

Our Brand is Crisis: US political consultants at their dirty work in Bolivia

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Directed by David Gordon Green; screenplay by Peter Straughan, based on the documentary by Rachel Boynton

The new film directed by David Gordon Green, *Our Brand is Crisis*, is a fictionalized version of the 2005 documentary with the same title by Rachel Boynton.

The subject is the 2002 Bolivian election. Boynton's movie is given over to examining the role of US political operatives in the Democratic Party-affiliated James Carville political consultancy firm, Greenberg Carville Shrum (GCS). Their machinations helped bring to power the deeply unpopular American stooge and former president, Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada.

Following a mass revolt in 2003 that paralyzed the country and led to the deaths of scores of people shot down by security forces, Sánchez de Lozada was forced to resign and flee to the United States, where he was granted political asylum. He is wanted in Bolivia on charges of mass repression and killing.

Green's film is a peculiar and essentially distasteful film, presenting itself as a contemporary screw-ball comedy set within the poverty and social misery of the Latin American country. This is an unholy mix, doomed from the start.

Sandra Bullock is "Calamity Jane" Bodine, a legendary American political strategist. The story begins when former colleagues Ben (Anthony Mackie) and Nell (Ann Dowd) beg a now burned-out, pottery-making Jane, in seclusion in the mountains, to return once again to the campaign trail—this time in Bolivia for a considerable sum of money. Her team would be working for Pedro Castillo (convincingly and tuggishly played by Joaquim de Almeida), one of the candidates in the country's presidential election.

Jane agrees only when she learns that her arch-rival, wily consultant Pat Candy (Billy Bob Thornton), will

be advising one of Castillo's adversaries in the race. In addition to Ben and Nell, Jane's team includes Rich (Scoot McNairy) and the political dirt digger, LeBlanc (Zoe Kazan).

At 12,000 feet, La Paz is the world's highest capital and Jane's trouble acclimatizing nearly ends her role in the project. She eventually finds her stride, and the movie jumps into a higher gear. Jane's job is not to change the hated Castillo, a former president, who was born in Bolivia but raised in the US. He is seen by the population as a 'gringo' lackey who privatized major industries. Her idea is that "we don't change the man to fit narrative, but the narrative to fit the man." And since Bolivia is facing the worst crisis in history, "what we are selling is crisis."

Some minor image-altering slightly raises Castillo's standing in the polls, where he is far behind. The movie goes on to show his campaign bus being stoned by an angry crowd of indigenous people in the countryside. The protesters are eventually calmed when the presidential candidate promises he will hold a referendum before bringing in the International Monetary Fund (IMF), with its inevitable program of austerity and more privatizations to benefit the American and European banks and the Bolivian elite.

Early in the campaign, Jane's team decides to go "negative," employing dirty tricks to counter Candy's underhandedness. To make her point, she tells a coarse story about former president Lyndon Johnson: in one of his early congressional campaigns, he allegedly told one of his aides to spread a gross rumor about his opponent. Johnson's aide exclaimed that the charge was obviously untrue. Of course, said the candidate, but I want to hear him deny it.

Desperate times require desperate measures and, at a certain point, Jane tells Nell to bring in "her other

friends,” i.e., the State Department and presumably the CIA. Tellingly, this salient fact is not made much of in the movie.

In another scene, Candy approaches Jane who is reading Goethe’s *Faust*. She feeds him a line Candy thinks is from the play, and which he has his candidate include in his public remarks: “It may be all right to have a power that is based on guns; however, it is better and more gratifying to win the heart of a nation and keep it.” The quotation, it turns out, comes from Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels. Exposure of the fact has the desired effect on Candy’s campaign.

Castillo eventually wins by a small margin. Within hours, however, he is setting up a meeting with the IMF, a move that provokes mass demonstrations, which are then brutally suppressed by the government. Jane, the erstwhile cynical dirty trickster, joins the demonstrators.

To begin with, Green’s *Our Brand is Crisis* has an unhealthy fascination, as does the Rachel Boynton documentary, with the Machiavellian American operatives, whose work is informed or even guided by the US State Department and CIA. The political and economic consequences of the manipulations carried out by these people is not a matter of much concern to the documentary or the fiction film.

Green’s movie briefly—and inadequately—depicts, or hints at, the terrible aftermath of Castillo’s victory. But what motivates the filmmakers to use, or misuse, the considerable talents of Bullock and Thornton, as well as Dowd, Mackie, McNairy and Kazan in a comic-seductive manner that trivializes what sinister forces were doing in Bolivia?

Not only are the dirty tricksters and their tricks trivialized in *Our Brand is Crisis*, they are stretched and twisted in unlikely ways. One of the most unconvincing (and, again, peculiar) scenes in the film occurs when Jane visits the house in the slums where a young Castillo volunteer—Eddie (Reynaldo Pacheco)—lives, along with his two anti-American brothers. Jane and the three brothers, drunk as skunks, end up in her posh hotel, using her underwear as a sling-shot to fire a bobble head of Candy’s candidate into the rival operative’s room.

Moreover, while the filmmakers include an ending meant to deepen Jane’s humanity, and Bullock brings something authentic to the moment, it does not emerge

organically from the preceding events and has a condescending air that tends to underscore the filmmakers’ distance from the Bolivian population.

Green’s *Our Brand is Crisis* betrays relatively little concern for what actually happened in 2002-03. Sánchez de Lozada was installed in the presidential palace largely through US intervention. As the post-election demonstrations got underway, there was mounting evidence that the CIA and US military played a direct role in organizing the bloodbath that was unleashed against Bolivia’s rebellious population.

As the WSWS wrote in 2003: “Bolivia is South America’s most impoverished country and has faced the harshest impact of the ‘free market’ policies of privatization and draconian cutbacks in social spending that have been imposed throughout the region.

“As the Bolivian events have already demonstrated, Washington is prepared to support and carry out on its own the most brutal forms of repression to defend US economic hegemony over the region and control over its energy supplies and other strategic resources. Despite this repression, the vast social crisis that is gripping the continent is bringing US imperialism face-to-face with a revolutionary explosion in what it has long regarded as its ‘own backyard.’”

No amount of filmmaking magic in Green’s *Our Brand is Crisis* can make these harsh realities appealing or humorous.



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