

Impeachment not revisited

The Contender, written and directed by Rod Lurie

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The Contender is a political drama, obviously inspired by the 1998 impeachment crisis surrounding US President Bill Clinton. Writer and director Rod Lurie, a former film critic and entertainment journalist, describes himself as a “political junkie.” He says that “Presidential election years are like football seasons to me. I watch the events unfold with great excitement.” Remarkably, however, Lurie has made no reference to the impeachment crisis in either his production notes or his comments to the press. This refusal to address the Clinton scandal directly, mirroring the silence of the major presidential candidates on the issue, is telling. As an examination of the film will demonstrate, Lurie is a Hollywood liberal, with all the opportunism and superficiality that all too often implies.

The story centers on the intrigues that ensue when a US president is obliged to name a new vice president following the death of the previous second in command. President Jackson Evans (Jeff Bridges), contrary to expectations, nominates Senator Laine Hanson (Joan Allen) for the post, an act that has to be confirmed by Congress. For reasons that are never entirely clear, a Midwestern Congressman, Shelly Runyon (Gary Oldman), sets out to block Hanson's appointment. He enlists a rookie Congressman to investigate her past in hopes of finding something discrediting. Photographs are dug up, apparently showing her engaged in promiscuous sexual activities in college.

In the face of mounting political pressure, Hanson steadfastly refuses to comment on her private life, thereby jeopardizing the nomination. As further apparently incriminating details emerge, the president is under pressure to withdraw her name. The original frontrunner for the vacant position seems to be gaining support. In the end, the president stands by Hanson, she

is vindicated and the right-wing congressman routed. In fact, Runyon is driven from the House, as the president castigates him, eliciting a standing ovation from the entire body.

The Contender misses the mark both artistically and politically. The first few minutes of the film—during which an atmosphere of dirty tricks and conspiracy is built up through a series of brief sequences—suggests the possibility of a hard-hitting exposé. This rapidly dissipates, however, as it dawns on the spectator that the film is less a critique than a part of the problem. It is a thoroughly establishment and essentially complacent piece, and any element of protest never goes beyond vague criticism of the most obvious “blemishes” of American democracy. Lurie is clearly mesmerized by the power wielded by the Washington elite. The production notes hint at the extent of the collaboration between the film's creators and the Clinton administration: “The filmmakers were extremely grateful to the White House, which gave them access to the Oval Office itself, as well as the mansion and grounds.”

Any misgivings he may have about the nature and possible abuses of this power take quite trivial forms, and, in any case, are always colored by the general awe with which Lurie views the political establishment. For example, the president is shown to be obsessed with ordering the most exotic foods on each occasion and expects them almost instantaneously. His need for immediate gratification is perhaps a reference to Clinton's perceived out-of-control appetites. There are two brief mentions of McCarthyism, which suggest that Lurie knows more than he's saying, but they are hardly likely to draw the spectator's attention to any dangers in the contemporary situation.

Even when the film shows promise, in its opening

sequences, it hardly ever rises above the level of cliché. We see familiar types: a slightly jaded president, a little wilted around the edges; his Machiavellian operatives; ambitious, careerist politicians, with their ambitious, careerist spouses; and the relentless, “dirty tricks” right-winger. The viewer who has read something about the film or seen its trailer at this point expects a work sympathetic to Clinton, perhaps a straightforward—albeit in fictional form—accounting of the drive to remove a twice-elected president engineered by the ultra-right. In fact, *The Contender* is something quite different.

As the story unfolds, the superficial “realism” of the initial scenes gives way to full-blown fantasy. President Evans turns out to be the staunchest defender of democracy; the operatives have all been working on the side of the angels; the up and coming careerist sees the error of his ways, the opportunist governor and his wife are sent packing, the right-winger is driven from Capitol Hill. The system has worked, magnificently.

Then there is the matter of Senator Hanson. Here the fantasy reaches its height. The film's heroine is physically impeccable, has a meaningful marriage, a son with a can't-fail future, and a sagacious father, whose position in the Republican Party insures a pedigree, despite the liability of her gender, acceptable to the president.

Hanson is a woman of unimpeachable (literally!) character, the Clinton that should-have-been. The stakes are very high—the possibility of a woman being vice-president for the first time—but her principles are higher. She is the virgin queen of squeaky clean politics. In fact, Lurie can't stop himself from making the point that the *fictional* Senator Laine Hanson voted, as a matter of principle, for the impeachment of the *real* Clinton. (She argues that since he was the Commander-in-Chief he should have been subject to the same standards of personal conduct as the rest of the military brass.)

Hanson embodies the views prevailing in Hollywood liberal circles. Or not-so-liberal circles. Defending herself against the attack of the right wing during a hearing in the House—or as she puts it, the “Chapel of Democracy”—Hanson describes her political agenda as pro-choice, anti-death penalty and full support for the use of American troops to police the world. Not a word about poverty, about social inequality, or any

significant social problem. Indeed *The Contender* is peopled by individuals with lots of money on their hands, and any hint of another American reality—that of the working population and the poor—is entirely absent.

Lurie is essentially a Hollywood insider, who can't conceive of life outside the privileged fast-lane. From his vantage point, politics is an insular power game, played by people who are essentially well-intentioned. The right and the left wing are always changing places and, in any possible scenario, life would be pretty good for all the players. In the film's production notes, Lurie expounds on his banal vision: “It is virtually impossible in politics to paint anyone as a good guy or a bad guy. The notion of what is good and what is bad changes with time. It's not just liberal versus conservative; it's not just good versus bad ... human beings tend to be enigmas, and social and political ideologies should represent that.”

For any thinking person, the film's final scene must be an absurdity. The president, speaking before Congress, reaffirms his nomination of Senator Hanson and lauds her as a shining example for all, including himself. Incredibly, the entire body, showing bipartisan unanimity, rises to its collective feet and cheers for this underdog, who is being pummeled by the media and the right wing. Is anything more unlikely, at a time when politicians are beholden, as never before, precisely to these very same forces? Evans is positively Jeffersonian. By comparison Frank Capra's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* looks like a hard-core documentary on US government operations.

An honest film, released in the middle of an election in which no candidate or politician has uttered a word regarding the attempted political coup two years ago, could have been an antidote to the efforts to dull the thinking of the general public. Instead, we get *The Contender*, which serves to reinforce the prejudices and illusions that hold so many Americans politically hostage.



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