

# All the King's Men and Man of the Year: Simply unserious

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*All the King's Men*, written and directed by Steve Zaillian, based on the novel by Robert Penn Warren; *Man of the Year*, written and directed by Barry Levinson

The degree to which matters have been thought and worked through in Steve Zaillian's *All the King's Men* can be gauged by the following: in the film's final moments, we see the headstone of the central character, Willie Stark (Sean Penn). His birth and death dates read "1909-1954."

The Robert Penn Warren novel on which both this and the 1949 version (directed by Robert Rossen) were based is a heavily fictionalized treatment of the rise and fall of Louisiana politician Huey Long. Narrated by highborn, dissolute journalist Jack Burden (Jude Law), who ends up employed by the crude Stark, the film follows the latter from his beginnings as exposé of corruption in a small town to his becoming one of the most corrupt, instituting a quasi-police-state regime. En route, Stark seduces and betrays various women, including Jack's old love, Anne Stanton (Kate Winslet), one of whom helps engineer his downfall.

Historically, Long, a Democrat, served as embattled governor of Louisiana from 1928 to 1932 and US Senator from 1932 until his assassination in 1935. He made many enemies in Louisiana and beyond, including officials at Standard Oil, whom he vociferously accused of dominating state politics and exploiting its oil and gas resources. Originally a supporter of Franklin Roosevelt, Long broke from the New Deal in 1933, claiming it was not going far enough to solve the economic crisis and the plight of the poor, and the following year launched his "Share the Wealth" program, with its motto, "Every Man a King." He apparently had a strategy in mind he hoped would land him in the White House.

Long was capable of making fiery denunciations of the wealthy. However, he rejected the claim that his project was socialistic, declaring, "Communism? Hell no! This plan is the only defense this country's got against communism." The Louisiana populist ended up allying himself with deeply reactionary individuals, including Charles Coughlin, the notorious right-wing priest and radio personality from Michigan.

Robert Penn Warren was a liberal-minded member of the conservative literary group known as the Southern Agrarians, whose 1930 collection of essays, "I'll Take My Stand," argued for individualism and tradition (and the small southern farmer) against modernism and "the philosophy of Progress." Warren's *All the King's Men* (1946) is a one-sided account of Long's career, treating the governor-senator principally as a demagogue (with

fascistic overtones) and downplaying the elements of his life and career that reveal how close America came in the 1930s to social revolution.

In any event, the careers of Long and his fictional counterpart, Stark, are thoroughly bound up with the Great Depression and the volatile political conditions to which it gave rise. Zaillian, displaying the insight that has made Hollywood what it is today, decided to shift the time frame of his film to the postwar era. Why? According to an interview published in the *Los Angeles Times*, "Zaillian opted to set Warren's 1930s story in the 1950s" because the "prewar years seemed archaic on film, he said, and the details of Warren's story—including old barnstorming political campaigning—would have conflicted with contemporary political campaigns waged mostly through television advertising."

What is one to say? The Depression years "seemed archaic." This is a recurring problem with history, so much of it happened years and years ago. How much simpler to transfer stories from bygone days to more recent and familiar ones! One might set the murder of Julius Caesar in the southern California of the Nixon administration, or the love affair of Eloise and Abelard during the stock market boom of the late 1990s.

Indeed, Zaillian told the same interviewer, "In one form or another, it [the Warren story] could take place at any time from the Roman Empire on."

In *All the King's Men*, the writer-director has taken a drama about the rise of a radical-populist demagogue, appealing to a rural or semi-rural population living in destitution, and planted it in the soil of the early 1950s. There isn't an obvious problem with this, except that it makes no sense whatsoever.

In the postwar period the US experienced unprecedented economic growth. Consumer demand and spending reached new heights. The automobile, aviation and electronics industries grew spectacularly. A housing boom, encouraged by relatively affordable mortgages for returning veterans, played its part. US gross domestic product climbed from approximately \$101.4 billion (in current dollars) in 1940 to \$293.8 billion in 1950.

The rate of home ownership in Louisiana specifically increased by 36 percent between 1940 and 1950. The state's economy changed, according to one commentator, "as agricultural mechanization accelerated to compensate for a shortage of labor and industries increased production to meet wartime demands." The number of people living on farms began a decades-long decline. Louisiana experienced rapid development with the rise of

offshore oil and gas drilling.

Accompanying the economic boom came changed political conditions. The Cold War and the McCarthy years inaugurated a period of political stagnation and reaction in the US, with anticommunism given pride of place as a quasi-state religion. Huey Long's son Russell served in the US Senate from 1948 to 1987 without distinction, notorious later in life principally for his drinking, a fairly typical "Dixiecrat" and opponent of integration who voted against civil rights legislation, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The appeal that Zaillian has his Willie Stark make to his fellow "hicks" in tiny rural towns to "nail up anybody who stands in your way," in other words, the political big shots and the state's wealthy elite, would have been unthinkable from a number of points of view during the early 1950s.

Amusingly, the director comments that it never occurred to him "to change it [the book] in some major way." He's entirely sincere when he says this, one knows that intuitively. Ripping a given piece entirely out of its historical context and destroying any logical connection it might have to the evolution of social life would not be viewed by many in the contemporary film industry as changing it "in some major way."

The wrongheaded and thoughtless choice of historical period is at one with virtually every aspect of this ill-conceived work. Apart from commendable efforts on *Schindler's List* as a screenwriter and *A Class Action* as writer-director, Zaillian has nothing much in his career—writing credits on *Hannibal* (2001), *Gangs of New York* (2002) and *The Interpreter* (2005), all dreadful films—to give one confidence.

In a feverish effort to provide "mood," nearly everything in this *All the King's Men* is overdone, including acting, lighting, décor and music. Smoke-filled backrooms have to be the ultimate in smoke-filled backrooms; a sedan driving through the Southern darkness needs to be the most sinister of all such sedans. Having stripped his film of its essential coherence and purpose, and reducing it to banalities, "getting your ends and means mixed up, a man of action versus a man of inaction...those kinds of ideas are timeless," the director is obliged to pump in significance from the outside.

Penn, Jude Law, Anthony Hopkins, Kate Winslet, Mark Ruffalo, Patricia Clarkson and James Gandolfini appear to have been lowered into this project and then more or less abandoned to their own devices. Penn does particularly poorly. He waves his arms and gesticulates in a forced and unconvincing manner. One senses that he arrived at a characterization, whether on his own or with Zaillian's assistance, and found himself stuck with it for the remainder of the filming. The performance does not speak in any meaningful way to life, to someone like Long; it is an artificial and self-conscious construction.

One imagines such a political figure capable of sincerely appealing to and feeding off an audience of the impoverished and oppressed, even with the elements of manipulation and demagoguery taken into account. Penn's Stark is primarily noisy, arrogant and unpleasant.

Not all of this is the fault of Zaillian or Penn. Warren's hostility to Long may simply have been too great. Ostensibly, a theme of

the book and film is that despite Stark's low cunning and thuggishness, his career demonstrates that "something good" can emerge "out of bad." We see very little of the construction of roads, schools and bridges he presumably is organizing, or the operations of a hospital, that despite fatal appearances, actually helps the poor. Stark is so rapidly and thoroughly a malevolent schemer that none of his good works carry much weight.

Whatever the flaws of Warren's book and his historical understanding, however, in Zaillian's careless treatment they have taken flight, so to speak, and attained entirely new heights.

Barry Levinson's *Man of the Year* is a negligible and insipid film. If one takes a storyline "from the headlines," one should do it with some depth or not bother at all.

The failure of the supposed opposition party, the Democrats, to oppose the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq created a peculiar political vacuum in the US in 2004-2005. For a time the most articulate critics of the government seemed to be a number of late-night comics and talk-show hosts, including Jon Stewart, Bill Maher and later, to more effect, Stephen Colbert.

Levinson's film takes as its premise a popular comic and talk-show host, Tom Dobbs (Robin Williams), mounting an independent campaign for the presidency, and apparently winning the national election. In a parallel story, a technician at a firm that manufactures computerized voting systems, Eleanor Green (Laura Linney), attempts to warn her employers of a failure in the equipment. The two stories intersect in an utterly implausible fashion.

Dobbs is supposed to be a breath of fresh air, an outspoken exponent of politics free of "special interests" and bickering partisanship. In fact, the candidate says almost nothing about the burning issues in American life, or when he does, it's nothing helpful. He's as miserable as the rest. In one scene, almost incredibly, Williams as Dobbs complains that "Four million illegal aliens are crossing the border with bedroom sets and night tables." This is shameful stuff.

Levinson (*Wag the Dog*, *Rainman* and many others) has shown wit and insight on occasion in the past. It is a measure of the state of Hollywood liberalism and American liberalism in general, their insularity from the conditions and feelings of broad layers of the population, that this is the "alternative" they advance. Real life, we suspect, will prove far more creative and audacious.



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