

Seven Days in May (1964): When American filmmaking envisioned a military coup

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On Monday, June 1, in an address to the American people delivered outside the White House, Donald Trump declaimed, “I am your President of law and order.” He proceeded to characterize the large-scale, generally peaceful protests in response to the murder of George Floyd and against police violence as “acts of domestic terror.”

If the marches and demonstrations did not cease, Trump promised to invoke the Insurrection Act of 1807 and “deploy the US military” on the streets of America’s cities, including Washington, D.C. Referring to the nation’s capital, the president went on, “As we speak, I am dispatching thousands and thousands of heavily armed soldiers, military personnel and law enforcement officers to stop the rioting, looting, vandalism, assaults and the wanton destruction of property.”

The following day, in a statement posted on the *World Socialist Web Site*, the Socialist Equality Party (US) explained that by this historically unprecedented threat to suppress political opposition through the use of the military, Trump had “repudiated the Constitution” and was “attempting to establish a presidential dictatorship, supported by the military, police and far-right fascistic militia acting under his command.”

Several thousand National Guard troops from 11 states were eventually brought to the area, to reinforce the 1,200 D.C. troops already called up. Moreover, Pentagon officials warned the Guard, according to the *New York Times*, that if they could not control the situation, “Mr. Trump would likely call in the 82nd Airborne.”

At this moment, political life in the US teetered on a knife’s edge. In the face of Trump’s dictatorial moves, the Democratic Party said and did nothing. The media largely remained silent. It was only on June 4 that Trump permitted regular troops to be sent home.

In fact, nothing has been resolved. As the SEP subsequently commented, “The conspirators in the White House have not ceased their plotting. The military is biding its time and considering its options. The police remain armed to the teeth.”

These “several days in June” brought to many minds the 1964 American film *Seven Days in May*, directed by John Frankenheimer and featuring Kirk Douglas, Burt Lancaster, Fredric March and Ava Gardner, which envisions an attempted military coup d’état in the US. Based on the 1962 best-selling novel of the same title by Fletcher Knebel and Charles W. Bailey II, the movie was scripted by Rod Serling of *Twilight Zone* fame. Received warmly by both critics and audiences, *Seven Days in May* angered the Pentagon, the FBI and the extreme right. Both the continuities and discontinuities between that period and the present day stand out.

Frankenheimer’s movie, set in 1974, centers on a plot by the chairman of the US military’s Joint Chiefs of Staff, James Mattoon Scott (Lancaster), an egomaniacal, authoritarian Air Force general, to overthrow the elected president, Jordan Lyman (March), convinced he must save the nation from a leader who is “soft on Communism.” Scott believes he has chosen an opportune moment: polls indicate only 29 percent of the population approves of President Lyman’s performance and the general mood in the country is sour.

The administration has recently signed a controversial disarmament treaty with the Soviet Union. In the film’s opening sequence, pro- and anti-treaty demonstrators brawl outside the White House gates.

Violently opposed to the agreement with the Soviet government, Scott sets in motion his attempted overthrow, with the aid and assistance of other members of the Joint Chiefs. An aide, Marine Col. “Jiggs” Casey (Douglas), gets wind of the plot and eventually convinces a skeptical president of its seriousness.

Under Scott’s plan, a secret US Army unit known as ECOMCON will seize control of the country’s telephone, radio and television networks, while Congress is prevented from implementing the disarmament treaty. Scott has launched his plan with the complicity of Frederick Prentice (Whit Bissell), the powerful Democratic Senator from California, and right-wing television commentator and demagogue Harold McPherson (Hugh Marlowe).

Although personally opposed to Lyman’s policies, Col. Casey is appalled by the plot. Alerted to the grave danger, Lyman gathers a circle of trusted advisors to investigate and respond, including the Secret Service’s Art Corwin (Bart Burns), Treasury Secretary Christopher Todd (George Macready), longtime friend and advisor Paul Girard (Martin Balsam) and Sen. Raymond Clark of Georgia (Edmond O’Brien).

Girard is dispatched to Gibraltar to extract a written acknowledgement of the conspiracy from the evasive Admiral Farley Barnswell (John Houseman), while Clark flies out to West Texas to locate the mysterious “Site Y,” the secret base at which the coup’s shock troops are training for the takeover and awaiting final instructions.

At the president’s request, with some reluctance, Casey pays a visit to Eleanor Holbrook (Ava Gardner), Scott’s former mistress, in hope of obtaining incriminating evidence against the general. In fact, he gets hold of some damaging love letters, but Lyman ultimately decides against using a sex scandal to rid himself of the Joint Chiefs chairman.

When Lyman asks Casey, a Marine and an admirer of Scott, what he thinks of the treaty with the Soviet Union, the latter replies that he does not agree with it, adding, however, “I think it’s really your business. Yours and the Senate. You did it, and they agreed so, well, I don’t see how we in the military can question it. I mean we can question it, but we can’t fight it. We shouldn’t, anyway.”

The president interprets this in his own way: “So you stand by the Constitution, Jiggs?” In fact, the US Constitution, appropriately enough, comes up for discussion or reference numerous times in the Knebel-Bailey novel, as well as the film.

The book, for example, describes Casey, in “a modest split-level house in Arlington [Virginia],” rubbing his eyes, turning off the lamp and laying down “a battered copy of the World Almanac. It was the only book he had been able to find in the house that contained the text of the Constitution of the United States.”

Later, Sen. Clark, seated in the White House, “separated from the President by only a wall,” has his feet propped up on a sofa and reads,

“carefully, an annotated copy of the Constitution of the United States—something he had not done since law school.”

The opening credits of *Seven Days in May* roll over an image of the original 1787 draft.

Once having established the reality of the imminent coup attempt and with documentary evidence in hand, the president calls Scott to the White House for a confrontation. Outlining the facts that have come to light, Lyman bluntly and angrily accuses the Air Force general of planning “the military overthrow of the United States government.” He goes on, “I’m prepared to brand you for what you are, General. A strutting egoist with a Napoleonic power complex and an out-an-out traitor.”

At a press conference announcing Scott’s resignation, which the latter grudgingly submits, Lyman explains: “Americans, traditionally and historically, have given vent to their views. On the day that the government does anything arbitrarily to stifle those views, it will have to change forms. It will cease to be a democracy.” This relatively understated comment is one of the strongest passages in the film and speaks directly to the current situation.

One of Serling and Frankenheimer’s major themes is the need for the military to be subordinated to elected civilian rule, a principle that has been almost fully abandoned by the Trump administration, which has seen the elevation of numerous Pentagon figures to cabinet and other prominent posts.

On the whole, *Seven Days in May* stands up, 56 years later. First and foremost, the issue of the threat represented by the American military to the democratic rights of the people has hardly receded into the background. On the contrary, it is ten times more pressing than it was in 1964. Decades of political and economic decay have eaten away at American democracy, leaving it little more than a shell. Superficial and shortsighted observers may draw the conclusion from recent events that the US military is the torchbearer of democracy. Hardly! The Pentagon, which remains a hotbed of ultra-right and fascist elements, merely chose not to be drawn in prematurely to openly repressive and murderous operations in America.

The fact that, after nearly 60 years, Frankenheimer’s film still conveys urgency and outrage is a tribute to its strengths. The viewer remains riveted for the most part by the generally high level of the performances, the tautness of the action and the element of suspense and intrigue.

(Interestingly, there was another adaptation of the Knebel-Bailey political thriller. In 1983, Soviet television broadcast a four-part adaptation of *Seven Days in May*, entitled *The Last Argument of Kings*, directed by Viktor Kisin and with a screenplay by journalist Vladimir Dunaev.)

Douglas, Lancaster and March clearly threw themselves into the production. They are thoroughly believable as these human beings.

Only four years earlier, Douglas, a prominent film star of the 1950s and 1960s, had assisted in ending the McCarthyite reign of terror in Hollywood by hiring and crediting blacklisted screenwriter Dalton Trumbo on *Spartacus* (1960). In *Seven Days in May*, the actor puts aside some of the histrionics in which he occasionally indulges and delivers a subdued characterization.

Lancaster was even more of a left figure. He began shooting the Frankenheimer film fresh from working with left-wing Italian filmmaker Luchino Visconti on *The Leopard*, in which he gave one of his most memorable performances. Lancaster later appeared in *Executive Action* (1973), co-written by Trumbo and Mark Lane, a drama that recounts how the Kennedy assassination might have been planned and carried through by ultra-right elements, businessmen and intelligence operatives. The actor also narrated *The Unknown War* (1978), a 20-part series documenting the bloody conflict between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Lancaster spent three weeks in eight cities in the USSR for location filming on that project.

Seven Days in May, Lancaster is appropriately terrifying, during his relatively brief time on screen, as the embodiment of a particular American military type, ruthless, relentless and cruel in his technocratic efficiency. Here is a man who would exterminate ten thousand men, women and children with a bombing raid before lunch and arrive punctually for a three o’clock appointment.

A member of an older generation, March was an extremely versatile and compelling Hollywood figure of the 1930s and 40s in particular, working with such directors as Howard Hawks, Ernst Lubitsch, John Ford and George Cukor. He featured prominently in one of the finest works of postwar social criticism, William Wyler’s *The Best Years of Their Lives* (1946). March, always a remarkable, thoughtful performer, brings genuine depth and intelligence to his role. His President Lyman is considerably stronger than the character in the novel.

The three central protagonists are more than ably supported by a host of character actors, the American film industry’s tremendous resource of the time, including Balsam, O’Brien, Macready, Marlowe, Bissell, Richard Anderson, Andrew Duggan and Helen Kleeb. Gardner is memorable in her role as would-be Führer Scott’s spurned lover. She tells Casey she now realizes the general “never really felt anything. Each move was calculated... I don’t believe he ever took a chance in his life or ever really felt anything, any real emotion.”

The military and FBI took very definite note of *Seven Days in May*, revealing their intense sensitivity to such criticism. A memo uncovered in Ronald Reagan’s FBI file reveals that the bureau was concerned the film would be used as Communist propaganda and was therefore “harmful to our Armed Forces and Nation.”

A March 20, 1964 memo details communications between retired Admiral Arleigh Burke and Assistant Director William Sullivan of the FBI in regard to the film and its potential damage. The memo includes this proposed smear: “One correspondent, according to Admiral Burke, made the following charges concerning the principal members of the movie’s cast: (1) Fredric March, together with his wife, Florence Eldridge, have been members of some 20 communist front organizations; (2) Burt Lancaster is a ‘zealous Moscow stalwart’ and was affiliated with several communist fronts; and (3) Kirk Douglas and Ava Gardner have been cited by a California Committee on Un-American Activities.”

Hollywood films at the time, despite their sometimes clumsy approach (and despite the debilitating ideological consequences of the anti-communist purges), still endeavored to address large political and social problems. To a certain and important extent, the encounter between Lyman and Scott does concretize and concentrate artistically a pivotal social collision, an obligation of enduring drama.

In his work devoted to Frankenheimer’s films, critic Gerald Pratley notes that March’s “respectable, liberal lines” have come in for criticism from certain “radical” commentators. There are undoubtedly points to be made about Lyman’s attitude and positions, but Pratley, in our view, is quite correct to note that the aforementioned words of dialogue are “delivered by March with complete naturalism at times where they are logically called for, and with great honesty and conviction. They re-state familiar principles perhaps, but they need to be said again, even if we have heard them before.”

Lyman speaks forcefully, but it is notable how close the Scott coup attempt comes to succeeding, only blocked by an improvised, rather ramshackle and amateurish countereffort on the part of the president and a handful of colleagues. And its near success does not feel far-fetched!

Along those lines, *Seven Days in May* does undoubtedly drive home to the viewer the very dark character of the period in question. The picture that the John F. Kennedy administration (and family) offered to the world was one of youthfulness, progressive social thought and a commitment to democracy. Beneath the relatively glamorous surface of this neo-“Camelot,” however, lay an uglier, grimmer, far more contradictory

reality.

Although this was the heyday of the postwar boom in the US, a great deal that was sinister and conspiratorial was occurring behind the scenes. In fact, there was layer upon layer of political reaction in play. Even before Kennedy came to power in January 1961, outgoing President Dwight D. Eisenhower, in his Farewell Address, famously cautioned the “councils of government” 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.” Knebel and Bailey place this warning from Eisenhower on the novel’s dedication page.

Once in power, Kennedy authorized the Bay of Pigs attack on Cuba in April 1961, aimed at overthrowing the Fidel Castro government, and only held back from a full-scale invasion out of fear of the Soviet response. He and his brother Robert proceeded to experiment with various plots to kill Castro, bringing in the Mafia in the process. Under the Kennedy administration, US intervention in Vietnam was stepped up, whatever the president’s trepidations may have been. In general, Washington’s counterrevolutionary global interventions continued unabated.

In addition, as Frankenheimer’s film centrally argues, there were violent conflicts within the American state. Kennedy had recurring clashes with US military chiefs and was deeply worried about the danger of a coup. Sixty years later...!

Several references are made in the book and film to the ultra-right views of various military figures, especially a certain Col. John Broderick (John Larkin). Early in the film, one of Casey’s military colleagues refers to Broderick as a “good officer.” Casey replies, “For certain armies. The kind that goose step.” Later, Sen. Clark contemptuously suggests that Broderick’s views “border on out-and-out fascism!”

Explaining his interest in *Seven Days in May*, a project that was brought to him by Douglas’s business partner at the time, producer Edward Lewis, Frankenheimer observed that he had “felt that the voice of the military was much too strong... We’d just finished eight years with President Eisenhower, which were in my opinion a very discouraging eight years for the country. All kinds of factions were trying to take power. The film was the opportunity to illustrate what a tremendous force the military-industrial complex is.” The director also later explained that he saw the film as an opportunity to “put a nail in the coffin of [Senator Joseph] McCarthy.”

These are worthy ambitions and concerns, and the film largely lives up to them. But one shouldn’t close one’s eyes to the damaging constraints within which liberal filmmakers worked, and which they accepted for the most part. The script’s assumptions include the reactionary anti-communism that was the state-sponsored quasi-religion of the time in the US. The film takes for granted, despite the troubling events it depicts, that America, if it repels Scott and his accomplices, can still be a beacon of democracy and freedom and that the Soviet Union represents tyranny, lies and duplicity (this is actually more pronounced in the Knebel-Bailey novel).

“American liberalism, both politically and intellectually,” as a WSWS comment on the 40th anniversary of Kennedy’s murder maintained, “was founded upon a lie. It had survived the social tumult of the 1930s and 1940s by striking a Faustian bargain with political reaction. Anti-communism became the prevailing ideology of the US establishment, embraced by Democratic and Republican politicians alike”—and also many American filmmakers, novelists and artists generally.

Another problematic aspect of Frankenheimer’s film is the fact, as we noted in an obituary of the director in 2002, “that the president and his advisors never consider warning or appealing to the American people. Indeed, General Scott and the other conspirators, in the end, are merely forced to resign, without their activities having been made public. The

president explicitly declares that the population, which has barely avoided coming under the heel of a military dictatorship, must not be told about the conspiracy, because it would create disorder!” It is absurd and socially illogical to dramatize an attempted coup supported by virtually the entire military high command and then suggest the country as a whole can be in a healthy political and social state.

Indeed, it wasn’t the Hollywood filmmaking community that formed the backbone of opposition to the danger posed by the extreme right. The weight of the mass social movement that erupted in the 1930s was still present. The trade unions continued to represent a significant force in American life and the mass campaign for African American civil rights wielded tremendous political and moral power.

The shortcomings of *Seven Days in May* are no doubt concretely bound up with its origins and development. Kennedy, embroiled in disputes with US military chiefs, read and endorsed the Knebel-Bailey novel, although he criticized its potboiler aspects, and actively encouraged its being made into a movie.

Frankenheimer later commented that he was certain Pentagon officials “weren’t happy when they heard we were going to make it but at the same time they didn’t try to censor us.” The director remarked that he had heard indirectly “that President Kennedy ... said he very much wanted the film made. Pierre Salinger, who was then his Press Secretary, was very helpful for us and when we shot the White House scenes he arranged for the President to go to Hyannisport [in Massachusetts]. Now if the White House had not wanted the film made I can assure you that we could not have obtained permission to shoot a small riot in front of it.”

American capitalism in the early 1960s stood at the pinnacle of its economic and political power. The foundations of that power, however, as the WSWS explained in 2003, “were about to be blown apart by immense tensions and contradictions that could not be contained by Kennedy’s policies.” *Seven Days in May* was filmed in the summer of 1963, with its theatrical release scheduled for December. That release was held up by the murder of Kennedy in Dallas on November 22. (The appearance of Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove* in theaters was delayed for the same reason.) The painful irony is that the real-life models for the fanatical right-wing elements in the military and intelligence apparatus fictionalized—and simply allowed to resign and fade away—in Frankenheimer’s film were no doubt linked to the cabal that carried out the assassination.

Scott is generally taken to be a fictional version or composite of several leading military or former military figures of the day, including, in particular, Curtis LeMay, appointed by Kennedy to be Air Force Chief of Staff, and Edwin Walker, a fascistic US Army general.

Gen. LeMay is a notorious figure, with a lengthy record of horrendous crimes to his name. The Air Force sent him in 1945 to direct the air war against Japan. A profile in the *New Yorker* magazine explained that LeMay, realizing that the Japanese had almost no air defense left, “sent three hundred and twenty-five planes loaded with jellied-gasoline firebomb clusters over Tokyo in the early hours of March 10, 1945. ... The mission succeeded: the United States Strategic Bombing Survey estimated that ‘probably more persons lost their lives by fire at Tokyo in a 6-hour period than at any time in the history of man.’” In that initial raid, “nearly seventeen square miles of the Japanese capital [were] burned to the ground, with at least a hundred thousand people killed and hundreds of thousands injured.”

LeMay organized fire-bombings “night after night until the end of the war, by which time sixty-three Japanese cities had been totally or partially burned out and more than a million Japanese civilians killed. Hiroshima and Nagasaki survived to be atomic-bombed only because Washington had removed them from Curtis LeMay’s target list.” Years later, he told a cadet, “I suppose if I had lost the war, I would have been tried as a war criminal. Fortunately, we were on the winning side.”

Later, as commander of the Strategic Air Command (SAC), LeMay, in

his first war plan drawn up in 1949, proposed dropping the entire stockpile of 133 atomic bombs in one massive attack on 70 Soviet cities within 30 days. At the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962, LeMay urged the bombing of Soviet nuclear missile sites in Cuba and campaigned for military invasion. He eventually left the Air Force over disagreements on Vietnam War policy (he threatened to bomb North Vietnam back to the “Stone Age”) and ran as the running mate of arch-segregationist Alabama governor George Wallace in 1968 on the American Independent Party ticket.

In Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove*, both Gen. Buck Turgidson (George C. Scott) and Brig. Gen. Jack D. Ripper (Sterling Hayden) are considered satirical versions of LeMay.

Gen. Walker, mentioned by name in *Seven Days in May*, was an extreme right-wing figure, who was forced to resign from the US Army in 1961—the only US general who resigned in the 20th century—because of his attempts to indoctrinate troops under his command in Germany with materials supplied by the far-right John Birch Society and Billy James Hargis’ fanatically anti-communist Christian Crusade.

Walker went on to participate in political events organized by Hargis and other ultra-right elements. In September 1962, Walker urged an uprising in protest against the attempt by James Meredith, an African American veteran, to integrate the University of Mississippi. Walker called on 10,000 “patriots” from every state to rally in Oxford, Mississippi. Thousands of Klansmen and assorted racists and fascists did show up and a violent melee broke out in which two people were killed execution-style and hundreds were injured. Walker was arrested, but charges were eventually dropped. He too is said to have partially inspired the Ripper character in *Dr. Strangelove*.

In representing these psychopaths in their film, one might say that Frankenheimer and Lancaster exercised considerable, almost excessive restraint. *Seven Days in May* remains a forthright denunciation of military interference into domestic politics, with many of its implications, and a defense of democracy and the US Constitution.

Where do we stand in relation to these issues some 60 years down the road? The Kennedy assassination marked a historical turning point. One of its aims, in which it ultimately succeeded, was to shift US government policies to the right and intimidate political opposition. It was not the final conspiracy, but rather ushered in an era of conspiracy, identified with such subsequent episodes as Watergate, Iran-Contra, the Clinton impeachment crisis, the hijacking of the 2000 election and the unexplained events of September 11, 2001. Unending war, ceaseless attacks on democratic rights, the growth of unimaginable social inequality—these have characterized much of the intervening period. And now we have reached a point where the president of the United States is the leading figure in a conspiracy to overthrow constitutional rule.

In this context, *Seven Days in May* is hardly the final word on these matters. But it compellingly and concretely dramatizes how dictatorship can come to America and by whom this might be done.



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