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Politicians: A Film Perspective

by Sidney Wise, Franklin & Marshall College

In a recent issue of *NEWS*, Professor G. Alan Tarr reminded us of how the feature film *Nashville* (1975) could be used as a springboard for thoughtful classroom discussion of American politics. While that film is ostensibly about country-music and its performers, Tarr makes a strong case that the Robert Altman film is "above all a commentary on political life." *Nashville* can be seen as an insight into a view of the voters and their indifference, indeed hostility to politics. The advance man of a presidential candidate is seeking to enlist big name performers for a rally but the candidate is never seen and the sound truck that advertises his campaign blares out the vague populist homilies which reminded many viewers of the then flowering Jimmy Carter speeches. The candidate is so irrelevant to the lives of the voters that when there is an assassination attempt, it is directed at the pop singing star of the rally.

If *Nashville* can be successfully described as a political metaphor, an attendant problem for many political scientists interested in film is why there are so few feature films which deal intelligently with politicians. Those of us who see politicians as continuously engaged in suspenseful, meaningful drama with incredibly high stakes, are frustrated by Hollywood's reluctance to tackle, if only occasionally, genuine political themes.

This is not to say that there have been no feature films dealing with politicians.¹ In the main, however, they have been to politics what *Animal House* has been to college life or what the Marx Brothers were to opera. Long ago Hollywood determined that serious politics was not what mass audiences wanted for entertainment and so those that have been attempted have usually been sitcoms steeped in cynicism or heavy dramas focusing on the personal foibles (usually sexual) of the protagonists.

A few illustrations make the point. In 1932, *The New York Times* reviewed *The Dark Horse* as the "first of

the political pictures." The story involved a convention deadlock, with the nomination for governor going to a Zachary Hicks, a character described as "so dumb that every time he opens his mouth he subtracts from the sum total of human knowledge." In the same year, George M. Cohan and Jimmy Durante starred in *The Phantom President*, dealing with a presidential candidate so inept that a double was hired to do the campaigning. The *Times* man noted that the audience was in "a constant state of glee." And so the trend was set.

The archetype political film, one which even now is more a part of Hollywood than it would admit, is *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), a film that is still shown on late shows and is quite likely to be familiar to students. James Stewart's successful 23 hour filibuster against graft, replete with readings from the Second Epistle to the Corinthians, is vintage Hollywood. Senator Alben Barkley's jibe that the film "showed the Senate as the biggest aggregation of nincompoops on record" and that the vote in the Senate against the film was 96 to 0, did not prevent *Mr. Smith* from receiving 11 Academy Award nominations as well as great financial success.²

The Great McGinty (1940), *The Senator was Indiscreet* (1947) and *The Last Hurrah* (1958) were reversions to graft as fun and outrageous slapstick. *Wilson* (1944) was so serious, reverential and uni-dimensional that it bored audiences and critics and upset historians. In 1949, Hollywood made an exciting film version of Robert Penn Warren's Pulitzer Prize novel, *All the King's Men*, but in the process stripped Willie Stark (Huey Long) and his entourage of all their complexities and motivations. Similarly, Otto Preminger's version of Allen Drury's *Advise and Consent* (1962) became unbelievable soap opera despite the authentic settings. Politics as black humor took over in 1964, with Stanley Kubrick's *Dr.*

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A Curriculum Guide for Law-Related Education

by Paul C. Cline and
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Law-related education is experiencing a growing emphasis in school curriculum throughout the American school system. Educators see the need for it though most are not trained specifically in the law. Therefore, they need as much guidance as possible to help them create a curriculum that is relevant for their students.

An excellent way to provide this help is through the development of a well-designed curriculum guide. There have been a few guides developed in law-related education in the last few years such as the one produced by the James Madison Institute on Law-Related Education at James Madison University (*Curriculum Guide for Law-Related Education in the Secondary Schools of Virginia*, copyright Virginia State Bar).

This guide as well as others should be of particular interest to a school system that is seeking to prepare one of its own. In order to have a creditable product, it is necessary to give attention to three principal factors in the development of the guide: the director and his role; the personnel who write the guide; and the design of the guide.

Role of the Director

The curriculum leader is responsible for the total organization of the project. It is this person who must be sure to envision the final outcome that will be derived. Even though others may assist, she/he is responsible for the selection of personnel, design of the model, assignment of tasks, setting deadlines, obtaining secretarial help, arranging for workspace and schedules, morale, and printing the guide.

The success of the project will depend to a very large degree on the competence of the director. It is imperative that he/she be in touch with every aspect of the project at all times to insure that it is constantly moving in the right direction and that all participants are carrying out their tasks properly.

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