

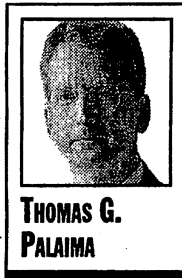
Movies, political myths and election 2000

BY THOMAS G. PALAIMA

Where do we get our beliefs in dedication, duty, patriotism, self-sacrifice, courage? A common theme in Vietnam War stories and poems is that baby boomers who fought in Vietnam or protested against the Vietnam War acquired these virtues at the movies. Tim O'Brien's celluloid teachers were Alan Ladd as Shane and Humphrey Bogart as, well, Humphrey Bogart. Ron Kovic in "Born on the Fourth of July" describes the impression made by John Wayne in "Sands of Iwo Jima" and the lump that afterward formed in his throat whenever he heard the Marine Corps hymn.

The movies have also given us powerful mythic notions about political virtue. During the long afterlife of presidential election 2000, some of us may feel justifiable nostalgia for bygone days when political events had a grandeur that translated into high motion-picture drama. Broderick Crawford in "All the King's Men" (1949) conveyed to young viewers the fearful pathos in the demagogic rise and fall of that rare thing in the political arena: "an honest

man with courage." A generation later in "All the President's Men," Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman brought to life the boredom, tension, excitement and courage of journalists tracking an awful presidential truth. Their portrayal of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein unraveling the tangled skein of President Nixon's political paranoia rivals the tragic determination of Sophocles' king Oedipus as he refuses to be deterred from following clue after clue until he reveals that he himself has murdered his king and father and taken his mother to bed.



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The dramatic myths of Huey Long, Richard Nixon and Oedipus of Thebes teach us that politics can easily corrupt those who practice it, that political acts have serious consequences for leaders and for those who are led. Roger Ebert writes that when Robert Redford acquired the rights to produce a film version of "All the President's Men," "the joke in the newsroom was about reporters becoming movie stars." The irony now is that affairs of state and the use or misuse of political or judicial power no longer furnish the stuff for serious film treatment. Our most sacred institutions provide ready-made

settings, characters and plots for satire.

We can see this trend in recent films such as David Mamet's "Wag the Dog," which gave us Balkan bombing as the outcome of Clintonian political triangulation theory, and "Primary Colors," in which John Travolta acted out Clintonian moral dexterity and opportunism on the road to the White House. One could accuse these films of trivializing important matters, except that these matters were already trivialized in real life by those who should have taken them seriously. In fact, Hollywood has shown amazing self-restraint in so far not producing any major screen versions of Monica's Story.

How much lower could real-life drama take us? Some rhetorical questions should never be asked. Presidential election campaign 2000 stays with us like the walking corpses in "Night of the Living Dead." In George Romero's film, sheriffs and sharp-shooting hunters follow a simple strategy: "Kill the brain, kill the ghoul." The strategy in Florida and other judicial venues has been to kill the recount, kill the election process. And the killing is being done by fellow citizens who hold or aspire to political office or who now sit on the supreme courts of their state or our nation.

They act, vote or rule along clearly

partisan lines. Sandy Levinson, University of Texas at Austin law professor, has declared that, no matter what the final outcome, justices of the U.S. Supreme Court by a single 5-4 partisan vote on Dec. 4 destroyed the myth that citizens of a free society need to believe, namely that the most solemnly appointed interpreters of justice in our country can act "above politics."

Likewise, Florida Secretary of State Katherine Harris, when faced with a crucial decision about election fairness, proved that she was no Antigone. Sophocles' heroine values justice above political and personal expediency, knowing it will cost her her life. Harris opted to save her own political life in favor of the Texas governor she so energetically supported throughout the primary and national election campaigns.

In short, election 2000 is one script that even Frank Capra could not save. We may long for Jimmy Stewart in "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," but what we have is Mr. Bush and Mr. Gore and the further erosion of confidence in vital American myths.

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