

The Manchurian Candidate

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February 13, 1988

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/manchuriancandidatehinson.htm>

Twenty-five years after its original release, John Frankenheimer's "The Manchurian Candidate" is back, and the mysteries surrounding the film as it returns to theaters are almost, though not quite, as compelling and bizarre as the movie itself.

Explanations of why the film -- which stars Frank Sinatra and Laurence Harvey and deals with a Communist plot to send a brainwashed American war hero to assassinate a presidential candidate -- are not as clear cut as the popular film lore might suggest. Even the exact length of time that the picture has been unavailable is hard to pin down.

One version has Sinatra, who obtained ownership of the rights to the film from United Artists in 1972, withdrawing it from release, along with the 1954 film "Suddenly," which also was about an assassination plot, after it was revealed that Lee Harvey Oswald had watched the latter before he shot President Kennedy.

The screenwriter George Axelrod, who adapted the Richard Condon novel for the screen, says "The Manchurian Candidate" has been out of release since immediately following the president's death in 1963, when the film's producers and United Artists decided to call it in.

"The climate of the times was such," says Axelrod, who produced the film along with Frankenheimer and Sinatra, "that having an assassination picture floating

around seemed to be in grotesque bad taste. Particularly since Frank had been friends with the president."

As for whose idea it was to withdraw the film, Axelrod says, "We practically all picked up the phone at the same time." But, he adds, "The decision was Sinatra's with our agreement -- we were the tail of the kite, really."

Axelrod reports that United Artists, the company that produced the film, had always been nervous about making the picture, but not because of any fear that it would encourage assassinations. "They didn't want to make it because they thought that it was un-American," he says. Ironically, it was a phone call from President Kennedy -- made at Sinatra's request -- that persuaded Arthur Krim, then head of United Artists and also the national finance chairman of the Democratic Party, to change his mind and start production.

(An additional irony, which may be more curious than telling but is entirely in keeping with the tone of the film, is that it was Frankenheimer who drove Robert Kennedy to the hotel in California the night he was assassinated.)

Seductive as all the theories may be, Richard Condon isn't buying them, and his response to Axelrod's version of the events is unequivocal. "Ridiculous!" he said when reached by phone at his home in Dallas. "I don't think it was ever actually 'pulled' from release. It had begun to peter out and play on late-night television. I know Sinatra has a very high regard for it. And I wouldn't be at all surprised if he put the film away, as one does, as an anchor to windward."

According to Frankenheimer's office, the film has, in fact, not been seen in this country, either on television or theatrically, except for scattered festival screenings, since its original release. But a spokesman there says that the Kennedy assassination was only "one of the reasons" the film has been out of circulation. The others, he says, are largely financial.

"It was money that held this thing up," says Axelrod, who first came up with the idea of turning the book into a movie. "Unromantic economics."

Sinatra himself was unavailable for comment, and when questioned on these matters, his spokesperson had no comment, except to say that Sinatra was "pleased and delighted" that the film would once again be available to moviegoers.

Controversy seems to have always followed this off-beat political thriller. When it first came out, one critic called it "the best film of the year, and the most irresponsible." And about the same time, the film was picketed in Orange County, Calif., for being pro-communist, while in Paris, protesters denounced it as right-wing propaganda.

In truth, the film, which takes off on McCarthyism and the anticommunist hysteria of the '50s, is an exceedingly loopy satire of the entire American political circus, and could be viewed as offensive to the sensitive-souled in either camp. And time hasn't in the least softened its bite.

The movie, which opened yesterday at the Key in Georgetown, has an excoriating, destabilizing wit that seems as knowingly sophisticated today as it must have then. The story is that of Raymond Shaw (Harvey), a Medal of Honor winner who, along with his platoon, was subjected to elaborate mind-control techniques by Soviet and Red Chinese officials after they were captured in Korea, and sent back to the States to do their captors' bidding.

Sinatra is really the film's hero, and apart from the musicals he made with Gene Kelly, he was never cast more sympathetically. Here Sinatra plays Bennett Marco, a member of the platoon who's plagued by recurring nightmares in which the brainwashing sessions are replayed, and who eventually exposes the fiendish Red scheme.

What the movie suggests, in the most offhandedly outrageous manner, is that it is possible for a Red-controlled stooge to reach high office while niftily avoiding detection by presenting himself as a rabid anticommunist. And it's this wry, cold-blooded attitude toward American political foibles that may have provoked such controversy at the time of its original release. Scoundrel times had barely passed when the movie recast them in the figure of the buffoonishly drunken, cue-card-reading Sen. Iselin (James Gregory). He is the man behind the charges that the Defense Department is lousy with Reds. But the brains behind Iselin is Raymond's

mother, played by Angela Lansbury, who along with the Asian Machiavelli Yen Lo (Khig Dhiagh) completes the cast of monsters.

Everything in the movie seems to carry with it layers of subtext, of double meanings and hidden codes. And, with Lionel Lindon's archly composed black-and-white cinematography, the movie's jagged, emphatic visual style is perfectly matched to its Chinese puzzle-box structure.

The movie adheres closely to Condon's original, which is perhaps why the author is such a fan of the film. "They did as faithful a reproduction of a novel as any I've ever seen," Condon said. "The dialogue is smack on and the characters are absolutely intact. It's a wonderful film. Back then those two boys -- Frankenheimer and Axelrod -- had wrinkles in their bellies and worked and turned out this marvelous picture."

Axelrod, too, rates the movie pretty high. Though at the time the screenwriter concurred in the decision to remove the film from circulation, it wasn't an easy move. "I was restive, because after all, how many good ones do you do? I think it's the best screenplay I ever wrote; certainly it's Frankenheimer's best picture, and it's one of Sinatra's top three performances. And of course Angela Lansbury very deservedly got a nomination for what she did.

"The poor thing, you know, went from failure to classic without ever passing through success. It would be nice for it to have some success."