Lee Daniels' *The Butler*: Identity politics at odds with history

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Directed by Lee Daniels; screenplay by Danny Strong, based on the article by Wil Haygood

Lee Daniels' *The Butler* is a fiction film based on the life of Eugene Allen, an African American who worked in the White House for 34 years, from the tail end of President Harry Truman's administration to Ronald Reagan's second term in office.

With a screenplay from Danny Strong (HBO's *Game Change*) that was inspired by a 2008 Wil Haygood article in the *Washington Post* ("A Butler Well Served by This Election"), Daniels (*Precious*, 2009) has crafted his movie to encompass the period from the mid-1920s to the election of Barack Obama in 2008. This potentially fascinating story of an encounter between a black worker and the upper echelons of the American political elite is fatally marred, however, by Daniel's shallow, identity politics outlook.

On a cotton farm in Georgia in 1926, a young Cecil Gaines [the fictional stand-in for Eugene Allen] witnesses his mother (Mariah Carey) raped and his father (David Banner) shot by the landowner (Alex Pettyfer). Out of pity and a sense of guilt, the farm family's matriarch (Vanessa Redgrave) makes Cecil a houseboy, where he learns skills that will eventually land him a job at an elite hotel in Washington, DC.

A White House staff member eventually hears about Cecil (Forest Whitaker) and offers him a position as a butler. Cecil is now able to provide a comfortable lifestyle for wife Gloria (Oprah Winfrey) and sons Louis (David Oyelowo) and Charlie (Elijah Kelley).

Cecil, who maintains a low profile and avoids airing any controversial views, becomes a historical witness to the Little Rock school desegregation crisis under Dwight Eisenhower (Robin Williams); the assassination of John Kennedy (James Marsden); the escalation of the Vietnam war under Lyndon Johnson (Liev Schreiber); the political disgrace of Richard Nixon (John Cusack) in the Watergate Scandal; and the support extended by the Ronald Reagan (Alan Rickman) administration to the continuation of the apartheid system in South Africa.

Meanwhile, on several occasions, during the transition from one administration to the next, Cecil approaches his supervisor to request that the black staff be paid wages in line with their white colleagues.

At home, tensions grow between Cecil, loyal to US government policy, and his son Louis, who views his father as an "Uncle Tom" and leaves college to become active in the civil rights movement. Cecil grows increasingly dismayed and angry as Louis participates in the campaign to desegregate Woolworth's lunch counters through sit-ins, becomes a Freedom Rider and has a brief stint in the Black Panther movement, enduring numerous incarcerations and beatings.

In the aftermath of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., Louis runs for office as a Democrat ("Dr. King's philosophy got him killed ... the next step is politics."). Meanwhile, Cecil's younger son Charlie joins the military in support of the Vietnam War. Cecil and Louis ultimately reconcile after the former resigns from his White House position and both participate in the fight to free Nelson Mandela.

The high point of Cecil's life—and, according to Daniels' film, the civil rights movement—is the election of the first African American president in 2008.

In tackling *The Butler*'s numerous false premises and artistic flaws, it is worth taking a brief look at the film's departures from the facts of Eugene Allen's life. First, Allen did not grow up on a brutal farm in Georgia, whose owner committed unspeakable acts, but in a segregated town in central Virginia. He worked as a waiter in whites-only resorts and country clubs. In the Haygood article, Allen says, "We never had anything. I was always hoping things would get better."

That is not to say that such things as Daniels depicts in the opening sequence did not happen, but here they serve to set a certain tone and reveal a definite social agenda. Racism and Jim Crow in the South are not seen as functions of class rule in America, which had as their central purpose keeping the black and white poor divided in order to better exploit both, but as a series of violent atrocities committed by maddened racists. They also indicate a Tarantino-like willingness to sensationalize and fantasize for the purpose of "making a point."

More liberties are taken to pump up the action. Allen's wife Helene never became an alcoholic or cuckolded her husband like the Winfrey character. In addition, Eugene and Helene had only one son, Charles, who was never a Freedom Rider or

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Black Panther. He did go to Vietnam, but survived (unlike his cinematic counterpart) and went on to work for the US State Department.

The scenes in *The Butler* that have the air of the greatest historical and social truth involve the activities of the black White House staff. The filmmakers carefully depict how these workers perform their duties, in the course of which they reveal their frustration with their demeaning conditions. (When Eugene Allen started at the White House, he was a "pantry man" washing dishes and polishing silverware. The job paid $2,400 a year [$20,800 in 2013 dollars], compared to the national average wage of $3,400.)

The big historical events fare far worse. The movie races through the evolution of the civil rights movement, a vast social experience, only touching superficially on certain well-known events, as if its major preoccupation is hurtling us toward the 2008 presidential election. Almost nothing is made of the enormous August 1963 march on Washington—the largest integrated demonstration that had ever taken place in the nation's capital. Fragments of footage of the actual events are haphazardly thrown in to provide a veneer of credibility. This approach reaches a low point when the assassination of King in April 1968 is primarily treated through a video of Jesse Jackson, the opportunist and Democratic Party operative, speaking about the killing.

While Daniels directs individually moving scenes in *The Butler*, he fails as a whole to create an integral, coherent or convincing drama. But how could he, starting with such false premises? The effort to present the Allen-Gaines story, and its related elements, as some sort of entirely unique "black experience" was bound to end badly. It inevitably requires the filmmakers to distort social and personal relations to fit their schema.

In the world of Daniels and his ilk, the immense sacrifices made and blood spilled in the civil rights struggle, by blacks and whites alike, find their central meaning and value in the eventual elevation of an African American stratum to wealth and fame, reaching its summit in the gigantic figure of … Barack Obama, who currently presides over the most reactionary, anti-democratic administration in American history.

How would it be possible for Daniels, even with the best of intentions, to do justice to the life of the oppressed when, at the same time, he finds cause for celebration in the career of one of the chief oppressors? The artistic outcome must be half-hearted and murky.

The movie has a brief scene in which Nixon calls for the promotion of "black capitalism." Do the filmmakers grasp the significance of this development? The scene is not followed through on. The great difficulty here is a terribly limited understanding of history and an equally limited perspective.

The emergence of conservative, self-absorbed petty bourgeois constituencies, among blacks, women, gays and other minorities is a major event of the last several decades. In 2011, a WSWS article on King aptly described this process: "The co-opting of a section of the black middle class was itself part of a broader development. … The goal was to cultivate a new 'left' constituency for American imperialism.

"Obama is the apotheosis of this process: a right-wing, militarist, pro-Wall Street African-American president. His elevation to the presidency is not the legacy of decades of civil rights progress, but rather an effort by wealthy corporate interests within the Democratic Party to use the candidate's skin color to disguise their reactionary policies.

"[Martin Luther] King was assassinated at the height of his public career, at the point where he was beginning to draw radical conclusions about the necessity to link the struggles of blacks in the South with those of the working class throughout the country, and to connect the fight for social justice at home with opposition to imperialist war abroad." [He spoke out forcefully against the Vietnam War.]

The night before his assassination, King told a group of striking sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee: "We've got to give ourselves to this struggle until the end. Nothing would be more tragic than to stop at this point in Memphis. We've got to see it through." This spirit of struggle is entirely absent from *The Butler* .

It's almost embarrassing to point out that the basic framework of *The Butler* is conformist respect for the various right-wing residents of the White House. There is sympathy for Nixon's downfall and, after all, Reagan was a good sort—didn't Nancy Reagan (Jane Fonda) invite Cecil and Gloria to a state dinner as guests, not servants?

In a recent interview with the *New York Times*, Daniels says: "Initially, the script had Obama in it, but I thought that would have been overkill. And we didn't even know whether we could get him. He was doing a campaign, and if they heard he was doing a movie in the middle of the campaign—God knows. I was tempted to call Oprah to call the president, but I couldn't bring myself to ask her." Thank heavens for small mercies!

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