

George Clooney's *The Ides of March*: What a great many people already know (and perhaps less)

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Directed by George Clooney, screenplay by Clooney, Grant Heslov and Beau Willimon, based on Willimon's play, "Farragut North"

The new film directed by George Clooney, *The Ides of March*, is laid in the world of contemporary American politics.

Its central figure, Stephen Meyers (Ryan Gosling), is junior campaign manager for Pennsylvania governor Mike Morris (Clooney), a Democratic Party presidential hopeful embroiled in a tight primary race with Sen. Ted Pullman of Arkansas. The result of the Democratic primary battle in Ohio, the setting for much of the film, will go a long way to determining the party's national candidate.

Stephen is approached by Pullman's top advisor, the Machiavellian Tom Duffy (Paul Giamatti). The former attempts but fails to reach his boss, Paul Zara (Philip Seymour Hoffman), and inform him about the prospective meeting. At the secret encounter, Duffy offers Stephen a job, "You're working for the wrong man." He tells Stephen that Morris, in the end, will turn out to be like every other politician. In any case, the young man turns down the offer. When the fact of the meeting ultimately emerges, Zara fires Meyers, in the name of "loyalty," an action our hero is not likely to accept lying down.

Simultaneously, Morris and Pullman, and their respective advisers, are involved in a contest to see who can obtain the endorsement of the unsavory Sen. Thompson from North Carolina (Jeffrey Wright), whose price for such support is a top cabinet post.

Adding to the complications is Stephen's affair with a campaign intern, Molly Stearns (Evan Rachel Wood), the daughter of a Democratic Party big shot. Meyers discovers that Molly had a brief fling with Clooney-Morris and, in fact, is pregnant as a result. Stephen assists her by raising money for an abortion and driving her to a clinic. Feeling abandoned and fearing that Meyers will use her situation to his advantage, Molly takes desperate action.

In the end, Stephen confronts Gov. Morris with what he knows and sets out his own demands.

The Ides of March is, first and foremost, a product of

Hollywood liberalism, with all the political amorphousness and bluntedness that implies. This is a treatment of life, in other words, that largely begins and ends in a cocoon.

The notion that American politics is a dirty, cutthroat business, whose practitioners are unprincipled, well-heeled opportunists, will come as news to very few people 13 and older, and that is perhaps doing a disservice to many 12-year-olds.

The intelligent and appealing cast—Gosling, Clooney, Hoffman, Giamatti, Wood, Wright and Marisa Tomei as an unscrupulous journalist—do what they can with these predictable figures and situations. However, *The Ides of March* is uninspiring to write about. While it is not one of those films that has you looking at your watch every few minutes, it is essentially conservative and inert.

Along with other difficulties, there is a central implausibility to the drama. The filmmakers want to have their cake and eat it too. They begin by painting Molly as a hardboiled figure, as tough and fast-talking as Stephen, and then let her fall utterly to pieces, in order to propel their story forward. That this ambitious, career-minded individual, who has been raised in the most cynical milieu, would take the course of action depicted in the film seems unlikely in the extreme. (Not only that, as has been the case in a number of other recent films, the writer and director present her situation in such emotionally devastating colors as to amount to a concession to the anti-abortion Christian right.)

Echoes of the various campaigns and difficulties of Bill Clinton, John Edwards, Howard Dean and others are to be found in Clooney's film. Those experiences are not precisely plumbed to their depths. The political lessons drawn and conveyed by *The Ides of March* are of an obvious variety, which were sitting placidly on the surface only waiting for the appropriate semi-artist, semi-publicist to come along and arrange them in the form of a drama.

The author of the film's source, "Farragut North," playwright Beau Willimon, worked as a volunteer on Democrat Charles Schumer's successful campaign for the New York Senate seat in 1998 and served as a press aide for Howard Dean's

unsuccessful campaign for the 2004 Democratic Party presidential nomination. According to the *Boston Globe*, he also worked on the campaigns of Hillary Clinton and former Sen. Bill Bradley of New Jersey.

“The play draws heavily on my experiences on the Dean campaign, but also other campaigns that I’ve worked on,” he told the *Globe*. “All the characters in the play are fictional. They’re an amalgamation of different people that I came across.”

Given this thoroughly conventional starting point, the results are probably not startling. In another interview, Willimon explained, “Everything that is mentioned in the play—and to a certain extent reflected in the movie—in terms of breaking laws, manipulating the democratic process, the backroom dealing, the power plays—all that’s true. It’s scary how much politicians will manipulate the process to get that brass ring of the highest office in the land. Playing by the rules of the game is not what gets you elected president” (Emanuel Levy).

The US population, by and large, understands this. That helps explain in part the growing disgust with both parties and the entire political superstructure. But, as noted, there is nothing that suggests that either Clooney or Willimon, or anyone involved, has drawn any especially sharp conclusions from this.

On the contrary, in the next breath, each seems likely to declare his continued support for the Democratic Party and the existing political system. Remarkably, co-screenwriter Grant Heslov, for example, comments about Clooney’s character, Gov. Morris: “Look, the truth is that he ends up with [Sen.] Thompson for all the wrong reasons. But at the end of the day, I guess the larger question is: is he the right man for the job? Yes, he has done what I think are some pretty despicable things. But I also think that he is the better candidate, and probably the better man for the job and so I hope it raises a bunch of interesting questions” (ScreenRant).

One can only strike one’s forehead in amazement. This hack, prepared to bargain for cabinet posts, is the “better candidate”? Why?

There isn’t any serious indication that Morris’s election would improve the lives of the population. It doesn’t take much to excite and satisfy Hollywood liberals, as their continued swarming around Barack Obama would indicate—a touch of populism and nationalism, a speaking voice slightly more sonorous than the next, vague and meaningless catch phrases (“Change we can believe in”), the ability to strike empty poses. One only hopes that in the future some in the film world will look back on their support for the congealed filthiness that is the Democratic Party with a certain degree of shame.

Clooney, whose previous directorial efforts include *Good Night, and Good Luck* (a better film) and *Leatherheads*, predictably insists this is not a political film, but “a morality tale.” He told a press conference, “Everyone makes moral choices that better themselves and hurt someone along the way. It could have been literally in Wall Street. It could have been

better in Wall Street.” Willimon repeats this, “It could be Wall Street; it could be Hollywood; it could be a hospital or Home Depot.” Well, the obvious question is: if you have nothing specific to say about American politics, why set it in that sphere?

The filmmakers, along with just everybody else on earth, have an inkling that American politics is rotten and corrupt, but they have nothing to say about *its shift to the right*, to sustained attacks on the jobs and living standards and conditions of wide layers of the population, to endless war, to anti-democratic, authoritarian measures. Clooney’s candidate receives applause for his one brief comment that “the richest don’t pay their fair share,” and that’s the extent of it.

Hollywood’s liberals, who think they are terribly advanced, are about a decade or a decade and a half behind the majority of the population. *The Ides of March* emerged in theaters in the middle of the Occupy Wall Street protests, whose more astute elements have raised a host of issues, including the interchangeability of the two political parties, apparently beyond the ken of the filmmakers.

The Ides of March does contain a hint of the popular disappointment with Obama, which the filmmakers no doubt share. “We’d been working for about a year and a half on the screenplay in 2008,” explains Clooney. “Then Obama was elected and there was such hope, everyone was so happy. It didn’t seem like the time was right to make the movie—people were too optimistic for such a cynical film! About a year later, everybody got cynical again, and then we thought we could make this film.”

That seems about right. Unfortunately, the filmmakers have not begun to work through and consider what the disappointment with Obama might mean. One suspects that to look at that more seriously would disturb and unsettle them. For the time being, at least, they prefer to take a more well-trodden and not terribly interesting path.



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