

[Mr. Smith goes to Hollywood]

Left Coast's Right Turn

The stars' politics aside, Tinseltown reinforces conservative values.

By Steve Sailer

THE FEDERAL ELECTION Commission's online database of political donors amusingly confirms that the movie industry is as one-sidedly Democratic as the stereotypes claim. Oscar-winning actors and directors give about 40 times as much to Democrats as to Republicans. Hollywood's Republican donors turn out to be mostly aged actors for whom the threat "you'll never work in this town again" long ago lost its terror. Over the last decade, stalwart Republican campaign contributors have included Jane Russell, who starred in Howard Hughes's 1943 Western "The Outlaw"; Yvette Mimieux, who played Weena the Eloi in the 1960 "Time Machine"; and sword-and-sandal star Victor Mature, who got so mature he's now dead. (Yet almost all politician-actors, such as Ronald Reagan and Arnold Schwarzenegger, have been in the GOP, which suggests voters appreciate that just being a Republican in Hollywood demonstrates strength of character.)

The right wing of the chorus of the perpetually indignant has repeatedly gone on the warpath against Hollywood for political crimes real and imagined, recently excoriating actress Maggie Gyllenhaal ("Secretary") for her brief criticism of American foreign policy and denouncing George Lucas for perhaps alluding unadmirably to George W. Bush in "Star Wars: Episode III—Revenge of the Sith." But the

actual relationship between Hollywood and politics turns out to be convoluted and often surprising.

Hollywood was not always so ideologically homogeneous. Consider one of the best films of the industry's best year, 1939—"Mr. Smith Goes to Washington." Leading man Jimmy Stewart, director Frank Capra, and studio head Harry Cohn were all Republicans, while its screenwriter Sidney Buchman was a card-carrying Stalinist. Today, though, acceptable views run the gamut all the way from Eleanor Roosevelt Democrats like Barbra Streisand on the Left to Harry Truman Democrats like Tom Hanks (who named a son "Truman") on the Right. What happened?

Keep in mind that Hollywood's relationship with the outside world is tenuous. It's a self-absorbed community, and its politics are skin-deep, serving functions within the industry that aren't always obvious to outsiders. Today's liberal monoculture is in large part an outgrowth of the compromise resolution to the ancient struggle between studio executives and screenwriters that culminated in the endlessly discussed but little understood blacklist of Marxists in the 1950s.

One of the blacklist's main roots has disappeared down the memory hole because it doesn't burnish the heroic image created to flatter the Communist victims. A 1919 theater strike won the

playwrights of the Dramatists Guild the right to retain copyright in their works. To this day, dramatists own their plays and merely license them to producers. Further, they have the right to approve or reject the cast, director, and any proposed changes in the dialogue. Contractually, a playwright is a rugged individualist, an Ayn Rand hero.

With the introduction of the talkies in 1927, Hollywood began importing trainloads of New York dramatists. Salaries were generous and the climate superb, but the dramatists found the collaborative nature of moviemaking frustrating, even demeaning. Screenwriters were employees in a vast factory, which owned their creations. The studios could, and generally would, have other hired hacks radically rewrite each script, all under the intrusive supervision of some mogul's semiliterate brother-in-law.

In the 1930s, Hollywood's Communist Party, under the command of its charismatic commissar, screenwriter John Howard Lawson, improbably but enthusiastically championed the intellectual property rights of scriptwriters. The ink-stained wretches found that the Marxist concept of alienation described their plight. They felt just like the once psychologically fulfilled hand-craftsmen forced into becoming dispossessed factory drones who cannot recognize their creativity in their employer's output.

Insanely ironic as it seems now, many screenwriters became Communists because they despised the movie business's need for co-operation. How turning command of the entire economy over to a dictatorship would restore the unfettered joys of individual craftsmanship was a little fuzzy, but, hey, if you couldn't trust Stalin, whom could you trust?

The possibility of studios blacklisting writers first surfaced in the 1930s, when the moguls' cartel turned aside the leftist screenwriters' push to align themselves with the Dramatists League by threatening to fire union supporters. "It wouldn't be a blacklist because it would all be done over the telephone," Jack Warner explained.

Decades later, after the formal blacklist era, this labor-management conflict was resolved by a tacit compromise. The blacklisted writers were elevated in the collective memory to the role of martyrs. Their leftism (but not their Stalinism, which was conveniently forgotten) was enshrined as the appropriate ideology of all respectable movie-folk. In return, the producers hung on to their property rights in screenplays.

In the wake of Mel Gibson's vast profits from "The Passion of the Christ," the industry finally senses that it's out of touch with much of its potential audience. Yet it can hardly be relied upon to figure out what it is doing wrong. If conservatives want to watch conservative movies, we will have to make them ourselves.

But much of what passes for conservatism in the Bush era is stridently prosaic, dogmatic, and anti-artistic. The "primarily political people," as culture blogger Michael Blowhard calls them, who now dominate the public voice of the Right deplore the imagination and empathy required to make good films.

Indeed, the movies are far less obsessed with politics than the right-wing media is, in part due to the years it takes modern free-agent Hollywood to

put deals together. If Hanks would suggest to Steven Spielberg, who has given hundreds of thousands of dollars to the Democrats, that they undermine the Republican campaign against the filibuster by remaking "Mr. Smith," which famously climaxes with the haggard Jefferson Smith trying to keep speaking against a corrupt bill, by the time they got their movie finished the Democrats might have regained control of the Senate and might be quashing Republican filibusters.

To those of us who care about more than partisan politics, however, the Hollywood of 2005 in some ways confirms historian Robert Conquest's first law: Everyone is conservative about what he knows best. The mainstream audience restrains Hollywood's leftist affectations, and the vicissitudes of making movies teach filmmakers hard-headed lessons in how the world really works, making the actual politics in the movies closer to Tom Hanks's than Michael Moore's.

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Contemporary Hollywood movies approve of manly men and womanly women, guns, violence in self-defense, anti-drug laws, true love, marriage, big weddings, big houses, and moms and dads spending time with their kids. The worst sin is parental adultery, because Hollywood's target audience of teens dreads anything that could break up their homes. And film heroines don't have abortions.

Many of the right-wing attacks on Hollywood stem from it not toeing the pseudo-conservative line of worshipping some of the less conservative forces in history, such as war, *laissez faire*, and George W. Bush. Movies such as Oliver Stone's "Platoon," Steven Spielberg's "Saving Private Ryan," and Mel Gibson's

"We Were Soldiers" have done America a service by taking war films to a new level of bloody realism. While neoconservative jingoes have worried that revealing the effects of combat too honestly will induce second thoughts about World War IV, veterans have typically been pleased that moviegoers can now get a better sense of the sacrifices they made in the service of their country. Nor is it Hollywood's fault that the Bush administration didn't learn anything about the dangers of occupying a Muslim country from "Black Hawk Down," the minutely detailed 2001 depiction of our Special Forces' desperate battle in Somalia.

As lavishly paid members of the private sector, filmmakers admire public sector workers, such as soldiers, cops, and firemen, who risk their lives for the kind of annual pay that a Beverly Hills matron might spend on *feng shui* consultations. For example, Hanks passed up tens of millions in movie earnings to

produce a patriotic miniseries about the GIs of World War II and the astronauts and engineers of the space race.

There are few conservatives in Hollywood, but at least there aren't many neo-conservatives either. When the GOP wanted to feature a movie star at the 2004 convention in New York, the best the party could come up with was Ron Silver, who once played, uh ... c'mon, Google ... Alan Dershowitz in "Reversal of Fortune."

And if movies tend to be skeptical that unbridled capitalism automatically produces the utopia foreseen by University of Chicago economists, well, filmmakers have all had some first-hand experience with just how far human beings will go to get rich. In Capra's "It's

a *Wonderful Life*,” George Bailey rages at the subterfuges of the banker, Mr. Potter, not because Capra was a pinko but because the director had similarly raged at his own boss Harry Cohn’s nefariousness.

Cinema, a medium of the visible, is innately ill suited for explaining the wonders of the invisible hand. But the movie’s basic message about business—that the magic of the market is no substitute for individuals making moral choices—isn’t necessarily anti-conservative. Capitalism is a terrific system, but it doesn’t absolve capitalists from the need for ethics.

Nor is it anti-conservative for film people to believe that they should occasionally make a quality film that might not be as profitable as most of the dreck they churn out. If the market was the measure of all things, three studios wouldn’t have gotten together and invested close to \$200 million in “*Master and Commander*,” 2003’s splendid, but not terribly lucrative, realization of Patrick O’Brian’s superb and deeply conservative seafaring novels.

As the deplorable quality of 2005 releases underscores, this resistance to pure profit-maximizing behavior is disappearing in Hollywood, but if conservatism means more than just the worship of the free market, that’s not a good thing.

Hollywood has so far resisted the efficiency urge, the Wal-Martization that has swept much of American industry. For example, in one studio’s parking garage, about 20 identical white Honda CR-Vs slowly gather dust, each with Will Smith’s picture painted on the rear window. Why? Perhaps somebody thought spending half a million dollars would amuse the star and incline him to make a movie with them again. The tomfoolery, the raw waste allowed in Hollywood nourishes artistic minds. And who is to say that Wal-Mart is the final arbiter of conservatism?

Also, Hollywood is a union town in a traditionally anti-union metropolis, and while that makes industry workers more Democratic, it also has paradoxically conservative effects. The creative artists’ unions such as the Writers Guild keep the movies from being an utterly death-or-glory business like the music industry, where countless wannabes work for years for almost nothing in the hopes of becoming one of the few superstars. The

kung-fu fighters. As it has been in American popular culture since Stephen Foster and *Huckleberry Finn*, the movies portray America as still a white and black nation.

Going back to 1967’s Best Picture winner “*In the Heat of the Night*” with Rod Steiger and Sidney Poitier, which launched the genre of white cop/black cop buddy movies, films have often promoted integration smartly by showing

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film guilds help those who have made it into the inner circle stay there long enough to raise a family.

At the blue-collar level, the Teamsters—the most Republican-leaning union—are widely despised as lazy goldbrickers, but most of the other crafts unions are considered team players whose members, while generously paid, are competent and hustle when needed.

A production company recently rented my front yard to shoot a few seconds of a beer commercial, my mongrel lawn being deemed more like that of the average American beer drinker’s than the posh landscaping of my entertainment-industry neighbors. About 60 technicians swarmed all over my street, the great majority of them white males, a proportion normally unheard of in Southern California, where so much of the blue-collar work is done by illegal immigrants. The movie and TV unions are pretty much all that’s keeping what’s left of LA’s American-born blue-collar workers from being driven out of California by illegal aliens willing to undercut their wages.

In Hollywood’s imagination, America isn’t really a multicultural nation. The new immigrants are shunted aside to play clichés, with Hispanics symbolizing family values and Asians restricted to

the two races learning to work together in conservative institutions such as the police, the military, or the football team. It’s easier to persuade people of different races to like each other as a by-product of having a common goal outside of themselves—fighting crime, winning the war, beating the arch-rival team—than by just nagging them to be sensitive towards each other.

In contrast to Hollywood’s leftist politics, which have been in stasis for decades, its increasingly moderate values reflect more recent trends, such as the clean-living fad that emerged in reaction to the Great Hollywood Snowstorm of roughly 1975-1985. As cocaine laid waste to a brilliant generation of filmmakers, the Boy Scout of the bunch, Steven Spielberg—who as a lad had earned more than twice the number of merit badges required to make Eagle Scout—went on to stupendous success.

Similarly, the top stars of recent years—such as Tom Cruise, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Harrison Ford—are highly disciplined professionals who can be counted on to establish a harmonious atmosphere on the set and market the product relentlessly in the media. A hothead can make it to the highest rank only if he is as talented as Russell Crowe.

While television has been getting more sex-obsessed, movies have been getting cleaner, especially since the 2000 congressional hearings that finally scared the movie theaters into not letting unaccompanied kids into R-rated movies. As conservative critic Michael Medved had long predicted, Hollywood's subsequent move away from R-rated films proved a financial boon.

Feminism gets no more than lip service in Hollywood. Films are ever more male-oriented because, unlike TV, they are not advertiser-supported. Marketers want women because men transfer roughly a trillion dollars per year of earnings to women to spend, but males buy the majority of movie tickets. The studios try to justify the proliferation in movies of butt-kicking babes and girls-with-guns as female empowerment gestures, but they are actually there because nerds get a charge out of catfights.

Similarly, most of the violent criminals in movies are white not because filmmakers hate whites, but because, as Tom Wolfe pointed out in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, white people find the preponderance of minorities among arrestees to be depressing and tedious. Films feature what Wolfe called the Great White Defendant because audiences find, say, the hyper-sophisticated Hannibal the Cannibal more fun to hate than the typical real-life murderer.

Finally, while the film industry is gayer than the aerospace or coal businesses, it's much less gay than Broadway, perhaps because gay actors find it hard to work without applause from a live audience.

In summary, to get movies we like, conservatives will have to make them ourselves. But we won't be any good at it unless we understand why Hollywood does what it does. ■

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The Next Superpower?

How China could win the War on Terror

By Leon Hadar

LONG BEFORE Runaway Bride Jennifer Wilbanks, there was Runaway Bestseller Paul Kennedy. It's difficult to imagine that once upon a time in American life—before Paris Hilton had been conceived and when the term “public intellectual” wasn't yet associated with Ann Coulter—a Yale history professor who published a long, footnoted study could be transformed into a media star. But when his book on the sexy topic of the overstretching and overspending of superpowers, with its breezy title, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1550 to 2000*, was published in 1987, Kennedy became an instant celebrity among the chattering class.

All this happened before the age of 24/7 cable news, so the debate over Kennedy's deep thoughts was confined to the *New York Times*' op-ed page, NPR, public television, and frequent quoting in diplomatic receptions in Washington. Not that many people actually read the heavy *Rise and Fall*. In fact, when then *New Republic* editor Michael Kinsley conducted an experiment to find out whether Washingtonians really read Big Books, he left notes hidden in the last few pages in several copies of Kennedy's tome in an Olsson's bookstore and promised \$50 to any reader who contacted him. Kinsley didn't lose a lot of money.

But even if few actually read *Rise and Fall*, there is no doubt that Kennedy's thesis had a huge impact on the policy debate, giving birth to a catchphrase—“imperial overstretch.” Kennedy warned that the expensive military standoff between the United States and the Soviet

Union could hasten the decline of both superpowers. He posed a dilemma: a nation's military strength rests on its economic strength, but economic strength tends to wither when a nation devotes too many resources to the military. Kennedy warned of the danger of the United States bankrupting itself through military overextension, which could erode its economic performance *vis-à-vis* demilitarized Japan and Germany.

The prophecy proved to be true when the Soviet Union collapsed a few years later. But even after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Kennedy continued to criticize American defense-driven growth, rising federal debt, and lack of a Japanese-style industrial policy. He warned that unless the United States changed its course, the winners of the Cold War would be Japan and Germany, which were not saddled with gigantic military budgets and had adopted goal-oriented economic strategies.

Then came Gorbachev and Yeltsin, Japanese stagflation, German reunification, America's high-tech boom, stock-market euphoria, and disappearing budget deficits. Kennedy and his “declinists” were run over by Francis Fukuyama and his End of History crowd. Hey, buddy, America won the Cold War. Smell the coffee, do some day trading and count yourself a winner.

Not so fast. It is quite possible that the Roaring Nineties, when Silicon Valley exploded and the American stock market soared to the stratosphere, could end up a brief intermezzo in what history may recall as America's symphony of decline. In fact, if one refrains from applying one-