Hollywood's Washington: 
Film Images of National Politics 
During the Great Depression 

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In her recollections of the 1930s, Louise Tanner helped to create an image that has stayed with us despite a number of studies that should have dissolved it by now. Thirties movies were, she insisted, a flop as a source of Communist propaganda. Some studios—notably Warner brothers—tried to bring Father to grips with social reality. But most of the cinemoguls agreed with Louis B. Mayer that Dad got all the social significance he needed at home. The script writers of Hollywood might take the Spanish Civil War to heart but they were more concerned with a public that preferred Carole Lombard doing secretarial work in a penthouse with a white telephone. Father sitting there in the dark forgot his own plight as he watched the gods and goddesses of the screen sweeping down staircases into dining rooms with a footman behind every chair. Depression movies portrayed an America devoid of economic conflict.

An earlier version of this essay was delivered as a paper at the meetings of the Organization of American Historians in Los Angeles, April 5, 1984. Lewis A. Erenberg, Lary May, and Richard Weiss, who responded to my paper on that occasion, have been instrumental in prompting me to reconsider and reformulate a number of my approaches and arguments. I am extremely grateful to them as I am to Thomas Cripps and Gerda Lerner, who took the time to give me fruitful criticisms and ideas for future research, to the staff of the Division of Motion Pictures, Broadcasting, and Recorded Sound of the Library of Congress from whom I learned so much, and especially to David Parker, who suggested the title of this essay to me and shared with me his vast knowledge of film history. Most of the research for this essay was completed while I was a Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.
Tanner was typical in seeing Hollywood as primarily "escapist" and in arguing that when politics did intrude upon this apolitical norm it was invariably the politics of the Far Left. If we have been taught to associate any color with the 1930s, it has been red: the "Red Decade" was filled with left-wing activity and filled as well with Republicans and businessmen—solid, respectableburghers, who feared the specter of imminent communist takeover. The films of the Great Depression constitute an important corrective to some of these standard images in reminding us that there were other fears and other threats stalking the land in the 1930s. The fear of fascism and, indeed, the appeal of fascism, have not yet been dealt with adequately by historians of the Depression. It is ironic that in a decade when fascism was the leading political force in Europe, we have had so little analysis of it as a potential force in the United States.

Ronald Reagan's recent remark coupling fascism and the New Deal would have seemed far less strange in the 1930s themselves. There were those who saw the New Deal as a first step toward not communism but fascism. A month before Roosevelt's inauguration, Norman Thomas returned from a trip to the Middle West and spoke of "a distinct trend toward an American brand of fascist dictatorship and toward war." "Something is happening to America," E. Francis Brown asserted in Current History in the summer of 1933. "Ahead we cannot see, but signs there are which bear out the contention of the Italian newspaper, the Giornale d'Italia, that America is 'on the road to fascism.'" By the end of the year, Harold Loeb and Selden Rodman warned that "certain features of the program of the present Democratic administration in Washington have all the economic earmarks of fascism." Magazine readers in the early years of the New Deal commonly came across articles entitled "Roosevelt—Dictator?" "Fascism and the New Deal," "America Drifts Toward Fascism," "The Great Fascist Plot," "Is America Ripe for Fascism?" "Must America Go Fascist?" "Will America Go Fascist?" "Need the New Deal be Fascist?" Most critics generally agreed with Norman Thomas that FDR did not have the temperament of a fascist dictator, but the machinery he was establishing—especially the National Recovery Administration, with its implicit union of industry and government—constituted the basic threat along with Roosevelt's failure to make sufficient inroads upon the economic and social crisis.

In the mid-1930s a number of books dealt with this specter of emergent fascism. Raymond Gram Swing, in Forerunners of American Fascism (1935), argued that two of the preconditions for fascism—the impoverishment of the middle class and large-scale unemployment—already existed; the third—paralysis of government—was rapidly developing, and the fourth—the threat of a strong communist movement—was being fabricated by a conservative press. Building upon these conditions, Swing fashioned a believable scenario for the repetition of the Italian and German experiences in the United States:
So the condition in this country today is that the New Deal is not doing what it needed to do. And in the country there is the rise of great popular unrest and dissatisfaction. This dissatisfaction will continue to rise. And as it rises the demagogues rise with it. And as they gain momentum, and their following increases, they will be recognized as the coming force in politics. And then the holders of economic power will begin to pay attention to them. And then we may expect to see repeated here the pattern of Germany and Italy, the coalition between the radicals [the demagogues] and the conservatives in the name of national unity. Then we shall be told that the trouble with America is that we have too much liberty, too much individualism . . . and that our Salvation lies in all pulling together, and particularly in bending our wills to the will of the leader. And a good many people will be ready to throw away their liberties as they toss up their hats. We shall then be told that it is un-American to oppose and to criticize. We shall be told that the unequal distribution of economic power is part of the American tradition, just as we are already told that it is against the spirit of the Constitution to advocate economic democracy.

Later in the year, the most popular of the books dealing with American fascism—Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here*—was published. The "it" of course was fascism and the purpose of the book was to show how easily "it" could be made to fit into American life and politics. Thus Lewis wrote of his fascist leader, Berzelius Windrip: "He could dramatize his assertion that he was neither a Nazi or a Fascist but a Democrat—a homespun Jeffersonian-Lincolnian-Clevelandian-Wilsonian Democrat . . . the while he innocently presented as his own warm-hearted Democratic inventions, every anti-libertarian, anti-Semitic madness of Europe."

The novel's able depiction of the Americanization of fascism convinced Hallie Flanagan that it should be mounted as a play by her Federal Theater Project. "When dictatorship comes to threaten a democracy," Flanagan warned, "it comes in an apparently harmless guise, with parades and promises; but . . . when such dictatorship arrives, the promises are not kept and the parade grounds become encampments." *It Can't Happen Here* opened on October 27, 1936 in twenty-two separate productions in eighteen cities, including an English and a Yiddish version in New York City, another Yiddish version in Los Angeles, a Spanish version in Tampa, and a black version in Seattle.

Several months before the play opened, Lawrence Dennis, in *The Coming American Fascism*, joined the chorus predicting the actual
possibility of a fascist takeover in the United States. The difference was that Dennis, himself a fascist, welcomed the imminent revolution. The alternatives to moribund liberal capitalism, he insisted, were fascism or communism. Dennis had no doubt which the American people would choose. Communism would mean the total destruction and reorganization of the present system, while fascism would utilize the existing structure and offer Americans a middle-class rather than a proletarian revolution. "Fascism regards private property rights, private initiative, and the free market . . . as useful institutions." Americans were completely prepared for fascism, Dennis boasted. Advanced technology had already created all the apparatus necessary for total indoctrination while "our national corporations and social organizations have unified and nationalized us into the most standardized people on earth." "Angry and frustrated men with a will to power," Dennis predicted, would utilize all the catchwords of the present system to create "an American fascist party, called by another name, of course.""

This focus upon the promise, or threat, of fascism, which fascinated so many writers by the middle of the thirties, had been a constant preoccupation of Hollywood since the beginning of the decade and was to remain a subject to which films continued to pay close attention until America's entry into World War II. Political films of the early 1930s, whether realistic or melodramatically implausible, most often contained graphic accounts of the nation's plight and vulnerability. In Washington Masquerade, released during the summer of 1932, Lionel Barrymore played Jeff Keane, newly elected reform senator from Kansas, who does battle on the floor of the Senate with the political servants of the nation's power and light monopolies. He rises to remind the senior senator from his state, who had just called government ownership of public utilities "communistic," that

The Almighty Hand . . . placed all the ingredients for the creation of power and light at the disposal of mankind. This land belongs to its millions of people! . . . if we, here in Washington, blinded by old formulas, if we haven't learned the lesson that every wind has carried in these last three tragic years, a hundred million people in this country have learned it. They've been forced to learn it! With the tears streaming down their cheeks, and their families famished—in the land where there's more than plenty! It's my solemn belief that a hundred million people are making up their minds that the things that belong to them and to nobody else, have been taken out of their hands and have been given back to them again at heartbreaking and impossible prices."

Two weeks before Roosevelt's election, Hollywood depicted the crisis more graphically and began to search for a more explicit solution. Wash-
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Figure 1. Walter Huston in *Gabriel Over the White House* (Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, New York).

*Washington Merry-Go-Round* was “Dedicated to those public servants in Washington who despite the hidden malignant force which operates to defeat the principles of representative government, are serving their country sincerely and well.” Again we have a newly elected reform congressman, Button Gwinnett Brown, a descendant of a signer of the Declaration of Independence, who discovers a Washington his ancestor would have wept to see: a city populated by weak, venal congressmen; cynical, manipulative lobbyists; unemployed men and women who no longer have faith in themselves—a city dominated, according to a press release for the film, by an “invisible power that leads, bleeds and squeezes the people of the country!” Presiding over this sad mix is the master lobbyist Norton—a surname given to political evildoers in at least three separate films during the decade—who makes his own intentions clear: “Never in the history of this country has there been a greater opportunity for a strong man. Italy has her Mussolini, Russia her Stalin. Such a man will rise in America too. A man not afraid to break the law.”

Several weeks after Roosevelt's inauguration, William Randolph Hearst's Cosmopolitan Studios, in conjunction with MGM, released *Gabriel Over the White House* (Figure 1), the movies' most searing indictment of conditions and most frightening prescription for action yet.
Whether or not the film echoed "the very heart-cry of the nation," as one ad promised, it certainly echoed the misery of the nation.10 On the day after his inauguration, President Judd Hammond is confronted by an angry reporter with the following litany:

Starvation and want are everywhere. . . . Farmers burn corn and wheat. Food is thrown away into the sea while men and women are begging for bread. Men are freezing without coats while cotton rots in the fields. Thousands of homeless—millions of vacant homes. . . . What does the new administration say to . . . this tale of misery and horror—of lost hope—of broken faith—of the collapse of the American democracy?

Looking like Warren Harding and sounding like Herbert Hoover, President Hammond rests his case on traditional platitudes and faith: "America will weather this depression as she has weathered other depressions . . . Through the spirit of Valley Forge—the spirit of Gettysburg . . . and the spirit of the Argonne. The American people have risen before—and they will rise again."

This gray bureaucrat is transformed not through a rational process of reform or education, but by means of a miracle. Driving his own car recklessly, the president crashes, suffers a severe concussion, and is pronounced "beyond any human help." At this point, the curtains near his deathbed rustle, the spirit of Gabriel presumably enters his body, and the leader is reborn in one of the numerous scenes in which Depression Hollywood resolved a crisis through the process of redemption. The rejuvenated president does more than merely survive; he engages in what can only be called an orgy of action. Proclaiming "As President of these United States my first duty is to the people!", he uses surplus food to feed the hungry; he dispenses aid to the farmers; he enlists the unemployed in an Army of Constructions "subject to military discipline" until a revived industry can reabsorb them; he prevents the foreclosure of mortgages until workmen can go back to work; he protects the people’s bank accounts; he repeals "that cesspool" Prohibition; he ends crime by summarily arresting all racketeers, trying them by military court-martial, and shooting them; he invites representatives of all foreign nations to a disarmament conference on an American battlefield, demonstrates the awesome might of American air power, and bullies them into disarming and paying their debts.

And he accomplishes all of this alone, forcing his formally dominant Cabinet to bend to his will or resign and coercing Congress into declaring a State of National Emergency and according his "full responsibility for the government." Accused by a Senator of subverting "the government of our fathers," he responds: "I believe in democracy as Washington, Jefferson and Lincoln believed in democracy, and if what I plan to do in the name of the people makes me a dictator, then it is a dictator-
ship based on Jefferson's definition of democracy—a 'government for the greatest good of the greatest number.' Collapsing as he uses Lincoln's quill pen to sign the universal disarmament accord, he dies while being assured by his lover that he has proven himself "one of the greatest men who ever lived."

The film's most striking characteristic is the extent to which it anticipated Lewis's novel and made the coming of dictatorship plausible within an American context. Equally significant was the popularity of the film and the relative calm with which it was received. Walter Lippmann dismissed it as "the infantile world of irresistible wishes... A dramatization of Mr. Hearst's editorials," The New Republic denounced it as "a half-hearted plea for fascism," and The Nation accused it of attempting to "convert innocent American movie audiences to a policy of fascist dictatorship in this country." However, most observers saw nothing sinister in its message. The New York Times reviewer summarized its plot as the story of "an earnest and conscientious President who tackles the problems of unemployment, crime and the foreign debts something after the fashion of a Lincoln." The Chicago Tribune hailed it as one of the "six best movies of the windy month" and advised its readers: "Don't miss this one!" The San Francisco Chronicle praised it as the story of "a President [who] suddenly becomes a reformer of government and puts the United States on a prosperous basis." The Commonweal hailed the film's advocacy of the summary court-martial and execution of criminals as "the only possible defense of society against a menace worse than revolution itself. In humanity, justice and decency, there cannot be two sides to such questions." The Hollywood Reporter hoped that the film would "put an end to the great problems that confront our nation today by showing... how a President of the United States handled the situation and the marvelous results he attained."

It was precisely this casual acceptance that helped to create so much of the nervousness that pervaded the decade. Critic Bruce Bliven commented that the audience at performances of Gabriel Over the White House "cheers loudly both the promise of jobs for the unemployed and the threat of a big navy. It is as enthusiastic over the abandonment of democracy as it is over reverential mouthings about Lincoln." If the film had appeared under different conditions, Bliven concluded, "with, for example, Mr. Hoover reelected and the depression suddenly much worse, it might even have had serious political consequences."

Bliven should have been better prepared for this reaction since it had characterized the response to Roosevelt's first Inaugural as well. Although that address has been most frequently remembered for Roosevelt's assurance that the nation had nothing to fear but fear itself, in fact the new president spent much of his time stressing just how monumental the problems were: "Values have shrunk to fantastic levels; taxes have risen; our ability to pay has fallen; government of all kinds is faced by serious curtailment of income; the means of exchange are
frozen in the currents of trade; the withered leaves of industrial enterprise lie on every side; farmers find no markets for their produce; the savings of many years in thousands of families are gone. More important, a host of unemployed citizens face the grim problem of existence and an equally great number toil with little return." When he was not focusing upon what he called "the dark realities of the moment," he was concerned with the need for "a unity of duty hitherto evoked only in time of armed strife" and for the need to "move as a trained and loyal army willing to sacrifice for the good of a common discipline." He hoped that the normal balance of executive and legislative authority would be "wholly adequate to meet the unprecedented task before us." Should it not be, "I shall not evade the clear course of duty that will then confront me. I shall ask the Congress for the one remaining instrument to meet the crisis—broad Executive power that would be given to me if we were in fact invaded by a foreign foe." The people of the United States, he concluded, "have asked for discipline and direction under leadership. They have made me the present instrument of their wishes. In the spirit of the gift I take it."13

Eleanor Roosevelt found her husband's inauguration a "little terrifying... because when Franklin got to that part of his speech when he said it might become necessary for him to assume powers ordinarily granted to a president in war time, he received his biggest demonstration."14 She could hardly have taken much comfort from the reaction of the nation's newspapers. Under such headlines as "FOR DICTATORSHIP IF NECESSARY," and "BROAD POWER SOUGHT IF CONGRESS DELAYS," the press widely reported the President's warnings, noted the applause with which they had been greeted, quoted such officials as Representative Black of New York who praised the President's courageous willingness "to assume the entire burden of the complex problem himself," and generally refrained from showing any marked signs of concern or dismay.15

There were other disconcerting signs as well, from Al Smith's desire to see the government become "a tyrant, a despot, a real monarch," as it had during World War I when it "took our Constitution, wrapped it up and laid it on the shelf and left it there until it was over," to Republican Governor Alfred M. Landon's conclusion that "Even the iron hand of a national dictator is in preference to a paralytic stroke," to the confession of the business magazine Barron's that "Sometimes openly and at other times secretly, we have been longing to see the superman emerge. The question whether Mr. Roosevelt properly belongs in that category is not now answerable; the point is that for the moment he acts like one." Barron's realized that dictatorship was contrary to the spirit of American institutions. "And yet—well, a genial and lighthearted dictator might be a relief from the pompous futility of such a congress as we have recently had... Only, let our semi-dictator smile upon us as he semi-dictates."16
Though this kind of enthusiasm for authoritarianism seemed to diminish, especially as Hitler's regime became more overtly brutal, it never receded completely. In King Vidor's *Our Daily Bread*, released a year and a half after Roosevelt's inauguration, a group of unemployed people take refuge on an abandoned farm and attempt to establish a viable community based on simple barter, subsistence farming, and self-government. Someone suggests they turn to socialism for their governmental model and another voice suggests democracy, but a Swedish immigrant carries the day with his logic: "We got a big job here and we need a big boss." The business journal *Fortune* agreed. It devoted its July 1934 issue to praising Italian fascism and wondering whether "Fascism is achieving in a few years or decades such a conquest of the spirit of man as Christianity achieved only in ten centuries." Though it proclaimed itself "non-Fascist," *Fortune* concluded that "the good journalist must recognize in Fascism certain ancient virtues of the race, whether or not they happen to be momentarily fashionable in his own country. Among these are Discipline, Duty, Courage, Glory, Sacrifice."17

On the surface, the films of the 1930s were far less disposed than *Our Daily Bread* to grasp the naked hand of authority. More typically, they seemed to lend their energies to warning against, rather than calling for, the emergence of the big boss. In late 1934, just two weeks after General Smedley Butler started a congressional committee with the assertion that he had been approached to lead a fascist putsch, Walter Wanger, who was convinced that the public was "eager... for themes that dare to grapple with real problems," released *The President Vanishes*, which was advertised as containing "revelations of the forces behind the operations of the nation."18 These forces are identified as a group of power brokers—a banker, politician, newspaper publisher, judge, oil man, and master lobbyist—who are described by the lobbyist's cynical wife as "the government of the United States. They don't hold any office but things happen because they want them to happen." They use their resources and their hold on the mass media to promote a war to maximize their profits and recoup the loans they made to Europe in World War I. They search for a slogan which like those of the past—REMEMBER THE ALAMO, REMEMBER THE MAINE, KEEP THE WORLD SAFE FOR DEMOCRACY—will stampede the people into war. Finding their motto—SAVE AMERICA'S HONOR—they manipulate public opinion, undermine the president—"America... a great country without a leader. We need a man!"—and finance a paramilitary group, the Gray Shirts, who give a slightly modified fascist salute as they bark out the password, "Union!" "Today we number millions," their leader Lincoln Lee tells them. "Tomorrow we will encompass the earth. He who stands in our way must be destroyed. That goes for brother and sister and rulers in high places." *The New Republic*, which had been convinced that movies "getting after such sacred trumpery in earnest could not be made," was awed by the manner in which this film, despite its many oversimplifications, pinpointed those
elements in the society which "will work in just about this way, ostensibly for God and actually for profits, with all this ballyhoo of press and radio." Audiences, the New York Daily News found, responded with enthusiasm to the film's message, frequently breaking into spontaneous applause. 19

By the end of the decade, in Confessions of a Nazi Spy (1939), the threat to the American form of government had become both external and internal. A German-financed German-American Nazi movement waged a campaign against what its leader called "the chaos that breeds in democracy and racial equality" and worked for the day when the United States would become "Unser Amerika—Our America," a nation free to solve its problems without the restraints imposed by the Constitution or the Bill of Rights. What was under attack was not just a nation, the prosecutor tells the jury during the spy trial which ends the film, "America is not simply one of the remaining democracies. America is democracy. A democracy that has a God-given inspiration of free men determined to defend forever the liberty which we have inherited."

On the eve of America's entry into World War II, Meet John Doe introduced the American people to D. B. Norton, a fabulously wealthy media baron with his own private army and his own distinctive ambitions. "These are daring times," he tells a group of businessmen, labor leaders, and political bosses. "We're coming to a new order of things. There's too much talk been going on in this country. Too many concessions have been made. What the American people need is an iron hand. Discipline!" In one of the most affecting scenes in the film, Norton's disillusioned and slightly drunk editor, Connell, who has just learned of his employer's intention to become dictator, tells John Doe of his feelings for the American system: "I'm a sucker for this country. I'm a sucker for the Star Spangled Banner and I'm a sucker for this country. I like what we got here. I like it. A guy can say what he wants and do what he wants without having a bayonet shoved through his belly. . . . And we don't want anyone coming around changing it, do we? No sir! And when they do I get mad. I get boilin' mad. . . . I get mad for a guy named Washington and a guy named Jefferson and Lincoln. Lighthouses, John. Lighthouses in a foggy world."

On the whole, then, Depression Hollywood came to the defense of the traditional American democratic system in the face of rising authoritarianism, but its defense was ridden through by a recurrent streak of pessimism and doubt. From the beginning of the decade, Hollywood evinced a pervasive ambivalence concerning the American people, who were constantly referred to as the core and hope of the state but who were depicted again and again as weak, fickle, confused sheep who could be frightened, manipulated, and controlled. This tendency can be seen as early as American Madness (1932) which combined eloquent praise of the people with brilliant scenes of frenzied mobs succumbing to rumors and storming the banks. President Hammond in Gabriel Over the White
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House refers to the people as "the roots of the nation," claims that he exists "only by the will of the people," and yet speaks of the need "to arouse the stupid, lazy people of the United States" and chooses to rule them without their consent. President Stanley in The President Vanishes asserts, "I have faith in the American people"; yet he lies and schemes "to bring the American people back to their senses." In film after film, hardened politicians understand and exploit the weaknesses of the public they ostensibly serve.

In The Phantom President (1932), a smooth-talking, charismatic medicine-show doctor takes the place of the dull presidential candidate he physically resembles, prescribes a medicine of thirteen herbs that will cure the country, and is elected by gullible voters. The identical theme is reiterated on the local political level in The Dark Horse (1932). A gubernatorial candidate, Zachary Hicks ("Hicks, The Man from the Sticks"), who is characterized as "so dumb that every time he opens his mouth he subtracts from the sum total of human knowledge," is a certain loser until his campaign is taken over by a manager who teaches him to answer every question, "Yes—and again—no," and to plagiarize from the speeches of Abraham Lincoln. The film ends with Hicks' triumph and the political sharpster's departure to manage an equally insipid candidate in another state. In Thanks a Million (1935), a cynical political manager dumps his party's uninspiring gubernatorial candidate in favor of an apolitical crooner who is elected by charming the people with his quips and songs. In The President Vanishes, the special interest groups are so successful in fomenting the war spirit among the people that the president arranges to have himself kidnapped to take the electorate's mind off war. "Three days ago the people were crying for war," a newspaper publisher observes. "Now they're crying for just one thing—the President." In almost every politically focused Depression film from Washington Merry-Go-Round (1932) to Meet John Doe (1941), public opinion is portrayed as equally mindless and volatile, succumbing to the last persuasive voice it is exposed to. "We've been fed baloney so long we're getting used to it," a citizen in the latter film laments.

In addition to their other faults, the people are frequently portrayed as blindly self-interested. Everyone constantly comes to Washington "to get something. Why doesn't someone come to give something?" a congressman asks the Bonus Marchers in Washington Merry-Go-Round. "Why don't you help the government instead of hindering it? . . . You call yourselves ex-service men, why don't you call yourselves service-men?" This attempt to arouse the people to go beyond their own immediate interests and act for the general welfare, was common in Depression movies. The gangster film Scarface (1932) began with the challenge: "This picture is an indictment of gang rule in America and of the callous indifference of the government to this constantly increasing menace to our safety and our liberty. . . . The government is your government. What are You going to do about it?"
Hollywood's tendency to place responsibility for the nation's plight upon the people themselves was accompanied by a tendency to view the people as unable or at least unlikely to free themselves from their own narrow concerns. John Doe's (and Frank Capra's) alter ego, the hobo known as "The Colonel," refers to this when he defines one of his favorite terms—"Heelots":

a lot of heels. They begin creeping up on ya, trying to sell you somethin'. They got long claws and they get a stranglehold on ya. And you squirm and you duck and you holler and you try to push them away, but you haven't got a chance. They gotcha! First thing you know, you own things. . . . You're not the free and happy guy you used to be. You gotta have money to pay for all those things. So you go after what the other fella's got. And there you are: you're a heelot yourself.

Ambivalence toward the people was paralleled by an ambivalence concerning politics. This took the form of a deep suspicion of politicians and the political process. One John Doe club in a small town refuses to let the mayor join, explaining: "You know how politicians are!" Indeed, if Hollywood audiences didn't know, they soon learned as they watched a parade of greedy, short-sighted politicians in movies depicting national and local politics. There were exceptions, such as The Man Who Dared (1933), the biography of Mayor Anton Cermak of Chicago who was killed by a bullet intended for president-elect Roosevelt, and who in the film turns to Roosevelt and whispers with his dying breath: "I'm glad it was me and not you." This positive image was more than matched by such films as The Night Mayor (1932), based on the life of New York's playboy mayor, Jimmy Walker, whom Roosevelt forced to resign, or The Great McGinty (1940), which depicted the rise of a politician who began as a bum voting thirty-eight times in one municipal election and rose through the ranks to become alderman, mayor, and governor only to fall when he attempted in one brief flash of honesty to buck the machine and help the poor. "This is the story," the film's introduction tells us, of a man who "was dishonest all his life except one crazy minute. . . . [and] had to get out of the country." McGinty's moment of honesty was rare; most Hollywood politicians were not that imaginative. Closer to the mark was The Phantom President, in which the vision of a senator's smug face dissolves into the image of a horse's ass.

The Washington Post reviewer who took Capra to task for making every politician in Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, save the hero himself, "a moving force of dishonesty, thievery, treachery and corruption," could have extended his charge to virtually every other film dealing with politics. The Columbia Pictures press release for Washington Merry-Go-Round boasted that its congressman hero "alone among his asso-
ciates seems to want to give anything to the government. The rest, almost without exception, are looking for everything they can get out of it."

Paradoxically, this deep suspicion of politics and politicians was linked with a constant appeal for greater political direction. The clergyman praying for the safe return of the kidnapped president in *The President Vanishes*, speaks of how desperately the American people need their leader: “He preached the precious gospel of peace. In our frenzied greed we struck him down. Oh God, restore him to us so that he may lead us in the paths of righteousness.” This paradox often resolved itself through a demand for leaders who would rise above politics, who would be greater than the system, above petty argumentation, ordinary concerns, sordid selfish interests. Such figures came closest to realization in the divinely inspired President Judd Hammond of *Gabriel Over the White House* or Capra’s simple creations, Jefferson Smith and John Doe, whose innocence and goodness allow them to transcend the system.

In thirties’ movies, as well as in many other aspects of Depression culture, there was a tendency to utilize patriotic symbolism, especially that of the Civil War, and to take heart from the examples of extraordinary individuals—Abraham Lincoln being a favorite—who were clothed in a quasi-religious aura. How pervasive the Lincoln image could be is manifest in *Gabriel Over the White House*, in which President Hammond uses Lincoln’s quill pen to sign the disarmament accords, has a bust of Lincoln in his office, takes inspiration from hearing his followers sing “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” and uses the following Lincolnesque rhetoric to address the Bonus Army:

> It is not fitting for citizens of America to come on weary feet to seek their President. It is rather for their President to seek them out, and to bring to them freely the last full measure of protection and health. And so I come to you."

This spiritual elevation of the leader could easily have the effect of diminishing his followers. At the close of *The President Vanishes*, a grateful President Stanley offers that small band of followers who stood by him anything they want. Val the grocery boy asks only that he be given a photo of his leader signed “to my faithful subject.” When the First Lady protests, “You’re not a subject. This is a Republic!” Val counters, “I know all that but that’s what I want,” and assures Stanley in a worshipful tone, “Anything you want is okay with me, Mr. President.”

Ambivalent feelings about the people and the politicians often helped lead to a quiet but pervasive sense of despair concerning the future of both the individual and democracy. This despair can be seen in how often those who champion the cause of the people and the cause of democracy are forced to go beyond the democratic method, are forced to lie to and manipulate the people for their own good. This dilemma is at
the core of Hollywood's Washington; indeed, it helps to define it. In *Washington Merry-Go-Round* and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, the attempts of two freshman congressmen to reform the system by working through it have disastrous results. Representative Brown is thrown out of the House by a bogus electoral recount staged by the local political machine in his state, and Senator Smith's reputation and political future are almost destroyed by the machine-ruled press of his home state. Both are forced to go beyond politics to save the people from their own democratic political system. In *Gabriel Over the White House*, the newly inspired President Hammond can protect the people from the rigors of the economic disaster only by abandoning the system entirely and ruling without it. In *The President Vanishes*, the only way in which the decent President Stanley can prevent the nation from being stampeded into war by the special interests is to stage his own kidnapping and blame it on the Gray Shirts, whose leader he has murdered. He can find no way of utilizing the system itself in order to save it. He must ape the methods of the interests he is fighting; he must deceive a gullible public for its own good; he must break the law in order to uphold it.

In *Meet John Doe*, the answer to the crisis of the Great Depression resides not in the government but in the John Doe clubs that blossom all over the nation, in which local people dedicate themselves to helping each other. Still, it is clearly implied that without the media-manufactured symbol of the great and good quintessential American John Doe, the clubs would crumble and the people would be incapable of sustaining their local efforts. Thus, even in those many movies which do not openly advocate authoritarian rule, which in fact combat it, the thrust is toward the importance of the leader. Contrasted with the venal politicians, greedy lobbyists, and the confused, easily led public, a figure such as President Stanley is wise, patient, and good. Although the means he employs are illegal and immoral, he is vindicated because he uses them for the greater good.

This disturbing picture of leadership in a democracy is paralleled by the equally disturbing focus upon the need for vigilante action; not only is it necessary for the leader to go beyond the system, but the people too must take matters into their own hands. *This Day and Age* (1933) has become the symbol of this focus. A group of high school students, disgusted by the failure of the courts to convict the murderer of a local shopkeeper and a fellow student, take matters into their own hands. They kidnap the murderer, try him in a dark, deserted brickyard where hundreds of frenetic students conduct what one of them calls "a court of justice if not of law as you understand it." "We haven't got time for rules of evidence," they inform him as they obtain his confession by lowering him into a pit filled with rats. To the tune of the Revolution's "Yankee Doodle Dandy" and other traditional American songs, they ride him on a rail back to town where they invade the home of the judge who originally freed the murderer and force him to hear the confession. A re-
lieved judge and sheriff praise the "heroic" boys and retrospectively legitimate their methods by deputizing the boys. Newspaper ads invited the public to "SEE... COURAGEOUS YOUTH... throwing off the yoke of oppression as their forefathers did before them... 5000 torches light the heavens... 10,000 glowing faces flame with eagerness, determination, and undying courage... as civilization goes on trial." Cecil B. De Mille, the ads promised, "shows us where we're heading.

This Day and Age was the most egregious and most effective portrayal of the need for citizens to take the law into their own hands, but it was by no means unique; it represented a popular genre—especially in the early years of the Depression. Song of the Eagle (1933) told the story of Prohibition through the saga of the Hoffman family, who build a brewery, lose it during Prohibition, and attempt to begin again when the Eighteenth Amendment is repealed, only to be terrorized by gangsters who destroy their trucks and raid their customers. Young Bill Hoffman looks for relief not to the law but to his wartime buddies whom he enlists to "fight fire with fire" as they successfully adopt the gangsters' own methods to save the brewery. Paramount Studios boasted that the film depicted the situation that would confront the nation as soon as alcohol was legalized again. The film offered, one ad promised, "a decisive solution to the problem confronting every American citizen." "This is your country," another ad announced. "Are you going to save it?"

Certainly, Hollywood was perfectly capable of advocating legal means of redressing wrongs. In Young Mr. Lincoln (1939), the hero defends two clients against a lynch mob with his folksy wisdom: "Trouble is when men start takin' the law into their own hands, they're just as apt in all the confusion and fun to start hangin' somebody who's not a murderer as somebody who is. Then the next thing you know they're hangin' one another just for fun... We seem to lose our heads in times like this. We do things together that we'd be mighty ashamed to do by ourselves." This antivigilante tone characterized a number of films produced in the second half of the 1930s: Fury (1936), The Legion of Terror (1936), Black Legion (1936), They Won't Forget (1937), and Mountain Justice (1937).

However, in the early 1930s most political films emphasized the need for forms of extraordinary action. In Washington Merry-Go-Round, the master lobbyist Norton cannot be controlled by official Washington, which he dominates, but only by a group of ex-soldiers (led by the deposed Representative Brown) who kidnap him, force him to confess, and then give him a gun with which to commit suicide. In Gabriel Over the White House, a military judge tells the gangster he is sentencing to death that "we have in the White House a man who has enabled us to cut the red tape of legal procedures and get back to first principles. An eye for an eye, Nick Diamond! A tooth for a tooth! A life for a life!"

This need to continually go beyond the system helped to create the
mood of bleak pessimism that characterized so many of these films. Always implicit in them was the message that the system no longer worked, no longer could contain the powerful forces that everywhere beset it, no longer could be responsive to the people it ostensibly served. The satirical political films of the Depression reflected the identical theme. In his extremely popular *Million Dollar Legs* (1932), W. C. Fields portrayed the president of Klostockia, who is forced by his country’s political process to win his office anew each morning in an Indian-wrestling match. He attends cabinet meetings toting a gun and wearing brass knuckles, while those around him engage in meaningless intrigues against him. A year later, the Marx Brothers went even further in depicting the meaninglessness of government. In *Duck Soup* (1933), Rufus T. Firefly (Groucho Marx) becomes President of Freedonia and makes it clear from the beginning that he will be corrupt since corruption is an inherent part of authority. Upon taking office he sings:

The last man nearly ruined this place,
He didn’t know what to do with it.
If you think this country’s bad off now,
Just wait till I get through with it.

He irresponsibly steers the nation toward war and when peace threatens, he cries out: “But there must be a war—I’ve paid a month’s rent on the battlefield.” Nothing has meaning: not country, not war, not patriotism, not even language. “Think of a number from one to ten,” Groucho tells Chico. “Eleven,” Chico replies. “Right!” Groucho declares. At the film’s climax, with Freedonia triumphant, Margaret Dumont begins to sing the national anthem and the Marx Brothers pelt her with apples.

Political films were not alone in communicating this message. It pervaded the crime films and G-men films of the decade. When the gangster Tony Camonte in *Scarface* refers happily to the “Writ of Homicide” that so often rescues him from the police, he is articulating something very much on Hollywood’s mind in the 1930s: the system of justice has been taken over by sinister forces. All too frequently it was gangsters and corrupt politicians rather than honest citizens who benefited from constitutional legalities and the courts. And in back of the gangsters in film after film were respectable bankers and businessmen. “This is a business,” a gangster says in *You Can’t Get Away With Murder* (1939). “Don’t you think those Wall Street guys got their hands in everybody’s pocket?” Racketeers, a crusading publisher in *Bullets or Ballots* (1936) testifies, “have the American public pretty well whipped. . . . [They] laugh at your laws, they make a joke of your courts. They rule by the fear of their bullets. They must be smashed by the power of your ballots.” The need to root out lawlessness through the system was the ostensible message of this film. Its effective message was articulated by an aroused police commissioner, who tells the gang boss whose premises he is searching with-
out a warrant. "Go get your restraining orders and injunctions and anything else you need. The police used to waste a lot of time getting them trying to stop you. From now on we act first. We'll let you waste your time getting 'em. Maybe you can stop us."

So long as the police operated within the law, so long would they be incapable of coping with their adversaries. This was the premise of the entire popular genre of private-eye movies and books. The private detective looked much wiser and was much more effective than the regular policemen precisely because he was free, as they were not, to emulate the procedures of the criminal: he could—and did—forcibly enter, threaten and beat witnesses, destroy evidence, lie to authorities. The distinction between him and the criminals he fought resided not in the methods employed but the end for which each labored. The means, a desperate Hollywood seemed to be saying, were less important than the ends.

This desperation, this perception that it was less and less possible to achieve traditional ends through the existing system, helped to give birth to a new folk figure in the late Depression years. In 1938, Superman made his first appearance in Action Comics and became the prototype of a host of heroes who were to become dominant in American culture in the coming decades and who constituted a logical extension of the political films I have been discussing. Fantasies were not new to the 1930s, but the nature of the prevailing fantasies is revealing. Superman had existed before in American culture. In the superheroes of the mid-nineteenth century, we find a concern with overcoming the environment. Real people might have to struggle with the vastness of American nature; their super fantasies like Mike Fink and Davy Crockett did not. One hundred years later the concern had shifted from the environment to the bureaucracy, from nature to society. Actual people of the 1930s might be confined by and have to respond to institutions, but their super projections did not. Thus, though Superman and his clones functioned with the consent of the law, they operated outside of it. Nowhere is it recorded that Superman stopped for a writ of habeas corpus before breaking down a wall to capture the criminals. Tony Camonte would have been most displeased. If there was in the 1930s a growing consciousness of the centrality of institutions, it was accompanied by a good deal of anger and discontent, by much awareness of the fact that the system no longer operated as it had been designed to. This distrust of modern institutions, this sense that the world no longer functioned as it was supposed to, that the old verities and certainties no longer held sway, formed the bridge of continuity between aspects of 1930s culture and the bleak film noir mood of the 1940s.25

Depression films help us to perceive continuity in still another area. Few contemporary historians would portray the 1920s without dealing with the cultural politics that were so central to the decade. For some time now we have understood the 1920s as a period of cultural conflict—
a period of dissonance between the traditional ideals and the new patterns of modern living, between small-town ways and the new urban presence, between the long-standing model of what an American was and the new realities of what Americans were actually becoming. Similarly, it would be difficult to find serious students of the 1950s who would fail to focus upon the emergence or reemergence of the politics of culture in that decade in order to understand such phenomena as McCarthyism or the American reactions to the Cold War. Indeed, one cannot understand contemporary America and the phenomenon of Ronald Reagan without some comprehension of these cultural tensions.

If these cultural forces were so important in the 1920s and reemerged after World War II as central aspects of the political landscape, what happened to them during the Great Depression? Our notion of the 1930s has for too long ignored this central question. Our preoccupation with the issues of politics and the economy in the thirties and the war in the forties has beguiled us into believing that the salient cultural issues disappeared. We have chosen to highlight those parts of the Depression that had to do with the New Deal—with reformation, progress, and the ongoing emergence of the new society and economy. Insofar as we have recognized the existence of cultural dissonance in the Depression, we have confined it to such peripheral groups as the Midwestern Regionalists, who filled their paintings with nostalgia for a faded Arcadia, or the Southern Agrarians with their endless lament for a lost world, their angry tirade against urban culture and urban peoples, and their resistance to what Alan Tate called “that all-destroying abstraction, America.”

The films of the 1930s remind us that similar laments could be found in the mass culture of the Great Depression. A significant number of the decade’s films were concerned with restoration, as if something had been removed from American life. Senator Jeff Keane in Washington Masquerade refers to a group of corrupt politicians and lobbyists, who had tempted him to forgo his crusade for reform, as “men like you—men who prowl into . . . people’s houses right beneath their breasts where their hearts beat. And for what? So that you can take this land that Washington gave us and make it your own and laugh at us!” Referring to the special interests, Representative Button Gwinnett Brown in Washington Merry-Go-Round charges, “They’ve made a scrap of paper out of the Declaration of Independence, they’ve made a joke out of the Constitution.” “We’re going to have law and order again,” he tells the lobbyist Norton. “The people are not going to stop until they get their government back.”

Our Daily Bread, King Vidor’s story of a group of Depression victims who find refuge on an abandoned farm, gets to the heart of Hollywood’s restoration theme. On the farm they learn that, as one of them puts it, the earth “makes you feel safe, confident. . . . It’s like a mother.” Going back to the land helps them discover themselves and sort out their
priorities. The snake in the garden is an urban woman who corrupts the community’s simple, earthy leader and convinces him to go to the city with her. “Don’t think back, baby,” she tells him. “Think ahead!” Throughout the films of the Depression it was the city, as the representative of modernity, that corrupted the traditional dream and fouled the promise of America; the city that spawned the amoral men and fallen women of the gangster films; the city that formed the backdrop for the glittering but empty antics of the glamorous men and women of the decade’s screwball comedies.

Hollywood’s Washington became a symbol of the forces and developments that had derailed America from its destiny and led it astray. Into the nation’s capital, trooped a group of starry-eyed reformers from small-town America who quickly become the dupes or victims of the sordid, cynical urban businessmen, journalists, politicians, and lobbyists. Senator Jeff Keane is attracted to a beautiful, sophisticated woman, secretly in the employ of corrupt interests, and led to abandon his ideals and desert the people who elected him; Representative Button Gwinnett Brown is deprived of the office to which he was rightly elected; Senator Jefferson Smith is pilloried, mocked, and almost destroyed; President Craig Stanley is dragged to the brink of impeachment for daring to champion the traditional pacifism of the American people against the avarice of hungry capitalists; the idealistic James Pomeroy in *Breach of Promise* (1932) sees his campaign for the U.S. Senate disrupted by blackmail inspired by a rural woman who became a “wild girl” in the city.

The full dimensions of this cultural conflict are revealed in the works of the Depression’s best known and most widely admired creator of film: Frank Capra. Although Capra did not treat the nation’s capital until *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* in 1939, he dealt with national issues from the very beginning of the Great Depression. In *American Madness* (1932), the first American film to depict the banking crisis in any detail, Capra told the story of Tom Dixon, a banker who championed the average depositor in a manner that buttressed traditional values. “Let’s get the right kind of security,” he tells his directors. “Not stocks and bonds that zigzag up and down. Not collateral on paper but character. Character! It’s the only thing you can bank on and it’s the only thing that’ll pull this country out of the doldrums.”

In *American Madness* we get the first clear statement of the dichotomy that runs through so much of Capra’s mature work and so many of Hollywood’s films in general: the dichotomy between a real and a fantasy society. The camera lovingly shows us the workings of a large modern urban bank, but this documentary realism is belied by the bank president who tells us that he personally reviews each and every loan application and, most fantastic of all, that “most of the depositors I know personally. I’ve seen them grow up in the community. I knew their fathers and mothers before them.” Materially, Capra depicted a modern urban bank;
spiritually and ideologically he gave us a nineteenth-century small-town bank. The combination reveals the great dissonance that existed between Capra's ideals and the situation he and other Americans were facing in the 1930s: they brought nineteenth-century small-town values and expectations to bear on a crisis involving twentieth-century modern bureaucracies. This portrait of an idealistic banker who first loses his faith in the people as he watches them succumb to rumors and stage a run on his bank and then regains his faith when the mob suddenly listens to those who remind it of how he had helped them when they needed him, lacks only one of the ingredients that came to characterize Capra's quintessential Depression films: the overt struggle between small-town and big-city values. This Capra added in his Depression trilogy: *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), and *Meet John Doe* (1941).

In each of these films Capra focused upon a small-town hero who came, like a lamb to the slaughter, into the midst of the sharpsters and hucksters of the big city, suffered profound humiliation and disillusionment, and survived to convert the heroine and the cynical newspapermen whom Capra used to symbolize urban values. In *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, Capra has his hero Jefferson Smith say, "great principles get lost unless they come to life." That is precisely the function of the Capra hero: he brings great principles to life; he unites traditional ideals and action. It was no accident that the name of Capra's first hero in this vein, Longfellow Deeds, was a combination of the nineteenth-century poet/thinker, Longfellow, and the man of action, of deeds—the man who, as Patrick Gerster has pointed out, is *deeded* the American tradition and clarifies its meaning for others. Thus when the hard-boiled newspaper reporter Babe Bennett, whose name symbolizes just how much urban Americans have to learn from their small-town countrymen, escorts Deeds to Grant's Tomb and remarks that most people find it a letdown, Deeds responds, "Oh, that depends on what they see," and proceeds to become her teacher by sharing his vision with her:

I see a small Ohio farm boy becoming a great soldier. I see thousands of marching men. I see General Lee with a broken heart surrendering. And I can see the beginning of a new nation like Abraham Lincoln said. And I can see that Ohio boy being inaugurated as president. Things like that can only happen in a country like America.

In *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, Capra once again married the image of the thinker, the idealist, the nineteenth-century giver of tradition—Jefferson—with Everyman—Smith. Jefferson Smith, the head of the Boy Rangers in, and the newly appointed U. S. Senator from, a Western state, is in effect a grown-up Boy Scout—the idealized image of what we had all been in our youth, of what America had been in its
youth—come to Washington. In this film, as in the others, we have Capra's classic double conversion: first, Smith's worldly-wise assistant Saunders and her coterie of newspaper cynics are converted by the innocence and wisdom of Smith and then they help to restore his faith when the corruption and lack of ideals he finds in Washington depress him severely. It is only after she comes to appreciate Smith that Saunders is able to reveal her own small-town origins and her long-hidden first name, Clarissa—a traditional piece of herself that she had learned to repress in the atmosphere of the nation's modern urban capital.

Babe Bennett and Clarissa Saunders, like their counterpart, Anne Mitchell, in *Meet John Doe*, are drawn back to the small-town innocence and unpretentiousness they—and America—have somewhere lost. They had been, as Babe puts it, "too busy being smart alecks. Too busy in a crazy competition for nothing." But with the help of unspoiled individuals like Deeds, Smith, and Doe, whom America presumably still had in abundance, they could redeem themselves. And this is precisely what so many of Capra's—and Hollywood's—Depression films are about: redemption. As Leonard Quart has observed, Capra was not concerned with the politics of social restructuring or revolution but with the politics of conversion and moral regeneration. If the films of the early Depression flirted with the need for social change and authority, Capra's political films dealt with the need for a return to the basics of American tradition. At the heart of his later films, Capra has written,

was the rebellious cry of the individual against being trampled into an ort by massiveness—mass production, mass thought, mass education, mass politics, mass wealth, mass conformity . . . a growing resentment against being compartmentalized.

In a 1972 interview, Capra put his message more succinctly: "you dirty bastards, get off our necks!"

It is important to understand that there is something deeper going on in Capra's films than the mere recitation of past virtues. Capra is struggling to understand how traditional American values and means could be made to work in contemporary America. Thus Capra progressively enlarges the scope of his canvas. While Tom Dixon faces a conservative board of bank directors and a frightened group of depositors, Deeds faces urban snobbery, cynicism, and petty larceny, Smith faces the entrenched power of the United States Senate, and John Doe faces the massive power of a media baron determined to become a fascist dictator. Capra kept expanding his investigation and less and less could he find satisfactory or believable ways out of the dilemma in which his representative traditional American man found himself. In film after film the villain becomes increasingly invulnerable to attack; you can stymie him and thwart some of his specific goals, but you cannot perma-
nently defeat him, for in the end he has the power. This is graphically
demonstrated at the end of Meet John Doe when D. B. Norton silences
the hero at a political convention by cutting off the microphone—that is,
by literally keeping the source of power in his own hands.

This telling scene reminds us that Capra focused on not only the
values of traditional small-town America but also its chief means of
communication: oral culture. His heroes invariably function through the
spoken word while many of his urban villians—cynical newspaper re-
porters and snobbish literary types—are people of the written word. It is
when they are shorn of their ability to speak directly with the people
that Capra’s heroes are at the nadir of their political influence: Tom
Dixon unable to speak the truth effectively in the midst of a riotous run
on his bank; Longfellow Deeds prevented by a severe personal depres-
sion from speaking in his own behalf at his insanity trial; Jefferson
Smith threatened with silence by the rules of the Senate; John Doe
attempting to address his followers through a dead mike.31

It was this dilemma—this futile search for ways in which to make
the means and ends of traditional America effective again—that made it
so difficult for Capra to find appropriate endings for his political films.
Capra filmed five different endings for his final Depression film, Meet
John Doe, in one of which, Gary Cooper, portraying a frustrated, impo-
tent Doe unable to expose the fascist ambitions of D. B. Norton, plunges
to his death from the city hall on Christmas Eve. Capra has testified
that he did not dare to use this ending. “You just don’t kill Gary Cooper.
It’s a hell of a powerful ending, but you just can’t kill Gary Cooper.”32 Of
course, it was not Gary Cooper that Capra was afraid of killing; it was a
dream, a hope, an ideal that he did not dare portray as dead. If Capra
could not allow Doe to destroy himself, neither could he allow him to
triumph. The film ends with Doe being led away from his intended
suicide perch by a small band of people who harbor the improbable
dream of rebuilding the network of John Doe Clubs that Norton had
wrecked.

Capra’s difficulties with Meet John Doe were not unique; he had diffi-
culty finding endings for all his political films. The reason was not aes-
thetic; it was that the logical endings, the effective endings that flowed
organically from all of the facts and details that Capra gave his audi-
ces, were not those endings Capra wanted. In life, Tom Dixon would
have lost control of his bank, or, at the very least, lost his faith in the
people; in life, Longfellow Deeds would have been committed to an insane
asylum or, at the very least, lost control of his millions; in life, Jefferson
Smith would have been expelled from the Senate, or, at the very least,
been beaten into impotent quiescence; in life, John Doe would have
jumped to his death or, at the very least, faded into obscurity.

The crisis of the Great Depression challenged the rationality of the
American system and Frank Capra responded by reasserting his faith in
traditional values and verities. But in spite of his aggressive optimism
and his comedic style, his response, like Hollywood's in general, was increasingly ridden through with ambiguities and a brooding pessimism. Hollywood films were far more prone to expose than to prescribe. Many of the films I have been discussing were quite successful in portraying the difficulties and the irrationalities of the American governmental system but they refrained from drawing the logical conclusions from the material they themselves supplied. Instead they tended to impose formulaic endings, which often bordered on the miraculous. Nothing Jefferson Smith did, for example, was sufficient to overcome the machinations of the lobbyists and machine politicians in the U.S. Senate. Victory comes only when the corrupt senior senator from his state has an unlikely bout of conscience and suddenly confesses. There were, as we have seen, other cultural responses to the breakdown of the traditional system: the response of the Marx Brothers or W.C. Fields; of Superman or the Hardboiled Detective; of those Hollywood filmmakers who flirted with authoritarianism and direct vigilante action. But such responses entailed a loss of innocence. Capra, and many of his Hollywood colleagues, insisted upon victory plus innocence—on traditional ideals and traditional heroes winning on their own terms.

There is a hubris which makes critics and scholars prone to believe that only they are privileged to see the kinds of cultural tensions, incongruities, and ambivalences I have been discussing and to write as if contemporary audiences somehow could not or would not see these things. It is important for us to investigate seriously the possibility—for which I believe much evidence exists—that, culturally, people can have their cake and eat it too; the possibility that a substantial number of Americans understood that the implied endings of many of the films they saw were closer to reality than the imposed endings; the possibility that audiences were able to learn from the main thrust of the films they saw even while they derived comfort and pleasure from the formulaic endings.

Capra's films help us to perceive another truth about Hollywood's Washington. No matter how close Capra's message may have been to that of the Regionalist painters or the Agrarian writers, he himself was very different. While they were native-born Midwesterners or Southerners, Capra had been born in a village on the outskirts of Palermo, Sicily, and brought up in an immigrant neighborhood in Los Angeles, the son of poor, illiterate parents. Capra is an important reminder that the reiteration of the traditional American creed emanated not just from defensive old-stock Americans but often issued in its most dynamic and aggressive form from converts to Americanism. This dynamism was reflected in the comment of a Hollywood producer shortly after he saw a preview of Mr. Smith Goes to Washington in 1939: "The great thing about that picture is that it makes America exciting." Stephen Handzo has referred to the remarkable talent that "the Sicilian-born, slum-raised" Capra had "for evoking the hopes and dreams of Middle
America. But Capra was not unique. Cultural historians have yet to investigate the impact of the presence of so many first- and second-generation Americans among the producers, directors, actors, writers, and studio heads in Hollywood and the reciprocal cultural relationship they had with the larger population.

It would be misleading to pretend that Hollywood's Washington was invariably serious. In *Thanks a Million* (1935), the American people sing of the complexities of their new government:

> They started up the NRA to keep the big bad wolf away  
> Then FDR began to be a headache to the GOP  
> Now that codes are everywhere we've got initials in our hair  
> The farmer's IOU's O.K. since Congress formed the AAA  
> The CCC chops down a tree and sells it pronto FOB . . .  
> The RFC and NHA led millions to the AAA  
> The AAA has crops it cuts and all of us are going nuts!

The film's hero croons his optimistic campaign speech:

> I'm sitting high on a hilltop  
> Tossing all my troubles to the moon  
> Where the breeze seems to say don't you worry  
> Things are bound to pick up pretty soon.  

In *Stand Up and Cheer* (1934), the president appoints a Secretary of Amusement "whose duty it shall be to amuse and entertain the people—to make them forget their troubles." With his budget of one hundred million dollars, the new secretary launches a "Smile Campaign" which soon has the American people singing in the streets:

**Laborer:** I'm laughing and I've got nothing to laugh about  
So if I can laugh, sing, dance, and shout—brother so can you!  
**Washwoman:** I'm laughing, with a dozen kids I have to feed  
So if I can laugh while I'm in need, sister so can you!  
**Farmer:** I'm laughing and there's a mortgage around my neck  
So if I can plow and sing, by heck, neighbor so can you!

Persevering against special interests that want the economic crisis to continue, the Department of Amusement finally is able to announce the joyful news that the Depression is over:

> Can't you see the writing that's on every wall?  
> The worst is over—here comes the clover—  
> We're out of the red!  
> We're out of the red!  
> We're out of the red!  
> We're out of the red!
In spite of this reiteration, the crisis was to last long beyond 1934 and Hollywood continued to reflect its political ramifications, continued both to mirror and to influence prevailing attitudes and ideologies. The writer John Clellon Holmes, who was a young and avid moviegoer in the 1930s, has observed, "We learned so much from the movies, and the lessons were so painless, that I, for one, still associate certain films with the dawning of certain ideas." He was never able to forget the actor Edward Arnold's portrayal of the fascistic D. B. Norton in Meet John Doe. "Edward Arnold's reptilian eyes behind his pince-nez will always signify for me the desparate lust for power out of which the powerlessness of modern life produces totalitarians... In the years that followed, when I became attracted to, and then involved with, and finally disaffected from, party politics, the memory of this film (and others like it) had an influence on my decisions and aversions that is incalculable."

Scholars need to pay more attention to this ongoing conversation between Hollywood and its audiences. We need to investigate seriously Holmes's assertion that "the movies of the thirties constitute, for my generation, nothing less than a kind of Jungian collective unconscious, a decade of coming attractions out of which some of the truths of our maturity have been formed."

NOTES

1. Louise Tanner, All the Things We Were (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1968), p. 266.

8. Except where otherwise noted, all quotations from films come directly from my viewing of the film.


18. *Time*, December 3, 17, 1934; Press Book for *The President Vanishes*, in Division of Motion Pictures, LC.


20. Dialogue Cutting Continuity for *The Man Who Dared*, in Division of Motion Pictures, LC.


22. Dialogue Cutting Continuity for *Gabriel Over the White House*, in Division of Motion Pictures, LC.

23. Press Book for *This Day and Age*, in Division of Motion Pictures, LC.

24. Press Book for *Song of the Eagle*, in Division of Motion Pictures, LC.


26. For an excellent discussion of this strain of thought in the 1930s, see Michael C. Steiner, "Regionalism in the Great Depression," *Geographical Review* 73:4 (October 1983), pp. 430–46.

27. For evidence of Capra's popularity in the 1930s, see the polls in *Increasing Profits with Continuous Audience Research* (Princeton, N.J.: Audience Research Institute, 1941), pp. 42–43. Robert Sklar has made the point that among the decade's filmmakers only Capra and Walt Disney shared the acclaim of all three of the significant audiences for movies: the ticket-buying public, the critics, and their Hollywood colleagues. While no other director won the Academy Award for Best Director more than once in the 1930s, Capra won it three times. Sklar, *Movie-Made America* (New York: Random House, 1975), pp. 197–198.


31. For more on the importance of the spoken word in Hollywood films, see Charles Affron, *Cinema and Sentiment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), Chapter 5.


35. Dialogue Cutting Continuity for *Thanks a Million*, in Division of Motion Pictures, LC.

36. Dialogue Cutting Continuity for *Stand Up and Cheer*, in Division of Motion Pictures, LC.