



The Book on *Dave*

by Victor Gold

Don't talk to me about the movie *Dave*. I've liked Kevin Kline as an actor since *The Big Chill*, and think enough of his co-star Sigourney Weaver to have sat through an entire performance of a theatrical mishmash called *Hurly Burly*. I've even enjoyed the work of *Dave*'s director Ivan Reitman when he's handled material like *Ghostbusters* and *Big*, aimed at pubescent and would-be pubescent audiences.

But *Dave* is another matter. It is, in case you haven't seen it or read the reviews, a movie about a thoroughly dislikable president who has a stroke while bleeping a woman other than his wife. A conniving chief of staff and White House communications director then conspire to keep their boss's condition a state secret. They do this by bringing in a double, but predictably, *Dave* the double, in heartwarming Hollywood fashion, is thoroughly likable, a salt-of-the-earth *mensch*. In short, given that the writer of the screenplay is a former wordsmith for Michael Dukakis, the character *Dave* is a liberal's idealized perception of a liberal, albeit of populist rather than Harvard persuasion. Think of Frank Capra—Mr. Smith, John Doe—and you have the essence of *Dave*, touted by Reitman and friendly critics as a post-Reagan affirmation of the ultimate triumph of compassionate leadership over gluttonous special interests. Think also of Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* and Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper*, fables involving a role switch between the powerful and the pure-of-heart.

Or think, as I necessarily do, of *The Body Politic*—assuming you've heard

of it—a Washington novel by Vic Gold and Lynne Cheney bought by Orion Pictures and scheduled for production in the political season of 1992.

Let me tell you about *The Body Politic*. It is the story of a thoroughly dislikable *vice* president who has a heart attack while bleeping a woman other than his wife. A conniving White House chief of staff and the vice president's press secretary then conspire, for ulterior political motives (as if there were any other) to keep the death a state secret. They do this by . . .

Of course Los Angeles is a marvelous environment for telepathy, so who am I to question the plot similarity between *Dave*, which surfaced as an, ahem, *original* screenplay in 1992, and *The Body Politic*, which was making the rounds of Hollywood's studios and agents as early as 1988? Or to wonder at the remarkable coincidence of real-life characters like the McLaughlin Group and Bob Novak appearing in *Dave* when the same personalities, playing their same obstreper-

ous selves, had been written into the Gold-Cheney plot five years earlier?

Who indeed?

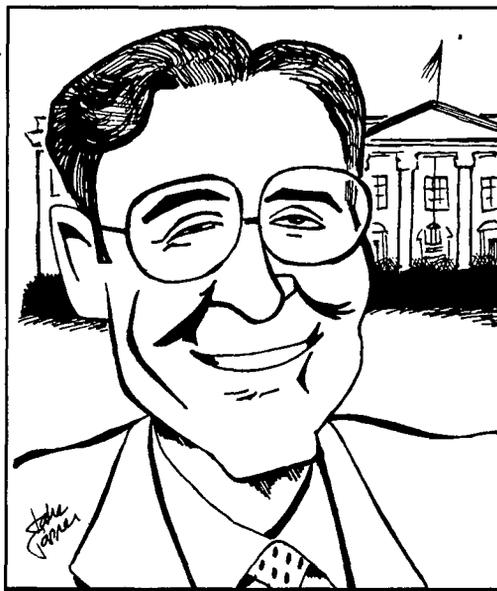
Still, I wonder. And it rankles that a major studio like Orion, instead of making *The Body Politic*, should, within weeks after buying it, do a Chapter Eleven, leaving Lynne Cheney, me—and among *auteurs*, the estimable social commentator Woody Allen—without a studio in which to flaunt our comic genius (though Allen, as we know, has gone on to bigger laughs).

But authorial paranoia aside, I doubt I'd like *Dave* in any event, perpetuating as it does the Capra-esque myth that there is nothing wrong with Washington (and government) that One Well-Intentioned Man can't set right.

For my own part, I was relieved of that puerile notion about the time John F. Kennedy, three months after riding into the Oval Office on a white charger, turned to the cameras and said, "This job's a lot more complicated than I thought it would be." But there are others, obviously, with less memory and more sanguinity, who go to the polls every four years in slack-jawed search of Mr. Smith, or *Dave*, or Bill.

Were I truly paranoid, instead of merely rankled, I'd conclude this is exactly what the liberal Hollywood myth-makers hope for when they make movies like *Dave*. But of course, as Ben Stein regularly tells us—and as my experience in the un-making of *The Body Politic* confirmed—this is to view Hollywood West as an ideological hotbed, which in fact it isn't.

True, there is evergreen Barbra Streisand to say otherwise, along with Robert Redford and that durable den-mother of Hollywood liberalism, Lauren Bacall. And who can forget the



Victor Gold is The American Spectator's national correspondent.

descent of the glitz-and-famous on Washington in January, when the new president and his leading lady, on their first night in the White House, turned the Lincoln Bed over to the producers of "Evening Shade" and "Designing Women"?

But think back, if you will, to another night, eight months earlier, when Billy Crystal, emceeing the 1992 Academy Awards show, brought the house down with a shake of his head and the words, "Didn't inhale?"

No, Hollywood West isn't so much a hotbed of serious opinion as a place with an attitude, a fickle constituency as likely to turn on its friend Bill as Capra's mob turned on Gary Cooper. This isn't to say that the place isn't liberal; only that, four decades after its holy war against the House Committee on Un-American Activities, the Hollywood Left is now reduced to showing its colors in terms of red ribbons and ski-resort boycotts.

All of which brings me back to *Dave* and Hollywood West's perception of how people-and-power operate in the nation's capital.

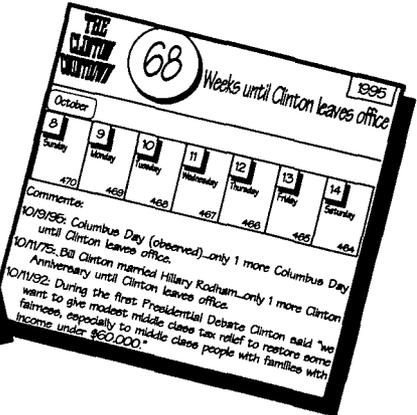
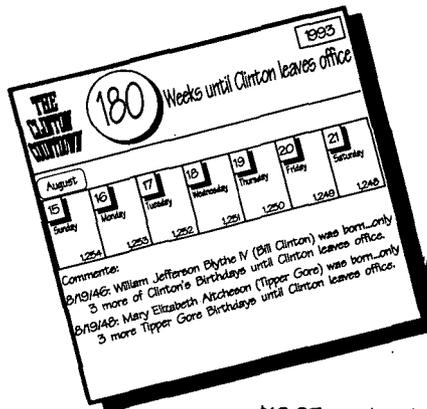
In Capra's day—indeed, up to the time of Otto Preminger, who came to town to film *Advise and Consent*—Washington was awed by the arrival of directors, stars, and crews to film scenes for a motion picture, major or minor. No longer; in any given week, the *Style/Life* sections of the *Washington Post* and *Times* bring word of Clint Eastwood holding up traffic (*In the Line of Fire*) or Denzel Washington's breakfast order at the Four Seasons (*The Pelican Brief*).

Hollywood East: Coming soon to your neighborhood theater, an excess of movies about Washington; some light, some heavy, but all given over to the Capra myth in one form or other. Nor do I, next time around, intend to get rolled when I add my contribution to the pile. I've learned the system, sufficiently so to . . .

Well, let me tell you about this truly original script I'm working on. It's about a young, ingenuous senator—call him Jones or Smith—who goes to Washington to do battle with the fat cats and lobbyists. Kind of a Jimmy Stewart type, but I see someone like Kevin Kline playing it, with, say, Sigourney Weaver in the role of a feisty newspaper reporter who . . . □

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All Shook Up

by James Bowman

This month's movies are about mix-ups in love. In *Dave*, a wife (a fictional first lady) realizes a persistent wifely fantasy and finds in her husband a new man—because he really is a new man. In *The Night We Never Met*, a married woman falls in love with a man she has never seen and so gets the wrong man when she goes astray. *Sliver* teaches the scary lesson that even voyeurism can be unsafe sex, and *Wide Sargasso Sea* reveals why Charlotte Brontë's Mr. Rochester must have been attracted to a little prig like Jane Eyre. In *Three of Hearts*, a lesbian hires a gigolo to break the heart of her bisexual lover so that she will come back to her, but reckons without the consequence that any movie-goer could have told her was likely to ensue—the pretense of love becomes the real thing. Something similar happens, more than once, in *Much Ado About Nothing*, an old favorite redone by the dashing Kenneth Branagh. This film also reveals that Shakespeare knew, some 360 years before the song was written, the answer to the question: Why do fools fall in love?

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Mix-ups in love are sometimes those of fictional characters, but these days they are more often, I think, those of their creators. For example, the politics in *Dave* (dealt with on the previous page by Victor Gold), are predictably infantile, but so is its more sympathetic love story. It is a fantasy, long beloved in Hollywood both on and off the screen, that just being really really nice is all a leader has to do to solve his and his country's political prob-

James Bowman is the Times Literary Supplement's American editor and TAS's regular movie critic.

lems when in fact, as Jimmy Carter discovered, mere niceness is a positive disqualification for leadership. It is equally a fantasy and equally typical of the entertainment industry that love is about finding The One Right Person.

This is a Harlequin paperback view of romance, but it has always been a standard one in Tinseltown. The idea that somewhere "out there" is to be found some ideal mate is likely to be destructive of real relationships and lead to promiscuity and infidelity on the one hand and futile attempts to remold our partners to our own specifications on the other. If you are going to get mixed up in love these days, that is how it is most likely going to happen: by clinging to a chimerical ideal—an ideal that the movies would convince you it's only a mix-up if you haven't got.

In *Dave*, Sigourney Weaver is not required by the plot to betray her marital vows, but only because the movie's creators thoughtfully provided a massive and ultimately fatal stroke to get rid of her husband, the president (Kevin Kline), whom they portray as corrupt, brutal, and power-hungry. Having got rid of the bad Kevin Kline, they can then match her up with her dream man—a gentle, funny, and childlike Kevin Kline. This kind of husband-replacement fantasy is encouraged by the assumption that men are of two types: coarse, rough, and brutally insensitive to women or soft, gentle, and sensitive. Under this increasingly common assumption, romance consists in getting the girl away from a Neanderthal type one and into the arms of some type-two girlie man who understands about "relationships."

The dream factory has another version of the same fantasy on display in *The Night We Never Met*. Kevin Anderson and Michael Mantell are type ones and

Matthew Broderick is the type two. The maiden in distress is Annabella Sciorra, a dentist's assistant who, like Sigourney Weaver in *Dave*, is linked for life to a lout (Mantell)—the kind of guy who takes a portable TV so he can watch the ballgame when she drags him off to a foreign film. He also shows his callous insensitivity by buying them a house in the suburbs without telling her. For these reasons we are meant to think that she is entitled to an affair, but, by mistake, she sleeps with a jerk (Anderson) who is even worse than her hubby. You can tell because he drinks beer, smokes cigars, watches football on TV, leaves a mess for others to clear up, and doesn't like the ballet.

Poor Miss Sciorra suffers. First there is her husband's neglect, then her lover's piggish insensitivity, and finally her husband's boorish inability to understand why she had to have the affair. After many vicissitudes she comes in the end to meet and hook up with her ideal, the man she thought she was trading for all along, viz. the soulful Broderick, a delicatessen attendant with the heart of a yuppie. She has fallen in love with him sight unseen on account of his caring and sensitive notes left for her in an apartment that both are subletting on different days of the week—notes about art, literature, houseplants, and sophisticated cookery. It is obvious that they will be very happy.

Sometimes, it is true, people really do find themselves in relationships with desperately unsuitable or even deadly partners, and this is another of Hollywood's favorite tropes, used or played off of in, among others, *Gaslight*, *Suspicion*, or *Dial M for Murder*. *Sliver*, the new thriller with Sharon Stone, William Baldwin, and Tom Berenger, is a variant on the formula in that we are invited to speculate as to which of Miss