2022

Frank Capra's America: The fall of political ambiguity, 1930-1950

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Frank Capra’s America: The Fall of Political Ambiguity, 1930-1950

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

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December 2022

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Abstract

As the United States sank lower into an economic depression, Hollywood sought to turn bread lines into lines for the box office. While other entertainment outlets faltered, film, with its low cost tickets and ability to help patrons escape, remained prominent. Hollywood started to produce films with profit in mind and in the thick of this environment was Frank Capra, a man destined to become one of the most popular film directors of the 1930s and 1940s. Capra made a conscious effort to choose contemporary stories and as a result they are a glimpse not only into the history of Hollywood but of the United States. In this project we will examine some of his most important contributions to film history and will see life in the 1930s and 40s graphically portrayed.
This Study by: Lydia Lennice Pakala

Entitled: Frank Capra’s America: The Fall of Political Ambiguity, 1930-1950

has been approved as meeting the thesis requirements for the

Degree of Master of Arts

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# Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction .................................................................................. 1
Chapter 2: Hollywood Community in the 1930s ........................................... 8
   Early Capra 1930-34 .................................................................................. 8
   Radical Hollywood ..................................................................................... 14
   The Hollywood Guilds 1931-39 ................................................................. 20
   Ideologues: Capra and Roosevelt ............................................................... 24
   Hollywood and the Common Man .............................................................. 26
Chapter 3: Capra’s American Hero ............................................................... 29
   It Happened: Success ............................................................................... 35
   Finding his Voice ...................................................................................... 38
Chapter 4: The Populist Well Run Dry ......................................................... 51
Chapter 5: Conclusion .................................................................................. 67
Bibliography ................................................................................................. 71
Chapter 1: Introduction

Frank Capra’s *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946) is near and dear to many and is listed eleventh on the American Film Institute’s list of the top one hundred American films. It was not an immediate success. It’s known as a sleeper hit which is a film that premieres poorly and gains popularity years later. Its rise in popularity had everything to do with it being aired on television for the first time in 1956 and every year after several times a week until it was a mainstay for many Americans. Capra’s most famous films praise the common man. Capra elevated him to hero status. For its praise of the little guy and criticism of the monopolizing business man, the film was viewed as a threat to national security by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The FBI saw Frank Capra’s film as an affront to American values in which the rich businessman is portrayed in an evil manner. Moreover, hardline anti-communists in the government argued that the film allegedly inspired class consciousness. The FBI submitted a report to J. Edgar Hoover, stating “this picture deliberately maligned the upper class attempting to show that people who had money were mean and despicable characters.”1

Capra being a person of interest to the FBI and accumulating a file of suspicious activity only serves to illustrate the rampant fear of Communism during the Cold War. With only the fact that the FBI found two of his films unpatriotic a conclusion is quickly and incorrectly drawn that Capra was a member of the liberal and tight knit Hollywood community of the 1930s. That he used his films and scripts to condemn Capitalism and laude his true hero, the American proletariat. However, as is always the case when studying history and people, it’s not that simple. By observing the films and career of Frank Capra

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we can not only observe Capra’s inconsistencies but observe how America grappled with her own inconsistent identity. Frank Capra was an Italian-American immigrant, and stated in his autobiography that his family struggled in poverty. On the other hand, he was also a self-proclaimed rags to riches story and he waved his American flag with vigor. He directed films like *It’s a Wonderful Life* and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* to exhibit the America he saw—the land of opportunity.

This paper adopts both deductive and inductive approaches and seeks to use Capra’s films to help illustrate the time in which they were created. The films also offer a look into the life of Capra, one of the most successful filmmakers of the 1930s and 40s. In chapter one we take in some of the early Capra films. The first is *Ladies of Leisure*. It is not his first film and not even his first sound film. He had made twelve silent and three more sound films before making *Ladies of Leisure*. I chose to start with this film because it is a good example of early Capra, not yet committed to the political commentary or Depression era themes, but more cinematic compared to his silent screwball comedies of the 1920s. The next three films were made before the introduction of the Hays Code. After the Stock Market Crash of 1929, film makers were caught in a difficult creative space between the affluence and indulgence of the 1920s and the political and economic realities of the Depression. To attract the more strapped for cash audiences, films with sex, violence, drinking, and shock appeared such as *Baby Face* (1932), *Scarface* (1932) and *Freaks* (1932). Following a well established American pattern of free expression tailed by a rise in conservatism, the Hays Code was enforced in 1934. *Ladies of Leisure* (1930), *Rain of Shine* (1930), *Dirigible* (1931), *Miracle Woman* (1931) are useful to serve as a contrast between early Capra films and the Depression era films to come in chapter two.
Before discussing the films that made Capra famous and helped him find his voice in chapter two, chapter one lays groundwork for this study. In Radical Hollywood, we see what Capra was not. Using Rebecca Prime’s book *Hollywood Exiles in Europe: The Blacklist and Cold War Film Culture* as well as Colin Schindler’s *Hollywood in Crisis: Cinema and American Society 1929-1939* as guides I sought to set a backdrop for Capra as a filmmaker. In this section we take the political temperature of the progressive, tight knit Hollywood community that Capra seemed to simultaneously be in and excluded from. Within the Hollywood community there were different responses to the Depression. As we will see, the Depression served as the thematic gasoline that powered Capra’s films.

In an effort to understand the Hollywood community of the 1930s as well as Capra’s alignment in it. We briefly look at the creation and struggles of the writers and directors guilds. The screenwriters fought against studio heads to gain basic work regulations. Screenwriters had no collective bargaining power, no minimum wage, no long term contracts, and no guarantee that a studio couldn’t hire them to get ideas for their next film and promptly fire them without cause. The Screenwriters Guild was recognized by the National Labor Relations Board as the official voice of the American screenwriter in 1938 however it did not provide any of the basic working conditions that the guild fought for. Capra was unphased by the writers guild, instead putting his energy into the Directors Guild. Throughout this study we will see Capra express his belief that the Director was the true author of the film. He did not personally seek to support the writers guild in their endeavors. Instead he sought artistic freedom for directors. Over
time we will see this behavior hurt his career, especially when he tried to re-enter the Hollywood community after serving in WWII.

In order to further crystallize Capra as a director and political reactionary, the next section focuses on the ideologies of Capra informed by and contrasted with those of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. In 1932 Capra was finding his voice and experiencing a thematic shift which he recognizes in his autobiography. Roosevelt was campaigning for presidential office. The interesting connection between this politician and filmmaker is that both rallied around the common man as a way to unite their American audience. Capra needed to identify a relatable, upstanding hero to draw people to the box office and Roosevelt similarly identified the Forgotten Man as his hero to draw voters to the voting booth.

The intentions of Hollywood during the depression are not unified, but as a whole the films that were produced during this period focussed on the need to draw audiences to the box office. Decades before the advent of television, home video capabilities or streaming platforms the only way to view a film was in the theater. Theaters were owned by the studios, who’s first priority was revenue. Depression era films had to relate to the audiences suffering as well as keep them faithful to the American systems that stabilized it. Strategies were concocted to reassure a worried populace. The film *Man’s Castle* (1933) serves as an example of a studio's attempt to reassure audiences that money isn’t what is important in a man's life anyway. The Influenza Syndrome attempted to reassure Americans that the economic depression would pass eventually. This idea along with themes of American grit and individuality aided the studios as well as Capra in filmmaking. It is in this economic and political climate that Capra found his American
hero. He used this thematic mold until it was condemned as trite. Chapter one of this project serves to establish an understanding of Capra’s work before 1932 when there is a thematic change in his films beginning with *American Madness* (1932). To understand the Hollywood community of the time and understand Capra’s place in it we explore the efforts of the Screenwriters Guild and Capra’s thoughts on the director's place as an authoritative creative voice. Capra established himself and his voice as a director during the Depression. In order to gauge his response to it we compare and contrast his hero to Roosevelt’s hero and how they both used the myth as a way to gain popularity. Lastly, we discuss the film Man’s Castle (1933) to illustrate Hollywood’s response to the Depression and its treatment of the American common man.

In chapter two we see Capra become more successful. He establishes his voice and sets his thematic mold which he will continue to rely on for years to come. I use his films, film reviews and his autobiography as primary resources to understand how he navigated through his career. The first film to discuss is the film *American Madness* (1932) which served as a catalyst for the Populist films to come. The film also marks the relationship with screenwriter Robert Riskin, a partnership that benefited Capra immensely but he always downplayed. The chapter goes through films relevant to this study in chronological order. The next is *Lady for a Day* (1933) followed by the film that situated him among the elite and won five academy awards, *It Happened One Night* (1934).

After the academy awards are accepted and Capra makes a significant mark in film history with *It Happened One Night* we have to discern what we can from the narrative Capra creates in his autobiography. Capra experiences what he calls a revelation
which he credits with his need to make films that “said something.” This strange and possibly completely fabricated revelation is the impetus behind the next three films we discuss: *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), and *Meet John Doe* (1941). These three films are Capra’s attempt to say something. They all focus on the little guy fighting for a cause he believes in. The themes Capra uses in *American Madness* are recharged and implemented in these David and Goliath stories. In these three films we see Capra struggling to resolve the issues created in his films. He fights with his own political beliefs as well as the rise of geo-political issues threatening the freedom of expression and individualism that he venerated in all of his films. He resolves two of the films with the help of the romantic leads but as we will see, is unable to resolve *Meet John Doe* even after trying five different endings with test audiences.

In chapter three we discuss Capra’s dwindling career after his inability to resolve the films that in his own admission he dedicated his life to making. As we discussed in chapter two, in response to not only the hardships of the depression but the rise of facism in Europe, Capra wanted to make politically relevant films that celebrated the American way of life and its common hero. However he was unable to resolve the issues posed by the films. As a result the films become less satisfying for audiences. After the discussion of the common man heroes, Capra is called to the service after the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. He creates a series of documentary films to encourage but mostly explain the role of the U.S. in the conflict. After failing to resolve his films in a satisfactory way, we see him thriving in the clear cut world of military propaganda films. We follow his career to its conclusion and discuss the thematic elements that made his mark on film history.
The majority of literature on Capra is not from the historical discipline. Film historians do the bulk of the heavy lifting and are referenced often. Specifically the work of Charles J. Mayland in 1980 and Donald C. Willis in 1974 illustrated an over-exaggeration of Capra’s idealism for liberalism. They mistake the criticism of villains in films Mr. Deeds Goes to Town (1936), Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939) and Meet John Doe (1941) for a critique on corrupt systems overall. In overestimating Capra’s critique, they surmise the films to be much more radical than they are and they misunderstand Capra. Colin Schindler in his work Hollywood in Crisis: Cinema and American Society 1929-1939 notes Capra’s work but does not recognize him as a front-runner in Depression era films. Joseph McBride’s work The Catastrophe of Success was invaluable to this project. He interviewed Capra extensively and has written two biographies about him in a loving but cutting way; however, he lacks historical context. My aim is to bridge the gaps between film history, and cultural history and produce a project that better understands Capra, his films and his historical context.
Chapter 2: Hollywood Community in the 1930s

In 1929 Frank Capra made his first full sound film and whodunit story, *The Donovan Affair*. The film was made in the classic old Hollywood style and became Capra’s and Columbia Pictures’ first 100% talking picture. When someone murders Jack Donovan (John Roche), Inspector Killian (Jack Holt) is on the case. Killian systematically follows every lead and in the end he discovers that the butler did it. In contrast to Capra’s free-of-contention murder-mystery, the Hollywood community of the 1930s was concerned with more serious and consequential matters. This chapter looks at some of Capra’s earliest films from the early 1930s and analyzes how the Depression changed the trajectory of his creative output. The chapter also looks at how the radical Hollywood community, the social and political unrest taking place across the country, the Depression, and Roosevelt and Capra to establish a context from which to observe and understand Capra’s most beloved and politically relevant films.

**Early Capra 1930-34**

Frank Capra was concerned not just with the proletariat, but also his own contemporaries. He dealt with characters he knew and could understand, accounting for his films’ natural flow and authenticity. On February 10, 1972, in La Quinta, California, Capra explained his intentions and the need to understand the subject of the writing. He once told the social historian, Colin Schindler:

The people of the time interested me. They were my times and I knew them. I have never made a picture overseas, because I like to know what I’m talking about. If I’m making a film, it’s my own film. I couldn’t see myself making a picture about Frenchmen because I don’t know Frenchmen. I would be ill at ease with Frenchmen. I wouldn’t know the little mannerisms…. I was entirely engrossed with my own surroundings— American surroundings, Americans as people— in my
own time. Even with historical American novels—I’d work at them, but at the last minute I’d pull back. Capra was able to gain wild popularity because of his ability to find a hero that was genuine and believable. He was able to give the crowd what they wanted. The success of his 1930s and 1940s films are due to this ability.

Besides the fact that this is a phenomenal romance film, it is worth noting Capra’s gift for capturing genuine emotion and believable characters. The story of the son of a wealthy man falling for a poor party girl and their love put in jeopardy by his parents’ disapproval has been a central motif in plays, stories, and cinema. *Ladies of Leisure* convinces the viewer to believe Capra invented the trope. *Ladies of Leisure* was the first of Barbara Stanwyck and Capra’s films working together and introduced Stanwyck as a star. As Ella Smith wrote in her book on Stanwyck’s career “Stanwyck’s work in Ladies of Leisure is perfection. If she had never made another film, she would be remembered for this one.”

The story begins at a raging New York penthouse party where Jerry Strong (Ralph Graves) is in attendance. He leaves alone, without his fiancee, whose shallowness is embarrassing and disappointing to him. While driving home, he gets a flat tire. He sees a woman rowing her boat to the dock nearby. She walks up to him and introduces herself as Kay Arnold (Barbara Stanwyck) and he offers her a ride home. Struck by her beauty, he asks if she will model for a portrait for two dollars an hour. She agrees and comes to his penthouse where Capra creates a highly romantic sequence. Kay and Jerry are on the terrace and seeing her beautiful face gazing up at the stars, Jerry is inspired by the hope he

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sees in her eyes. They rush back into the studio and begin to paint late into the night. When he is finished he suggests that she stay the night. The couple are almost torn apart by his rich parents’ disapproval of the match, but Jerry rescues Kay from attempted suicide and they decide they have to be together, parents be damned.

*Rain or Shine* is a good example of Capra’s early screwball comedies. *Rain or Shine* was a successful Broadway Musical that debuted in 1928. To save money, Capra wanted to cut out all of the musical numbers and use some of the best comedians of the day as a way to bring in serious revenue for Columbia. The success of the film can be credited largely to the comedic team made up of Joe Cook, Tom Howard, and Dave Chasen. The story follows Mary Rainey (Joan Peers), trying to run her late father’s financially suffering circus with help from her manager, Smiley Jones (Joe Cook). The purpose of the film was to make people laugh at a meager cost. In his autobiography, *The Name Above the Title*, Capra stated that Harry Cohn, the producer and President at Columbia, pushed back on the project at first: “...you’re bats. *Rain or Shine* is a smash Broadway musical! It’s a sacred cow with the critics. Take out the numbers, and the New York Papers’ll murder you. ‘That’s Hollywood for you!’ they’ll yell…” “Buy it for me, Harry. I’ve got a hunch.” Capra clarifies in his autobiography that in the early years of his career, he prided himself on his ability to make box office hits with meager funds. He states: “The hunch proved correct. *Rain or Shine* was a modest film with a spectacular box office.”

Capra made three films in 1931, the first of which was *Dirigible*. The story is centered around two pilots Jack Brandon (Jack Holt) who is Dirigible’s commander and “Frisky” Pierce (Ralph Graves.) The two men are friends, but Pierce’s wife Helen (Fay

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Wray) is growing tired of the instability of marriage with Pierce and is becoming increasingly attracted to the Commander, Brandon. Brandon and Pierce see a lot of action throughout the film as the Dirigible goes down in an electrical storm and Pierce, in a scout plane, directs an aircraft carrier to rescue Brandon and the crew. The height of the action is a scientific mission to the Antarctic where Pierce is lost and realizes he needs to be better to his wife. The end of the film is nicely tied up with Pierce and Helen renewing their strained marriage.

The film was celebrated for its technological advances. Columbia teamed up with the United States Navy Bureau who provided government aircraft, equipment, and engineers. In 1931, a *New York Times* article titled “Picturing Air Scenes,” the film was praised for its usage of motor-driven cameras and the unique placement of cameramen inside the motor gondolas. The article praised Capra and his crew especially:

“In the production of the aerial film “Dirigible” the Columbia Studios production forces ventured into a new and unexplored field of technical difficulties. Despite the fact that the United States Bureau of Naval aviation cooperated by providing the use of use of the giant dirigible Los Angeles and facilities of the naval air station at Lake Hurst, N.J., the accomplishment of securing the necessary camera shots remained with the director Frank Capra, and his staff.”

The film succeeded financially at the box office for Columbia and it established Capra as a director who pushed technological advancements and creativity. Columbia, with the help of Capra, was beginning its ascent from poverty row to the big time.

Following the success of *Dirigible*, Capra’s next film was a disappointment. *The Miracle Woman* (1931) is based on the play *Bless You Sister*, co-written by Capra’s long-time partner Robert Riskin. The film opens with a biblical quotation, “Beware of false

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profits who come to you in sheep's clothing” (Matthew 7:15). Florence Fallon (Barbara Stanwyck) has led a religion-centered life with her father, a dedicated preacher, to a small town protestant church.

After 25 years, the church elders decide to instate a new and young pastor. On a Sunday morning in the sanctuary, the congregation waits to hear the final sermon but is met with the preacher’s daughter instead. Florence announces that her father died while dictating the words of his last sermon, “you have chosen to hire a younger man.” She delivers a fiery condemnation upon all of them in response. She states that this is not a house of God but a meeting place for hypocrites. As the congregation leaves the church, a traveling salesman, Bob Hornsby (Sam Hardy), has seen Florence's gift for public speaking and sees a possibility for profit. Hornsby convinces the newly irreligious Florence to become an evangelist and perform fake miracles for donations from gullible believers. Florence and Hornsby the Temple of Happiness evangelistic where Florence, now Sister Fallon, performs miracles and delivers sermons. John Carson (David Manners), a blind ex-military pilot, is seen about to jump out of a window when he hears Sister Fallon speaking on the radio station WGOD. He decides not to commit suicide and asks his is landlady to take him to hear Sister Fallon at her temple. They fall in love and she is happy to be with Carson, away from the racket that she has become the face of. In the film's last scene, Hornsby, on to his next scheme, sees a transformed Florence marching with the Salvation Army. Hornsby turns to his friend and says, “And she gave up a million dollars for that! The poor sap.”

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*The Miracle Woman* is an early Capra film and as a result, is not as well known. It is also a fine example of a pre-code film because of its criticism of American Evangelism and a brief scene in which a police officer flips off his boss after closing a door. Pre-code Hollywood took place between 1930, when the Hollywood Production Code was formally introduced by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), and 1934 when the guidelines were rigidly enforced by the newly formed Production Code Administration (PCA). Thomas Doherty in his book *Pre-code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema, 1930-1934* describes the period as a time of self-regulation. At the time, the ineffective Studio Relations Association (SRC) was in charge of enforcing the code. Doherty states that the SRC watched weakly as the studios “operated under rules of their own” and produced “the raw stuff of American culture.” Filmmakers had more creative freedom and were largely free from censorship. This changed because of the Motion Picture Production Code or the Hays Code, named for Will H. Hays, the president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) from 1922 to 1945. In 1945 the trade association changed its name to the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) until 2019 and is now known as simply the Motion Picture Association (MPA). The Hays Code changed the way people made films. It was concerned mostly with sexually explicit or suggestive content but covers a wide range of topics. With such provisions as “No picture shall be produced that will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin.” the rules are both rigid and vague.

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Radical Hollywood

The Hollywood Community in the 1930s was a progressive, left-leaning community that enthusiastically backed the anti-fascist movement. It was a highly politicized group that actively supported charitable groups. Political ideas were easily spread among the Hollywood community due to its relatively small size. Social connections intersected with professional and political, as Rebecca Prime illustrates in her book *Hollywood Exiles in Europe: The Blacklist and Cold War Film Culture*.

A glance at the films written and produced by future targets of the blacklist shows a high degree of creative cross-pollination, with films such as *The Prowler* (directed by Joseph Losey from a script by Hugo Butler and Dalton Trumbo), *He Ran All the Way* (directed by John Berry, also from a script by Butler and Trumbo, and starring John Garfield), and *The Boy with Green Hair* (directed by Losey from a script by Ben Barzman) boasting impeccable left-wing pedigrees.8

While Hollywood Cinema was not overtly political in the 1930s, it was topical and driven by morals. American populist cinema in the 1930s aimed to entertain audiences and perhaps more importantly, ease the pain of existence that accompanied life in the Depression. In his book *Not So Long Ago*, Lloyd R. Morris reflected in 1949 on the films of the previous twenty years, stating that, “Few adult Americans, in all probability, accepted the stories told on screen as literal substitutes for reality. Yet they participated in them, imaginatively. And it seemed that their participation was likely to be most active and intense when the stories in some way gave meaning to their own lives.”9 Some of the Hollywood community wanted to embrace a spirit of idealism in their films; Capra was one such idealist.

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Where did Hollywood filmmakers get the inspiration for this ideological shift? It seems a natural response to the Depression that Americans would desire more communal, less competitive tropes in entertainment. In the 150 years since the Declaration of Independence, the United States survived countless economic recessions. The Civil War overseas trade, and the extravagance of international high finance caused a panic between 1905 and 1907. The United States followed Europe into a lasting depression in the late nineteenth century but nothing dashed American confidence like the 1929 Stock Market Crash. The United States as a land of opportunity had become a commonly held belief in the early 1900s, but that began to have little truth to those suffering economic hardship brought on by unfettered capitalism. In the wildly popular 1909 book, The Promise of American Life, Herbert Croly stated that “All the conditions of American life have tended to encourage an easy, generous, and irresponsible optimism.” This feeling of optimism is reflective of the U.S. stock market. People who saw their imaginary profits on paper doubled, were encouraged and continued to borrow on the margin until total collapse.

Farmers were the first to feel the effects of the Crash. In July 1929, wheat sold for $1.29 in Chicago. One year later, the price fell to a mere 76 cents. Farmers could not justify harvesting all the product they could given the steep drop in prices. This angered farmers whose crop failed to bring in a profit for them in order to survive and enraged those going hungry to see food going to waste. The 1929 harvest produced 200 million surplus bushels of wheat. A witness before the Congressional Subcommittee on Labor reported, “The last thing I saw on the night I left Seattle was numbers of women searching for scraps of food in the refuse piles of that city. Several Montana citizens told me of thousands of

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11 Schindler, Hollywood in Crisis, 12.
bushels of wheat left in the fields uncut on account of its low price that hardly paid for the harvesting."\textsuperscript{12}

Another way the Stock Market Crash can be graphically seen is in wage cuts and unemployment. Schindler provides some figures that demonstrate the extreme losses in

\textit{Hollywood in Crisis:}

Between 1929 and 1932 factory wages fell from a total of $12 billion to $7 billion. After declaring that they would cooperate with the President [Herbert Hoover] and freeze wages, US Steel cut them by ten per cent. General Motors and Bethlehem Steel followed suit. In 1929 US Steel had 225,000 workers on its books; three years later there were only 110,000 and many of them worked only part-time. A man who worked forty-eight hours a week in 1929 would work only thirty-one hours a week in 1931. During the short-lived depression of 1921 Ohio manufacturers had paid out a yearly average wage of $1,252; ten years later it was down to $960. Average weekly earnings fell from $28.50 in 1929 to $22.64 in 1931.\textsuperscript{13}

American optimism was now under siege, but Hollywood would perform the job it did best, entertain. Hollywood had the opportunity to whisk people away as well as offer hope for better times ahead. To aid them in this task, a new president who could instill in many a sense of confidence would lead them.

Franklin D. Roosevelt set forth ideological guidelines that many Hollywood community members lapped up eagerly. Roosevelt entered office in 1933 with three primary goals. He needed to create policies to end the worst economic depression the U.S. had ever seen. He needed to help the millions of Americans in financial distress, and he needed to implement lasting reforms to prevent such a disaster from happening in the future. The goals were clear enough - prosperity needed restoration—but in truth, Roosevelt did not know how to solve any of these issues. In his book \textit{Liberalism and its


Discontents, Alan Brinkley states that New Dealers were unsure of how the crisis had happened.

Some believed the Depression was a result of overproduction, which had driven down prices and launched the spiraling deflation. Others sensed that it was a result of underconsumption, of the inadequate incomes of working people and hence the inadequate markets for industrial goods. Some believed the problem was the composition of currency, others that it was a lack of ‘business confidence.’ Few people in any of these groups (and in many others, with different diagnoses still) had any persuasive prescriptions for how to solve the problems they cited.¹⁴

Roosevelt entered office convinced that he needed to reduce federal spending. Within the first week of taking office, he passed the Economy Act, which reduced federal wages and veterans benefits. Historians and economists now understand that perhaps the best steps Roosevelt could have taken in 1933 would be to increase federal spending substantially. Unfortunately, Roosevelt didn’t grasp this until 1938 after another recession brought on by balancing the budget. He came out and fully endorsed public spending as a means to stimulate the economy.¹⁵

One of Roosevelt’s most valuable contributions to the economic crisis in the 1930s was to restore confidence in the government and effectively position himself as a strong leader. He thrust himself into public life. His inaugural address is a testament to this as it famously promises that “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”¹⁶ In an effort to be as forthcoming as possible about what the government was attempting to accomplish he

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¹⁵ Brinkley, Liberalism and its Discontents, 20.
¹⁶ Franklin D. Roosevelt's Inaugural Address of 1933. NARA-FDRL.
enacted the “fireside chats”\textsuperscript{17} to warmly comfort the American public and establish himself in the American household.

While Roosevelt was not the first president to affiliate himself with the film community, no predecessor had so enthusiastically summoned Hollywood stars to propagate and support his public policies. He formed a close friendship with actor Melvin Douglas and his wife Helen Gahagen Douglas, both of whom actively supported the New Deal policies. Melvin Douglas was the first actor to be a delegate at the Democratic National Convention, and Helen served on many advisory boards for New Deal agencies. Eventually, Helen became a Democratic National Committeewoman from 1940-44 as well as the first woman elected on the Democratic ticket to Congress in California.\textsuperscript{18}

Roosevelt and his New Deal policies appealed especially to liberals in Hollywood concerned about the rise of fascism in Europe. Support for Roosevelt was widely felt in the Hollywood community during the 1944 presidential campaign. Glittering stars such as Judy Garland, John Garfield and Humphrey Bogart accompanied Roosevelt and proclaimed public support for him across the country. An article published in \textit{Life} magazine exemplifies that the American public understood Roosevelt as supported by the Hollywood community: “Since the New Deal’s salad days, Tin Pan Alley has almost been as staunchly Democratic as Tammany Hall. Broadway and Hollywood have consistently expanded most of their political enthusiasm on Franklin D. Roosevelt.”\textsuperscript{19} The \textit{Life} article includes images

\textsuperscript{17} CBS reporter Harry Butcher coined the term “fireside chat” in a press release before one of Roosevelt’s speeches on May 7, 1933. The name remained as it evoked the comforting intent behind Roosevelt’s words, as well as their informal, conversational tone.


of Frank Sinatra and Orson Wells, standing at the podium speaking in support of Roosevelt. Anecdotes like these emphasize that the Hollywood community unabashedly favored liberalism.

Historians Rebecca Prime and Mark Wheeler partly attribute the rising tide of liberalism to the migration of New York writers and stage actors to Hollywood. They were called across the country to California in response to the technological advancement of sound, which offered better pay and prestige. The “Talkies”\(^{20}\) required good dialogue, and the studios in Hollywood were seeking out Broadway-based playwrights as well as novelists and short story authors. Members of the New York theater community are an important source of background for the sensibilities of the Hollywood Community of the 1940s. To emphasize this she includes names of exceeding prominence that all had their breakthroughs in the New York theater. “Directors Jules Dassin, John Berry, Joseph Losey, Cy Endfield, Elia Kazan, and Nicholas Ray; screenwriters John Howard Lawson, Albert Maltz, and George Sklar; and actor John Garfield, along with his Group Theater colleagues Franchot Tone, J. Edward Bromberg, and Roman Bohnen, all got their start in the radical New York theater world.”\(^{21}\) The New York theater community was tight knit. When asked about some of the above well-known names making it big in Hollywood, Joseph Losey stated “We all knew each other.”\(^{22}\)

Many writers were happy to have steady work provided by the big film studios. Others criticized and abhorred the Hollywood writing lifestyle. At MGM, Irving Thalburg

\(^{20}\) The term “talkies” or “talking pictures” first emerged in the late 1920s and was used to exemplify films that were exclusively shorts. The first full length feature, presented as a “talkie” was \textit{The Jazz Singer} in 1927.


\(^{22}\) Ibid.
ruled over the writers with tyranny. Many very good writers made very bad screenwriters because of the conveyor-belt nature of production that Thalberg created. Under Thalberg, the writers worked five and a half days a week and had to submit eleven pages a week. Similarly, at Columbia Pictures, Harry Cohn was “...known to lean out of his office window and shout in the direction of the Writers’ Building if he became aware that the volume of typing sound had started to diminish.”23 Some writers were hired not for their output but for the prestige it brought the studio just to have them on staff. For example, executive at Warner Brothers, Jack Warner boasted about signing William Faulkner, stating ‘I’ve got America’s best writer for $300 a week’.24 In New York, writers who had written politically charged dramas such as Albert Maltz’s *Black Pit* (an examination of the effects of a coal strike) and Wexley’s *They Shall Not Die* (a dramatization of the racially motivated Scottsboro Boys’ case) felt politically ineffectual. If it were the 1990s, we would say they had sold out.

**The Hollywood Guilds 1931-39**

To battle self-loathing while sitting next to their glittering swimming pools, writers needed a political outlet. Colin Shindler writes in his book *Hollywood in Crisis: Cinema and American Society 1929-1939* about writers’ political response to being a writer in California:

> Politics, Left-wing, radical politics within the bastion of entrenched privilege, was their escape hatch. They fought the studio bosses and the Republicans with the same passion that they raised money to send ambulances to Spain and to bring Jews out of Germany. There were estimated to be around three hundred members of the Hollywood branch of the Communist Party during the decade 1936–46. At least half of them were writers.25

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The first attempt to create a screen writers guild took place in 1931. It was led by John Howard Lawson and Dudley Nicholls and immediately crushed by the studio producers. Two years later in 1933, after drastic wage cuts to writers and more recruits arrived from New York, another attempt was made to create a guild. The studios intended to put the kibosh on it as they had in 31’ and they fought against the self-proclaimed Screen Writers’ for the next three years. In 1938 the Guild threatened to use section 7a of the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 to deem all writing contracts with the film studios null and void. The writers wanted to move toward Amalgamation with support from The American Writers Guild. They argued they should use the bargaining rights that were granted by the bill. The producers among them voted against this but the writers outnumbered them. The writers acted against the producers advice and deemed all writing contracts void from May 2, 1933.

The thirty-two producers who voted against it deemed this an act of war and wanting nothing to do with it, they left the guild. This dispute between producers and writers was big news as we can see it followed in Newspapers across the country. In Racine, Wisconsin the dispute was followed and cast in a Cold War tone already. “A group of 100 writers lead by Novelist Hughes formed a group known as “The Screenwriters of Hollywood,” which has at its aim the ‘saving’ of screenwriters from what Hughes described as a ‘amalgamated soviet of writers.”26 The loss of the producer's support did not stop the Screenwriters however, negotiations continued.

Rupert Irving Thalberg at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) and Darryl Zanuck at Twentieth Century Fox invited the top writers to join their companies' unions. They wanted to make a compromise and name it the Screen Playwrights. They offered long-term contracts to the writers as an incentive. The Guild retaliated with the call for a strike, which brought a usually well composed Thalberg to fury as he announced that he would close down MGM and trigger large-scale unemployment if the Screen Writers’ Guild carried out its threat. The remaining members of the Guild were now faced with the prospect of either joining the company union or being unofficially, but effectively, blacklisted. In mid-1936, the situation was complicated due to the fact that the Wagner Act of 1935 could now be seen to apply to screenwriters, therefore offering the chance of government support for their claims for collective bargaining.

Eventually, in the summer of 1938, the National Labor Relations Board met to decide whether the Screen Playwrights’ or the Screen Writers’ Guild would be the official voice of the Hollywood scriptwriters. Schindler sums up the Summer of conflict well in *Hollywood in Crisis*:

The producers tried to intimidate the Board by claiming that motion pictures were not engaged in interstate commerce and therefore were not governed by the provisions of the Wagner Act. When that was summarily rejected they tried to prove that, since screenwriters were artists rather than workers (an ironic twist), they were not covered by the collective bargaining clauses of the Wagner Act either. These legal antics failed to make any headway and the Board duly recognised the Screen Writers’ Guild at the end of June 1938.27

Even though the Screenwriters were given national recognition and had fought successfully against the infuriated producers and studio heads, their victory was not complete. Screenwriters had no collective bargaining rights; there was also no minimum wage or

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employment period. No notice was promised before dismissal. They also had no protection against the producers stealing their ideas and then firing them.

Meanwhile back at the ranch, Capra was fighting a less politically driven battle with the producers and studio heads for artistic freedom. He was part of the Directors Guild, who offered their vote of confidence to the Screenwriters Guild prior to their hearing before the National Labor Relations Board. Capra was less interested in the plight of the screenwriter. Capra often undervalued writers as evidenced by his treatment of longtime partner Robert Riskin. In a 1939 article Capra published in the New York Times he reveals a contempt for production company limitations. Here he bemoaned the restraints imposed on directors by production companies.

“First of all, There are only half a dozen directors in Hollywood who are allowed to shoot as they please and who have any supervision over their editing… We have tried for three years to establish a Directors Guild and the only demands we have made on the producers as a guild were to have two weeks’ preparation time for “A” pictures and one week preparation time for “B” pictures and to have supervision of just the first rough cut of the picture. You would think that in any medium that is the director’s medium the directors would naturally be conceded these two very minor points… I would say that 80% of the directors today shoot scenes exactly as they are told to shoot them without any changes whatsoever and that 90% of them have no voice in the story or in the editing… I believe the blame is as much with the director’s as it is due to the mass-production system, because directors are prone to sitting back and enjoying their fat salaries and forget the responsibilities they have toward the medium they are in. So please excuse this letter, which doesn’t seem to make any too much sense, but the director at present has no power and pictures today are not truly the director's medium.28

The leading directors like Capra, John Ford, and Leo McCarey were politically very conservative and with the exception of Rouben Mamoulian who was leading the Directors Guild at the time did not conform to the ideological make-up of the activists. They did not

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28 Frank Capra, "By Post from Mr. Capra: Disputing Mr. Aisner." *New York Times*, Apr 02, 1939.
identify with the Writers’ Guild and Actors’ Guild. Capra’s demands as well as other conservative directors’ demands really were just about creative power.

However, Capra being a Conservative did not mean he was unconcerned by the years of political and economic unrest. He questioned the status quo in almost every film he created. He led the charge of socially conscious and politically inquisitive filmmakers. Capra, who was widely credited with initiating the social-problem film and tackling overt political topics in movies related to the contemporary context of the Great Depression. Capra’s series of films at Columbia Pictures in this era set a standard for Hollywood social and political inquiry that early on included The Power of the Press (1928), Platinum Blonde (1931) and Forbidden (1932) but which was really set in motion by American Madness in 1932.

**Ideologues: Capra and Roosevelt**

As the United States sank to lower depths of economic depression during the 1930s, the new entertainment capital of Hollywood was determined to keep the cameras rolling. Hollywood and the American film industry emerged in the particularly good climate of the post-World War I era, and with their low ticket prices, they were primed to remain that way. However, when the Depression hit, ticket sales became the utmost important and films were produced with profits primarily in mind. Thomas Schatz in his book *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era*, states that in response to the economic depression, studios created a “holy trinity” among budget, star, and genre to guarantee hits. Schatz argues that focus on profit alone leads to the production of films that lack ingenuity and creativity. He states that, “the prospect of anything truly innovative or distinctive being produced in Hollywood was becoming more remote by the mid-1930s,
even at the prestige level where competition was fiercest.”

In the 1930s, Capra was on the precipice of becoming one of the most famous film directors of his time. In 1932 Franklin D. Roosevelt was campaigning for the presidential election in the thick of economic depression and civil unrest. Meanwhile, Capra was experiencing his own formative career experience in 1932, which he explains in his autobiography:

Before 1932 I made only fictional films — without basis in reality — “escapist” the critics called them. Now I took a hard look at life from the eye level of the hard-pressed Smiths and Joneses. It was not the same, rosy life we saw — and copied — in each other’s Hollywood movies. The real lot of American citizens in 1932 was stark, bleak, and worsening.

As Capra was making an intentional shift in his films to focus on the common man or the “Smiths and the Joneses,” Roosevelt was doing something very similar in his 1932 campaign. On April 7, 1932, Roosevelt delivered a radio address in which he saluted the “Forgotten Man.”

In the speech he stated, “These unhappy times call for the building of plans that rest upon the forgotten, the unorganized but the indispensable units of economic power for plans like those of 1917 that build from the bottom up and not from the top down, that put their faith once more in the forgotten man at the bottom of the economic pyramid.” Capra and Roosevelt both identified their hero, the segment of society in which to put their faith.

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**Hollywood and the Common Man**

Before 1932, bleak movies that resonated with the downtrodden American public used the Great Depression as a backdrop. One such film for the down and out that is often identified as an example of this theme is *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* from Warner Bros., but Capra and writer Robert Riskin took on the subject of the Depression much more abrasively when they created American Madness in 1932. Capra states in his autobiography, *Name Above the Title*, “Those who lived through the tragic thirties remember them dimly because of man’s tendency to forget the unpleasant. But in 1932, they faced no unpleasantness—they faced disaster!” Capra and Riskin worked on their first film collaboration and looking back on the film, Capra stated that “In truth, it was one of the first Hollywood films to grapple directly and openly with the Depression’s fears and panic. In our film story, bank president Huston has a theory: Money is something you can’t eat, wear, or plant. But you can put it to work. And the harder the times, the harder it must work.” Capra’s focus was on the little man, ideals, and the individual. However one does not have to think too hard to realize a big reason for these emphasis in Hollywood, the little man was the one buying the tickets.

Overall, Hollywood did not wish to take part in any kind of revolutionary thinking. It meant to reassure its audience of their importance and their grit in order to encourage the public, but also to subdue them. It emphasized the durability of the American System and likened the depression to a pandemic, something to be endured with a good attitude until it disappeared as mysteriously as it had arrived. The American cult of individuality can be

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33 Capra, *The Name*, 137.
employed in both of these responses. Hollywood echoes the cult by assuring its audiences that anyone can improve their situation by hard work, perseverance, and faith.

In his book *Hollywood in Crisis*, Schindler provides a film example of what he calls the Influenza Syndrome, the idea that the Depression would soon pass and there was no need to worry. From Capra’s home studio, Columbia Pictures, came the film *Man’s Castle* (1933), in which Loretta Young plays Trina, a young homeless woman who hasn’t eaten for two days at the beginning of the film. She meets Bill, played by Spencer Tracy, dressed up to the nines in a top hat and tails. Trina likens herself to the pigeons who search for crumbs on the city streets. Bill scoffs at this and tells her that no woman in a town like New York has to go hungry. He takes her to a fancy restaurant, and they order a meal at the end of which he reveals he is just as poor as she. He is banking on the owner shooing them out quietly rather than make a scene.

Trina and Bill set up a shack together in a shantytown and Bill finds his longing for freedom is being replaced by his feelings of responsibility for Trina. Trina, looking at their shack on the river, exclaimed‘There can’t be any heaven nicer than this.’ Trina is pregnant and when Bill finds out, he interprets the news as the loss of his freedom forever. He tries to leave her and tries to commit a robbery to leave his partner and child with $5,000 but only succeeds in raising the attention of the Police. The film ends with a happy Trina and Bill lying together in a hay-filled boxcar headed West.

The message of the film is that money can’t bring you happiness. Look at these two young lovers, they are happy with their lot. Trina is able to look at the shack and compare it to a paradise because she has the right attitude. The film portrays real poverty and is

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topical, but it is also condescending. It simplifies the situation of the two lovers and recommends that in the face of economic depravity one should really try being happy instead of angry. Hollywood was trying to reassure and capture the mood of the country while not escalating anger. Capra was perhaps informed by *Man’s Castle* because he became accomplished in consoling whilst criticizing. His new cause was to restore faith in the American system. Capra’s 1930’s films raised ‘the little guy’ to the level of a national hero. In 1977, he offered these words to a film studies class at Washington State University,

“I’m just trying to show you that perhaps the films that I’ve made. I have used small guys in trouble who get out and they’re by their own—something deep, deep within them. That it can be done, that men count, men and women count, single men and women count. That individualism is the most important thing in life, the individual… I want you to see these films that I made for this one purpose, to show you that this kind of material is very saleable. People just love it.”

Capra reveals in this telling interview, that he understood that “small guys in trouble” were appealing to the audience and that he saw profit in their utilization. In chapter two we will explore the films that made him famous and that established him as the voice of the little man.

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Chapter 3: Capra’s American Hero

“The truth about Frank Capra and the films he made is as elusive and contradictory as the American dream itself.” Ron Howard

In this chapter we will discuss the films that built Capra’s fame and established his voice as a filmmaker. As the Great Depression brought a feeling of hopelessness to the nation, Capra sought to reassure the American public with a series of films that focus on the average working man and elevate him to the status of a hero. The films are not as profound as writer Charles Maland suggests in his book Frank Capra, arguing that Capra’s populist films were politically radical. On the contrary, I argue that the films are meant to reassure the American people that hard work and determination is all one needs to succeed and that the American system, even amidst crisis, should be trusted and venerated.

The first film that we will discuss in this chapter is American Madness (1932). A film set in a bank, it debuted at a time when most Americans had understandably lost faith in the banking system. Between 1929 and 1933, one third of all United States banks failed. In American Madness, Capra follows a narrative that we have seen and will see repeatedly in his films. The plot follows the big, corrupt system taken on and challenged by the civic-minded hero. Though we see traces of this structure in Miracle Woman (1931), American Madness brings the theme to the fore and is the first glaring evidence of Capra being socially informed or culturally relevant, demonstrating what film critics and analysts identify as his social voice. Capra’s decisive pivot to the voice of the American proletariat or the common man coincided with the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt as well as the rise of fascism in Europe. With World War I fresh in their
memory, Capra and many other Americans perceived the rise of fascist dictators to be a threat to Western democracy. *American Madness* helps us to understand this shift in Capra’s concerns for the preservation of the American way of life. In it, he creates a hero and a centrist, populist, American mythos that would unify his audience against the threat of social collapse.

The story is set at the Union National Bank where Thomas Dickson (Walter Huston) is bank president. Dickson believes in the integrity of all of his clients and fights hard to give loans to anyone of character who applies. The bank’s board of directors does not perceive the bank business as concerned with people at all and thinks of nothing but merging with an even bigger bank. This is communicated in a board meeting early in the film:

Dickson: The trouble with this country today is there’s too much hoarded cash. Idle money is no good to industry. Where is all the money today? In the banks, vaults, socks, old tin cans buried in the ground. I tell you we’ve got to get the money in circulation before you’ll get this country back to prosperity.

Clark: Well, who’re we going to give it to? Men like Jones? Last week you gave him an extra loan of $50,000. You call that intelligent banking?

Schultz: Can’t pay his bills. How do you expect him to pay us?

Dickson: That’s a fair question, Schultz. Now let’s see how bad a risk Jones is, what’s his history? He’s been a successful businessman for 35 years. Two years ago business started falling off. Today Jones needs money and if he doesn’t get it he goes into bankruptcy and throws 900 men out of work. Answer: Unemployment. It also means his creditors aren’t paid. They’re in trouble. They go to the banks and are turned down. More bankruptcies. It’s a vicious circle my friends, and the only place to cure it is right here at the source. Help Jones and you help the whole circle. Now when Jones comes to me I ask myself two questions. First, is he honest? Yes. Second, is he as good a businessman as he was before? And the answer is, he’s better. He’s not only older and wiser, but his present trouble has taught him precaution. In my estimation gentlemen, Jones is no risk. Neither are the thousands of other Joneses throughout the country. It’s they who built
In this tone setting scene, we understand that Dickson is our hero and that he is up against the board who do not see profit in the Joneses of the world.

Simultaneously, vice president of the bank Cyril Cluett (Gavin Gordon) cooperates with plans to rob the bank to pay off his gambling debts. He throws suspicion on the chief teller Matt Brown (Pat O’Brien) and he maneuvers Thomas Dickson’s wife Phylis Dickson into being his alibi by taking her out to see a play while the gang robs the bank. Matt intervenes to protect the honor of his employer’s wife; police assume Matt Brown to be the robber but soon identify Cluett as the one who changed the timer on the vault, allowing his creditors to rob the bank. Rumors of the extent of the robbery become quickly exaggerated in a dramatic and humorous sequence of telephone calls which Joseph McBride calls “the film's most brilliant sequence...”37 The scene starts with one phone operator gossiping to another. She tells her friend correctly that the amount stolen is one hundred thousand dollars. Without missing a beat the second phone operator pulls the plug on that line and plugs it in to another friend and the amount in question becomes two hundred thousand dollars and a run on the bank quickly ensues.

Thomas Dickson reaches out for help but the board, wanting him out of the way anyway, turns a deaf ear. The bank is drained of money and Dickson, believing the worst of his wife and feeling abandoned by his colleagues, plans to resign as bank president and even contemplates suicide. Matt Brown and Dickson’s dedicated secretary, who vouches

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36 American Madness, directed by Frank Capra (Culver City, CA: Columbia Pictures, 1932).
for his integrity throughout the film, devise a plan to save the bank and their boss. The duo who incidentally are romantically interested in each other contact recipients of Dickson’s goodwill. They call on the “men of character” who Dickson gave loans to when the board objected. The camera climbs to the ceiling of the Bank lobby and we see surging masses of panic stricken depositors trying to withdraw their money. One man makes his way through the crowd and makes a deposit, others follow, turning the tides and saving both Dickson and the bank.

The resolution of the story led critics of Capra to describe his films as “Capracorn” or fantasies of goodwill. At first Capra and the man who became his main collaborator on his populist films, Robert Riskin, were calling Riskin’s original screenplay for this film *Faith*. The title represents the faith that Dickson had in his depositors and the faith that they eventually extended back to him. The sentiment of faith on the part of the American populace was understandably strained. A contemporary review of the film in *The Nation*, called American Madness “sheer propaganda for the banks.”

In writing about this film, many hold that Dickson is taking on the corrupt system. To do so, they refer to the scene where the bank directors accuse Dickson of being “more liberal than ever.” to which Dickson replies “yes, and I’m going to continue to be a liberal,”. They take this as evidence that it is politically radical. What this unvarying summary ignores is that Dickson is the president of the bank, very much in the system, and is seen denying loans that are seen as too risky twice in the film. *American*

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Madness, criticizes the board members but does not touch institutions that Capra identifies as part of the American system. Indeed, the film is meant to reinstate faith in the U.S. banking system.

The film *Lady for a Day* is the next important film to note because it is of a distinctly higher quality than earlier Capra films and marks the beginning of an upward climb in industry and Academy recognition. *Lady for a Day* was inspired by the short story *Madame La Gimp* by Damon Runyon. It is a New York fairy tale that tells the story of a homeless woman who sells wilted flowers and old newspapers on the street and is transformed into a high society woman. In Capra’s film version of the story, instead of flowers, the woman sells apples and is nicknamed Apple Annie (May Robson). In 1933 the switch to apple selling may have been chosen as a nod to the Great Depression; when many men and women turned to hocking apples on street corners for survival. Apple Annie has a daughter, Louise, whose education abroad she supports with her apple sales. Her daughter writes and tells her that she is engaged to the son of a Spanish nobleman, and that the three of them are sailing to New York to meet her. Apple Annie has been conducting a ruse, telling her daughter that she married a wealthy man, E. Worthington Manville. She is able to keep up appearances by making friends with an employee of an upscale hotel who steals stationary for her and mails it from the hotel. With her daughter coming to see her, it seems to Apple Annie that the jig is officially up. Apple Annie is saved by Dave the Dude (Warren William), a gambler and petty criminal. The Dude thinks that Annie’s apples are good luck charms so he steps in with the help of his girlfriend Missouri Martin (Glenda Farrell) to turn Apple Annie into “Mrs. E. Worthington” for one night. They throw a glittering soiree and fool Louise and the
Spanish dignitaries. The film ends with the ship sailing for Spain and Louise and her fiancé making plans to send for Annie to join them soon. A happy, fairy tale ending for all.

The film was a huge success and was nominated in four major categories: Best Picture, Best Writing, Best Directing, and Best Actress. It was the first time a Columbia film or anyone affiliated with Columbia had ever been nominated! In Capra’s autobiography he states that he became impossible to live with. He was dizzy with the success of the film and was convinced it would sweep all four categories. He tells a story about his overconfidence getting him the Best Director award in his autobiography:

The next award was for Best Directing! While Rogers read the nominations, I sneaked a last quick look under the tablecloth at my wrinkled acceptance Speech. But I couldn’t even hold it let alone read it. Rogers said a few nice words about directors, then: “... and the best director of the year is … the envelope please… [he opened it and laughed] Well, well, well, what do you know! “I’ve watched this young man for a long time … Saw him come up from the bottom, and I mean the bottom. It couldn’t happen to a nicer guy. COME UP AND GET IT FRANK!” My table exploded into cheers and applause. It was a long way to the open dance floor. The spotlight searched around trying to find me. “Over here!” I waved. Then it suddenly swept away from me—and picked up a flustered man standing on the other side of the dance floor—Frank Lloyd!... I stood petrified in the dark, in utter disbelief, until an irate voice behind me shouted, “Down in front!”

Capra was no longer satisfied with films that made money; he knew how to produce a hit. He wanted to be an esteemed film director, one with the awards to prove it. *Lady for a Day* had the necessary pieces, but it was ultimately a disappointment to him. Being involved in a film that is nominated in four categories, however, was a serious achievement for Capra and Columbia.

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Before diving into the film that gave Capra the critical acclaim he so longed for, we should address the factors other than Capra that made this success possible. If one reads Capra’s autobiography alone, he would have us believe he did it all himself. Between 1930 and 1934 he found the aesthetic and the voice that we know him most for. The tightening of his aesthetic and the fine tuning of his voice was possible partially because of his work with a regular group of collaborators. For example, cinematographer Joseph Walker worked with Capra on all of his films from *Flight* in 1929 on. Beginning with *American Madness* in 1932, Stephen Goosson was Capra’s regular art director. Perhaps the most important members of the collaborators, or at least the most recognized for making Capra’s films a success were writers Jo Swerling and Robert Riskin. In the book *Columbia Pictures* Bernard F. Dick states that “There is clearly a connection between Capra’s growing self-confidence as a filmmaker and the stable work environment and group of collaborators that Cohn and Columbia offered him from 1930 on.”

**It Happened: Success**

MGM and Universal had both made films that took place on buses and had both been flops. Capra explains in his autobiography that he read a short story in *Cosmopolitan* magazine called *Night Bus* by Samuel Hopkins Adams. Robert Riskin read the story and agreed that it could be nicely turned into an outline for a movie with plenty of room for gags to make it a comedy.

The film centers around a couple and a will-they-won’t-they storyline. The first scene takes place on a yacht on which Ellie Andrews (Claudette Colbert) is being held.

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against her will by her father Alexander Andrews (Walter Connolly.) Ellie wants to
marry a famous aviator, King Westley (Jameson Thomas), and her father disapproves.
She jumps overboard, swims to shore, and starts her journey from Miami to New York by
way of a bus. She meets a newspaper reporter who quickly recognizes her as she is a rich
socialite whose whereabouts are featured in many newspapers. The reporter Peter Warne
(Clark Gable) offers to help her reach New York undetected and in return he intends to
record and print her “mad flight to happiness.” There is a rainstorm, and a washed out
bridge forces the couple into the same hotel room, their funds dwindling. Peter hangs a
wire and a thin blanket between their beds to which Ellie teases “That, I suppose, makes
everything quite alright?” He replies, “Oh, this? Well, I like my privacy when I retire…
Behold—the walls of Jericho Maybe not as thick as the ones Joshua blew down with his
trumpet, but a lot safer. See I have no trumpet!” Ellie asks if he could turn out the light
and while he smokes, she undresses behind the blanket. The rain pours on the rooftop and
the couple goes to sleep. Capra states in his autobiography that “Sex was so much in their
minds, it charged the atmosphere.”

For some of the journey they hitchhike, facilitating the famous hitchhiking scene
in which Warne stands on the side of the road trying to flag down drivers. Ellie, seeing
the flaw in his methods, takes his place on the side of the road and flashes an oncoming
driver with a hike of her skirt. Capra is very proud of this scene, but Colbert objected to
it, revealing Capra may not always have been in agreement with his collaborators. Capra
tells the story like this:

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She [Colbert] was a tartar but a cute one. In the well known hitchhiking scene in which she proves her leg is greater than Gable’s thumb, she refused to pull up her dress and show her leg. We waited until the casting director sent us a chorus girl with shapely underpinnings to ‘double’ for Colbert’s. When she saw the doubles leg, she said, “Get her out of here. I’ll do it. That’s not my leg!” And it sure wasn’t. There are no more luscious gams in the world than Colbert’s—not even Marlene’s.”

The way Capra openly writes about Colbert’s attitude and her body lends us some context for why she was quoted as saying “Am I glad to get here. I’ve just finished the worst picture in the world.” after the conclusion of the filming. As the film continues, Ellie and Peter learn more about each other and Ellie learns more about the harsh realities of a life not lived on a yacht. Ellie falls in love with the rugged self-reliance of Peter and her father miraculously agrees with her new choice. The final scene is of a tourist-cabin manager and his wife, who is holding a cat, standing outside a distance from a recently rented cabin, discussing why the newly arrived couple needed to have a rope, blanket, and toy trumpet! In swift succession the trumpet sounds, we see the blanket fall to the floor, and the lights go out.

After the embarrassment at the Academy Awards banquet for Lady for a Day, Capra did not have high hopes for It Happened One Night and neither did Colbert. She was not planning to attend. Lyle Abbott of the Los Angeles Herald-Express describes the scene:

“Claudette Colbert! Clark Gable! They were crowned last night … as the outstanding actress and actor of 1934. And, to complete the picture, their film, It Happened One Night, received the accolade as the major production of the year… Irvin S. Cobb, incomparable humorist, tried, like any good master of ceremonies, to keep his audience keyed to the mood of surprise as he opened envelopes, but soon failed. “You guessed it,” he shouted over the loud speakers. “It is something that … Happened one night!” vociferated the audience. At tables, in aisles, crowding the entrances, the guests at the dinner took up the refrain… “Happened One Night!”… Hidden at one of the obscure tables was Miss Colbert … in a tan

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44 Capra, The Name, 170.
sport suit. For Miss Colbert was going east. Her train was about to leave. An ardent coterie of studio attendants had dragged her to the Academy dinner—"just in case." Capra and Colbert’s doubts and disbelief aside, the film took in five academy awards—Best Actor, Best Actress, Best Director, Best Picture and Best Screenplay. It was the first time any one film swept all five major awards and the record went unchallenged until One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest in 1975. With this, Capra is now at the pinnacle of his success and in the face of these accolades, he is paralyzed by fear for his next films.

**Finding his Voice**

1935 was a turning point for Frank Capra by his own admission and design. As stated in chapter one, he was learning the film business and making films that would sell. In a town like Hollywood this is nothing new, but the way Capra tells it he had a revelation in 1934 after which he could no longer continue to make films purely for entertainment like Rain or Shine or Dirigible. He wanted to start making films that said something. According to Capra, the realization that he needed to make a dramatic change in his film output came after the remarkable and unexpected success of It Happened One Night. According to Capra, the inspiration for a purposeful shift in his creative output came during an illness following the success of It Happened One Night. He had tuberculosis and was confined to his bed. A good friend of his, Max Winslow, a song-publishing partner of Irving Berlin, was often at his bedside. Capra weaves a very delphic tale in his autobiography about how the change in his voice came to be. He relates that one of the times Max was visiting, Capra told him that he was most surely going to die.

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45 Capra, *The Name*, 171.
Max tells him there’s a man in the library whom Frank should really meet. Capra does not want to see the man, but agrees at Max’s insistence. The story goes thus:

‘He’s just across the hall in the library. Get up.’ ‘Max! Are you crazy? I’m dying. I can’t stand up.’ Max helped me out of bed, put a robe on me, and pushed me toward the door. ‘Max, hold me up. The room is swimming.’ ‘You can make it. Go on. I’ll sit here and play the radio.’ I was so mad I could spit. But I was also intrigued about a voodoo treatment. I made it across the hall and into our second-floor den. A little man rose from a chair; completely bald, wearing thick glasses—as faceless a man as you will ever see. There were no introductions. He simply said ‘Please sit down, sir.’ I sat down weak as a cat, and just as curious. The little man sat opposite and quietly said: ‘Mr. Capra, you’re a coward.’ ‘A what?’ ‘A coward, sir. But infinitely sadder—you are an offense to God. You hear that man in there?’ Max had turned on the radio in my room Hitler’s raspy voice came shrieking out of it. ‘That evil man is desperately trying to poison the world with hate. How many can he talk to? Fifteen million—twenty million? And for how long—twenty minutes? You, sir, you can talk to hundreds of millions, for two hours—and in the dark. The talents you have, Mr. Capra, are not your own, not self acquired. God gave you those talents; they are His gifts to you, to use for His purpose. And when you don’t use the gifts God blessed you with—you are an offense to God—and to humanity. Good day, sir.46

This is the story that Capra consistently tells to explain the shift to social commentary in his films after 1934. An unknown “faceless” man comes to his home chastising him for denying his role as director to the masses. Capra responds to his visit from the oracle with the film, *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*. The story fits perfectly with the Capra mythology and it reveals that Capra thought of himself as the voice of the common man, possessing the power of influence. The story is almost certainly fictional, but that makes Capra even more interesting as he positions America as God and the common man, or maybe himself, as savior or prophet.

Criticizing the upper classes and glorifying the middle class hero was very common in the films of the 1930s and 1940s. Economic depression scourged the 1930s

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46 Capra, *The Name*, 176.
and was not truly alleviated until after WWII. As such, Hollywood films had to fight to keep bodies in theaters. Films of the 1930s and 40s sought to comfort the down and out, and claimed that riches lead only to sadness. Malord discusses the “Rosebud Syndrome” originating from the movie *Citizen Kane* in his book; “The Rosebud Syndrome admits the unequal distribution of wealth and power in America but asserts that the wealthy are unhappy people and that real satisfaction can only be found in the common lifestyles of most of us, the audience.”

The Rosebud Syndrome also supports the heroism of the common man and, if the theme of 1930’s cinema was a glorification of the common man, this next film fits into frame perfectly.

The film *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* tells the story of Longfellow Deeds (Gary Cooper), the archetypal small town man. Deeds runs a tallow workshop, writes poems for greeting cards, and plays tuba in the community band. The opening scene shows a car racing down a winding road and careening over a cliff. We find out in a spinning newspaper sequence that in the car was Martin W. Semple, a financier from New York with an unknown heir. Semple, of course, is Longfellow’s Uncle which means that our Mr. Deeds is inheriting twenty million dollars. When Deeds hears the amount he asks his late uncle’s lawyer John Cedar (Douglas Dumbrille) and press agent Cornelius Cobb (Lionel Stander) “I wonder why he left me all that money? I don’t need it.” The lawyer and press agent stare at him incredulously, shocked at a person who conflates personal necessity with how much wealth they should have. Upon his arrival in New York, he is immediately taken advantage of and mocked for his innocence and his small-town naivety. He is befriended by reporter Babe Bennet (Jean Arthur) who pretends to faint at

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47 Maland, *Frank Capra*, 87.
his feet just as he’s going out for the evening. She tells him that her name is Mary Dawson, giving him a false story about her identity in order to appear relatable. She states at their first date together “I’m really just a nobody.” She feigns romantic interest, but in truth she has been hired to spy on him for the inside story and write a piece mocking him. Finding him so genuine, she falls in love with him, but that does not stop her from publishing story after story to his detriment.

Deeds’s press agent finds out the truth about Bennet and calls her newspaper asking for a Miss Bennet. Babe’s boss answers the phone and hands it to her neither of them knowing Longfellow was going to be on the other end. Caught in her lies, she admits that it has been her writing the articles. Feeling wholly betrayed, Deeds wants to return to his home in Mandrake Falls. As he attempts to leave, a stranger bursts in and threatens to kill him. The stranger is a farmer who lost everything in the depression. In a confrontation curiously similar to the visit from the “little man” to Capra’s own mansion, the farmer tells Deeds that he should be ashamed of himself for not helping those less fortunate with his new wealth, stating “All you ever thought about was pinching pennies, you money-grabbing hick. You never gave a thought to those starving people in the bread lines not knowing where their next meal was coming from. Not able to feed their wife and kids.” In yet another spinning paper transition we learn Deeds plans to give away his fortune. Deeds begins subsidizing small farmers by granting each two acres and a cow. Because of this, scheming lawyers and relatives accuse him of insanity and he has to defend himself in court. At first, extremely dispirited Deeds feels incapable of speaking. In the courtroom, Bennet rises up and defends him, giving him the energy to deliver a
courtroom monologue the likes of which will be perfected later in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*.

*Mr. Deeds* is one of example of why critics use the term “Capracorn”. Donald C. Willis recounts one of its more cringy scenes in his book *The Films of Frank Capra*;

“Alone with Miss Bennett, Longfellow asks her, ‘Why are people so mean to each other? Why can’t they just like each other?’ Underneath that homilies-and-mush exterior, Capra is just homilies and mush.”

The film itself didn’t age particularly well, but for our purposes it does give us another example of Capra’s American hero archetype. It is a message about the immensely wealthy not sharing any of their wealth. Even Mr. Deeds, a poor man relative to his Uncle, when endowed with all of the wealth, must be reminded by the farmer that he has fallen into the same behavior. Ultimately it is communicated that when the little guys are endowed with money they can and will do good with it.

Another theme that is a constant in Capra’s films is the people in power or the people at the top are greedy and anxious to take advantage of the little guy. The director states in his autobiography that this film was the first to have an intentional, overt social message, but in the end the message was quite simple. “And what was the great message of Mr. Deeds? Nothing earth-shaking. Just this: a simple, honest man, driven into a corner by predatory sophisticates, can, if he will, reach deep down into his God given resources and come up with the necessary handfuls of courage, wit, and love to triumph over his environment.”

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49 Capra, *The Name*, 186.
The next film of interest is one of the best examples of Capra’s American hero archetype and is his most overtly political film, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939). The film tells the story of the rural man, Jefferson Smith (James Stewert), the idealistic and patriotic boy ranger troop leader. Smith is selected to fill the vacancy left by a state senator who has died. Smith is thrown into a political atmosphere in Washington D.C. that he has idealized to an unrealistic degree. He expects the politicians that he finds there to be as idealistic and patriotic as he is, but the realities of political work have made everyone he meets jaded and pessimistic. Naturally, they see the small-town patriot as naive, much like Mr. Deeds. The point of interest in the film centers around a land deal being pushed through congress by the state's senior senator, Joseph Payne (Claude Rains). Jim Taylor (Edward Arnold), a powerful political actor, has bought up all the land around Willemet Creek under fake names. Senator Paine, his partner in the scheme, introduced a deficiency bill by which the government would buy up a creek area for the construction of a dam, making them both a lot of money. Smith idolizes and respects Senator Paine, and both Taylor and Paine hope that Smith’s naivety will keep him from thwarting their plans. Smith’s Secretary and the love interest of the film Clarissa Saunders (Jean Arthur) also knows about the deal and is advised to distract Smith and keep him in the dark. Mr. Smith knows he will not be in office long and wants to use his short time to propose a single bill to turn the Willet Creek area into a national boys camp for the boy rangers. Eventually, conscience-stricken, Saunders tells Smith that the land he hopes to turn into a boys camp is at the center of the corrupt deal and, even worse, that Senator Paine is one of the main players.
The honorable Mr. Smith refuses to cooperate with Paine and Taylor. Paine then accuses Mr. Smith of buying up the land around Willet Creek himself to re-sell it to the government for his boys’ camp. Paine and Taylor forge Mr. Smith’s signature to prove their story. In order to hold them off, Mr. Smith filibusters the bill to the point of physical exhaustion. Incidentally, Jimmy Stewart found it hard to fake the hoarseness of Mr. Smith’s voice. Twice a day his throat was swabbed with a “vile mercury solution” the results of which Capra called “astonishing.”

To break down the already drained Smith, Paine and Taylor spread lies about him to his constituents back home and write hate mail that is delivered to him in baskets on the Senate floor. Mr. Smith, thinking that those he is fighting for hate him, collapses. Paine, seeing an honest man broken and confronted by his deeds, rushes out and tries to kill himself. He is stopped and bursts in and admits to all his schemes on the Senate floor.

Mr. Smith is concerned principally with morals and cares deeply about the very least of his constituents, children. Smith only relents on the senate floor when he is presented with disapproval from the constituents he was fighting for. In Frank Capra, Maland states that Mr. Smith is a continuation of Mr. Deeds. “What of Jefferson Smith’s ideology? In essence, it is another example of the American/Christian humanism that Capra began with Mr. Deeds, modified by a greater stress on patriotism and adherence to the ideal of human liberty.” Patriotism to the country, but not the government, is glorified in Mr. Smith. Smith’s dedication is to his countrymen that he was chosen to represent. Smith’s main goal in Washington is to petition the government to buy up private land and create public resources for his Scout troop. In the film Smith does not

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50 Capra, The Name, 276.
51 Maland, Frank Capra, 109.
accomplish a full exodus of evil from Capitol hill, but merely converts one corrupt man. The villain remains the villain in the end and suggests that the system cannot be saved, but that individual people can choose good. The most prominent message is that the established government is corrupt, and the small-town man is a moral creature who will do good when given the opportunity. In the February 24th, 1940 edition of the *New Yorker* Geoffrey T. Hellman wrote that “In MR. SMITH . . . the ending which Capra liked most showed the destruction of the political machine opposing Mr. Smith. The audience on which this was tried out failed to react as favorably as one which saw a non-committal conclusion leaving the fate of the political boss in doubt. Capra settled on the latter version. Capra wanted to say something in his films, but didn’t push that intention if he did not feel the public would pay to see it.

By many accounts *Mr. Smith goes to Washington* was well received by the academy and the public, as exemplified in a October 11, 1939 article in *Variety*: “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington’ is typically Capra, punchy, human and absorbing—a drama that combines timeliness with current topical interest and a patriotic flavor blended masterfully into the composite whole to provide one of the finest and consistently interesting dramas of the season.”52 Likewise, Frank Nugent from the *New York Times*, stated in an October 1939 article “Frank Capra’s ‘Mr Smith Goes to Washington’ is such a jaunty boutonnière in democracy’s lapel.”53 It was also very popular in the box offices and brought growth to Columbia McBride notes in *Frank Capra*, “...the studio’s overall

net profits rose from $2,046 in fiscal 1939 to $512,000 in fiscal 1940.” However, the film brought on a great deal of controversy as well, incensing Capra. He did not think of the film as radical, but many politicians came out publicly to denounce it as dangerous. *The New York Times* reported that Senate Majority Leader, Alben Barkley stated that the film “Makes the Senate look like a bunch of crooks” and would give a false impression throughout the country.” Ambassador Kennedy wired Harry Cohn from London in November of 1939 that he feared what foreign audiences would take from the film, stating “…it will give an idea of our political life that will do us harm…” The Ambassador also sent telegrams to William Hays, head of Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, as well as the President, stating that the “To permit this film to be shown in foreign countries and to give people the impression that anything like this could happen in the United States Senate is to me nothing short of criminal.” In his autobiography, Capra states that both he and Cohn were shaken by a direct reprimand by the Ambassador, but Capra became very angry at the idea of any person trying to suppress a piece of art, stating in his autobiography, “…no ambassador has the right to censor films. Besides, he’s mistaken. I know he is.”

*Mr. Smith Goes To Washington* was nominated for an academy award in nine categories including Best Picture, Best Actor (Stewart), Best Supporting Actor (Rains),

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56 Capra, *The Name*, 292.
57 Ambassador Kennedy’s Telegram re: “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington” File 840.6 in the 1939 GENERAL RECORDS of the U.S. Embassy in Great Britain (Entry UD-2599A, NAID 1667799), part of Record Group 84: Records of Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, National Archives Building, Washington, DC.
58 Capra, *The Name*, 289.
Best Directing, Best Original Story (Lewis Foster), and Best screenplay (Sidney Buchman.) 1939 was a strong year for films, however, and Mr. Smith could not compete with now venerated films such as Gone With the Wind, The Wizard of Oz, and Wuthering Heights. In his autobiography, Capra sums up the fate of the film, saying “With exception of one surprise winner, Lewis R. Foster for Best Original Story (Gentleman from Montana), Smith ran second-best right down the line—close, but second. Moral: Don’t make the best picture you ever made in the year that someone makes Gone with the Wind.” The ending of Mr. Smith is indicative of Capra’s trouble with resolving his films. He attempts to strike a chord between rugged individualism and communal cooperation, but fails to do so in Mr. Smith because the system remains the same.

Mr. Smith Goes to Washington was the last film Capra directed at Columbia. Capra does not provide a reason for the break other than “It was time to leave.” In a New York Times article published in July of 1939, Douglas W. Churchill stated that the move was “no surprise” and that “It had been expected for some time that Capra and Riskin would form an independent concern.” It was a surprise that Riskin would follow Capra on an independent venture. He had started work with Samuel Goldwyn at MGM and was making a salary of $500,000 a year and a percentage as opposed to his work at Columbia where he was making $100,000 and no percentage. Capra, on the other hand, had his sights set on another studio. In fact he was haggling with John Selznick to let him

59 Capra, The Name, 298.
60 Capra, The Name, 294.
62 McBride, Frank Capra, 325.
direct *Gone with the Wind* while *Mr. Smith* was underway. “Year after year Capra threatened to leave,” recalled Columbia writer Lewis Meltzer. “Finally Cohn let him.”63 McBride, in *Frank Capra* quotes Riskin on starting Capra Productions Inc. “It was the sense of freedom, rather than actual freedom, which led us to do it,” Riskin explained. “Also there was the adventurous side to it, which one doesn’t feel when working on a stated salary. We were just a pair of dice-shooters at heart.”64 Riskin left Goldwyn in 1939, and on February 21, 1940, Capra and Riskin made a deal with Warner Brothers to produce their film *Meet John Doe*. 

The film *Meet John Doe* was inspired by a story Riskin had read in *Century* magazine titled *A Reputation* written by Richard Connell. The film fits comfortably as the last installment of Capra’s depression era films. In an effort to continue to say something about topical issues *Meet John Doe* (*1941*) is a warning against the dangers and evils of facism. In the first scene of the film, we see the words “‘Free Press” being chiseled off of the front of a stone building. The sign reading “*The Bulletin* ‘A Free Press Means a Free People.'” is being replaced by a new sign “*The New Bulletin: A Streamlined Newspaper for a Streamlined Era*.” Newspaper writer Ann Mitchel (Barbara Stanwyck) has just been fired along with many of her colleagues. She begs the new boss, Henry Connell (James Gleason), to let her keep working. He replies coldly in the negative and as she walks out he tells her not to forget to finish her last column before she picks up her check. Angry, she creates the character John Doe who, fed up with the injustices of the working man, threatens to commit suicide by leaping from the roof of City Hall. So great is the response to the new column, Mitchel is able to convince Connell to find a real John Doe 

64 McBride, *Frank Capra*, 346.
to be the author of a column titled “I protest,” that would actually continue to be written by Ann. Many out of work and starving men come willing to play along with the scheme, but none with the right face. Finally they find an injured ex-baseball player John Willoughby (Gary Cooper,) who is so hungry in the interview that he faints when he sees a sandwich on the nearby desk. The column is a success and the new owner of the 
Bulletin D. B. Norton (Edward Arnold), with his sights set on political office, decides to use the fame of John Doe to further his campaign. He created John Doe Clubs as an “apolitical” front for his third-party campaign. John Willoughby is fueled by a new sense of purpose as he believes Norton wants to help the John Does of the country. He travels across the country spewing vague American ideals, essentially campaigning for Norton before realizing how he is being used. He attempts to reveal the fraudulence at the John Doe convention and is dragged off the stage. He decides the only way to redeem the movement is to commit suicide, but is convinced not to by Ann.

Capra explains in his autobiography that the main problem with Meet John Doe is the ending. Riskin didn’t write an ending that he approved of before filming started, at the request of Capra, who thought it would be made clear. In the end they filmed five endings. A New York Times article released in 1941 titled “MOVIE ENDING CHANGED: Speech Recanting Facism Deleted from ‘John Doe’,” it relays a statement from Riskin “Robert Riskin, collaborator with Frank Capra on the film, said in a statement from Hollywood that the revision had been based on letters, personal statements and audience behavior both in New York and Los Angeles.”

Times review by Bosley Crother in 1941, he praises the film overall for two qualities
“They have exposed, in a way that is subtle but nonetheless obvious, the peculiar
inclination of Americans for ‘joining’ movements and the perils which lurk therein, and
they have substantially called attention to the ‘American fascist’ type.” but also states that
“We very much regret to say that the end of the picture is offensively illogical and
sentimental to the extreme, so just try to overlook it.”

Meet John Doe was not an outright failure, but it does reveal some fundamental
issues that Capra was facing concerning filmmaking as well as his image of himself as a
person. It is clear from his autobiography and the film Meet John Doe that the threat of
fascism weighed on his mind. One would expect that in true Capra form, the American
spirit of democracy would emerge as the victor. There is perhaps an attempt at this as the
editor Connel turns to Norton and exclaims that the power of the people had saved John
from killing himself all while Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony plays in the background.
However, the ending is ambiguous and unsatisfactory. Perhaps the fear of totalitarianism
that had already taken hold in his childhood home loomed so large that the ending was
impossible to plot out. The film was released in 1941, and after the fall of France the
possibility of a fascist Europe was looking more and more probable. In light of this I
argue that Capra found it impossible to resolve the issues of the film.

66 Bosley Crowther, “How to be a Good American: In ‘Meet John Doe,’ Frank Capra Continues His
Illustrated Lectures on the Duties of Democratic Citizens,” New York Times, March 16, 1941,
https://login.proxy.lib.uni.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.proxy.lib.uni.edu/historical-
Chapter 4: The Populist Well Run Dry

There are several components that contributed to Frank Capra’s fall after 1941. He left Columbia and all of the security provided by the studio. Bob Riskin and his new production company could not afford to keep making films after *Meet John Doe* had passable but not overwhelming success. After a year with no salary, the pair of them dissolved the company. In June of 1941, David O. Selznick, a producer and screenwriter best known for producing *Gone with the Wind* and Capra as a team were going to join Mary Pickford, Charlie Chaplin, and Alexander Korda as part owners of United Artists. United Artists was a production company started by Pickford, Chaplin, D.W. Griffith and Douglas Fairbanks in 1919. An opportunity to be part owner and work closely with Selznick would be rewarding in prestige as well as capital and it would provide the security he missed, but Capra in his autobiography tries to convince us that his heart and the U.S. were restless.

On August 18, 1941, the U.S. House of Representatives voted 203 “yes” vs 202 “no” to extend the Selective Service Act. Much of the U.S. did not want to commit to another worldwide conflict. However, less than four months later with the attack of Pearl Harbor, there was a dramatic shift in sentiment. According to Capra, he received a telegram from the office of Chief of Staff George C. Marshall who was tasked with creating an orientation series of films to instill a sense of purpose in U.S. troops. In his autobiography, Capra states that even the phrasing of the telegram was jarring to him, being used to the role of delivering orders. The telegram read: “Major Frank Capra… You will proceed on February Eleventh to Washington DC reporting chief signal officer for duty… That’s a pretty cheeky order, I thought. Not ‘Please proceed,’ or ‘Kindly
proceed,’ but you will proceed...”\textsuperscript{67} He wondered: “Why trade all this fame, glamor, and wealth for a number stamped on a dog tag that hung around my neck—the number 0900-209?”\textsuperscript{68} Capra, in his films and autobiography, frames himself as a person who resists authority, a rugged individual. One would think the military would be a constricting environment for him. Yet Capra accepted a job from the U.S. Military to make the Why We Fight series.

Capra was assigned to the Signal Corps. in charge of Moral Films. Though in his autobiography Capra frames himself as an individual, resentful of authority, this attitude seemed to extend only to Harry Cohn, Producers, and Hollywood as a whole. By all accounts, Capra took to Military service naturally. “The war was a very significant change for Capra, a very revealing part of his character,” said Paul Horgan, the Pulitzer Prize winning historian and biographer, who worked in Capra’s unit and served as a liaison between the Pentagon and Capra’s creative staff. “I always thought that Capra’s smiling ego...was part of his great power: with utter charm he would be above the battle at all times. But I don’t think his ego impinged on his work in the war. No one worked more patriotically or threw all of himself into his work in the war more than Capra did.”\textsuperscript{69} His immediate superior, Colonel Edward Lyman Munson, Jr., told the Army he considered Capra “one of the bestrounded officers I have ever seen; he would succeed at any assignment in the Army.”\textsuperscript{70} From these accounts, perhaps we can assert that Capra, relieved of the pressure of having his name above the title of his work, enjoyed the structure and even the limitations of Military service.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{67} Capra, The Name, 314.\textsuperscript{.}
\textsuperscript{68} Capra, The Name, 314.
\textsuperscript{69} McBride, Frank Capra, 369.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.}
A large limitation, though not imposed by the Military, was Capra’s inexperience with documentaries. In an interview with Dominique Noth, with WNVS-TV, Milwaukee, Capra admitted that prior to his work with the U.S. Signal Corps. He had very little respect for documentaries and those who made them, stating “At the time I had to make the documentaries I had never seen one. And I didn’t know anybody who had ever made one. We in Hollywood had heard about documentaries. We thought they were a lot of kooks with long hair making these things…” The overall style of the documentary was based on a compilation format, a method of piecing together previously unrelated footage and images and imposing strong narration and music to support the purpose of the documentary. The purpose was to inform young servicemen why U.S. military presence was necessary in the war. To do this Capra, along with his team set about creating seven films over a three year period.

All of the films can stand alone but they were released chronologically as follows:

*Prelude to War* (1942), *The Nazis Strike* (1943), *Divide and Conquer* (1943), *Battle of Britain* (1943), *Battle of Russia* (1943), *Battle of China* (1944), *War Comes to America* (1945). The first and last of the films, *Prelude to War* and *War Comes to America* are history lessons that provide a sense of what led to WWII and the how and why of U.S. involvement. Both of these films focus on the contrast between the Allied or “free” and the Axis “slave” world. *The Nazi Strike* and *Divide and Conquer* focus on the strength of the German Army and overall Nazi tactics and strategy. They also serve to dehumanize the Nazis and impress upon the U.S. troops the ruthlessness of the enemy. *Battle of Britain*, *Battle of Russia* and *Battle of China* were ally films meant to demonstrate the

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strength of their allies. They remind the perhaps formally isolationist soldiers that their allies had been fighting already, had suffered attacks on their civilians and needed help. The conclusion that is deeply felt when viewing the films is that of “us or them.” This emotional aim was intentional by Capra and he thought it necessary to reach the troops who Capra surmised would need simplification in order to understand.

The films provide information on the war and attempt to prove the information by providing extensive film documentation of the events. The use of newsreels may have also been a result of budgetary restraints. In an essay by Dr. Thomas W. Bohn he states that There was an emphasis on “proving” this by using newsreel, documentary, and battlefield footage. For example, *The Battle of Russia* contained approximately 7,400 feet of film. Of this total, some 4,500 feet were from Russian feature productions, documentary films, combat footage, and newsreels.”

As the footage was originally shot for another purpose and, as such, represents “found footage”, in order to create meaning and develop a consistent narrative, Capra and his team used editing as the principal stylistic building block for the series. This was a departure from any of the films Capra had ever worked on.

The temporary departure from entertainment films to indoctrination films for troops gave Capra a welcomed out. In chapter two of this study we looked at Capra’s most staunch populist films. These films had built his career but they also created problems for him. In an effort to “say something,” the films grow more and more unresolved culminating in *Meet John Doe*, a film so unresolved it had five possible

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endings that Capra couldn’t decide between. Capra was hit with the realization that saying something is easy, but standing for something was far more difficult. In the Why We Fight Series, he had a chance to be unapologetically and vehemently patriotic. Capra was burdened with the task of making the war understandable and acceptable. The series is almost a sermon, but then the films discussed in chapter two can also be characterized this way. This time however Capra, through the Why We Fight series was finally able to deliver a sermon above reproach. For his work in the Signal Corps he received the Legion of Merit and the Distinguished Service Medal for his WWII service.

After Capra returned to civilian life in 1945 he found Hollywood to not be his town any longer. During the 1930s he had become one of the most influential film directors in Hollywood and had academy accolades and many successful films to prove it. In 1945 however, he found it to be a different scene altogether. In the 1977 interview at Washington State University Capra said this of his return to civilian life. “I was away almost six year from the camera. Jimmy Stewert was away for six years. We came back to Hollywood and we didn’t know anybody. People would introduce me to somebody and they’d say ‘Frank Who?'”73 Nevertheless, Capra did return by way of a new independent film studio called Liberty Films, Inc., in partnership with William Wyler, George Stevens, and Samuel Briskin. Capra, in his autobiography, explains that he had tremendous resentment for Hollywood during the war years. He saw himself as doing important work in the Signal Corps and everyone left behind as making easy money on weak films. He states: “For, besides the major studios regressing to assembly-line production, the ‘anything goes’ war years had spawned a novel group of ‘independent’

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producers: War profiteers seeking status, socialites seeking glamor, swishy ‘uncles’
promoting handsome ‘nephews,’ big daddies buying star parts for blonde chicks, et cetera
ad nauseam.”74 We can gather from this quotation that Capra did not respect Studio
productions or independent film production. Years later as he wrote his autobiography he
is extremely harsh not just on the quality of the films but of Hollywood society as a
whole.

McBride in the Catastrophe of Success states that perhaps Capra did feel this way
but his feelings could have less to do with Hollywood and more to do with his poor
reception of his return. His independent film company was a way to get back into
filmmaking but it was a solution found after trying to get a contract with several
production studios first. While Capra was still in the service Samuel Briskin had pitched
his name to several studios and contracts were not forthcoming. Furthermore McBride
states that:

“Hollywood’s lack of enthusiasm for Capra on his return from service stemmed
from an accumulation of factors unique to Capra: it was a reflection on his
faltering box-office track record and his reputation for extravagance; a delayed
backlash against his rebellious posture toward studio control before the war, both
in his own career and on behalf of the Screen Directors Guild; and, perhaps, a
resentment of his arrogance toward Hollywood during his Army years, such as his
blast from London at Hollywood for “embarrassing” the troops with “flag-
waving” war movies. Capra’s assumption of moral superiority toward those who
remained in the studios making entertainment movies while he was in uniform—
even though he spent most of the war at Fort Fox—undoubtedly helped negate
whatever rewards he expected his wartime service to bring him in Hollywood.”75

When Capra was most successful, he was at Columbia, benefiting from the guarantees
that Studios could then provide but now it seemed he was on his own.

74 Capra, The Name, 372.
75 McBride, Frank Capra, 417.
It should also be noted here that no one would be benefiting from the Studios as they once had as a result of the court case United States vs. Paramount and the subsequent Paramount Decrees in 1948 or the Hollywood Antitrust Case. In 1938 the Department of Justice filed an antitrust lawsuit alleging that eight major motion picture companies had conspired to control the motion picture industry through their ownership of film distribution and exhibition. The eight original defendants were Paramount Pictures, Inc., Twentieth Century-Fox Corporation, Loew’s Incorporated (now MGM), Radio-Keith-Orpheum (dissolved in 1959), Warner Brothers Pictures, Columbia Pictures Corporation, Universal Corporation, and United Artists Corporation. The studios had to relinquish their theaters and they no longer had the assurance of a theater playing their films. Capra had long advocated for this change and was vocally against block-booking, however it was a system that he benefited from while at Columbia.

In light of this drastic change in film production, studio offers and long term contracts were not as common. While still in the service, Samuel Briskin had decided rather than return to Columbia he would start his own independent film studio. Capra, who hadn’t received an offer or contract anywhere, readily agreed to join. Capra as president, Briskin as secretary-treasurer announced their postwar company on January 29, 1945 and Liberty Films was incorporated on April 10, 1945. They very much needed partners and they pursued two other army colonels William Wyler and George Stevens. William Wyler agreed to join Liberty on July sixth, after he was discharged from the Army and finished a film with Samuel Goldwyn (MGM). The partnership and clout of William Wyler enabled Liberty to make a deal on August 23 for the release of nine
pictures with Radio Keith Orpheum Pictures (RKO). Capra’s return to the film industry was perhaps his most remembered film, *It’s a Wonderful Life*.

Charles Kroener, RKO’s studio chief is partially responsible for *It’s a Wonderful Life* getting made. The original story *The Greatest Gift* was written by Philip Van Doren Stern in 1939. It was rejected by many publishers and the author resigned to having it printed as a 24 page Christmas card for his friends and family. In April 1944, RKO bought the rights to the story with the intention of their boy Cary Grant playing the lead. Screenwriters Dalton Trumbo, Marc Conolly and Clifford Odetes all worked on scripts before the project was abandoned, according to Capra, because none of the writers could do the original story justice.\(^76\) RKO had spent a considerable amount paying three writers for scripts that were never used. According to Capra, Kroener pitched the story to him, offered the rights for fifty thousand, and threw the three scripts in for free. *The Greatest Gift* was the story that Capra needed. He states in his autobiography that, “It was the story I had been looking for all my life! [...] What an idea. The kind of idea that when I got old and sick and scared and ready to die—they’d still say, ‘He made *The Greatest Gift*’”\(^77\) He bought the material from RKO on September 1, 1945, for $50,000. He then hired Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett to write a new adaptation. Capra also employed three more screenwriters before the film's completion. Michael Wilson, was signed to a writing contract with Liberty on January 2 and did what his widow, Zelma, has described as a “polish”.\(^78\) Jo Swerling collaborated with Capra on scene revisions, continuing to do so into the film’s production. Dorothy Parker contributed to dialogue revisions. The

\(^76\) Capra, *The Name*, 376.
\(^77\) Ibid.
\(^78\) McBride, *Frank Capra*, 422.
shooting script in Capra’s files indicates that about a fourth of the scenes were rewritten by Swerling and Capra during the shooting. This was more revising than he ever had to do when he was with his former partner, Bob Riskin. Ultimately, only Goodrich, the Hackett’s and Capra were recognized in the credits for their writing. Though Trumbo, Odets, Connelly, Wilson, and Parker had all played a role. This is a recurring theme of Capra’s career. Capra always took more credit for the making of his films than he deserved, especially when it came to his treatment of screenwriters. This is exemplified by his book One Man, One Film, a book of advice for young filmmakers arguing that he couldn’t imagine making art by committee. Perhaps he just couldn’t imagine crediting the committee. The refusal to give credit to those who contributed to his success could be another reason for his decline. Fewer people wanted to work with him as a result.

Capra’s selective memory in his autobiography of the collaborators on It’s a Wonderful Life, may have to do with the 1947 HUAC trials. Capra fails to mention the contributions of Michael Wilson and Dorothy Parker who were both blacklisted. Wilson for his refusal to testify about his alleged membership in the Communist Party. Parker was accused of being a communist in Red Channels in 1950 for left-wing activities such as co-founding the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League and the Motion Picture Artists Committee to Aid Republican Spain. Capra does relay to the reader of his autobiography that Dalton Trumbo worked on the script of The Greatest Gift before Liberty films purchased it but does not admit that he borrowed ideas as well as lines of dialogue from that script. Capra didn’t mention this in light of Trumbo being blacklisted after the October 1947 HUAC hearings as one of the Hollywood Ten and sent to prison for contempt of Congress in 1950.
As we have discussed, the importance of the individual was a primary theme in Capra’s films. The populist films that we discussed at length in chapter two especially stressed the power of the individual with a heart and head full of ideals and the good that that individual could accomplish. The theme that had made Capra famous, had become a chain around the director's neck. His films that intended to say something, had become more and more unresolved. After the war, Capra had no desire to continue making message films, knowing after the tumult of WWII, any politically driven film such as *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* or *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* would fall on despondent, exhausted ears. In a 1945 *New York Times* article Thomas Pryor wrote of Capra:

> Although Mr. Capra has devoted his considerable talents to the development of the information film these past four years he said he did not intend to produce any ‘message films,’ not serious ones, anyway, for he does not believe the time is yet ripe for the emergence of the so-called ‘think film.’ For one thing, he feels that film makers are not sufficiently conversant with world problems to offer guidance in international affairs. For another, he does not think the public is in the mood at present. ‘A message has to come from someone responsible,’ Mr. Capra stated firmly. ‘How could you make a message picture with universal appeal? People are disillusioned.’

Filming began on April 8, 1946 and took place over four months. Capra wrote “The pace was that of a four-month non-stop orgasm.”

The film is characteristically Capra because it hinges on the individual man with ideals that we often find in Capra films. George Bailey (Jimmy Stewart) has spent his life giving of himself to the people in his hometown, Bedford Falls. He has always longed to travel and has longed for a more exciting life outside but has been, in Capra’s words, “so

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80 Capra, *The Name*, 382.
busy helping others, life seems to pass him by.”81 When George is just a boy, he saves his brother Harry from drowning in an icy creek and incurs an injury that results in George going deaf in one ear. George planned a trip to Europe, but must stay in Bedford Falls when his father dies of a stroke. George plans to go off to college, but again his life is put on hold when the board of his recently departed father’s company votes not to sell to his father’s enemy on the condition that George become executive secretary. Even when George gets married, on the way to the honeymoon, the young couple is informed that there was a run on the company and their honeymoon fund is used to pay the members of the building and loan company.

George continually feels it is his responsibility to prevent the rich villain Mr. Potter (Lionel Barrymore) from buying up the entire town. All that prevents Mr. Potter from doing so is George's building and loan company. The building and loan company was based on the idea of self-reliance combined with mutual aid. The Building and Loan Association allowed for individuals to hold shares in the institution. In return, it offered borrowing privileges as well as the right to dividends. Members committed to making regular payments into the association, and took turns taking out mortgages with which to buy homes. George Bailey’s Building and Loan was founded by his morally upright and generous father. George planned a trip to Europe, but must stay in Bedford Falls when his father dies of a stroke. George plans to go off to college, but again his life is put on hold when the board of his recently departed father’s company votes not to sell to Potter on the condition that George become executive secretary.

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81 Ibid., 376.
On Christmas Eve, George's Uncle Billy loses the business's $8,000 in cash while intending to deposit it in the bank. Potter finds the misplaced money and hides it from Billy and George. When the bank examiner discovers the shortage later that night, George realizes that he will be held responsible and sent to jail and the company will collapse, finally allowing Potter to take over the town. Thinking of his wife, their young children, and others he loves will be better off with him dead, he contemplates suicide. But the prayers of his loved ones result in a gentle angel named Clarence coming to earth to help George with the promise of earning his wings. He shows George what things would have been like if he had never been born. At the very end, he arrives back home, just happy to be alive and with his family. He is met by the entire town offering money to save his savings and loan business.

Though it is still remembered as a great film, the reception of *It's a Wonderful Life* did not signal the unanimous celebration of Capra’s return to Hollywood that he had hoped. The sentimentality of Capra’s films that had awarded him fame in the 30s was not received with the same readiness. Bosley Crowther’s review of the film in the New York Times illustrates the audiences apprehension:

> Indeed the weakness of this picture, from this reviewer point of view, is the sentimentality of it—its illusory concept of life. Mr. Capra’s nice people are charming, his small town is a quite beguiling place and his pattern for solving problems is most optimistic and facile. But somehow they all resemble theatrical attitudes rather than average realities. And Mr. Capra’s “turkey dinners’ philosophy, while emotionally gratifying doesn’t fill the hungry paunch.”

The film received favorable reviews but unfortunately just as many negative reviews. Perhaps more concerning, the film did not make as much money as Capra hoped. A little more than a year after the film was released Variety listed its domestic rentals as 3.3 million. This was twenty-seventh on the list of films released in late 1946 and 1947 and was $480,000 less than the cost of making and distributing the film. To rub salt in the wounds 11.3 million was accumulated by Liberty partner William Wyler on his film for MGM, *The Best Years of Our Lives.* Liberty Films was in economic trouble.

The film was meant to recapture Capra’s commercial success. It counted on formulas from his other films to remind the world who he was. In the George Bailey character, we see Tom Dickson the financial savior of the community in *American Madness* (1932). Clarence Odbody, George’s guardian angel who talks sense into the main character functions much the same as the little man who confronts Longfellow Deeds in *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936). Situational comparisons can also be made for *Meet John Doe* (1941), who also attempts suicide on Christmas Eve but it talked off the ledge, just like George in *It’s a Wonderful Life.* Furthermore, the film forces the Bailey-Potter conflict into Populist Party rhetoric of the 1890s. Through the 1930 populist themed films that had made him a success had locked him into an anachronistic pattern.

Even one of the more favorable reviews written by James Agee in *The Nation* who called the film “one of the most efficient sentimental pieces since *A Christmas Carol*” also stated that “It interests me, by the way, that in representing a twentieth-century American town Frank Capra idealizes so much that seems essentially nineteenth-century. Many small towns are “backward” in that likable way, but I have never seen one so Norman-

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83 Maland, *Frank Capra*, 155.
Rockwellish as all that.” In 1947, Capra’s continual drawing from the well of poulist thought had run it dry.

The next film Capra directed, *State of the Union* (1948) is a testament to Capra trying to remove the expectation of political themes in his films. The film’s conclusion comes when the politician finds he is not worthy of the office at all and swears it off. Originally, the play *State of the Union* was written by Russel Crouse and Howard Lindsay. The plot follows a prominent businessman who is convinced by his mistress and friends to run for president. In order for his campaign to stand a chance he has to keep up appearances with his wife Mary. Along the way, they fall in love once again. The play opened in the National Theatre in Washington D.C. and then on Broadway where it ran for two years. Crouse and Lindsay sold the film rights to Capra in January of 1947 with principal photography scheduled for September. The film has the benefit of great performances from Katherine Hepburn as the wife, Mary and Angela Lansbury as the right wing Newspaper publisher and mistress. “And all the hoopla of its finale, as frenetic and noisy as anything Capra has put on the screen, cannot disguise the fact that the hero resigns from politics… . In one sense, this is Capra at his most realistic, but also at his least engaged. For the artist, withdrawal from the world—the world as he perceives it—is never achieved without some radical diminution of his art.”

Less than two years after the release of *It’s a Wonderful Life*, Liberty Films was sold to Paramount.

Capra successfully completed eight more films after *It’s a Wonderful Life* the last being a remake of *Lady for a Day, A Pocket full of Miracles* (1961). These last cinematic performances from Katherine Hepburn as the wife, Mary and Angela Lansbury as the right wing Newspaper publisher and mistress. “And all the hoopla of its finale, as frenetic and noisy as anything Capra has put on the screen, cannot disguise the fact that the hero resigns from politics… . In one sense, this is Capra at his most realistic, but also at his least engaged. For the artist, withdrawal from the world—the world as he perceives it—is never achieved without some radical diminution of his art.”

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efforts were not to the quality of the films that had made him famous. Capra had found success in the celebration and criticism of the United States, but the United States started to turn her back on Capra beginning with the film *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939.) The screenplay was written by Sydney Buckman whom Capra admitted in his autobiography deserved a lot of credit for the films’ success. Capra also admitted to Joseph McBride that Buchmans’ script for Mr Smith was the best one he ever had to work with.\(^85\) What Capra does not mention is that Buchman was a member of the communist party. The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) had been adding to Capra’s file since *Mr. Smith* in 1939, but a very concerning adage came from his involvement with the Screen Directors Loyalty Oath requirement for members.

In compliance with the Screen Directors Guild’s Anti-Communist policy, Capra, then a board member, signed an affidavit in 1948 stating that he was not a communist. The Board president, Joseph Mankiewicz, also signed the affidavit without contestation. However, in 1950, every member of the SDG was required to sign a loyalty oath, Mankiewicz was strongly against this measure. Capra was also against this measure. For this he was recognized by the *Daily Worker* and perhaps fooled some into thinking he was taking a stance he firmly held. “CAPRA, Frank. Supports revolt against loyalty oath in Screen Directors Guild.”\(^86\)

When his own allegiance was questioned, Capra and “Idealism and disillusionment toward the American system” “His finger on the pulse of American spirit during the Great Depression. The United States is a place where denial of uncomfortable

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\(^86\) *Daily Worker*, October 18, 1950, page 11.
truths keeps our identity preserved. Capra taught us how to do that. Think back to Mr. Smith’s patriotic D.C. monument montage. It’s a love letter to the founding fathers. Glossing over every inconsistency there in. This is how we can have a banker in American madness waxing lyrical about helping Americans through the depression by believing in the benefits of Capitalism while dealing with the mess caused by Capitalism.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

This paper has examined the films that I argued were most culturally and historically relevant to Frank Capra. The films give us an opportunity to understand the motivations behind Capra’s filmmaking as they are often romanticized or misunderstood. He was touted by many including himself as a serious filmmaker. A director whose passion was to glorify the everyday man. What this study has revealed is that Capra used the common man as a trope. He used the trope as a response to the Depression era. His most famous and focused films adopted a Populist guise that led many to believe Capra to be a director concerned with the plight of the common man. However, this study’s close evaluation of Capra’s films reveal that once that trope was no longer profitable, it was abandoned.

In chapter one we inspected the early films of Capra beginning with the film *Ladies of Leisure* followed by *Rain of Shine, Dirigible*, and *Miracle Woman*. These film examples helped us better understand his more successful films that came later as well as help illustrate pre-code era cinema. In addition to providing background information of Capra’s early films, the section Radical Hollywood explored the Hollywood community of the 1930s in an attempt to contrast how relatively conservative Capra was. This community was one of progressive motion driven by the anti-fascist movement. We observed that the Hollywood community was tight-knit with topical and thematic ideas passed in social circles and within studios. In response to the stock market crash in 1929, there was a topical shift in the Hollywood community with Capra at the fore. The Great Depression forced filmmakers to respond and themes of resilience served as Capra’s thematic material and made him one of the most successful filmmakers of the 1930s.
To further understand the Hollywood community and how Capra worked in it we explored the development of the Hollywood Guilds from 1931-39. We briefly discuss the formation of the screenwriters and directors guilds. The plight of the screenwriter in the 1930s was dire with no collective bargaining rights and no right to their creative work if they were terminated. Capra often adopted a similar attitude toward his writers, especially his long time collaborator Robert Riskin. Throughout this study, we observe again and again, Capra’s belief that he as the Director was the author of his films. Capra didn’t actively support the screenwriters guild as much as he worked to improve the directors place in the Studio system. Capra was a member and briefly served as head of the Directors Guild.

In the next section, Ideologues: Capra and Roosevelt we saw Capra further develop into a political and moral commentator. Using his contemporary Franklin Delano Roosevelt as a guide we explored the ideologies of Capra. In 1932 Capra was finding his voice and turning from screwball comedies to more serious commentary. This section revealed the connection between the politician and the director. Both men rallied around the common man, responding to the downtrodden as a way to unite their audience. In this section we see Capra identifying his hero that he utilized in films such as *American Madness* (1932), *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) and *Meet John Doe* (1941).

Hollywood was not unified in its treatment of the depression but there was certainly a response. The response was critical to keep audiences in theater seats. Films had to relate to the audience with themes that would resonate with their fears and uncertainty. Capra’s response to the depression helped him find what he characterized as
his creative voice. The depression gave him the thematic fuel he needed and a character he believed in. Chapter one laid the foundation of this project by introducing the early films of Capra before 1932 when there was a decided thematic shift with *American Madness*. By exploring the Hollywood community of the 1930s we saw Capra fighting for creative freedom of the director above any other member of the studio system. To understand Capra’s response to the Depression, we contrasted his American hero to Roosevelt’s American hero. To conclude Chapter one we briefly discuss the film *Man’s Castle* (1933) to illustrate Hollywood’s response and treatment of the depression.

In chapter two we analyze the themes that Capra utilized to make him very successful. Capra found that a man in trouble fighting for a cause he knows is right was extremely successful among his audience. We analyzed his films, film reviews and his autobiography as primary sources to understand how he responded to his historical context of the Depression. First we analyzed the film *American Madness* which started a Populist theme in his films. An analysis of *Lady for a Day* (1933) follows and serves as a bridge to *It Happened One Night* (1934), the film that made him a significant consideration in film history winning five academy awards.

After the benchmark in his career of *It Happened One Night*, Capra experienced a watershed moment when he claimed a revelation and made a more decided shift to make films that “said something”. He is confronted by a man in his home or perhaps a feverish vision that challenges him to make films that celebrate men who stand up for small causes against insurmountable odds. The next three films are an expression of Capra’s new direction: *Mr Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939),
and *Meet John Doe* (1941). These three films are the most clear example of Capra’s American hero.

In chapter three we discussed Capra’s inability to resolve the films that he chose to make. Capra was called to the service after the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. We discussed his series of documentary films which served as an educational tool for American soldiers as well as civilians. We saw him excel in propaganda which comes as no surprise after analyzing his films. For once the ending is not ambiguous, he could be unapologetically pro-America, pro-underdog, pro-American hero. This paper followed his career to its conclusion and appreciated his advances in film history.

Capra’s response to the Depression made him successful and gave his films relevance. His love for his idea of America and his adoption of an American hero to right the wrongs he perceived were as politically ambiguous as he was. Capra wanted to make culturally relevant films that spoke to the common man, but with no desire to take any specific stance in his film other than good vs. evil or David vs. Goliath became more and more unresolved and dissatisfying to audiences.
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