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6-19-2004

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Recommended Citation

Whitney, Gleaves, "Presidents in the Movies" (2004). *Ask Gleaves*. Paper 99.
http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/ask_gleaves/99

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Presidents in the Movies

Have there been many movies made about the presidents? If so, which ones would you recommend seeing? Do you have a favorite?

Hollywood has produced enough movies about U.S. presidents to constitute a small cottage industry. The top three most frequently portrayed presidents have been -- in this order -- Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy, and Andrew Jackson. Lincoln has been portrayed in more than 150 films, probably because he served in office during our nation's greatest trial, the Civil War. Next has been Kennedy, most famously in *PT 109* (1963), *Prince Jack* (1984), and *JFK* (1991). In third place is Andrew Jackson, who has been played by Charlton Heston twice.



Remarkably, our nation's first president -- the so-called indispensable man, George Washington -- has rarely been the action hero of a major film. In movies about the nation's founding, he has usually been relegated to a minor role. The recent Jeff Daniels production, *Washington's Crossing*, is an exception.

The Smithsonian Institution's exhibit, "The American Presidency: A Glorious Burden," points out that "The presidency has always been an element of feature films, although movies depicting actual or fictional presidents were rarely box-office successes. Early silent classics included *Lincoln*, *the Lover* (1914) and *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). Some films sought to glorify -- *Young Mr. Lincoln*, starring Henry Fonda, *Sunrise at Campobello*, and *PT 109*. Others explored the ambiguity of the office -- *Seven Days in May*, *Nixon*, and *Dr. Strangelove*. More recent movies, like *Air Force One*, *Deep Impact*, and *The American President*, turned the president into an action hero, a romantic leading man, or a symbol of all that is right -- or wrong -- in America."

To elaborate on the answer to your question, Sam, I asked [Laura Bulkeley Goldsmith](#) to offer her insights. She is a perceptive film critic and Hauenstein Center associate. Here is what she wrote:

There are two movies which resonate most for me as they portray (in Hollywood fashion) the lives of our presidents. In some sense they are quite arbitrary in that there have been several films that have admirably tackled the subject matter. The list goes on and on and in fact, I will at some point compile a "Top 25," which again would be subjective but at least in the ballpark of fairness to the artists standing behind these sincere efforts. However, trying to narrow it down to a "favorite" is challenging but exciting. (I had to push the envelope of the question.) My two final choices could not be more different and were chosen almost impulsively.

The easiest choice for me is the musical 1776. Despite the fact that the 1969 Broadway musical by Peter Stone and Sherman Edwards was an enormous hit and won the Pulitzer Prize, despite the fact that it was the first musical comedy ever presented in its entirety at the White House, I never saw a stage production nor did I seek out the 1972 film adaptation. The great film critic Pauline Kael hated it, thinking that it burlesqued the founders. Happily, I saw the film in the late 1990s and fell in love with it. Kael could not have been more wrong.

The film depicts the story of America's first Continental Congress bringing to a vote the question of independence from Great Britain. Simple? No. In order to attempt to come to an agreement, it is decided that there must be drafted a "Declaration," which defines for the world, the ages and for the representatives themselves the grievances and the justice of their cause. The question, so obviously acknowledged by history, amazingly leaves viewers on the edges of their seats. Will they or won't they agree to seek independence?

The cast of this movie is flawless and the music is delightfully memorable. The lyrics are witty and informed, poignant, admiring, yet down-to-earth and all-too-human. Its characterizations are positively prescient in light of our culture's more recent understanding of the founders. Its introduction to the history of the birth of this nation is amazingly and candidly accurate in spirit and insight. Certainly there are some historical inaccuracies and John Adams no doubt did not break into song in the middle of the Continental Congress; after all, this is not a documentary. Nevertheless, the details of the debate over slavery and particularly the entire fight for nationhood in relation to that compromise are remarkably succinct. Flawed men made a shattering compromise after vicious debate; yet clearly, without it, the nation would have never been born at all. As the pragmatic Benjamin Franklin says, and which the film goes to great lengths to impart, history will have to judge the founders, not as "demi-gods." They were "men, no more, no less."

This is the great lesson of the 1776 and why it should be shown in every high school history class in the country. The great men who built the nation were imperfect and did so in an imperfect manner. Richard Henry Lee of Virginia is portrayed as self-important. Stephen Hopkins of Rhode Island was, seemingly, quite fond of rum. John Dickinson of Pennsylvania remains loyal to Britain and is the Declaration's fiercest critic. (He ultimately accepts the judgment of his peers and goes off to fight for independence.) John Hancock comes alive as principled and maddeningly reasonable. Thomas Jefferson of Virginia is taciturn, flawed but clearly the genius that he was.

However, the casting of William Daniels as John Adams and Howard Da Silva as Benjamin Franklin (who both originated their roles on Broadway), is beyond inspired. Their performances are iconic. If Adams and Franklin were not as portrayed by Daniels and Da Silva, they should have been. Remarkably, in recently written historical biographies (David McCullough's book on Adams and Walter Isaacson's on Franklin, both best-sellers), the men are defined largely as they are depicted in the film: the infinitely tenacious, stubborn, strong-willed Adams from Massachusetts and the magnificent, arrogant, witty, charming Benjamin Franklin from Pennsylvania.

The movie is unapologetically patriotic and unique. What could be dry or stodgy (a musical about the Declaration of Independence?!), is actually riveting. The final scene, which re-creates the actual signing of the Declaration to the accompaniment of the calling of the roll and the ringing of the Liberty Bell is, I believe, one of the stirring sequences in American film history.

The presidents in this film are, of course, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson (pre-presidencies, of course). Ingeniously, however, although he never appears on screen, our first president, George Washington, casts an enormous presence over the entire film. His dispatches to the Congress are read by the clerk. They are blunt, eloquent, desperate missives that plead for support. When the clerk finishes each letter and pronounces the name, "G. Washington," every single time a short drum roll is played in the background, as if in reverence for this unseen giant.

Surely, musicals are not universally beloved; however, any student of popular culture and history both, must see 1776. It has been underrated too long. Early editions on VHS were atrocious, in every respect, particularly the "pan and scan" format. The relatively recent release on DVD is outstanding. The movie is restored to wide-screen format, which is essential for songs such as "The Egg" and "Molasses to Rum." Director Peter H. Hunt does commentary and even restores the number, "Cool, Considerate Men," which had been edited out. There are even screen tests in the extras. At our house, we watch 1776 every Fourth of July. Learning of the philosophical debates that drove these radical, incredible men and the compromises they made to achieve independence is educational and inspiring. Now more than ever.

*My second choice for favorite movie about a president might be less known. It is the 1939 black and white production of *Young Mr. Lincoln*, directed by the legendary John Ford and starring Henry Fonda. While 1776 has an uncanny way of suggesting our founders' characters, Ford's film aims for a more elegiac evocation of our mythic understanding of Abraham Lincoln. The film attracted little attention, won no awards and was not even successful financially. (Ford's most popular film of 1939 was the classic *Stagecoach*, starring John Wayne.) Now, it looks like a masterpiece.*

*In the prelude, it deals with Lincoln's discovery of Law (he accepts a law book as payment at his grocery store) and his friendship with Ann Rutledge in New Salem, 1832. The second section depicts a trial in Springfield, 1837, a success that sets Lincoln on his road to his (and his country's) future. The screenplay is by Lamar Trotti, a Ford collaborator on two folksy Will Rogers films of the 1930s. He adapted the trial sequence from an actual trial that took place in 1857 in which Lincoln used *The Farmer's Almanac* to win a case. (As portrayed in the film, due to a moonless night, the witness testifying against Lincoln's client couldn't have seen the murder committed.) However, the timeline and some details are necessarily altered somewhat so as to present a great man in the making as we the audience understand -- and want to understand -- him. As John Ford himself said, "Everyone knows Lincoln was a great man, but the idea of the picture was to give the feeling that even as a young man you could sense there was going to be something great about this man."*

Through the course of Lincoln's journey in the film, he moves from awkward, immature youth to wise adulthood, from inexperience to understanding, from very human to a man of destiny. He is the Lincoln of our collective memories: reading by candlelight in a log cabin, inspired by young Ann to ambition, discovering the Law as Truth. "Why gee," he says, "that's all there is to it, right and wrong!" (Later in the film he says to the prosecutor, "I may not know much of the law, but I know what you're doing is wrong.") Ann's death and her belief in him and this instinctive perception of right and wrong propel Lincoln to seek what's in him and somehow mark his life.

*As portrayed in one of Henry Fonda's great, early performances, Lincoln has this gravitas, yet he is funny and poignant, comic and dramatic as the drawling, awkward young hero, kindly, respectful, admirable, and brilliant. (Fonda would play men of stature and/or quiet dignity again and again throughout his career. His work here certainly sets the stage for films like *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Mister Roberts*, *12 Angry Men*, *Fail-Safe*, and *Midway*.)*

Lincoln finds a sort of home and mother figure in Mrs. Clay (Alice Brady), the mother of two boys he chooses to defend from an accusation of murder. Lincoln becomes Lincoln and enters legend by calming an angry mob and finally, by winning the case with "common man" humor and ingenuity, a point made clear by the public acclaim as he leaves the courthouse

*At the end of *Young Mr. Lincoln*, Abe must walk into history. Ford and Fonda imply this with such poetry: saying goodbye to his sidekick, who asks him where he is going, he says humbly yet almost knowingly, that he'll "walk a bit farther, up to that hill maybe." Not so subtly, this precious moment is followed by "Battle Hymn of the Republic" and a picture of the Lincoln Memorial statue. Those were not necessary. His simple words tell us that he knows his will be a life of duty and destiny.*

This film is not yet available on DVD, but VHS copies can be purchased as part of a Henry Fonda collection.

(Question from Sam G. of Mason, Ohio)