

Cover Story

SUPER TUESDAY

Politics from Hollywood

Filmmakers' agenda elects to entertain in drama or comedy

By Valerie Takahama
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In Frank Capra's 1939 classic "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," James Stewart plays a naive Westerner whose idealism is shaken by rampant corruption in the US Senate. But Stewart stages a grueling filibuster to bring down a crooked colleague, thereby upholding truth, justice and the American way.

In Oliver Stone's "JFK," Kevin Costner plays Jim Garrison, a New Orleans district attorney who sets out to prove that the assassination of President John F. Kennedy was a conspiracy by people in the highest levels of US government. In the end, Garrison fails to make his case with a New Orleans jury, and — at least in the Stone version — the true villains go free.

A lot has changed in the 50-plus years between the making of "Mr. Smith" and "JFK," but one thing remains the same: Hollywood loves a good political yarn. And if it's a story about someone bucking the Washington powers that be, so much the better.

With Super Tuesday upon us today — in this surprisingly contentious and dramatic political year — it seems an ideal time to look at how Hollywood treats politics and politicians.

It's not a pretty picture.

Many political movies focus on loss of ideals, from classics such as "All the King's Men," the 1949 adaptation of Robert Penn Warren's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel about the rise and fall of a Huey Long-like politician, to contemporary dramas such as last year's "True Colors," which tracks the political careers and corruption of two law-school friends.

In the 1972 film "The Candidate," Robert Redford plays a California lawyer who is invited to run for senator. He's groomed for the race by a savvy campaign manager and a smooth media consultant. With his good looks and bland political agenda, the candidate takes off, and he's elected.

The last line, spoken by Redford, has ominous overtones: "What do we do now?"

As "The Candidate" and "JFK" indicate, rising politicians and fallen leaders seem to play better in the movies than working politicians. Hollywood loves lawyers, law enforcers (cops and the FBI) and lawbreakers (petty criminals and gangsters), but not lawmakers. It virtually ignores the actual workings of government, as if they were too tedious or too incredible for the screen.

Instead, it trains its cameras on back-room politics in "The Best Man" (1964) or focuses on political cronyism in "The Last Hurrah" (1977) or comic corruption in "The Great McGinty" (1940).

And many of the most memorable political movies use politics as a backdrop. "All



Jimmy Stewart and Jean Arthur starred 'Mr. Smith Goes to Washington' (1939), in which Stewart plays an honest politician who won't be manipulated by his backers.

the President's Men" (1976) is a study of journalists working to break a political story. "The Manchurian Candidate" (1962) and "The Parallax View" (1974) are thrillers with political settings.

But which movies about politics do people in the business of electing people like to watch? Which films raise their hackles? And what aspects of the current political campaign would they pitch in a Hollywood story idea meeting?

We canvassed some political types to find out.

"The Candidate" is a favorite of Martin Wattenberg, a political science professor at University of California, Irvine, and political consultant David Ellis, whose clients include Rep. Ron Packard, a Republican from Oceanside, and Dana Point Mayor Michael Eggers.

Both Ellis and Wattenberg praise the film's satiric look at the importance of good looks, personality and money in modern media campaigns.

But Wattenberg faults the film for exaggerating and selling politicians short.

"I think it's very informative on how modern TV campaigns work. On the other hand, it exaggerates things in the extent to which you can build an image without any substance behind it," he says.

He particularly dislikes the film's closing line. "It puts out the message that people get elected without any idea of what they're going to do. That never happens," he says.

Wattenberg saves his harshest criticisms for "JFK," Stone's controversial drama.

"I think it's telling our kids stories (that make) them distrust the government and says that our government is so evil and

corrupt that thousands of people would conspire to kill the president to save their own necks," he says.

Nor is the film a favorite of Mark Petracca, another political scientist at UCI, who dislikes Stone's tendency to blend fact with fiction and history with art.

"It's not because they're bad movies. I just think most of his movies do a disservice to the incredible complexity of reality," he says.

Political experts see the current topsy-turvy campaign on both the Republican and Democratic sides as fertile territory for imaginative screenwriters.

Ellis envisions a remake of "Wayne's World," using characters modeled on Jerry Brown and Larry Agran in place of heavy-metal fans Wayne and Garth.

"It would focus on their sort of new wave attempt to tap into a level of public disgust. It would be a great satire," he says.

Petracca pitches another comedy: "An insider's view — a sort of 'Saturday Night Live' take — of what goes on in campaign briefings when President Bush is told what Pat Buchanan has said this time."

He has another idea for a drama centering on the new breed of campaign advisers, the "hired guns who help design campaigns while at the same time representing big business and lobbying groups.

"The public likes a whodunit," he says. "I think trying to piece together — not from what the candidates are saying but uncovering a couple levels underneath that — what happens before the candidate opens his mouth. I think the public would be fascinated by this."

MOVIE GUIDE

Winners in the race for the best rentals

Here's a subjective list of some of the best movies about politics:

■ "Advise and Consent" (1962): Directed by Otto Preminger with Henry Fonda, Don Murray, Charles Laugh-ton. A melodrama based on the best-selling Allen Drury novel about sleazy political dealings and Senate confirmation hearings.

■ "All the King's Men" (1949): Directed by Robert Rossen with Broderick Crawford, Mercedes McCambridge. Crawford won an Academy Award for his portrayal of Willie Stark, a Southern politician based on Louisiana Gov. Huey Long.

■ "All the President's Men" (1976): Directed by Alan J. Pakula with Robert Redford, Dustin Hoffman, Jason Robards. Washington Post reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein go after the story that brings down the Nixon presidency.

■ "The Best Man" (1964): Directed by Franklin Schaffner with Henry Fonda, Cliff Robertson, Edie Adams. Gore Vidal's riveting but dated drama about the smoke-filled rooms at a presidential convention with Fonda as a moderate and Robertson as a reactionary.

■ "The Candidate" (1972): Directed by Michael Ritchie with Robert Redford, Peter Boyle, Melvyn Douglas. Senate candidate Redford compromises his ideals to increase his political viability.

■ "The Parallax View" (1974): Directed by Alan J. Pakula with Warren Beatty, Paula Prentiss. A thriller in which Beatty plays a reporter investigating a senator's assassination.

■ "Power" (1986): Directed by Sidney Lumet with Richard Gere, Gene Hackman, Kate Capshaw, Julie Christie. A melodrama about media manipulation with Gere as a global political consultant.

■ "State of the Union" (1948): Directed by Frank Capra with Spencer Tracy, Katharine Hepburn. Tracy plays a businessman who seems willing to say anything to get elected president but faces opposition from his wife.



Dustin Hoffman, Robert Redford star in 'All the President's Men.'