

Films and Politics - II

by **Blue York**

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Our second entry of Films and Politics looks at two pictures made more than 3 decades apart. Also, as an aside, [Disinterested Spectator](#) picked up the ball and did a far more thorough review (beware of spoilers if you can spoil a 60 year-old movie) of *The Last Hurrah*, a movie I looked at last time.

My primary interest here is to catalogue political films with an emphasis on how film handles elections. However, I will look at films that cover politics in the broader sense, such as *Seven Days in May*.

The Best Man: (1964).

Based on Gore Vidal's Tony Award-winning play of the same name, *The Best Man* tells the tale of two men vying for their party's presidential nomination during the National Convention of an unidentified party. Yet, once we meet the two main contenders, we know that this is the Democratic party circa late '50's early 60's. We have an "egghead" liberal and his opponent, representing the blue dog wing of the party.

William Russell (Henry Fonda) is a former Secretary of State. A liberal, Russell's public life is fairly spotless. He did have an extra-marital affair and also hides a past nervous breakdown (shades of Thomas Eagleton).

Senator Joe Cantwell (Cliff Robertson) is a southern populist, a bigot and a hardcore anti-communist who, like JFK, campaigns on closing the non-existent missile-gap with the Soviet Union. Robertson is an interesting choice for Cantwell as he had played Kennedy the year before in *PT-109*.

Russell and Cantwell, in addition to hating each other, battle for the endorsement of a popular former President, Art Hockstader (Lee Tracy). During the course of the convention Russell's psych records materialize as does a witness to Cantwell's alleged homosexual activity during the war (perhaps Cantwell is a Republican after all).

Many people point out that Russell is partly based on Adlai Stevenson, the former Illinois Governor and two-time Democratic candidate for President (1952-1956). Cantwell is an amalgam of Nixon and Kennedy and Cantwell has a brother/campaign manager quite like Robert Kennedy. Former President Hockstader is essentially a Harry Truman stand-in.

In a 2000 Theater Talk interview available on YouTube Vidal denies any direct, one-to-one comparison with his characters and any actual person. Instead, he sees each character as an amalgam of personalities and political archetypes. Indeed, if one thinks Cantwell, the ruthless amoral politician is a thinly-veiled Kennedy, one should know that JFK and Vidal were friends (however Vidal disliked Bobby). We, the audience, see a finished product and sometimes make connections where none, or few, exist. The creation of a good product is always more complex than just slotting in a real person with a fictitious name.

This is a solid movie with some good performances. Never having experienced a brokered convention it feels more unrealistic now than it may have in '64. Again, if older films, especially the older acting style, don't work for you, don't bother. I don't know if a remake would work (although the play has been revived a number of times). Few of us, perhaps none of us, has lived through a brokered convention (I am not sure when the last one occurred although Stevenson did throw his VP selection to the delegates in '52) despite the threat of one every four years. The system isn't designed for a brokered convention, not now, with campaigns so money dependent and that dependence hinging on primary success.

Where would one stage a play or movie that addresses the selection of a presidential candidate today? A series of early primaries, a boardroom, the offices of a national party? Did someone in the back just say The Kremlin?

Worth a watch. The Best Man, Last Hurrah and All the King's Men would make a good triple bill if you enjoy black and white films. Gore Vidal's writing is always smart and always sprinkled with sharp humor.

In the play (1960) and the film, the media is a target of criticism and accused of what we now know as...fake news. The more things change...