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Mr. Carter

Frank Capra’s Mr. Smith was an idealistic and innocent outsider who succeeds in Washington.

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Mr. Carter Goes to Washington

By ALLEN ROSTRON

Jimmy Carter’s presidency was a new story for America. It began, like Frank Capra’s Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939) come to life, as the familiar tale of an idealistic and innocent outsider making his way from a humble small town to the nation’s capital. Carter’s arrival there, like that of Mr. Smith in the film, heralded a return to morality, compassion, and old-fashioned common sense. From that promising beginning, disappointment and frustration followed. What began as “the miracle of Jimmy Carter” in 1976 ended in nearly universal recognition of his presidency’s failure. It was a startling turn of events—a Capra story with an unhappy ending—and an unprecedented demonstration of virtue’s futility.

Film critics and political commentators alike have noted that films often serve as a barometer of the country’s mood, reflecting changing political attitudes and even presidential administrations. Studies of U.S. films and politics of the last quarter century, however, have suggested no unique relationship between Carter’s story and contemporary films. Instead, two observations have dominated the studies: that Vietnam and Watergate triggered a wave of cynical, paranoid films, and that the United States swung toward the political Right by the end of the 1970s, producing both the Reagan presidency and an extended cycle of conservative, recuperative films. William Palmer’s The Films of the Seventies, for example, extensively analyzes ties between politics and films of the period, but does not even mention Carter. Kenneth Morris’s recent biography, Jimmy Carter, American Moralist, seeks to relate Carter’s presidency to popular music, television, and movies, but repeats the consensus view that films like Jaws (1975), Taxi Driver (1976), and The China Syndrome (1979) reflected pessimism and doubt instilled by Vietnam and Watergate,
while Reagan’s election mirrored the return of strong, unambiguous heroes in the Star Wars, Indiana Jones, and Rambo films (10, 208, 292). Similarly, Frank Tomasulo situates the 1979 film . . . And Justice for All as “just one year before the crucial Carter-versus-Reagan presidential election and several years after the Watergate scandal” (51). The studies treat the films that appeared during Carter’s term as post-Watergate or pre-Reagan and in effect deny that the Carter administration had a distinctive impact on films.

In fact, the story of Carter’s undoing found reflection in several films, particularly . . . And Justice for All (1979), The Seduction of Joe Tynan (1979), and Brubaker (1980). Each concerns an idealistic hero whose uncompromised good intentions cannot prosper. These films capture a unique period when events tested America’s enduring belief in the efficacy of virtue.

The Candidate as Capra Hero

Watergate generated the need for a hero, like Capra’s Mr. Deeds or Mr. Smith, to set things right in Washington. In America’s mind, the scandal took political corruption to new levels, from smoke-filled back rooms to the Oval Office, betraying the nation’s emotional and cultural investment in the institution of the presidency. The New York Times, for example, reviewing a revival of Capra’s State of the Union (1948), reflected that the film’s “simple theme—that an honest man can rise and prevail against the politicians” would appear almost foreign to jaded modern audiences (Eder).

Watergate did not immediately produce such a hero, but Hollywood filled the gap. The box-office and Academy Award champion of 1976, Rocky, had the images of morality and courage that Capra himself diagnosed as missing in the current cinema (Quart). Better yet, Rocky was two Capra stories in one: Behind the character Rocky Balboa’s rise from nobody to contender, there was the fairy-tale story of Sylvester Stallone, an unknown actor, turning down lucrative offers for his script and sticking to his demand to be cast in the starring role. “Boy, that’s a picture I wish I had made,” Capra remarked about the film (qtd. in Culhane 1). Inevitably, a Capra hero in some form had returned to the screen in the aftermath of Vietnam and Watergate.

Jimmy Carter, like Rocky, rose unexpectedly from obscurity to become a contender in 1976. This appearance in the national political arena had a similar inevitability (Christensen 135–36; Morris 248). It was an extraordinary intersection of the man and the moment. As Carter’s advertising chief Gerald Rafshoon put it, Carter “came along at a time when the country was looking for him. He fit the mood of the country” (qtd. in Smith 32).

Carter’s pitch was idealistic, personal, and symbolic rather than ideological. His campaign team believed that Americans did not care about traditional issues; the real issue was post-Vietnam, post-Watergate disillusionment. Their approach amounted to psychoanalysis of a nation: After Kennedy’s abandonment and Nixon’s betrayal, America needed a pure, nurturing, and caring leader (Beisel 80–83). Carter was it. He promised to bring morality and virtue to the White House. He would give America a government as good, honest, decent, truthful, fair, compassionate, and filled with love as its people. He promised, although without specifying the means, to conquer inflation and unemployment. In foreign affairs, he pledged a “remoralization” of policy and absolute commitment to human rights that would take precedence over competition for power.

Carter became the Capra hero his country needed. He fit perfectly into the ranks of Longfellow Deeds, Jefferson Smith, et al.—“idealistic young men from the countryside, naive to the ways of the city, but roused to do battle against corrupt powerbrokers and restore the lost faith of the cynical” (Wolfe 21). Carter did not have to play up his humble origins because they still emanated from him. He was rural—a peanut farmer—and a citizen of Plains, his hometown of 683 residents. He projected common sense and innocence, offering himself as an ordinary man who carried his own suit bag off airplanes and rode on buses, not in limousines. In a classic “common man” touch, Carter and his family stepped out of their limousine and walked to the White House at his inauguration. Carter was also deeply religious, a regular teacher in the men’s Bible study in the basement of the Plains First Baptist Church.

Most important, Carter presented himself as an outsider untouched by Washington’s political machinations and sordid past. His campaign implicitly sounded the populist themes of Capra’s cinema—metropolitan corruption, suspicion of sophistication, the virtue of the rural, distrust of politics, and fear of government (Pechter; Richards). He was, like Mr. Smith, a modern imitation of Christ driving the money changers out of the temple of government. As Carter’s campaign speech-writer Patrick Anderson put it, Carter viewed himself as something “out of Horatio Alger, with a touch of Frank Capra thrown in, a Sunday-school hero writ large”—a “spunky little fellow” who gets the best of “the big bullies, uppity women, and city slickers of the world” because he is “canny and honest and pure” (109).

Carter seemed as ingenuous and simple as the characters that Gary Cooper or Jimmy Stewart played. He first gained national notice, for example, for his frequent vows that he would never lie to the American people. There was also an element of absurdity to Carter, some “quality of irreducible foolishness” emblemizing his humanity, like Mr. Deeds’s tuba playing or Mr. Smith’s fanatical patriotism (Pechter 127, 130). Carter’s inner circle called it the “weirdo factor.” It manifested itself in everything from his UFO sighting, to his tortured, pious views on sex and morality revealed by the infamous Playboy interview, to his habit of relaxing at the end of a hard day by reading verses from a Spanish translation of the Bible.

Carter seemed to differ from Capra’s heroes in only one respect. He came out of the peanut fields of southern Georgia; Capra’s heroes were quintessential “Yankee crackerbarrels” (Gehring, Populism, 1–23; Gehring, “McCary”).
Even that distinction dissolves on closer examination, for Carter was a Yankee in spirit, a “Georgia Ben Franklin,” a “Puritan in blue jeans” (Miller 20). He lacked the sociability and hospitality, verbosity and eloquence of speech, and sense of vision and romance of the archetypical southerner. To the contrary, he was a loner, a notoriously regimented and tireless worker, meticulously organized, detail oriented, frugal, and possessed of “a Yankee intellect—particular, didactic, concise, inductive, exact” (Miller 27–37).

Carter’s candidacy became a real-life version of Mr. Smith Goes to Washington. His narrow victory in the 1976 election was, like Capra’s happy endings, a ritual of innocence and virtue triumphant. American voters selected the candidate who struck them as “most warm, most sincere, most honest” or in other words “the swellest guy—the candidate who seems most like Gary Cooper, James Stewart, Henry Fonda or Spencer Tracy” (Mast 21). As Mr. Deeds would have said of Carter’s journey from peanut farm to White House, “Things like that can only happen in a country like America.”

Mr. Carter in Washington

For Mr. Smith, the happy ending was really an ending. He was victorious over the forces of corruption and the credits rolled. Carter’s story, on the other hand, continued. If all went according to form, his presidency would have been a resounding success of 1977, his administration made its first significant stumble. Allegations of financial impropriety forced OMB Director Bert Lance’s resignation, betraying the promise that the days of White House scandal were over and undermining Carter’s claim to the moral high ground. The Lance affair also revealed Carter’s inexperience in the ways of Washington politics, for he stuck by Lance, an old friend, far longer than political wisdom prescribed.

Carter’s Capra-like character, rhetoric, and symbolism began to work against him. The press decried the “small-town” mentality of his White House, where self-perceived outsiders “stick together and resent the city slickers who second guess them or get in their way” (Farney). Things seemed to go only downhill. Carter’s twin crises—the economy and energy—worsened. Inflation, unemployment, and interest rates climbed. Oil supplies shrunk, OPEC’s price squeeze tightened, and gas-station lines grew. Bad luck seemed to be Carter’s only luck. Just when alternative energy sources took on greater significance, the Three Mile Island mishap became front-page news. By mid-1979, Carter’s presidency was in critical condition, his approval ratings dipping lower than those of any U.S. president, including Nixon in the final throes of Watergate. Carter found himself in a world in which idealism and virtue did not do the trick. The best of intentions paved the road only to failure and derision. Carter’s story soon defied its description as “Capraesque.”

Cinematic images of presidential weakness recurred throughout the Carter era. Some films, like American (1979) and First Family (1980), depicted foolish, incompetent presidents. Others signified presidential impotence with images of the president held hostage, such as Twilight’s Last Gleaming (1977), The Kidnapping of the President (1980), Escape from New York (1981), and Superman II (1981). One film did both: In The President’s Women, released as Carter’s term began and revived as it ended, kidnappers of the president’s daughter demand as
ransom that the president and first lady have sex on national television.

Several films opened toward the end of Carter's term that spoke more precisely to his situation. Jerry Schatzberg's *The Seduction of Joe Tynan* was about politics, Norman Jewison's *And Justice for All* involved criminal justice, and Stuart Rosenberg's *Brubaker* concerned prison reform. Although their settings track the phases of Watergate—from political scandal, to the spectacle of the hearings, to the punishment of the conspirators—these films have a far more specific relation to their political context than simply being post-Watergate.

The premise of the three films was the same: an idealistic hero having trouble coping with how things—"the system"—really work. Together, they demonstrate the Carter story's distinct reflection in contemporary film.

**Carter Heroes on Screen**

Each film features a leading man of Capraesque, or perhaps Carteresque, virtue. In the *Seduction of Joe Tynan* Joe Tynan (Alan Alda) is a young senator from New York, and the film's early scenes reveal that he is a "fiery liberal" do-gooder. His fellow senators chug liquor and chase call girls. By contrast, Tynan is first seen on the Senate floor arguing for a public works bill (à la *Mr. Smith*) that will create jobs and put bread on the tables of the needy. "How many children can this nation afford to let go hungry?" he asks. "If we're not here for these children, for these families, what are we here for, gentlemen?"

... *And Justice for All* concerns Arthur Kirkland (Al Pacino), a young criminal defense lawyer in Baltimore, and the most virtuous and idealistic lawyer in town. As the film begins, Kirkland is in jail. His crime, in essence, is caring too much about one of his unfortunate clients—a young man stopped for driving with a broken taillight who, through a series of misidentifications and misunderstandings, wound up convicted of stabbing a prison guard. Kirkland took a swing at Judge Fleming (John Forsythe), the least virtuous and idealistic man in town, because Fleming refused on procedural grounds to hear evidence that would prove the client's innocence and free him from prison. From his cell, Kirkland watches as a young transvestite, trembling in fear of the jeering inmates, is humiliated by the police officers escorting him into the lockup. Kirkland asks the officers to "give the kid a break" and put him somewhere else, but they ignore his plea for compassion.

*Brubaker* also begins with its idealistic hero behind bars. Henry Brubaker (Robert Redford) is a liberal crusader tapped by the governor to be the new warden of Wakefield, a maximum security prison farm in the rural South. Brubaker enters the prison disguised as an inmate for an uncensored look at its condition and spends the first reel of the film watching in anguish a parade of squalor and brutality. When he finally reveals his identity, Brubaker tells the prisoners he is "what the governor promised—a reform warden" sent to clean up the notorious prison. After exposing the Watergate scandal in *All the President's Men* (1976), Redford appears here as a surrogate for Carter, the mythic redeemer called to cleanse the tarnished institution.

Each film focuses closely on the relationship between morality and politics. For Joe Tynan, the two are not initially at odds. He hopes that political involvement can be a means to accomplish good. For the other films' heroes, being apolitical is an integral part of their moral nature. One character describes Arthur Kirkland as a "very principled, ethical lawyer, with no political ties." Similarly, Henry Brubaker announces he is "not here to work for a political party or a state or a governor"—he only cares about what is right. These heroes, like Carter, derive moral authority from their status as untainted outsiders.

**American Ideals**

Each film shows a litany of problems with the U.S. institutions examined, but just as in Capra's films, there is criticism only of the systems, of the misuse of power, and never of the American way. This is established well by the remarkably similar title sequences of *Seduction of Joe Tynan* and... *And Justice for All*. Both consist of children's voices over iconic visual images of American democracy. In *Seduction*, black school children visiting the nation's capital sing "My Country 'Tis of Thee" as their bus rolls past the familiar Lincoln, Washington, and Jefferson monuments—the same icons that stand for American ideals in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. In... *And Justice for All*, unseen children recite the pledge of allegiance while the camera explores the architectural grandeur of a courthouse, from the imposing front steps to the judge's bench. The legal system's majesty is undercut by interposed shots of signs dictating trivial rules such as "No chewing gum while court is in session." These opening sequences affirm from the outset a faith in America's basic ideals, but they associate that faith with innocence and naiveté by giving voice to it through children. Moreover, the stumbling manner of the children's delivery conveys a sense of fragility and a threat to the values represented.

*Brubaker* also opens with a bus ride: a load of new inmates headed for Wakefield. The film affirms American ideals and emphasizes their precariousness by equating the prison and the nation. As a politician tells Brubaker, "Although Wakefield is admittedly an imperfect institution, much like America herself, she is nonetheless a grand experiment."

**American Politics**

Just as the films assume a basic faith in American ideals, they assume the audience also accepts the pervasiveness of the forms of corruption depicted. As Veronica Geng wrote of the *Seduction of Joe Tynan*, the film is not propaganda—"Propaganda's aim is to excite us to belief; these movies assume that our feelings don't have to be stirred, because we already believe" (90).

*Seduction* shows how power and success seduce even an idealistic politician. Tynan's public persona of smiles and handshakes is so memorized that it turns on and off appropriately without him even noticing. The
ambitious, amoral staffers who surround him relentlessly counsel political expedience. Tynan lies in bed at night, giddy at his own accomplishments: "I've got clout. My little subcommittee has power. . . . Do you know there are dozens of men lying in their beds just wishing they were me?"

Tynan gets a chance to boost his political stock when he learns that a Supreme Court nominee from the deep South once defended segregation during a campaign speech. Tynan's problem is that he already promised his friend and mentor, Senator Birney (Melvyn Douglas), that he would not lead the opposition to the nomination. Birney's motivation for protecting the nominee is purely political; he wants the nominee to become a justice so that he will no longer be a rival for his Senate seat. Tynan's reasons for ultimately betraying Birney and fighting the nomination are equally self-interested; he knows he can earn "a lot of ink" by scuttling the nominee. The moral implications of putting a racist on the Supreme Court become an afterthought in everyone's equation. In the words of Karen Traynor (Meryl Streep), the Louisiana civil rights lawyer who brings Tynan a film of the candidate's regrettable speech: "When I think about the splash you could make if you had this film, I get weak in the knees. . . . And of course it's the right thing to do."

Meanwhile, Tynan is seduced in a second sense. While working together to defeat the nomination, Tynan and Traynor slip from a flirtation into an affair. When Tynan's wife Ellie (Barbara Harris) discovers his infidelity, Tynan ends his relationship with Traynor and pleads for his wife's forgiveness. The damage to the marriage looks beyond repair. The personal seduction mirrors the political; Tynan's moral compass no longer serves him.

In . . . And Justice for All, Arthur Kirkland tries harder to keep his virtue intact, but events test him as well. When Kirkland's nemesis Judge Fleming is arrested on rape charges, he begrudgingly asks Kirkland to defend him. The judge's reasons are political; he hopes that the press and public will think that Kirkland would only defend the opening scene, cannot handle the thought of going to prison and commits suicide after being sentenced to a lengthy term because of the negligence of an attorney babysitting the case for Kirkland. Kirkland's law-office partner (Jeffrey Tambor) suffers a mental breakdown—shaving his head and bombarding courthouse personnel with cafeteria dishes—after a murderer he once freed on a technicality kills again. As Frank Rich stated, "if the American hero of Midnight Express had come from Baltimore, there would have been no reason for him to escape the Turkish prison and return home" (84). The film depicts an unending parade of corruption, incompetence, and madness for which Kirkland's idealism and goodness are no match.

The debasement and corruption depicted in Brubaker are equally complete. The inmates literally run the asylum. The "trustees," a select group of armed prisoners, obtain special privileges in return for policing the other inmates. Until Brubaker's arrival, the trustees also steal and resell food intended for the prisoners and viciously punish any spark of defiance. The horrors inside Wakefield are manifestations of wider corruption. Brubaker discovers that the former warden took bribes, that the prison's doctor extorts cash in return for medical care, that local businessmen treat the prison as a free-labor pool, and that one politician on the board overseeing the prison sold it insurance policies for nonexistent farm equipment. When Brubaker creates a council of inmate representatives, the film's theme of inherent corruption is explicit. As one blunt candidate declares, "I am corrupt, but I am honest. You vote for me, you know exactly what you get."

North and South

Hollywood representations of the South proliferated during Carter's term, particularly those featuring the country "redneck" imagery associated with the president's brother Billy, as in Smokey and the Bandit (1977) and its imitators and television's Carter Country and The Dukes of Hazzard. The Seduction of Joe Tynan, . . . And Justice for All,
and Brubaker contrast northern and southern elements, but employ another stereotype. The heroes are Yankees while the political environments in which they must operate are southern, aristocratic systems of connections and influence. . . And Justice for All, for example, contrasts Kirkland's earthy, working-class ethnicity with Judge Fleming's cavalier, patrician airs. Director Norman Jewison explained that he chose Baltimore for the film's location "because it had an Eastern law establishment feeling to it and a Southern political temperament" (Mariani, "In").

Similarly, a bright North/South line cuts across The Seduction of Joe Tynan. Half of Tynan's life remains in Yankee territory, with his home and family in the New York suburbs. For them, politics has no appeal. It takes Tynan away, physically and emotionally, and brings unwanted attention and pressure to maintain a careful public image. Tynan's son is embarrassed to be the subject of his father's talk-show anecdotes. His daughter rebels—hitchhiking, getting a tattoo—to punish him for his neglect. Tynan's wife, his conscience, does not try to hide her hatred of politics and its effect on him. She can barely contain herself, for example, when Tynan's aide chides her for telling a reporter that she received therapy from a psychiatrist and informs her that he "took care of" the article to avoid any negative political fallout.4

In Washington, Tynan is a Yankee surrounded by Dixiecrats. The two other senators that the film contrasts with Tynan are conspicuously southern, from their accents to their Bourbon and gumbo, as are Tynan's mistress and the Supreme Court nominee whom Tynan derails. The film's opening sequence associates Washington with the South, with the bus full of singing black children on their field trip to the capital evoking a cluster of images of the civil rights movement. The scene is a reminder that Washington was the Union's capital but was nevertheless a southern city. In another early scene, Tynan and Traynor go to Louisiana and meet, on a dirt road in a soybean field, with a young, black congresswoman who has the only footage of the Supreme Court nominee's controversial speech. She first withholds it because of political pressure from party officials but decides to release it, convinced more by Tynan's promise, "I will not forget you when I win" than by the obvious ideological considerations. The southern elements in the Seduction of Joe Tynan are strongly connected to Washington, politics, and amorality, if not immorality.

Brubaker, based loosely on events at a real Arkansas prison, is set entirely in an unspecified southern locale. Like film predecessors of the 1970s such as Cool Hand Luke (1971) and Norma Rae (1979), Brubaker takes the pious northern view of the wicked and irredeemable Deep South. The characters speak with a "pan-Southern accent—the more corrupt the character, the thicker the accent" (Kael 93). Brubaker, the film's sole northern character, was a U.S. Army captain who ran a military stockade in Maryland before coming south to carry out his Reconstruction-like reform of the degenerate southern institution. In one of his first acts as the new warden, Brubaker emancipates a dozen black prisoners caged for months in dark solitary confinement. In contrast to the artificial loquaciousness and gentility of the local politicians and businessmen, Brubaker displays the Yankee personality common to Carter and Capra's heroes. He is a rigid, no-nonsense loner who micromanages the overhaul of the prison and disdains the trustees' enjoyment of corrupt pleasures like liquor and loose women. Brubaker also exhibits a strong populist streak, presenting himself to the inmates as a common man who wears jeans and flannel shirts instead of a suit and who gets his hands dirty in the prison's fields.

The films' dominant images are of noble Yankee heroes wading in the swamp of southern politics. Those images had their clear contemporary counterpart in Carter, an idealistic president surrounded in the White House by an inner circle of advisors—the "Georgia Mafia"—widely perceived as contributing to his presidency's failure.

Virtue and the Anti-Politicians

Carter won the presidential election on the promise that he was an outsider,
like Kirkland or Brubaker, who owed favors to no one and would govern according to his moral instincts rather than by making deals and playing politics. But what brought Carter to the White House damned him there. Carter fulfilled his promise and remained an anti-politician and an outsider to the Washington establishment. He governed like the engineer he was, believing problems should be solved rationally by the collection of sufficient information and application of sound reasoning rather than by political gamesmanship. America soon discovered the flipside of Carter’s crowd-pleasing campaign rhetoric was the notion that amateurism and intensely held ideals somehow provide solutions to complex national problems. His administration became a “Hell of Good Intentions” and his programs “largely exhortation and sand castles” (Hoffman: Lewis).

The heroes in the Seduction of Joe Tynan... And Justice for All, and Brubaker are also idealists who must operate within systems demanding pragmatism, expediency, and compromise. Seduction depicts politics as a matter of chasing votes, cutting deals, and returning favors. After Tynan agrees to support a fellow senator, for example, Tynan’s chief aide chides him: “I wish you’d made him ask you twice. At least he’d owe us something...”... And Justice demonstrates that the criminal law system is also about making deals. The goal is victory and personal advancement rather than justice. Kirkland describes the system as Let’s Make a Deal. Director Norman Jewison believed the timing of the film was right because “[p]eople are fed up with the Law and its inequities, the way it’s handed down. Fed up with plea bargaining, lawyers, deals. Justice for the rich and justice for the poor” (qtd. in Mariani, “Jewison,” 187). Jewison’s remarks echoed Carter’s careful campaign rhetoric, which condemned America’s “double standard of justice,” and with which Carter indirectly raised the issue of Ford’s pardon of Nixon. Jewison’s prior film, F.I.S.T. (1978), had the same theme of compromised idealism. F.I.S.T., which portrayed the rise and fall of a Hoffalike union leader (Sylvester Stallone), had as its explicit motto the phrase “Nothing’s clean”—not labor, not big business, not politics.

The tension between idealism and political compromise is most explicit in Brubaker. Brubaker’s ally in the governor’s office, Lillian Gray (Jane Alexander), criticizes him, as the press blamed Carter, for not understanding the role of power and compromise in politics. Like Carter’s struggles with Congress, Brubaker’s reform efforts depend on cooperation from politicians, in Brubaker’s case, the prison board. Gray admonishes Brubaker to be pragmatic and to work with the board, because “[i]f you’re not in the system, you can’t change it.” Like Joe Tynan, she believes in compromise, but Brubaker scorns her advice. The real obstacles to prison reform, he says, are “pseudo-reformers, people that just want to say the right thing, be at the right place at the right time, get themselves in the paper, and get nothing done.” Gray warns him, to no avail, that when you think “everything you do is right, everything everybody else does is absurd” and “[i]f you don’t figure out how to play these people, you are going to self-destruct.”

The Capraesque traits that served Carter in 1976 turned against him as president, just as those qualities failed the heroes on screen. Those who once praised Carter’s idealism began to accuse him of trivializing serious national and international issues. His continual appeals to principle began to be taken as insincere tokenism, products of cartoonist Gary Trudeau’s imagined “Department of Symbolism.” Critics also chastised Carter—who appealed to voters in 1976 as a plain, common man of the people—for not upholding the majesty of his office. As the character Mr. Smith would have in his place, Carter looked like a small man in an oversized job. He seemed more comfortable wearing his well-known cardigan sweaters than he did projecting an image of presidential leadership.

Malaise

In each film, the hero’s confrontations with political reality eventually result in disillusionment. For Tynan, politics loses whatever idealistic appeal it once held. At one point, he consoles another senator about an amendment omitted from a legislative package. The amendment would have saved a few lives but would not generate any political payoff. The senator tells Tynan that he has had enough and will not be back for the next session:

After a while, you start to forget what you’re here for. And then getting clout and keeping it is all there is. You start lying to your constituents, your colleagues. And you forget what you thought you cared most about in life.

The next shot—Tynan alone staring wistfully out a Capitol window—confirms how the senator’s words struck Tynan. Similarly, Kirkland’s grandfather (Lee Strasberg) asks him whether he is a good, honest lawyer. “Being honest doesn’t have much to do with being a lawyer,” Kirkland sighs.

Brubaker’s low point comes after an aging inmate confides that scores of prisoners killed over the years were reported as escapees and secretly buried in the prison farm fields. Before he can lead Brubaker to the unmarked graveyard, the trustees kill the old man, electrocuting him with a crude device constructed from a telephone battery pack, and hang his body from the prison’s flagpole as a warning. Brubaker, in despair over the murder and his realization that none of the politicians want the hidden graves to be discovered, directs his outrage inward, and shocks himself with the trustees’ murder device.

In real life President Carter’s disillusionment became equally apparent. This frustration over his inability to translate virtue into accomplishment crystallized in the summer of 1979 when, against the objections of advisors, Carter scrapped a nuts-and-bolts speech about energy policy and spoke instead about the broader “crisis of confidence” besetting the nation. It was the pivotal moment of Carter’s presidency. His fate, like that of Capra’s heroes, depended on an act of public persuasion, an attempt to win over an audience by exhortation and confession. Carter’s effort failed. His
speech blamed the American people for losing faith and lacking confidence. It was taken as too pessimistic and as an abdication of responsibility, for Carter said that the task of reviving the country from its stupor rested on individual Americans rather than the White House. Although Carter did not use the word malaise, it became the caricature for his message.

**Responses to the Futility of Virtue**

Carter’s attempt to salvage his presidency backfired. What had worked for him in 1976—a spiritual if not messianic appeal to idealism, virtue, and moral principle—now failed to inspire. After the “malaise” speech, troubles continued for his administration. In the span of two months, Carter purged five cabinet members in a shake-up reminiscent of Nixon’s “massacres”; UN Ambassador Andrew Young resigned because of his unauthorized meetings with a PLO representative; and published reports accused chief of staff Hamilton Jordan of various indiscretions including use of cocaine. Worse, Senator Ted Kennedy hinted that he would challenge Carter for the Democratic nomination, and polls showed him leading Carter in most of the country. A cartoon in the Washington Post in September 1979 depicted Carter’s advisors studying a poll showing sagging support for the infamous “killer rabbit” (Block). However, Carter’s confrontation with Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini did the most to undermine him; the seizure of the U.S. embassy and hostages in Tehran in November filled the news every day with images of Carter’s incompetence and weakness. Then, in December the Soviets invaded Afghanistan.

The protagonists of the *Seduction of Joe Tynan*, *... And Justice for All*, and *Brubaker*, similarly disillusioned, ultimately face their own moments of decision. The heroes find two responses to their dilemmas: to compromise principles and accommodate political reality or to abandon the system altogether. Each response anticipates, to some extent, Carter’s own.

Tynan’s response is compromise and accommodation. He accepts political reality, strives to play the game well, and his political fortunes rise. In the midst of his marital crisis, party leaders reward him with an offer to deliver the presidential nominating speech at the Democratic national convention. Backstage at the convention, Tynan’s wife says she is leaving him. He pushes her to reconsider but is pulled away to deliver his speech before he can get her answer. As Tynan stands at the podium in the midst of convention hysteria—signs waving, balloons dropping, and delegates chanting, “We want Joe”—his eyes fix on his wife, but she does not respond. After a suitably dramatic pause, she finally softens and, with a wave of the tiny American flag she holds, acknowledges that she will stand by him.

The film ends as Tynan begins his speech. He has become a national hero, even a presidential hopeful, by striking a bargain between his ideals and an imperfect system’s demands. As Alan Alda put it, Tynan is ultimately a politician “caught within a web of accommodation” (qtd. in Ansen 62). It is an amoral ending, a victory of compromised virtue.

President Carter tried to accommodate the political realities facing him. With memories of Vietnam receding, and the United States symbolically held hostage in Iran, public demand for the reassertion of American strength grew. Carter tried to revamp himself into the warrior the country wanted. His foreign policy preoccupation with repentance and human rights gave way to the “Carter Doctrine,” which promised swift use of force to protect threatened U.S. interests in the Persian Gulf. He instituted selective service registration, asked Congress to escalate military spending, embargoed grain sales to the Soviet Union, and called for a boycott of the summer Olympic games in Moscow. Carter’s public and private rhetoric hardened. The night after Soviet forces invaded Afghanistan, he told his wife that he would “make sure that Afghanistan will be their Vietnam” (Glad 391). His speeches condemning the Soviets’ lack of basic moral values foreshadowed the “evil empire” rhetoric of his successor.

The culmination of Carter’s conversation came in April 1980. After resisting proposals for a military response to the Iranian hostage crisis for five months, Carter approved a rescue operation. Afterward, he had to tell the nation that the mission failed and resulted in the deaths of eight American soldiers. The failure fed concerns about U.S. strength. Carter incurred sharp criticism for unilaterally proceeding with the mission without consulting congressional leaders. His secretary of state, Cyrus Vance, resigned over his disagreement with the rescue mission in particular and Carter’s new hard-line slant in general. Carter’s presidency had hit bottom.

Arthur Kirkland and Henry Brubaker have a different response in the films. Accommodation is impossible for Kirkland because the legal system depicted in *... And Justice for All* is irrational. Indeed, critics’ principal complaint about the film was that it portrayed a system characterized not merely by unfairness, but by a “demented unfairness” or “hysteria” (Canby; Sarris; Schlesinger). *Seduction* assumes that the political system’s values are skewed but that it has a certain logic to which one can adapt. Kirkland’s world, by contrast, contradicts the fundamental premise of the crackerbarrel, populist, and Capra hero outlook that the world is rational and accommodates reasonable change.

For example, in one odd scene, Kirkland sits slumped on a park bench, dejected, having the previous night witnessed the death of his client during a prison hostage-taking. He looks up as a group of joggers pass by him. A moment later, he leaps off the bench and joins them, running through the city streets in his three-piece suit and overcoat. He eventually veers away from the group and winds up walking to his office. There is no explanation of why or where he was running. The scene is incoherent, except perhaps as a reference to Rocky’s memorable runs through Philadelphia. Kirkland is not too exhausted to charge up a monumental set of steps; but unlike Rocky, he has no reason to do so. Rocky’s
world was simpler and made sense in a way that Kirkland’s does not.

Inevitably, Kirkland must abandon the system. On the eve of the judge’s rape trial, Kirkland fortuitously discovers damning evidence of guilt. Confronted, Judge Fleming admits the crime but reminds Kirkland that it is irrelevant to the job to be done. In court, Kirkland’s opening statement lays out the evidence that will surely result in the judge’s acquittal. Then, suddenly, he turns on his client. Enraged, he screams that the judge is guilty but will go free because the system does not work. “I’m out of order?” he screams, “No, you’re out of order! This whole trial is out of order!” As bailiffs drag him from the courtroom, Kirkland knows that he has avenged himself by destroying the judge’s reputation, but that he will never practice law again. It is a scene of frenzied, total renunciation.

In the film’s final shot, Kirkland sits in resignation on the courthouse steps. He greets his law-office partner, who is still clearly imbalanced, who is heading into the building. Kirkland could not adjust to the system inside the courthouse, but his demented colleague stands a better chance.

Brubaker also abandons his cause rather than compromise. When he and the inmates unearth the corpses of the murdered prisoners, exposing the sins of past administrations, the politicians offer Brubaker a deal. If he will stop digging and go along with their story that an old paupers’ cemetery lies in the prison’s fields, they will give him the resources and discretion to implement the full reform agenda he planned for Wakefield. Lillian Gray, the governor’s aide, cannot believe Brubaker refuses the bargain.

GRAY: And you don’t see any options? No middle ground?
BRUBAKER: I don’t see playing politics with the truth, Lilly.
GRAY: No way to compromise?
BRUBAKER: On strategy maybe. But not on principles.

Unwilling to compromise, Brubaker is fired. In the finale, as the new warden addresses the inmates gathered in the prison yard, Brubaker gathers his things and state troopers escort him off the premises. As Brubaker passes, an inmate turns and begins to clap slowly and loudly. The others join him, surging toward Brubaker and sending him off with a round of applause in the uplifting final shot. Brubaker wins a moral victory but fails to accomplish practical results. The notion of the idealistic hero’s failure was a twist on the traditional Hollywood account. As Pauline Kael recognized:

[It says that the evil is so all-encompassing that even the mythic American hero is futile now. It’s like the John Wayne films where the wishy-washy liberals compromise and sell out their friends but the Wayne heroes prove their purity by being steadfast and winning. Only, Brubaker proves his purity by losing. (93–94)]

Critics did not miss the political implications of Brubaker’s conclusion. As one wrote, “Shouldn’t liberals know by now that the halo doesn’t fit on a political man who puts personal rectitude above everything else?” (Denby 54).
Abandonment and Comeback

Carter's uneasy, eleventh-hour attempt at compromise failed. Like Kirkland and Brubaker, he could not accommodate his idealistic and anti-political approach to political realities. Carter did not exactly abandon politics—more precisely, politics abandoned him. In 1980, there was again an extraordinary matching of man and moment, but this time it was Ronald Reagan rather than Carter who suited the national mood. In his farewell address, Carter returned to the themes of human rights and idealism on which he came into office. His political involvement in the following years was limited to serving as a phantom candidate against which the Republicans continued to run in each election. Carter's profile sank so low that he did not even campaign for his former vice president, Walter Mondale, during his 1984 presidential bid.

But another "Jimmy Carter miracle" was still in store. One critic writing about Brubaker noted that "[i]dealists don't always win, though the hindsight of history frequently applaud them" (Winsten). Like Brubaker, Carter lost his job but eventually won applause. In presidential retirement, the same qualities responsible for Carter's failure as president—his idealism, commitment to moral principle, and rejection of traditional politics—won over even his former critics. His untiring humanitarian and diplomatic efforts rehabilitated his tarnished image. Carter served as a uniquely moving national symbol of morality and virtue, both as a future president and a former one. It was only during the intervening years, when he was in the White House and his idealistic style met political reality, that his problems arose.

Capra heroes on film eventually recovered, as did Carter. For a time, America witnessed a wave of film heroes emphasizing action over ideals; Luke Skywalker, Indiana Jones, and John Rambo struck a chord with audiences eager for the reassertion of American strength. As the Reagan era ended, film heroes in the traditional Capra mold returned to the screen, with happier endings in store: in Field of Dreams (1989), The Distinguished Gentleman (1992), Dave (1993), and Forrest Gump (1994) (Gehring, Populism, 12-16, 37-54). Unlike the heroes in the Seduction of Joe Tynan... And Justice for All, or Brubaker, the heroes in the later films unmistakably come out on top. In particular, Dave is essentially Carter's story cheerfully retold—an ordinary, naive, idealistic outsider becomes president and successfully governs through enthusiasm, conscience, and common sense. Uncompromised innocence and virtue triumph over disillusionment, as surely as they did for Mr. Smith and Mr. Deeds, and as surely as they could not for Joe Tynan, Arthur Kirkland, or Henry Brubaker. Perhaps only during the final, frustrating years of the Carter presidency did the idea of a Capra hero's failure seem fitting.

NOTES


2. Some believed that Carter was well aware of the benefits of looking like the "lost leader" resurrected, his "deliberately-cultivated Kennedy hair-style, and reminiscent grin successfully undercut[ing] what otherwise would have been Teddy Kennedy's rival appeal." See Coral Bell, "Virtue Unrewarded: Carter's Foreign Policy at Mid-Term," International Affairs 54 (Oct. 1978): 559-72, at 561.

3. Considering its explicitly political theme, critical reaction to The Seduction of Joe Tynan made little reference to contemporary national politics. David Denby called it "a Carter-era political movie, sweet and more than a little beside the point." (See "Too Good To Be Good," New York 3 Sept. 1979: 62-63.) Several others noted that the film's portrait of a liberal, northeastern, philandering senator was a fitting prelude to the presidential candidacy of Senator Ted Kennedy. See Betsy Erkkila, Rev. of The Seduction of Joe Tynan, Cinaste (Trenton, NJ: 1979): 80: 49-50; and Andrew Sarris, "Films in Focus: Parables for Our Time," Village Voice 20 Aug. 1979: 49.

4. The incident seems a cross among several 1970s' political episodes: the disclosure that Thomas Eagleton had been hospitalized for depression, ending his 1972 vice presidential bid; Carter's 1976 Playboy interview; and Betty Ford's revelation of her treatment for substance abuse.

WORKS CITED


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