

# An honorable effort, but it lacks fire

David Walsh  
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*The Manchurian Candidate*, directed by Jonathan Demme

Jonathan Demme's *The Manchurian Candidate* makes many telling points about contemporary American political life, but fails on the most difficult, the most essential questions.

The work borrows its title and narrative thrust from the 1962 John Frankenheimer film, with Laurence Harvey and Frank Sinatra, about a US soldier brainwashed and programmed during the Korean War to become a "sleeper" assassin. Frankenheimer's film (scripted by the late George Axelrod) captured something essential about the atmosphere of the Cold War era. It attacked both the "left" (the Soviet and Chinese "communists") and the right (McCarthyite demagogues in the US), in the name of the committed liberal middle.

Demme's new film is set in the not so distant future when the US government's "endless war on terror," as it is termed, has been extended to Guinea, Indonesia and elsewhere. One giant conglomerate, Manchurian Global, has profited the most. Its close links to the Washington political and military establishment have allowed it to accumulate billions, in some cases from no-bid contracts.

A right-wing US senator, Eleanor Shaw (Meryl Streep), browbeats her party's leaders into accepting her son, Gulf War hero and congressman Raymond Shaw (Liev Schreiber), as their vice presidential candidate in place of veteran liberal ("one-worlder") Senator Thomas Jordan (Jon Voight). It rapidly becomes apparent that Shaw is Manchurian Global's man, with company officials determined to see elected "the first privately owned and operated vice president of the United States."

Meanwhile Shaw's former commander in the Gulf War, Ben Marco (Denzel Washington), is having disturbing dreams. So is another member of the same unit, whose mental state borders on the psychotic. Marco begins to wonder whether the episode that earned Shaw his Congressional Medal of Honor ever in fact took place. Or is it merely a false memory implanted in his and the others' brains?

Raymond Shaw gains a place on his party's national ticket and launches a reactionary campaign around the slogan "compassionate vigilance." He tells voters: "I know how much Americans have to fear today. I believe that freedom from fear is not negotiable. We must secure tomorrow today!"

Marco's attempts to convince Shaw that something is horribly wrong with both of them land him in police custody. He turns to Shaw's old rival, Sen. Jordan. The latter warns Marco about the foe he's tackling: "Among the shareholders in Manchurian Global, you would find former Presidents, deposed kings..." The meeting with Jordan has only tragic consequences. In the end, Marco is obliged to take matters more or less into his own hands.

There are valuable insights in Demme's film. It paints a picture of a political system thoroughly pervaded and dominated by corporate power, and dedicated to the preservation of that power. "Cash is king," explains a Manchurian Global executive. The company, which seems to owe something to both Dick Cheney's Halliburton and the Carlyle Group, benefits from the global "war on terror" and at least implicitly has every interest in its continuation.

*The Manchurian Candidate* unfolds as a giant conspiracy against the

democratic rights of the population. Marco asserts at one point: "This isn't an election. It's a coup—a regime change in our own country." This is not science fiction, this is recent American history: the manufactured sex scandal and impeachment drive against Clinton; the hijacking of the 2000 election; the unanswered questions surrounding the September 11 attacks; the criminal war against Iraq; the present attempt to intimidate the population through "terror alerts." All elements of an escalating assault on the democratic rights of the population that lays the basis for a police-state.

When asked by an interviewer (ComingSoon.net) whether his film might increase the present paranoia in the US, Demme rightly answered: "We certainly hope that it won't relieve any of the paranoia. We've got a lot to be paranoid about today." In one pointed sequence, a surveillance camera follows Marco as he carries out research in a public library. And to Eleanor Shaw and her ilk defenders of the Constitution are virtually terrorist sympathizers.

The film effectively portrays the manner in which the media bombards the population with apocalyptic sound-bites. Politicians appear on a CNN-like cable network, with ticker tape headlines at the bottom of the television screen passing on their lies and banalities without criticism. The vileness, shrillness and emptiness of the media, its playing on fear, its relentless and cynical manipulation of public opinion—all that is present.

Moreover, Demme's film quite forthrightly represents corporate and government officials prepared to use ruthless violence around the globe to defend their social interests. Wars, assassinations, provocations, illegal activity of all types—nothing is beyond them. These are gangsters in expensive suits. The criminalization of the American political elite finds a certain expression here.

Eleanor Shaw's backroom argument in favor of a war hero candidate, "We can give them heat! Give them a war hero forged by enemy fire in the desert in the dark!," uncannily evokes last week's Democratic Party national convention and its nomination of Sen. John Kerry. As does Shaw's eventual appearance on the stage of his party's flag-draped convention backed by firefighters, policemen and military personnel, along with the party's slogan, "Secure Tomorrow."

Demme and screenwriter Daniel Pyne deliberately blur party lines, suggesting in that manner that the Democrats and Republicans increasingly resemble one another. Demme told the same interviewer: "Many people today really look slightly askance at the notion that we have a really legitimate two party system going on. There is nothing fresh about the ideas so ultimately, what's the difference? Especially with certain parties, in which the politicians speak one set of beliefs and then they seem to vote a whole different way, if you look at their voting records. So is this still a functioning two party system?"

All in all, the filmmakers have made a serious effort to reflect on certain American political realities. The actors—Washington, Schreiber, Streep—perform honorably and intelligently. Schreiber's dead-eyed Shaw, adored and manipulated by his megalomaniacal mother, is particularly memorable. He is perhaps the one character with a truly tragic dimension, quasi-conscious of his own deformed and dangerous mental state, telling Marco late in the film, "I am the enemy."



And yet the film as a whole fails to move deeply. One questions whether it will have a profound impact on its viewers. Considering its subject matter, the vast threat posed by corporate power to elemental democratic rights, how is it possible that *The Manchurian Candidate* lacks fire? Why is there so little of a “life-and-death” feeling to the drama? Why is it that Frankenheimer’s version of the story, for all its confusion and even its anti-communism, is more forceful and convincing in its delineation and denunciation of demagogues and the dangers they represent?

Various factors no doubt come into play, including the personalities and talents of the individual artists concerned (in the original, Angela Lansbury is riveting as the sleeper assassin’s mother and James Gregory nearly as fine in a smaller role as his stepfather), but, in the end, certain social processes play a critical role, particularly the transformed character of American liberalism and its perspectives. Liberalism in 1962 and 2004 are not one and the same thing.

Frankenheimer’s film appeared in cinemas in the US at an extraordinary moment, October 24, 1962, in the middle of the “Fourteen Days” of the Cuban Missile Crisis (October 15-28), when the Cold War came as close as it ever did to becoming a nuclear catastrophe.

In an obituary of Frankenheimer, I wrote: “*The Manchurian Candidate* is a film that literally drips with ‘sweat,’ quite consistently off the characters’ faces as they undergo their psychological torments. It is trying far too hard. Nonetheless, with all its limitations and implausibilities, Frankenheimer’s film does manage to convey something of the paranoia and delirium of the Cold War years. When Shaw simultaneously assassinates both [his step-father and presidential candidate Senator John] Iselin and his mother, who has turned out to be his ‘Communist’ controller, one assumes Frankenheimer and Axelrod are making the ultimate liberal statement about ‘extremism.’”

Only a year before, in his farewell address, President Dwight Eisenhower called on the population to “guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.” A year later rogue elements of this same military-industrial complex apparently carried out the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

Frankenheimer was a committed Cold War liberal, passionate about racism, militarism and official brutality (he also directed *Birdman of Alcatraz* and *Seven Days in May*). If he informed his *The Manchurian Candidate* with a level of conviction and urgency largely missing from the latest version, it has something to do with the relative confidence and optimism American liberals felt in the early 1960s.

After all, the exposure of the fact that 40 million people continued to live in poverty in the US (in Michael Harrington’s *The Other America*) did not lead in 1963-64 to meaningless and reactionary appeals for “individual responsibility” and paeans to the “market” as the solution to each and every problem, as it would today. The administration of Lyndon B. Johnson felt obliged to declare an “unconditional war on poverty” in January 1964 and initiate the various Great Society programs. (That this war was declared, but never fought, speaks to the organic impossibility of such a struggle being waged within the framework of capitalism.)

A great deal of water has flown under the bridge since that time. American society finds itself in an advanced state of crisis, with a far narrower margin for maneuver. Demme, with undoubted sincerity, approaches his material from a quite different historical angle than Frankenheimer, with all the social and ideological baggage of the past several decades to contend with.

How has his history equipped him for the task? Born in 1944 in Baldwin, New York, Demme received his first opportunity to write and later direct from low-budget producer-director Roger Corman. The French New Wave formed one of Demme’s strongest influences. From our present vantage point, it is not necessary to idealize either Corman, who

has developed a “legendary” status, or the New Wave directors (Truffaut, Godard, etc.).

Demme’s early films were graced with a certain informality and charm, a feeling for the grittier and less glamorous corners of American life: *Citizens Band*, *Melvin and Howard*. After an unhappy experience in Hollywood with *Swing Shift* (1984), which was taken out of his hands, Demme made his documentary about the Talking Heads, *Stop Making Sense*, followed by *Something Wild* (1986).

The latter is a peculiar film, seemingly of two minds. On the one hand, its story of a strait-laced businessman who gets involved with a “flaky” young sexpot and her psychotic boyfriend seems a criticism of the young urban professional class and its ethos; on the other, *Something Wild* presents itself as a cautionary tale, warning about the “heart of darkness” that may lie within the unwashed masses. The results are not entirely pleasant.

And, along the same lines, we have Demme to thank for the most indelible characterization of the serial killer Hannibal Lecter in his 1991 film, *The Silence of the Lambs*. Again, the work, or the director at least, seems conflicted. Demme described it to an interviewer on set in 1990 as “the most serious film I’ve ever done. It’s about a social problem, serial killers, who are a product of a society that tolerates epidemic child abuse.” This was largely self-deception. The film attracted a following because of its sympathetic, almost loving, portrayal of the monstrous Lecter. Who remembers the concern about child abuse? Demme’s work, in fact, opened the floodgates for countless films about depraved serial killers, whose crimes were the result of “senseless evil.”

Speaking about *Something Wild* and *The Silence of the Lambs*, Demme made a revealing comment to interviewer Gavin Smith: “If there were certain themes about the dark side of America lurking beneath the surface, terrific. But it’s not like a deep-seated vision that exists already within me ... My whole process is really, come to think of it, a series of responses. First, I respond to a writer’s work, and then the next big thing is responding to the work of the actors. And finally, in the cutting room, I’m responding to the footage we’ve wound up with.”

But it is not simply the writer’s or actor’s work that Demme is “responding to.” Endowed with a sincere but essentially passive liberal sensibility, the director has found himself at times swept along by or unable to resist, contrary to his own intentions, quite powerful but retrograde social moods. His humane social concerns—civil rights, the AIDS crisis (*Philadelphia*, 1993), women’s rights, the conditions of the Haitian people (*The Agronomist*, 2003)—have not always found happy or convincing artistic expression.

Now circumstances have piled up to such an extent that Demme has “responded” in a thoroughly creditable fashion to the threat posed by the Bush administration and the decay of American democracy in general. But his history and outlook prevent him from imparting to the material the necessary element of protest and depth of conviction that would have made it fully come to life. Nor do they permit him to see that the source of the drive toward authoritarian rule by both parties lies in the state of American society and its devastating contradictions, for which the powers-that-be have no solution.

These intellectual-aesthetic problems find an absurd dramatic expression in *The Manchurian Candidate*. Facing a full-blown conspiracy by the most powerful corporation in the world, a company that employs US senators, makes use of the military for its own nefarious projects and organizes assassinations of heads of state, Marco is assisted and rescued in the end by a covert federal police unit.

In other words, Demme’s film envisions an America whose institutions are so hollowed out and fragile that one capitalist concern can mastermind an effective coup d’état, yet a shadowy arm of the state—which has been shown as being under the thumb of moneyed interests—rallies to the side of democratic rights and defeats the conspirators. There is science fiction



in the film, after all! This is a liberal fantasy of the worst, most self-delusional and complacency-sowing variety.

The ending to the film is dissatisfying and unconvincing from almost every point of view. This does not negate the accurate picture that has been built up of a corrupted and degenerate political process, but it helps to blunt the latter's impact. Presumably skeptical about the American people and its "dark side," Demme entrusts the future of democracy to the figure of the policeman. How inappropriate and how revealing.



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