Revolutionary War music, and it named its hero Jefferson Smith after the author of the Declaration of Independence. If its slapstick stopped short of indecency, the motion picture certainly employed humor to call corruption corruption and graft graft. Mobilizing patriotic icons to deliver "unbridled blows at American democracy," was not the "lover of his country" who directed *Mr. Smith* (aided by scriptwriter, Sidney Buchman, a member of the Communist Party of the United States), the American Aristophanes for whom the international Communist was calling?

Mr. Smith Goes to Washington is the tale of a patriotic innocent from the American heartland (Jimmy Stewart), head of the Boy Rangers, who finds himself appointed to the United States Senate. What he does not know is that his appointment has been arranged precisely because he is a political naif who doesn't have a clue about the way political deals are made. The senior senator from his home state whom Smith admires (Claude Rains as Senator Joseph Paine) is the tool of Boss Jim Taylor (Edward Arnold), the media magnate who runs their state. Taylor and Paine have attached to an appropriations bill a provision to build a dam at Willet Creek that will enrich their supporters. Taylor is also promoting Paine for the presidency, having successfully built his brand image as "The Silver Knight," the man who fights for the little people. The senator and the boss assign Saunders (Jean Arthur) to control Smith, but when she helps the eager young Smith introduce a boy's camp bill that sets aside that same Willet Creek land, they frame him to make it seem that he himself has a corrupt interest in the real estate. Overmatched, threatened with expulsion from the Senate, and in despair, Smith is on the point of returning home until, in an emotional scene at the Lincoln Memorial, Saunders (having switched allegiances) convinces him to stay and fight. With her help he begins a Senate filibuster, mixing his exposé of the Willet Creek scandal with long passages from the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bible. Boss Taylor keeps the truth from the people of their state, and the thousands of telegrams he orchestrates condemning Jeff bring the junior senator to the point of collapse. His martyrdom is too much for Senator Paine, however. "Expel me!" he shouts after a failed suicide attempt, and a prostrate Jefferson Smith carries the day as he is carried out of the room.

Mr. Smith's picture of Washington was "bitter beyond belief," and the "great personages" forced to watch themselves on screen were not pleased by what they saw. House Majority Leader Sam Rayburn and Senate Majority Leader Alben Barkley denounced the film. Barkley declared the film "as grotesque as anything I have ever seen!" South Carolina's important Democratic Senator James F. Byrnes told the press, "Here is a picture that is going to the country to tell the people that 95 out of 96 senators are corrupt; that the federal, state, and municipal governments are corrupt; that one corrupt boss can control the press of a state; that the newspapers are corrupt; the radio corrupt; reporters are corrupt; that the trucks will intentionally run down boys in the streets." Like Byrnes, the State Department worried that, with the outbreak of European war two weeks before *Mr. Smith's* premiere, the film would "abet the hostile propagandists by ridiculing American democracy." The

Ambassador to England, Joseph P. Kennedy, lobbied to keep Columbia from releasing the film in Europe. Joseph Breen, head of the motion picture industry's own censorship board, had objected that the original story presented "a general unflattering portrayal of our system of government." But the people and press outside the capital welcomed *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, as if the reception of this "stirring, patriotic document" exemplified the synthesis of theater and democratic politics for which James was soon to call.

Although Washingtonians did not appreciate Frank Capra's version of politics, an actor who had made his Hollywood debut two years before *Mr. Smith's* premiere did. Only one American president deliberately modeled himself on the Frank Capra hero. That actor who began his career in New Deal Hollywood and ended up in the White House was Ronald Reagan. The apparently spontaneous line in the New Hampshire 1980 primary debate against George Bush that saved his presidential campaign, "I'm paying for this microphone, Mr. Green," turned out to be lifted from Capra's 1948 movie, *State of the Union*. Once in office, Reagan made the lineage explicit. He defended his economic policy with extended quotations from *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), and when his nomination of Robert Bork to the Supreme Court ran into opposition, he responded, "You may remember the movie *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, when Jimmy Stewart stands in the well of the Senate and says that lost causes are 'the only causes worth fighting for. . . . I'm going to stay right here and fight for this lost cause even if this room . . . is filled with lies.' So will I." Frances Fitzgerald introduces her history of Ronald Reagan and the Strategic Defense Initiative (Star Wars) with several pages on Ronald Reagan as Jefferson Smith.

Whereas Reagan spoke for the political values he had acquired in Cold War America, Capra spoke to New Deal America in the 1930s and later, as the producer of the armed forces Why We Fight documentaries, for U.S. values in World War II. Called "Hollywood's greatest director" in 1938 by *Life* and "the most important figure in motion pictures today" by the New York *Herald Tribune*, and featured on 8 August of that year on the cover of *Time*, Capra was "the most important American director of the 1930s." But he never made a successful Hollywood film after 1942. Modeling himself on the Capra hero and on Franklin Roosevelt, was Reagan the legitimate inheritor or the perversion of Frank Capra in particular and New Deal mass politics and culture more generally? From what point of view is *Mr. Smith* made to castigate Washington politics? To understand the affinity between Frank Capra and Franklin Roosevelt, the Capra film and the New Deal decade, we need to enter the immediate political situation in which, as if taking on the role of the American Aristophanes, Capra put *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* on the screen.